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Designing Black Watch: How Being a Military Spouse Shaped My Creation of the Set Design for a Play about War

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Designing *Black Watch*:

How Being a Military Spouse Shaped My Creation of the Set Design for a Play about
War

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in

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Thesis Advisor

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Portland State University

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Abstract

This thesis documents the process of designing the set for the play *Black Watch* by Gregory Burke. The play tells the story of the British Army's Black Watch Regiment and their deployment to Iraq in 2004. The Black Watch Regiment is a Scottish regiment, and the play focuses on their history, as well as their current operations. *Black Watch* was first performed on the 5th of August 2006 in Edinburgh, Scotland with the National Theatre of Scotland and received the Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Play. This thesis will focus on two main areas. First, I will highlight the methodology and decision-making process I used in the actual set design. I will explore the technical aspects of design such as drawing a clear ground plan and building a model of the set. Secondly, I will explore my own experience with war as the wife of an Army Officer who has deployed multiple times during Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. I will search for the rationale behind my image of a war zone, and how it differs from my husband's personal stories of war and the stories of war found in mass media. The intent of this task is to define how and why my idealized image of war may not necessarily represent the reality.

Introduction

“The study of battle is always a study of fear and usually of courage; always of leadership, usually of obedience; always of compulsion, sometimes of insubordination; always of anxiety, sometimes of elation; always of violence, sometimes also of cruelty, self-sacrifice, and compassion; above all, it is always a study of solidarity...”

-John Keegan¹

The process of designing a set for a play is long and complex. Great attention must be given to researching the background of the play, interpreting the script and the playwright’s intentions, and identifying any relevant details that are important to the function of the play. This can include analyzing the psychological motives for characters’ behavior and actions. In a play such as *Black Watch* that is centered on military conflicts, it is important to understand the psychology of the soldier in order to design a set that furthers the action and emotion of the play, without hindering or distracting from it.

The set designer creates the set to give the audience visual information that helps them understand the what, when, where and why of the action. In this sense, the set designer as well as the rest of the creative team such as the lighting designer, costume designer, and director are all storytellers. In my case, my personal connections to the military informed how I told this story. In order to explore my background with the military, as well as the memories and associations I harbor, I kept a journal as I read the play. This journal ultimately turned into an autobiographical statement that bridged my personal narrative and with my set design choices and decisions.

Any grasp of the psychology of a soldier I have comes from my experiences with the military. Those experiences come from my being both a military child of an enlisted

¹ John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York, NY: The Viking Press, 1976), 297-298.

Army infantryman and a military wife of an Army officer who has been deployed several times. My father and husband have seen the effects of war and/or terrorism first hand. I have emailed and skyped with my husband while he has been deployed. I have seen how his wartime experiences continue to stress him long after the deployment has ended. The behavior of my husband both during and after deployments has thus informed my view of how soldiers experience a war zone. I am aware that my impressions of war are second hand through the limited accounts from my husband, from my watching television, and reading news articles. It is those impressions, however, along with the reflections on my own experiences with the military that have helped me create an effective set design.

I was born on an Army base. My dad and all four of his brothers were in the Army, his dad was in the Army, my mom's dad, grandfather, and brother were in the navy, my sister married a man in the Army, one of the men in my dad's unit in fact, it is in my blood. When we got married my husband was a middle school teacher. About a year into our marriage, my husband came home and said he was thinking of joining the Army. He was fed up with the way the school system functioned, and had always felt that every American should spend some time giving back to their country. After all his dad was also in the Army briefly. He had served as a medic during the Vietnam War. I was almost relieved. I had missed the military life, the sense of community, the moving, the adventure and the camaraderie that civilian life didn't supply.

My motive for designing the set for *Black Watch* was twofold. First, I found the play quite interesting from a military history, government, and psychological standpoint. Second, and perhaps more importantly, I had a personal stake in the current conflicts

based on my husband's active military status. Once I added in the personal aspect, the pressure to design an effective set increased. I want to do justice to the material but also I want to do justice to my husband, my father, and all the soldiers who have fought in this or any war. By including a military biography alongside my design, drawings, and design process, I have tried to examine how my wartime experiences and my loyalty to my family and all soldiers have shaped my process and the design.

I began my thought process for this design with the idea that the set would be very literal. I have always felt that the creativity that it takes to design or create something conceptual was a thing I lacked. Through a conversation and simple question from my advisor, I found the inspiration. I shared with him some source photos I had selected to gain inspiration for my design. Collecting primary source materials like photographs is one of the first steps in beginning the design concept. These photos show the complicated, messy infrastructure of Iraq. One aspect of that infrastructure that is immensely intriguing to me is the convoluted and crazy way that the electrical grid is assembled throughout the streets of Baghdad. These electrical grids consist of webs of sometimes hundreds or thousands of wires resembling a rat's nest with seemingly no rhyme or reason to their makeup.

The wires have become a metaphor for the war and the play. They represent Iraq, the feeling of being there, the chaos of war and the American occupation. The wires also have significance to me personally. I remember back in 1996 my mother and I were being evacuated from Saudi Arabia following terrorist attacks focused on Americans living there. My father drove us to the rally point to meet the other families who would be getting on the plane with us. When we got on the highway in Riyadh to go

to the airport my father radioed in that we were on the net, which meant we were on our way. As we were driving I remember hearing voices of other soldiers driving their families to the airport come over the radio to say they too were on the net. It was as if the families headed together to the airport, all of us coming from a different location, were building a web that connected us all. Twenty years later the concept of the net connects my past experiences to my present work on the set design of *Black Watch*.

The wires also represent communication, which is so important to the soldiers. A significant portion of this play is concerned with correspondence between soldiers and their family and friends back home, either through emails or news broadcasts of the war. While so much in the modern world is done wirelessly now, these wires are a tangible reference to the connectedness. In my source photos each grouping of wire resembles a piece of abstract art, like a man made spider web or a net. All the necessary set pieces would be built into or out of the wires. To help the fluidity of transitions each scene would have a section of the stage differentiated by a shift in lighting. The web, the net, my inspiration, complicated but simple.

The Play

“They’re looking for glory, and they seem to be finding it in martyrdom. Glory, however, is something, which my boys are very unlikely to emerge with. The controversy around this war means there’ll be no victory parade for us.”

-*The Officer, Black Watch*²

The play *Black Watch* by Gregory Burke focuses on the real life events surrounding Scotland’s Black Watch Regiment’s deployment in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom in the fall of 2004 to an area of Iraq, south of Baghdad, known as the “triangle of death”. The creative process was complicated and was rooted in the voices of the Black Watch soldiers. Constructing this play was different from many typical playwriting methods. After conducting interviews with real soldiers from the Black Watch, Gregory Burke along with the director John Tiffany and several other creative members of the production team assembled the play during the rehearsal process using transcripts of the interviews.³ Prior to beginning rehearsals Burke had done some fictional writing but that and the interview transcripts were the only script until shortly before the play opened at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in August of 2006.

To put the play in a historical perspective it is important to understand that Scotland and England have long had a contentious relationship. Thousands of years of back and forth have made the two like bickering siblings. The Scottish people have a proud history and despite recently voting to continue being a part of England in 2014, many are bitter about the rule the British government has over them. So when that same government decides to dismantle a proud part of Scottish military history, the

² Gregory Burke, *Black Watch* (London, UK: Faber and Faber, 2007), 58.

³ Nicholas Cull, "The National Theatre of Scotland's Black Watch: Theatre as Cultural Diplomacy." (*British Council and USC Center on Public Diplomacy* 10, 2007), http://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/sites/uscpublicdiplomacy.org/files/legacy/media/Black_Watch_Publication_010808.pdf.

Black Watch Regiment, while simultaneously sending that same regiment to war in one of the most dangerous segments of Iraq, old resentments bubble to the surface.

The amalgamation of the Black Watch Regiment with the Royal Regiment of Scotland as a part of the downsizing of the British military forces and their subsequent dissolution inspired serious debate and controversy. The amalgamation of 2005 was already in process during the writing of the play *Black Watch*, but even after the play was completed more changes were made to the historic regiment. On June 23rd, 2012 the official colors of the Black Watch Regiment were retired, effectively ending the Regiment, as it had been known. The traditional green and black tartan would no longer be worn and the colors, which had never been lost throughout 164 battles, spread over four centuries, would not be flown again. It was a sad day for both current and past members of the regiment, with many expressing that the government did not care about history, or pride. The Scottish soldiers saw it as a betrayal on the part of the British Government. That feeling is made clear in the words and emotions of the characters of *Black Watch*.

The play begins in a pub in Fife, Scotland where a group of former Black Watch soldiers wait for a reporter who would like to interview them about their time in Iraq. They are not in the mood to be interviewed or gawked at; they are more interested in meeting the pretty journalist named Sophie they believe they will be talking to. But the reporter they meet is not Sophie; it is the character only known as the Writer, a young male reporter who has no interest in sleeping with them (like they assume Sophie would). He just wants to ask them about the war, the exact topic they were trying to avoid.

Through these interviews with the Writer you are taken into the battlefields of Iraq and are given a first hand account of the events that took place there. There are lighthearted moments of soldiers joking around with each other, but ultimately the play centers on deep frustrations and great tragedy. The climax of the play is the death of three soldiers in the regiment and an interpreter due to a suicide bomber. This is an action that deeply haunts the characters that all sense that it could have been avoided had they not been sent into an unnecessary war by a British government who doesn't care about them.

Black Watch consists of nine characters, Cammy, Granty, Rossco, Stewarty, Macca, Nabsy, Writer, Fraz, Kenzie, Sergeant, and Officer. Cammy is arguably the main character of the play, it basically begins and ends with him. It would appear that he is the most cool, calm, and collected of the group of soldiers, basically the unofficial leader. It is his beginning lines that sum up the mood of the play and the disconnect that soldiers feel with civilians, "I didnay want ta day this...I didnay want tay have tay explain myself tay people ay...See, I think people's minds are usually made up about you if you were in the army...They poor fucking boys. They cannay day anything else. They cannay get a job. They get exploited by the army." That's how he feels, how they all feel. The writer is just another civilian out to exploit them in one way or another.

The rest of the named soldiers seem equal in their importance in this play. They each have a different role. Stewarty is the hot head. This is his second deployment and one he should have never been sent on. He was far too damaged by the first but the government saw fit to send him again. Fraz is smart, funny and calm. He is another combat veteran who has been on previous deployments. Kenzie is the newbie. He is

on his first combat tour so he hangs on every word the veteran soldiers say. He is timid, quiet and eager to show that he can fit in as one of the boys. Then there is the Sergeant. His role is far smaller than that of the other men but no less important. The men respect him and his leadership and show it through their treatment of him. There is plenty of joking around and “taking the piss,” but in the end they will follow him anywhere.

Design Method

“There are two ways to tell the story. Funny or sad. Guys like it funny, with lots of gore and a grin on your face when you get to the end. Girls like it sad, with a thousand-yard stare out to the distance as you gaze upon the horrors of war they can’t quite see. Either way, it’s the same story.”

-Phil Klay, *Redeployment*⁴

The process of designing a set for a play differs among designers and their subjects but typically the first step, after reading the play a number of times, is to come up with a design concept. The design concept establishes a guiding thread and language for the production, which ideally add cohesion to the work that the entire creative team sets out to do. But once that initial concept has been worked out it is time to begin the physical design. This is the process that will ultimately be the groundwork for the final realized set on the theatre stage.

For myself this stage of the design began with rough sketches. Before I even thought about where the actors needed to be and what the physical needs of the space were I first tried to translate my inspiration into something tangible. This proved difficult because the needs of the actors and the actual scenic elements of the play are crucial to the design. So it was at that point that I created a document to give myself an idea of what set pieces are needed when and what actors needed to be where. A set could look great but if it doesn’t function effectively then it is a failure.

Once I was clear about the physical needs of the play I was able to begin to translate those rough sketches into a workable set. For the play *Black Watch* there are 4 different settings in the story. Because my stage design is more conceptual than literal it is not necessarily crucial to have a dedicated space for each setting. Areas can morph

⁴ Phil Klay, *Redeployment* (New York, NY: The Penguin Press, 2014), 53.

into others, allowing them to serve multiple purposes, through either movable set pieces or a shift in lighting. I designed this set for a thrust stage, specifically the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's Thomas Theatre. As the name implies, this type of stage thrusts into the audience with seats on three sides of the stage.

Once I'd completed my script analysis and initial sketches I drew a scale ground plan of the stage and all the scenic elements. This ground plan was then translated into an exact $\frac{1}{4}$ inch scale model of the final set. By building this model I was able to get a three dimensional view of the stage as it would be for the performance and also see if there were any design elements I wanted to change. Based on some of the changes that were necessitated by the model I drew a final ground plan that reflected a better functioning final set. The model is also useful in rehearsals for the Director to convey ideas to the cast, it's useful for the design collaborators to see the world of the play in 3D, and lastly, it's useful in the scene shop to help the Technical Director understand the intention and structure of the design.

I decided to keep the set pieces and design fairly minimal with the exception of the maze of wires I discussed previously. The only physical set pieces are the utility poles, a large plywood rectangle in the middle of the stage, and some moveable barrels. The stage is covered in plywood and raked upstage towards the backdrop using sand that blends into the plywood. Just in front of the backdrop there is an additional set of poles with more wires that is meant to loosely resemble the shell of a destroyed building.

When thinking about the physical design another important consideration is the sight lines of the audience. For this set I had to think about these lines very carefully.

Although the set is minimal in its design the placement of the utility poles and wires could very easily adversely affect the success of the design by blocking much of the audience's view of the stage. Because there are poles and wires in the audience as well, it was necessary to include the seating area in the model. This was also useful because it made it possible to get a better view of how the wires and poles may affect the sight lines from each angle. I learned after making the model that the rake of the stage was too steep for some of the audience members to see over. Because of this fact I decided to lower the height of the stage about a foot and a half. I could not change the rake of the stage because it would have caused a problematic moving of the pool table/wagon.

After the model was built and complete I did notice one area that could have been more well thought out and if the set were being built for a real production, would have had to be rectified. For one the rake in the makes it impossible to quickly and easily go from left to right stage while on the stage. To cross the stage the actor would have to go back stage and come back on, which could be problematic. To fix this there are a few options, create a much more gradual slope on either side of the rake, lower the rake and create a flat stage area at the top of the rake, or add stairs to either side of the rake. I think the most effective solution would be a combination of the lower rake with a flat playing area and the gradual side slopes. It would make moving about the stage easier and give more sky area to play with projections and/or lighting. Even though there is not much acting happening back there, to have the option to utilize it more efficiently would be beneficial.

Despite the challenges I discovered and faced with my design, I believe it is successful and I am happy with the final product. I feel as if I stepped out of my comfort zone with the design and created something simple while still being visually interesting. Through this process I was challenged to think beyond the literal and a little into conceptual set design. One of the more difficult aspects I found while designing the set was how to convey what was in my head into writing and in the model, but in the end I believe that I was able to provide a good representation of my vision for the set design.

Design Autobiography

“Some of the evil in my tale may have been inherent in our circumstances. For years we lived anyhow with one another in the naked desert, under the indifferent heaven.”
– *T.E. Lawrence*⁵

When I was 15 my father was stationed in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, or simply *Saudi* as we began to call it. Because I was a teenaged girl I could not go to school in the country. Women had and still have very few rights in Saudi and that extended to the foreign military families that lived there. The high school aged children of the American soldiers were sent to Department of Defense boarding schools in different parts of the world. My sister and I went to a school in High Wycombe just outside of London and loved it, but we would go back to Saudi every Christmas, spring break, and summer. We lived in walled compounds, much like the communal stateside military bases of my childhood in the United States. We were insulated from the daily life of the Saudi people unless we decided to venture out. My mother was never one to stay home and live a quiet life. We were given coupon books with which to pay men in town cars or “limos”, as they were called, to come and drive us around the city of Riyadh. With our limo vouchers in hand we explored Saudi malls, restaurants, markets, and historical places. We wore abayas over our clothes and veils on our hair but we were still stared at since our pale skin, blue eyes, and light hair peaked out. But we didn't mind.

One afternoon we were wandering in an open-air market, as we had done often. We purchased rugs, pottery, and other trinkets to keep for ourselves and to send home to family. It was easy to get lost in these markets. Each stall began looking the same

⁵ T.E. Lawrence, “Seven Pillars of Wisdom,” *Project Gutenberg Australia*, published October, 2001, <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks01/0100111.txt>.

and there were many turns and alleys. While trying to make it back to our driver my mother, sister and I turned into an open area. It was crowded, very hot and there was a lot of yelling, and cheering. Because I was very short it was hard for me to see what everyone was going on about but it didn't take long for my mother to figure it out. We had wandered into Justice Square, Chop Chop Square, as it was known. My mother abruptly rushed us out of the square. Only later did she tell us that there was a man being beheaded.

Shortly after that incident, a suicide bomber attacked the building where my father and other American military members worked. Five American soldiers and one civilian were killed and many others were wounded. Up to that time our little compound, our commune, had given us the illusion, a veil, of security. It was then that the veil was pulled back, now it was clear that we were not welcome. Not long after another military building, the Kobar Towers near Dhahran, Saudi Arabia was the target of a terrorist attack. Twenty-four marines were killed. That put an end to families accompanying soldiers on their tour to Saudi Arabia. The military thought it was best then to remove dependents from the country. My mother and I, along with the other American military dependents, were evacuated in the middle of the night. We were flown to a sequence of mystery locations, often not knowing the names of the places where we were landing, and sleeping in airplane hangers. Finally, we were dropped off in Charleston, South Carolina where we were greeted by news cameras and reporters questions, given a rental car, and told to go home, wherever that was.

The 20th anniversary of the OPM SANG⁶ bombing, which blew up the building in

⁶ OPM SANG – Office of the Program Manager, Saudi Arabian National Guard

Riyadh where my father was assigned, passed recently. I didn't have a lot of emotions at the time of the anniversary, but then again I didn't have a lot of emotions when the actual event happened either. I can still remember getting news about the bombing via phone call and not feeling much after I hung up the phone. This was ironic because when I was little I used to try to cry on cue in order to get what we wanted. Devious, I know. One of the ways I would try to make myself cry was to think about my father being killed. While we were living on military bases in the United States, he was gone a lot, assigned to the Sinai desert mostly, and as far as I knew it wasn't dangerous but at those moments I would imagine it was. I would imagine he was killed in combat there. After the OPM SANG bombing I had a personal relationship with a real tragedy like those I had only imagined as a child.

And yet I remained unaffected in my day-to-day attitudes towards danger. Before the evacuation from Saudi the American military community would coordinate bombing drills where we would get in a closet or under a table, sort of the like the nuclear drills of 1950's. During these drills I was never afraid, not of the bomb threats, nor during the evacuation, never. I don't say this because I think I was brave. It's different now with Rob than with my father. I am not apathetic anymore. Rob has deployed three times and every time he is deployed I am afraid. I am also afraid that Rob could be targeted as a military member stateside. After the recent terrorist attacks in Beirut and Paris, I am terrified my husband will be sent back overseas to fight. I don't see an end in sight to the war on terror, only more years of fear.

It is not just fear for Rob, I also fear for my children. Both his family and my family have a military legacy, much like the members of the Black Watch regiment. Numerous

members of my father and mother's extended family, going back generations, were in the military, as well as my husband's father. That scares me. It scares me that my children could one day enlist in the military. As much as there are aspects of military life that I love, my experiences have shown me that it's not safe. We have been lucky. No one in my family has died in combat, but we have had close calls. I've suffered through three deployments with my husband. I don't know if I could bear my children going to war.

I have seen that spark in my son's eye, the pride he takes in being the son of a soldier that may lead him to one day want to join the military himself. The day before Veterans Day last year Rob and another soldier volunteered to go speak to students at my son's middle school where we live in West Linn, Oregon. Rob and his colleague, a senior non-commissioned officer from his unit, came to the school straight from work, still in their uniforms. Before joining the military Rob was an eighth grade history teacher who always seemed to have enjoyed teaching. I was struck by his transformation. It was interesting to see my husband back in the middle school setting. In front of those kids he immediately turned back into a teacher. The kids filed into the library and sat together among the books, mumbling under their breath about the two soldiers standing in front of them. He had reverted from the stiff and serious Company Commander from the 364th into the laid back but engaging 8th grade history teacher I remember from fifteen years ago.

The students raised their hands excitedly to ask the soldiers in front of them questions they had written. Most of their questions were benign questions such as, "why did you join the Army" and "how long have you been in the military?" But they also

asked questions such as, “Have you or anyone you know ever been injured in combat”, or “what was the most interesting thing you saw in combat?” I expected these questions, but I was curious how Rob and his colleague would answer them. They answered the questions very diplomatically and much to the disappointment of the students. The answers had nothing to do with fighting, injuries, or death. When I asked both of them later about that moment, they said they knew they would be asked those types of questions and the students would be disappointed with the answers, but they also knew the students didn’t need the real answers. Even with me they wouldn’t elaborate.

I do wonder sometimes what my husband went through during his deployments. But I don’t ask and he doesn’t tell. He acts very nonchalant about the whole thing but every once in a while he will change his demeanor or there will be a shift in his voice in a way that makes me consider the harsh experiences he has endured. He has lost friends and has probably seen things he would rather not think about. I wonder why he doesn’t talk about it. It took my father twenty years after he saw his friends and co-workers die in the terrorist explosion at his office building in Saudi Arabia before he finally admitted to himself and to us that he was suffering with PTSD. My husband has been deployed several times as part of this war. Even if he doesn't show it, I think he suffers. Both my father and my husband have lost friends and colleagues. I'm angry at how these experiences have affected them both, how their trauma affected me, and how it will affect my children. This two pronged war; the war in the Middle East and the emotional war has been a part of my life for twenty years.

One night I asked Rob to explain to me not what it's like to be in combat but what it is like to return to civilian life at the end of a combat tour. It is a commonality between soldiers that if you have not lived it you cannot fully understand it. He gave me a very useful analogy. He likened the experience to that of being a domesticated dog. Like a Labrador retriever being raised in a normal home and then thrown out to live with wolves. After a while the Lab would become accustomed to the chaotic and stressful life with the wolves. It would become its strange type of normal. If you then return the wolf into its domesticated life it obviously would have trouble adjusting. It would become untrusting of the world around it even though it has nothing to fear. The Lab would have to resist the primal urges it feels that were so normal with the wolves but then punished in its return to its domesticated life.

I can't tell you what's it's like to be in combat like my husband can. I can't relate to the characters in this *Black Watch* like maybe he could. What I know is that as the spouse of a deployed soldier every minute of every day is tense. I can tell you what it's like to worry every day that you might have a chaplain waiting on your doorstep when you get home. I can tell you what it feels like to put your husband on a plane and genuinely think you will never see him again. I can tell you what it feels like to get a phone call saying your father was in a building that was bombed by terrorists. All of this gives me a unique perspective on this war and on the play *Black Watch*. It's unique to me just as the experience of any soldier's spouse or child's experience is unique to them. While they are exclusive to each of us we also share a type of bond that is unexplainable to someone who hasn't been personally touched by war.

I found this to be true while rereading *Black Watch*. Something struck me that I had not realized before. Scattered throughout the play are some emails written from soldiers to loved ones. What occurred to me was that through all the emails and phone calls I have received from my husband throughout his three deployments he never gave details or opinions of the war or the operations they carried out. In the play the emails tend to surround the soldiers talking about what they are doing and where they are going. It made me wonder if it is just my husband who either did not want to or did not think he should mention those things or if it is the author who is using artistic license for this particular aspect of the play.

One of the only things I remember Rob telling me about the war was about when they would find abandoned vehicles outside their compound walls. If the cars were there too long eventually the American soldiers would go out onto the street and blow them up in a controlled manner. When Rob came home from Iraq he brought a few discs and photo albums with him. Most of them I never saw, he turned them in during a phase of redeployment. But there was one he showed us. It was a video of one of those abandoned cars being destroyed. Some of the soldiers had videoed the event and set it to the song Thunder by ACDC. Rob seemed to take pride in this video. I wonder if he liked it so much because it is human nature to enjoy blowing things up. Or maybe he enjoyed it because it reminded him of an operation that was simple, which ended well. Or perhaps he enjoyed it because it reminded him of vengeance for all the things that had happened there that I never saw or heard about. Vengeance for all the things that were in those photos and videos that got turned in before people like me, people who

should not see them could see them. For soldiers who are trained to fight sometimes rage can be fun.

Combat tours do take their toll on the soldier and their family. PTSD, divorce, suicide, and depression are all real results of war and constant deployments. Even if it is all I have known I am constantly reminded that military life is a strange, fun, and many times a hard reality. Recently my husband lost a friend he was deployed with to suicide. Unfortunately this was not the first and may not be the last. Most soldiers have dealt with events like this before. About a month later while attending our annual military formal a soldier who was retiring after 20+ years in the army gave an emotional speech about the only man he ever lost in combat. The other soldiers in the audience rallied around him, voicing what a great sergeant the deceased man was. The invited speaker at that event was a judge who was ex military. He spoke a lot about how many soldiers and civilians have died both in combat and because of suicide. It was a sobering and eye opening speech, one we all understood. It was a speech that connected us through the shared experience of war, whether as a soldier or the family of a soldier.

It is inevitable then that all that time spent surrounded by the military did not affect my personality and the way I view the world in some way. Being a military child and spouse is an immersive educational experience that encompasses every facet of your life. Every day I think about some aspect of military life, whether my husband will be deployed again, if we will get PCS⁷ orders and move unexpectedly, where we will live next. These thoughts are just a part of my life. I don't worry about them; in fact I embrace them. Military life has become so engrained in my psyche that I am not sure

⁷ PCS – Permanent Change of Station

what I will do when my husband retires and I don't face those types of questions everyday. I don't know who I am without the military.

Conclusion

“I fought for my regiment. I fought for my company. I fought for my platoon. I fought for my section. I fought for my mates.”
- *The soldiers of the Black Watch*⁸

Being a military spouse is tough. Constant moves, being alone, worrying about your spouse and your children’s well being is stressful. It seems that my life and my identity are all wrapped up in being a military wife. I don’t have anything that is my own. So although this thesis is about military life and war, it is also an act of me taking ownership of experiences and relationships that sometimes leave me feeling alienated and confused. It demonstrates how as an artist I can express myself through my exploration of my life as a military spouse and child. To do that successfully, I have had to be able to write honestly about my life and my feelings about my husband, my father, and this lifelong relationship I have had with the military.

Not only was the process of completing this thesis more difficult because of the level of personal exposure I felt, but also it was fraught with family emergencies, distractions, and difficulties. During the time I have worked on this project, my husband was away training for eight months, both of my parents were hospitalized, and there were a few deaths in the family. The events that unfolded felt like life imitating art. Although they were stressful, and at times emotionally draining, these circumstances actually gave me more awareness of the subject matter I was writing about and trying to process into a set design for *Black Watch*.

One of the insights I gained was about my father and his experiences with the military and PTSD. He became very ill while I was writing this thesis and his near death

⁸ Burke, 72.

brought up a lot of feelings about what he went through and how it affected him. I began to go through a lot of his papers and found applications for disability connected to the bombing in Saudi Arabia and his subsequent PTSD. I learned through his own descriptions of his emotional state the toll that the bombing and years of being away from his family had taken on him. He had helped people out of that building after it's destruction without regard to his safety. He didn't see his actions as anything spectacular. All he had to show for it was lingering guilt for surviving when many others did not. This sentiment is seen over and over again among soldiers and is one of the central themes of *Black Watch*. It took many years for this to surface for my father. It makes me wonder what emotional demons could be lurking within my husband.

It is hard to say if from undertaking this project I learned anything about my husband and his war experiences. He has always been very closed off about it and getting insight into his feelings while doing this project was no different. He acted almost as a consultant, giving me insights into what may or may not be a realistic representation of Iraq, but never going beyond the surface. We talked about the use of the wires as a both literal and metaphorical representation of Iraq, as well as the relationships between soldiers and their families. He gave me the confidence to pursue the rats' nest of wires when I thought they looked to distracting because he felt they portrayed an important point and they were an accurate image of that part of the world. That point is that they tie everything together. My husband's war stories may still be trapped in this metaphorical net, but even if he does not share them this net still has connected many pieces of our story. In the past the wires linked my husband to his deployments, to the military, to his family and to me. Through the course of this thesis

that connection came full circle, joining our experiences with the play and with the design of the set. By helping me realize that more than anything my husband was a great help in the process of completing this project.

Being closed off seems to be a trend among active military members. They don't talk about war zones as emotional experiences; they break them down into facts. I think that is where a lot of dramatized military art forms get it wrong. They focus on the random soldier who goes off the rails, not the majority who just go on with their lives. Gregory Burke did a good job of not overdramatizing the actual speech and actions of the soldiers while still being able to convey the frustration and anger that a war zone can cause. That is what this process showed me, that my husband is the norm, that he is like most soldiers. Yes, being in a war zone is horrible, but with time, for now, he has been able to separate those experiences from his real life.

Appendix A, Image 1*

*Patrick Baz, *Electrical Wires in Baghdad*. Copyright: 2008, published August 2, 2010,

Appendix A, Image 2*

*Scott Nelson, *Typical Baghdad Utility Pole*, Copyright: 2010, accessed October 3, 2015, <http://scottnelson.photoshelter.com/image/I000087XnKP4A6CI>

Appendix A, Image 3*

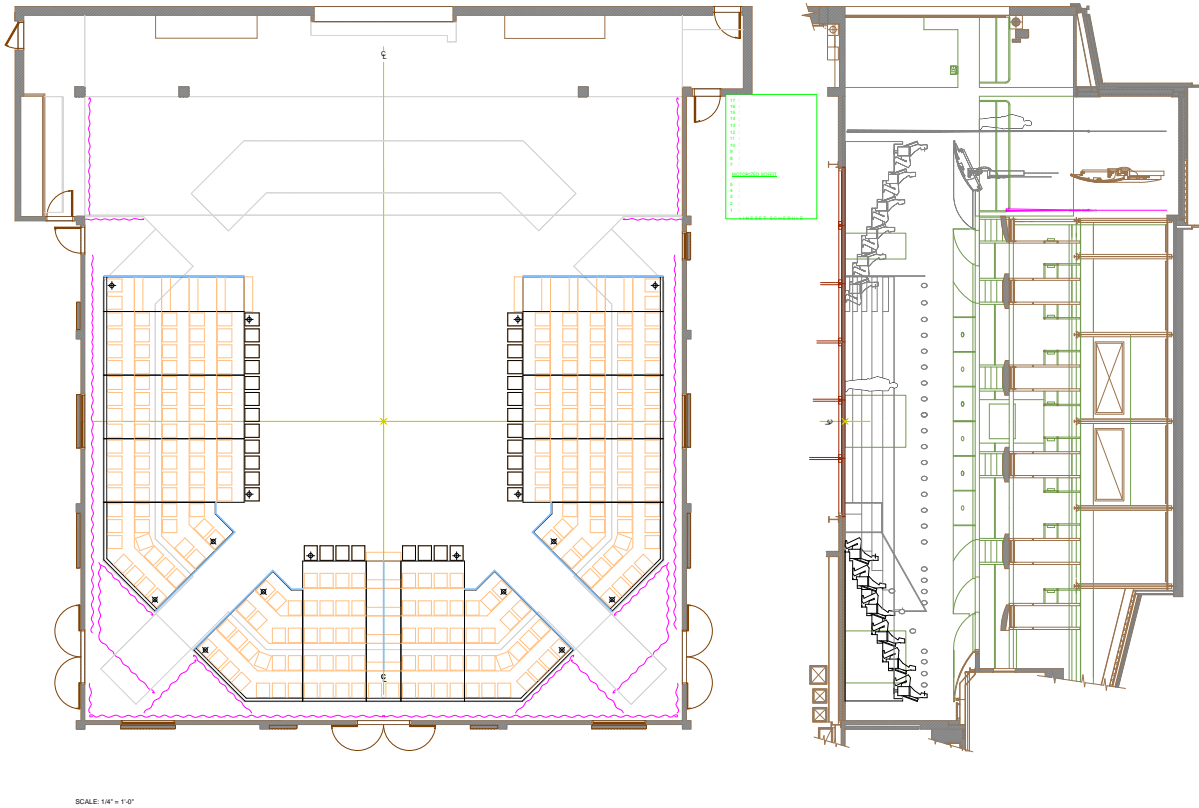


*Khalid Mohammed, *Bombed building in Baghdad*, Copyright: 2013, published May 31, 2013, <http://hereandnow.wbur.org/2013/05/31/iraq-deadly-attacks>

Appendix A, Image 4*

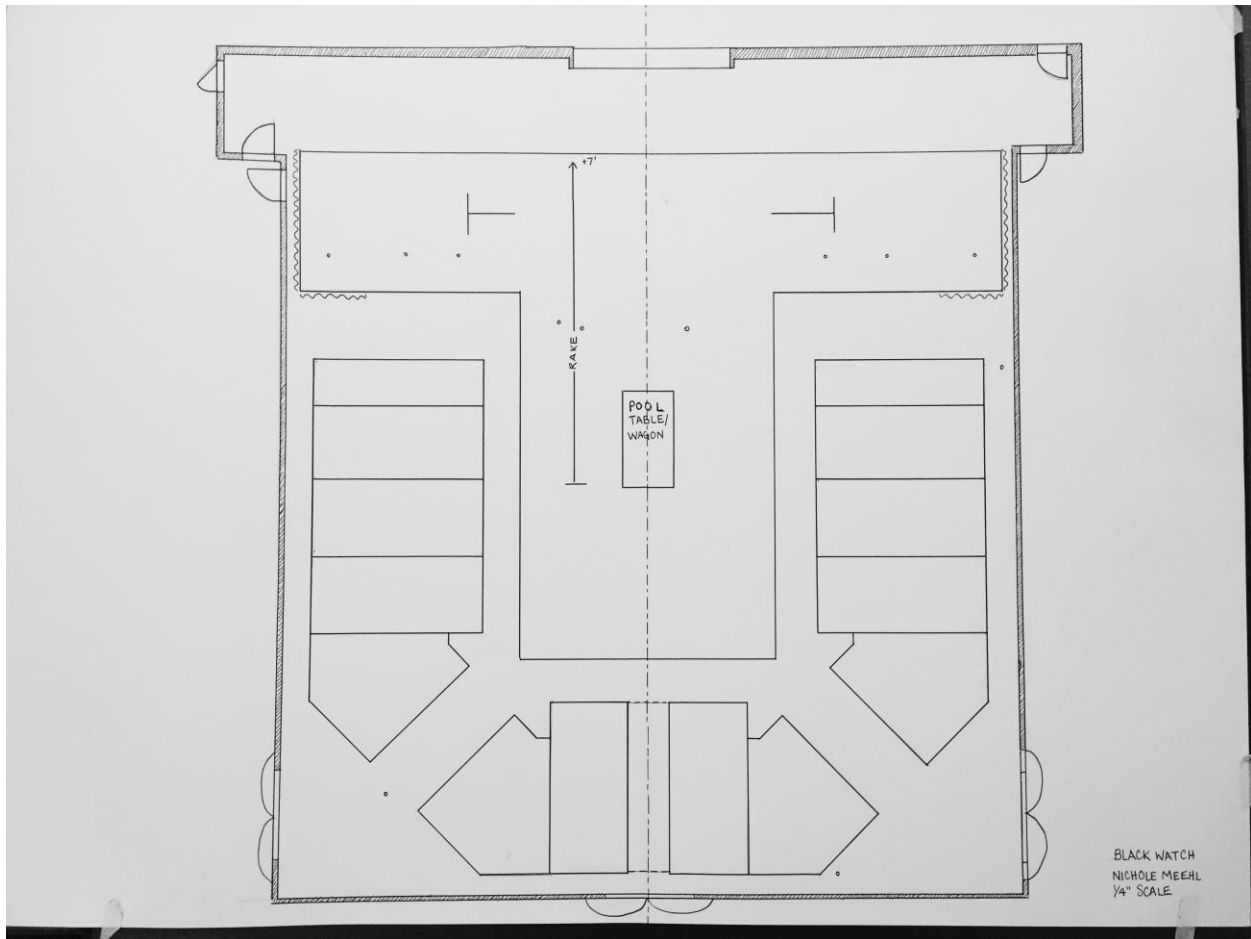
¹ P.A., *Soldiers of the Black Watch on patrol in Iraq*. Copyright: 2004, published May 7, 2012, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2141112/Historic-regiments-like-Black-Watch-face-wiped-Government-defence-cuts.html>

Appendix B, Image 1*



*Oregon Shakespeare Festival Thomas Stage blueprint, Ashland, Oregon

Appendix B, Image 2*



* *Black Watch* ground plan by Nichole Meehl

Appendix C, Image 1*



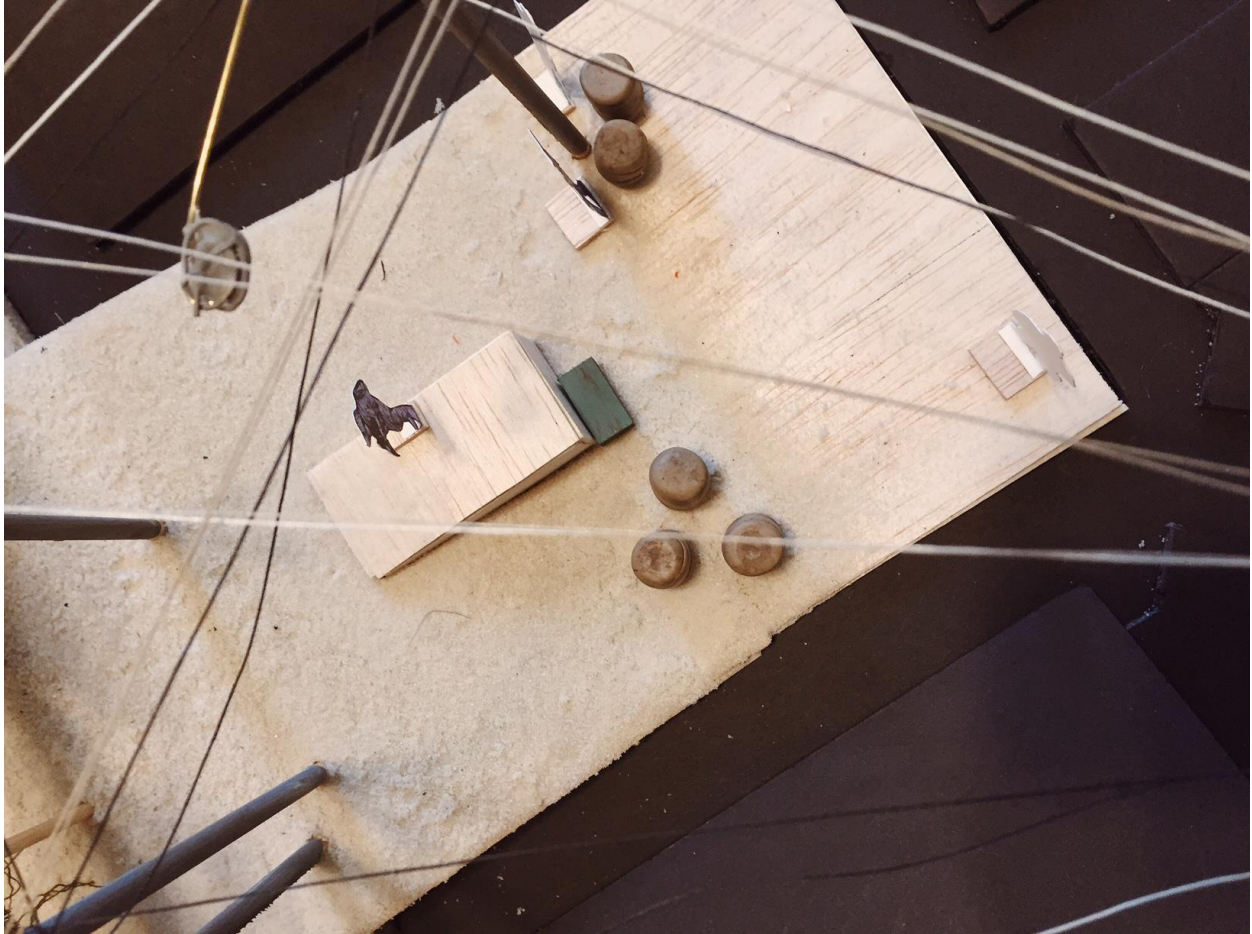
* *Black Watch* scale model view 1

Appendix C, Image 2*



* *Black Watch* scale model view 2

Appendix C, Image 3*



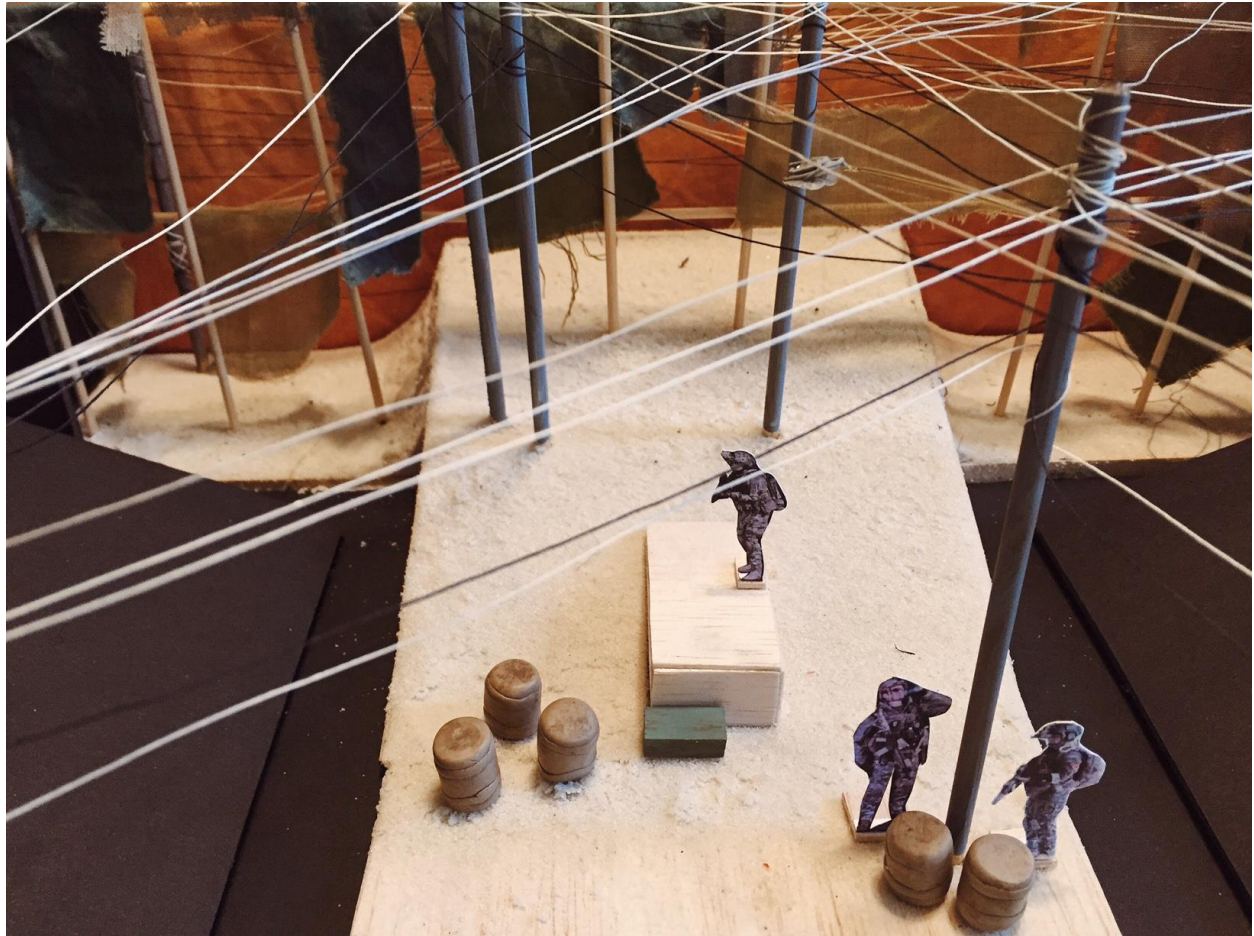
*Black Watch scale model view 3

Appendix C, Image 4*



*Black Watch scale model view 4

Appendix C, Image 5*



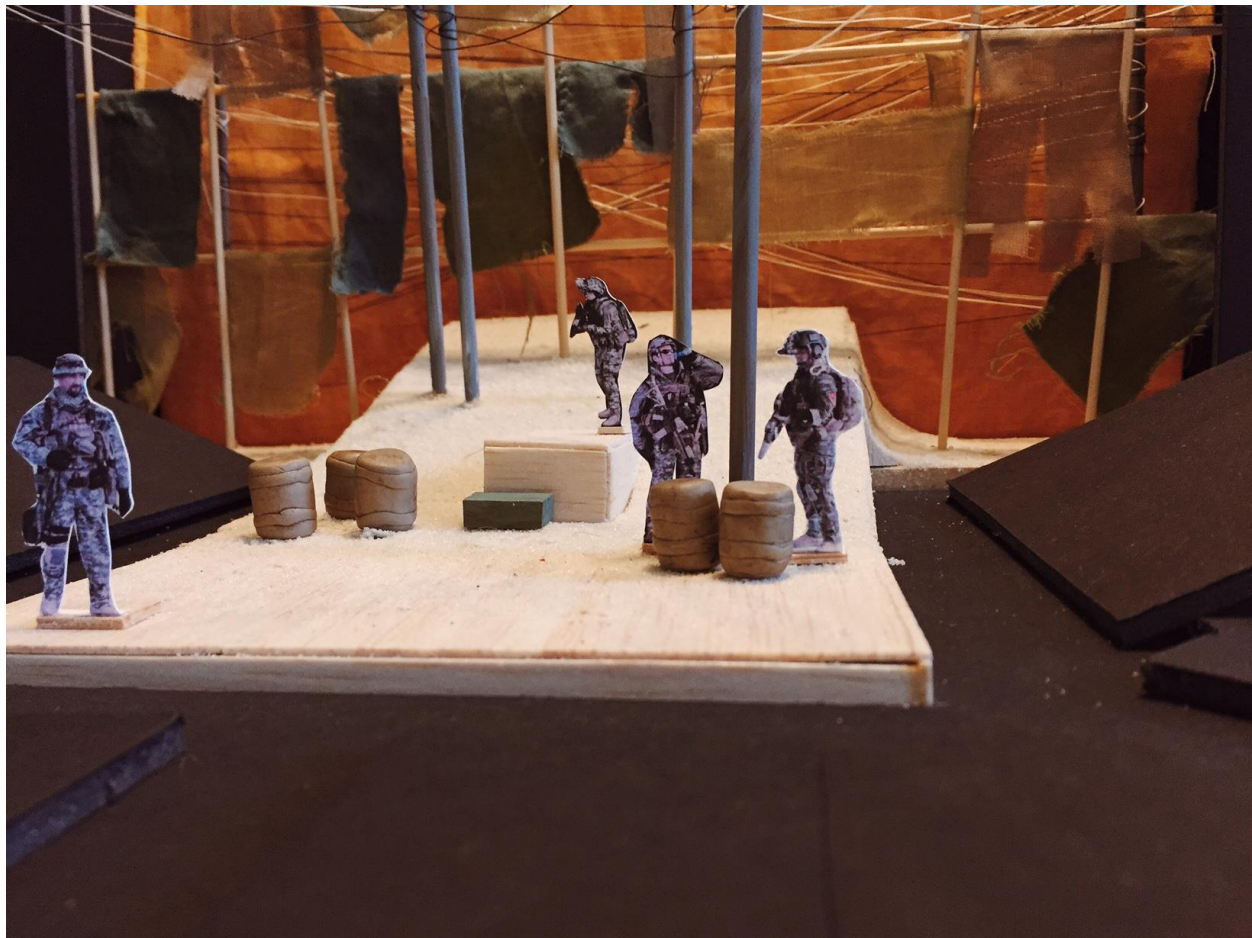
*Black Watch scale model view

Appendix C, Image 6*



*Black Watch scale model view 6

Appendix C, Image 7*



*Black Watch scale model view 7

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