



FALLING OUT

Findings from a study into the experiences of Australian Army Reserve personnel returning to civilian employment after overseas duty

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1. OVERVIEW

This paper reports on data gained from interviews with eleven Australian Army reservists who have dealt with the challenges of re-joining the civilian workforce after having been deployed overseas on operational duty.

From the data there emerged several experiences that the interviewees had in common, including (1) realisation of the need to confront a change in identity from being a soldier to being a civilian, (2) difficulties in re-adapting to the norms of the civilian workplace, (3) benefiting from the support of others who had already returned to the civilian workforce, (4) being disadvantaged as a result of institutional failures, and finally (5) dealing with the adverse effects of military service on civilian employment and career outcomes.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this research was to identify common difficulties encountered by Australian Army Reserve veterans returning to civilian employment following a period of overseas operational duty. The findings of this study will inform the scope and direction of a subsequent study into the measures that may be taken to help reservists prepare for their return to civilian employment.

3. METHODOLOGY

Eleven reservists volunteered for the study and were interviewed between 14 June and 14 August 2019. There were ten male interviewees and one female. The youngest was 29 years and the oldest 53 years. The mean age was 44 years. All participants had been deployed on at least one overseas operation as a reservist. Four participants had been deployed more than once, and one participant experienced four overseas deployments.

Interviews were conducted using a journey mapping technique constructed to explore each participant's recollections and personal insights relating to the key events of the transition period. This process generated detailed accounts of reserve veterans' transitional experiences: during the activities in which the participants were involved; of the participants' recollections of their personal goals and motives; their experiences when trying to gain help from the systems and resources that were supposed to be there to help them; and finally of their reflections or insights from their experiences. (Howard, 2014; Smith & Osborn, 2004)





4. FINDINGS

Similar patterns emerged from the data in relation to five themes. Extracts from the interviews relating to these themes are presented below.

THEMES

■ THEME ONE

Awareness of a change in identity from soldier to civilian

■ THEMETWO

Re-adapting to the norms of the civilian workplace

■ THEMETHREE

Finding support from people with firsthand experience of the military-to-civilian transition

■ THEME FOUR

Dealing with problems caused by institutional failure

■ THEME FIVE

Reservice service impairing civilian careers and employment opportunities

4.1 THEME ONE

AWARENESS OF A CHANGE IN IDENTITY FROM SOLDIER TO CIVILIAN

Several studies focusing on identity (Binks and Cambridge, 2018; Daniels, 2017; Davis, 2016) have observed that veterans who placed less importance on their military identity also reported being more satisfied with the results of their overall experiences after transitioning to civilian life.

This observation is supported by a few of the cases examined during this study. Examples relating to a sense of value in society, identity coherence, and preparing for a change of role are outlined below.

4.1.1 - ON BEING VALUED

Ian* served in combat roles on four overseas missions and returned to job that was held for him under the provisions of the Defence Reserve Service (Protection) Act 2001 (Cth).

“I was a damn good soldier. And then to leave and transition was the fucking hardest thing because you’re ... seen in the community as military strong, and you know you are good [soldier]... you’re sharp at your skills and then you come back, and you’ve got fucking nothing.”

He spoke intensely about losing his identity as a soldier and what it was like suddenly finding himself in a situation where his skills and experiences were no longer valued by society.

Harry, who served on a six-month peacekeeping deployment, commented that he felt his civilian work was of little importance compared to what he had done on operations.

“So much of what we do in the first world, it’s just so unimportant compared to what you do on a deployment. I mean, yeah, despite being in a service industry where I know I’ve contributed to the lives of a whole lot of kids, compared to what I did over there, it just doesn’t seem to be anywhere near as worthwhile. And I miss the excitement and I miss the level of danger.”





4.1.2 - ON SERVICE AND IDENTITY

Several years after returning from his peacekeeping mission, Harry was diagnosed with PTSD and was awarded a full disability pension from the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA).

“Yeah, obviously I've had lots of complications. But I would do it all again tomorrow. Yeah, today or later today. I've got my [military] gear set up... I'm hopeless.”

Even though his military service has caused permanent health issues which prevent him from working, he is hoping for an opportunity to resume his service.

Daniel, a peacekeeping veteran who had served with an infantry unit, reflected on how his ongoing involvement with the army reserve has become an important aspect of his identity.

“It has become such a key part of my identity, and I think [the army reserve] is something that I have to do.”

4.1.3 - ON PREPARING FOR CHANGE

Carl served in a combat role in Afghanistan. He attributes his successful transition to his adopting a civilian identity as soon as possible. He also suggests that the army does not do enough to help reservists prepare for the changes they will experience when they return to civilian life.

“So, I would sum it up with saying that I've had a very positive experience, but I would say that was solely due to me. I've had a good experience despite the army, not because of it. There were wasted opportunities along the way that army could have used to help me. There was no training to help me transition back into civilian life. There was no psychologist [advising] me how to create a new identity as a civilian, or how to resume my old identity as a civilian... These identity shifts happen, and there was no structure. There was no guidance given to me on that. That was a missed opportunity.”



4.2 THEME TWO

RE-ADAPTING TO THE NORMS OF THE CIVILIAN WORKPLACE

Every participant in the study expressed some level of dissatisfaction with some aspect of their civilian employment experiences upon their return from overseas duty. Re-establishing employment was a particular issue for veterans who were in casual employment prior to their deployment. Other veterans were confronted by significant changes in the workplace that affected their role and position in the organisation. Others found adjusting to the norms of the civilian workplace was a struggle.

4.2.1 - ON BEING UNEMPLOYED

Jessica was out of work for ten months after coming back from her overseas deployment. Within the military she had developed skills in a highly specialised area of logistics that were difficult to translate for the civilian job market. Jessica found it extremely problematic to secure employment which recognised her skills and the level of responsibility that she had previously held. Forced to fall back on her savings from what she earned during her deployment, Jessica had to reduce her cost of living by lodging with family or friends.

"I had almost every family member and friends asking me constantly, 'Where are you? Where are you living? Have you found work yet?' So, [I'm] telling people... probably ten times a day... no, I don't have a job yet. I'm still jobless and homeless."

4.2.2 - ON BEING EASED OUT

Several veterans expressed anger about coming back to changes in their workplace that foreshadowed their loss of relevance within the organisation. In some cases they spoke about feeling underappreciated and being socially isolated prior to being made redundant.

"I could sort of see the writing on the wall... alright, I think I've been culled... unofficially. They were going to wait me out."

While he was deployed on a peacekeeping mission, Peter's job in an executive position for a large manufacturing business was protected under the Defence Reserve Service (Protection) Act 2001 (Cth). He described how, within a few weeks of getting back, he was socially isolated from his work colleagues and felt pressured to leave his job.

Ian* angrily recalled the experience of being exploited by his civilian employer whom he said had taken advantage of the Government's support payments to hold his job while he was deployed.

"Oh, I got shat on by my boss... He was paid by Defence to hold that position for me. So [the] sneaky bugger, when I got back, he said, 'Oh look, I don't really need you in the head office [anymore]. We've replaced you. You can go work in the retail store.' So, I got shoved into the retail store, which I was dirty about. Thirty years old working in a retail shop ... not for me mate. "

Note: Pseudonyms have been used throughout this report to protect the identity of the participants



4.3 THEME THREE

FINDING SUPPORT FROM PEOPLE WITH FIRSTHAND EXPERIENCE OF THE MILITARY-TO-CIVILIAN TRANSITION

It is not surprising that veterans talk about how they relied on peer support during the transition process, given the ideals of mateship and camaraderie which are hallmarks of the military ethos. Every participant was able to identify one or two individuals who specifically helped them, and they all indicated that they volunteered for the study in the hope of improving support processes for future veterans.

Several veterans spoke about the valuable support they gained from their extended network of friends and professional associates outside of the military. For some, this support was instrumental in helping them with work opportunities and important career moves.

4.3.1 - ON A HELPING HAND FOR A SUCCESSFUL CAREER MOVE

After a bad experience with his employer, Ian* accepted the opportunity for another deployment and set himself the goal of establishing a new career for when he got back. While he was on deployment, an army reserve colleague back home set up an important introduction.

“He [said to me], ‘Mate, I know someone that’s just opening up [a] business.’ ... I organised an interview as soon as I got back... like day one, I got the job.”

4.3.2 - ON A GENTLE PUSH FROM A FRIEND

Although she experienced a great deal of difficulty in finding a job after her deployment, Jessica explained how a friend intervened to help her maintain motivation during a long stretch of unemployment.

“So, after the first three months, I started slipping a little bit ... and then I got a kick by my friend and then I ended up joining a gym. So I made it a routine that every morning I would go to one of their classes ... Because, if I couldn’t control the job searching and employment, I could control my routine.”

Note: Pseudonyms have been used throughout this report to protect the identity of the participants

4.4 THEME FOUR

DEALING WITH PROBLEMS CAUSED BY INSTITUTIONAL FAILURE

Every veteran interviewed raised matters relating to some degree of institutional failure within the ADF. Some veterans reported not being able to access the mandatory post-deployment psychological screening that was meant to occur within three months of their return to Australia. The ADF's Employer Support Payment Scheme was mentioned often, as was the legislation that is supposed to protect the reservists' civilian employment when they deploy (Defence, b. 2019).

4.4.1 - ON FALLING THROUGH THE CRACKS

Harry struggled with his return to civilian life, describing circumstances that included problems with alcohol, deteriorating relationships at work, and a divorce. He claimed that because he lived in a regional area, he was unable to get access to the mandatory post-operational psychology screening. Several years later, he was diagnosed with PTSD and is now on a full disability pension.

"He [said to me], 'Mate, I know someone that's just opening up [a] business.' ... I organised an interview as soon as I got back... like day one, I got the job."

Jason, who also grappled with his transition which included an extended period of unemployment, spoke about feeling abandoned by the ADF.

"No one's ever called me, ever. From the day I landed in Australia to now. No one's ever done a follow up call or nothing ... My post deployment psych screen was probably due two months ago, three months ago. No one's followed up. I could be like totally wiggin' out, homeless, mental issues ... no one's contacted me."

4.4.2 - ON THE BARRIERS TO GETTING HELP

Despite his combat experiences, Matthew is reluctant to get in touch with the DVA and other support services with regard illnesses caused by his military service. He explained that DVA has a poor reputation amongst veterans and that, in any case, he doesn't know what support is available.

"I don't understand DVA. I've never made a DVA claim because... I don't want the stress. I don't want the problems. I [don't] know the medical system. I haven't applied for anything ... I didn't know how that all worked, especially in the reserves."

Dennis, whose civilian job is within an emergency services organisation, raised concerns about veterans getting access to adequate mental health support and compensation when it is difficult to assign liability to either one or the other.

"If you break your leg on deployment, [then the] army broke your leg on deployment. But who caused that person's mental health to break? You know, was it there or was it here, or was it both?"

4.5 THEME FIVE

RESERVE SERVICE IMPAIRING CIVILIAN CAREERS AND EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Participants reported that while reserve service was a rewarding and fulfilling experience, it did have an adverse effect on employment opportunities and career progression. Time away from work for reserve service was cited as a key issue, along with a reduced capacity to participate in extra training and professional development for advancing their civilian careers.

4.5.1 - ON BEING HELD BACK

Tom, a reserve officer who also holds a senior management position in a government department, is concerned that her reserve experience is not adequately recognised by other senior managers in the department and that his service in the reserve was responsible for him missing out on opportunities to advance his career.

“ In my eyes, my [deployment] has set [my civilian career] back about five years.”

When discussing the career and personal choices involved in maintaining two careers, Bradley lamented about how much personal leave he had sacrificed to maintain his training commitments with the army reserve.

“ There’s generally no reserve leave in private industry, so you use your annual leave or take non-paid leave. I don’t think I’ve had a holiday for like ten years. It’s go to work, go on an army course, go to work, and then back to army again... [On top of that], I would say the army reserve has probably cost [me] five years of my civilian career... [promotion-wise] it holds you back.”

4.5.2 - ON THE DELAYED EFFECT

Owen was deployed overseas as a specialist administration officer within a large multi-national headquarters. While he enjoyed his experience and having the opportunity to use his specialist skills on an overseas deployment, he has not been able to maintain steady employment.

“After getting back from [deployment], I transitioned back to civilian work quite easily, really easily actually ... and then, uh, my civilian career’s pretty much gone haywire ... I’ve had about eighteen jobs in the last seven years.”

4.5.3 - ON THE RESTRICTION OF JOB CHOICES

Matthew joined the army reserve while he was studying for his vocational degree. He explained how, at that time, the army reserve easily fitted in with his student lifestyle and provided much needed income. But later, Matthew found himself choosing jobs based on how flexible the employer was about his army reserve commitments.

“ My partner [said to me], you do not get paid anywhere near as much as you should be, [and] you’ve picked that job because a good six, seven, eight years ago [it fitted in with the reserve]... and that’s not beneficial for us as a family because you are not in [the army] anymore.”





5 THE NEW NORMAL

BALANCING CIVILIAN AND MILITARY CAREERS

As part-time soldiers, army reservists manage the challenging task of balancing the competing demands between their civilian and military careers (Davis, 2016).

With a lifestyle that falls between being an ordinary citizen and being a soldier, reservist occupy a unique position in society requiring them to move repeatedly between the social norms required of a good citizen and those expected of a good soldier. The Binks and Cambridge (2018) phenomenological study of British veterans' transition experiences found that veterans who have a heightened sense of military identity, often established through participation in more intense military roles, reported more difficult transitions.

These findings imply that those who internalise military identity struggle the most upon discharge. It was also noted that veterans who reported a reduced feeling of connection with their military identity also reported a smoother reintegration into civilian life.

The authors found that veterans in non-combat related roles were more likely to experience service-life as a job rather than an all-consuming lifestyle, thereby placing less importance on their military experiences in establishing identity.

Pyzyk (2017) observed in her study of U.S. National Guard and Army Reserve veterans that the transition to home was just as challenging for them as serving in a combat zone. Ahern et al. (2015) referred to this as the difficult process of 'searching for a new normal' (Ahern et al. p3). Pyzyk (2017) concluded that the transition was challenging because of the practical and psychological adjustments required before feeling normal again.

While noting the duality of the roles played by reservists, as both soldier and civilian, she did not fully explore how reservists deal with the oscillations between their military and civilian personas as they manage the coexistence of their military and civilian employment.

The duality of the civilian and military roles was also touched upon by Daniels, (2017) who examined military to civilian transitions from an acculturation perspective.

Daniels explored the combined effects of cultural and psychological changes experienced by veterans as they moved into the civilian workforce.

Daniels promotes the view that the military subculture, with its distinct norms and values, instils lasting cultural and psychological qualities within the veteran that need to be adapted by the veteran for the civilian workplace.

Daniels argues that the consequences of living in the civilian culture without making the necessary adjustments can be a source of emotional challenges that can ultimately lead to continued discomfort and alienation.

Besides supporting the findings of the above-mentioned research, a further consolidation of the findings suggests that reserve veterans may benefit from proactive efforts to influence transition outcomes across key areas, including awareness of one's social identity and self-perceptions of one's role in society, developing and using social support networks, and preparing for the life-style changes ahead.

Drawing on recent literature on military transitions and the analysis of the interview data, the findings from this research suggests three key elements for promoting successful transitions:

1. **Planning Ahead** to prepare veterans for the changes ahead
2. **Self-awareness** to facilitate constructive adaptation of the veteran's identity for civilian life
3. **Social support** to help the veteran bridge the cultural gap from soldier to civilian

These ideas may be communicated to reserve veterans as the three keys to successful transition as represented in Figure 1.

Addressing these keys will help veterans prepare for the changes ahead and make the most of their experiences.

Further research would have to test validity of the model and trial the efficacy of related supports.

While further research is required to test the validity of this model, policy-makers and support agencies should note the unique challenges being faced by Australian reservists and work towards addressing the issues raised by this report to help our veterans deal with these challenges and make the most of their experiences.



3 KEYS TO TRANSITION



6. ETHICAL CLEARANCES

The following ethics approvals were obtained:

- Department of Defence and Veterans' Affairs Human Research Ethics Committee (DDVA HREC) approved on 31 May 2019.
- Swinburne University of Technology Human Research Ethics Committee (SUT HREC) clearance obtained on 5 June 2019.

7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe my heartfelt gratitude to the veterans who shared their very personal accounts of the transition back to civilian life. Their ongoing commitment to the ethos of mateship and service is a major source of encouragement and inspiration.

This research would not have been possible without the generous support afforded to me by Melbourne Legacy and RSL Victoria. It's been a privilege to witness the tremendous difference these organisations are making to the lives of veterans and their families who need that extra support.

I also thank my PhD supervisors, Associate Professor Chris Mason and Professor Anne Bardoel for their ongoing support and guidance.

8. ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Schroffel is a veteran and part-time PhD candidate at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne. Since leaving full-time service in 1997 as a commissioned officer in the Australian Regular Army, Mark has built his career as a management consultant specialising in corporate strategy.

In 2018, Mark was engaged by Melbourne Legacy to design a research and engagement program to gather actionable insights about post-1991 veterans and their families. The results of this work are reported in the form of insights and stories that can be found at www.shoutout.org.au.





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11. APPENDIX

Example Journey Map. Adapted from (Klehbahn & Utley, 2017)

Transition Journey Map					Sheet <u>1</u> of <u>2</u>
Participant ID: P14 Interview Date: 27 Aug 2019 Interviewer: M.S.					
	Transition Phase No. <u>1</u>	Transition Phase No. <u>2</u>	Transition Phase No. <u>3</u>	Transition Phase No. <u>4</u>	
	Description: End of Mission - 2 weeks <i>e.g. End of Mission</i>	Description: Staging Camp - 3 days <i>e.g. Extended Leave / Return to Work / Job Seeking</i>	Description: RTA Reception & Admin - 2 days <i>e.g. Initial Transition Experiences / Adjustment</i>	Description: Civvy work reintegration - 2 weeks <i>e.g. First Transition Experiences (2 - 6 months on)</i>	
Key Activities	Started packing footlockers to be sent back Still very busy patrolling Wrote up mission reports	Cleaning gear and AQIS clearances Med/Psych Videos and footy	Travel home Hand in stores WETS and BFA Final admin sign-offs	Visited civvy boss and got update on business. Getting reacquainted with work routines and changes. Found out about job change	
Participant's Goals or Focus	I had to organise my people Issue back home required a lot of attention, but there wasn't much I could do	Just wanted to get home Thinking about next 12 months and doing something different with my life	Just wanted to get home Needed to be with family to provide support on Copas issue Get ready for civvy work	Trying to find my place in the organisation. Felt that I'd been edged out of my previous role.	
Key Interactions / Touchpoints	Mainly people in my chain of command Didn't contact employer - they knew when I was due back	Spoke to boss on phone Transition debriefing and what to expect Good session from Padres	Q-store Wife and kids Civvy boss	Civvy boss and workmates Spoke to mate in other organisation to sound out new opportunities	
Subjective Experience Rating	Extremely Positive +3 Mostly Positive +2 Somewhat Positive +1	Extremely busy and focussed activity on handing over	Held overnight in barracks for admin when we could have gone home	Seeing workmates Not sure what to make of unexpected changes	
	Neutral 0	Too much admin and poorly organised			
	Somewhat Negative -1				
	Mostly Negative -2				
	Extremely Negative -3				
Participant's Reflections	It was OK. Just a lot of work to be done to close-out. It was good because we were all busy.	They need to do more to help us plan our next step. I find out later that so much changes at work that I was unprepared for	These two days were pretty bad. We knew we needed to do it all, but they could have made it easier by letting us go home at night.	Was confused most of time. I didn't realise how strange it would be	

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

AGENDA AND CHECKLIST

Participant Code: _____

Interviewer: _____

Location: _____

Date: _____

PRELIMINARIES CHECKLIST

- Welcome and overview of the study
- Overview of the interview agenda and Transition Journey Map worksheet
- Outline steps taken to safeguard confidentiality
- Confirm consent and obtain signed Consent Form

AGENDA

1. Preliminaries

- Work through preliminaries Checklist
- Reconfirm consent before proceeding
- Allow time for self-introductions and establishing rapport

2. Background and experience

- Ask the participant to provide a brief overview of their personal background experience focussing on their civilian employment and involvement with the Army Reserve.
- Explore motives for joining the Army Reserve and serving overseas.
- Develop a good understanding of the extent of the participants work experience and their motives for work.

3. Transition Journey Map

- Focusing on the participants most recent overseas deployment, complete the journey map in accordance with the facilitator's guide.

4. Challenges and Implications

- Referencing the Transition Journey Map, explore challenges faced by the participant and their perspective on the impact (positive and negative) of their service with Army Reserve in relation to their civilian employment.

5. Close-out

- Close-out the interview and thank the participant for their contribution
- Complete all actions in the close-out checklist

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