Comprehension Section Examples

Q: How have returning soldiers been depicted in the following passage?

**The following extract is taken from the Canberra Times website entitled – *The Silent War*.**

# When the war comes home

#### By Scott Hannaford

IT WAS around midnight when Nicholas Hodge stepped into the middle of the road, lay down on the white line and placed his identity card on his chest. A passing taxi driver was the first to spot him and pulled over. The driver picked up the card on Hodge's chest, reached for his phone and began dialling.

Soon, a police patrol arrived and two officers made their way towards to the large, powerfully built figure lying face-up on the bitumen. One of the officers recognised Hodge: a factor, he says now, that – combined with the way ACT Policing handled him that night – probably saved his life.

Under the gaze of nearby diners in the trendy Canberra restaurant district of Kingston, Hodge begins to sob. "I was hoping a car would run me over," he explains. "I just started bawling my eyes out, saying, 'I need help, I need help'."

Hodge clamps his eyes shut as he tells the story and he freezes momentarily in his chair. After a long pause his tightly clenched face eases a little and he lets out a low sigh, as if waking from a trance. "Sorry, it's this medication I'm on. It makes me twitch and close my eyes every so often."

Today is a good day for Hodge. A fortnight ago he asked a friend to call and postpone our interview. Hodge had been overwhelmed by an anxiety attack after getting into a shouting match with a passing motorist while riding his bike. Now he's leading me down the corridor of his home to the "war room" – the label his wife has given it.

In one corner of the room hangs a blue United Nations beret. In another, the butt of a MAG 58 machine gun is mounted on a board. Plaques, glass-framed certificates, awards, photos and scraps of newspaper articles adorn every wall.

Walking into the room feels like stepping into a monument to a cherished, lost way of life. So how did it all unravel so quickly? How did this promising career, hallmarked by a rapid rise through the ranks, end by the age of just 37?

Hodge, a veteran of multiple deployments with both the army and the Australian Federal Police, is one of the hundreds of Australian soldiers who, on returning home, find themselves haunted by post-traumatic stress disorder.

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**Use the following extract to answer the question below:**

Q: How have particular ideas about soldiers been explored in this text?

**In the heat** of February, Kbora Ali is being inducted into the Army.

A pre-enlistment fitness test ensures her body mass index is within the acceptable range. She’s given the standard-issue Army Disruptive Pattern Camouflage Uniform (DPCU) and field equipment.

She’s learning to march, turn and salute; to circuit train and endurance march with gear twice her weight.

An F88 Austeyr rifle is the first weapon she will hold, and learn to use.

“The first day I will never forget,” she says. “At first, I thought it was the wrong decision. I doubted myself the whole week and it was very hard to accept the challenge ahead of me, and being with new people from all of Australia that I didn’t know, get used to them, accept them as part of my new family.”

“It was hard to transition to such a culture shock of waking up early, being told what to do.”

She is the smallest soldier some of her superiors have ever seen. Special boots have to be ordered in to fit her tiny feet; Halal food is set aside; she is given time to pray.

Kbora says the early days were tough. She found it difficult to physically keep up with her fellow recruits.

“Sometimes I hoped for a shoulder to cry on... the first week was hard,” she says. “I did cry, I admit, but everyone goes through that phase saying, ‘it’s hard, but we can all get through it’.”

As homesickness took its toll, Kbora felt trapped.

“She was telling me, ’I’m looking at the wire – how can I escape?’” says sister Razia. “It was like a prison for her during the first week.”

At the end of each week, new recruits are handed back their phones to use.

“When she called, that’s when I think it hit her really hard and badly,” Razia says. “Because emotionally, she was really upset. Physically, she said she could cope, but emotionally, it’s the hardest job she can do.”

“You’re being trained from a civilian to a soldier,” says Kbora. “So it’s definitely an intense three months to train, physically and mentally. It was definitely harder for me, just finishing Year 12 and moving out.”

On the phone to her family, she cried while they talked. But her father, who had begged her not to leave, now changed tact.

“When she started her training, she called me,” Sultan says. “She said she missed us and was crying. I told her, ‘Well now you’re there, don’t miss us. You didn’t listen to me, so you should stay there. It’s one issue [that] you went; it will be 1000 issues if you come back and quit. You have to be patient.’

“I told her this because I wanted her to achieve what she wanted. I didn’t want her to become defeated.”

The directness of his words speaks more to his matched experience of testing work and separation from family than disapproval of Kbora’s decision.

“[I listened] to my dad saying how he sacrificed everything from his life being away from his family,” remembers Kbora. “He said, ‘I came to Australia, I didn’t speak any English, I worked alone for seven years picking oranges. If I can do it, you can do it as well.’”

“That was definitely a boost in motivation. Every time I wanted to give up, I remembered him saying that and it really helped me to work harder.”

Kbora's initial distress did not go unnoticed by her superiors. They, and the local chaplain, wrote to the Ali family to express their concern – and support – for her. In spite of this, Razia worried about the impact of the experience, and knew that if Kbora decided to return home, she would blame herself. She’d be a failure.

Kbora pressed on.

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