The Comfort of Empire

NAAFI, Post-Imperial Contraction, and the Photography of Institutional Endings

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> *'It's adapt or die, and there are many different forms of death available to those who can't pick up the business buzz or muster the requisite enthusiasm for the creative industries.'*
>
> Mark Fisher, introduction to Laura Oldfield Ford's Savage Messiah (Verso, 2011)

Abstract

Between approximately 1990 and 1992 I worked as a corporate photographer for the Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes — NAAFI — documenting its facilities, staff, and community life across the British military world at the precise moment that world was beginning its definitive contraction. I signed the Official Secrets Act. The photographs I made were retained by the institution. What I carry is memory, not archive.

This research note reconstructs that period from testimony: what I witnessed inside an institution that had been built to serve an empire, at the moment when the empire's operational infrastructure was being systematically dismantled. It situates that witness within the broader Liminal Mind framework — the longitudinal study of British institutions created with genuine purpose and transformed by extraction logic — and connects it to the Quantum Memory project's concern with embodied knowledge, institutional memory, and what is lost when organisations that carried a social contract are dissolved or hollowed out.

NAAFI is the first chapter in a sequence. What I saw there — the paternalism, the logistics of comfort, the withdrawal of a world — I would see again at Poptel, at Easynet, at Valleys to Coast. The pattern was already fully formed. I just did not yet have the language to name it.

I. What NAAFI Was

The Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes was founded in 1921. Its purpose was simple and total: to provide retail, catering, and recreational facilities for British armed forces personnel wherever in the world those forces were stationed. For seventy years it followed the British military — from the Western Front to the Western Desert, from the Rhine to the South Atlantic — running shops, bars, clubs, canteens, and finance centres in every garrison, on every base, on every ship, at every remote outpost the empire required someone to defend.

By the time I joined it, NAAFI understood itself as a paternal organisation in the fullest sense. It did not merely supply goods. It supplied belonging. The pensioner meetings on military bases, the regimental golf days, the rugby matches, the clubs where soldiers and their families could spend an evening — these were not peripheral activities. They were the institution's understanding of its own purpose: to maintain the social fabric of military life across an entire lifecycle, from recruitment to old age.

The logistics of that purpose were extraordinary. Getting the right goods to the right places — Mars bars and tinned soup to a garrison in Belize, luxury items to a remote base in the Falklands, the specific brands that said to a twenty-year-old private a very long way from home that someone had not forgotten him — required a supply chain of considerable complexity. The unglamorous operational backbone of something that mattered enormously to the people depending on it.

> *NAAFI's entire purpose was comfort. The cup of tea, the familiar brand, the small luxury. In the Falklands, in Ascension Island, on a frigate in the South Atlantic, those shops were a physical connection to home for people who had no other.*

I did not fully understand any of this when I arrived. I came from editorial photography — from the world of ES Magazine, of portrait commissions, of the kind of work that circulates through London's creative networks. NAAFI was something entirely different: an institution

with a mission, a geography, and a social function that had no equivalent in civilian life. It took time to understand what I was actually photographing.

II. Western Germany: Watching the Cold War End

The postings to Western Germany came at an extraordinary historical moment. The Wall had come down in November 1989. By the time I was travelling across the North German Plain — driving between garrisons, listening to Test Match Special on British Forces Broadcasting Service, the cheerful continuity voice broadcasting a kind of England that seemed to exist outside of any particular decade — the geopolitical architecture that had justified the British Army of the Rhine for forty years was dissolving in real time.

BFBS was its own version of what NAAFI provided materially: a portable acoustic England, transmitted into whatever landscape the forces happened to occupy. Driving through a Germany that was still absorbing the shock of reunification, still processing what it meant that the Wall was rubble, the cricket commentary on the radio was not nostalgia. It was institutional continuity — the organisation insisting, through its technology, that you had not been forgotten, that home was a frequency you could always find.

The Officers' Mess in Berlin was a grand building, like a posh hotel — the British military's attempt to reproduce a certain idea of institutional comfort inside a foreign city that had just undergone the most dramatic political transformation in postwar European history. Outside, Berlin was becoming something new. Inside, the silver service and the panelled walls and the particular atmosphere of a British officers' mess said: this has not changed. We have not changed. The institution holds.

> *The institution was photographing itself at the moment it was becoming redundant. I was the camera. What I recorded was the domestic interior of a military world that was about to lose its reason for being in that location — comfort systems for an occupation that was ending.*

The drawdown had not yet fully arrived in the atmosphere of those places. People knew Options for Change had been announced. They understood intellectually that the Cold War had ended and that British force levels in Germany would fall. But the daily reality of the messes and the clubs and the NAAFI shops still felt continuous, still felt like something that would go on. Institutions carry their own momentum. The people inside them are often the last to feel the deceleration.

III. The Imperial Fringe: Falklands, Ascension Island, Northern Ireland

The Falklands posting was a different register entirely. A decade after the war that had made those islands briefly the centre of the world's attention, NAAFI was still there — maintaining the infrastructure of comfort for a garrison whose existence was itself an argument about imperial will. The shops, the canteens, the bars: in that landscape, at that distance from anywhere, they were not peripheral. They were the whole point. The message they delivered — you are not forgotten, the institution reaches even here — was the only message the institution had to send.

Ascension Island was remoter still. A volcanic outcrop in the South Atlantic, a staging post, a place of strategic utility and no other kind. The NAAFI presence there was spare and functional, stripped of the social elaboration of the German garrisons. What remained was the logistics: the supply chain reaching to its furthest extension, maintaining the minimum infrastructure of belonging in the maximum isolation.

Northern Ireland was different from both. The Falklands and Ascension Island were remnants of imperial geography — the far edge of a world the empire had claimed. Northern Ireland was home soil, or was formally classified as such, which made the presence of the military and therefore of NAAFI more contested, more fraught, more aware of its own strangeness. The conflict was active. The bases were defended. The NAAFI function — comfort, normalcy, the cup of tea — was being performed inside an environment of genuine threat, on the island that Britain officially regarded as part of itself.

> *In Germany I photographed the end of the Cold War from inside the mess hall. In the Falklands I photographed the residue of a war that had already happened. In Northern Ireland I photographed an institution trying to maintain normalcy inside a conflict that had no resolution in sight. Three different kinds of ending, all requiring the same institutional response: keep the shop open, keep the tea hot, keep the supply chain running.*

I signed the Official Secrets Act. What that means, practically, is that there are things I witnessed that I cannot disclose even now, more than thirty years later. The constraint is itself significant. I was a photographer embedded inside an institution at the end of empire, authorised to see things that had to remain unseen. The archive I generated was retained by NAAFI. What I carry is not images but memory — the knowledge stored in the body of someone who was present, which is the only form in which that knowledge now exists outside the institution's own files.

IV. Imperial Court, Kennington

NAAFI's headquarters at Imperial Court in Kennington was a building that understood its own history. Purpose-built, substantial, carrying in its architecture the confidence of an institution that had followed the British military across the world for seventy years. To work there was to be inside a physical argument: that NAAFI was not a service provider but a pillar, that its purpose was not contingent but permanent, that the organisation that had maintained the domestic infrastructure of British military power would go on doing so indefinitely.

The move to Aylesbury — which came as the contraction gathered pace — was the physical enactment of a change in institutional self-understanding. Aylesbury was not Imperial Court. It was office space, functional, appropriate to a cost centre rather than an institution. The silver service and the grand architecture of Kennington said: we are part of the permanent furniture of British military life. The offices in Aylesbury said: we are a logistics operation under review.

> *Every institution that is being hollowed out eventually moves to smaller premises. The headquarters shrinks before the mission does. The building tells you what the annual report will not yet admit.*

I was made redundant. The manner in which redundancy arrives in an organisation that still thinks of itself as paternal is particular — there is a gap between the language used and the reality enacted, between the institutional warmth of the communication and the coldness of the outcome. What the institution said and what it did were not the same thing. That gap — between stated purpose and operational reality — is something I had begun to recognise. I would recognise it again, many times, in the decades that followed.

V. The Pattern, First Encountered

Looking back from 2026, the NAAFI years were the first legible instance of a pattern I would spend the next three decades observing from the inside of various institutions. The pattern is consistent: an organisation created with a genuine social purpose — to serve, to support, to maintain the fabric of a community — encounters the logic of financial engineering and begins its transformation into something else. The language of mission persists long after the mission has been subordinated to cost reduction. The people inside the institution absorb the contradiction between what the organisation says it is and what it is actually doing. The

contraction accelerates. Eventually the purpose is outsourced, privatised, or simply abandoned.

At NAAFI the purpose was comfort — the cup of tea at the end of the world. The extraction logic arrived through the Options for Change defence review, through the post-Cold War contraction of the British military, through the decision that an institution which had served seventy years of imperial logistics could be rationalised, downsized, and eventually handed to private contractors. Booker Foods and its successors would provide what NAAFI had provided, but without the social contract, without the pensioner meetings, without the golf days, without the understanding that the organisation was responsible for something beyond the transaction.

> *The privatisation of NAAFI's function was not the end of a service. It was the end of a particular understanding of what service meant — that an institution could owe something to the people who depended on it across an entire lifetime, not merely at the point of sale.*

I saw this first at NAAFI. I saw it again at Poptel, the cooperative internet provider, where the utopian impulse of the early network gave way to the realities of a market that did not reward mutual ownership. I saw it at Easynet and Cable and Wireless, where the infrastructure of connection was financialised and stripped. I see it now at Valleys to Coast, where a housing association created to serve communities in the South Wales valleys has absorbed the logic of corporate governance to the point where the communities it was built to serve have become, in practice, a risk category rather than a constituency.

The through-line is not coincidence. It is a structural feature of how British institutions have been transformed over the past forty years — the systematic replacement of social purpose with financial logic, performed so gradually and with such institutional fluency that each individual transformation appears reasonable, even necessary, even at the time it is happening.

VI. What the Photographs Would Have Shown

The photographs I made for NAAFI are held by the institution. I cannot reproduce them. What I can reconstruct is their subject matter, which is itself a kind of evidence.

I photographed NAAFI shops — the retail infrastructure of military life, the shelves of familiar brands in unfamiliar locations, the specific visual grammar of the high street reproduced in a garrison in West Germany or on a base in the Falklands. I photographed

financial centres — the institutional management of money for people whose financial lives were structured by their service, who needed the organisation to function as banker as well as grocer. I photographed bars and clubs — the social spaces where the day ended, where the rank structure relaxed slightly, where something like ordinary life was performed. I photographed canteens on ships, fast food outlets on bases, cafes in remote postings. I photographed golf days, rugby matches, pensioner gatherings.

These are almost completely undocumented spaces in the visual record of British military history. The historiography of the armed forces tends toward the operational and the ceremonial — the hardware, the parades, the moments of formal significance. The domestic infrastructure that kept people psychologically functional in extreme environments, the mundane comfort systems without which operational effectiveness would have been impossible, has not been treated as a subject worth photographing. Except that I photographed it, and then the institution kept the photographs.

> *I generated the visual record of an institution's final years. The institution kept it. That is not an accident. Institutions that are contracting do not generally make it easy to see what they are losing.*

The Official Secrets Act creates a formal boundary around what can be said. But the more consequential silence is the institutional one — the retention of an archive that would, if it were accessible, constitute primary evidence of a social world that no longer exists. The NAAFI bar in West Germany in 1991. The canteen on an aircraft carrier. The shop in the Falklands. These images exist. They are simply not available to the people whose history they document.

This is another version of the problem that Quantum Memory is attempting to address. Not the dramatic erasure of compulsory purchase and Olympic demolition, but the quieter institutional sequestration of evidence — the files that are retained but not released, the photographs that were taken but are not accessible, the record that exists in theory but cannot be consulted in practice. The memory is present somewhere in a filing system. It is simply not available to the people who need it.

VII. Notes on Method and Next Steps

This research note is reconstructed entirely from personal testimony. The photographs are not accessible. Primary documentary sources — NAAFI's own institutional records, the Options for Change review documentation, the Audit Commission or National Audit Office

assessments of the organisation during this period — have not been consulted for this draft and would be necessary for any version of this document intended for academic citation.

What this note offers is what only personal testimony can offer: the texture of being inside an institution at a specific moment, the sensory and relational knowledge that does not appear in any official record, the gap between what the institution said it was and what it felt like from inside. That testimony is offered as primary evidence, with the limitations of memory and the passage of thirty-five years openly acknowledged.

The connection to Quantum Memory is structural rather than thematic. NAAFI is not a subject of the Quantum Memory project, which is focused on the communities of South Wales and the specific memory infrastructure of the Welsh industrial valleys. But NAAFI is part of the biographical archaeology that underlies the project — the sequence of institutional encounters that produced the artist who is now making Quantum Memory, each one adding a layer to the understanding of how institutions carry and lose their social purpose, how the people inside them absorb and survive that loss, and what remains when the institution has moved on.

The photographs are held by NAAFI or its successors. Whether they are still accessible, whether a freedom of information request would yield anything, whether the archive has survived the organisation's own subsequent contractions — these are research questions worth pursuing. The visual record of British military domestic life in the final years of the Cold War, made by a photographer working under the Official Secrets Act, is not a small thing. It is evidence of a world that has largely disappeared, retained inside an institution that may not know what it has.

Note on Sources

This document is based on personal testimony. The author worked as a corporate photographer for NAAFI c.1990–1992 and signed the Official Secrets Act as a condition of that employment. Photographs taken during this period were retained by NAAFI under standard institutional copyright arrangements. No classified material is disclosed or implied in this note.

Key References

Fisher, Mark. 'Always Yearning for the Time That Just Eluded Us.' In Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures. Winchester: Zero Books, 2014.

HM Government. Options for Change: Statement on the Defence Estimates 1990. London: HMSO, 1990.

NAAFI institutional archive [held by NAAFI/successor organisations — access status unknown].