Hierarchies of Heroism: Captain Tom, Spitfires, and the Limits of Militarized Vicarious Resilience during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Across the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has seen the label of "hero" assigned to an expanded range of unexpected figures, from carers to supermarket delivery drivers, lauded for their selflessness. In Britain, however, none received the levels of public veneration experienced by the late Captain Sir Tom Moore, who became famous for completing a sponsored walk of his garden for his 100th birthday, raising £38.9 million for National Health Service charities. What can account for the resonance of an elderly war veteran in the context of a global health emergency? Contributing to nascent international relations scholarship on vicarious identity, ontological security, and militarism, in this article we develop the concepts "vicarious resilience" and "vicarious militarism" to explain why "Captain Tom" captured the British public imagination. While objects of vicarious identification are typically distinguished by their superior agency, we argue that the case of Captain Tom is interesting because it was not Moore's agency but his *symbolism* that made him a target for vicarious identification. Specifically, his military symbolism facilitated vicarious identification with Britain's mythologized wartime past aimed at assuaging ontological anxieties generated by the pandemic and boosting national resilience. However, the broader militarized pandemic response also reasserted gendered and racialized military heroism at a moment when the category of hero was being extended to civilian occupations. Finally, we note the limits of vicarious militarism in responding to ontological insecurity, including its tendency to generate anxieties of intergenerational insufficiency and its rhythmic/episodic character, concluding by commenting on the future trajectory of pandemic subjectivities.

En todo el mundo, la pandemia de COVID-19 ha hecho que se asigne la etiqueta de "héroe" a un amplio abanico de personajes inesperados, desde cuidadores hasta repartidores de supermercados, alabados por su forma de actuar desinteresada. Sin embargo, en el Reino Unido, ninguno recibió los niveles de veneración pública experimentados por el difunto capitán Sir Tom Moore, que se volvió famoso por completar una caminata patrocinada alrededor de su jardín con motivo de su cumpleaños número 100 y recaudar 38,9 millones de libras para organizaciones benéficas del NHS. ¿Qué puede justificar la repercusión de un veterano de guerra en el contexto de una emergencia sanitaria mundial? En este artículo desarrollamos los conceptos de "resiliencia vicaria" y "militarismo vicario" para explicar por qué el Capitán Tom capturó la imaginación del público británico; de esta manera, hacemos nuestro aporte a la naciente erudición de las RR. II. sobre la identidad vicaria, la seguridad ontológica y el militarismo. Mientras que los objetos de la identificación vicaria se distinguen típicamente por su organismo superior, sostenemos que el caso del Capitán Tom es interesante porque no fue la entidad de Moore, sino su simbolismo, lo que lo convirtió en un objetivo para la identificación vicaria. Específicamente, su simbolismo militar facilitó la identificación vicaria con el pasado bélico mitificado de Gran Bretaña, con el objetivo de mitigar las ansiedades ontológicas que generó la pandemia e impulsar la resiliencia nacional. Sin embargo, la respuesta a la pandemia más militarizada también reafirmó el heroísmo militar racial y de género en un momento en que la categoría de héroe se estaba extendiendo a las ocupaciones civiles. Por último, señalamos los límites del militarismo vicario para responder a la inseguridad ontológica, en la que se incluye su tendencia a generar ansiedades de insuficiencia intergeneracional y su carácter rítmico/episódico, para concluir comentando la trayectoria futura de las subjetividades pandémicas.

Dans le monde entier, durant la pandémie de COVID-19, l'étiquette de « héros » a été attribuée à un éventail élargi de personnes, des soignants aux chauffeurs-livreurs de supermarchés, qui ont fait l'objet de louanges pour leur altruisme. En Grande-Bretagne, cependant, aucun d'entre eux n'a bénéficié d'autant d'adoration du public que le regretté capitaine Sir Tom Moore, qui est devenu célèbre pour avoir effectué une marche sponsorisée dans son jardin pour son 100e anniversaire, ce qui a permis de lever 38,9 millions de livres sterling pour des œuvres caritatives au bénéfice du NHS. Comment expliquer la résonance d'un ancien combattant âgé dans le contexte d'une urgence sanitaire mondiale ? Dans cet article contribuant aux recherches naissantes en RI qui portent sur l'identité par procuration, la sécurité ontologique et le militarisme, nous développons les concepts de « résilience par procuration » et de « militarisme par procuration » pour expliquer pourquoi le « capitaine Tom » a captivé l'imagination du public britannique. Bien que les objets d'une identification par procuration soient généralement distingués par leur agentivité supérieure, nous soutenons que le cas du capitaine Tom est intéressant car ce n'était pas l'agentivité de Moore mais plutôt son symbolisme qui en ont fait une cible d'identification par procuration. Plus précisément, son symbolisme militaire a facilité l'identification par procuration avec le passé mythifié de la Grande-Bretagne en temps de guerre ayant pour objectif d'apaiser les angoisses ontologiques générées par la pandémie et de renforcer la résilience nationale. Cependant, la réponse militarisée à la pandémie a également réaffirmé l'héroïsme militaire genré et racialisé à un moment où la catégorie de héros était étendue aux professions civiles. Enfin, nous constatons les limites du militarisme par procuration lorsqu'il s'agit de répondre à l'insécurité ontologique, notamment sa tendance à générer des angoisses d'insuffisance intergénérationnelle et son caractère rythmique/épisodique, et nous concluons en commentant la trajectoire future des subjectivités pandémiques.

Doing beats being every time: Just look at Captain Tom
(Julie Burchill, The Daily Telegraph, 19 April 2020)

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, and the vast social and economic disruption that followed, understandably dominated the global airwaves in 2020/2021. Accompanying it was a parallel proliferation of the language of heroism in public and official discourse. In Britain, those hailed as heroes included delivery drivers, shop workers, garbage collectors, carers, and especially National Health Service (NHS) staff who worked exhausting shifts in hospitals where COVID-19 was running rampant, often at great cost to their health. Between March and December 2020, over 850 healthcare professionals died from COVID-19 in England and Wales (Shone 2021). For many more, the pandemic has exacted a lasting toll, with levels of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and "long COVID," particularly high among healthcare professionals (Gilleen et al. 2021). Admiration for healthcare workers was particularly evident during the first national lockdown (March—May/June 2020). Rainbow flags adopted as a symbol of the NHS adorned house windows, shop fronts, civic buildings, and other public spaces, while 8 pm on Thursdays was set aside for the nation to "clap for the NHS" from their doorsteps—something undertaken by large numbers of people (BBC News 2020a).

In the pantheon of British pandemic heroes, however, one figure became preeminent in the British public imagination. We refer to Captain (later Sir) Tom Moore—a British Second World War (WW2) veteran who rose to public fame by completing a one-hundred-lap sponsored walk of his garden to raise money for NHS charities on his 100th birthday during lockdown. Moore's efforts became the subject of (inter)national media and political coverage and captured the British public imagination, as testified by his walk ultimately raising £38.9 million for charity and being voted in one poll as the "highlight of 2020," notably surpassing other perceived highlights including a "new appreciation for key workers" (Jenkins 2020). Indeed, despite attempts to draw attention to the contributions of individual NHS staff (especially those who had died of COVID-19), no individual was venerated during the pandemic quite like Moore. While several public health officials (e.g., Chief Medical Officer Professor Chris Whitty) became household names, their public image was characterized more by technocratic expertise than heroism, especially as their roles in advocating lockdowns made them politically contentious figures. By contrast, "Captain Tom's" popularity never wavered through to his death from COVID-19 in February 2021 (an event that even prompted a White House tribute) and continued posthumously (BBC News 2021).

The conspicuous attention accorded to Moore compared to other British pandemic figures provides the animating puzzle for this study: why did "Captain Tom" resonate with the public, becoming a widely venerated national hero, when others' contributions never received equivalent recognition? The article's epigraph suggests that the explanation lies in what Captain Tom "did" rather than who he was. Yet, Moore's contribution was also clearly quite different in character from that of keyworkers. Whereas the heroism of healthcare professionals and keyworkers stemmed from their tangible contributions to the pandemic effort, Moore's heroism stemmed from his willingness to undertake an impressive but ultimately indirect action to raise money for those risking their lives daily to save others. This is not to denigrate Moore's efforts, but to suggest that his contribution was qualitatively different, being primarily psychosocial rather than material. Moreover, contrary to Burchill's assertion, we argue that it is exactly who Moore "was"—a captain and WW2 veteran—and who he was understood to symbolically represent, the so-called greatest generation, which mattered more. In this respect, the Captain Tom phenomenon marked a reassertion of militarized social hierarchies at a time when civilian rather than military heroism had been ascendant in public discourse.

To make this argument, we first draw on emerging theories of "vicarious identity" in international relations (IR; e.g. Browning et al. 2021), which highlight how vicarious identification often operates as a mechanism for managing self-anxieties and enhancing ontological security. We then bring this literature into conversation with scholarship on "militarism," which refers to the *normalization* of the existence, function, and ethos of the military in modern societies (Enloe 2000; Robinson 2016, 258). Militarism is present when governments reach for military solutions to nonmilitary problems and entails a *privileging* of military values in society, typically marking out those with military experience as idealized citizens (Enloe 2000). Thus, militarism frequently involves the privileging of military service and sacrifice *over* civilian contributions. Bringing together scholarship on vicarious identification and militarism, we develop the concept of "vicarious militarism"—the process of living through and drawing self-identity and status from the military exploits and reputation of others.

Two sections then illustrate vicarious militarism at work during the COVID-19 pandemic. We start by analyzing the case of "Captain Tom" as the quintessential example of vicarious militarism before exploring other cases of vicarious identity promotion in the "war on COVID," evident in the widespread deployment of military metaphors, nostalgic references to WW2, and Spitfire flypasts. We argue that a nostalgic form of vicarious militarism has been tempting because it facilitates a form of "vicarious resilience" that reinforces individual and national ontological security—particularly through reaffirming self/national identity and esteem—at a time of deep uncertainty and powerlessness. Yet, vicarious militarism also functions to construct a hierarchy of heroism. We end, therefore, by indicating the limitations of vicarious militarism during the pandemic, highlighting its operation as a form of societal disciplinary power within which seeds of national division are evident. More fundamentally, we argue that vicarious militarism's ability to resolve anxieties around identity and self-esteem is inherently double-edged, especially in the context of a pandemic in which the "heroic" actions most have been asked to perform have largely involved staying at home. In concluding, we note the episodic character of (militarized) vicarious resilience demonstrated by the changing resonance of war framings and "Captain Tom" in the context of the shifting British public mood.

Overall, the article makes two key contributions. The first is in deepening scholarly understanding of societal responses to the profound insecurity generated by the pandemic, where a particular focus has been on analyzing the evident mobilization of securitizing practices (for an overview, see Kirk and McDonald 2021, 3–5) and linked observations about the militarization of the pandemic symbolized by the prominent roles played by military institutions in national responses (Gibson-Fall 2021). The article broadens the focus beyond military institutions themselves, by considering militarization as a deeper phenomenon

involving the diffusion of militarist values and subjectivities. We explore how these have influenced societal framings and responses to the pandemic at the level of the everyday, thereby developing the existing understandings of militarism as a resource for ontological security in the British pandemic response.

To substantiate this argument, the article makes a second theoretical contribution to emerging scholarship on vicarious identity, ontological security, and militarism by developing the concepts "vicarious militarism" and "vicarious resilience." Here, existing scholarship has observed how crisis situations that challenge subjects' sense of self-identity and self-esteem often generate calls for national resilience as a mechanism for restoring a sense of individual and national ontological security. In such situations, the onus for upholding societal security is often shifted onto ordinary citizens' ability to absorb shocks and to continue performing national narratives and routines (Brassett et al. 2013). We extend this thought by showing how in a pandemic, which has at times severely curtailed people's own ability to enact and uphold self-identity narratives and routines, desires for resilience have been pursued *vicariously* by identifying with objects embodying national—and militarized traits. Although we primarily use these concepts to understand the case of Captain Tom and the militarized character of the broader British pandemic response, this case also allows us to challenge a more general supposition in the study of vicarious identity: namely, that targets of vicarious identity are typically characterized by their superior agency and ability. In helping to make sense of militarism as a response to existential anxieties, these concepts deepen our understanding of militarized responses to crises in other national contexts.

Vicarious Identity as Ontological Security

Central to understanding the disproportionate amount of public and political attention Captain Tom generated is recognizing how he became a target of vicarious identification at a time of significant societal anxiety. Vicarious identity references the phenomenon of "living through another" and appropriating the other's experiences and achievements as if they happened to the subject itself (Goldstein and Cialdini 2007; Norrick 2013; Cochrane 2014). Despite sounding unusual, vicarious identity is commonplace, being notably evident in familial relationships when parents "live through" their children, drawing pride and self-esteem (and even vicarious credit) from their achievements or experiences. It is also evident in the bragging rights assumed by fans when "their" team wins (Cialdini et al. 1976). Unlike identification ("identifying [and even empathizing] with the experiences of others short of appropriating them as one's own") or admiration ("respecting and appreciating another [and their actions], possibly with the aim of emulating them"), vicarious identity often entails an element of bathing in reflected glory via a particular relationship of close association that merges self with other (Browning et al. 2021, 17).

Recently, the idea of vicarious relationships has been applied to understand elements of international politics. For instance, Silvestri (2013; also Steele 2019a) has analyzed the proliferation of military "homecoming" videos associated with US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, noting how they encourage viewers to emotionally identify with military families and strengthen their sense of national belonging, participation, and "vicarious sacrifice." Similarly, Gollwitzer et al. (2014) have analyzed how the 9/11 terrorist attacks generated feelings of "vicarious victimization" among many US citizens, with this being replaced by a sense of "vicari-

ous revenge" following Osama bin Laden's assassination ten years later (Steele 2013).

Evident in these cases is a process through which vicarious identity is established with a broader (usually national) community, something also visible in Anderson's (1983) emphasis on nations as "imagined communities" where, through socialization, citizens come to feel affinity with co-nationals and become emotionally invested in the nation. Here, a further analytical distinction can be drawn between "vicarious identification" and "vicarious identity promotion." The former refers to practices that subjects engage in while establishing a sense of vicarious identity, while the latter refers to active attempts—often undertaken by leaders, the press, or other national custodians—to actively induce citizens into vicariously identifying with others, typically deemed to symbolize national ideals (Browning et al. 2021, 81–82). Insofar as such promotion is successful, we become emotionally invested in how "our" nation fares, be that on the sports field, in economic or cultural competition, in diplomatic battles, or on the battlefield itself. And if the nation—through its representatives—fares well/poorly we may feel pride/humiliation, even though we ourselves most likely played no part (Browning et al. 2021, 57).

There may, of course, be different drivers that push subjects to embrace a vicarious identity. However, in a recent analysis of the concept's application to IR, Browning et al. (2021) argue that it often functions as a mechanism through which subjects are able to reinforce a sense of ontological security, status, and self-esteem. Drawing from existentialist philosophy, ontological security emphasizes subjects' need to be able to bracket out existential anxieties related to questions of nonbeing around death, meaning/purpose, and their need for moral standing (Tillich 2014), if they are to be able to "go on" with life without becoming overwhelmed (Giddens 1991; Rumelili 2021). To manage these anxieties, subjects develop ontological frameworks comprised of (auto)biographical narratives, routines, and trust relations, which provide a socially situated sense of stability, predictability, agency, and self-esteem. Although anxiety is an existential condition, then, insofar as subjects can sustain such frameworks, they are able to keep dread at bay, thereby facilitating a sense of normality and ontological security.

However, subjects' sense of ontological security is inevitably, periodically challenged by crises. These can be personal in nature, like breakups or near-death experiences, but they can also be events experienced collectively—wars, terror attacks, elections/referenda, or disasters—that strike at the heart of our collective being and result in anxiety aggregating to the level of a "public mood" (Rumelili 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic is such an event, having activated ontological anxieties connected to death and the health of friends and family, profoundly disrupted people's everyday routines and destabilized social relations, and raising questions of meaning and purpose. Although such anxieties have been experienced at the individual level, they have also had societal manifestations, with COVID-19 raising fundamental questions, for example, about the structure and functioning of society and the economy and the competence of government and science. Lockdown has also involved the reordering of social labor hierarchies, thus entailing novel social relations and anxieties around guilt and individual moral value, especially among those in non-key worker positions.

Ontological security scholarship has typically focused on how actors at different levels respond to anxieties generated by unpredictable events through a range of

different ontological security-seeking strategies. These include rearticulating identity narratives, adopting new routines, reaffirming home, deploying humor to relieve stress and reconstitute community, and transposing anxieties onto objects of fear via securitization (see Kinnvall and Mitzen 2017). Some of these were evident during COVID-19 lockdowns, during which people adopted new routines such as daily exercise (e.g., British readers might recall the sudden popularity of Joe Wick's online exercise routines), reclaimed the notion of home through renovation or even by moving house, and (as discussed later) turned to humor to make sense of the situation.

As noted, though, vicarious identification provides an alternative ontological security-seeking strategy through which subjects can reaffirm a claimed identity or status, or extend their sense of agency by vicariously investing in the actions and identities of others who are generally assumed to be more capable than the identifier. However, vicarious identity also entails significant vulnerabilities, not least that the actions of vicarious proxies could embarrass and reflect poorly on the identifying subject, or that subjects' claims could be called out by others for "passing"—possibilities which render vicarious identity (in most cases) a nonideal strategy. Thus, while vicarious identity is (like other strategies) most likely to appeal in contexts where a subject's sense of self-identity or standing is destabilized, Browning et al. argue that its inherent vulnerabilities mean that it is likely to be restricted to contexts in which the identifying actor's own personal agency to resolve anxiety is especially constrained or meaningless. For example, at a state level they suggest that practices of vicarious identification with the United States via the "special relationship" have historically enabled the United Kingdom to avoid confronting the full extent of its postimperial decline and uphold a self-narrative as a global power by claiming a role of global leadership by proxy (Browning et al. 2021, Chapter 4). Thus, vicarious identification has the potential to satisfy ontological security-seeking in situations when the subject may perceive that its own agency is lacking in some way.

The example of the UK–US "special relationship" also highlights two further points regarding the salience of vicarious identification as an ontological security-seeking strategy. First, the fact that certain targets are the repeated focus of vicarious identification over time suggests that a further facilitating condition is the existence of embedded resources for vicarious identification in societal discourses that can be easily (re)activated. The next section highlights how the existence of a readily accessible intertextual vernacular around (nostalgic) militarism helped make vicarious identification with a war veteran an intuitive move for many Britons. Second, the US–UK "special relationship" also indicates the "rhythmic" or episodic character of both anxiety and vicarious identity as phenomena of (inter)national politics. This highlights the limitations of vicarious identity: that when anxiety—or certain configurations of it—dissipates, vicarious identification is liable to become less attractive, ceding to the more distant forms of social relation (e.g. identification and admiration) noted above. This does not necessarily mean that objects of vicarious identification are abandoned altogether; rather, they may "become latent […] [and] reactivated in times of stress" (Browning et al. 2021, 192).

With this overview in mind, it is worth noting that the configuration of society-wide anxieties activated by the COVID-19 pandemic has rendered vicarious identification particularly attractive. Notable here is the extent to which, for many, lockdown conditions generated profound feelings of powerlessness that confounded social norms of crisis re-

sponse. For instance, whereas crisis management in Britain and beyond often consists of calls for citizens to uphold societal resilience by defiantly "going on" with normal narratives and routines in the face of challenges to the social order, by discursively recoding citizens as biopolitical threats to themselves and others the pandemic has necessitated that most people *not* show resilience in the usual ways (Chandler 2020), and not impede the notably centralized efforts of key workers, with these enhancing anxieties of powerlessness and loss of agency.

In this context, we suggest that vicarious identification has operated as a mechanism for managing self-anxieties and enhancing ontological security through its ability to promote a sense of *vicarious resilience*. We understand "vicarious resilience" as a phenomenon whereby subjects seek to manage anxieties and draw reassurance by vicariously identifying with the experiences and actions of others. In conditions where personal agency is limited, objects of vicarious resilience can offer subjects' the possibility of vicariously realizing their own desires to endure and surpass during moments of crisis and threat. In this way, the resilience of objects and subjects can become psychologically fused, with objects standing for "our" collective resilience, thus reassuring subjects that they will survive because of the traits embodied by the fantasy object. During the pandemic, vicarious resilience has often taken a national framing, reflecting ontological security insights regarding how people come to "live through" the nation, especially in times of crisis (Marlow 2002). Specifically, we argue that practices of vicarious resilience during the pandemic have often been explicitly tied to a broader affective politics of national becoming that has itself been reflective of a more general sense of existential anxiety at the national level. Thus, it is not only individuals who may derive comfort through vicariously identifying with the actions of other citizens, but the nation itself that has likewise sought to salve collective anxieties, thus reaffirming established nostalgic narratives of national identity—narratives also constituting hierarchies of status.

Finally, while practices of vicarious identification have the potential to reinforce a subject's sense of ontological security and status, and may be attractive for that reason, as with other ontological security-seeking strategies vicarious identities are never able to resolve underpinning anxieties entirely and may also become a source of anxiety themselves. In the final section, we explore how the comfort generated through vicarious identification with Captain Tom and all he is seen to stand for is double-edged and exposed whenever there is an injunction that ultimately we do not match up to the fantasized ideal. In concluding, we also reflect upon the limits and rhythmic character of vicarious identification by reflecting on the changing resonance of "Captain Tom" in light of the shifting British public mood and amid attempts by the British government to "move on" from the pandemic.

Vicarious Militarism and the Affective Politics of Remembrance

Returning to the article's activating puzzle, why did Captain Tom become a particular target of vicarious identity (promotion) and an embodiment of societal vicarious resilience, as demonstrated below? In principle, vicarious identification with the nation can take different forms. For instance, it is evident in the emotional engagement with national sports teams whenever fans cheer on "our" players. During the pandemic even scientists became the target of

vicarious identification, most evident in the emergence of the phenomenon of "vaccine nationalism" and pride that "our" scientists were leading the way. However, the answer to why Captain Tom became a particular target of vicarious identification arguably lies in how vicarious identification with the nation often takes a militarized form, in this case being closely connected to the prominence of militarism in contemporary Britain.

Militarism broadly refers to "the prevalence of warlike values in society" (Gillis 1989, 1; Robinson 2016, 258). While it can be disaggregated in different ways (see Stavrianakis and Selby 2013, 14–15), for our purposes two interconnected elements are especially important. The first concerns the *normalization* of the military's existence and function in society with "militarization" referring to a process through which society "comes to imagine military needs and militaristic presumptions to be not only valuable but also normal" (Enloe 2000, 3). This element of militarism is evident, for example, when military tactics, cultures, equipment, and weaponry are adopted by law-enforcement organizations. It is also evident in the now-routinized visible presence of military personnel at sporting occasions (Kelly 2013). However, we also see it in the proliferation of military aesthetics as a commercially lucrative means of selling fashion, food, and toys (Enloe 2000).

Second, and closely linked to normalization, is the *privileging* of military values and a "military ethos." Here, militarism "covers every system of thinking and valuing and every complex of feelings which rank military institutions and ways above the ways of civilian life, carrying military mentality and modes of acting and decision into the civilian sphere" (Vagts 1981, 17). In Britain, for instance, this has manifested in armed forces being normalized as key actors in nonmilitary disaster response, including flood relief (Ware 2014). Militarism has also been applied to social problems, as evident in successive governments actively promoting the retraining of former soldiers as teachers to improve discipline and attainment by instilling a "military ethos" in schools. Underpinning such programs is the uncritical assumption that people with military experience have something unique to offer that exceeds civilian educators (Basham 2016b, 259–60).

The privileging of military experiences and ethos can also be discerned whenever certain politicians are heralded as particularly capable because of their military background. This tendency is particularly powerful in US politics but is also occasionally evident in British politics. Thus, in the context of interminable debates over Brexit, it was sometimes argued that turning to politicians with military experience might be the only way to unify the nation because "they have access to a language of patriotism that is denied to people who haven't risked their lives in combat" (The Economist 2018). The point is not simply that veterans are seen to be able to help schools and resolve complex political problems but that their military background is seen to make them *uniquely qualified* to do so. The consequence of such processes, Enloe (2000, 15–18) argues, is to elevate the soldier to the idealized status of a model citizen, a paragon of national virtue, where the service and sacrifice of military veterans are valued above those of other citizens—be they teachers, politicians, or, indeed, NHS workers.

Building on this, we argue that militarism's privileging of military experience and ethos also impacts on practices of vicarious identification in militarized societies. Specifically, it encourages vicarious identification with military subjects and themes in two ways. First, if one of the drivers of vicarious identification is subjects' desire to enhance their sense of standing and status, then it is reasonable to assume that people will be drawn toward vicariously identifying with those held in the highest regard in national discourses. Second, insofar as military themes, events, and experiences have become embedded in biographical narratives of national identity, practices of "vicarious militarism" may also serve to reaffirm these at societal and individual levels (particularly in times of stress). Vicarious militarism, therefore, refers to the process of living through and drawing self-identity and status from the military exploits and reputation of others.

Vicarious militarism has become a central feature of British political life in recent years. Official concerns that the unpopularity of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars might delegitimize future British military adventures led the government to actively adopt policies designed to induce citizens into vicariously identifying with the military (e.g., through the creation of Armed Forces Day in 2006). The significant anxiety generated by Britain's modern military engagements (not least their ambiguous outcomes) has also seen a renewed emphasis on commemorative practices and discourses associated with Britain's past wars—in which "[a]ll wars – past, present, and future – are conflated within imaginations of a nostalgically omnipresent 'good war': a hybrid of World Wars One and Two" (Tidy 2015, 227).[1] As Basham (2016a, 885) notes (quoting Berezin 2002, 44), the (increasingly) ritualized annual period of military remembrance in the United Kingdom now "enables 'communities of feeling [...] where citizens enact and vicariously experience collective national selfhood' in its gendered and racialized forms." The affective resonance of such practices also circumscribes the possibilities for critiquing modern wars, with commemorative spaces governed by narrowly defined logics of acceptable behavior marking out dissenters for social stigma (Wegner 2021).

These commemorative practices have been heavily centered on their original referents—the aging veterans of World War One (WW1) and WW2. While military veterans are routinely portrayed as apolitical and authoritative national heroes, the subjectivity of aging veterans is further augmented by their advanced age and as representatives of their respective generations. WW2 veterans are especially revered as members of the highly esteemed "greatest generation," positively associated with both agency and victory in the mythologized "good war"—this contrasting starkly with Britain's modern wars. The esteem of the WW1 and WW2 generations has grown and been extended to an ever-greater range of members of those generations as living witnesses to the wars gradually pass away and the wars themselves become mythologized by national custodians as history and national identity *rather* than politics. Here, deference for the armed forces and older generations constitutes a "double-move" around aging veterans, which grants them superior resonance compared to modern veterans and insulates them—and war itself—from critique.[2]

In recent years, these figures—and the generations they are seen to represent—have become important focal points in an expanding commemorative culture. Whereas remembrance was once focused on the days immediately around November 11, today public discourse references a "Remembrance season" lasting months. With the 2014–2018 WW1 centennial commemorations, months became years,

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[1] Similar dynamics are evident in US "honor flights" in which veterans of past wars have been objectified to reinforce national ontological security at a time of anxiety about United States' contemporary wars (Steele 2019b).

[2] We are grateful to a reviewer for this point.

characterized by an "affective-cultural context of hyper-commemoration" (Withers 2020, 430). A key feature of this context has been the official promotion of vicarious militarism, with actors being encouraged to vicariously appropriate ancestral military exploits. During the WW1 Centenary, for example, national campaigns encouraged individuals, communities, and even companies to engage in genealogical research, discover military ancestors, and, in so doing, establish their own vicarious link to national sacrifice (see Haigh 2020)—something broadened in appeal by the focus of the centenary on the WW1 generation *writ large.* Finally, beyond specific connections, Haigh (2020) argues that British politics has been marked by a tendency to invoke *generational* military experiences for political advantage, with claims that "we won the war" being deployed by subsequent generations as geopolitical currency when claiming international status.

Evident in these practices are active attempts at vicarious identity promotion, which, to varying degrees, have fostered an almost instinctual (even unconscious) societal predisposition to lean upon vicarious militarism when facing anxieties. Central to this is the affectively resonant remembrance of a mythologized military past that, while connected to WW1, is most evocatively and emotively associated with WW2. In the COVID-19 context, however, we argue that the predisposition toward vicarious militarism has also facilitated a form of militarized vicarious resilience.

Vicarious Militarism and Captain Tom

For the purposes of this article, two things are notable about the (inter)national response to COVID-19. The first has been its militarization, evident in various respects including governments' utilization of military metaphors such as "fight," "battle," and "war" to describe the situation, which has already drawn critical reflection (e.g., Caso 2020; Musu 2020; Serhan 2020). Evidently, for some governments, deploying war metaphors has been understood as a means of legitimate securitization, by invoking a "wartime spirit" in calling for national solidarity and cohesive (in)action. This has helped to emphasize the need for the adoption of extraordinary policy responses, for example, restrictions on liberty and massive public spending. It has also legitimized deploying the military to assist with the response. In Britain, for example, armed forces have been deployed to construct temporary NHS Nightingale hospitals, deliver personal protective equipment (PPE), operate testing and vaccination centers, and participate in Downing Street coronavirus daily briefings (Gibson-Fall 2021, 163). Yet, critics have also warned of the possible abuse and extension of emergency powers, and how war metaphors imply the existence of enemies, which during COVID has seen the targeting of particular (racialized) communities as threats (Rythoven 2020). Framing COVID-19 through military metaphors, therefore, risks fostering a new nationalism (Musu 2020).

The second point is that COVID has frequently taken on a *national* framing, with international solidarity sometimes in short supply despite the pandemic's global dimensions and public health officials promoting coordinated transnational responses. This was evident in the early collapse of EU solidarity and the reinstitution of national border enforcement practices in the Schengen area. It was also visible in President Trump's labeling of COVID as "the China virus" and in the incessant daily "league table" comparisons of infections and deaths, with this establishing an unsavory sense of national competition, which in Britain has often been framed in terms of the ongoing politics of Brexit. It

was evident in the hoarding of PPE supplies and the emergence of vaccine nationalism. However, the deployment of military metaphors has facilitated not only securitization but also a nostalgic and national-oriented form of vicarious militarism, which in the United Kingdom has found its clearest expression in the veneration of Captain Tom.

Why Captain Tom became a focus of concerted (vicarious) attention is interesting because it marked a reassertion of militarized social hierarchies at a time when categories of heroism had been extended to include NHS staff and, to a lesser degree, other civilian occupations. The Captain Tom phenomenon, therefore, demonstrates how ultimately vicarious military sacrifice/resilience—experienced through vicarious identification with Captain Tom—was privileged over the actual sacrifices and resilience of NHS and other key workers. Yet, the heroism of doctors and nurses could also be recognized and (partially) enhanced through association with Captain Tom and the military more broadly, which we discuss in the next section. However, if vicarious identification is ultimately driven by desires to compensate for a sense of lack in the self, then Captain Tom is also intriguing because, given his age and infirmity, and given that most people could accomplish in hours what took him weeks, in some respects he appears an unlikely target of vicarious identification. This, we suggest, can only be accounted for by who he was and was seen to represent, ultimately having little to do with what he did.

Notably, Captain Tom was not the only person to undertake NHS fundraising activities in 2020. For example, inspired by Captain Tom, Margaret Payne (aged 90 years) climbed her stairs 282 times—the equivalent height (731 meters) of Mount Suilven in Scotland—raising around £450,000 and subsequently being awarded the British Empire Medal (Wyllie 2020). Similarly, 91-year-old Margaret Seaman raised £3,600 by knitting a model "Nightingale" hospital (BBC News 2020d). Yet, neither Margaret captured the national imagination like Captain Tom.

There may be various explanations for this. It could be because Captain Tom's effort was a lockdown "first," which inspired other fundraising efforts. He was also slightly older than other fundraisers, with the defiant fundraising of a centenarian being especially resonant at a moment when older Britons were being disproportionately afflicted by COVID-19. Arguably, though, while important, age alone cannot account for Moore's conspicuous resonance. Rather, it was his military background and symbolism that really made his achievement "heroic" and underpinned the national outpouring, the daily updates on his progress, and the flood of donations. Notable, for instance, was that Moore was (and still is) always referred to by media and political commentators by his military rank: he is always "*Captain* Tom," never just Tom Moore. This military identity was further branded onto him when, on his 100th birthday, he became an honorary Colonel (a title that never resonated or replaced "Captain" in national discourse) and received a Royal Air Force (RAF) flypast from the iconic WW2 Spitfire and Hurricane fighter planes (BBC 2020b). This flypast was repeated at his funeral—televised live—with his coffin carried by soldiers of the Yorkshire Regiment (Sky News 2021). It was this military subjectivity that made Captain Tom not simply inspirational but highly conducive to cross-societal efforts at vicarious identity promotion.

In this respect, his persona dovetailed with the government's routine use of military metaphors and with various other performances, including an early lockdown televised statement by the Queen, which she ended by saying "We will be with our friends […] [and] families again. *We will meet*

again" (emphasis added), thus directly invoking Vera Lynn's WW2 song "We'll meet again" and evoking a sense of vicarious identification with the resilience demonstrated by the mythologized "greatest generation" (BBC 2020a).

Following Moore's walk, additional honors followed. He was knighted by the Queen, becoming Captain Sir Tom Moore, and made a double captain when David Beckham presented him with the captaincy of the England "Lionhearts"—an initiative by the Football Association "to pay homage to 23 inspirational individuals" from across British society who had supported the pandemic response (The FA 2020). Subsequently, Captain Tom released (with singer Michael Ball) a chart-topping recording of "You'll Never Walk Alone," a song made famous by Gerry and the Pacemakers and the fans of Liverpool football club, but which was originally a show tune from the 1945 musical Carousel (Savage 2020). The song emphasizes unity and resilience but clearly only topped the charts because of Captain Tom's participation. While the song has no direct military connection, significantly its reception did become militarized in some respects. For instance, a steel-fabrication company designed a commemorative metal bench (echoing benches that proliferated during the WW1 centennial) featuring images of Captain Tom—both contemporary and as a young soldier—against a background of red poppies, with the refrain "You'll Never Walk Alone" inscribed underneath. The bench was delivered to Moore's residence and received favorable press coverage (Davies 2020). However, one satirical tweet noted the conspicuous absence of any mention of the NHS from the bench, joking that the "patriot" designers had omitted it because they did not want the bench to become "political" (Hope 2020). The bench focused exclusively on Moore's military identity: whereas the iconography of militarized remembrance was seen to faithfully represent Moore's heroism, the sacrifices of NHS workers did not feature in the narrative.

Notably, similar emphases can be seen in the wider proliferation of Moore's image, not least in the numerous painted murals of Captain Tom on buildings in public spaces throughout the country, including in Belfast, Manchester, and Tamworth.[3] A comparison between the bench and these murals is interesting in two respects. First, like the bench, many Captain Tom murals feature his image—usually depicted with him wearing his blazer, medals, and a facial expression of determination—against a background of remembrance iconography, whether in the form of silhouettes of WW1 soldiers or widespread use of the poppy. Second, however, unlike the bench many of these murals *do* include the NHS logo. Yet, even on the murals featuring the NHS such as the Tamworth mural (e.g., Press Association 2020), Captain Tom is clearly *the focus* of the artwork, with the NHS assigned a supporting, peripheral role (as signified by the relatively small NHS logo offset to the left side of the piece),[4] its esteem bestowed largely through association with Captain Tom, not the other way round. Indeed, the directional nature of this relationship was exemplified by Prime Minister Boris Johnson in a 100th birthday message he recorded that referred to Moore as a "point of light in all our lives," but also stated:

> Your heroic efforts have lifted the spirits of the entire nation. You've created a channel to enable millions to say a heartfelt thank you to the remarkable men and women in our NHS who are doing the most astounding job. (BBC 2020b)

A hierarchy of heroism is, therefore, implied whereby vicarious identification with Captain Tom is deemed appropriate due to his military credentials. Through him, it becomes possible to activate fundamental national narratives of sacrifice and resilience associated with the "fallen" of WW1 and the "greatest generation" of WW2. In contrast, despite the NHS also being part of the national story (e.g., featuring prominently during the 2012 London Olympics opening ceremony), it has always been more closely embraced by the Left, in recent decades becoming a political football with respect to its nationalized versus privatized future—this remaining a sensitive political undercurrent throughout the pandemic.

The Captain Tom phenomenon notably went far beyond inspiration, becoming an object for vicarious resilience. Moore received approximately 125,000 cards on his birthday, suggesting a significant level of personal investment in his story. Books also emerged associating him with morale and resilience. Titles included Moore's autobiography *Tomorrow will be a Good Day* (Moore and Holden 2020), which became a Sunday Times No. 1 bestseller; *Captain Tom's Life Lessons* (Moore and Holden 2021); and the children's title *One Hundred Steps: The Story of Captain Sir Tom Moore* (2020). Indeed, Captain Tom was also integrated into school activities, including lesson plans titled "What can we learn from Captain Sir Tom Moore?" encouraging students to reflect on his achievements (Bawtry Mayflower Primary School 2021), and the gifting of copies of *One Hundred Steps* to pupils as a reward for —and *symbol of*—their resilience throughout the pandemic (Lord Deramore's 2021). In this way, Captain Tom captured the public mood—the "Blitz pandemic spirit" (Jenkins 2020)—of lockdown in 2020.

To summarize, a "double move" of vicarious identification can be identified around "Captain Tom." The first entailed vicarious identification with Moore himself as an elderly subject representing the "best of British," where his success, joy, and stoic demeanor could be invested in and appropriated by others. However, this was itself premised on a linked second move, activating a broader sentiment of vicarious militarism with the "greatest generation" that Captain Tom was seen to represent, serving as living proof of past and present national resilience when facing trauma. This was also blurred with the veterans of WW1 through using remembrance iconography—a conflation facilitated by the preceding hyper-commemorative context of the WW1 centenary. Captain Tom, therefore, emerged as an ostensibly apolitical symbol of national resilience: one fundamentally reliant on vicarious militarism promoted by political and media figures.

Spitfire Flypasts as Vicarious Resilience

That a global health crisis should be met with displays of vicarious militarism is clearly an intriguing development. Without precluding alternative interpretations, these discourses and displays can be understood as responses to the profound societal anxiety unleashed by the pandemic, including deep uncertainty regarding its potential duration, intensity, and ultimate death toll. In the early months, for instance, comparisons with the influenza pandemic of 1918–1920 were widespread—mortality estimates of which vary

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[3]For examples, see https://www.google.com/search?q=captain+tom+mural&rlz=1C1CHBF_en-GBGB836GB836&hl=en&tbm=isch&source=lnms&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjygcac_JX3AhXjnVwKHeTTAtQ4ChD8BSgCegQIARAE&biw=1745&bih=852&dpr=1.1.

[4]Indeed, when the mural was renovated by artist Graffiti by Title in December 2021 following winter damage to the wall's rendering, the NHS logo disappeared entirely, with the image of Captain Tom now standing alongside that of Queen Elizabeth II to mark her Platinum Jubilee in 2022. See Graffiti By Title (2021).

widely from 17 to 100 million, but were regularly invoked as offering a "known" possible trajectory, adding to a sense of foreboding and even panic that the world was facing a similarly calamitous event (e.g., Traynor 2020).

In Britain (and beyond), vicarious militarism emerged as a significant mechanism through which individuals and society sought to face the situation and reassert a sense of ontological security. Above, we demonstrated how "Captain Tom" became a particular focus, facilitating a form of militarized vicarious identification with narratives of resilience and ultimately victory, central to British national mythology and identity.

While certainly the standout example, however, the Captain Tom phenomenon fitted a broader pattern. For example, the aforementioned proliferation of war metaphors is significant in two additional respects. First, in ontological security terms, one effect of war metaphors was to transpose anxieties about the unknown (e.g., connected to death and uncertainty) into identifiable objects of fear to be countered and mobilized against (e.g., Tillich 2014, 35–37; Rumelili 2021, 1023). Such metaphors rescripted COVID-19 as a "deadly enemy," which could be fought and defeated (Boris Johnson quoted in Rawlinson 2020), therefore offering a route out of helplessness by creating space for feelings of agency and purpose. While Prime Minister Johnson (quoted in Cambridge 2020) noted that the "enemy" was to be fought primarily by "nurses and doctors on the frontline" (who would be described frequently as "heroes" having "given their lives in sacrifice"), he emphasized that "in this fight [...] each and every one of us is directly enlisted" (Johnson 2020). Thus, additional to the conventional army being mobilized to provide logistical support, the NHS announced that it was "'rallying the troops' for the war on coronavirus," issuing a call for a "volunteer army" under the slogan "Your NHS Needs You" (NHS England 2020). Hundreds of thousands responded to the call. More generally, Health Secretary Matt Hancock described it as "mission critical" that members of the public "Stay at Home, Protect the NHS, Save Lives" (BBC News 2020b).

Second, while some metaphors invoked war in general, many had a more overtly vicarious function, drawing culturally resonant analogies with the World Wars, as evident in the NHS's slogan "Your NHS Needs You," which echoed military recruitment campaigns from these conflicts. The *Sun* newspaper also told its readers that "Your Country Needs You," but this time superimposed Boris Johnson's face on a famous WW1 poster replacing that of Lord Kitchener—Britain's Secretary of State for War (Wheatstone 2020). Such militarized framings also led some to cast Johnson in the culturally resonant role of wartime Prime Minister Winston Churchill, with a *Financial Times* column declaring the pandemic "Boris Johnson's Churchill moment" (Barber 2020). The Queen, in her aforementioned "We will meet again" national address, also drew a direct parallel between lockdown measures and the mass evacuation of children during the WW2 Blitz, suggesting that present generations would compare favorably with that "greatest generation": "those who come after us will say the Britons of this generation were as strong as any" (BBC 2020a). Meanwhile, Dame Vera Lynn released a new version of her famous WW2 anthem, recorded with opera singer Katherine Jenkins. Finally, in the midst of Britain's first lockdown, allies of Prime Minister Johnson were reportedly keen on the symbolism of easing the lockdown restrictions to coincide with the seventy-fifth anniversary of VE [Victory in Europe] Day on May 8, with the symmetry of the events envisaged as a way to connect "victory" over the virus with past military glories (Parker and Beesley 2020).

Drawing such parallels served to frame the fight against COVID as a nostalgic extension of Britain's wartime history. However, beyond the comparison there were also direct elements of vicarious identification (and vicarious resilience) at play. One notable example was "Operation Spitfire," organized by the Airport Restoration Company, which painted "Thank U NHS" on a Spitfire's underbelly and began conducting flypasts directly over UK hospitals, believing that seeing the emotive plane would provide a public morale boost (BBC News 2020c). The Spitfire, of course, is a culturally resonant symbol of national defiance and "derring-do" when faced with indomitable odds. Thus, even if only unconsciously, such flypasts clearly signified drawing a vicarious connection to the heroes of WW2 and the "Battle of Britain," specifically. The "battle" being fought by NHS staff on the ground was, therefore, amplified by association with the nation's ultimate military heroes. Similar sentiment upholding militarized hierarchies of heroism was also reinforced at official levels, with the defense minister emphasizing that the NHS "does not fight alone" and "that our Armed Forces have always got their backs," being ready to step in by contributing the military's unique skills in medical care, logistics, and command (Wallace 2020).

The vicarious militarism inherent in the flypasts' popularity had another interesting dimension. For a donation, people could nominate the names of those they wanted to thank during the pandemic—anyone "[f]rom a supportive family member to a kind neighbour, local community hero to frontline worker." The first 80,000 names would then be scribed onto the fuselage of what was now designated "the NHS Spitfire" (Duffield 2020). Symbolically, then, the act of nomination was a process through which the nominator made a case for the nominee to be seen to sit alongside those who risked all in WW2. The vicarious element was reinforced by the fact that the names were not legible from 10 ft, let alone 10,000 ft.

Yet, the Spitfire flypasts are also instructive in another sense. One of the reasons pilots who fought the Battle of Britain have been immortalized in British culture is because of the pervasive—and erroneous—myth that their life expectancy was a mere four weeks (with 544 dying in total) (Harford and McNeill 2018). Vicarious identification with the Spitfire and pilots of the Battle of Britain, therefore, had a flipside for NHS doctors and nurses: namely, that military heroism and resilience often come with an expectation of mortal sacrifice. Instructively, then, NHS staff who protested that they never signed up for this were sometimes met, particularly on social media, with comments that they should stop whinging and be grateful that they still had a job.[5] In 2021, for example, when the government sparked controversy for offering NHS staff only a 1 percent pay rise, Conservative peer, Lord Bethell, defended the meagre increment by arguing that compared to those who had faced economic upheaval during the pandemic, NHS staff were "well paid [...] [and] have a secure job" (Mitchell 2021). Although widely criticized, such arguments did inspire negative comparisons of NHS staff with the military heroes of the World Wars in some quarters. One tweet, for example, featured an image of British soldiers at the Battle of the Somme captioned "Actual heroes/No pay rises" (PrimalPolitical 2021). While British troops *did* in fact receive pay rises during WW1, this erroneous claim served to reinforce militarized hierarchies of heroism by distinguishing NHS staff from the "actual" military heroes.

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[5] Some argued the "heroism" discourse functioned to distract from systematic government underfunding of the NHS (Anonymous 2020b).

The flipside of vicarious militarism for NHS staff was, therefore, to establish an expectation of willing mortal self-sacrifice in "battle." NHS staff voicing concerns were often compared negatively to shop workers who also turned up to "the front line" but were not receiving equivalent levels of adulation, while the political inclinations of NHS staff speaking up were also often scrutinized by the conservative press as a mode of de-legitimization, the assumption being they demonstrated a Left-wing bias (e.g., Revoir 2020).

The Limits of Vicarious Militarism

> Our generation has never been tested like this. Our grandparents were, during the Second World War, when our cities were bombed during the Blitz. Despite the pounding every night, the rationing, the loss of life, they pulled together in one gigantic national effort. Today our generation is facing its own test, fighting a very real and new disease. We must fight the disease to protect life… I am sure we will rise to this challenge.
>
> (Matt Hancock, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, 14 March 2020)

In this final section, we consider some of the potential ironies and limitations of vicarious militarism as an activator of societal resilience and ontological security during the pandemic. Specifically, we suggest that owing to its inherent reaffirmation of militarized hierarchies of heroism, vicarious militarism always has the potential to be double-edged. Thus, while it has operated as a mechanism to relieve extant pandemic anxieties, its ability to do so may also be limited.

A sense of this is evident in the above quote from Health Secretary Hancock (2020). Here, the Blitz spirit is again invoked as a culturally resonant legacy the nation continues to vicariously identify with, through which we can draw sustenance and resilience. The implication is that the Blitz spirit is a cultural heritage lying dormant within the nation to be activated when required. Yet, the final sentence may also betray a doubt that perhaps we are not *quite* like those mythologized forebears after all. Concerns that this generation may not actually compare well with the "greatest generation" have been recurrent throughout the pandemic, most visibly in the proliferation of memes such as: "Your grandparents were called to fight in world wars. You're being called to wash your hands and sit on the couch. Don't **** this up!" (e.g., Cain 2020).

Two things can be noted about the meme's sentiment. First, it raises questions about agency. Above, we argued that one of the attractions of deploying war metaphors in framing the pandemic response was that they offered a possible route out of feelings of helplessness and ontological insecurity. The nation was to be "enlisted" and fight. However, in reality such highly agentic metaphors have not been fully satisfying and sometimes may have been counterproductive. As Chandler (2020) notes, during WW2 those not sent to fight were called on to act very differently, to "Keep Calm and Carry On" (a wartime phrase facilitating an often ironic sense of vicarious identification that has saturated British popular culture). Even if bombs were falling, everyday life was to be maintained. However, since carrying on as normal is dangerous, COVID lockdowns have required a different response: an inverted, almost antiheroic agency that requires most of us *not* to act. Arguably, the result is that vicarious heroism—where we "imagine" ourselves to be on the "front line"—is all that remains but is a form that ultimately

does not really bear comparison to the mythologized narratives people such as Captain Tom were seen to embody—somebody who did, of course, decide to "do" something and thereby help "us" rediscover "true" heroism. One exception, of course, concerned those designated "key workers" who were expected to carry on as before, which in turn facilitated more individualized forms of vicarious identification, as relatives and close friends could draw a sense of vicarious pride from their efforts.

The second notable point is the meme's accusatory injunction, with appeals to vicarious militarism during COVID often performing a disciplining function. "Wash your hands," "sit on the couch," "don't **** this up" are less a call to arms than a demand to step aside and let "key workers" get on with the job. However, while keyworkers are therefore marked out for heightened praise, the disciplining element to such interventions has arguably enabled even non-key workers to locate themselves within hierarchies of heroism through mechanisms of virtue signaling (i.e., "look at how responsible I am") and shaming of others deemed to be failing to live up to requirements—something crystallized in the widespread deployment of the term "COVIDiots" that could be used against anyone acting in ways the accuser disapproves of (Nerlich 2021).

The unstable (even nervous) recourse to vicarious militarism, premised on vicarious identification with the "greatest generation," as a basis for mobilizing a sense of resilience has also been exposed by potentially destabilizing deployments of humor. This has been evident in the proliferation of ironic memes and jokes satirizing the invocation of nostalgic vicarious militarism around the Dunkirk/Blitz spirit etc., although it is important to recognize humor's role in managing anxieties during crises including COVID-19 (see Ridanpää 2020; Bischetti et al. 2021). However, these destabilizations have sometimes hit a more caustic note in direct resistance, for instance, when the military comparison has been derided by lockdown skeptics and inverted as a critique depicting contemporary Britons as "sheep" cowering at home waiting to be told what to do.[6]

Finally, although Captain Tom himself has been routinely portrayed as a figure of national unity, debates over his symbolism have exposed societal divides. Moore's agentic stoicism has, for instance, been invoked by some conservative commentators to denigrate the character of younger generations. Indeed, the article from which this paper's epigraph is taken compares the get-up-and-go attitude of Captain Tom with those whose celebrity stems from being "*attractive enough to simply be* and get paid for it" (original emphasis). More pointedly, it references a social media meme—captioned "A Tale of Two Citizens"—comparing Captain Tom's fundraising walk with the singer Sam Smith, who had shared an emotive picture of themselves struggling with lockdown while sitting in their mansion (Burchill 2020). Given Smith's widely publicized adoption of gender-neutral pronouns, the meme also arguably has a "culture war" subtext, centrally focused on what critics see as "woke-ist" preoccupations with self-identification. This dovetails with how Captain Tom was mobilized by some commentators to push back against what they perceived as "woke-ist" prejudices prevailing against "old white men" (e.g., O'Neill 2020). Although support for Captain Tom has transcended generation, gender, and race, following media calls for Britons to "clap for Captain Tom" after Moore's death, some like Reverend

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[6] "LordBrexit" (quoted in Poppy® Watch 2020) tweeted: "Remember it was UK citizens who risked their life's [sic] to free soldiers from the beaches in Dunkirk. Now they are pathetic sheep who are scared of a hoax."

Jarel Robinson-Brown (quoted in Sherwood 2021) notably expressed concerns that Moore's symbolism had been co-opted by a broader "cult of white British nationalism." Consequently, certain invocations of "Captain Tom" have contributed to broader anxieties that militarism tends toward the reassertion of a conservative, white, masculine ideal of citizenship (Basham 2016a).

Conclusion

Departing from the puzzle of Captain Tom's ascent to national veneration during the first UK COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, this article has developed five linked arguments. First, that while his fundraising effort was not unimportant, Moore's rise to prominence was fundamentally linked to who he was and the mythologized WW2 "greatest generation" he was seen to embody. At a time of deep anxiety, Captain Tom became a target of individual and societal vicarious identification that functioned to bolster resilience, which was vicarious insofar as it was "lived through" the actions and experiences of another. Thus, while Moore's charity fundraising did inspire some to undertake similar efforts, Britons were not necessarily being encouraged to get out in their gardens and raise money, but to experience resilience through his example, with the veneration conferred on him indicative of social investment in his representation as a better version of us, of who we have been and can be again.

Second, vicarious identification with Captain Tom was itself facilitated through the broader normalization of vicarious militarism in British society in recent decades, most pervasively promoted during the WW1 centennial commemorations. Thus, the Captain Tom phenomenon was just one part of a broader trend whereby militarization has provided mechanisms for managing extant ontological anxieties that have, for example, also been evident in the ongoing politics of Brexit (Haigh 2020). Military metaphors played an important part in facilitating feelings of agency over events; meanwhile, Captain Tom and Spitfires became vessels for vicariously reanimating and reliving nostalgic heroic myths about Britain's wartime past that have become fundamental to biographical narratives of national identity.

Third, a consequence of militarized vicarious identification during the pandemic has been to reassert established militarized hierarchies of heroism within societal discourses. Thus, while NHS staff and other "key workers" (and the general public to a lesser extent) were often described as heroes, this heroism was frequently marked (and contrasted) through the use of military metaphors, thereby drawing implied comparisons to the "real" heroes—the soldiers of WW1 and especially the fortitude and resilience of the WW2 "greatest generation." Notable, therefore, is that despite vicarious militarism's prevalence throughout the preceding year and more than 100,000 Britons dying of COVID-19, when an event was announced in March 2021 to mark the anniversary of the first lockdown, it called for a "National Day of *Reflection*," not "remembrance." It is only conjecture, but one reading for avoiding "remembrance" may be because in the national psyche remembrance is fundamentally connected to military heroism and thereby sanctified. The danger may, therefore, have been of diluting remembrance's meaning and the militarized hierarchies of heroism it constitutes. Similarly, despite suggestions that a "blue poppy" (the color of the NHS) be created to help commemorate the dead and the sacrifices of NHS workers annually (Anonymous 2020a), the former head of the British Army General Lord Dannatt who supported national pandemic memorialization nevertheless expressed his preference for a different symbol (Fisher 2021). Again, is this because a blue poppy would destabilize the existing hierarchies of heroism that privilege military sacrifice and are associated with the red poppy? Of course, from a statist perspective the idea of commemorating COVID-19 deaths may seem odd, at least insofar as these deaths may appear "politically empty" and purposeless in comparison to the deaths of soldiers, potentially even standing as an indictment of the state response. There are, after all, few memorials to those who died in the 1918–1920 pandemic, but innumerable memorials to the "glorious" mortal sacrifice of "the fallen" of WW1 (Youde 2017).[7] Yet, this is to miss how through practices of vicarious identity promotion, and in contrast to 1918–1920, whole populations have been interpellated into militarized narratives of agency that gave the "fight" against COVID at least the veneer of "political action." And while this has been ascribed to some more than others (e.g., NHS workers), *all* were "enlisted."

The above discussion, however, highlights our fourth argument: that as a mechanism for managing COVID-related ontological anxieties, militarized vicarious resilience has limitations. For instance, for most people—perhaps excluding NHS staff and keyworkers—military metaphors have been illusory, offering only an *idea* of agency. Ultimately, it is hard to equate wearing face masks, social distancing, or staying indoors watching Netflix with being on military deployment. Yet, it is precisely this that exposes how such identifications are inherently vicarious. Likewise, while drawing comparison with, and vicariously appropriating the experiences of, the "greatest generation" has been attractive, it has also generated anxieties around being "called out" and unease that, ultimately, we might *not* match up. Consequently, the militarized vicarious resilience that emerged during the pandemic has an element of fragility baked into it that not only limits its ability to resolve pandemic anxieties but may also exacerbate them.

The last argument is that as the British government attempts to declare an "end" to the pandemic (even as it remains a lived reality for many), urging Britons to "live with" the virus—the public mood is changing such that this veneer of militarized interpellation and vicarious identity promotion is wearing thin. At the time of writing, there is now almost an embarrassment about the claim and a sense that people might rather prefer to forget the whole experience (i.e., did we really stand on the street banging pots!). Rather than a necessary battle, lockdowns are increasingly remembered more ambivalently—even as unnecessary, by some. In other words, there is no glory here anymore. This apparent forgetting suggests a drifting out of vicarious identification that corresponds with the idea of vicarious identity as rhythmic or episodic, something that may be reached for in times of intense anxiety. As such, vicarious identity is now shifting back in favor of identification/admiration for NHS staff—and for some, even criticism.

Indeed, this shift is also evident with Captain Tom's symbolism. For instance, when Moore's daughter was asked by the *Metro* newspaper in February 2022 how Captain Tom would approach "troubled times" (e.g., political turmoil surrounding the breaking of lockdown rules by government officials, a steep rise in the cost of living, a looming Russian invasion of Ukraine), she noted his belief that "we should join together as communities" using the "power of positivity" and that he would warn people to "not get too caught up in the rumblings of politics" (Ingram-Moore, quoted in Layton 2022). However, this familiar call for resilience had evidently

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[7] Our thanks to a reviewer for this point.

lost some of its resonance for this new context, with some responding "will the power of positivity pay my gas bill?," and others resenting the perceived use of Moore's image to deflect widespread public anger toward the government with calls for unification. Today, it seems, some are no longer in the mood to unify. In this instance, Moore's image no longer stands as a resonant vicarious proxy for "our" national resilience but is perceived as a disciplining tool for neutralizing critique. However, this does not preclude that his image might become salient again in future. As the COVID generation ages, it seems possible that lockdown experiences—for now disavowed—may, over time, become romanticized reference points for vicarious resilience in future crises, just as Britons now vicariously appropriate the experiences of the "greatest generation."

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