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## **FORCES IN MIND TRUST**



### **How Counter-Insurgency Warfare Experiences Impact upon the Post-Deployment Reintegration of Land-Based British Army Personnel**

**John D Brewer and Stephen Herron**

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**How Counter-insurgency Warfare Experiences Impact upon the Post-Deployment Reintegration of Land-Based British Army Personnel**

**Grant number FiMT14/1017QUB**

**End-of-Award Report**

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## FOREWORD

“Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it”, wrote philosopher George Santyana in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The two World Wars that defined that Century have though proven to be the exception rather than the rule. The UK’s Armed Forces, and in particular the British Army, have been consistently engaged over many decades in counter-insurgency warfare, which places unique demands on the very souls of those who fight.

One hundred years after Santyana’s words, and with British soldiers still serving in Afghanistan, albeit mainly in training roles, and perhaps in more discrete roles elsewhere, this report draws upon the lived experiences of those who fought the counter-insurgency fight. Over the years, doctrine has evolved and terminology has been sanitized, but the essence of fighting war ‘amongst the people’, a term first captured by the distinguished and thoughtful General Sir Rupert Smith, has remained. And the differing impact on its participants compared to that suffered by those from more conventional or symmetric conflicts, is presented here in rich and credible detail.

By highlighting the more ethereal issues of trust, identity and cultural awareness, this report does not shy away from asking many and difficult questions. In its policy recommendations, the report likewise presents a lengthy and varied menu, a word I use advisedly as it implies selection, whereas every recommendation deserves at the very least proper consideration.

The pragmatist in me recognizes that not all of these policy recommendations will be implemented, and perhaps ownership of some is so diffuse as to require fundamental societal change. Forces in Mind Trust is ambitious, but I doubt even we would claim to be able to influence to that extent. For now.

But then, the idealist gains the upper hand, and as I re-read this report, it is apparent that we *can* avoid repeating the lessons of history, and we *can* improve the chances of successful transition for those returning from counter-insurgency warfare. We just need to take the time to read and absorb the report, and to consider how individually we might change our approach so as to collectively and at every level support those in transition.

These are serious challenges that can only be solved by serious hauling on the policy levers. Counter-insurgency warfare seems unlikely to go away, and nor do the needs of those affected by it. Let us work together and provide the direct support, create the environment and develop the society that will allow serving personnel to transition with dignity and success.

Air Vice-Marshal Ray Lock CBE  
Chief Executive, Forces in Mind Trust

## 1. Executive Summary of Report

1. This Report isolates one specific set of land-based soldiers, those who were deployed in counter-insurgency (COIN) warfare in Afghanistan, to explore their specific transition experiences.
2. COIN operations contrast with conventional warfare in terms of the nature of the enemy, the army's operational objectives and role, and the higher levels of unpredictability and risk in the deployment. This form of warfare intensifies the emotional labour involved, particularly in terms of trust, identity and stress.
3. The research was not intended to contrast the transition experiences of troops from conventional warfare, for which a control group of equal numbers would be needed, but to undertake a small, two-year qualitative study capturing the experiences of Afghanistan veterans in their own words.
4. The research design introduced a longitudinal dimension by comparing the transition experiences of Afghan veterans with earlier COIN operations, in Britain's wars of decolonisation in the 1950s and 1960s, and the Ulster Defence Regiment in Northern Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s. This allowed us to explore the impact of cultural changes on transition, particularly changed attitudes towards trauma, and changed public attitudes towards COIN warfare generally.
5. The data set on which this Report is based involves 90 hours of taped interviews with 129 respondents, representing 20 from earlier COIN operations in the 1950s and 1960s, 30 from the Ulster Defence Regiment in Northern Ireland, 70 Afghanistan veterans, and 9 from other conflicts. We interviewed veterans of all ranks, both regular and reserve; we included a sub-sample of current serving soldiers.
6. Reintegration back into civilian life should be seen as a continuum, with one pole represented by successful management of the transition, the other unsuccessful. Most COIN personnel can be placed somewhere along this continuum, which is why we refer to it as the continuum of normal transition.
7. Locations along the continuum are not fixed and unchanging because life events, planned or unplanned, can increase or inhibit an individual's success in managing the transition. These life events are normal; they occur for us all. They are not just faced by ex-military returning to civilian life. The key issue therefore is the resilience of soldiers towards them.
8. Veterans' sense of identity is crucially important in managing the transition. Over-identification with the army and with the combatant soldier role predisposes veterans to an inability to cope in civilian life. This is usual in all soldiering; there are, however,

special features in COIN warfare that intensifies over-identification, worsening management of the transition back to civilian life.

9. These special effects are: i) the public controversy surrounding the combatant role in COIN warfare can increase 'the quest to belong' with former comrades as an escape from public criticism at worst or public indifference at best; ii) the combatant role in COIN, where there is uncertainty about whom to trust and who the enemy is, increases reliance on comrades, intensifies the sense of camaraderie, narrows the boundaries of the trusted in-group, and enhances the tight-knitted nature of friendships with one's immediate peers, whose very lives in a combat situation are in the group's hands, dependent on each looking after the other.
10. COIN warfare creates a 'bubble' environment for soldiers. The term 'bubble' was used regularly by respondents, which suggests it is part of the vocabulary in the occupational culture of ordinary veterans.
11. The 'bubble' effect of COIN is both strength and a weakness. On operations, survival depends on close knitted camaraderie, where looking after the squad is the same as protecting oneself, but in civilian life it can be problematic by keeping veterans in the bubble.
12. The bubble is closely tied to the issue of trust. COIN warfare narrows the boundaries of trust, restricts the number of those who can be trusted, and increases the emotional emphasis soldiers place on another's trustworthiness. Reliance on others' trustworthiness is very important in COIN, and can create a mutually reinforcing community of people who 'understand what it is like': they understand why they are fighting where they are, doing what they're doing, needing no justification or explanation that requires them to be made accountable.
13. Narrow boundaries of trust and anxiety about another's trustworthiness in civilian life are problematic, making normal social relations and human social interaction difficult, which can increase feelings of isolation and withdrawal outside the army. The mutually reinforcing trusted community suddenly disappears, and unless the boundaries of trust are broadened and the emotional priority placed on people's trustworthiness is rebalanced, veterans can have difficulties in adjusting.
14. Alternative sources of camaraderie are important in managing the transition. Some found this in formal regimental associations and ex-servicemen groups, some in self-constructed communities, through Facebook, shared leisure activities, and the like. These alternative sources of community helped in transforming their former violent or hyper forms of masculinity into more normal forms. Some Afghan veterans resisted the idea of engaging with the British Legion, seeing it as 'an old man's club', whereas non-Afghan veterans saw Help for Heroes, for example, as too Afghanistan focused.
15. Some veterans were able to compartmentalise their former life in the bubble, hermetically sealing it in the past, transferring identity in civilian life on to their family, work, religious life, and the like. These veterans rarely questioned their former role,

nor reflected on it. They cut themselves off from the public ambivalence to the COIN war and its purpose, and did not tend to participate in army-based alternative communities.

16. Those not doing so well in managing the transition tended, now they are outside the bubble, to be much more reflexive, questioning their role in an unpopular COIN war, being more sensitive toward the public's ambivalence toward the war, and to reflect more upon their experiences and the harrowing scenes that remain vivid in their memory. Post-deployment increased this internal reflexivity and questioning.
17. This internal reflexivity and questioning existed to such a level in some Afghan veterans as to constitute what we call an 'ontological crisis', which intensifies their inability to manage in civilian life. This ontological crisis is directly related to their COIN role for there is evidence that amongst those who are not managing the transition well, they are more aware of, and sensitive towards, public criticism of the war and its public unpopularity.
18. Veterans in our sample from earlier COIN conflicts did not articulate this ontological crisis. In the case of the UDR/RIR this is because the veterans justified their role to themselves (to defeat an illegal terror campaign by the IRA), a justification upheld by the British state and supported in many forms of local media and in Unionist popular culture. In the case of the colonial wars of independence this can be explained because there were no media campaigns at the time to suggest their role was unnecessary or unwanted.
19. This indicates that it is important to investigate the 'technique of neutralization', as we call them, that veterans use to justify their COIN experiences, as well as the factors externally within society, culture and the media that support or undercut these rationalisations.
20. The lack of preparation for life outside the bubble causes what we call a 'transition vacuum', where veterans are left to cope with the transition on their own. The MOD needs to improve the planning and preparation for veterans transitioning from the bubble back to civilian life and to improve post-deployment care. There are some examples of successful after care services, such as the Royal Irish 'After Care Service', the UDR Regimental Association and the regional after care service provided in Scotland by Veterans Scotland.
21. COIN warfare always exists in tension with public opinion. Respondents reproduced this tension, veering between feelings of being unloved and forgotten, yet craving public recognition and affection. Some veterans complained of being forgotten; this might be expected from veterans from the 1950s and 1960s, but some Afghan veterans felt their war would be soon forgotten too, if not already. In contrast, others complained about the high level of public attention given to the Afghan war in fear that it reinforced its public illegitimacy and thus added to their ontological crisis. This highlights the contradictions arising from the tension in the relationship between COIN operations and public opinion.

22. There was a high level of cynicism toward the public. The interplay of feelings about their participation in what they saw as forgotten wars, wrongly remembered wars and unpopular wars, and the of feelings of being unloved yet wanting greater recognition and respect, ended up in most developing a highly cynical attitude toward public opinion. Cynicism is part of the tension between COIN operations and public opinion: veterans wanted greater public acclaim yet rejected any public affirmation as itself reflecting the cynicism of public whose support at base is not even half-hearted.
23. Cynicism towards public opinion is deeply rooted yet highly contradictory. Some complain that the public has forgotten the war; others fear the public will forget it. Some are suspicious of public interest in the war; some think the public have no interest in it. Those veterans who expressed fear at public disinterest largely did so on the view that public interest was necessary in order to keep public opinion focused on post-traumatic stress issues, whose symptoms might not manifest until some years hence. It is noteworthy that these veterans believed their future mental health needs were dependent on public commitment rather than MOD commitment. This reflects an even broader cynicism toward the MOD and the government, whose neglect of the veterans – whether real or imagined – they feared.
24. Etched in the memories of our Afghan veterans are the national commemorations of two world wars that have taken place during their own readjustment back into civilian life. Having to cope with what they see as public indifference, even rejection, of their war experience, while craving the sort of public narratives of honour and celebration experienced by the soldiers who served in these conventional wars, increases the tension between COIN warfare and public opinion and accordingly intensifies their cynicism.
25. Successful transition requires ex-service personnel re-familiarize themselves with the cultural expectations of civilian life so as to reclaim the cultural awareness that is associated with civilian life. The ‘institutional self’ that the army – as a ‘total institution’ – requires, can deplete the skills and cultural awareness needed to live again as a civilian. Cultural awareness training might usefully form part of the preparation the MOD makes for a return to civilian life,
26. The cultural awareness needed for civilian life is linked to broader skill sets, especially those needed for a return to employment, for a more settled family life, and for reintegration back into an identity as a civilian member of the community. Ex-soldiers’ expectations of co-workers, family members and the general public need to accommodate people’s lack of familiarity with the nature and demands of ‘institutional self’ that army life imposed on ex-service personnel. Ex-service personnel need to adjust their expectations of non-army people, who can appear unsympathetic, non-understanding, rather laid-back and undedicated and unregimented.
27. Former soldiers who are transitioning well criticise the growth of a ‘health and safety culture’, which they believe is disempowering ex-soldiers and encouraging an over-sensitivity to risk and a ‘dependency culture’ that robs them of the personal resilience



to manage 'normal' life events. There is some evidence to support this co-dependency. This is a dilemma for the MOD: they want to mould and shape a military identity that is essential for them to be an effective COIN unit, but without developing an over-dependency that makes it difficult to release the 'institutional self' on retirement from the army and which robs some of resilience to deal with life events when back in society.

28. Some successful 'transitioners' refer to 'chosen trauma', believing those less-successful in transition have succumbed to what they refer to as the over-medicalization and over-traumatization of the transitional experience. The wider therapy culture of late modern society is coupled with a media focus on post-traumatic stress to almost encourage, they believe, the choice for a traumatised self.
29. Some who have transitioned well are ex-service personnel who never fully absorbed or adopted the army's institutional self but retained some personal identity throughout, such as by seeing the army instrumentally as 'just a job' rather than as a way of life into which they fully integrated. Instrumentality this has enabled them to retain a personal self. Reserve personnel for the most part adeptly switch between the institutional and personal self and are used to managing their disjuncture, but regular personnel adjust better when back in civilian life when their personal self was set in balance against the institutional self within the army.
30. Instrumentality exists in degree and context, for some, deployment experiences and circumstances can squeeze and limit the retention of a personal self, such as frontline combat roles that encourage the 'bubble' mentality.
31. Emotional distancing also helps with instrumentality and the retention of a personal self. This helps in them 'doing their job' 'getting on with the job', without the emotional engagement and emotional over-identification that turns their job into a 'way of life' that requires a fully absorbed institutional self.
32. Emotional distancing was easier for those who subsequently avoided reflexivity about their experiences and encounters in COIN warfare. Emotional distancing was found at two extremes: the highly educated and articulate who had the capacity to recognise the importance of emotional disengagement, and the relatively non-articulate whose inability to find the words to be reflexive made them try to avoid thinking and talking about the past generally. Emotional distancing is also easier for those ex-service personnel who had projected their post-deployment identity and sense of self onto their family, work, and/or community and leisure activities.
33. Training in the army might better balance the requirement to inculcate an institutional self with retaining life skills and cultural awareness to cope when back in civilian life. Attention might be given to what we call the 'transitional self', in which preparation and training for retirement and resignation gives attention to the adjustments that need to be made ahead of transition in order to prepare for the cultural re-familiarization required and for the changed expectations that they need to be made aware of to reintegrate back into the wider community.

34. The 'transitional self' is a transitional identity between the institutional self of the army and an identity as a civilian. It permits adjustments to be made in how ex-service personnel see themselves. The development of a transitional self should be an object of policy, preparation and training before ex-servicemen and women leave the army and an object of reinforcement and consolidation in post-deployment support by service providers.
35. Veterans from earlier COIN operations in particular feel there is over exposure to trauma in Afghan veterans. This view needs to be placed in context. The Malaya conflict was seen by them as a forgotten war, in contrast to the media attention they see lavished on Afghan veterans. They see themselves as 'slipping back quietly' in civilian life and neglected. They also see their combat experience as cause for pride. It is also one that received no negative media attention and they have experienced no legal complaint or victimisation from it. UDR veterans also saw some Afghan veterans as consciously adopting a position of victimisation as a 'chosen trauma'.
36. The Malaya and Afghan conflicts are seen as mirror reflections of each other by Malaya veterans. Afghan is over-medicalised, with too much media and cultural focus on trauma, lacking in pride and honour, and with veterans socially constructed by the media as 'victims'. Reflecting back half a century like this may encourage Malaya veterans to minimise their transition stress.
37. UDR veterans were similar in that the passage of time permits them a 'look backwards' in which they cast their military service as one of pride and honour, something continually reinforced in the support accorded them in the Protestant-Unionist-Loyalist community and Unionist media. The cultural context of their service, at least for one section of the community, permits a more positive look backwards. This encourages a more negative attitude towards the medicalisation of the transition process for Afghan veterans. The passage of time might also mean that they are better integrated back, at least into the Protestant community.
38. Veterans in all wars have a sense of personal pride, even Afghan veterans, but this was culturally disseminated and supported in Protestant culture for the UDR and not undermined for Malaya veterans by a negative campaign in the media, politically and in the wider society; there was no collective doubt, uncertainty and ambivalence about their service, largely because the Malaya conflict was neglected and ignored.
39. Pride in military service is a dual emotion. It is internal, describing the accord and acclaim we give ourselves. It is also external, describing the accord and acclaim others bestow on us. We might call the first personal pride, the second public pride. For different reasons, the Malaya and UDR veterans had both.
40. Afghan veterans transitioning badly, tend to have only personal pride and perceive themselves as receiving no public pride, regardless of whether or not this is actually the case. The perceived lack of public pride reinforces the poor transitioning and the medicalisation of their transition experience. Support is often sought from other

Afghan veterans to reinforce their sense of personal pride as 'soldiers together', but the nature of public pride ensures this is never sufficient to compensate for the lack of external accord and acclaim.

41. The criticism from earlier generations of COIN soldiers about the over-exposure of the traumatic nature of the Afghan war, with the corollary of its over-medicalisation, is paradoxical, for Afghan veterans who are not transitioning well *want* their experiences to be medicalised and for their trauma to be recognised culturally and publicly. But they determinedly do not see this cultural recognition as self-constructed victimhood or as 'chosen trauma'.
42. Afghan veterans who are doing well in transitioning to civilian life do not see themselves as dependent on the need for public pride. Indeed, they see their less fortunate colleagues as co-dependent in seeking others' acknowledgement, acclaim and accord; something, they say, hinders their reintegration back into civilian life. This is because poor 'transitioners' are said to be aware of the lack of public recognition and public pride. Successful 'transitioners' declare themselves sufficient in personal pride as not to need public recognition; or not to care. This view is mutually reinforced, of course, by the success of their transition process, as well as their ability to resist the adoption of a total institutional self while in the army, their instrumentality in attitude towards the army, and lack of reflexivity about their experiences when in service.
43. Successful 'transitioners' experience a virtuous circle akin to the biblical St Matthew principle: to those who have, more will be given, to those who have not, more will be taken away. To those veterans doing well, circumstances reinforce their success, while they denude those doing badly of personal resilience and cultural reinforcement and support, worsening their transition experience.
44. Successful 'transitioners' are also aware of the importance of in-house military support on first re-entering civilian life but then distance themselves from the military, preferring civilian support structures and engagements. Those transitioning badly want on-going military and civilian support.
45. The former soldiers in our sample could find little charity toward the charities helping them. One of the chief complaints made was that support agencies confuse means and goals, pursuing funding to keep themselves afloat to the neglect of supporting veterans. Veterans in need responded to their own demands and not those of a chronically under-funded support system. Former soldiers insisted that greater government regulation is needed so support goes towards those charities who are making a real difference.
46. COIN veterans felt that while their experiences were unique they did not want a dedicated support structure of their own because this would further categorise veterans, add extra layers of ambiguity in the definition of veteran, and result in yet more fragmentation in the support system. COIN veterans were also conscious not to

create a hierarchy of veterans, in which their experiences were given more credence than others.

## 2. Executive Summary of the Policy Recommendations

1. The British military must engage in a conversation about how they see themselves as an employer in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and whether they accept they have responsibilities that transcend the normal social conventions of the workplace.
2. Transition strategies must provide practical and engaged support through interactive learning and mentoring. It should not be a 'tick box' exercise that amounts merely to the provision of information leaflets and the like.
3. Cultural awareness training is necessary for return to civilian life as a preparation for retirement that it then supported and reinforced from within and across the voluntary sector.
4. Self-reliance and self-responsibility in the transitioning soldier are important, but the transitioning soldier should not have to find information out for themselves. Self-reliance and responsibility must be taught as part of a broader process of cultural rehabilitation into civilian life.
5. Cultural awareness training for civilian life should not be confined to a lecture room in the barracks but involve transitioning soldiers going out and engaging with communities, employers and educational trainers.
6. Deepened relationships need to extend throughout society so as to provide a holistic and collective approach to soldiers' cultural retraining.
7. The MOD should consider developing a 'buddy' scheme, where a mentoring support worker is assigned to all transitioning soldiers, not just 'at risk' ones.
8. There must be greater focus on how to prepare the family for a transition to civilian life. A 'buddy' system could be provided for the family unit by military families who have transitioned well.
9. Family units should participate in a training programmes geared toward the transition that they may experience as a family unit.
10. Support programmes need to avoid creating a 'culture of dependency'. Dependency has the potential to deplete or undermine the skills necessary for successful transition.
11. Cultural awareness training should include learning in the modes of behaviour, actions and interactions needed in civilian life. Cultural awareness training should include the differences in civilian family life compared to military family life.
12. Support programmes should avoid 'transitional naivety' through garnering unrealistic expectations of post-deployment employment prospects.

13. Over-identification with military life can narrow soldiers' identity, making it difficult to shift identity on to aspects of their civilian life.
14. Role models are needed for transitioning soldiers to practically demonstrate that identity can be successfully transferred on the family and home life, employment, or leisure pursuits.
15. Life events impact on transition. Resilience to negative life events is important in successful transitioning. Resilience cannot be taught but can be learnt experientially; the need for resilience can be noted in cultural awareness training.
16. Instrumentality is an important part of resilience. Encouraging soldiers to view a military career instrumentally rather than an all-encompassing identity will greatly assist in the transition to civilian life.
17. Learning to live with broader boundaries of trust is also important for transitioning COIN soldiers. The issue of trust should also feature in cultural awareness training.
18. Over-identification with the military plays a part in narrowing the boundaries of trust. We encourage the military to reduce the distinction between soldier and the broader population.
19. A public message of positivity rather than perpetual suspicion should be complemented with programmes which encourage former soldiers to interact with local communities.
20. The public perceptions of COIN soldiers as victims can become self-categorising. Increased public celebrations of successful individual transitions can challenge and change the public narrative away from victim status.
21. Balance in trauma awareness is vital. It is to be commended that there is increased public awareness of mental health issues amongst veterans but an over-emphasis on trauma can result in the medicalisation of the transition process.
22. The 'politics of chosen trauma' should be avoided in which organisations competing for resources contribute toward a narrative of trauma.
23. It is important to avoid a blame culture developing where the military is scapegoated for transition issues that are not its fault or making.
24. The veteran support community has responsibilities in the public sphere to ensure they do not contribute to the politics of chosen trauma, do not encourage victim status in former soldiers or over-medicalise the transition process.

25. The effectiveness of any single organisation in providing care for individual soldiers in the public, private or voluntary spheres is mitigated by the chaotic and blurred nature of the sector as a whole.
26. The patchwork nature of veteran support ensures there is less clarity and co-ordination than veterans deserve. The MOD and voluntary sector stakeholders should begin a discussion at the regional and local levels to co-ordinate support and share best practice.
27. Support for vulnerable personnel is often best administered at a local level, so local support providers should be encouraged to share good practice and be facilitated to input into the larger regional policy debate.
28. There is currently an emphasis on veterans making the first move to seek support when often veterans cannot do this due to individual and societal pressures. The MOD and the voluntary support sector should give thought to how they might become more proactive in dealing with veterans.
29. The responsibilities of the national government need to be recognised in setting wider policy and funding frameworks. The government should dialogue with support providers to hear from the sector how best they feel the government can help them.

### **3. Introduction**

In this Introduction we want to give a very brief overview of the research and to outline its rationale. The rationale justifies its purpose, giving the reasons why we think it was important to do and the hopes we have for its policy impact. We also explain how this Report is structured.

#### **Research Overview**

COIN operations are different from conventional warfare between nation states because they involve dealing with internal, civilian insurgency while also trying to militarily defeat several disconnected armed groups rather than formal armies. The experiences of COIN soldiers are thus distinctly different to those involved in more conventional wars, which can affect their reintegration when they eventually leave the armed services and seek to settle back in to civilian life.

The British are familiar with counter-insurgency operations in Northern Ireland, but they are widely associated with wars of independence, with decolonisation, and contemporary operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. These are very different cases and the research explores the experiences in three cases over time: Britain's wars of decolonisation in the 1950s and 1960s, the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) in Northern Ireland in the 1980s, and Afghan veterans today. Ex-Service personnel involved in these three conflicts have been interviewed directly, giving us over 90 hours of data.

We know a lot about the experiences of the communities affected by counter-insurgency operations, although there is still more to know, but we know relatively little directly relating to the impact of this style of warfare on the Service personnel who conducted



operations and its effects on their everyday lives when they returned to civilian life. So familiar have counter-insurgency operations become in modern warfare that there is an urgent need to understand the experiences of counter-insurgency soldiers so as to inform the development of policies and support structures post-Service. The research is thus designed with impact in mind, in trying to make a difference to the lives of armed force personnel and their families when coping with a return to civilian life.

### **The Rationale for the Research**

Contemporary warfare stands at a crossroads. No longer are conflicts confined to competing nation states on a battlefield but instead are becoming increasingly unpredictable, progressively localised and ever more complex. While these complexities have profound implications for the long-term success of the armed forces in such conflict zones, of similar importance are the post-conflict experiences and reintegration of troops involved in such operations.

Soldiers returning from conventional wars between nation states benefit from a post-war national narrative that recognises their contribution and acclaims their sacrifices, a narrative which is often reinforced by cultural rituals and symbols that honour their deployment. This does not necessarily assuage problems of post-traumatic stress or ease their civilian reintegration, but the national and cultural narrative is an important mediating factor in any post-conflict transition.

Soldiers returning from counter-insurgency operations also face problems around post-traumatic stress and civilian reintegration but do not benefit from a national and cultural narrative of victory, honour and popular celebration. This only adds to their post-deployment reintegration problems. It also exposes soldiers to unfamiliar stressors and contexts as they

fight the enemy while developing and maintaining rapport with local populations and communities. As such, these unique complexities can result in the development of post-deployment difficulties as soldiers seek to reintegrate into civilian life. However, to date, there has been little attention paid to the social and cultural complexities of COIN operations and the impact this has on effective preparation, engagement and post-deployment reintegration of soldiers.

In an organisation whose primary purpose is to engage in fighting, the transitional process of personnel from military to civilian life can be reduced to secondary importance by the military. This is a mistake. Not only will improved focus on the transitional patterns of personnel help to promote the role of the armed forces as an employer but also help in recruitment and retention of soldiers. Yet this can only be achieved by paying attention to the unique cultural and social contexts which soldiers operate in and how this plays a role in their post-conflict behaviour and actions. It is our hope that this Report will encourage the armed forces to be more aware of the complexities of the transition to civilian life by former counter-insurgency personnel, and that our research will contribute significantly to future policy.

With these impacts in mind, our research sought to investigate the post-conflict reintegration patterns of land based soldiers who have returned most recently from counter-insurgency conflict in Afghanistan. The MOD and associated stakeholders are alert to the issues they face in terms of the management of stress, injury and civilian reintegration, which are in some respects very similar to soldiers returning from deployment in the Falklands and the Gulf Wars. But there are some key differences for Afghanistan returnees, principally arising from the unique experiences of COIN warfare and the absence of a national and cultural narrative of victory, honour and celebration.

As a result, in research funded by the Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT), we have focused on two distinct samples of land based soldiers from Afghanistan operations, namely full-time and reserve personnel. Furthermore, as part of this project key reference groups consisted of a sample of soldiers from earlier counter-insurgency wars, namely those returning from the Colonial Wars of Independence in the British Empire in the 1950s and 1960s, such as Malaya, Aden and Cyprus, and those who served in the UDR in Northern Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s.

Comparisons between Afghanistan soldiers, both full-time and reserve, with personnel from previous counter insurgency operations has two virtues. First, it isolates the special experiences of counter-insurgency soldiers who return to civilian life without a national and cultural narrative of victory, honour and celebration, to assess whether the absence of such narratives impacts negatively on their post-deployment civilian life. Secondly, it introduces a longitudinal dimension, allowing us to see what issues and problems emerged in earlier deployments only after some passage of time. This permits stakeholders and service providers to anticipate problems that might be faced by Afghanistan returnees sometime in the future and to form an appropriate policy response. Stakeholders can also be informed about the coping strategies of earlier counter-insurgency soldiers, of what worked and did not work in the past, to better gauge their appropriate response to Afghanistan veterans. Such improved awareness will not only have profound implications as to how to approach such issues but how to construct an overall narrative and case to support discussions with key stakeholders when attempting to garner further support for transitional programmes and projects.

While this research seeks to contribute towards further understanding post-deployment experiences for British soldiers we did not set out with a pre-determined focus

on 'negative' post deployment experiences but also included those occasions and situations where soldiers have seen an improvement in their lives as a result of military engagement and experiences, of which there were numerous examples. Fundamentally, we hope this research will contribute towards the growing body of literature on the military, and provide lessons which can be applied to enhance the successful reintegration of soldiers returning from counter-insurgency theatres of combat.

### **Structure of this Report**

The Report is split into discrete sections for ease of reading. We use several appendices to expand on technical information that we do not wish to disrupt the narrative. In what follows, Section 4 summarises our research aims and objectives and explains the research design used in the investigation. We undertook a systematic literature review on counter-insurgency warfare and this is reported in Section 5. It focuses on the definition of counter-insurgency, the nature of its warfare, and on research that has addressed the emotional consequences of this type of deployment. Since we are interested in the reintegration experiences of COIN personnel, we also reviewed the expanding literature on the transition of military personnel to civilian life. The research findings are outlined in Section 6. We make many analytical observations about the data and give some highly selective extracts from the interviews. We have over 90 hours of interview material and the extracts used in this Report are only emblematic of a very large mass of data. We also provide vignettes as more detailed case studies that expand on some of our analytical observations. Editorial comments within quotations are enclosed within square brackets. In Section 7, we identify the policy implications and recommendations that follow on from our analysis.

## 4. Research Design

### Introduction

It is necessary to be reminded of our research aims and objectives and the research design that we adopted to realise them. Our research aims and objectives can be summarised as follows:

- To undertake a systematic literature review on counter-insurgency warfare;
- To understand how experiences resulting from counter-insurgency warfare impact upon the post-deployment lives of land based British soldiers, both full-time and reserve, and their reintegration into normal everyday civilian life;
- To explore four case studies relevant to understanding these issues: by using four case studies:
  - (a) current full-time returning troops from Afghanistan;
  - (b) current reserve troops returning from Afghanistan;
  - (c) counter-insurgency soldiers involved in campaigns during the 1950's and 1960's, such as Malaya and Cyprus;
  - (d) troops from the locally recruited Ulster Defence Regiment who were involved in counter-insurgency operations in Northern Ireland during what is commonly known as 'the Troubles';
- To illustrate the coping mechanisms used by soldiers engaged in counter insurgency warfare in these four instances/contexts;
- To evaluate the effectiveness of the Army's official post-deployment support mechanisms in previous counter-insurgency wars;
- To learn what worked and did not work in the past and to assess the applications of these lessons to Afghanistan veterans;
- To explore how veterans are affected by the absence of a national narrative, how they engage with national debate about the war and can contribute to shaping a more positive national narrative;
- To analyse and compare differences of experience and response between full time and reserve personnel.

## **Research Practice**

The project focused on two distinct samples of land based soldiers from Afghanistan operations, namely full-time and reserve personnel. According to the MOD regular personnel are defined as follows. 'UK Regulars are full time Service personnel, including Nursing Services, but excluding FTRS personnel, Gurkhas, Naval activated Reservists, mobilised Reservists, Military Provost Guarding Service (MPGS) and Non-Regular Permanent Service (NRPS). Unless otherwise stated, [the number] includes trained and untrained personnel.' (MOD, 2014: 20). Reserve forces are defined by the MOD as: 'Volunteer Reserves comprise the Maritime Reserve, the Army Reserve and the Royal Auxiliary Air Force. They are members of society who voluntarily accept a liability to attend training with the Armed Forces on a part-time basis (usually conducted during evenings and weekends) and to be mobilised to deploy on operations alongside the Regular Force. As they are at a known level of readiness they are usually the first reservists who are called on for operations. The Volunteer Reserve also includes personnel with capabilities or skills that cannot be held economically within the Regular Force or are better drawn from the civil sector, for example personnel with specialist IT or medical skills.' (MOD, 2014: 28).

Our research focused on land based members of the army who were either regular or reserve. The vast majority of participants in this research were former military personnel with a small sample still currently serving in the military. We were particular keen to explore the differences in both coping strategies adopted by full-time and reserve personnel and the mechanisms put in place by the defence community to help in the process of successful military-civilian transition.

The project was carried out over a two-year time period between 14 September 2015 and 13 September 2017 and was hosted at the Senator George J. Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security and Justice at Queen's University. The research team was headed by Professor John Brewer and employed Dr Stephen Herron as Research Fellow (for biographical details of the authors, see Appendix 3). Michael Semple, Visiting Professor in the Institute and an international expert on issues relating to Afghanistan acted as consultant on the project. In addition to the research team, an International Advisory Board was appointed to oversee the correct management of the project (for membership of the International Advisory Board, see Appendix 2).

Participants in the research were obtained through consultation with key stakeholders and contacts who advised as to the most suitable participants to take part (for a list of gatekeepers see Appendix 1). From this we utilised a research technique known as 'snowballing' whereby through a process of trust and confidence building from existing contacts and gatekeepers, we were able to access further participants. We liaised fully with contacts and gatekeepers throughout, thus ensuring our research remained open and transparent at all stages.

We followed Queen's University protocols for ethical practice in the field. All participants were made fully aware of the project and its known risks and benefits, and had explained who was involved in the research, its funder and its purpose. We used a written information sheet (see Appendix 4), which all respondents were required to read, detailing the procedures, risk and potential benefits of the research. An informed consent form was signed by participants and guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity within the law were given (see Appendix 5). Participants were given the freedom to determine their level of participation in the project and were free at any point to withdraw their consent. We had only

one case of a participant agreeing to take part then changing their mind. Participants were fully informed regarding what information would be held about them and who would have access to such information thus complying with the Data Protection Act 1988. Ethical approval for the research was awarded by the Research Ethics Committee of the then named School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, at Queen's University.

### **Research Design**

We developed a sophisticated research design involving qualitative interviews with different target populations that gave us a longitudinal perspective, as well as control groups to permit comparisons with counter-insurgency warfare. For a piece of qualitative research, we sampled a very large number of participants with a total of 129 soldiers and veterans interviewed. The longitudinal dimension was provided by interviews with personnel from earlier cases of counter-insurgency operations: 20 interviews with veterans Britain's colonial wars of independence in the 1950s and 1960s and 30 interviews with veterans who operated in Northern Ireland during 'the Troubles'. Two control groups were also employed. The first was of 25 participants still serving in the army, including 20 who are current reserve personnel and who have yet to confront the challenges of reintegration on leaving the service. These interviews were carried out in order to establish their expectations on retirement and, importantly, to assess service provision to help them prepare and plan for it. The second control group composed of nine veterans who served in conventional warfare and peacekeeping operations in different theatres in order to isolate factors special to counter-insurgency soldiers. Our sampling of Afghanistan veterans, the main target population of our study, totalled 70 interviews, the vast majority of which came from England. Because of concerns over litigation arising from their deployment, former soldiers in Kenya were



impossible to access, so our respondents in this sub-sample were mostly from Malaya. A breakdown of our sample is given overleaf in Table 1.

It was essential in our sampling that we obtained a cross-section of respondents to avoid our samples being biased toward those veterans who were not managing the transition to civilian life (or who were doing so very successfully). To ensure this we drew on the contacts of Professor (Visiting) Michael Semple, a member of the Mitchell Institute who acted as Consultant, and we worked in partnership with a large number of veteran associations, service organisations and individual gatekeepers (see Appendix 1). We are indebted to their assistance and the success in meeting our interview objectives. We owe a great deal to their co-operation and helpful kindness.

We began our research by isolating the special and unique experiences facing soldiers who engage in counter-insurgency warfare by exploring existing literature and research which has examined the impact exposure to such warfare can bring upon affected personnel. We then undertook a scoping exercise during which we explored the current ways in which the military provide support and guidance to soldiers.

Following completion of the literature review and desk research, the project proceeded on to the qualitative fieldwork stage through a series of interviews with soldiers and veterans throughout the United Kingdom. Interviews were approached in a semi-structured style and took place in a variety of locations, from army barracks and British Legion premises to veterans' homes and even local golf clubs. The interview approach adopted often took the form of a 'conversation with a purpose', whereby the interviewee was made to feel at ease so they could tell their story in their own words and at their own speed and comfort. Several veterans who had spoken about their experiences for the first time commented on their relief at finally being able to talk about their experiences.

We began by interviewing personnel and key stakeholders involved in counter-insurgency conflict during the 1950s and 1960s. We then moved on to interview former

**Table 1**  
**Breakdown of the Sample**

<p><b>Veterans of campaigns in 1950s-1960s (20)</b></p> <p>Conflicts involved:  17 from Malayan Emergency  2 from Aden  1 from Cyprus</p> <p>Geographical location of participants  14 from England  4 from Northern Ireland  2 from Wales</p>
<p><b>NI Troubles Veterans (30)</b></p> <p>23 from UDR (4 who were both UDR and Royal Irish)  2 from Royal Irish Regiment  5 from England who completed tours of Northern Ireland in Troubles</p>
<p><b>Afghanistan veterans (70)</b></p> <p>42 from England  22 from Northern Ireland  4 from Republic of Ireland (all in British military)  1 from Scotland  1 from Wales</p> <p>Of the 70 interviewed this includes:  5 current regular troops  20 current reserve troops</p> <p>9 of the soldiers/veterans had previous experience in Iraq</p>
<p><b>Other conflicts/non-counter-insurgency campaigns (9)</b></p> <p>1 Bosnia/Kosovo (4 others involved in Afghanistan also mentioned Balkans experiences)  3 First Iraq War  3 Second Iraq War  2 Falklands</p>

soldiers of the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR), the only locally recruited regiment in the British Army who undertook counter-insurgency operations in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. The experiences of these groups were not analysed in isolation from current operations, but used as a measure of how the experiences of former soldiers engaging in such campaigns can provide lessons with respect to current COIN operations.

We then proceeded to interview a sample of land based soldiers who operated and returned from military operations in Afghanistan. We restricted ourselves to land based soldiers as a way of managing the sample size. Within this section we looked at both full-time and reserve personnel. We did so for two reasons. First to examine if the military should be adopting different approaches that recognise the varied social contexts which full-time and reserve personnel operate and live in. Secondly, we sought to address how reserve personnel balance the 'holy trinity' of work, family and reserve commitments, and how exposure to insurgency-type conflict and operations impact upon the successful balance of these three factors. This has key implications as to the future role of the armed forces, both as an employer and as an effective fighting force considering the numbers of reserve personnel within the armed forces is set to increase over the next three years offset by a reduction in full-time personnel. All data collection and analysis was completed after 18 months, with the final six months spent constructing the Report with a dissemination strategy to follow.

## **Conclusion**

Our research collected over 90 hours of qualitative data. It is an impressive set of qualitative findings and is the first of its kind with British counter-insurgency soldiers across three different time periods and three theatres of war. This Report can only use an emblematic and

highly selective amount of this qualitative data. It is hoped eventually to archive the whole data set in a British data repository once it is appropriately anonymised for use future generations of researchers. For security reasons, the raw tapes are lodged in a safe in a secret location and the verbatim transcribed interviews are kept as secure word files behind password access, the password for which only one person has knowledge of.

Special as this data set is, however, it nonetheless has limitations. It only covers land-based personnel, and it does not explore those ex-Service personnel whose transition experiences have been so negative as to fall off the continuum of normal transition experiences and who have ended up homeless, in prison or in hospital. The data also does not include interviews with the families of COIN soldiers.

## **5. Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

Part of our research aims and objectives was to undertake a systematic literature review for the funder on counter-insurgency soldiering. This was useful for the research team also by sensitising us to the issues raised in the literature on the social reintegration of COIN veterans so that our fieldwork would be enhanced. We therefore undertook the literature review at the beginning, ahead of our own fieldwork. Our literature review included attention given to the definition of counter-insurgency warfare, which is contested, and on questions about public attitudes towards counter-insurgency operations, and the trauma and stresses experienced by some veterans. We begin this summary of the literature with issues at the heart of our research, the nature and definition of COIN warfare.

### **Defining Counter-Insurgency**

The subject focus for this study has been those soldiers and veterans who have engaged in counter-insurgency warfare as part of the British army post-World War Two. The term counter-insurgency suffers from imprecision and confusion. It has, in the past several years, been used interchangeably with 'stability operations', 'foreign internal defence', 'counter-guerrilla operations', and, most recently, 'countering irregular threats'. In addition, it has been included as a subcomponent of terms like small wars, unconventional warfare, irregular warfare, asymmetric warfare, low-intensity conflict, and 'military operations other than warfare (see Moore, 2007: 13). The result of such complexity is that conflicts can often have elements of conventional warfare, counter-insurgency and peacekeeping operations all in the

same deployment. The Iraq war is one example whereby conventional and counter-insurgency warfare fused.

Given such complexities, an agreeable definition of counter-insurgency can be difficult to obtain. Nonetheless, there are a number of definitions which can prove helpful in determining what we understand by it. The British Army Field Manual (2010: 1-6) defines counter-insurgency as: 'Those military, law enforcement, political, economic, psychological and civic actions taken to defeat insurgency, while addressing the root causes.' This is similar to other international definitions. The US Department of the Army, for example, defines counter-insurgency as follows (2006: 4): 'Those military, paramilitary, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat insurgency.' As Moore (2007: 14) points out, the emphasis on defeating an enemy betrays a military bias in such definitions, and he offers his own definition: 'Counterinsurgency is an integrated set of political, economic, social, and security measures intended to end and prevent the recurrence of armed violence, create and maintain stable political, economic, and social structures, and resolve the underlying causes of an insurgency in order to establish and sustain the conditions necessary for lasting stability.' This is a prescriptive definition: understanding counter-insurgency must begin with comprehending not only its mechanisms, but its ultimate objective. COIN operations are defined as much by their operational mission as the nature of their combat.

What these technical definitions lack, however, is a sense of the nature of the warfare involved and thus the form the deployment takes for those in counter-insurgency roles. The following features are critical to distinguishing counter-insurgency warfare:

- There is no identifiable enemy, or at least, the enemy is indistinguishable from the local population.
- The distinction between enemy combatant and friendly civilian is unclear and opaque.
- The enemy is not necessarily a professional soldier but can be universalised to include women and children.
- Enemy warfare is conducted with highly technologically sophisticated weaponry but is also de-technological, with everyday implements used as weapons, such that implements of harm are unpredictable, such as knives, swords and cars.
- Enemy combatants are unpredictable in their warfare, no longer necessarily with escape routes to protect themselves but content to be human suicides, to inflict maximum damage.
- Enemy warfare has intensified in its level of moral enervation, resulting in degradations and atrocities against the human body to symbolise the lack of dignity and rights now accorded British combat personnel.
- The operational role includes both combat and winning 'hearts and minds', requiring engagement with enemy combatants and promoting wider political, cultural and socio-economic objectives.
- Military personnel are required to switch between short but intense levels of armed conflict, confidence-building strategies with the untrustworthy local population, and long periods of boredom.
- Risk and danger are ever-present but are unpredictable.
- With ambiguous operational aims and unclear indicators of success, what constitutes victory is uncertain, so exit strategies to bring the conflict to an end are unclear.
- The lack of clarity around what victory means can impact on public attitudes towards COIN operations, making the public more ambivalent than towards conventional warfare.

The nature of counter-insurgency warfare has provoked considerable research on its impact on the service personnel responsible for conducting it. We turn to this aspect of the literature review now.

## **Literature on Counter-insurgency Warfare**

There is growing qualitative and quantitative evidence on the unique characteristics and experiences of military personnel involved in COIN operations. Much of it was initially based in the USA for obvious reasons connected to their early experience in the Vietnam War and similar US-led conflicts since. Most attention has been given to forms of mental and psychological tension arising from this form of warfare but it must first be noted that combat experiences are not the only stressor. Cultural stress brought about by exposure to unfamiliar social and cultural environments was illustrated by Azari, Dandeker and Greenberg (2010). They argue that cultural stress operates where military personnel overseas engage with local populations to achieve mission objectives and is related to stressors arising from quite marked cultural and linguistic differences. Cultural stress like this is on a level of anxiety different from culture shock and occurs because most counter-insurgency deployments take place overseas, the British deployment in Northern Ireland being a marked exception. Familiarity with the cultures to be encountered in overseas deployments is a necessary protection against cultural stress.

The literature, however, is largely confined to charting forms of psychological stress following on from COIN operations. The unique dangers posed by insurgent and guerrilla type warfare have discussed by Hogancamp and Figley (1983) in their analysis of Vietnam War veterans. They argue that four aspects of military combat experienced by Vietnam War veterans made it particularly traumatic. First, the war was perceived as highly dangerous by the combatant, with higher levels of fear and risk. In Vietnam, the fear of death was even more menacing than in previous wars because the enemy was 'hidden' in many respects. Secondly, with the high number of casualties, individuals in combat experienced a profound



sense of loss of lives, including the loss of youth and innocence. Third, soldiers felt a sense of helplessness, with no control over their fate from moment to moment. Finally, they had to confront destruction, with defoliated land, burned buildings, and scorched corpses. These features are associated with high levels of stress faced by Vietnam veterans. This is true also of later conflicts. Applewhite *et al* (2012) study into the mental health of US soldiers engaged in counter-insurgency warfare in Iraq highlights that COIN deployments create considerable stress with severe psychological demands matching the high physical demands in such operational environments.

According to Chaudhury, Goel and Singh (2006) three contributory factors add to the problems arising from COIN operations: the low intensity nature of the conflict; the support given to insurgents by known and unknown numbers in the local population; and the elusiveness of the enemy. The fighting of an elusive enemy is coupled, they argue, with the lack of reliable intelligence and co-operation from the local population, and the ambiguity of operational aims. The lack of visible measures of success, when combined with high casualty rates, can all impact upon the morale of the COIN soldier. For these reasons, Chaudhury, Goel and Singh argue that, stress levels are much less in conventional, structured conflicts than that in COIN warfare. This view was supported by Tovy (2012). Referring specifically to deployment in recent contemporary deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan, Tovy suggested that the long-term wellbeing of veterans can only be fully learnt by looking back at the experiences of soldiers in past counter-insurgency conflicts. Longitudinal research such as ours was thus anticipated in the literature.

## **COIN and Trauma**

The conflict in Afghanistan has made the Vietnam experience more contemporaneous and broadened the international nature of the research. It was a conflict with many allies and with ramifications and effects in several societies. Afghanistan in many ways has come to epitomise the stresses and risks associated with COIN operations and the public's ambivalence toward it as a form of warfare. One of the most fundamental issues arising from the nature of COIN warfare in Afghanistan is that of trauma.

Previous research has highlighted how exposure to counter-insurgency conflict, can affect former soldiers' recovery, rehabilitation and reintegration into civilian life (Abramowitz 2009; Theidon 2009; Vivod 2009). Combat related trauma has the capacity to shatter 'the meaningfulness of the self and the world' (Robben and Suarez-Orozco 2000: 20), forcing its sufferers to be in a constant state of alert, while also becoming distrustful of others, and of their own memories and visual perceptions. The increasing inability for recent Afghanistan veterans to escape the images and memories of conflict, enhanced through global social networking, means that a 'micro language of terror', as Feldman (2001: 66) terms it, is conveyed by gesture and expression, and sinks deep into the lives of affected veterans. The result is that living in a state of fear becomes a normal part of everyday life for Afghan veterans suffering from stress, in which affected veterans live in a chronic state of fear behind a façade of normalcy (Green, 1994).

Research into military-based trauma has included work on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars (Finley 2011). Kings College London in association with Help for Heroes (2015) carried out a study with analysed Service personnel who had undertaken regular service between 2001 and 2014, and from the data estimated that over 61,000 regular veterans would suffer from mental health issues at some

point with those in combat roles more at risk of developing PTSD. Other research (for example, Fear *et al.*, 2010; Hotopf, *et al.*, 2006) has also highlighted that those in combat roles are more at risk of developing PTSD, with deployed reservists even more at risk than regular troops. Hipes, Lusa and Kleykamp (2015) have highlighted the stigma associated with conditions such as PTSD.

According to Hendrix and Anell (1993: 37) PTSD consists of the following features: '(a) experiencing an event that is outside the range of normal experience, (b) re-experiencing the event through intrusive thoughts or memories, (c) avoiding of reminders of the traumatic event or general numbing of responsiveness, and (d) persisting symptoms of increased arousal.' The effects of such trauma can manifest itself unconsciously in number of bodily symptoms, including the mental re-living of the event, unpredictable emotional behaviour, nightmares and hallucinations, and other consequences which affect the daily life for sufferers. Young's (1995) reflection on PTSD provides notable reference points. He states that we should not deny the reality of PTSD, but attempt to explain how it and its traumatic memory is made real in the lives of sufferers, and the mechanisms which facilitates its penetration of these life worlds.

Consequently, our research with former soldiers across the longitudinal spectrum indicates that while PTSD has been diagnosed and treated in a significant number of soldiers and veterans, a focus on PTSD alone fails to fully take into account the impact of trauma upon the personality of the individual. This is because applying PTSD as a blanket term to cover a wide array of conditions 'generally fails to take into account key aspects such as the context of the traumatic experience, whether the trauma was inflicted upon an individual or group, through natural disaster, conventional warfare, state terror, or interpersonal acts of violence'

(Robben and Suarez-Orozco, 2000: 20-1). An account of trauma through the 'expression of particular experiences' (Kilshaw, 2009: 4) is thus vital.

To provide context we examined the daily experiences of trauma for veterans from the narratives of those who suffer as they engage in a process of re-contextualizing and restructuring their lives post-deployment within wider social and cultural frameworks which enable trauma to be recognised and treated in the UK. These approaches, we propose, illustrate how an individual's environment, their interactions and sense of identity, contributes towards the impact of emotional responses, and thus propensities to experience trauma and the development of conditions such as PTSD. To understand these effects, soldiers and veterans were asked about their experiences in the field and the impact post-deployment. Thus, the experiential realities of soldiers and veterans form the bedrock of the findings in this report.

The invasion of fear into the everyday life of veterans has implications for how we understand trauma in the first place. Kilshaw (2009) highlights the importance of broader social and cultural factors in understanding and treating trauma. According to Suárez-Orozco and Robben (2000: 21), the hegemony of the PTSD concept has been so great 'that collective manifestations of trauma and their impact on the surrounding society continue to be neglected areas of scientific study'.

The idea of 'collective manifestations of trauma' refers to the social construction and institutionalization of violent memory, which moves from an acutely individual experience to one which is structured and managed by the social body and the military institutional framework. The idea of cultural trauma (see Alexander, 2012) fits in with the idea that late-modern society has become a therapeutic society, dominated by what Furedi calls the 'therapy culture' (2003). These tendencies to make vulnerability cultural and social, are

reinforced, however, by the peculiar experiences of conflict, in which combat experiences can be traumatic. Weiss (1997), for example, highlights how the reproduction of an ethos of sacrifice through bereavement and commemoration of fallen Israeli soldiers has become institutionalized and has become taken for granted as part of the national discourse of the military, where loss of life in battle is inevitable for the survival of Israel. The traumatic experience has moved from a primarily subjective, individual experience, to be appropriated by the collectivity, leading to its cultural standardization.

However, according to Maček (2001: 203) in her representation of soldiers' experiences of war in Sarajevo, it was the need to put the events of war and conflict behind them, a need to know that the war was over, and a desire to organize 'the other opaque and complex phenomenon of war' that provided a basis for soldiers to welcome the simplification and ritualization of social memories through collective processes. Also, because of the need to share the experiences of conflict, suffering and loss, and to have a constant reminder of the character and brutality of violence, the cultural ritualization of conflict was vital to these soldiers. Yet, Silverman and Klass (1996) challenge the idea of total closure as a necessary conclusion to the grieving process. Instead they propose that 'memorializing, remembering, knowing the person who has died, and allowing them to influence the present are active processes that seem to continue throughout the survivor's entire life' (Silverman and Klass, 1996: 17).

Veterans of recent conflict in Afghanistan have become part of a broader national narrative which has debated the UK's role in conflicts within an increasingly complex world and its effects on the soldiers engaged in them. Of particular relevance is the way narratives about veteran issues are managed and manipulated in the public sphere (see Novak and Rodesth 2006: 1), and what Svašek (2005: 196) calls 'chosen trauma' narratives of some

veterans themselves. The notion of 'chosen trauma' may need explanation. Used by Svašek in research amongst Sudeten German expellees, the idea of 'chosen trauma' is now being used to refer to British veterans of Afghanistan. The idea of 'chosen trauma' was a concept first introduced by Volkan (1999) to examine intergenerational transmission of trauma. Taking this concept on board, Svašek highlights that in order to 'examine the political dimensions of traumatic suffering, "trauma" must neither be reduced to individual psychobiological malfunctioning, nor be simplified as a purely socio-cultural phenomenon' (Svašek 2005: 208). Rather, to explore the politics of trauma, 'it is necessary to analyse interrelated processes of bodily interaction, perceptual experience and meaning construction' (Svašek 2005: 208).

This has particular relevance with regards to the reintegration experiences of counter-insurgency soldiers, in particular how feelings and memories of conflict are remembered and re-experienced in the present. Erikson expands on the re-shaping of trauma by arguing that 'traumatized wounds inflicted on individuals can combine to create a mood, an ethos – a group culture – that is different from (and more than) the sum of the private wounds that make it up' (Erikson 1995: 185). Finley (2011) further draws attention to the role of cultural influences, including societal perceptions of the legitimacy of the war and cultural attitudes towards soldier trauma, and how this impacts upon the reintegration of personnel, especially on those veterans who need support but may choose not to access it. Sections of the veteran community will 'use discourses and practices of collective victimhood in an attempt to gain political influence and claim compensation for their suffering' (Svašek 2005: 195). The public narratives of soldiers' suffering seek to both collectivise memories of the conflict and install a sense of victimhood (Svašek, 2005: 195). Herron's (2013) research with Northern Ireland veterans highlights how the increasing focus on obtaining increasingly scarce resources has

contributed to a narrative of victimhood dominating the post-conflict arena as competing victim groups appropriate the memories of participants in 'the Troubles' to access funding and resources.

The politics of 'chosen trauma' outlined by Svašek illustrates how the 'embodied memories and narratives of trauma have been politicized in local, transnational context' (Svašek 2005: 198), thus demonstrating the interplay of history, emotions, memory and politics in collective memories of counter-insurgency warfare. This is important because it alerts us to a neglected issue with respect to the trauma experienced by some former COIN soldiers; namely, the question of emotions.

### **Emotional Labour and COIN Warfare**

Erving Goffman (1968) viewed the military as an example of what he describes as a total institution. Total institutions are 'a place of residence or work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time together lead an enclosed formally administered round of life' (Goffman, 1968: 11). Goffman's depiction of the military as a total institution is further illustrated in Woodward and Jenkins (2011) view of the process of turning a civilian into a soldier as a transformative act. The training required to transform the individual into a soldier helps to ensure the recruit forms new identities based on their military experiences. Segal (1986) argues that total institutions place great demands on individuals in terms of commitment, loyalty, time, and energy, which are often matched by demands placed on families, meaning that, as Janet Finch once put it, military families are 'married to the job' (1983).

Research conducted by Maček (2001) into soldier experiences of war in Sarajevo demonstrates the role the military as a total institution plays in shaping soldiers' responses

to violence. Incorporated into an institution in which every part of their lives is controlled or regimented, the military subordinates people's individuality and instils a rigid conformity and compliance to military values. Maček argues that looking at the bloody uniforms of fellow soldiers on the front line, encourage others to see these uniforms as representative of a collective ideal which denies individuality. According to Maček, soldiers on the battlefield identify themselves as interchangeable and as part of an overall collective framework fighting on behalf of a particular side and cause. King (2006) argues that the main vector for cohesion is through collective military practice in training and operations, which he sees as a precursor to strong internal social relationships and bonds. Kirke (2009), one of the foremost ethnographers of organisational culture in the British military, draws attention to the centrality of military culture in the process of creating a soldier.

Total institutions by their nature generate tight occupational loyalties and bonds. These features that characterise total institutions combine with the unique features of counter insurgency warfare defined above, to create strong cohesive bonds with a small number of trusted colleagues. Counter-insurgency warfare is characterised by the uncertainty of whom in the local population to trust, the unpredictability and unmanageability of risk, and the ambiguity over operational aims and role. This reinforces the reliance on a small group of trusted comrades that places great strain on soldiers' emotions.

One way to conceptualise the role of emotions in COIN operations is by using the idea of emotional labour. Hochschild (1983) presents this as the work performed by an employee who is required, as part of their job, to display verbal and non-verbal emotions with the aim of inducing particular feelings and responses among those for whom the service is being provided. This is reflected in the behaviour and actions of the counter-insurgency soldier, whereby they suppress their inner feelings 'in order to sustain the outward countenance that



produces the proper state of mind in others' (Hochschild, 1983: 7). The 'other', in this context, is the local civilian whose heart and mind the COIN operation is partly designed to win by defeating the enemy combatants who compete for the same civilian loyalty. For counter-insurgency soldiering, the emotional labour to suppress feelings, and facial and bodily displays of emotion, are vital in order to 'coordinate self and feeling so the work becomes effortless' (Hochschild 1983: 8), in order to enable them to have a commanding presence and maintain control on operational duty.

However, the emotional labour required by COIN soldiers to act in such a way separates their military roles from their civilian behaviour. This idea is touched on in other military research. Ben-Ari's (1989) research on the Israeli army during the Palestinian uprising, for example, argues that when soldiers put on the uniform, this acts as a physical and social disguise or mask, allowing them to behave in a manner that is separate from their civilian lives, for example in displaying hostility and 'macho' behaviour. The separation between the emotional labours of military life compared to civilian behaviour can affect a soldier's ability to reintegrate into civilian life post-deployment. Thus, the frameworks within which soldiers both train and operate, are contributing factors which impact upon the soldier's emotions, both in and out of uniform. Therefore, the regimentation, operational structure, and the collective ideals of the military as a total institution impacts on Service personnel as a form of emotional labour that can heavily shape resilience and coping back in civilian life. Rank is sometimes a mediating factor in this, for the rigours of a total institution are felt most strongly amongst the lower ranks. In Maclean and Edwards (2010) analysis of military rank and health in the USA, they proposed that higher military rank is associated with better health.

## **Public Perceptions, COIN Operations and Veteran Identity**

Broader societal attitudes and responses to warfare can also impact upon the sense of wellbeing and identity expressed by ex-Service personnel. Previous research highlights how the definition of a veteran can affect a service personnel's identity and access to services and benefits. We know from the literature that classifying former soldiers as veterans can in some cases be problematic. The FiMT, for example, in a 2013 report which examined the transitional issues facing soldiers, do not refer to ex-service personnel as veterans given the reluctance of some to describe themselves as such (FiMT, 2013: 12). Understanding what we mean by a veteran is thus complicated. The official UK government definition states that anyone who has performed military service for at least a day and received a day's pay is classified as a veteran. According to Rice (2009) this also helps veterans and their dependents access benefits associated with this status. This encompassing definition is in stark contrast to other nations, as highlighted by Dandeker, Wessley, Iversen and Ross (2006).

Burdett, Woodhead, Iversen, Wessely, Dandeker and Fear (2013) argue that the identity of an ex-Service member is impacted by what they themselves understand as a veteran. While some place great emphasis on their identity as a veteran, others do not valorise the veteran identity, despite meeting government criteria, which can affect the support they access from charities, regimental associations, and other services. Their research with ex-Service personnel indicated that approximately half of those analysed classified themselves as a veteran according to UK government definitions. This same research also discovered that often definitions used by UK ex-Service personnel do not align with the official UK government definition or public perceptions of 'veterans,' which tend to focus on older veterans and those who served in both World Wars. How people view the

military and service personnel can therefore significantly impact on how soldiers themselves view their identity as a member of the armed forces.

The question of how veterans view themselves is only one part of a double question, the second being how the public view veterans. Public perceptions of the military amongst the UK population have been a source of previous analysis, including by Strachan (2003) and Edmunds (2012). According to Cohen (2000, 2002) there are three aspects which shape civil-military relations: first, the relationship between military and societal values and culture, secondly the amount of interference from civilian institutions into the military, and thirdly, debate surrounding whether military or civilian leaders are more influential in shaping policy. Rahbek *et al.* (2012) take the work of Cohen further by proposing four gaps between civilian and the military in a US context. Namely, the 'cultural gap', meaning whether the attitudes and values of the civilian population and the military differ, the 'demographic gap', describing the extent to which the military represents the population in terms of its political views and socioeconomic construction, the 'policy gap', whether there is a separation between civilian and military leaders with respect to public policy issues, and finally the 'institutional gap', which refers to gaps between the military and civilian institutions like the media, courts, education system and so on.

In a UK context, Forster's (2012) analysis of the role of the military Covenant highlights a number of issues with respect to the military's relationship to wider society. Created to distinguish itself from those outside the military, debates around the Covenant have, according to Forster (2012: 282), 'left a lasting legacy concerning the problematic nature of the services' conceptualization of the relationship between service personnel and between the services and government and society'. The Covenant itself has been an example of the competing attitudes towards the military as 'the Covenant has been used to urge the public

to support the armed forces even if they do not support the missions in Iraq and Afghanistan' (2012: 279.) However, Hines, Gribble, Wessely, Dandeker and Fear (2015) propose that current levels of support for the British armed forces remains high despite lack of support for recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. This distinction between empathy toward the serving soldier and the political unpopularity of the operation itself may not, however, be sustainable, as indifference towards COIN operations extends to soldiers. This was a fear of Retired General Dannatt, who complained: 'soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan have been dismayed at the "indifferent" attitude toward them by the public' (quoted in Forster 2012: 279).

Empathy toward soldiers regardless of ambivalence or outright hostility to COIN operations can turn malign in another way. McCartney (2011) refers to the increasing portrayal of the UK soldier as a victim. Drawing attention to the increasing celebration of victimhood within British 'therapy culture', coupled with public opposition to recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, McCartney argues that the victimisation of the British soldier could have long-term implications not only for future recruitment and retention but where and when the UK engages in war in the future. Hines *et al.* (2015) have argued that the images of the individual soldier as hero, victim and villain intermix, meaning that concerns about the civil-military gap are likely to become increasingly prevalent. Of course, people connected to the military will always have higher levels of support. In the US, for example, Krueger and Pedraza (2012) showed that support for Afghan veterans was significantly lower amongst those with little or no connection to the military. In this regard, military life leaves a permanent legacy of camaraderie.

## **Transitioning Back to Civilian Life**

Making the transition from military to civilian life can be a complex task with many individual, cultural and structural factors impacting upon the transition, and it affects all military personnel, not just COIN veterans. Having addressed some of the literature on counter insurgency warfare, we want lastly to address the broader transition literature that forms a backcloth to our research on the transition experiences of COIN ex-Service personnel.

Understanding what we mean by transition is important in further understanding its consequences. Our understanding of transition is based on the definition offered by the FiMT (FiMT 2013, quoted in Cooper *et al.*, 2016: 2). ‘as the period of reintegration into civilian life from the military and encapsulates the process of change that a service person necessarily undertakes when her or his military career comes to an end’. The process involved in creating the conditions necessary for an efficient and effective transition for the soldier was highlighted by the following definition compiled by a group of stakeholders as part of an FiMT paper (2013) exploring military to civilian transition. ‘A good transition is one that enables ex-Service personnel to be sufficiently resilient to adapt successfully to civilian life, both now and in the future. This resilience includes financial, psychological, and emotional resilience, and encompasses the ex-Service person and their immediate families’ (FiMT, 2013: 5).

A number of previous studies have outlined the complex processes involved during military personnel’s transition to civilian life. For example, in a UK context The Veteran’s Transition Review (2013) has highlighted the difficulty soldiers can have in moving from military to civilian lives and how a greater recognition and understanding of this by the armed forces can have a positive impact on the effectiveness of the military. A recent report issued by the FiMT (2015), following consultation throughout the UK, refers to the need for a stronger ‘evidence base’ to understand the critical issues that impact upon the families of

service leavers. Furthermore, the FiMT Report highlights the need to have structures in place which can facilitate families in the complex transition from military to civilian life. We draw from this the importance of having a deeper understanding and awareness of the human, social, cultural dimensions of transition. What the FiMT report tellingly indicated, was the need for further research across many of the issues identified to determine the scale of the problem. We drew from this that our research therefore needed to provide evidence-based answers to those range of issues that have a real and significant impact upon the post-conflict reintegration of ex-service personnel and their families.

As highlighted by Dandeker, Wessely, Iversen and Ross (2004) and Iversen *et al.* (2005), the vast majority of soldiers transition well. However, there are significant numbers who still fail to make the transition successfully and are affected by a range of factors (Iversen *et al.* 2005). Ashcroft's report into veteran transition (2014: 7) argues that effective support for the transitioning soldier should be a central feature of the military's functionality, 'ensuring a good transition is more than a matter of meeting our obligations to a series of individuals. It can help to promote the core functions of our Armed Forces, and consequently should not be thought of as a fringe activity'.

Questions surrounding transition in the military remain important given the numbers of soldiers leaving the military annually. For example, according to the MOD in the 12 months prior to April 2016, 16,540 personnel (or 8.4 per cent of the full strength) left the UK military (MOD: 2016). A 2014 Royal British Legion Household survey estimates that 4.4 per cent of the UK population, approximately 2.83 million people are veterans with a further 2.09 million dependent adults (3.2 per cent) and nearly one million dependent children (1.5 per cent). This collates to an estimate 5.91 million or 9.2 per cent of the population who are connected to the former soldier or veteran community. The FiMT Transition Mapping Study (2017)

propose that by the year 2020 redundancies from the army will stabilize at around 14,500 per year with approximately two-thirds of those leavers being from the army.

In the study it was acknowledged that service leavers can experience a complex transition with initial difficulties, including lack of planning and challenges integrating into civilian life, especially in the workplace. The MOD (2016) estimate that there are currently 900,000 veterans of working age (16-64) with approximately 35,000 members of the volunteer reserve. Of these working veterans around 90 per cent are male. A Deloitte Report entitled *Veterans Work* (2016) further highlights the complexities facing transitioning service leavers. While 90 per cent of organisations interviewed who actively recruit former soldiers feel they perform well, in the Deloitte Report, it acknowledges that there is still a lack of understanding in civilian life of the skill set(s) former soldiers bring which subsequently impacts upon gaining a foothold in civilian employment. The effects of difficult transition can have an impact across the functioning of a veteran household with the Centre for Social Justice (2016) reporting that 10 per cent of ex-service community households have one of three key financial difficulties: lack of sufficient money for daily life; lack of savings to purchase or replace necessary items; and debt issues. This is consistent with research carried out by Wolpert (2000), who highlights that the career leaver frequently confronts a number of concerns, such as a loss of status, a need to work for financial reasons, a requirement to compete with younger people, difficulty finding equivalent levels of responsibility, civilian disinterest in their military past, and changing family dynamics.

Cooper *et al.* (2016) further illustrate the complexities involved for the reintegrating soldier as they move from military to civilian life. Using the work of Bourdieu as a conceptual basis and in particular his works on capital and habitus, they argue that the rules which individuals and society conform to in civilian contexts are different from those encountered

in military environments. The different sets of values and ways of communicating in these respective fields, means that transitioning soldiers have to navigate through a complex process from military to civilian life and in the process must acquire aptitude in the rules and conventions of civilian life.

The ability to make the transformation into civilian life is to a large degree, according to McGarry, Walklate and Mythen (2015), based on the resilience of the reintegrating soldier. Through an analysis of the resilience in the British military system and how this impacts upon the post service life of soldiers, they argue that ‘the fostering of resilience within the moral careers of soldiers—perpetually working to a resilient military imperative—casts a dark shadow of hegemonic masculinity, gender-role conflicts and stigma, resulting in demobilization and reintegration problems for some (British) military veterans’ (2015: 366). According to such analysis it is therefore important to examine the cultural and individual impact of resilience within a military context and how this affects the soldier in civilian life, especially how the resilience built up in the total institution of the military influences the attitudes, interactions and problems of some military veterans post service (2015: 368).

Support for the post-deployment and transitional soldier can occur at different stages and levels ranging from the initial stages post-operation to a soldier’s retirement and subsequent transition into civilian life. A Kings College London Report into the mental health of the armed forces (2010) highlights that programmes such as ‘Trauma Risk Management’ (TRIM) may have benefits and fits into the military culture when engaging in operations. Practised by military personnel rather than civilian psychiatrists, its focus is on accessing those who might be most susceptible to risk later down the line and thus ensuring that effective support is provided to ‘at risk’ soldiers. In an American context an approach entitled BATTLEMIND ‘aims to work by trying to explain to troops that the skills they used to maintain



operational effectiveness deployed may need to be adapted for them to achieve a successful 'transition' home' (Kings College London, 2010: 33).

A more well-known programme in the UK has been what is known as 'third location decompression' (TLD). TLD is the first step of a comprehensive post-operational stress management process which allows personnel who have deployed together to begin to mentally and physically 'unwind' together (Fertout, Jones and Greenberg, 2012: 188). TLD is based at a facility in Cyprus, and returning personnel spend approximately 24–36 hours there, going through a number of programmes, 'including psycho-education and group and individual activities intended to facilitate post-deployment adjustment' (Fertout, Jones and Greenberg, 2012: 188). Fertout, Jones and Greenberg (2012: 194) highlight the benefit of such programmes recommending 'the active incorporation of third location decompression into post-deployment transition back to the home base at the end of operations'. However, they also highlight that those who wanted to take part in TLD prior to arriving in Cyprus were more likely to benefit from it than those who did not.

For those soldiers making the transition into civilian life, an increasing focus has been placed on providing support in a number of capacities. This has included improved support for soldiers' mental health, both regular and reserve, through a number of pilot and fully integrated programmes, for example the Reserves Mental Health Programme (RMHP). The FiMT have also highlighted programmes such as the Career Transition Partnerships which now includes Early Service Leavers (ESL). A recent study by Fossey (2013) with support from the FiMT examined the Futures Horizon Programme, a programme commissioned by the MOD to test various methods of supporting Early Service Leavers, especially with respect to helping them into sustainable employment. The report highlighted the vulnerability of this group when making the transition to civilian life and a group who often received the least support.

The report, which highlighted the benefits of programmes such as Future Horizons, also impressed upon the need to further understand the levels of vulnerability between untrained and trained early service leavers.

Improving opportunities through education and training is gaining further traction within the veteran support community. A recently launched paper by the FiMT and Directory of Social Change (2017) highlights how 35,800 veterans have received educational or employment support from 78 charities with a spend of £25.6m on such initiatives. Such movements have been complemented with the introduction of the Veteran's Gateway in April 2017 as 'a single point of contact for leavers, and greater co-ordination among leavers charities' (FiMT, 2017: 7) as examples of transitional support improvements at various stages in service leavers' lives.

However, despite attempts at addressing transitional issues across the spectrum of a soldier's career research indicates that much more could still be achieved. A report for the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association (SSAFA) into the mental well-being of veterans (2016), demonstrated that according to research 85 per cent of veterans do not feel the UK gives veterans enough support while 69 per cent of the general public feel likewise. In a response to the views of veterans the SSAFA drew up a three-point plan: (i) Welfare screening of potentially vulnerable servicemen and women before they leave the forces; (ii) A mentor assigned to support them for a least a year; and (iii) the MOD must improve their discharge processes to ensure that the service records of veterans are shared with the appropriate health and welfare professionals. The findings from the SSAFA and other reports indicate that effective veteran transition support still has some way to go.

## **Conclusion**

This section of our Report has wrestled with the meaning and nature of counter-insurgency warfare, and its emotional costs on the Service personnel who undertake it. What was once primarily a US-led literature is now international following UK and allied involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. This neglects earlier UK COIN operations in its wars of decolonisation in the 1950s and 1960s, and the UDR in Northern Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s. The virtue of our fieldwork is that the neglect of these earlier COIN operations is corrected by our longitudinal research design. This enables us to assess whether the attention given in the current literature on Afghanistan to emotions, emotional labour, trauma and stress, micro-languages of terror, risk, and the ambivalence of public attitudes, is reflected in earlier periods or not. This permits us to establish the potential differences of today's veterans and their transition experiences. It is to these important questions that we now turn when outlining our research findings. In doing so, we draw on many of the themes of this literature review.

## 6. Research Findings and Analysis

### Introduction

Reintegration for soldiers following military service is a complex and multifaceted process affected by numerous social, cultural and individual factors. This inevitably means, therefore, that the reintegration experiences of soldiers will differ. This can make attempts at creating a more effective and efficient transitional process difficult. Variability thus needs to be acknowledged at the outset; no two soldiers are the same and as a social group they are not homogenous. Nonetheless, evidence gained from conversations with counter-insurgency veterans right across the UK in our research illustrates that steps can be taken which can have positive effects across the transitional process.

Before we present our findings, we should first explain that our analysis of the data is inductive as this is understood methodologically (on induction see Brewer, in Miller and Brewer, 2004: 154-6; Brewer, 2000: 252). By this we mean that analysis is built from the ground up and from the voices we heard in over 90 hours of conversations with COIN land-based personnel across three case studies. It is bottom-up, rooted in what respondents said, rather than imposed by us deductively in pre-set ideas and theoretical preconceptions. Many of the terms we use are those of the interviewees themselves. Qualitative research, especially on sensitive topics and amongst hard-to-access groups is invariably inductive (Brewer, 2000). Inductive research, however, still requires analytical meaning and understanding for sense to be made of the cacophony of voices that comprise the data. The analytical skills of the researchers are thus vital – respondents are rarely their own competent research analysts – but researchers' analytical skills need to be used empathetically and sympathetically in order to retain the authenticity of respondents' words and social meanings.

- This means that our analytical categories and theoretical statements in what follows are grounded in the data and try to remain true to the views of our respondents. We present our findings therefore, around a number of analytical categories and observations that in our view make sense of the transition experiences of the COIN soldiers we interviewed but which, we claim, are grounded in the authentic voices of our respondents. These analytical observations are used as headings and placed in italics, with relevant interview data used to populate them. Occasionally our analytical observations are supported by a vignette as a more detailed case study encased in a box, which can be read in the course of the narrative or returned to later as the reader prefers. All data extracts and vignettes are anonymised. One last point to note is that we suggest many policy recommendations in the course of our analysis in order to show they are evidence led. These recommendations are codified and brought together in Section 7.

### ***The Continuum of Normal Transition***

We suggest that reintegration should be seen as akin to a continuum, with one pole represented by successful management of the transition, the other unsuccessful. Most COIN personnel in returning to civilian life can be placed somewhere along this continuum, which is why we refer to it as the continuum of normal transition. There are some ex-service personnel whose lack of success is so extreme that they drop them off the continuum of normal transition completely, represented by those who are in prison, homeless, and hospitalised with stress, mental health issues or failed suicide attempts. These are what we refer to as ‘negative transitioners’ whose transition experience is so bad as to place them

outside the normal. They are qualitatively different from those respondents who are at the unsuccessful pole on the continuum of normal transition. These respondents, while not transitioning as successfully as others, were nonetheless continuing to struggle to achieve successful management of the reintegration process; they had not given up on the idea of a normal transition. The current research does not concern itself with those ex-service personnel whose unsuccessful transition places them well off the scale.

By considering successful transition as a continuum that the majority of COIN personnel continue to try to achieve, we are able to accommodate the obvious reality that the struggle is harder for some than for others, even though so few fall off the edge completely. Representing transition as a continuum enables us to answer questions about why some veterans are not managing well, while others are, and why some are coping and others not. What are some veterans doing that assists them to transition well? How do the relatively successful transitioners manage? Furthermore, by comparing three data sets over time in different theatres of COIN warfare, we are able to contrast what those veterans from early counter-insurgency operations did to successfully transition back to civilian life. We are able to explore whether or not changed sensitivities to post-traumatic stress today affects soldiers compared to earlier periods. What impact does today's 'therapy culture', with its different cultural attitudes towards masculinity and vulnerability, have on transition stress?

Another advantage of conceptualising transition as a continuum is that we are able to explain how locations along it vary, not only between different COIN personnel, but across the life span of individual soldiers, as circumstances arise that reposition them. Location along the continuum of normal transition is, in the overwhelming majority of cases, a progression toward greater and greater success. COIN soldiers bring different experiences with them on retirement from Service, which means they start at different places along the continuum, but

for most respondents the direction of travel is forward toward greater and greater success. However, while location is never fixed and is always changing, it can also go backwards towards the unsuccessful end of the continuum. It is necessary to understand why in individual cases backward regression occurs along the continuum of normal transition.

### ***The Role of Life Events***

Locations along the continuum are not fixed and unchanging because life events, planned or unplanned, can increase or inhibit an individual's success in managing the transition. Life events like divorce, unemployment, marriage and the birth of a child shift the landscape and can cause movement one direction or another along the continuum. Life events work to influence both directions of travel between the poles. The birth of a child, for example, can assist a soldier in settling down; in others it can throw them off. Some respondents indicated that these life events made their transition more difficult and they provided many examples of relationship problems, family breakdowns and financial stress, amongst others, as indicators of transition difficulties.

These life events are normal; they occur for us all. They are not just faced by ex-military returning to civilian life. The key issue therefore is the resilience of soldiers towards them. We have discovered amongst our interviewees markedly different levels of resilience to life events, which is crucial in repositioning them along this continuum of normal responses. Understanding resilience in veterans is thus essential. While understanding resilience was not the aim of our research, many of our analytical categories and observations relate to resilience, for they impact on resilience greatly.

At this point in the Report, though, it is sufficient to note that the occupational culture of the military as a total institution, coupled with the COIN soldier's deployment experiences,

can negatively impact on resilience and, indeed, be a cause of some of the more harmful life events in the first place, such as alcohol abuse, marital breakdown and stress. Comments from those soldiers who have been affected by life events in a negative way, repositioning them permanently or temporarily backwards along the continuum, suggest that their lack of resilience towards them is linked to the emotional costs of COIN warfare, and the lack of support when making the transition to civilian life. As a former Special Forces soldier said: *'My first wife couldn't hack it, my second wife, it was hard as she had to bring up children on her own'*. The level and adequacy of support features significantly in our findings. We argue that the lack of consistency and coherence with respect to information and support for ex-Service personnel adds a further layer of stress to an already complex transitional process.

### ***Identity and the 'Bubble' of Counter Insurgency***

Identity is important in managing the transition. Over-identification with the army and with the combatant soldier role predisposes veterans to an inability to cope in civilian life. This is usual in all soldiering; there are, however, special features in counter-insurgency warfare that intensifies over-identification, worsening the transition. These special effects are:

- i) the public controversy surrounding the combatant role in counter-insurgency warfare can increase 'the quest to belong' with former comrades as an escape from public criticism at worst or public indifference at best;
- ii) the combatant role in counter-insurgency, where there is uncertainty about whom to trust and who the enemy is, increases reliance on comrades, intensifies the sense of camaraderie, narrows the boundaries of the trusted in-group, and enhances the tight-knitted nature of friendships with one's immediate mates whose very lives in a combat situation are in the group's hands, dependent on each looking after the other.



It is thus conceptually useful to propose that counter-insurgency warfare creates a 'bubble' environment for soldiers. The phrase 'bubble' was used regularly by respondents, which suggests it is part of the language of the occupational culture of ordinary veterans. The 'bubble' effect of counter-insurgency is both a strength and a weakness. On operations, survival depends on close knitted camaraderie, where looking after the squad is the same as protecting oneself, but in civilian life it can be problematic by retaining an over-identification with the army.

The bubble is also closely tied to the issue of trust. Counter-insurgency warfare narrows the boundaries of trust, restricts the number of those who can be trusted, and increases the emotional emphasis soldiers place on another's trustworthiness. **(See Vignette 1)** Reliance on others' trustworthiness is very important in counter-insurgency, and can create a mutually reinforcing community of people who 'understand what it is like': they understand why they are fighting where they are, doing what they are doing, needing no justification or explanation that requires to be made accountable. However, narrow boundaries of trust and anxiety about another's trustworthiness in civilian life are problematic, making normal social relations and human social interaction difficult, which can increase feelings of isolation and withdrawal outside the army. The mutually reinforcing trusted community suddenly disappears, and unless the boundaries of trust are broadened and the emotional priority placed on people's trustworthiness is rebalanced, veterans can have difficulties in adjusting. Mistrust, in other words, forces a reliance on the identity as a soldier since comrades are the only ones capable of being trusted. As one of our respondents said.

### **Vignette 1**

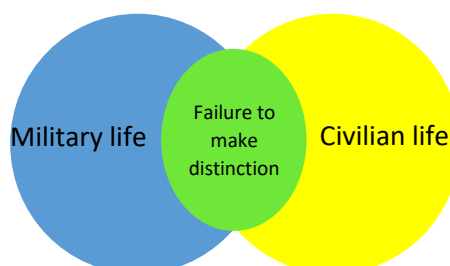
#### **Former regular soldier who reflected on veterans' mistrust of those outside the bubble and his own struggles with reintegration.**

*You have got to be careful about who you talk to, especially with the way things are going on in the Middle East and how it's now filtering into this country with ISIS and the like. The problem with all these things is that it already takes time when you meet a person to build trust with them and now it takes even longer because you don't know who to trust these days. The classic example for a lot of us veterans and even current soldiers is the Lee Rigby example, an off-duty soldier murdered by an extremist. So, it is on our doorstep, it's not over in a far off land anymore, it's right on our doorstep. That strikes a real nerve with veterans, there is a lot of apprehension because we have seen the threat before [Northern Ireland terrorism]. Say we were close to the barracks and met someone with a Northern Irish accent we were suspicious right away, and they [Irish insurgents] were very good at placing sleepers. ISIS are also placing sleepers, they are using the same tactics that was used in Northern Ireland and was used by organisations like the IRA. ISIS are now using the same tactics; the only difference now is that technology has improved which makes things even more difficult. Even with the IRA they would never have carried out a suicide bomb, they would never commit anything until they were 100 per cent clear the escape route was clear, it's now a very different situation with attackers prepared to blow themselves up. The problem with all this suspicion and mistrust is that a lot of veterans prefer now to keep their identity hidden. I tend to now keep away from anything military or veteran related at all now, even remembrance services or commemorations. I would sometimes go out with a bikers group who are all ex-army and it's like a band of brother's thing, we're all from similar backgrounds but where I'm from, it's such a multicultural city and you don't feel you can reveal your true identity because of the fear of who is watching or listening. It all has an impact on you when moving back into civilian life. It's hard to explain how I have felt when back in civilian life, with friends I was different than what I would have been before I joined. With some friends, especially those who had served in the army with me I'm fine but with others, especially those who didn't know what it was like to be a soldier, it's different. You react in a different way, your humour can be different, the way you address certain circumstances. Before when in the army you hung around with like-minded individuals so you knew what people's reactions would be, working closely as a team we knew each other inside out. I would still see non-army friends but none of them really understand. If I go with my friends into the city, which is rare, I'd rarely go for a night out into the city, I'd reach a point where I'll have to go home and I can't carry on. I get uncomfortable, there's a shut off point in me and I have to go home. I get aggressive when in an uncomfortable situation and you're trained [in the military] to defend yourself and secondly, it's like you feel enclosed and claustrophobic and it's hard to explain to someone who hasn't been in those circumstances. I know that PTSD can happen to people after things like a traffic accident but it's different for soldiers, you're dealing with bodies, strangers you don't know and those you do, but you have to get on with your job. It's not just the fear of being killed yourself it's also having to take people's lives and that's really hard to deal with, sometimes you sit back and question yourself but nobody ever thinks about that side of things.*

*You're always on edge, always looking, expecting something to happen, I was in the army for over 20 years. You don't really switch off because you don't have any real de-briefing when you come back from a tour and you don't have an outlet, you have a lot of frustration and tension obviously on tours with no outlet and then when you come back to base you just end up going out and getting drunk and fighting and that was it, your social outlet, you drink and something kicks off and that's it your gonna fire off. It [military experience] affects you in everyday life when you return from operations. I was walking by the seaside with my ex fiancé and a car backfired and I dived in the doorway, just automatic reactions like that, even to this day if I saw a package in the middle of the road I'd go straight back to it and look for command wires or signs of anything and you live with that everyday day but people don't see that. I don't like being in crowds and things like that because I'm watching and it's constant. Even though you know you're in a city in England you're still doing all this subconsciously in the back of your mind [former regular soldier, male].*

### **The 'Ontological Crisis' and 'Techniques of Neutralization'**

When experiencing the transition process, we found a broad range along the continuum scale of normal transition, ranging from those who seamlessly transitioned to those who found it more difficult. Some veterans were able to compartmentalise their former life in what we describe as the bubble of military life, hermetically sealing it in the past, transferring identity in civilian life on to their family, work, religious life, and the like. These veterans rarely questioned their former role, nor reflected on it. They cut themselves off from the public ambivalence to the counter-insurgency war and its purpose, and did not tend to participate in army-based alternative communities. Those who were unable to make the distinction between military and civilian life after transition and mentally escape the bubble found it much more difficult to transition and were more susceptible to transitional problems.



Those not doing so well in managing the transition tended when outside the bubble to be much more reflexive, questioning their role in an unpopular counter-insurgency war, to be more sensitive toward the public's ambivalence toward the war, and to reflect more on their experiences and the harrowing scenes that were kept vivid in their memory. This internal reflexivity and questioning existed to a level in some Afghan veterans as to constitute what we call an 'ontological crisis', which intensifies their inability to manage in civilian life. This ontological crisis is directly related to their counter-insurgency role. Those who are not managing the transition well, are more sensitive toward public criticism of the war and its public unpopularity.

Veterans in our sample from earlier counter-insurgency conflicts did not articulate this ontological crisis. In the case of the UDR/RIR, for example, we explain this because the veterans justified their role to themselves (to defeat an illegal terror campaign by the IRA), a justification upheld by the British state and supported in many forms of local Unionist media. In the case of the colonial wars of independence this can be explained because there were no media campaigns at the time to suggest their role was unnecessary or unwanted.

'Techniques of neutralization' are important in mediating this reflexivity and in managing any ontological crisis that might occur. By 'techniques of neutralization' we mean the strategies veterans use to make 'normal' their deployment and to justify it to themselves and to those others to whom they have to give an account of their deployment. They enable veterans to justify their counter-insurgency experiences, to counter wider cultural ambivalence to conflicts they have been involved in and to come to terms with sacrifices which have been difficult to accept. Afghan veterans frequently adopted such techniques in an attempt to come to terms with the controversies of a complex conflict.

External factors, like broader societal attitudes and opinions that support or undercut these techniques of neutralization, are important factors contributing to the success of the transition. For example, the lack of clarity from the public in terms of support and understanding of counter-insurgency was a common theme in soldier responses that affected them. As one interviewee remarked:

*There is huge admiration for the serviceman but whether there's admiration for the cause I'm not sure. I think it's less clear cut with the growth of communication tools, and the many shades of opinions expressed, that it's difficult to be as clear about it [Afghanistan and counter-insurgency] as for example the cold war which was clear (former regular army officer, male).*

The distinction between individual soldiers and the military establishment was used by some veterans to neutralize public concerns, explaining away public disquiet with popular personal support. Yet despite the difficult transitioning experienced by some, when asked if they would join up again, the vast majority of respondents said that they would, *'it's a bit funny because part of me tells me I wouldn't but I say I would. I did it because I felt I needed to, all my family have been in the military and stuff like that and I felt like it was something I needed to do'* (former reserve soldier, male). Another male soldier who was a regular medic in Afghanistan commented:

*I joined to be a soldier, didn't want to have to do the stuff I had to do but I felt the job I was doing near the end as an army medic was such that if I wasn't doing it who else would. I felt it was more about a saving life than taking life. I've done all that before, but it was better to think of saving someone's life, it gave you more power than somebody dying on you.*

These remarks are simultaneously techniques to neutralize criticism and accounts of motive together which justify actions and address their ontological crisis.

### ***Compartmentalizing their Military Career***

We also found a distinction between those who strategized their time in the military and those who did not. Those soldiers who viewed their time in the military as a career, as an opportunity to develop as a person, learn new skills and experiences, were on the whole much more able to compartmentalise their experiences as part of 'the job'. Viewing their time in the military from a purely instrumental perspective rather than as part of a collective identity meant it was much more likely they could distance themselves from the bubble and make sense of their military experiences. As described by one former recruit '*I used the military for my benefit rather than being used by the military for their benefit*' (former regular officer, male). **(See Vignette 2)**

We understand that a fundamental part of military training and culture is to instil within the recruit that they are part of a collective machine where individuality is deemed secondary in importance to the functioning of the military body as a unit. This is what is meant by the military being a 'total institution'. Individuality is subsumed to an 'institutional self' and identity is absorbed into that which the total institution demands of its recruits. However, this can create problems when transitioning with over-identification with the military and lack of individual identity. We found that over-identification with the military made it more difficult for soldiers to escape the bubble even after leaving, with continued over-identification impacting on other fundamental parts of their identity, such as husband, wife, father, mother, employee, and the like. Finding the balance between institutional self and the personal self would assist soldiers when they make the transition to civilian life, primarily by encouraging soldiers to view the military as an instrumental career path rather than the central feature of their identity. One former soldier who had a positive transition commented

## Vignette 2

### **A Special Operations veteran recalls how he compartmentalizes his military experiences.**

*I had lots of experiences in Afghanistan and other operational zones and most of them still stick out for their own reasons. One of my regrets in life relates to one incident I was involved in, they [insurgent enemy] took out a vehicle which had US Special Forces in it. We got there two or three minutes after it happened, all in the attack were supposedly dead, however we seen one alive and took him away. I told my medic to check, one had lost legs, had an arm missing and guts hanging out but he wasn't dead so we transported him to a local hospital but the rest were dead. It didn't bother me per se but a short time after when we had a cordon up they [insurgents] crashed into it and we then had a firefight, they then tried to set off a suicide bomb at a container. There was one dead with a bloke lying there with some kids. I lifted up two kids and brought them over, but there was also another kid and I didn't get back over for that kid the fire was that bad and it stuck by me. That kid must have died in the fire. I wonder should I have went back into the fire or not, that really pisses me off but the thing that pisses me off about that incident, the medic whom I handed over the injured to get a medal based on a citation which said that the medic went in, the doctor shouldn't have buckled and admitted it wasn't him who went in. I remember the medic avoiding me after that. The hidden politics of it all does make you question what's going on and it affects motivation but you have to think, what's the bigger picture? But I realise that people let you down in the military as in all walks of life and you don't know how someone will react until the bullets are flying. At the end of the day training can only take you so far. In my own experiences I had a number of close shaves but I would say I had one tour in Iraq that was like film black hawk down. We got pummelled for 24 hrs with enemy fire. However, it didn't affect me mentally because I knew it was part of the dangers of the job I was in. I think that's why I don't suffer from PTSD because for me it was just a job, it was work, you knew what was going to happen. I'm used to having the odd nightmare about stuff that went on in Afghanistan and Iraq, but I don't know why it hasn't affected me as much as others especially given some of the stuff I have seen. Maybe it's because I had a normal life between tours or because I had a hard father with no mollycoddling and maybe I'll get it [trauma] in the future, but I think a lot of it is down to the fact that as far as I was concerned I had a job to do and I knew what I had let myself in for.*

on his regrets with respect to the impact on the family, but balanced this with the opportunities and benefits he felt military life had given him.

*The only regrets I have are from a family perspective, not regrets having joined, I may have done some things differently, but essentially no great regrets because I had the most extraordinary experiences which tied in with what I wanted to do, working in some of the most incredible parts of the world, involved in some of the most serious conflicts rather than some mundane operation and hopefully making a contribution to peace (former male regular officer).*

### ***The 'Institutional Self' and the 'Transition Self'***

A successful transition requires ex-service personnel re-familiarize themselves with the cultural expectations of civilian life so as to reclaim the cultural awareness that is associated with a civilian identity. The 'institutional self' that the army – as a 'total institution' – requires its soldiers to develop, can deplete the skills and cultural awareness needed to live again as a civilian. Cultural awareness training might usefully form part of the preparation the MOD makes for a return to civilian life. The cultural awareness needed for civilian life is linked to broader skill sets, especially those needed for a return to employment, to 'normal' family life, and for reintegration back into an identity as a civilian member of the community. Ex-soldiers' expectations of co-workers, family members and the general public need to accommodate to people's lack of familiarity with the nature and demands of the institutional self that army life has imposed on ex-service personnel. Ex-service personnel need to adjust their expectations of non-army people, who can appear unsympathetic, non-understanding, rather laid-back and undedicated and unregimented.

Those who transition better are ex-service personnel who never fully absorbed or adopted the army's institutional self but retained some personal identity throughout, such as by seeing the army instrumentally as 'just a job' rather than as a way of life into which they fully integrated. Instrumentality enabled them to retain a personal self. Reserve personnel adeptly switch between the institutional and personal self and are used to managing their disjuncture, but regular personnel adjust better when back in civilian life when their personal self was set in balance with the institutional one of the army. Instrumentality exists in degree and context, for some deployment experiences and circumstances, it can squeeze and limit the retention of a personal self, such as frontline combat roles that encourage the 'bubble' mentality.



The 'transitional self' is a transitional identity in between the institutional self of the army and an identity as a civilian. The transition process can be seen as involving adjustment between the institutional self of the army, the transitional self of someone adjusting back to civilian life, and the civilian identity required for normal life in society. The 'transitional self' should be a temporary identity reflecting the period from turning from a soldier into a civilian. It permits adjustments to be made in how ex-service personnel see themselves; with a managed expectation that it is short term. However, the transitional self can persist if the adjustment back is problematic. A number of ex-service personnel described the difficulty in moving from the transitional self into a civilian self, such as the following former male regular soldier who had experienced conflict in Kosovo, Northern Ireland, Bosnia, Iraq and Afghanistan:

*I couldn't do it [reintegrate]. I conducted myself as if I was still in the military and they don't mix, I struggled a lot and ended up having to set up my own business as I couldn't work for anyone. I developed this hyper vigilance, hyper awareness thing and it just grew on me and I had nowhere to turn to and I struggled and still do now (former regular soldier, male).*

Another soldier commented on the state of transitional ambiguity experienced by those soldiers who are left alone:

*There's some when they go out, they struggle to leave and find it difficult to escape army life. There are some who will want to leave that life all together but they may struggle to adjust but the problem is that they'll be on their own, sitting in a corner and nobody knows how they're getting on. But if there was a system where you become an honorary member or an associate member of your camp, it's about having a buddy when you need support, say you haven't slept all night and just need someone to be there (current regular officer, male).*

The development of a transitional self, therefore, should be an object of policy, something prepared and trained for before ex-servicemen and women leave the army, and an object of

reinforcement and consolidation in post-deployment support by voluntary sector support providers.

Training in the army might better balance the requirement to inculcate an institutional self with retaining life skills and cultural awareness to cope when back in civilian life. Attention must thus be accorded to the transitional self, in which preparation and training for retirement and resignation gives attention to the adjustments that need to be made to help address transitioners' former institutional self and the cultural re-familiarization and changed expectations that they need to be made aware of to reintegrate back into the wider community.

### ***Emotional distancing***

Emotional distancing also helps with instrumentality, new identity formation as a civilian, and the retention of a personal self. This helps in them 'doing their job' or 'getting on with the job', without the emotional engagement and emotional over-identification that turns their job into a 'way of life' that requires a fully absorbed institutional self. Emotional distancing was easier for those who subsequently avoided reflexivity about their experiences and encounters in counter-insurgency warfare. Emotional distancing was found at two extremes: the highly educated and articulate who had the capacity to recognise the importance of emotional disengagement, and the relatively non-articulate whose inability to find the words to be reflexive made them try to avoid thinking and talking about the past generally. An officer in the Reserve highlighted the challenges in engaging in emotional distancing when returning from operations:

*I think you take a step back initially, you're out and about going shopping and everyone is getting on with their lives. You try to think of it [operational duty] that you were going out to do something which you've been trained to do but that's not*

*the case for everyone. Maybe I'm cold hearted or it's just the way I've been trained but it [the memories] leaves me quite quickly and I don't think about it again. I had a job to do and I was trained to do it to the best of my ability (current reserve officer, male).*

Emotional distancing is also easier for those ex-service personnel who had projected their post-deployment identity and sense of self on to their family, work, community and leisure activities. A male veteran of the Malaya Emergency explained his approach to coping. *'I coped with my experiences, happily married, I just carried on and it got less and less [the memories]. You didn't know what it was, I thought it was just me and I eventually got over it, maybe we know too much now [about trauma], plus I got a family with responsibilities and you accept these responsibilities.'*

### **Transition and Trust**

As we have seen already, the military bubble is closely tied to the issue of trust. Counter-insurgency warfare narrows the boundaries of trust, restricts the number of those who can be trusted, and increases the emotional emphasis soldiers place on another's trustworthiness. A former male regular officer remarked on the problem of winning the local population's trust: *'if you made a mistake you weren't going to win the trust of the population back so there was a great deal of pressure on our shoulders'*. Other soldiers commented on the unpredictability of the operation that impacted on trust:

*It didn't matter where you were it always had a very disorganised feel about it, it was reactive you didn't know what was around the next corner, even the orders sheet that went out the window as soon as you left the gates because you would have faced something unexpected everyday (former regular, male).*

*It's very hard to beat somebody in their back garden, they know all the alleyways, the lie of the land, we knew in places like the Afghan national army or the Iraqi police there would be people who would be infiltrated into it, it's very hard to trust because everyone your looking at is a potential insurgent, there's been examples of ones*

*defecting back to where they come from so as I said it's hard to beat someone in their own back, and it's hard to be sure who is really on your side* (current reserve officer, male).

Reliance on others' trustworthiness is very important in counter-insurgency, and can create a mutually reinforcing community of people who 'understand what it is like': they understand why they are fighting where they are, doing what they're doing, needing no justification or explanation that requires to be made accountable. Narrow boundaries of trust and anxiety about another's trustworthiness in civilian life are problematic, making normal social relations and human social interaction difficult, which can increase feelings of isolation and withdrawal outside the army. The mutually reinforcing trusted community suddenly disappears, and unless the boundaries of trust are broadened and the emotional priority placed on people's trustworthiness is rebalanced, veterans can have difficulties in adjusting.

One notable example of the current issues surrounding trust in counter-insurgency soldiers was the concern some Afghan veterans had in revealing their identity as a former soldier to the wider civilian population: *'my friend was clear, he doesn't hang his uniform up, he doesn't come home in uniform, no one in the nice complex of flats he lives in has seen him in uniform, seen him with a military bag or knows what he does for a living'* (former regular soldier, male). This has traditionally been a major concern for UDR veterans as a result of anxiety over personal security. This fear still remains for many UDR veterans. As one UDR veteran described 'it's like leading a double life'. This fear still remains for many UDR veterans as shown in the comments of respondents:

*I would've been very quiet and I still am [about membership of the UDR]. I have to say there would have been people who didn't want to associate with you because you were in the regiment. I remember getting my car serviced one time and a friend come across and took the car over, but whoever else was over there recognised the car and said what are you doing helping that boy so he came back and said that I couldn't get my car serviced there again* (former UDR soldier, part time, male).

*What we experienced is not the case for a lot of other soldiers. They go on a tour of duty and return home to their family. This is what makes it different for us and other most other former and current soldiers. Not only did we fight a known but often unseen enemy, we also lived with them and still do. They were our neighbours, our co-workers. We passed them in the street, shopped beside them, went to the same doctors, how could it not invade our everyday life and it still does for many of us (Former UDR soldier, part-time, male).*

*I think there still exists a wariness, you still don't trust your neighbours. Granted things are not as tense now as what they were but you just can't forget what happened. I think because members were always aware of the danger of being shot, anywhere at any time, that they built up a complete mistrust of everybody, bar those closest to them. But that this is not to say there wasn't good community relations before it started, the Troubles changed all that (former UDR soldier, part-time, male).*

With respect to Afghanistan veterans, we discovered significant numbers who were reluctant to reveal their identity as a soldier to civilian employers out of fear.

Soldiers who had fought in counter-insurgency campaigns expressed how a mistrust of others not experienced previously had developed within them, along with increased hesitancy towards those they did not know. Such attitudes were further compounded with the increased fear amongst some soldiers with respect to 'terrorism' and the threat posed by local extremists. Former soldiers expressed their concerns at the threat posed by extremists, often referring to information posted on social media as examples of the threats posed. *'If I was in middle of [city name deleted] then yes where there is a big congregation of Muslims, not because of their Muslim religion, but because of the Muslim part of it [extremism]'* (former regular soldier, male). Another former regular male soldier commented: *'10 years ago when I was serving we were being encouraged to get out into community in uniform because we had been hiding away for so long and now we are back to hiding away again. So that will continue to grow.'*

The infiltration of 'fear into the everyday life' is a potential threat to former soldiers' ability to make the transition from the military bubble to everyday life. UDR soldiers' experiences once again can provide important examples as to the dangers that fear, suspicion and mistrust of others can have on restricting their ability to lead a normal everyday civilian life. Hyper vigilance, irrational fear and reluctance to engage with others are very real and prevalent problems for many UDR veterans. Living in a state of fear need not have to be the case. Greater emphasis by the military on community integration and participation, including access to employment opportunities, can assist those making the transition.

### **The 'Transition Vacuum'**

One of the other critical forces that prolong the 'transitional self' is what we call the 'transition vacuum'. By 'transition vacuum' we mean leaving veterans to cope with transition alone. We acknowledge that the military have strived to provide more information to soldiers engaged in the transition process and improvements have certainly been made in this. Resettlement packages exist and information leaflets on issues ranging from welfare to finances are made widely available. There are also opportunities to obtain qualifications, such as Career Transitioning Partnership (CTP) resettlement courses. There are many examples of the military acting to assist soldiers making the transition. Indeed, the vast majority of soldiers participating in the project recognised such improvements. However, the fragmentary and uncoordinated nature of the information provided, and lack of consistency with respect to transitional support, complicates soldiers' expectations and realities of what they receive.

Reference was also made, for example, to decompression programmes previously implemented by the military such as a two-day programme in Cyprus for returning Afghan troops. However, there was overwhelming criticism of this programme with former soldiers

calling it a 'drinking session', an 'opportunity to fight' and so forth, with little attention paid to the long-term decompressing of all troops. It was seen by interviewees as a 'tick boxing exercise' for the MOD and looked on by participants cynically. As described by a male reserve soldier who went through Cyprus: '*you come back to Cyprus to supposedly decompress and all you do is have a few beers and beat the shite out of each other*'. (See Vignette 3) Another reserve soldier described an experience he had:

*you go through decompression and all it is, is ticking a box, they introduce you to alcohol after six months [on tour] and the staff at the decompression, and this is from the staff, they'll say right guys there'll be a fight here tonight but it's nothing to do with us because it happens. This is friends actually fighting, but it happens, so you get the two days and drink and beat the shit out of each other and then head back to the UK and de mob and then head to our homes. I personally think they should keep [soldiers] us together in the barracks then send us home for a day or two then bring us back in head to the mountains, seaside as a group to walk, talk and ease it back in properly, most of our guys can deal with it but many can't.*

Thus, an issue for the MOD is whether there is anything they can do to diminish the bubble as part of a planned programme of decompression for soldiers both when immediately leaving operations right through to when they are about to retire. An interesting perspective on this was provided by soldiers who felt that the window of operational focus needs to be expanded to include greater pre- and post-deployment transitioning attention:

*You've got this situation where I've cried in the corner hundreds of times and he's [army colleague and buddy] cried in the corner hundreds of times and we've both cried together, we've been on the same tours, seen and did the same things. But the problem is everything is based around the six-month operation, that's the sole focus. Now in my view for someone to decompress after a six-month tour over a few days with a rake of beer is not going to do it, the whole tour needs to be viewed within a twelve-month window, so you have a three-month lead in, six-month actual and three-month wind down. That may seem crazy but I have seen the effects, I've come back from operations with my Company and I've seen the issues. I know what's going to happen after a week or two when these fellas go home but the issues are still there three months later so the six-month tour needs to be a year's focus (current reserve officer, male).*

### **Vignette 3**

#### **Former regular soldier on decompression for troops returning from operations.**

*When I served in Afghanistan as a medic over several tours each time I came back home it was getting harder to fit into civilian life, not in the daily routine I could do that, but it was a different world over there and people were just getting on with their lives here and I felt people were having a lack of respect for what we were doing over there. But I also understand they had every right in opposing it, so I'd be talking to them over a drink and totally agreeing with them. If you're going to ask a soldier a question, ask them, do they think they should be there and they will tell you the truth, how it is. So, over the years I have had to watch a lot of my friends coming back a lot worse than me trying to fit into civilian life, it's bad enough being a soldier without conflict but when your back in civvie life after conflict, it's hard to explain. It's hard for people [including employers] to understand us, me and my background and they don't want to accept there is a military background and accept any conflict and any ideas which come from that and that is sometimes a good thing but most times a bad thing. We've have had to learn things the hard way, so sometimes I have to tell people I'm not in the army or haven't been in the army, for them it's high up in their list in terms of weakness or to be avoided. But they're not understanding the experience we as soldiers or veterans have got, what knowledge we have and how could we could migrate that knowledge into what they do to make things better. My company is successful because of my drive but it's been successful because people have realised this guy is right and former soldier's do have transferable skills. But controversial conflicts like Afghanistan have made civvie life more difficult. Back in 2010 I didn't realise at the time that it was my worst tour as a medic. I was working with a highly skilled medical team. Upon leaving operations in Afghanistan and heading to decompression in Cyprus that's when it all went wrong and the army has got to put their hands up because when we went to Cyprus we were supposed to be held there for a week. The program was you go in there and chill out for a bit, no alcohol, you get to talk about things in large and small groups, talk about comrades who we had lost. Day three was more into sport, entertainment, a little alcohol, and then sessions allowed for people like myself to be looked at more closely so people could say 'that person or this person needs to be looked at'. But it never happened, so we got the aircraft went to Cyprus, went through the system, de-kitted, got new stuff, then straight into the bar and you then look for your name on a wall, which sports group you were in and so forth. It's now a Monday and we're flying back on a Wednesday so I said to my boss 'what's going on here? We can't do this as we're flying back to the UK in a couple of days'. He just said, 'well they're organising it'. So, we were supposed to be here for a week but he said, 'as far as I'm concerned the quicker I get home the better' but I said there's guys here who need to be debriefed and it never happened. I said to him this will have repercussions, but he never did anything. The lack of understanding is an issue, there is still the attitude that I'm ok, I'm fine, but good leadership can recognise the signs, for example I remember a commanding officer and he was fantastic and he said before we drew down [from Afghanistan] we're gonna do some counselling sessions. We got one day of that but the aircraft that had to bring us back got brought forward. The commanding officer said that we'll continue when we get back but he wasn't there when we got back and I know for a fact if people had organised themselves it would have happened. There should be a proper support program with a start and a finish point, the people in Afghanistan, then in Cyprus and so on.*



On occasions it was stated that dedicated information and support was provided by individual regiments, or through the foresight and vision of respective commanding officers but not through any coherent or dedicated provision process from within the MOD. The lack of preparation for life outside the bubble causes what we call a 'transition vacuum', where veterans are left to cope with the transition on their own. As one former regular male soldier described it: *'If a person was showing issues when serving once they leave they're on their own. Even if we could get the top 10 per cent [of those in most need] handed over to someone and they have someone visit them once every two weeks but it goes from the military bubble to nothing'.* (See Vignette 4)

A current soldier commented on the difficulties faced by a friend, also a soldier, who was transitioning to civilian life post Afghanistan:

*I have a close friend who came back from Afghanistan on the Friday, he didn't get decompression or anything and was straight back to daily life on his own with no support or access to other guys who been out there, and on the Monday was picking the child up from school and he started to think of the huge life change he's just went through and then a few days later he's at a party at his parents and next thing he's in the kitchen crying, he was pretty messed up for a while because there was no one there who'd been through what he'd been through (current soldier, male).*

A veteran of the Afghanistan conflict commented on what he saw as the importance of effective support during the early stages of transition:

*There's loads of issues, but they go away but 10 years down the line they reappear again but that initial transitional period there has got to be a military way to police that to nip it all in the bud from the start. I'd loved the opportunity when I first left to be able to have contacted an appointed person. It's about knowing there's someone there and that they are not alone, that's the big thing (former regular soldier, male).*

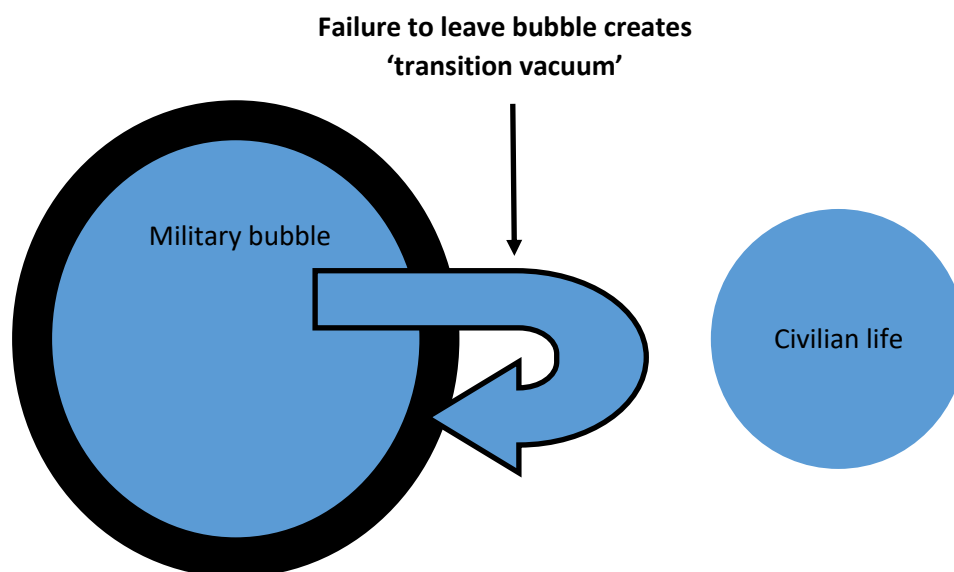
The MOD needs to improve the planning and preparation for veterans transitioning from the bubble back to civilian life and to improve post-deployment care. A strong feature of this

#### **Vignette 4.**

#### **Former regular soldier recall's post-conflict reintegration difficulties and what he perceives as a lack of support from the military and associated charities.**

*I got sick within about 6 months of leaving the army and I was hospitalised with some psychological problems which were put down to my service in Afghanistan. However, I found it difficult to get any support and help from any charities and it was only my brigadier who helped get me referred to combat stress, but it was over a year before I got offered a place on their intensive programme, in that time the NHS had addressed my needs wonderfully well. They originally had a few concerns that I had self-referred myself. The psychiatrist whom I was initially referred to was from Africa and had no comprehension of what I was telling him, how I was feeling and so on. Two weeks later I went missing, was caught by the police and put in hospital for a short while. By then the NHS system kicked into gear. Over the next two years, and I still have treatment, I found the NHS wonderful but I discovered the military charities extremely difficult to get into. I was referred to [charity name deleted] in April and didn't get to see anyone until August and not until the next year was I offered the program and told I qualified for it. So, you have to do an awful lot of pushing, it becomes very lonely. I think I'm trying to be as objective as I can here but it's difficult and I have needs. But I am very fortunate in that I have a very supportive family, though I still find it hugely difficult. Ironically, I actually found when I looked at the syllabus for the [charity name deleted] intensive program that I had done most of this through the NHS by then and I actually found the support groups for the NHS refreshing. A retired policeman, a businessman, a mother, a young man, I found it refreshing to talk about the difficulties we had as human beings rather than sitting around telling war stories but that really came up through necessity rather than design because I had to have an episode or incident before this support happened. Places like [charity name deleted] do a great job but often they are heavily undermanned and under great strain to deal with the number of cases out there. I had a bit of a relapse not so long ago and got referred to the home treatment team. I kept my diary of my moods and all of the techniques I was told to use and these were techniques I was originally taught through the NHS. Yes, I got to do some good stuff with [charity name deleted] but I had to push hard to get in. They also offered me some horticultural therapy but it was very mechanistic, ticking boxes to see if I qualified for the intensive program and when I looked at the syllabus it had already been covered by the NHS and the NHS were much more attuned to the person, the context, the upbringing. I feel the system as a whole doesn't take the wider cultural and social issues into account, it ticks boxes. When we took part the invasion of Iraq in 2003 I remember de-kitting in Kuwait before we went to Iraq and we had to hand our weapons in and I remember a psychiatric nurse came in and said 'right none of you have seen anything near bad enough for any of you to come up with any psychological issues'. We were being told and dictated to on how we felt rather than being asked. A group of 600 very individual people and here was the perception that there was going to be nobody who would have any trauma issues as a result of their experiences, I thought that was fascinating and disheartening. The system protects itself, the system is very cold and I get the impression in the system's view unless you were knee deep in blood for 24 hours a day for 6 months they can't understand why anyone would have any issues.*

support could be a 'buddy' system where a mentoring support worker from a regimental association or similar had the appropriate experiences to be able to work alongside the transitioning soldier. Frustration from soldiers who have found the transitional process difficult was also often laid at the manner in which available support or information was provided to them. It was regularly commented upon that support and information may have been available to soldiers, however, it required soldiers themselves to be pro-active in seeking such information and guidance, thus placing responsibility on the individual soldier to plan their transition and make the necessary arrangements to receive support. Former soldiers who said they were negatively impacted by this approach, felt that the MOD and military community were renegeing on a duty of care to their employees, especially given the nature of the COIN service they undertook. **(See Vignette 5)**



### ***The Responsibility of the Individual Soldier in Avoiding the 'Transition Vacuum'***

The perspectives of officers and rankers contrasted sharply with respect to the delivery of transitional support to soldiers; officers expected self-reliance, whereas rankers more

### **Vignette 5**

#### **Former regular soldier recall's post-conflict reintegration difficulties and what he perceives as a lack of support from the military and associated charities.**

*I got sick within about 6 months of leaving the army and I was hospitalised with some psychological problems which were put down to my service in Afghanistan. However, I found it difficult to get any support and help from any charities and it was only my brigadier who helped get me referred to combat stress, but it was over a year before I got offered a place on their intensive programme, in that time the NHS had addressed my needs wonderfully well. They originally had a few concerns that I had self-referred myself. The psychiatrist whom I was initially referred to was from Africa and had no comprehension of what I was telling him, how I was feeling and so on. Two weeks later I went missing, was caught by the police and put in hospital for a short while. By then the NHS system kicked into gear. Over the next two years, and I still have treatment, I found the NHS wonderful but I discovered the military charities extremely difficult to get into. I was referred to [charity name deleted] in April and didn't get to see anyone until August and not until the next year was I offered the program and told I qualified for it. So, you have to do an awful lot of pushing, it becomes very lonely. I think I'm trying to be as objective as I can here but it's difficult and I have needs. But I am very fortunate in that I have a very supportive family, though I still find it hugely difficult. Ironically, I actually found when I looked at the syllabus for the [charity name deleted] intensive program that I had done most of this through the NHS by then and I actually found the support groups for the NHS refreshing. A retired policeman, a businessman, a mother, a young man, I found it refreshing to talk about the difficulties we had as human beings rather than sitting around telling war stories but that really came up through necessity rather than design because I had to have an episode or incident before this support happened. Places like [charity name deleted] do a great job but often they are heavily undermanned and under great strain to deal with the number of cases out there. I had a bit of a relapse not so long ago and got referred to the home treatment team. I kept my diary of my moods and all of the techniques I was told to use and these were techniques I was originally taught through the NHS. Yes, I got to do some good stuff with [charity name deleted] but I had to push hard to get in. They also offered me some horticultural therapy but it was very mechanistic, ticking boxes to see if I qualified for the intensive program and when I looked at the syllabus it had already been covered by the NHS and the NHS were much more attuned to the person, the context, the upbringing. I feel the system as a whole doesn't take the wider cultural and social issues into account, it ticks boxes. When we took part the invasion of Iraq in 2003 I remember de-kitting in Kuwait before we went to Iraq and we had to hand our weapons in and I remember a psychiatric nurse came in and said 'right none of you have seen anything near bad enough for any of you to come up with any psychological issues'. We were being told and dictated to on how we felt rather than being asked. A group of 600 very individual people and here was the perception that there was going to be nobody who would have any trauma issues as a result of their experiences, I thought that was fascinating and disheartening. The system protects itself, the system is very cold and I get the impression in the system's view unless you were knee deep in blood for 24 hours a day for 6 months they can't understand why anyone would have any issues.*

expected that the army should assist. This difference is understandable given that the 'institutional self' in part is about taking away individual responsibility from the recruit. Some officers, however, encouraged rankers to look for information and such support was seen as a normal obligation of their position. Rankers sometimes wanted information handed to them 'on a plate', as described on several occasions. A former male regular officer said, *'it's only after they come out they say who's gonna help us and by then that transitional mechanism is not available to them, they are not pro-active in seeking support'*. Others agreed.

*There's a huge improvement in the resettlement support available and far better than it used to be but most of the people leaving are either because they can't wait to get out or are forced out, such as through medical discharge, they then tend to be disgruntled and no matter what you do for them it does no good, we look after personnel, we see them coming out as wounded, injured and sick and until they're actually discharged they don't want to listen to us, they don't want to engage and they don't take the opportunities which are there (former regular officer who now works to provide support for transitioning personnel as a 'buddy', male).*

*I don't know that the army have a role in directly supporting the soldier once they have left, the MOD has [a responsibility] but even then, their role is ensuring other government departments deliver services in a way which helps veterans and the military covenant includes veterans but it's really about the serving community. A government department devoted to veterans however would be for a relatively small number of people, but the Minister for Veterans in the MOD needs to be able to hold other departments to account, such as the NHS is not sufficiently engaged in mental health care of veterans and they need to be held to account, or the housing situation the MOD needs to be able to hold department of communities to account so that should be better. Real focus should be transition, if there is going to be a minister of veteran's affairs and government is going to accept unlimited liability for all of those who have served for remained of lives that's an extraordinary thing to commit to, where do you draw the line? Focus should be on better preparation for leaving and better transition when going from the military (former regular officer now a politician, male).*

We acknowledge that in one sense encouraging soldiers to seek information and support can help to instil in them at an early stage the importance of self-responsibility, planning and self-reliance. On the other hand, COIN warfare has required them to live in the

'bubble' of an institutional self. Training in self-reliance therefore can assist when making the move from military to civilian life.

If self-responsibility is to be a fundamental feature of soldier transition, it must be complemented with a broader education in self-reliance throughout their time in the forces. This, however, does not fit with the 'institutional self' where soldiers are trained to conform to the total institution's strict rules and regulations. Independence and self-reliance may well be trained for when required in an operational context, but not when exiting the army altogether.

### ***Military Assistance in Avoiding the 'Transition Vacuum'***

There are some examples of successful after care services, such as the UDR/RIR After Care Service and the regional after care service provided by Veterans Scotland. The UDR/RIR Aftercare service can provide a model for moving forward with respect to military transitional support. Their location 'inside the barracks' ensures that an attachment to the military can be maintained for veterans as part of their 'transitional self', and support on a regimental basis can be obtained from those from those perceived as having the appropriate insider knowledge and thus the relevant experience and expertise.

We propose the military give greater focus on providing a coherent and consistent approach with respect to information provision, guidance and advice. Effective mentoring of transitioning soldiers for a period of time to ensure smooth transition would help reintegration and in shortening the period where the 'transitional self' was needed. As one soldier commented *'they need to phase people in rather than expect people to take off the uniform, head back into civilian life and that is it. You can't switch off just like that. The army moves on quickly so people are left behind very quickly and it means the soldier is stuck in no*

*man's land'* (current reserve soldier, male). It is important to be aware of potentially 'at risk' groups before they leave active service, so as to inform support providers and assist those most in need. This is put well by one of our interviewees.

*Some people have put forward that when you come out of the military you're sad, mad, or bad, or more sad, mad or bad than your civvie counterpart but your military service can equip you better to be a better citizen, gives you citizen plus skills and that applies to the guys and girls who engage with the military and come out with a career. The danger group though is the early service leaver. The young lads plucked out of a dysfunctional family, sees the horrors then leave and then they're the ones who don't get the benefit of being in the military and becoming a better person and they're the ones who can end up in trouble, in prison because maybe they don't have the family dynamic to turn to and that's the group we should be focussing on. But because the military is reducing in size it and can now pick and choose more who joins up, this potential group is no longer seen as a problem but we have left behind a group of 25-35 year olds who have been badly affected and haven't been looked after and they are the early service leaver and we don't know who and where they are (former regular officer, male).*

Steps need to be taken to ensure that transitional support is pro-active and not reactive. Screening of 'at risk' soldiers to determine needs and levels of risk is required. Greater sharing of information, records and data between the military and civilian support providers would assist the transition process (where feasible and while protecting the security and safety of the individual).

Another critical part of this top-down support is appropriate training in the new skill sets needed in transitioning from the bubble. Soldiers referred to the importance of cultural awareness training when they were deployed in counter-insurgency operations overseas and in unfamiliar territory. We argue that comparable cultural awareness training is needed to reintegrate back into civilian life. A training programme should be implemented that gives them the skills sets for re-entry into civilian life. This includes the cultural expectations of civilian life. This should involve practical engagement with professionals in health, financial skills, and family welfare, as well as awareness training in what the differences are for

acceptable modes of behaviour and language between military and civilian life (for example, army humour in comparisons to civilian humour). The concepts of communities of practice and situated learning are useful here. Just as a new recruit is trained through practical engagement in environments which are as close to real life combat theatres as possible, a practical approach to re-indoctrinating transitioning soldiers through interactive training with wider society would be beneficial in the reintegration process back into civilian life. This would have benefits for the armed forces, showing them to be caring employers, which could strengthen future recruitment. **(See Vignette 6)**

### ***Moving into Employment and 'Transitional Naivety'***

One of the chief difficulties soldiers expressed when making the transition was moving into the civilian workplace. For example: *'I look at things now with a different lens as a former soldier and what really worries me is what has a former soldier got in terms of other employment'* (former regular officer, male). Soldiers had concerns on a number of levels. This included lack of confidence in the civilian employment process, lack of trust towards those outside the military community, and whether they will be given a 'fair shot' at being employed in civilian life.

*The army takes in those in the infantry who if it's not army, its prison. Therefore, the army can rather mask their personal deficiencies and we forget because we create a soldier who can run ten miles with a rucksack on his back and can kill someone and is a good laugh, we forget that individual was pretty ineffective before they joined and we trained them to do all sort of things, but we haven't trained them to be able to manage affairs or things once outside of the army and I think the army could do with understanding that better. There's a difficulty in balancing in the training of life skills that might be of value to another employer and the army is reluctant to do that as it is retention negative and the army is reluctant to that for civilian employers as they [early service leaver] will bugger off and in fairness they will get paid more on the outside so the army is stuck with a moral responsibility to prepare people for life after service while not wanting them or encouraging them to leave (former regular officer, male).*



## **Vignette 6**

### **Afghanistan veteran who suffered from PTSD reflects on the challenges of obtaining support.**

*I knew there was something different in me when I came back from Afghanistan, but one of the first things I went to when I came back was a big family wedding which maybe wasn't the best thing to do but I didn't realise what was wrong with me at the time. I had been back for only two days and then on to the wedding and on the third day I tried to commit suicide. I knew something was wrong early on, I remember standing watching everyone having a beautiful time and it wasn't the alcohol which had an effect on me. Next thing I remember I'm lying on the ground after this man has rugby tackled me to save me jumping off a bridge. At that point I knew I needed help. I was still in the army so I went to see my GP in the army and told him how I was feeling and he referred to me to someone in the army who was a retired ex-RAF nurse. When I was trying to explain all my thoughts and feelings he would try to have an answer and give advice on what I should do but he had no combat experience. We have got these psychiatrists but I thought it was a complete waste of time, and I said, 'are you going to refer me for proper treatment' and he said, 'no I think we can work through this' but I said, 'well I'm not dealing with it', so at that point I left the army and went to see my own doctor. I was seeing my own doctor anyway so he knew right away and he said, 'right ok let's stop this' and he wanted me to see one of the leading mental health support providers. I went to see this organisation and enjoyed it but I found it distressing there as the medic who was trying to deal with me had no combat or military experience and they said, 'we'll put you on the Vietnam program from Australia', 'why would you do that I asked, is it because you have no research', so I had difficulty with them. I was on medication which was only working to an extent so I got involved with PTSD Resolution. I did get diagnosed with PTSD and have moved on but it is a struggle. PTSD Resolution's programme is a bit similar to what I experienced previously but it was more focussed on not trying to understand everything about your condition but rather 'let's pick something out, understand more on how can we make it better, how can we help with it, we know it's still there so we use different thinking methods'. It was more therapeutic, a more comfortable environment to the extent that we have now become friends. I'll admit it's a struggle but we need to all understand better on how do we reintegrate people with conditions from service back into society and treat them, we've not learnt from that. At one point during my early treatment experiences before going to PTSD Resolution I had to remind them that I am a human being, that I was being just rushed through and they kept changing the people I saw which meant I couldn't build up a mental relationship and trust with people. But I found with PTSD Resolution that I had a great opportunity to help others, I feel one of my strength's with dealing with PTSD is to help others understand it, the great thing is I can help them and direct them and its empowering. Since I left the army I have had a lot of trauma and I've had to fight through it but I have been successful, it's a silent killer you have to fight it all the time. I don't recover from it [trauma], I deal with it better than I ever had and that's the good thing because I have no thoughts about death. I look at people and treat them differently, when I teach I think more about the type of person I am dealing with, it's amazing the strengths which have come out of it rather than the weaknesses.*

There was acknowledgement that employment problems can affect service leavers at all stages of the army career ladder. While early service leavers face barriers to work, especially those with little education, there is also, for long term personnel and officers, the issue of what we describe as 'transitional naivety' with respect to the opportunities that present senior personnel when leaving the military.

Comments suggested a 'false impression' was being created in the armed forces that senior and long-term personnel would find equivalent level of civilian employment with ease. This is a mistake. We are in no doubt there are transferrable and key skills which former soldiers possess but this must be complemented both with realistic expectations, prior planning to enable individuals to both recognise and articulate transferrable skills to a non-military audience, and education for the civilian work environment. As one former male regular officer commented: *'there's jobs that we think we're qualified but we're not and we need to get boys out of that mind-set, even the way we speak, you know, you can't speak like that out in the streets, you can't talk to them as if they are a ranger or a corporal, you need to break that system down and if there's a method to do it use it.'*

Effective preparation of soldiers needs to be combined with less naivety about what it takes to place people in civilian workplaces. This would greatly assist the transitioning soldier on what next steps they need to take. Soldiers commented that they feel they have considerable skills which would be invaluable in civilian workplaces. However, respondents also frequently said that employers do not mostly appreciate the transferable skills possessed by them and are unconvinced of soldiers' employability. Greater promotion by the military of the transferable employability skills of former soldiers would significantly assist in the

transition process. Changes in attitude are also required by employers. As remarked by one former regular officer who found difficulty gaining employment in civilian settings:

*I mean ultimately to me Britishness is kind of about being reserved and not really wanting adulation, the type of recognition I wanted when leaving the army was when walking into an interview room the interviewer who got it [the skills from being in the military], who knew that I would work hard, a high standard guy, deliver projects for them in an efficient way. To me it wouldn't be a leap of faith, they would already know (former regular officer, male).*

Cultural complexities between military and civilian work was further illustrated by the frustration some former soldiers who are currently in civilian employment had towards co-workers. These participants commented that the discipline, determination, and dedication shown by ex-soldiers in civilian jobs is not matched by their civilian counterparts. This frustrates them as workers but on occasions also made them nostalgic for the bubble of like-minded, equally dedicated, trustworthy squaddies. The military must do more, not only to inform, but to educate soldiers when making the transition that the requirements, expectations and subsequent delivery by others in civilian life can be markedly different to what is expected in military life.

### ***The Relevance of the Reserve Question***

At the core of any approach to assisting soldier's transition is in understanding the holy trinity of work, life and military for reserve soldiers. As commented by one former male reserve soldier: *'I found it [transition] quite easy to begin with but when I went back to work there was all these things which kept bugging me and that turned out to be my PTSD which took a while to kick in but it kicked in. Occasionally I'd get scared, I'd have panic attacks, very stressed out, depression, those sorts of things.'* The military is in the midst of organisational change with increasing emphasis placed on reserve soldiers. Over the next several years this process

is set to continue and this has significant implications for the future shape of the armed forces, as well as the successful integration of reserve troops alongside regular forces. Reservists who do not integrate well suffer in morale while in service, which can affect the transition when they go from full-time back to civilian life.

*I was in the TA [Territorial Army, now known as Reserve] and went on one tour of Afghanistan and it was rough. The biggest pressure was the heat, you go through a depressed phase when you're out there, you're stuck out there. I had some more personal problems as well I was picked on quite badly, I was a reservist so I wasn't part of them [the regular military community] I took it very personally and there's no one you can turn to (former reserve soldier, male).*

Another former reserve soldier commented:

*From a reserve point of view, it's totally different, there's still not an understanding of reserve soldiers, when we came home your pretty much left to your own device, I think it depends on what type of tour you've had granted on how bad you'll be but you don't have access you any support (former reserve soldier, male).*

We therefore argue that the transition process must enable soldiers to feel confident to return to their civilian lives without fear of prejudice or discrimination. Respondents who were reservists referred to the uniqueness of their position as both a soldier and a civilian and provided examples of lack of co-operation and support by civilian employers for their reserve role, commenting that having a civilian employer who is hospitable and supportive of their role in the military encourages them to want to stay within the reserve forces.

This is not the case for all. Despite legislative and cultural pressure for employers to be receptive to employees' membership of the reserve forces, respondents highlighted occasions when attitudes by employers impacted negatively on their role as reserve soldier. One former regular soldier commented, *'the military won't give them [reservists] the training needed because civilian employers won't give them the time off. If you're a regular reservist*

*the employer has to keep you job open for when you come back, if you're in the TA, no'* (former regular soldier, male). Respondents also said that some employers were concerned at the physical injuries they could sustain, as well as the psychological damage, impeding their normal functioning as an employee. Improved relations with employers and business organisations should be at the cornerstone of any transitional strategy undertaken by the MOD so as to ensure soldiers feel confident in engaging with civilian employment process and will not be discriminated against. Future engagement with the business community should focus on highlighting the skills brought by former soldiers and reservists to any company business. Such an approach will also greatly assist those reserve soldiers in managing the tension between military and civilian roles and also help in encouraging more reserve recruits.

### ***The Balance Between Support and Co-Dependency***

Many of the veterans from earlier COIN campaigns, and some Afghan veterans, referred to a problem we have termed 'co-dependency', where those veterans not doing so well were said to be overly reliant on support services that encouraged dependency. The use of these services was thought to be a slippery slope to non-management of the transition. Co-dependency was seen as a risk that they sought to avoid by means of their own resilience or the use of support structures that did not create co-dependency. **(See Vignette 7)**

Ex-soldiers want support, but they also want to stand on their own two feet. This requires a delicate balance and individual circumstances give ex-soldiers different needs. In our encounters with those veterans who have been having difficulty making the transition, there was great frustration expressed at the levels of support provided by the military. At the same time however, they readily availed of the support structures made available. What matters is that the support is effective and meets their needs. Veterans from the early COIN

### **Vignette 7**

#### **Former regular army officer on avoiding over-identification and dependency.**

*My reintegration was seamless and I think there are a number of factors in that, I'm more educated than most, I don't mean that just in terms of my three degrees but in terms of my outlook in life and my intellectual curiosity. Basically, one of the main reasons I joined the army was to open my horizons and when in the military I chose to go to more international areas where possible. This may have curtailed how far I could go up the army career ladder but my goodness I had some amazing experiences. My final jobs were embedded the French army in Paris, working with NATO and flying all over the world with the international organisations we worked with and then my last job was defence attaché with issues in East Africa so those sort of horizons gave me an outlook in life which wasn't insular. Throughout my career I also considered for family reasons leaving the military so I always kept an eye out for what was available in a civilian workplace context. Also, early on we [interviewee and his wife] bought our own properties, so we always would have property outside the barracks and always had disposable income which took any pain away. Furthermore, my wife has always been very well qualified and worked so we were never in a position if I left the army that I would have had to rely on them as a mothering provider. If anything, that side of things I purposely pushed away from, so while I didn't make myself an outsider from the military I used my time in the army as a vehicle for doing the sorts of things I wanted to do and it gave me phenomenal freedom. A lot of people think it's all about orders and commands but it's not, if I was in accountancy or law firm or a big corporate business your beholden to the bottom line and the corporation. I had much more autonomy in the military and flying over the world in very broad parameters which I wouldn't have had in any other job and thus I left the army fine. But I do believe there should be more done to help those who can't cope, what the army offered me on leaving to me seemed pathetic and given the experiences I had naïve. I can remember doing the senior officers resettlement course in my early 50's prior to leaving at 55 and I was very upbeat. How to write and cv, how to sell yourself at interview, how to get work and all those sorts of courses, but in actual fact they were naïve in that they gave us the impression that we would walk into a senior appointment elsewhere and I rather suspected post the age of 35-40 you are increasingly becoming unemployable in the civilian world. While there's all sorts of people in the army who can step out into international security we don't all want to go into that field. I speak several languages, have an MBA but I knew the military was not going to get me a comparable well-paid job at 55 so the army could do more than what it is doing in preparing people and be more open and less naïve about what it takes to place people in a civilian work setting, be that a trade or a senior management role. For example, I think if you did things like 6 months training and support for a prospective plumber that is real transition, not two weeks here and there. I'm reasonably self-aware that I my outlook and planning may be an exception. I'm well-educated, psychologically quite strong, extrovert and always had a wide-ranging outlook, saved my pensions, etc. I've also been not just of the officer class, but made sure I carved my own independence at the expense of climbing up the ladder. Leaving the army as a full colonel is not bad at all, I made sure that I wasn't totally compromising my army career, but I planned for life outside. I'm self-aware though to know that some young guy who hasn't had my advantages and has been in the wrong place at wrong time and who leaves the arm in his 20s after giving a lot isn't looked after properly and that has to change.*

campaigns felt some forms of support were counter-productive, in that it encouraged over-dependency and this weakened resilience. Some Afghan veterans shared this view.

*There's a danger of humanising it [the army] too much. It's really interesting the way selection for Special Forces, which I have done and got quite far but not hacked it physically and I think a degree of bad luck there [in not getting selected]. I retried it over three different summers, it's the epitome of soldiering, if you have any psychological weakness you're not going to get through it, its commitment required. I've never heard of any special forces soldiers suffering from PTSD, and maybe that says something (former regular officer, male).*

Following on from this, stakeholders must ask the question as to whether their support resists the development of resilience by creating over-dependency?

The benefits of dealing with this question are two-fold. First, a clearer understanding across the military about what constitutes support and how it is provided, would provide clarity for soldiers in terms of what they can expect when making the transition. Secondly, by providing a support model that demonstrates dedication to helping transitioning soldiers, would engender and enhance soldiers' feelings of comfort, belonging and morale. Numerous soldiers we spoke to, while wanting additional support, were pragmatic as to the realities of what could be achieved. A major concern was what they perceived as a lack of emotional care and on-going acknowledgment of them once out of the army. They feared being forgotten and neglected. As one former soldier commented '*I think more attention needs to be paid to the significance of being discharged and civilianised. I don't think a lot of soldiers feel appreciated. Many soldiers feel they've just been thrown out*' (former regular soldier, male).

On many occasions respondents, including those who had transitioned effectively, felt the military removed themselves from care and support too soon once a notice of intention to leave was issued. A former soldier highlighted this by commenting '*once you inform your*

*superiors of your decisions to leave the army you are effectively ostracised and isolated from the wider military community. The army spends money on those who are in and want to be in the armed forces, not on those who are going to leave them as they are of no benefit to them'* (former regular soldier, male). Furthermore, many respondents thought that the military itself feels it should not assist 'too much' in the transition of soldiers. This was because they perceive the military as not seeing it as their problem once soldiers leave. The MOD needs to address these opposing perceptions on the legacy and level of continuing care beyond military employment. In an increasingly competitive marketplace it is more important than ever that the armed forces are seen as effective employers. Former members of the armed forces can be the best recruiting tool for the army. They have the ability to demonstrate to prospective recruits the benefits of a military career in a way few other marketing tools can achieve. They can be local champions for an armed forces career. Taking these factors into consideration we propose that support is provided in a manner which shows that the military cares for its troops both during and after they leave service, but it is in the form that ensures resilience is built up amongst its retiring soldiers.

### ***Media, Social Attitudes and Public Perceptions***

Veterans from earlier counter-insurgency conflicts expressed sympathy for recent Afghanistan veterans due to the saturated media coverage of the conflict. As one former male Malaya veteran described it:

*Each soldier is different, a different human being with different physical and mental strengths and weaknesses and that's the hard side of it, we know from the Second World War many of them just blocked it off they did not speak about it, they shut it off, they need never come up with it and that's how you dealt with it. Today the fashion is to open everything up and discuss but of course the press and social media is going to play it all out and they [Afghan veterans] are under much more pressure, it will come down to how individually strong the person is.*



They felt that blanket coverage on both traditional and new media, meant that recent veterans would find it more difficult to put the memories of conflict behind them. Veterans from earlier counter-insurgency conflicts felt the lack of media coverage for their conflicts put them in a better position to compartmentalise their actions in battle and to leave them back in the war zone. Some earlier veterans did not take their own advice and still found it difficult after all these years to leave the conflict behind them. This was particularly the case for UDR soldiers, where reminders of 'the Troubles' penetrate their daily lives. A 'micro language of terror' (Feldman, 2001: 66) sinks into the lived body where it becomes part of everyday life. One former male UDR soldier in Northern Ireland expressed this as following. *'You had to be careful because you couldn't walk about in your uniform, you couldn't say what you done. We live in an abnormal society here and it's very sad. That is so, so wrong, they should be no different than mainland UK.'* However, none of these veterans from earlier campaigns face the same issues around the negative public image of their war that Afghan veterans confront.

Afghan veterans face constant exposure to emotionally challenging circumstances in a context where the cause of such psychologically debilitating feelings lacks general public acclaim and support. As we noted above, while UDR has almost universal opprobrium from the Nationalist community, it can lay claim to almost universal honour from Unionists. The level of public support for Afghan veterans cannot match even that of the UDR. This leads to avoidance actions taken by the affected individual in order to cope with a level of stress that receives little empathy and support. The avoidance mechanisms adopted by soldiers range from self-medication, alcohol, various forms of social withdrawal, and the refusal of counselling. The increasing inability to escape the images and memories of an unpopular conflict, enhanced through increased communication and social networking tools on a global

scale, means that there is a real danger that avoidance mechanisms can become the norm for affected personnel. As one Afghan veteran commented: *'I don't like to have reminders, even if there is something comes on the TV, the picture of a coffin draped in the Union flag or a documentary on Afghanistan or something, I'll switch it over straight away or leave the room all together'* (former regular soldier, male).

Counter-insurgency warfare always exists in tension with public opinion. Respondents reproduced this tension, veering between feelings of being unloved and forgotten, yet craving public recognition and affection. Some veterans complained of being forgotten; this might be expected from veterans from the 1950s and 1960s, but some Afghan veterans felt their war would also be soon forgotten. In contrast, others complained about the high level of public attention given to the Afghan war in fear that it reinforced its public illegitimacy and thus added to their ontological crisis. There was an overall high level of cynicism toward the public.

**(See Vignette 8)** As one former male regular soldier remarked:

*I think that's part of the frustration when soldiers go out into civilian life, we've been to war you haven't [civilians], you've no idea what it was like, don't even talk to me about it and this is where I think PTSD is going to happen later in life because you can forget about things but they start settling and even though I feel myself at times up here and down here, I definitely changed as a person.*

The public were thought to be fickle, oscillating between moments of neglect and sympathy; sympathy often provoked by a media campaign that quickly became yesterday's news. Comments were especially concerned at the distinction seemingly now being created between the individual soldier and the military/government with the potential that soldiers were being used as a tool to beat decision makers rather than any genuine sympathy towards them. Some interview data expresses this well.

### **Vignette 8**

**Former Regular soldier with experience in Afghanistan and Northern Ireland reflecting on the political and public attitudes toward counter-insurgency and the narratives about such conflicts.**

*I have been very critical of our political masters especially because of my last experience in Afghanistan where there were a lot of constraints put upon us which helped to form some of the difficulties I subsequently had (psychological problems). So, in that context I have been deeply critical of our political masters because they have been focussed on a domestic audience, how were things going to be seen back in London and in the general voting public. Little Britain as it stands today is more interested in what's the bare minimum I can do and I think people need to wise up and to punch at our weight and not above our weight. But the politicians from all colours be that red [Labour] or blue [Conservative] as soon as they get to that table of power in my opinion they can't wait to bomb Syria, bomb Libya, invade Iraq, get involved in Afghanistan, it's almost egotistical. Whilst they are on the outside they might say no and bring up all the humanitarian and humility you'd expect them to display but from what I can see as soon as they get to table of power they want to punch above their weight and commit troops to situations which haven't gone particularly well in the recent past. David Cameron was adamant he wanted to bomb Syria, I think it was ill-judged and ill-informed and when they can wield out the troops it gives them a disproportionate view of where they stand in the world and I think politicians become intoxicated by it. In terms of the public in Northern Ireland I find it heart-breaking the constant desire to re-shape the narrative [of 'the Troubles'] and make the military and state feel dirty for what they did. I find that has a debilitating effect on me every day. I just wish I could get into more of the community and say that the stuff I did I'm proud of but because of the contexts in Northern Ireland they will make us feel dirty, dirty to have been in the military. I struggle with what we did in Northern Ireland and no one really says it was a good job unless they're people celebrating in a partisan way or using it for their own political reasons. Similarly, in Iraq and Afghanistan there is no defined winner, we have no clarity or conclusion, nobody to say a job well done or the operation was a success. The only way you can fix an insurgency is to have a political context and you don't get any progress until you establish a political context and the military bit is just one of the levers used, as soon as you get the political context you get progress, that's how I try to rationalize the military role in counter-insurgency, as part of a bigger picture. Quite often I say it's not a bad thing the IRA won here, people fall off the chairs and say they didn't win, they say 'they are in government because we beat them' but yet again it's what your perspective is. But I am open minded enough to say they couldn't be defeated militarily and therefore we create conditions for things to move on politically. If you can create a winner and a loser you can contextualise as a veteran more easily your part in that, but because there's lots of shades of grey and no clear winner I think that has massive effect.*

*More people are aware of the distinction and divide [between individual soldier and decision makers] they are more forgiving to the likes of me who have worn the uniform and served to realise that I'm OK and that I was a consequence of the decision making but I wasn't the decision maker myself so even there's a lot of hatred they don't hold the members of the British army personally responsible (former regular soldier, male).*

*The army before Afghanistan and halfway through Iraq were looked down on but [organisation name deleted] helped to push to revere those who were fighting such miserable battles and going through such danger and the horrible injuries they were coming back with. Whether it was the press which picked it up or whether it was someone running a really good campaign but it really did lift and go, wow, these people are really special. We're now moving into a slightly post-conflict situation where those people aren't coming back, it's not a story every week and we've pulled out and people are now asking why did we do that and that's the real danger, you're taking away their whole reason for pride, being proud of what they're doing, that's the danger you may have just wasted lives and limbs (former regular officer, non-Afghanistan, male).*

The interplay of feelings about their participation in forgotten wars, wrongly remembered wars and unpopular wars, and feelings of being unloved yet wanting greater recognition and respect, ended up in most developing a highly cynical attitude toward public opinion. Cynicism is part of the tension between counter-insurgency operations and public opinion: veterans wanted greater public acclaim yet rejected any public affirmation as in itself reflecting the cynicism of public whose support at base is seen as not even half-hearted. The lack of a definitive winner in the Afghanistan conflict (as happens in much of counter-insurgency conflict), coupled with the lack of a cultural narrative of celebration or victory, meant that Afghan veterans did not feel the same sense of pride and respect from the broader public.

Etched in the memories of our Afghan veterans are the national commemorations of two world wars that have taken place during their own readjustment back into civilian life. Having to cope with what they see as public indifference, even rejection, of their war experience, while craving the sort of public narratives of honour and celebration experienced

by the soldiers returning from these conventional wars, increases the tension between counter-insurgency warfare and public opinion. This accordingly intensifies their cynicism.

One of the forces at play to explain the tension between counter-insurgency warfare and public opinion is whether or not the trauma that this form of warfare can garner is publicly acknowledged. There is occasional media attention on trauma and PTSD, but many veterans see this as dissipating all too quickly. The media is also thought to give negative portrayals of former soldiers, ranging from negative stereotypes of them as homeless, drunks, in prison or as domestic violence abusers, to people who over-emphasise trauma and cultivate victimhood status through 'chosen trauma'. Some ex-soldiers collude in such a view.

*Afghanistan kicked off as flavour of the month, Ross Kemp with all his documentaries, it's in the Sun newspaper and the like and the stock is quite high but if you look now at messaging coming out its PTSD, alcoholism, irresponsible debt, all of those things which are being tagged on to a soldier collectively are issues which are common amongst young people. Papers will be published on soldier's credit cards, the cumulative effect of stories which come out week on week, throw on to that a high profile sexual assault or whatever and you just start to get the feeling everything is quite negative. Don't get me wrong it's brilliant that people who need support get support but the ones who are troubled are the ones who don't open up. As you go through the trauma risk management process which is a big thing now they tell you continually talk about things and I agree with that'* (former regular officer, male)

As one male Malaya veteran described, *'the military is run down too much now, if there is anything wrong blame the military and that's not fair'*. This view was replicated across all participant groups including those currently in service, as one current soldier described:

*We need to see the strong side of the military and its soldiers, not a [expletive deleted] advertising campaign where you see a soldier with a gun sitting in the corner like he's gonna kill himself. Instead you would see something where the soldier is seen as strong. The government has spent millions on where they make it seem as if you have a problem, there should be great pride as if they done well, the days of negativity have gone. A more positive approach is needed, even in terms of training positive thinking works way better* (current soldier, male, previous experience in Afghanistan).

### ***'Chosen Trauma' and Victimhood***

Since the Afghanistan conflict, increasing public attention has been placed on the emotional costs of COIN operations. This is coupled with increased participation by the public in commemorations and memorialisation's. There are also increased opportunities for former soldiers to retell their experiences. These participatory frameworks have been designed both at national and local community levels. For example, with respect to Northern Ireland, former UDR soldiers have been involved in a variety of activities from oral history projects, to campaigns by victim groups for truth and justice. Similarly, veterans of Afghanistan have become part of a broader national narrative which has debated the validity of Britain engagement in the war, as well as the UK's role engagements in an increasingly complex world stage. This public profile has three contradictory consequences. First, it reminds them of the ambivalence of public support for their war service. Secondly, it increases ex-soldiers' cynicism at the fickleness of public opinion. Thirdly, it brings back memories of painful things that most would prefer to neglect. This is the tension we referred to above in wanting acknowledgement and respect but fearing its consequence for their mental wellbeing should they receive it.

Set within this tension is an approach to understanding trauma. According to Svašek (2005: 195) 'trauma itself is a culturally and historically specific interpretation of human suffering'. From this viewpoint we argue that some counter-insurgency veterans use discourses and practices of collective victimhood in an attempt to gain political influence and claim compensation for their suffering. Current public attention is primarily focused on constructing a public narrative which places the soldier in a position of suffering and a victim of actions carried out by a dispassionate and uncaring state. This has created a separation

between the individual soldier, who is seen as a victim, and the military hierarchy and government, which is seen as the perpetrator. Lack of a cultural narrative of celebration and victory, coupled with public opposition to the Afghanistan conflict, places former soldiers in a state of ambiguity in the public consciousness, betwixt and between the polar opposite positions of hero and villain. (See **Vignette 9**)

Victimhood status has been appropriated by a number of veteran support groups, which seek to both collectivise memories and install a particular narrative in order to claim resources based on the empathy accorded to ex-soldiers as victims. Organisations that have been developed to support former soldiers and their families have been considerably active in seeking to define their members as victims in the conflict. This represents the politicisation of emotion through the way COIN soldiers are remembered as victims. It constitutes a form of 'chosen trauma'. This is not just a public narrative employed as a resource mechanism by support groups, some successful transitioners also refer to chosen trauma, believing that those who have transitioned less successfully have succumbed to what they refer to as the over-medicalisation of the transition experience. The wider therapy culture of late modern society combines with a media focus on PTSD to almost encourage, they believe, the choice of a traumatised self.

### ***Balancing Trauma***

Trauma featured a great deal in the interviews conducted; more so, of course, in those at the less successful pole of the continuum of normal transition. By bringing to attention the effect such experiences have on their daily lives, respondents were trying to give shape and meaning to soldiers' identities once out of uniform. Throughout the data gathering process numerous soldiers highlighted the impact exposure to conflict incidents had on their civilian lives

## **Vignette 9**

### **Afghanistan veteran who discusses the issues surrounding public attitudes to the military.**

*I feel 100 per cent yes that we have victimized the soldier too much which prohibits some from making a full recovery. There is this problem of creating a hero and victim and I'm still not quite sure which way is best, we put them [soldiers] on a pedestal and then feel sorry for them. We don't join the army to be felt sorry for, soldiers also tend to not like the hero tag very much. I've seen someone winning a CGC [Conspicuous Gallantry Cross], I know what heroic is like, I've been in a firefight, achieved my mission, I did it as best I could and accepted the element of danger involved, but that is what I signed up for. But the public have now put forward the idea of a hero to such an extent that you're now a hero if a soldier can tie his shoelaces. When we got back from Afghanistan in 2009 and had a lot of guys injured and killed the battalion had got bit of celebrity status so there was people who got in touch and said they wanted to take 10 of our guys over to parade the town and they could drink all the beer they wanted, with free entry into night clubs and so on. So, blokes came to expect this and if you have developed a mental health condition as a result of your service being put in a place where you can compensate and suppress emotions because your being treated like a quasi-celebrity we found detrimental to recovery. You created a monster because we had young riflemen who had lost a leg but they were still a rifleman and you would get a rifleman turning in 15 minutes late, that culture was created where they made themselves into something they were not. Of course, they deserve gratitude and many suffered but we noticed those who went on most freebies were those who were recovering most slowly. They become dependent and getting better became of secondary importance. The pendulum I feel has swung too far one way in terms of trauma awareness and the difficulties that can bring. It's better in some ways than where it was at, in Northern Ireland and the Falkland's there was an unwillingness to accept mental health but we are now in a position whereby people are exaggerating mental health and hiding the fact that they were and remain feckless and not very organised and all has happened is that they have left the army and it is just who they are. I also recognise some ways that by saying they've a mental illness is also probably better than just suppressing, it's a difficult balance to ask the military and public to strike. The politicians are also to blame as the easiest thing to get applause in constituencies is to say God bless the troops and so politicians talk up veteran mental health all the time. While it's important to highlight trauma it's important not to create a culture whereby everyone has been permanently mentally scarred by their experiences. Showing the odd bit of emotion on Remembrance Sunday or welling up when telling a story, that's not PTSD. The procedural problem is the one we should look at and whether that should be under the umbrella of the armed forces covenant. But I don't think handing over mental health from military clinicians to NHS clinicians is anywhere near good enough, no continuity of care so people falling through cracks, also TRIM [risk management training] records destroyed so if you represent late with a mental health condition, which often happens, tracing back the origins of that there's no opportunity for clinical psychologists to go back and understand issues. It strikes me that the army could have done this very simply but they hadn't foreseen the challenges that lay ahead.*



through the stress it causes. Counter-insurgency warfare places great strain on the body and mind and does contribute towards the development of trauma. A former regular soldier, male, said, *'a counter-insurgency operation is more of a three-sixty threat and I always found that it was quite a nerve wrecking experience working with the locals'*. **(See Vignette 10)**

Yet the adoption of victimhood and over focus on trauma also creates a number of difficulties both for the military and the individual soldier. Numerous soldiers commented on the misconception of trauma in broader society and its impact on the wellbeing and moral of the soldier. As one example, a former male officer in the regular army said, *'society perception has changed massively, there's the misconception that everyone has PTSD, it's almost as if people are looking for these and if you have been to Afghanistan you're going to have issues and it's not healthy for society to hold those views'*. The military face a difficult balancing act with respect to trauma. On the one hand it acknowledges that increasing attention on trauma can help remove the stigma associated with seeking treatment for mental health conditions. Conversely, evidence suggests that an over focus on trauma can medicalise the transition process and help in persuading former soldiers that they suffer from PTSD, when this is not the case, denuding them of resilience to deal with normal life events. One interviewee commented at length on this.

*We have got a political environment where trauma has become politicized so in order to maintain or improve operational effectiveness we've got to manage trauma. The thing is that the military environment is the military environment, it's not full of counsellors or people who join to be nice. There are people at all levels who want to be aggressive, who want to get stuck in and be involved in engagement with the enemy, get as close to enemy as possible to inflict violence on enemy and feel they're doing the best they can in a culture where the people who are rewarded are those who are closest to the enemy. So, if you're going to be the best soldier you want to be near the enemy, so the military has a problem. It needs people to be near the enemy, to kill the enemy, to put lives in danger but as human beings we're no longer living in an environment which is stiff upper lip, politically everything is about more communication, more honesty, so short term fix is trauma risk management (former regular officer, male).*

### **Vignette 10**

**A former Afghanistan veteran who was a regular officer and who also had experience in Kosovo and Northern Ireland provides an overview of the challenges of COIN and the support needed for veterans.**

*A lot of COIN is close up and personal and there is more fear of the unknown in counter insurgency. Afghanistan in particular was a hard environment and not just operationally, environmentally as well. The ground, the heat, it was a really hard place to operate. Some of the younger guys didn't initially grasp it [the dangers and complexities of the operation] but after a few weeks you began to question whether this was going to work, fighting a third, fourth world mind-set and it was difficult to overcome that. I think my traumatic memories was more relating to the cases of near misses and sitting down and realising that it was close. I've seen people dying but it was a case of sitting down afterwards and it was the near misses which affected me most. At the time you don't realise but it's when you sit back afterwards that you realise how lucky you were to have survived. When I returned home from operations or tours it was relatively easy because I was in the bubble. I would have went to the shop but I didn't interact with anyone, I just purchased what I wanted and went back. I would have just socialised with my fellow soldiers. Even after leaving the army I still don't socialise well with others and I know my tolerance of others isn't what it should be. I think part of that is because I'm always risk assessing, looking for a sniper and so forth. If I am somewhere I like to sit with my back to the wall so I can see what's going on. Part of the problem we now face here is that there is a separation between the individual soldier and the military and that's dangerous and also between the government and the military. We have a problem whereby the government thinks of the military as a stick they can use when they like without understanding the bigger picture. And from that we have a further problem where the soldier is separated from the military to the extent now you have a hate the war like the soldier scenario. The problem with this with respect to helping those soldiers who are finding transition difficult is that while they are people and organisations that are trying to do things they face a problem whereby conflict and trauma has become politicized and also people think they have PTSD without really showing symptoms. It has become increasingly easy, perhaps too easy to state that you have PTSD and this has been reflected in attitudes of doctors who will proscribe you with two tablets and diagnose you with PTSD without proper analysis. Despite what we may think we do not know enough about the long-term impact of PTSD. I know I suffered from dreams when I came back but then they went away. However lately I have noticed them coming back and that's about 10 years after I came back from Afghanistan. That's why I think there needs to be greater centralisation of charity work, audit of charities and greater focus on helping former soldiers reintegrate into society rather than a focus on sickness and removal from society, don't isolate them, help them become productive. That's why we need to focus not just on the soldier but a focus on the family as well whereby a month before they [soldiers] come back family members are invited to come along to take part in sessions which explain what they may be about to face and methods to help soldiers cope with circumstances when they return to civilian life.*

Medicalisation of the transition process, when combined with a public narrative of victimhood that some soldiers collude in disseminating, can lead former soldiers into a funnel of self-pity, a lack of confidence, and social withdrawal from a full and active role in wider civilian society. Such veterans can be branded as unstable, fragile and unbalanced, with knock-on effects for people's willingness to employ former soldiers. All stakeholders, including the military, must be alert to the dangers of over-use of a narrative of trauma and victimhood in the public realm. Successful transitioners should be publicly acknowledged as role models without neglecting the problems faced by their less successful colleagues.

### **Trauma and Today's 'Therapy Culture'**

Evidence from conversations with many former soldiers suggests that experiences stay with them and are embedded within their memories to affect their behaviour.

*It takes time, there are days when you have a drink to knock yourself [out] and you wake in the morning and it really hits you and you ask is it really worth it? It's not now in the forefront of my mind [following treatment], but it's still there sub consciously, you just have to have determination to keep going, it's frustrating as well having to prove your disabled in civilian life as well, to justify yourself. I've tried working but you realise in your own head you can't do things anymore because your disabled that's one barrier to overcome, let alone deal with mental problems. I found I was in relationships where I was supporting them and rather looking after what I needed. I've been in quite a few, also got divorced since leaving the forces and I've moved nine or ten times from 2004-2010 to where I'm living now. You're seeking things but you're also avoiding things thinking it's not you but it is you (former regular soldier, male).*

The traumatic experiences and behaviour of ex-service personnel is, after all, why the public debate about ex-COIN soldiers is primarily about trauma rather than celebration, honour and victory. We should expand our understanding of trauma, however, to explore the everyday experience of trauma. It is vital therefore to examine the factors which contribute towards ex-soldiers' experience of trauma as part of their daily lives as civilians.

Our research with former soldiers across the longitudinal spectrum indicates that while PTSD has been diagnosed and treated in a significant number of soldiers and veterans, a focus on PTSD alone fails to fully take into account the impact of trauma upon the individual. As described by one former male regular soldier, *'you've got medical professionals backing up all these claims from soldiers that return from Afghanistan that they have got PTSD as they don't want to upset the apple cart, which makes it more difficult. Its quick to diagnose PTSD and it can become a real problem for veterans'*. Therefore, applying PTSD as a blanket term to cover a wide array of conditions can take attention away from important issues such as context. It is important to examine the contexts within which trauma is developed by taking into account how particular beliefs and experiences shape traumatic experiences. It is important also to highlight the daily experiences of trauma for veterans from the narratives of those who suffer as they engage in a process of re-contextualizing and restructuring their lives post-deployment.

One of the most important of these contextual factors in mediating trauma is today's modern 'therapy culture'. As we have already argued, many of the earlier veterans and some Afghan veterans referred to a problem we have termed co-dependency, where those veterans not doing so well were said to be reliant on support services that encouraged dependency. The use of these services was thought to be a slippery slope to non-self-management of the transition. Co-dependency was seen as a risk that they sought to avoid by means of their own resilience or the use of other support structures that did not create co-dependency. It remains to be answered whether such resilience is real or imaginary and is a disguise for avoidance of support structures that could be helpful. Former soldiers who are transitioning well, however, criticise the growth of a 'health and safety culture', which they believe is disempowering ex-soldiers and encouraging an over-sensitivity to risk and a

‘dependency culture’ that robs them of the personal resilience to manage ‘normal’ life events. There is considerable evidence to support this co-dependency. This is a dilemma for the MOD: they want to mould and shape a military identity that is essential for them to be an effective counter-insurgency unit, but without developing an over-dependency that makes it difficult to release the ‘institutional self’ on retirement from the army and which robs some of resilience to deal with life events when back in society.

We should be reminded that some successful transitioners refer to ‘chosen trauma’, believing the less-successful transitioners have succumbed to what they refer to as the over-medicalization and over-traumatization of the transitional experience. The wider therapy culture of late modern society is coupled with a media focus on post-traumatic stress to almost predispose the choice of a traumatised self. Veterans from earlier counter-insurgency operations in particular feel there is over exposure to trauma in Afghan veterans. A male Malaya veteran remarked: *‘you get the impression now that there is a lot of people trying to swing it now [manufacture illness and trauma]. The problem is those who really need help don’t get the help they need and there could be more done to help those really in need.’*

This view needs to be placed in context. The Malaya conflict was seen by them as a forgotten war, in contrast to the media attention they see lavished on Afghan veterans. They see themselves as ‘slipping back quietly’ in civilian life and neglected. They also see their combat experience as cause for pride. *‘I was fine, I had no problems making the adjustment, it was an adventure but it was a job we were sent out to do at the end of the day’* (Malaya veteran, male). It is also one that received no negative media attention and they have experienced no legal complaint or victimisation from it. UDR veterans also saw some Afghan veterans as consciously adopting a position of victimisation as a ‘chosen trauma’.

The Malaya and Afghan conflicts are seen as mirror reflections of each other by Malaya veterans. Afghan is over-medicalised, with too much media and cultural focus on trauma, lacking in pride and honour, and with veterans socially constructed by the media as 'victims'. Reflecting back half a century like this may encourage Malaya veterans to minimise their transition stress. As one former Malaya veteran described: *'I probably had PTSD, I had bad dreams and nightmares but I didn't receive any support but I just learnt to cope with it. I'd think back to myself in those times and I say, bloody hell I must have had it, but then people would say to you should have played on that [manufactured trauma] but I said no I'm not going to do that. My children all went onto the forces so it's not as if my experiences put my children off or like. I didn't say to them look at what the army did to me because I just coped with it and got on with things'*. Another male Malaya veteran commented: *'When I went to Malaya, you can imagine someone there it was life changing experience in that sense that nobody at that time travelled very far. Especially to the far side of the world. But when I came back I was fine because I was that sort of character, I'm sure there was those who weren't fine.'* Another Malaya veteran voiced concern at the 'over-focus' on trauma: *'I think there's too much focus on trauma, in my personal opinion, too much interference, everything has got to right, political correctness, you daren't say anything.'*

UDR veterans were similar in that the passage of time permits them a 'look backwards' in which they cast their military service as one of pride and honour, something continually reinforced in the support accorded them in the Protestant-Unionist-Loyalist community and Unionist media. The cultural context of their service, at least for one section of the community, permits a more positive look backwards. This encourages a more negative attitude towards the medicalisation of the transition process for Afghan veterans. The

passage of time might also mean that they are better integrated back, at least into the Protestant community.

***Pride: Public and Personal***

Veterans in all wars have a sense of personal pride, even Afghan veterans, but this was culturally disseminated and supported in Protestant culture for the UDR and not undermined for Malaya veterans by a negative campaign in the media, politically and in the wider society; there was no collective doubt, uncertainty and ambivalence about their service, largely because the Malaya conflict was neglected and ignored. *'The conflict [in Malaya], virtually nobody in this country knows about it. Vietnam was going on, nobody remembers what we were doing, the people in Malaya think we're great but nobody remembers us'* (Malaya veteran, male).

Pride in the context of military service, however, is a dual emotion. It is internal, describing the accord and acclaim we give ourselves. It is also external, describing the accord and acclaim others bestow on us. We might call the first personal pride, the second public pride. For different reasons, the Malaya and UDR veterans had both. Afghan veterans transitioning badly, tend to have only personal pride and perceive themselves as receiving no public pride, regardless of whether or not this is actually the case. The perceived lack of public pride reinforces the poor transitioning and the medicalisation of their transition experience, as described by one former male reserve soldier: *'I keep my status as a veteran very quiet, when I was in it [TA] I was very proud but now I don't tell anyone anything, and I don't know why quite honestly, I don't feel proud of what I did if that makes sense. It's partly because of the operation I think, I didn't really do much out there, I mean I went through a few little things which shook me up but I didn't feel like I achieved anything when I was out there.'* Support is

often sought from other Afghan veterans to reinforce their sense of personal pride as ‘soldiers together’, but the nature of public pride ensures this is never sufficient to compensate for the lack of external accord and acclaim.

The criticism from earlier generations of counter-insurgency soldiers about the over-exposure of the traumatic nature of the Afghan war, with the corollary of its over-medicalisation, is paradoxical, for Afghan veterans who are not transitioning well *want* their experiences to be medicalised and for their trauma to be recognised culturally and publicly. But they determinedly do not see this cultural recognition as self-constructed victimhood or as ‘chosen trauma’. Afghan veterans who are doing well in transitioning to civilian life do not see themselves as dependent on the need for public pride. Indeed, they see their less fortunate colleagues as co-dependent in seeking others’ acknowledgement, acclaim and accord; something, they say, which hinders their reintegration back into civilian life. This is because poor transitioners are said to be aware of the lack of public recognition and public pride. Successful transitioners declare themselves sufficient in personal pride as not to need public recognition; or not to care. This view is mutually reinforced, of course, by the success of their transition process, as well as their ability to resist the adoption of a total institutional self while in the army, their instrumentality in attitude towards the army, and lack of reflexivity about their experiences when in service.

### ***The Quality and Effectiveness of Veteran Support***

A final issue needs to be addressed, for it dominated our respondents’ accounts and its huge contribution to successful reintegration in the long-term cannot be challenged. Namely, the quality and effectiveness of support for veterans. We discovered that the system of support, if administered correctly, has a significant and worthwhile contribution to make. Veteran



support encompasses many key stakeholders including veteran charities, more general charities, veteran associations, statutory and voluntary bodies, and military organisations. There are many charities and voluntary bodies who do significant work in very challenging and financially straitened circumstances. Because of the volume and breadth of the organisations involved in the sector however, it is a system that lacks co-ordination, regulation and oversight. A complicated picture of veteran support was presented by our respondents, with little clarity on its direction and layout. One of the chief concerns was the disjointed approach to veteran support, which enhanced the frustration and anxiety of users. As one former regular male soldier commented, *'I didn't know until recently the types of support that was available, I don't think it's advertised enough the support that is available out there'*. Other veterans commented similarly:

*I don't know what's available and that's the point nobody knows. There's a load of websites but not unless somebody is going to stand there and say, 'right I am your area representative for any issues you have' [are they worthwhile]. Everyone that leaves the army goes through the resettlement system and does resettlement but someone needs to be a point of contact [after that]. Local communities do it, a community group can do it where they will phone the elderly or those who have no one, we rely on hearsay, there is support but where is it and who is it? (former regular soldier, male)*

*There is a lot of support out there for veterans but many don't know how to obtain support. They need to come to the serviceman, not the other way around, the serviceman might be scared to go out of the house, there needs to be teams to go out and see them (former regular officer, male).*

*It's very hard to access support. I've been interviewed twice by [organisation name deleted] and that's all they have done, no indication of support you can receive. It's a totally different culture [in the military], your told what to do every day, your programmed what your gonna do that evening, the next day, food is cooked for you, accommodation etc. and then its suddenly dropped, your lost. You go through resettlement, you spend three or four days learning how to CVs and applying for jobs and that's all well and good if your physically able, there's nothing whatsoever to direct you who to get in touch with, they give you leaflets but it's all just word of mouth and ticks a box. It's just lip service, I haven't seen anyone (former regular soldier, male).*

One of the chief complaints made was that support agencies confuse means and goals. Support providers were said frequently to be pursuing the 'prize' of funding to keep themselves afloat to the neglect of supporting veterans. Participants expressed significant levels of concern about this confusion of means-ends. This is the dilemma of all organisations, who need money to survive in order to meet their remit, but it is a dilemma that charities find particularly problematic for their public image. The former soldiers in our sample could find little charity toward the charities helping them. Agencies were said to be self-serving rather than driven by the needs of veterans.

*It's very difficult to get veterans support, everyone goes on about [organisation name deleted] but they only support those in it, but if you're not in it and anything happens to you it's not their problem and it's the same with all these associations because I have tried but you can't get any help. They say go to your doctor and you'll get quicker treatment, load of cobblers, they say the word will go down but it doesn't (Malayan veteran, male).*

*If you look at organisations such as [name deleted], apart from collecting money, what do they actually do? [Organisation name deleted] have become that big they have forgotten about themselves and what they do. We have to go back to our roots of thinking, we work well together in small teams, we need small teams in different areas. It's the government which needs to get behind it, not charities, when was the last time anyone spoke to me from [organisation name deleted], a year ago, no one checked up on me to see if I was alright, they just presume everything is alright. So there is a lot we can do (former regular soldier, male).*

*Veteran support has been destroyed by the accountants who have reorganised the [organisation name deleted], we have lost the clubs and have completely underfunded regimental associations. If you take the US system, the local veteran community is part of their system, they get respect and rewards, the [name deleted] has turned into a fucking useless accountancy driven bureaucratic bunch of parasites, they can't even provide enough case officers (Former Regular Officer, male).*

The needs of the sector for money reflect the vastness of the transition needs that former service personnel present them with; and it is the vastness of these needs that in part explains the dissatisfaction veterans feel, making the problem a classic Catch 22 dilemma. No support system could meet the needs of all. As needs multiply, levels of dissatisfaction with

un-met needs inevitably increases. Un-met needs force under-funded support providers to search for more money: and so, the circle spirals downwards. A blame culture surfaces and some ex-Service personnel withdraw from seeking help through anger and contempt. We found this dissatisfaction to be highest in those who were dependent on the sector; they were its most vocal critics.

However, it was not only those who made most use of the support system who criticised it. Sufficient concern was levied across all participant groups and ranks as to the fragmented and disjointed nature of support.

*My concern is there is potentially sufficient support but it is fragmented. The bulk of support comes from service charities and they are competitive but not brilliantly coordinated and therefore it's easy for veterans to fall between the cracks (former regular officer, male).*

There was a general consensus that the potential for adequate support existed; the major question was how to regulate and administer it so those most in need obtain the support required. Some suggested a greater role for the government:

*If the government can't take responsibility it's not going to work, your speaking to me now and I know of many who have not made contact and there must be thousands of guys who have not got support and have turned to alcohol, crime etc. (former regular soldier, male).*

Others wished for a support system independent of government. Too much responsibility placed on the shoulders of the government would remove power from the local provider and take away the expertise of those with the closest knowledge of the problems on the ground. These respondents wanted a system responsive to local needs and based on local knowledge. Localism, however, risks lack of co-ordination, over-sight and regulation. What consensus there was amongst our veterans was for a streamlined, co-ordinated and coherent system

that was responsive to local, regional and national needs. The launch of the Veteran's Gateway was universally seen as a first step in this process.

Respondents were specifically asked about whether they felt a dedicated support system was needed for COIN veterans. COIN veterans invariably felt their experiences were unique but they also argued strongly *against* a dedicated support structure of their own because this would further categorise veterans, add extra layers of ambiguity in the definition of veteran, and result in yet more fragmentation in the support system. COIN veterans were also conscious not to create a hierarchy of veterans, in which their experiences were given more credence than others. As one veteran commented:

*I don't think it's beneficial to put veterans into different categories. It's important however for those delivering services etc. to recognise that low intensity conflict may have the highest intensity in terms of its impact upon the soldier involved in it. It's important not to view counter-insurgency experiences less intense. You need to be careful about tiering veterans, [the] system just needs to be mindful that people's experiences can be intense no matter what the type of conflict is (former regular officer, male).*

They recognised that COIN experiences can have high impact on personnel, but they felt strongly that COIN veterans should be supported within the current system, albeit a significantly improved and better co-ordinated one.

Given the range of responses amongst veterans we note that support for vulnerable personnel and poorly transitioning soldiers is often best administered at a local level by charities who can respond to immediate client needs and with whom individual soldiers can more closely identify. However, greater co-ordination and sharing of information is necessary. Such a system should be proactive so that the veteran does not make the first move in seeking support. Within this framework government must facilitate dialogue with support providers to hear from the sector how best they feel the government can help them.

There must be a commitment on all parties involved in the veteran support sector to ensure collaboration between local, regional and national policies and practices.

## **Conclusion**

Successful transitioners experience a virtuous circle akin to the biblical St Matthew principle: to those who have, more will be given, to those who have not, more will be taken away. In other words, to those veterans doing well, circumstances reinforce their success, while they denude those doing badly of personal resilience and cultural reinforcement and support, worsening their transition experience. Successful transitioners are aware of the importance of 'in-house' military support on first re-entering civilian life but then distance themselves from the military, preferring civilian support structures and engagements. Those transitioning badly want on-going military and civilian support. Camaraderie amongst veterans is an important feature of 'out-house' support. Alternative sources of camaraderie are important in managing the transition. Some found this in formal regimental associations and ex-servicemen groups, some in self-constructed communities, through Facebook, shared leisure activities, and the like. These alternative sources of community helped in transforming their former violent forms of masculinity into more normal forms. Some Afghan veterans resisted the idea of engaging with the British Legion as 'an old man's club', whereas non-Afghan veterans saw Help for Heroes, for example, as too Afghanistan focused, suggesting the need for service support structures and the MOD to think carefully about meeting the needs of younger veterans and those who served in other conflict zones.

Focus on young veterans within the veteran support sector tends to be based around those who have suffered physical or psychological injury. There exists a gap in the 'veteran association and support' market for organisations which meet the particular needs of young

veterans or early service leavers with no explicit injuries or trauma. The complexity of the veteran sector is further compounded by the plethora of organisations in existence to 'assist' veterans. Veterans agreed that the number of organisations can be counter-productive as many veterans struggle to know who to contact. Veterans stated that making the first step in contacting a veteran support organisation is often the biggest step of all. It is therefore incumbent that this step is made as easy as possible. The launch of the Veterans Gateway and further programmes to assist transitioning veterans, such as early serve leavers programmes, are examples of progress being made. But this is still based on the premise that the veteran will make the first move, a move which can still be culturally difficult to make for many veterans, despite wider societal change towards mental health, veterans issues and conceptions of masculinity.

Participants in our research project not only proposed a more streamlined veteran support system with greater encouragement from central government, but a system within which a veteran support visitor or mentor would call with a veteran (this may be only once or twice every couple of years) to check on the wellbeing of the veteran, inform them of any support which is available and be a point of contact if the veteran wish to avail of support. This approach would not only help the veteran to feel a sense of belonging, but would also demonstrate to those outside the armed forces that the military does care for its personnel. We feel there is potential in government and individual charities working closer together. A more streamlined, government initiated support system need not mean the death knell of individual charities. This is because local based solutions are often the best to meet the needs of transitioning personnel, especially those who are finding such transition difficult and have a lack of trust in outsiders. What government could do much better is providing the basis for

a veteran support system which results in greater co-ordination, cooperation and checks and balances to ensure that veterans' needs are being effectively and efficiently met.

Assisting soldiers in making an effective transition to civilian life has potential benefits not just for the soldier but for the military itself, for the best recruiting tool for the army is the former soldier. If soldiers are able to make an effective transition from military to civilian life this can be an effective example to potential new soldiers of the care and support offered to them both during and after service. Prospective recruits will therefore be reassured that their time in the armed forces will not preclude them from enjoying a productive life post-deployment and that they will be afforded life benefits and chances. Improved support provision thus has potential individual and collective benefit.

## **7. Policy Recommendations**

### **Introduction**

We have embedded our policy recommendations in the body of our findings and analysis in the previous section, in order to show they are evidence led, but in this section of our Report we collate them and draw them together to assist policy-makers and stakeholders interested in our findings. Section 7 therefore gives context to and expands on the Executive Summary of the Policy Recommendations given in Section 2. But first it is worth noting the backcloth to our recommendations. Veteran support in the UK is complex and obscure. The lack of a coherent system of support replicates broader cultural ambiguities and disagreements on what is deemed as appropriate support. The transition experience is further complicated by the large number of transitions which take place during a soldier's career. The reserve soldier faces added difficulties of constant civilian-military-civilian reintegration.

### **Policy Recommendations**

We proffer the following recommendations for stakeholders across the MOD, the statutory and voluntary sectors, and other interested parties. They are embedded in the analysis provided in Section 6 and are presented here in point form.

1. The question of veteran support is tied very closely to how the military is perceived as an organisation and employer. The British military must engage in a conversation about how they see themselves as an employer in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Future debates on the support the military provides for the transitioning soldier



must be grounded in what it sees as its role and purpose as an employer, requiring them to wrestle with the question of whether employees' work, namely dangerous armed service to the Crown, obligates the MOD to have responsibilities that transcend the normal social conventions of the workplace and to extend beyond the employees' period of service with them.

2. In resolving this question, the MOD should note broader cultural debates, which see the military as a symbol of national identity and as a unique institution which transcends normal workplace conventions.
3. The unpopularity of recent British counter-insurgency operations in the public sphere does not extend to individual soldiers, although some soldiers believe it does; by and large individual soldiers still receive considerable public empathy and sympathy. There is thus a wider cultural expectation that as an employer, the MOD should respond with support strategies that recognise its unique duty of care to soldiers which extends well into their retirement.
4. Transition strategies must provide practical and engaged support through interactive learning and mentoring. It should not be a 'tick box' exercise that amounts merely to the provision of information leaflets and the like. The key to ensuring soldiers make a seamless transition is practical training, engagement with employers and communities, and the promotion of skills and education through qualifications.

5. Self-reliance and self-responsibility in the transitioning soldier are important, but it is misplaced to require the transitioning soldier to find information out for themselves because in many cases their 'institutional self' in the 'total institution' of the army depletes their capacity to do this. Self-reliance and responsibility must be taught as part of a broader process of cultural rehabilitation into civilian life. Learning the social skills and cultural awareness to successfully reintegrate into civilian life is necessary while still in the army and as part of the preparation for retirement.
6. Re-training for civilian life should not be confined to a lecture room in the barracks but involve transitioning soldiers going out and engaging with communities, employers and educational trainers so as to learn the cultures and values of civilian life. Work placements, community activities, educational programmes which encourage practical engagement would all help in this process.
7. We note that steps have been taken to build relationships between soldiers and outside organisations and stakeholders, such as the over 900 British companies who have signed the 'Corporate Covenant', where they pledge support to the Armed Forces community and have set up career programmes. Such engagement needs to be further encouraged so more companies sign up. It also needs to be extended to other organisations.
8. Deepened relationships need to be forged between the military and academics, universities and other educational providers, as well as with financial advisors,

health professionals, key skills practitioners, community organisations, and welfare planners, amongst others, so as to provide a holistic and collective approach to soldiers' cultural retraining.

9. Support is also on ongoing responsibility of the MOD not just of outside organisations, charities and voluntary stakeholders.
10. The model adopted by UDR/RIR Aftercare Service proffers an example, in which 'in house' and 'in barracks' training provides a basis upon which to move forward. This not only helps to maintain an attachment with the soldier's regiment but also ensures that if a transitioning soldier needs assistance they know they can contact someone they trust and with the knowledge and experience of military life.
11. The MOD should consider developing a 'buddy' scheme, where a mentoring support worker is assigned to all transitioning soldiers, not just 'at risk' ones. This may involve only *ad hoc* visits and contact, sharing at minimum telephone numbers and email addresses should emergency help be required. Regimental associations might form a recruiting source for 'buddies'. We realise that some soldiers may not wish to avail of such opportunities. The transitional experience of soldiers is highly complex and it will prove impossible to assist all ex-personnel. This, however, should not distract from attempts to find a more inclusive and practical approach to transition.
12. The transitioning process does not just affect the individual soldier but also the wider family unit. There must be greater focus on how to prepare the family for a transition to civilian life. With the hands-off approach of the MOD, in many

respects the responsibility for managing the problems arising from poor transition move from the military to the family. Support structures need to be implemented for the family, through training and education; a 'buddy' system could be provided for the family unit by military families who have transitioned well.

13. One of the most important balances that support programmes need to make is to avoid creating a 'culture of dependency'. Dependency equally depletes the skills necessary for successful transition. It is for this reason that support systems must encourage self-responsibility, self-reliance and personal skills enhancement.
14. This balance between support and resilience should feature as a learning outcome to the cultural awareness training that all transitioners should undergo prior to retirement.
15. Cultural awareness training should not just mean 'administrative training', such as CV writing, how to apply for bank loans, and so forth. While important, these must be set within a broader cultural training programme to include learning in the modes of behaviour, actions and interactions needed in civilian life, from alcohol use in civilian life, to the contrasts between army and civilian humour and language, through to shifts in the realistic expectations ex-army personnel should have of civilians, in work and leisure settings.
16. Cultural awareness training should include the differences in civilian family life compared to military family life. Family units might participate in a similar training programme geared toward the transition that they will make as a family unit.

17. It is also necessary to make a careful balance to encourage realism about the issues involved in making the transition. Expectations must match reality. This means avoidance of 'transitional naivety' with regards to employment prospects. Employment difficulties face all ranks as well as early service leavers and long service officers. It is imperative that soldiers of all ranks are given realistic expectations of what employment opportunities there will be and how their military background can improve or impede their prospects. Civilian cultural training should be designed to maximise the prospects of transitioning soldiers using their military experiences to acquire relevant civilian employment but be done in a way which does not paint an unrealistic employment picture.
18. Realism about the transition should also require that cultural awareness training acquaint soldiers with the risk of ontological crisis when they leave. Over-identification with military life can narrow their identity, making it difficult to shift identity on to aspects of their civilian life. We understand that a vital aspect of an effective military is to instil a mind-set in the soldier that they are part of a collective whole, which subsumes individuality to operational goals. However, new identity formation processes are needed in civilian life to transfer identity from the army to avoid an ontological crisis.
19. Role models are needed for transitioning soldiers to show that identity can be successfully transferred on the family and home life, employment, or leisure pursuits. Buddy schemes and mentoring programmes might focus on the issue of identity formation.

20. Life events intrude into the transition and can negatively affect the progress soldiers and their families make. Resilience to negative life events is important in successful transitioning. Resilience cannot be taught in a classroom but can be experientially learned over a time frame; the need for introducing personal resilience can be introduced organically during any period approaching transition. The need for resilience in dealing with life events should feature in cultural awareness training that warns against transition naivety.

21. Instrumentality is an important part of resilience. We discovered in our research that many former soldiers were able to compartmentalize their emotions by viewing their military career as just a job. This instrumentality enabled them to pursue individual growth, enhance their social skills and experience personal development. Encouraging soldiers to view a military career instrumentally rather than an all-encompassing identity would greatly assist in the transition to civilian life.

22. Learning to take the 'leap of trust' is important in successful transitioning. Mistrust is an anxiety characteristic of feelings of increased vulnerability and risk but is exaggerated in many counter-insurgency veterans because the 'military bubble' narrows the boundaries of trust. Learning to live with broader boundaries of trust is important for transitioning COIN soldiers. The issue of trust should also feature in cultural awareness training.

23. Over-identification with the military plays a part in narrowing the boundaries of trust. We encourage the military to reduce the distinction between soldier and the

broader population. The transitioning soldier should be able to merge back into society with ease if prior preparation and support has been designed with this goal in mind. Ease of transition should be the cornerstone of any assistance so as to avoid the need for long term dependency.

24. Many counter-insurgency veterans commented on the cynicism and fickleness of public opinion regarding COIN warfare. Increased media coverage of soldiers as victims, the focus on the terrorist threats faced by soldiers and the attention on trauma has led many ex-service personnel to be suspicious of those outside their 'closed groups'. This can lead to soldiers and veterans removing themselves from wider society and engaging in very restricted social networks. Living in a routinized state of fear need not be the case. A public message of positivity rather than perpetual suspicion should be complemented with programmes which encourage former soldiers to interact with local communities. This community engagement should be facilitated also by voluntary sector stakeholders and regimental associations, who need to understand their remit and responsibilities in broader terms.

25. The isolation, fear and perceived vulnerability of soldiers, links into public perceptions of COIN soldiers as victims. Public perceptions can become self-categorisations. If the risk of trauma is not kept in balance, there is potential for soldiers to adopt the status of victim, which reduces soldiers' feelings of self-worth, denudes their confidence and encourages social withdrawal. There must be more public celebrations of successful transitioners in order to change the

public narrative away from victim status. Those who have transitioned successfully need to adopt a greater public role to undercut the victim narrative.

26. It is to be commended that there is increased public awareness of mental health issues amongst veterans; it not only breaks down barriers, but assists in identifying those most at risk. This must be balanced, however, against the costs of over-emphasis on trauma. Over-emphasis on trauma can result in the medicalisation of the transition process, turning resilience issues and life event problems into self-perceptions of trauma, when this is not medically the case. Balance in trauma awareness is vital.

27. In pursuing this balance, the 'politics of chosen trauma' should be avoided. The politics of chosen trauma occurs when organisations advance a narrative of trauma. This is often for organisational ends to mobilise resources. It is rarely in the long-term interest of soldiers.

28. We discovered the potential for the military to become a scapegoat for the negative post-military experiences of some soldiers. Often the negative life events experienced by soldiers are not due to the military. It is important to avoid a blame culture developing in which the military is scapegoated. It is the responsibility of voluntary sector stakeholders and successful transitioners to contribute to public debate to undercut this scapegoating.



29. The veteran support community therefore has important responsibilities in managing veteran issues, in the public and private spheres that extend well beyond their organisation remits and foci of interest.
30. The veteran support community has responsibilities in the public sphere to ensure they do not contribute to the politics of chosen trauma, do not encourage victim status in former soldiers or over-medicalise the transition process. They have important campaigning duties to mobilise resources for former soldiers but need to avoid engaging in competitive victimhood in the public sphere.
31. The veteran support community continues to have important responsibilities to the care of individual soldiers in the private sphere. The support provided by many organisations is key to assisting those veterans most in need. The effectiveness of any single organisation, however, is mitigated by the chaotic nature of the sector as a whole.
32. The patchwork nature of veteran support ensures there is less clarity and co-ordination than veterans deserve. The launch of the Veteran's Gateway is a first step in improving ease of access for veterans seeking support, however further co-operation and co-ordination continues to be vital. The MOD and voluntary sector stakeholders should begin a discussion at the regional and local levels to co-ordinate support and share best practice.
33. It is clear that support for vulnerable personnel and poorly transitioning soldiers is often best administered at a local level by charities who can respond to immediate client needs and with whom, individual soldiers can gain closer identify. Local

support providers should be encouraged to share good practice and be facilitated to input into the larger regional policy debate.

34. There is currently an emphasis on veterans making the first move to seek support when often veterans cannot do this due to individual and societal pressures. The MOD and the voluntary support sector should give thought to how they might become more proactive in dealing with veterans.

35. The responsibilities of the national government need to be recognised in setting wider policy and funding frameworks. The government does not have a key role to play as a support provider but in setting the policy and financial structures, determining conditions and regulations, and in facilitating charities and voluntary sector organisations to be more effective support providers. This requires that government dialogue with support providers to hear from the sector how best they feel the government can help them. New lines of communication should be established and existing ones reinvigorated and renewed to ensure integration between local, regional and national policies and practices.

## **8. Conclusion**

### **Introduction**

After a long and painstaking account of their detailed findings, all researchers need to ask themselves the simple question, so what? Why does it matter that we know this? In this final substantive part of the Report we intend to draw the discussion of our research findings to a close by concentrating on two issues. First, we focus on the transition experiences of counter-insurgency soldiers. We hope this helps in understanding the peculiar emotional labour costs of this form of warfare. Secondly, we focus on transition as a process. We emphasise its complexity and develop a model of transition that captures this complexity in diagram form. We hope this model helps stakeholders and support providers better understand the transition process and the very different needs of veterans.

### **Understanding Counter-Insurgency Transitioning**

Modern warfare is changing. Conventional wars between nation states are declining and battlefields and enemies reflect the new forms of war with vastly different sorts of counter-insurgents, at home and abroad. Counter-insurgents recognise no rules of war and aim to inflict levels of atrocity that reflect the absolute moral enervation of their opponents. Meanwhile, those from within the British Armed Forces who militarily engage with counter-insurgents remain rule bound and are held to account for their conduct, unless specifically exempted. This form of asymmetrical war is becoming the norm.

The Executive Summary of the Report in Section 1 serves as a useful summation of our research findings and analysis, so this part of the Conclusion will instead address three key questions raised by our unique research design. Namely:

- The particularity of the transition experience of COIN people, given the special features of COIN warfare;
- The distinctiveness of Afghan veterans compared to earlier COIN soldiers; and
- The different transition experiences of regular and reserve COIN soldiers, given that reservists are due to become an increasingly significant part of the British armed forces.

In many senses, of course, soldiers are very alike because the military is experienced by them in similar ways, at least according to rank and operational deployment, and the values and practices of its occupational culture are shared within ranks, and sometimes across them. The ‘institutional self’ the army cultivates as a total institution reflects this standardisation of culture and practice. Nonetheless, it is worth exploring the differences in the transitional experience that our research design was skilfully planned to elicit.

### ***The particularity of the COIN transition***

Our research design has not compared the transition experiences of COIN soldiers with those from conventional theatres of war in two sets of matched samples. We focused instead on capturing the lived experiences of COIN soldiers in a small piece of qualitative research that allowed them to describe their transition in their own words. This gives them a voice when, often, theirs is the one unspoken and unheard. However, this nonetheless allows us to glimpse the impact of COIN warfare and the particularities of their transition experiences as they see it, if not yet fully contrast the distinctiveness of the transition.

The defining features of COIN warfare reflect in the higher levels of unpredictability of the threat, the greater levels of risk, ambiguity about who constitutes the enemy, confusion over operational aims and roles, and uncertainty about the meaning of victory and success.

This imposes a significant emotional cost on COIN soldiers that we have described as its 'emotional labour'. It is unusual to apply this concept to soldiering, given that the military is usually conceptualised through the lens of hyper-masculinity which rules out engagement with emotions and investigating the emotional costs of army life. Late modernity, however, is a risk society, with increased vulnerabilities and increased sensitivity to risk, which has manifested itself in a cultural form that is variously described as a 'therapy culture' or a 'psy-culture'. The military is not immune to cultural change and the increased public awareness and attention generally to mental health issues, mental well-being and trauma, intersects with public recognition of the emotional labour of modern COIN warfare, to generate a public discourse about Afghan veterans that has medicalised the transition process, prioritises the topic of trauma and casts veterans with a victim status.

While most COIN soldiers transition well and resist the medicalisation of their transition, vociferously objecting to the trauma narrative, they are nonetheless fully aware of the public discourse about them and the language through which their transition is understood in the public sphere. Voluntary sector bodies that help less fortunate transitioners unintendedly contribute to this victim narrative by the way they campaign to mobilise for extra resources by evoking sympathy. This gives the false impression that Afghan veterans have a 'chosen trauma' and that they are 'psychologically damaged goods'. The trauma narrative tends not to be balanced in the public sphere with media attention on the successful transitioners. This public debate is a resource that individual soldiers feel obliged to engage with to shape the terms of their private narratives, so that even successful transitioners see the trauma narrative as a constraint that impacts on accounts of their transition. Structural and cultural factors thus combine to give attention to the emotional labour of COIN warfare in soldiers' accounts of their transition. This is why we argue that it is a useful conceptual tool

through which to understand the particularities of the transitional experience of ex-COIN service personnel.

This emotional labour is manifested in the extra demands that COIN warfare places particularly on trust, identity and mental stress. The key to understanding this is what our respondents called 'the bubble'. This term is part of the language of the occupational culture of ordinary veterans. The 'bubble' effect of counter-insurgency is both a strength and a weakness. On operations, survival depends on close knitted camaraderie, where looking after the squad is the same as protecting oneself. The bubble narrows the boundaries of trust, restricts the number of those who can be trusted, and increases the emotional emphasis soldiers place on other's trustworthiness. Reliance on others' trustworthiness is very important in counter-insurgency, and can create a mutually reinforcing community of people who 'understand what it is like': they understand why they are fighting where they are, doing what they are doing, needing no justification or explanation that requires to be made accountable to the untrustworthy.

However, in civilian life the bubble can be problematic by retaining an over-identification with the army. Its narrow boundaries of trust and its raised anxieties about other's trustworthiness are problematic in civilian life, making normal social relations and human social interaction difficult. This can increase feelings of isolation and encourage social withdrawal once outside the army. The mutually reinforcing trusted community suddenly disappears, and unless the boundaries of trust are broadened and the emotional priority placed on people's trustworthiness is rebalanced, COIN veterans can have difficulties in adjusting. Mistrust, in other words, forces a reliance on the enduring identity as a soldier since comrades are the only ones capable of being trusted, which is itself problematic for successful transitioning.

COIN soldiers, however, are in one sense like all other members of the military in developing an 'institutional self'. The army as a 'total institution' requires its soldiers to develop a collective identity in which individuality is subordinated to the unit. On leaving the military, it can be difficult for all former Service personnel to shift identity from the institutional self on to the family, the home, work and the community. Identity as a civilian tends to pass first through what we call a 'transitional self', as veterans begin to make these adjustments, retaining some features of their former identity as a soldier but slowly developing new identity formations. All soldiers go through this transitional self; COIN soldiers are no different.

The peculiarities of the transitional experience of ex-COIN personnel are that their transitional self is negatively affected by the higher levels of mental stress counter-insurgency combat provokes, as well as by the constraints imposed by the trauma narrative through which their transition is medicalised in the public sphere, and by the legacy of 'the bubble' that instils a prolonged identity with the institutional self of the unit. Over-identification with the institutional self can deplete the skills and cultural awareness needed to live again as a civilian. This is why the most successful COIN transitioners were those who had emotionally compartmentalised their army life and resisted against the institutional self by retaining some individuality. Instrumentality was important in this emotional distancing. Looking on the army instrumentally as 'just a job' rather than as a way of life into which they must fully integrate, enabled them to retain some personal self.

Emotional distancing like this was also important as a way of emotionally dealing with the past. Emotional distancing was easier for those who subsequently avoided reflexivity about their experiences and encounters in counter-insurgency warfare. Emotional distancing was found at two extremes: the highly educated and articulate who had the capacity to

recognise the importance of emotional disengagement, and the relatively non-articulate whose inability to find the words to be reflexive made them try to avoid thinking and talking about the past generally. Some COIN veterans were able to compartmentalise their former life in what we describe as the bubble of military life, hermetically sealing it in the past, transferring identity in civilian life on to their family, work, religious life, and the like. These veterans rarely questioned their former role, nor reflected on it. They cut themselves off from the public ambivalence to the counter-insurgency war and its purpose, and did not tend to participate in army-based alternative communities. Those who were unable to make the distinction between military and civilian life after transition and mentally escape the bubble found it much more difficult to transition and were more susceptible to transitional problems.

### ***The distinctiveness of Afghan veterans***

COIN warfare evinces general patterns and unique features at the same time. The transition experiences of soldiers in Britain's wars of decolonisation in the 1950s and 1960s will be different. They vary even within the different theatres of war in this period. It was impossible to get veterans from Kenya to participate because of the litigation being taken by victims of alleged abuse. Malaya veterans participated because they think of themselves as being perceived positively by locals in British Malaya; and the Malaya Emergency is now wholly forgotten as a conflict. UDR soldiers are different again because they were from the communities they policed and while they are reviled in the Nationalist-Republican community, they are honoured in the Unionist-Loyalist one. Their operational role was also more clearly defined and articulated; and they had a victory of sorts in the resolution to the Northern Ireland conflict, in which they claim a part. These profound differences aside, earlier cohorts of COIN veterans had nonetheless to transition back to civilian life and had



emotionally to deal with the peculiarities of COIN warfare as they experienced them. What can be learned from their transition experiences?

What we have learned primarily is the distinctiveness of the Afghan veterans' transition. Cultural change has medicalised the transition process, increased Afghan veterans' sensitivity toward risk and trauma, and cast them as victims. The unpopularity of the Afghan war mixes with this to denude them of public pride while reinforcing in the public domain a victim narrative that gives them no sense of national honour and celebration. This can rob them of the resilience needed to cope with normal life events to reposition them backwards along the continuum of normal transitioning. Lack of resilience impacts on employment, family life, alcohol use, identity and social withdrawal, compounding the negative effects of life events to potentially create a spiralling circle downwards.

UDR veterans, while retaining high levels of vigilance and sensitivity to risk because of the idiosyncrasies of Northern Ireland's peace process, have not experienced the same structural and cultural shifts in the way their veteran status is understood publicly. They do not have to confront in their accounts a public narrative of victimhood or the medicalisation of their transition. They rarely talked about trauma and did not reflect on the same emotional labour costs arising from their deployment as Afghan veterans. We do not explain this as due to them facing a lower level of unpredictable threat – in some ways, attacks on the UDR during 'the Troubles' bear the hallmark of COIN warfare – but there is no public narrative of victimhood or medicalisation to shape and dictate their private accounts of their transition. Indeed, to some sections of the community, they are seen as honourable and unfailingly popular. This is much like Malay veterans see themselves amongst locals in British Malaya, although Malaya veterans benefit from the absence of any public narrative about their war, which is truly a forgotten one.

It is for this reason that veterans from earlier COIN operations saw themselves as having, in silence and in private, to develop the resilience to transition successfully for there was no other choice. 'Getting on with it' through their own resources was necessary for they were largely neglected by the MOD and ignored publicly. While some now bemoan being forgotten about, the absence of a public narrative was beneficial in the sense that their transition was not medicalised and they were not turned into victims. Their 'transitional self' could progress into a civilian identity unencumbered, influenced only by levels of personal resilience. The UDR, of course, can draw on a public narrative of honour if they choose to be deaf to Nationalist-Republican contempt. It is for this reason also that veterans of earlier COIN warfare complain at the medicalisation of Afghan veterans and think theirs is a 'chosen trauma', reflecting over sensitivity to health and safety and to trauma.

It is almost as if there is 'competitive veteranhood', with the ideal being 'toughing it out' and not succumbing to 'chosen trauma'. This, of course, places these earlier veterans at the apex of their own hierarchy. It is worth remembering however, that their accounts involve looking back, in some cases, over several decades, from the vantage point of time having healed and glossed over the worst of the past. Their accounts may well have differed if they were being asked about transition in the immediate aftermath of their wars and were suffering as a contemporaneous lived experience, the emotional labour of their deployment. Time, however, is unlikely to heal, as the old adage goes, for Afghan veterans because their veteran status is located by them in the cultural and political shifts that give it, in public narrative at least, a different meaning than for earlier COIN veterans.

### ***The Different Transition Experiences of Regular and Reserve COIN Veterans***

With increasing emphasis in the British military on reserves, it was necessary in our research to devote attention to the transitional experiences of reserve veterans. Our sample focused on those who had finally given up on being a reservist. Many of the experiences of reserve troops were comparable with their regular counterparts. Reservists have equally to confront the legacy of the bubble environment and the costs of their emotional labour in COIN deployment. A number of ex-reserve personnel commented, for example, on the difficulties they had reintegrating into civilian work environments after each deployment. The bubble of the military environment which acted as a safety net was no longer there for returning reserve soldiers. They told us they often found it difficult to come to terms with their own experiences. Watching daily life continue while they struggled internally with their memories placed reservists in limbo until their next posting. They never adjusted to this; it never got easier. Some remarked, indeed, that it got worse with each deployment. They had no outlet upon which to share experiences and recall their memories, and the bad memories kept getting added to.

There are some notable differences, however. Reserves make the transition regularly as they go back and forth between their civilian life and their military deployment. It is as if they live constantly with a 'transitional self' until they finally leave. They often retain their civilian employment and slot back in when they finally leave, although some complained at the lack of understanding shown by employers towards their irregular hours when they were posted. Reservists are also more adept at retaining a personal identity, since the institutional self is never long-lasting and permanent. Identity formation is continually being renewed and it is easier to transfer identity when they finally leave on to the family, home, work and community. After all, these were never fully subordinated to the institutional self in the first

place. Indeed, some reservists spoke of the difficulties in appropriating the institutional self when transitioning from civilian life for a temporary period of military deployment. It is for this reason also that some reservists said they never felt fully accepted by their regular counterparts.

One thing they did share with regulars however, was criticism of the military about feeling abandoned and left alone on final retirement. Even here, though, reservists can be different. Their lack of belonging and identification with the military community, in particular the ambivalent acceptance they felt they received from regular soldiers, was a concern for reserve soldiers. Feeling outside the military community extended into operational contexts where reserve soldiers commented on being external to the inner circle of the military when on tours of duty. Unfortunately, for a number of reserve soldiers, being in the military does not always mean being 'in' the community. This is a weakness for military managers and planners, especially as the size of the reserve is due to increase, for it affects their efficiency and morale while in the Service. It must also be seen as a strength, however, when fully and finally transitioning from it. The 'bubble' imposes less of a constraint on their transition from army life because they were never fully inside it.

Reserve members, like their regular counterparts, expressed a particular concern at the potential damaging impact of increased societal focus on mental health, trauma and the victimhood of the Afghanistan veteran. They feared being perceived wrongly as 'psychologically damaged goods'. Employment concerns and the relationship between military, home life and civilian work thus remain a pressing concern for reserve soldiers. For the reserve soldier this means they can find themselves in a state of social ambiguity, caught between a public narrative that medicalises their transition and presents them as victims, and

their normal life as a citizen which they were able to continue, with greater or lesser ease, when not on tours of duty.

Some manage this tension by keeping secret their former role as reservist, in part to moderate the risk but mostly to avoid being stereotyped as 'psychologically damaged goods'. While the need for secrecy might be bemoaned, it tends to accelerate the shift from a transitional self to a personal one by limiting engagement with former colleagues and reducing identification with the army. There are loose similarities with the experiences of UDR veterans in Northern Ireland who have to develop skills in hiding their military identity. While this is an endless pressure, it assists the transition experience. Reservists largely transition well if they can develop the skills for managing their identity.

### **Understanding the Transition Process**

It is worth distinguishing two important functions of the support sector that bear crucially on the success of the transition process: service delivery to meet transition needs; and public engagement with what it means to be a veteran. The first function is reactive, the second proactive. We will address each in turn.

### ***Support Delivery***

The paradox of the transition process is that the less successful transitioners are the ones who over-identify with the military and cannot develop new identity formations that shift from the institutional self of the army to a transitional or personal self, and thus need to continue to have links with the military and want in-house, barracks-based, support. Over-dependence on the military is the problem, yet reliance on the military for help is their best solution, at least initially. However, reliance on in-house support is counter-productive in the long term.

The most effective structure for meeting transitioners' need therefore involves organisations inside and outside the barracks working together, beginning in the pre-retirement stage and extending long after retirement. The country's duty of care does not end when a soldier retires but should be ongoing. This care needs to be better co-ordinated and financed. It should be locally delivered by organisations closest to the transitioning soldier but with the national government determining broad policy and finance parameters.

This imposes obligations on the voluntary sector and charities, as well as on the MOD as the former employer. Important within this process is a willingness for organisations to work together and share information with other veteran support providers. This system will be complemented by the integration of a buddy scheme which may involve only *ad hoc* visits and contact, but sharing at a minimum telephone numbers and email addresses in the event of an emergency. Regimental associations could also play an important a recruiting source for 'buddies'. We realise that some soldiers may not wish to avail of such opportunities and it will prove impossible to assist all ex-personnel. It is important however, that attempts are made to find a more inclusive and practical approach to transition, not just for the benefit of transitioning soldiers and veterans, but in demonstrating the MOD as a forward-thinking employer in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one who recognises that their duty of care extends beyond normal employment contexts.

It is important that the MOD recognises that it has a key role to play in successful transitioning by preparing personnel for it well in advance. Perhaps one of the most valuable ways in which a soldier can be 'reprogrammed' is to receive what we have called cultural awareness training before retirement. The best learning method in cultural awareness training is for learners to become practically engaged in the learning processes. This involves 'situated learning', or learning on the ground in practical settings. This means engaging with

local communities as well attending classes from outside experts in the cultural expectations of civilian life. Rather than using their own limited knowledge distorted by absorption in the institutional self of the military, transitioning soldiers would be able to gain confidence and knowledge of the expectations, behaviours and practices that constitute conventional civilian life. The ultimate aim is to create the embodied civilian whereby former soldiers act instinctively and know how to behave in civilian settings without thinking.

### ***Public Engagement with the Veteran Status***

While local support providers and the MOD meet the needs of the individual soldier and their family in the private sphere, the sector as a whole needs to assume a higher profile in managing veteran issues in the public sphere. This requires support providers to re-envision their role in broader terms, engaging with the way veteran issues are raised and discussed culturally and politically in the public square. The public narrative of victimhood which medicalises the transition process needs to be challenged and a counter public narrative developed that balances trauma with resilience, points to the many successful transition experiences of the majority, and creates positive role models that celebrate effective reintegration.

The public narrative of victimhood is as much a constraint on transitioning soldiers as the emotional legacy of their operational and combat experiences. When COIN veterans complain that their reintegration is being negatively affected by the misplaced public perception that they are 'psychologically damaged goods', the support sector has to recognise that it must not only be reactive to negative transitioners' needs, it has to be proactive in reshaping and recasting the public image of what it means to be a veteran of the Afghanistan war.

### ***The Model of Transition***

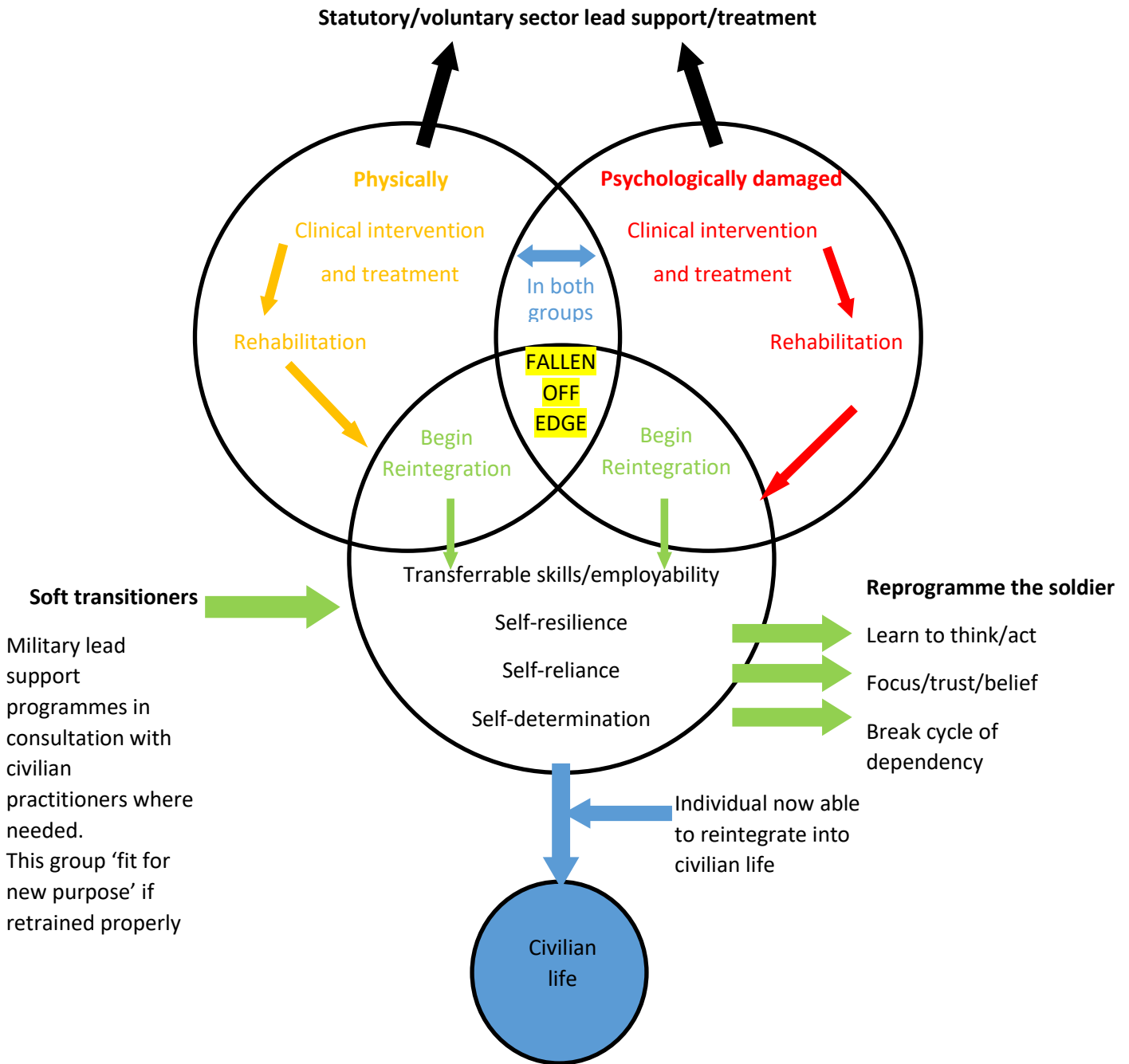
In attempting to provide some clarity on the complexity of current transitional and veteran support we have developed the following reintegration strategy model which we have termed 'the trinity of transition'. This model provides an example of how transition could be managed through the co-operation and co-ordinated functioning of each part of the transition support system. Figure 1 overleaf gives a diagrammatic presentation of the model. In what follows we explain it.

The continuum of normal transition through which we conceptualise the process of transition makes clear that the poles represent veterans who are striving to transition as normally as possible despite the different locations they occupy when they start and the repositioning that takes place as they confront life events with more or less resilience. It does not refer to those who have fallen off the edge and have given up the aspiration for as normal a transition as possible, through homelessness, suicide, hospitalisation or prison. Those who have fallen off the edge are identified in the centre of this model. They are unable to make any transition. Further research is needed on this admittedly small group to ascertain what are the contributing factors that led them to fall off the edge of the continuum and what from their perspective is needed to help their reintegration?

The largest group are what we refer to as 'soft transitioners'. We call them such because they have what is fashionably called the 'soft skills' for successful reintegration into civilian life. They do not have an over-identification with the army, they have emotionally compartmentalised their institutional self, they were instrumental in their approach to the army, and have a capacity for emotional distancing that positively impacts on their reflexivity



**Figure 1**  
**Reintegration Strategy Model:**  
**The Trinity of Transition**



about the past. They do not have overtly narrow boundaries of trust and are not restricted to social networks dominated by former army friends. They leave the Service as 'fit for purpose' and manage the transition to civilian life effectively. This group is not without transition needs, around employment, educational qualifications, and public recognition and respect, but they have the emotional 'soft skills' needed for resilience toward life events. Their ability to retain a personal self while in the army, means they have a greater capacity for self-reliance, self-determination and self-resilience that shortens the period of their 'transitional self' and quickens the development of a civilian identity.

Despite their evident success in transitioning, they do not feature in the media, are neglected in the public narrative of victimhood, and are largely forgotten by the military and the needs driven parts of the voluntary sector. They are an under-used resource and could well constitute the 'buddies' necessary to mentor the less successful transitioners and be the positive role models that can help change the public narrative.

The other group are the 'negative' or 'bad' transitioners, who need additional statutory and voluntary sector intervention to make the move to the soft transitioned group. To transition more effectively this group requires a needs-based delivery service that better meets their needs. This is why we emphasised earlier that the support system must be better structured, streamlined and co-ordinated, combining agencies inside and outside the barracks. This will involve a professional aftercare service on a regional and regimental basis and specialist agencies to meet the specific needs of clients. They have not given up on the goal of a normal transition and this aspiration offers the prospect that training in civilian cultural awareness, in work and employability skills, education, and in the 'soft skills' of self-reliance and self-independence can diminish over-dependence and, as it were, reboot or re-programme the robot created by the institutional self to live again as a civilian.

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## 10. Appendices

### Appendix 1: List of Gatekeepers

In alphabetical order:

1<sup>st</sup> Royal Irish Regiment

2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Irish Regiment

Andy Allen MLA

Army Reserve

Brenda Hale MLA

Cllr David Taylor

Cllr Glyn Hanna

Combat Stress

Danny Kennedy MLA

Danny Kinahan MP

Doug Beattie MLA

The Ely Centre

Gavin Robinson MP

James Heappey MP

Jim Shannon MP

Johnny Mercer MP

Lord Empey

Lord Rogan

National Malaya and Borneo Veterans Association

Northern Ireland Veterans Support Committee

Out of the Shadows

PTSD Resolution

Regimental Association of the Ulster Defence Regiment

Sir Jeffrey Donaldson MP

Tom Elliott MP

Tom Tugendhat MP

UDR and RIR Aftercare Service

Veterans Lifeline

## **Appendices**

### **Appendix 2: International Advisory Board Members**

#### **Chair**

Charles Kirke, former British Army Officer and Lecturer Cranfield University.

#### **Members**

Dr Neil Jarman, Research Fellow, Queen's University Belfast

Mr Peter Sheridan, Chief Executive Officer, Co-Operation Ireland

Mr Barry Fennell, Co-Operation Ireland

Major Edwin Parks, former British Army Officer, Director of Castlehill Foundation

#### **Research team**

Professor John Brewer, Principal Investigator, Queen's University Belfast

## Appendices

### Appendix 3 Biographical Details of the Authors

#### John D Brewer

A sociologist by background, John Brewer is Professor of Post Conflict Studies in the Institute for the Mitchell Institute at Queen's University Belfast, having formerly been Sixth-Century Professor of Sociology at Aberdeen University. He was awarded an honorary DSocSci from Brunel University in 2013 for services to social science and the sociology of peace processes. He is a Member of the Royal Irish Academy (2004), a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh (2008), a Fellow in the Academy of Social Sciences (2003) and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (1998). He has held visiting appointments at Yale University (1989), St John's College Oxford (1991), Corpus Christi College Cambridge (2002) and the Australia National University (2003). In 2017 he was appointed Honorary Extraordinary Professor at Stellenbosch University. In 2007-2008 he was a Leverhulme Trust Research Fellow. He has been President of the British Sociological Association (2009-2012) and is now Honorary Life Vice President, and has also been a member of the Governing Council of the Irish Research Council and of the Council of the Academy of Social Science. In 2010 he was appointed to the United Nations Roster of Global Experts for his expertise in peace processes. He is the author or co-author of sixteen books and editor or co-editor of a further five, and has well over a hundred peer reviewed articles. His books include *C Wright Mills and the Ending of Violence* (Palgrave 2003), *Peace Processes: A Sociological Approach* (Polity Press, 2010), *Religion, Civil Society and Peace in Northern Ireland* (Oxford University Press, 2011, 2013), *Ex-Combatants, Religion and Peace in Northern Ireland* (Palgrave, 2013) and *The Public Value of Social Sciences* (Bloomsbury, 2013). He is General Editor of the Book Series *Palgrave Studies in Compromise after Conflict*

and Co-Editor of the Policy Press Book Series *Public Sociology*. He has earned over £6.4 million in grants and was Principal Investigator on a £1.26 million cross-national, five-year project on compromise amongst victims of conflict, funded by The Leverhulme Trust, focusing on Northern Ireland, South Africa and Sri Lanka. Two books are appearing shortly from this research programme *The Sociology of Compromise after Conflict* and *The Sociology of Everyday Life Peacebuilding*, both in the *Palgrave Studies in Compromise after Conflict* Series. He regularly teaches peace and reconciliation workshops in Sri Lanka and was active in the Northern Irish peace process facilitating the Faith in a Brighter Future Group of leading ecumenical churchmen and women. He has also been involved as a policy advisor on policing reform in South Africa and Northern Ireland. In 2013 he gave the Academy of Social Science Annual Lecture, in March 2014 the Annual Lord Dunleath Lecture, in April 2014 the Annual Lord Patten Lecture and in June 2014 the Annual David Stevens Memorial Lecture. In May 2014 he spoke at the Westminster Faith Debate on the motion that religion is a positive force in peace building and in 2016 at the British Academy Faith Debate on whether true religion is always extremist. He has supervised 11 post-doctoral research fellows and supervised over 35 PhD students to successful completion on time.

### **Dr Stephen Herron**

Stephen Herron is an anthropologist by training, having been awarded his PhD in social anthropology from Queen's University in 2015 with a thesis on the Ulster Defence Regiment, the first major academic study of its kind. He was employed as a Research Fellow by Queen's University between 2015 and 2017 to undertake this research as co-investigator. He is one of only a handful of bespoke military anthropologists in the United Kingdom. Dr Herron has extensive experience dealing with and researching soldiers who have not only operated in

counter-insurgency environments but have suffered significant military transitional and post-conflict reintegration issues. Dr Herron has extensive contacts in the military and veteran community throughout the UK and has conducted fieldwork with hundreds of soldiers, veterans and family members including those with mental health issues, physical injury, homelessness and in prison. In addition, Dr Herron has worked and researched in both academic and non-academic environments involving former Service personnel, such as victims and veterans organisations. Experienced in both grant management and project organisation and holding BPSS security clearance, Dr Herron has considerable field experience and knowledge in military anthropology.

## Appendices

### Appendix 4: Participant Information Sheet

**(NB: This was read by every respondent before interview)**

#### **Study title**

How counter-insurgency warfare experiences impact upon the post-deployment reintegration of land-based British army personnel.

#### **Invitation to take part**

We would like to invite you as a former or current serving British Army soldier to take part in this research study. Before you decide to take part we would like to explain why this research is taking place and what your involvement will be. We therefore ask you to please read the following information carefully. You are free to talk to others about the study if you wish. This study is focussed on examining the post-conflict reintegration patterns of land based soldiers, both full time and reserve, who have returned most recently from counter-insurgency operations in Afghanistan. In order to ensure as full a picture as possible is obtained we will be researching soldiers from earlier counter-insurgency wars, such as those returning from the Colonial Wars of Independence in the British Empire in the 1950s and 1960s, such as Aden, Malaya and Kenya, and those who served in the Ulster Defence Regiment in Northern Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s. Thus, this project aims to provide a longitudinal, evidence-based approach which will provide definitive and tested recommendations based on analysis of relevant literature and key stakeholders across the military and their counter-insurgency operational history.

#### **What is the purpose of the research?**

The purpose of this study is to examine the post-conflict reintegration patterns of land based soldiers who have returned most recently from counter-insurgency conflict in Afghanistan. This project is focussed on both providing information and lessons on the issues affecting counter-insurgency troops post-conflict reintegration, as well as drawing on the experiences of past counter-insurgency troops so real and tangible lessons can be learnt thus ensuring that levels of satisfaction for the armed forces amongst soldiers and civilians are high thereby encouraging improvements in recruitment and retention of forces personnel and furthermore, improved efficiency savings by adopting specific post-conflict reintegration programmes and strategies for returning troops.

#### **Who is doing this research?**

Queen's University Belfast is carrying out this project which has been funded by The Forces in Mind Trust (FiMT). FiMT is a charity funded by the National Lottery which specialises in working with ex-service personnel and their families. Further details about FiMT can be found at <http://www.fim-trust.org/>.

The project team consists of:

Principal Investigator: Professor John Brewer

Co-Investigator: Dr Stephen Herron; Project Consultant: Professor Michael Semple. All are based in the Institute for the Study of Conflict Transformation and Social Justice (ISCTSJ) at Queen's University (note, the Institute has since changed name).

Further information about ISCTSJ can be found at <http://www.qub.ac.uk/research-centres/isctsj/>

### **Why have I been invited to take part?**

You have been invited as a former or current serving British Army soldier to take part as you fit the criteria of individuals deemed suitable for this study. Approximately 140 people have been selected to take part in this research

### **Do I have to take part?**

Participation is entirely voluntary and you are free to leave the research at any point. We will describe the study. You will have the opportunity to ask questions and seek clarification and in private if requested. You will be invited to agree to sign a consent form to demonstrate you have agreed to take part but you will be free to withdraw at any point. This will not affect your Service career in any way (either as a current serving soldier and/or veteran).

### **What will I be asked to do?**

Depending on the type of session organised you may be either asked to take part in a one to one in-depth interview or a focus group. You may be asked to take part in more than one interview. Further points to understand at this stage include:

- Participation in any aspect of the research is entirely voluntary and you will be free to leave at any point.
- You will not be pressurised to give particular answers or say anything against your will.
- Interviews will usually last approximately 1-2 hours and focus groups will last approximately 2 hours.
- During interviews and focus groups participants will be recorded using a digital audio recorder as well as notes taken by the interviewer. **NO** video recording will be used.
- Participants can at any point ask for their audio recording to be destroyed
- Before any participant is allowed to take part in the research they will be required to fill in a consent form and every effort will be made to protect participants' anonymity within the law..
- If participants take part more than once in the research (such as a follow up interview) they will be required to sign consent forms each time.

### **What are the benefits of taking part?**

This research's principal focus is to provide recommendations and frameworks which will have a positive impact across the military both on an individual and collective basis. Furthermore, while the focus of this study is based on the experiences of land based soldiers we envisage a number of insights and recommendations which will be of benefit across all spectrums of the armed forces community including naval, air force and land personnel. As such, not only will participants play a vital role in improving the effectiveness of post-conflict reintegration patterns across the armed services community, improved effectiveness in this area will have, it is hoped, a direct and long-



term positive impact in soldiers' own post-conflict reintegration patterns and experiences.

**What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

There are no known risks associated with this research. However, questions will be asked which seek to unearth what difficulties (if any) have arisen as a result of engaging in counter-insurgency warfare and how such experiences have impacted upon the post-conflict reintegration of soldiers. This may cause interviewees to critically examine issues and themes which can be discomfoting.

**Can I withdraw from the research and what will happen if I don't want to carry on?**

You can withdraw from the research at any point and nothing will happen if you wish to withdraw. You should however request (if for example giving an interview recording) for that recording to be destroyed if you so wish, otherwise material already obtained will be deemed to be useable.

**Are there any expenses and payments which I will get?**

No expenses will be provided as part of this research

**Will my taking part or not taking part affect my Service career or medical care?**

No

**Whom do I contact if I have any questions or a complaint?**

If you have any questions or complaints you can either approach one of the investigators on:

Professor John Brewer (Principal Investigator): Email: [j.brewer@qub.ac.uk](mailto:j.brewer@qub.ac.uk); Tel: 02890 973835

Dr Stephen Herron (Co-Investigator): Email: [stephen.herron@qub.ac.uk](mailto:stephen.herron@qub.ac.uk); Tel: 02890 975343

Professor Michael Semple (Project Consultant): Email: [m.semple@qub.ac.uk](mailto:m.semple@qub.ac.uk)

**What happens if I suffer any harm?**

We do not envisage participants to suffer any harm as a result of this research but if you do suffer any harm as a direct result of taking part in this study, we will put you in touch with Army Welfare Services (Tel: 01452 519951) and the veterans mental health charity Combat Stress (Tel: 0800138 1619).

**Will my records be kept confidential?**

All records will be kept confidential as in accordance with all legal requirements and protocols including the Caldicott Principles and Data Protection Act 1998. All information obtained during this study including recorded interviews, focus group sessions, workshops and questionnaires will only be used for this research and all recordings from interviews will be erased. Only the project team will have access to data gathered. Should any difficulties arise from the research the project team will consult with the advisory board, the Forces in Mind Trust and the Ministry of Defence to ensure all legal and moral obligations are upheld. Data will be retained for the duration of the study before being permanently destroyed.

**Who is organising and funding the research?**

Queen's University Belfast is organising the research and is being funded by The Forces in Mind Trust

**Who has reviewed the study?**

This study has undergone ethical approval by Queen's University.

**Compliance with the Declaration of Helsinki.**

This study complies, and at all times will comply, with the Declaration of Helsinki as adopted at the 64<sup>th</sup> WMA General Assembly at Fortaleza, Brazil in October 2013.

## Appendices

### Appendix 5: Copy of Informed Consent Form

**Title of Project:** How counter-insurgency warfare experiences impact upon the post-deployment reintegration of land-based British army personnel.

**Principal Investigator:** Professor John D Brewer

**Other Investigators:** Dr Stephen Herron, Professor Michael Semple

**Participant's**

**Name:**

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We invite you to take part in a research study to examine how counter-insurgency warfare experiences impact upon the post-deployment reintegration of land based British army personnel. Taking part in this study is entirely voluntary. If you decide to participate it is very important that you sign this form to show that you are willing to take part and that we have your permission to use anonymized extracts from the interview.

There are no known risks associated with the research. The benefits are that we will understand better the post-deployment reintegration experiences of land based troops who have engaged in counter-insurgency warfare and thus from this develop models and frameworks which can improve troops post-deployment reintegration experiences.

We will keep your participation in this research study confidential to the full extent provided under law and your identity will remain completely anonymous. If you choose to participate, you are free to withdraw from the interview at any time and to withdraw your permission for the use of the interview data.

Queen's University Belfast and the investigators are receiving a grant from a charity, The Forces in Mind Trust, to support this research. Your identity will not be disclosed to them.

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant or you have concerns or general questions about the research, they can be addressed by the interviewer at the time or by the research team (on any of the following numbers: Professor Brewer 02890 973835; Dr Herron 02890 975343; Professor Semple 02890 973771).

**Participant:** By signing this consent form, you indicate that you are voluntarily choosing to take part in this research and allowing us to use edited and anonymized extracts from the interview.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date