

RYDER MAWBY  
STAFF

## Stop grooming teenagers for war

If I were to follow in my father's footsteps, I would enlist in the Marine Corps, wake up at the crack of dawn and head to the shooting range with my machine gun handy. But my father's footsteps are far too aggressive for my taste, and the only gun I'll ever hold will be the one in Call of Duty.

My family has served in the military for generations: My father served in the Marine Corps, my grandmother served as a psychologist for the Department of Defense, and my great grandfather served in the Navy.

You'd think I would follow in the family tradition. But joining the military is part of a long list of hypermasculine pursuits I have avoided at all costs, accompanied by the Boy Scouts, any activity that would force me into a men's locker room and anything football-related.

Because of my predisposition to the military, I was disinterested in the recruiters who regularly visited my high school. They'd set up their equipment in the school cafeteria, offering us candy if we did pull-ups. Now, I'm not a particularly astute person, but I could see past the glitz and glamour. That isn't the real military. You won't get a Snickers for lifting your head over a bar 10 times.

The empty guarantees of recruiters, meant to prey off of ambition, proved futile for me. A job in the career of my choice? "Paid" college? Leadership opportunities? I had heard it all before. At this point, the appeal had worn out. But the sergeant persisted, tracking

me down on Facebook to reiterate his tired promises, like a fisherman casting out another line of bait.

It was only once I realized this behavior is common among military recruiters that I began to see the immorality of their presence in public schools. These are adults exploiting teenagers.

There's a reason I encountered numerous recruiters while I lived in rural Appalachia but none when I transferred to a magnet school in the middle of San Francisco. Military recruiters often leverage the financial insecurities of lower-income students in order to meet their quota: Students in San Francisco generally don't need the increased financial stability or the military promises, whereas lower-income students in Appalachia may be more drawn to these benefits. The military often turns to rural areas with lower economic opportunity because that can mean higher demand for work.

Recruiters' jobs are to meet a quota, not to pick and choose their recruits. So while their behavior may be predatory or exploitative, it's not deliberate. Rather, it reflects a deeper institutional issue — one at the hands of the U.S. military as a whole and its desperation for numbers.

This past week, I took the time to sit down with my father and discuss his experiences with military recruiters.

“Were you recruited for the Marine Corps, or did you join based on your own interest?” I asked.

“I was very deliberate in my interest,” he said. “They didn't recruit me, I went to them fresh outta high school. I could've gotten any job, but I wanted to go into the infantry.”

He said there were a lot of guys who tested poorly on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery, the aptitude test used by the military, and only qualified for the infantry and a couple other positions. These guys were told by recruiters that they'd be able to make a lateral transfer to another position. But recruiters, my father said, are notorious liars.

“Why do you think they went to such lengths to sign recruits?” I asked.

“Recruiters are like salesmen,” he said. “Once you let a recruiter get their claws in you, they're relentless. But it's not really their fault. There's a very real threat involved with them not meeting their quota.”

So what can be done to address the predatory dynamic that military recruiters perpetuate? We can start by partially repealing legislation that allows them access to public high schools in the first place. The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 includes a provision requiring schools that receive certain federal funds to release their students' contact information to military recruiters. Additionally, it grants military recruiters the right to access school grounds, given that they allow college recruiters on campus. We need to amend the act to remove this provision.

When military recruiters are allowed to enter a public school, a certain degree of trust is established between the recruiters and the students — one that leaves unsupervised minors susceptible to influence that could end up changing the course of their lives.

If prospective recruits are genuinely interested in the opportunities the military has to offer, they'll do what it takes to seek those opportunities out. But allowing military recruiters access to public schools infringes upon what is supposed to be a safe

environment for learning and self-discovery. There are other places recruiters can focus their efforts: shopping malls, large events or other public venues.

For someone who had lots of exposure to the military before meeting a military recruiter, I found it easy to dodge their deception, but those who are unfamiliar with recruiting tactics may be unable to discern fact from fiction. Given an ultimatum and afraid to forfeit something potentially meaningful, many teenagers will unknowingly find themselves stuck in a rabbit hole of legal commitment, struggling to find their way out.

*“Off the Beat” columns are written by Daily Cal staff members separate from the semester’s regular opinion columnists. Contact the opinion desk at [opinion@dailycal.org](mailto:opinion@dailycal.org) or follow us on Twitter @dailycalopinion.*