



RESOURCES FOR
YOUTH ON THE
REALITIES OF
MILITARY SERVICE

► BRIAN BOIES

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A



SOLDIER

A teen comes up to the reference desk. He is interested in learning more about military service. Recruiters have been contacting him, and he wants other sources of information. Where does a librarian find resources to fill this important request?

This article lists the resources that best address this inquiry, making it easier for librarians to serve interested teens and teen advocates—parents, teachers, and others. Originally I wanted to find a single, balanced overview of the experience of military service. I searched booklists and Web sites, asked for help on the YALSA-BK listserv, and looked at Internet resources. I found quite a few Web sites with relevant information, but the value of some sites was diminished by an inflammatory tone. None of these materials are very balanced or objective, but it is our job as librarians to provide this balance through strategic comparison and contrast. These items should be given to teens with a message: All materials are biased from different directions; read them with scrutiny. Many teens have not yet learned this important life skill.

I wanted to provide material that youth could use to make rational decisions instead of emotional ones. Consider the emotional impact that a recruiter can have on a teen, who might equate the uniform with police or other authority figures, and therefore feel obliged to obey the recruiter. Teens should know that the recruiter holds no power or threat over them; a recruiter is essentially just another salesperson. On the other hand, it must be refreshing for a teen to be directly sought after when almost everyone else in today's culture seems unfriendly or dismissive toward teens.

Parents often have a strong influence on a teen's decision to join the military. Much of the information in this article has been brought to light by parents upset about recruiters' access to their children or the misstatements that recruiters make. The military has sought to counteract these concerns with a marketing campaign directed at parents of potential recruits. Although I chose the following resources with teens in mind, they could also be used by curious parents.

Demand for this type of information will only increase. The No Child Left Behind Act (2002) includes the stipulation that to qualify for federal aid, schools must provide students' contact information to military recruiters. Schools also must allow recruiters access to campus, including such activities as gym classes and other classroom presentations (Cave, *New York Times*, June 3, 2005, A1). Current long-term conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq place pressure on the military and their recruiters as well as recruits.

In January 2005, the Marines failed to meet their monthly recruiting goal for the first time in almost ten years (Schmitt, *New York Times*, February 3, 2005, A12). The Army National Guard missed its recruitment goal by more than 5,000 in 2004 (Dickinson, *Rolling Stone*, February 10, 2005, 50). Desertions in the Army have risen from 1,509 in 1995 to 4,739 in 2001; from all branches of the military, 5,500 people have deserted since the beginning of the war in Iraq (Dobie, *Harper's Magazine*, March 2005, 33-34). The Army has lowered its standards for admission to let in twenty-five percent more high school dropouts. The Marines are offering a \$30,000 reenlistment bonus (Dickinson, 48). And the military already spends almost three billion dollars a year on recruitment (Cave, *New York Times*, May 3, 2005, A23).

Several incidents of recruiters acting improperly have been recently documented. The Army itself admits that recruitment improprieties have increased sixty percent in the past five years (Cave). In April 2005, teen journalist David McSwane caught a recruiter on tape helping him to get a fake high school diploma and a drug detoxification kit (see <http://www.cbnews.com/stories/2005/05/02/earlyshow/main692561.shtml>).

Before making the pivotal decision to join the military, a young person must gather as much information from as many different sources as possible. The following resources offer a wide variety of perspectives and information on the realities of military service.

BOOKS

Ostrow, Scott A. **Guide to Joining the Military**. 2nd Ed. ARCO, 2003. 208p. \$16.95 Trade pb. 0-7689-1441-8.



In this pro-military overview of the recruitment, enlistment, and basic-training processes, Ostrow includes chapters such as "Your First Meeting with a Recruiter: Facing the Best Trained Salesperson on Earth," "Getting the Facts Together: Should or Shouldn't I Enlist?," and "Women in the Military." Although this book

appears to sensibly assuage most fears or concerns about military service, it ignores or minimizes many issues raised by other resources, such as homosexuality, the GI Bill and Veterans' benefits, soldiers' rights, rates of sexual harassment, and more.

Among this guide's many good points is its admission that like representatives of any profession, some recruiters are unscrupulous. It gives the reader basic parameters to help determine whether a recruiter is stepping beyond limits. Ostrow also explains a big reason for much enlistee disgruntlement: "Why then all those horror stories of 'how my recruiter lied to me'? In most cases, it's a matter of 'selective listening' on the applicant's part. This book helps you to understand the enlistment process and keeps you from being a selective listener" (IX). Despite its many strengths, because of its pro-military slant, Ostrow's guide is best paired with other resources.

Ensign, Tod, et al. **America's Military Today: The Challenge of Militarism**. The New Press, 2004. 410p. \$26.95. 1-56584-883-7.

Coming from a critical perspective, this in-depth, well-researched book looks into several facets of military service, many of which are not mentioned in Ostrow's **Guide to Joining the Military**. It includes chapters on military recruiting, basic training, letters from soldiers in Iraq, women in the military, gays in the military, the health effects of the use of depleted uranium in the battlefield, and a discussion of the possible return of the draft. Ensign, its main author, is a lawyer who specializes in the rights of soldiers.



Although it offers a few references for youth, the book's real target seems to be left-leaning adults. This hefty book contains a thirty-page chapter on Vietnam-era basic training as well as a theoretical feminist critique of the military as a whole. The wealth of good information here takes some commitment to find amid all the material not directly addressed to teens. Yet one important aspect of this book is that it provides a vastly different view of basic training than Ostrow's **Guide**. It includes quite a bit of information on the recruitment process and a practical section called "Words of Advice If You're Considering Enlistment." Its useful index allows young adults to gather whatever information they need from this expansive text.

Moore, Michael. **Will They Ever Trust Us Again? Letters from the War Zone**. Simon & Schuster, 2004. 240p. \$22. 0-7432-7152-3.



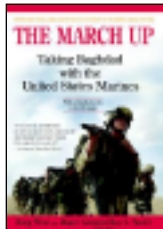
This disappointing book is basically fan letters from Iraq, with soldiers reflecting Moore's beliefs that the war in Iraq is illegitimate and that the administration is not giving soldiers enough support. Although Moore and his views are surprisingly popular in the military, he must have received letters that challenge his opinions; the book would be of more interest had he

included some of them. One quote, however, from a letter by Kyle Waldman, a soldier in Iraq, serves as an inspiration for this article and its title:

I was a naïve 19-year-old looking for a different route in life. Like most enlisted soldiers, we signed our lives away before going through a self-scrutinizing process to help us learn what a demanding commitment it was. We certainly did not know what it meant to be a soldier, but we were going to find out soon enough (17).

Several books written by journalists embedded with soldiers during the current war in Iraq give a good perspective on what combat and military life are like:

Atkinson, Rick. **In the Company of Soldiers: A Chronicle of Combat.** Henry Holt, 2004. 336p. \$25. 0-8050-7561-5. \$14 Trade pb. 0-8050-7773-1.



Smith, Ray L., and Bing West. **The March Up: Taking Baghdad with the 1st Marine Division.** Bantam, 2003. 320p. \$24.95. 0-553-80376-X. \$14 Trade pb. 0-553-38269-1.

Zucchini, David, et al. **Thunder Run: The Armored Strike to Capture Baghdad.** Atlantic Monthly Press, 2004. 368p. \$24. 0-87113-911-1. \$14 Trade pb. 0-8021-4179-X.

Wright, Evan. **Generation Kill: Devil Dogs, Iceman, Captain America, and the New Face of American War.** G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2004. 368p. \$24.95. 0-399-15193-1. \$14 Trade pb. 0-425-20040-X.



Among these embedded journalist accounts, Wright's book, from the pages of **Rolling Stone** magazine, is most likely to appeal to teens.

PAMPHLETS AND WEB SITES

Flyers and pamphlets are available at any recruiters' office (check local yellow pages under "Recruiting—Armed Forces"). Again, because of the clause in No Child Left Behind, teens will have no trouble receiving information from military recruiters by phone or on campus. Each military service maintains its own informative Web site:

<http://www.1800goguard.com> (National Guard)

<http://www.afreserve.com> (Air-Force Reserve)

<http://www.airforce.com>

<http://www.goarmy.com>

<http://www.goarmyreserve.com>

<http://www.marforres.usmc.mil> (Marines Reserve)

<http://marines.com>

<http://www.navy.com>

<http://reserves.navy.mil>

<http://www.uscg.mil> (Coast Guard)

Several political organizations run Web sites that contain printable pamphlets about military service. These organizations make no pretense toward objectivity. They raise several interesting points that go against the grain of standard military recruitment claims. One wonders what a military recruiter would say about these pamphlets.

Supporting Resistance to an Illegal War (SNAFU).

<http://www.join-snafu.org>

This organization seems to have disbanded at the height of the awareness of this issue. Their Web site and phone number are no longer in service. Yet their information from other sources is worth pursuing—and perhaps SNAFU might resurface. Their pamphlet, "Military Recruiters' Myths: The Pentagon Doesn't Want You to Know," was available at <http://www.join-snafu.org/PDFs/RecruiterMyths.pdf>. The pamphlet covered five "myths" of military recruiters, refuting these myths with cited information, often culled from government sources. Here are two examples of the pamphlet's statements and their sources: "Only 12% of male veterans and 6% of female veterans made *any use* of the skills they learned in the military in

their civilian jobs" (Magnum & Ball—Ohio State University Study). "Among personnel who signed up for the Montgomery G.I. Bill, 65% receive no money for college" (Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors). All emphases are from the originals.

The Project on Youth and Non-Military Opportunities (Project YANO). <http://www.projectyano.org>

The latest edition of the pamphlet, "What You Should Know Before Joining the Military," is available through a link on the site's front page. The pamphlet's strongest statistic: "In 2002 only 46% of enlistees in their first term were satisfied with the military way of life." Refuting the standard claims of recruiters, the pamphlet also suggests questions that a person should ask herself or himself before enlisting ("Do you enjoy being bossed around? Do you want someone constantly telling you what to do and how to do it?"). It also offers other options for a career and finding funding for college. The site contains other similar pamphlets, some in Spanish.

American Friends Service Committee—National Youth and Militarism Program. <http://www.afsc.org/youthmil/default.htm>

The printable pamphlet, "Do You Know Enough to Enlist?," is located at <http://www.afsc.org/youthmil/Military-Recruitment/Enlist.PDF>. This pamphlet takes a psychological approach based on the following questions: "Will enlistment help me achieve my goals? Am I trying to escape my own problems? Am I willing to give up control? Am I willing to kill . . . and be killed? Do I have other options?" Under the main site's "Resources" tab is a link to the Syracuse Cultural Workers site (<http://www.syraculturalworkers.com>), where a poster called "Ten Points to Consider Before You Sign a Military Enlistment Agreement" can be ordered for \$5 (click "Catalog" and then "Counter-Recruitment" in the subject index). Libraries that choose to be proactive about getting these questions out to the public might consider displaying the poster. The AFSC main Web site also contains information about conscientious objection, the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) test, and the Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC).

Center on Conscience and War. <http://www.nisbco.org>

This Web site has information, advice, and opinions about selective-service registration, conscientious objection, and the possible return of the draft.

G. I. Rights Hotline, (800) 394-9544, <http://girights.objector.org>

This site and telephone hotline provides information to those already in the military about military discharges, grievance and complaint procedures, and other civil rights.

ARTICLE

Bigelow, Bill. *The Recruitment Minefield. Rethinking Schools*, Spring 2005. http://www.rethinking-schools.org/archive/19_05/recr195.shtml

This article describes a political science unit taught by the author in collaboration with Julie O'Neill, a teacher at Franklin High School in Portland, Oregon. The students, all seniors, share their experiences with military recruiters. "One hundred percent of O'Neill's students—three untracked classes of almost 40 students each—had been recruited in some manner by one or another branch of the military," says Bigelow. "Even students whose parents had asked the school in writing not to share information with recruiters [as per No Child Left Behind] reported being contacted multiple times." One student wrote, "When I see them talking to high schoolers, they remind me of a pack of lions going in for the kill. They try to get them into a corner or up against a wall."

Included in the article is a PDF of a difficult-to-obtain enlistment contract used in the unit, which recruiters won't let prospects,

parents, or teachers take home. The class analysis of this “scary” contract shows that it allows the military to do almost anything without a breach. Declares Bigelow: “A critical examination of this document should be part of the core curriculum in every high school in the United States.” The class studied a real case resulting from this boundless contract: Emiliano Santiago’s service obligation was extended twenty-seven years and four months until 2031, following his recent honorable discharge from an eight-year term of service. Two students’ reactions to the contract: “How can one sign a contract that is always changing?” and “How can the Army focus so much on honor but not agree to honor agreements?” Teens might be drawn to this interesting and provocative article because of its inclusion of many teen voices.

CHAT ROOMS

A good way for youth to find out what military service is like is to chat online with those who are currently in the armed forces. Here are three of the several sites available:

- Look for “Military Room” under “Government and Politics” at <http://cbat.yahoo.com>.
- <http://forums.military.com/1/OpenTopic>
- <http://www.military-quotes.com/forum>

AUDIO-VISUAL RESOURCES

Army of One. <http://www.redstorm.ca/armyofone>

This feature-film documentary directed by Sarah Goodman follows (for two years) three recruits who join the military after 9/11. Coming from different backgrounds, they have vastly different experiences in the military. The film is currently being shown on the Discovery Times Channel and in a few select theaters. Its powerful reviews, unprecedented access, and the visual medium’s appeal to teens make it valuable for this resource list. Check its Web site (and other commercial and professional sources) for availability.

Gunner Palace. DVD. Color. 85 min. Produced by Palm Pictures, 2005. Directed by Michael Tucker and Petra Epperlein. \$24.99. <http://www.gunnerpalace.com>

This documentary follows a group of soldiers over a period of time in Iraq. The soldiers live in Saddam Hussein’s son’s palace and participate in raids in Baghdad. The film has been hailed for its objective view of the war. The *San Francisco Chronicle* calls it “the best glimpse yet of what it’s like to be in Iraq” (LaSalle, March 4, 2005, E5). One teen journalist calls it “the greatest film in the history of American cinema” (Morse, *Youth Outlook*, March/April 2005, 24). After a theatrical run, the DVD was released in June 2005.

Fahrenheit 9/11. DVD. Color. 122 min. Columbia Tristar, 2004. Directed by Michael Moore. \$19.94. VHS \$50.99. <http://www.fahrenheit911.com>

This infamous documentary by Michael Moore has a section on recruiting as well as soldiers talking about their realities of military service. It shows recruiters in action and discussing their tactics. It also discusses veterans’ benefits, and profiles injured soldiers relating how they have been treated. This documentary could be very enlightening to teens, but it comes with a lot of baggage and some of the self-serving problems mentioned above in the summary of Michael Moore’s book.

Live from Iraq. Various Artists. CD. 4th25 Entertainment, 2005. \$12. <http://4tb25.com>

This hip-hop CD was recorded in Baghdad by soldiers, one of whom ordered \$35,000 in recording equipment and had it sent to Iraq. It claims to be “the only album ever produced, written, and

recorded by soldiers at war—about war.” Although this independently distributed CD has gathered few reviews in the mainstream press, it stands out as an important document of the war, illuminating the Iraq situation in the soldiers’ own words and medium. Order from its Web site.

National Public Radio. <http://www.npr.org>

National Public Radio (NPR) has done many stories on the current realities of military service. Find them by searching their Web site for “military service” or “military recruitment.” Although many libraries will not have facilities for listening to these broadcasts and it might be difficult to convince teens to listen, NPR-style radio stories can be very powerful and informative, especially to someone who has never heard them before. These broadcasts are some of the most balanced pieces on this list. Here are links to a few of the most relevant stories—the last link to *School Counselors Grapple with Military Recruitment*, a January 2005 story by Elaine Korry, is especially fitting:

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4488292>

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4242682>

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1904094>

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4464458>

Youth Radio. <http://www.youthradio.org>

This radio for youth by youth, based in Berkeley, California, broadcasts regularly on several NPR and Pacifica outlets. Check their Web site for details. Several features on military service can be found at <http://www.youthradio.org/politics/iraqindex.shtml>. The stories are organized under such categories as Voices from the Military, Views on the War, and The Draft.

CONCLUSION

No doubt many people benefit greatly from military service. Yet in my research for this article, I came across many sobering facts. The decision to join the military is perhaps the most important commitment that an eighteen-year-old man or woman can make. By providing these resources to teens, libraries and schools can help them to make informed decisions about whether or not military service is right for them. ■

SOURCES

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