

Arms and the woman

Life in the Irish army is different for women: it means reconciling military service with raising a family, and one of the high-flyers paid a high price

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IN THE SHADOW OF MEN — Is the Army Any Place for a Woman? by VALERIE O'BRIEN
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At first glance, Valerie O'Brien's website is a wide-eyed tribute to the power of hope. The opening page is dominated by a video from YouTube listing famous quotes to the tune of John Lennon's Imagine. Famous lines and thoughts about hope, dreams and ambition are packed in all the way down the page. One quote, attributed to Voltaire on the website but originally coined by Jonathan Swift, declares: "Vision is the art of seeing things invisible to others." It is a line that chimes with O'Brien's story more than any other, one that shows how violently dreams can collide with reality. O'Brien imagined things that were impossible, but also glaringly missed and neglected the things at the centre of her life that she cherished most.

Despite a desperately clunky and uncertain start, the story of her life in the Irish army turns out to be more than a retreading of the same formulaic steps as the Private Benjamins and GI Janes of Hollywood invention. As well as smashing through the glass ceilings that previously incubated female soldiers, O'Brien also wanted the big house, the happy family and the doting husband. She strove to win the award for best overall soldier during her training to become a non-commissioned officer, and succeeded. She applied to become the first Irish female soldier to be attached to an infantry battalion as a combat soldier and was chosen. She served in

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Lebanon and Eritrea with the United Nations. She chased a post with the elite Army Rangers until her body broke down. She endured bullying, physical assaults, sexual harassment and an almost complete loss of her feminine identity to stay in the army.

In the end, she failed to juggle both lives, and fell victim to bulimia and a crippling series of illnesses. She arrived home one evening to discover that her young son spoke better Polish than English because he had spent so much time with the au pair. Her marriage fell apart under the strain of army ambitions, shared by O'Brien and her husband. Her army life was decorated with almost everything she ever aspired to. In the end, though, she was left with nothing she truly cared for.

Her colourful recollections of her tours of duty with the United Nations detail the routine use of a brothel for Irish soldiers stationed at a base in Asmara, the capital of Eritrea. Some of the women were beaten by their Irish customers. Some were promised a life in Ireland by soldiers before being jilted. Others were denied monetary payment in favour of chickens and pizza, often liberated from the army store.

Those experiences left a deep mark on O'Brien, and continued to exact a toll when she returned home, taking years to heal. Yet this book at its best isn't simply about equality or a woman's place in the army, or even the drunken tendencies of our male soldiers overseas. It depicts the tyranny of choice that tortured so many people during the Celtic tiger, when prosperity and opportunity insisted we could have our cake and eat it with any amount of cream we like.

In the end, O'Brien's path led her to happiness with her children and a new life as a beautician. By finally giving up everything she ever dreamt of, she got close to everything she ever needed.





Fighting a losing battle:
O'Brien in uniform

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