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**Written Submission to the Australian Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs,  
Defence and Trade**

**Summary**

- Evidence based on research which examined the effects of counter-insurgency warfare on the reintegration of British land based military personnel
- Research carried out by team at the Senator George J. Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security and Justice at Queen's University Belfast in Northern Ireland
- 129 interviews conducted with veterans across the UK
- Respondents included interviews with veterans from COIN operations in the 1950's and 1960's as well as Northern Ireland's 'Troubles'
- 70 interviews carried out with veterans of the recent Afghanistan conflict.

**Findings**

The written evidence provided to the Committee is based on research (supported by the Forces in Mind Trust which is a body focussed on increasing research, knowledge and assistance to armed forces personnel in the UK) which explored the effects of counter-insurgency (COIN) warfare on land based British Army Personnel, principally those who operated in Afghanistan. We explored their specific transition experiences back to civilian life.

A lack of evidence exists relating to the impact of COIN operations on the reintegration of soldiers both on a UK and international basis. We appreciate that transitional experiences for armed forces personnel in the Australian Defence Force (ADF) may differ somewhat from their UK counterparts due to a range of specific structural and social factors. Nonetheless a number of areas from our research outlined below can provide insights to the committee which will assist in increasing awareness of the issues which affect the transition of ADF personnel to civilian life.

COIN 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. Our study discovered that veterans' sense of identity is crucially important in managing the transition. An over-identification with the army predisposes veterans to an inability to cope in civilian life, with the special features in COIN warfare intensifying over-identification, thus worsening the management of the transition back to civilian life.

COIN warfare creates a 'bubble' environment for soldiers which is both strength and a weakness. On operations, survival depends on close knitted camaraderie but in civilian life it can be problematic by keeping veterans in the bubble. 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. Alternative sources of camaraderie can therefore be important in managing the transition, including ex-servicemen groups, in self-constructed communities, through Facebook, shared leisure activities, and the like.

Some veterans are 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. They cut themselves off from the public ambivalence to COIN war. However, those not doing as well in managing transition tended to be much more reflexive, questioning their role in the war, being more sensitive toward the public's ambivalence toward the war, and to reflect more upon their experiences. Post-deployment increased this internal reflexivity and questioning to constitute what we called an 'ontological crisis'. There was evidence of increased cynicism toward the UK Ministry of Defence (MOD) and the government, whose neglect of the veterans – whether real or imagined – they feared.

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 in the UK needs to improve the planning and preparation for veterans transitioning from the bubble back to civilian life and to improve post-deployment care. Part of the process in successful transition requires ex-service personnel to 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 in the UK and similar bodies in other nations makes for a return to civilian life.

Former soldiers who are transitioning well do, however, criticise the growth of a 'health and safety culture' with some successful 'transitioners' referring to 'chosen trauma', believing those less-successful in transitioning have succumbed to what they refer to as the over-medicalization and over-traumatization of the transitional 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.

In terms of broader veteran/charity support in the UK 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. Yet while 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 with COIN veterans were conscious not to create a hierarchy of veterans.

### **Recommendations**

In light of the findings from our research we proposed the following recommendations to improving veteran health and wellbeing in the UK, some or all of which may prove insightful for transitioning soldiers in the ADF and their support organisations.

- 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 or not they accept that they have responsibilities that transcend the normal social conventions of the workplace.
- Transition strategies must provide practical and engaged support through interactive learning and mentoring.
- Cultural awareness training is necessary for return to civilian life as a preparation for retirement that is then supported and reinforced from within and across the voluntary sector. Self-reliance and self-responsibility in the transitioning soldier must be taught as part of a broader process of cultural rehabilitation into civilian life and such training should involve transitioning soldiers going out and engaging with communities, employers and educational trainers.
- The MOD should consider developing a 'buddy' scheme, where a mentoring support worker is assigned to all transitioning soldiers, not just 'at risk' ones. A 'buddy' system could also be provided for the family unit by military families who have transitioned well. Role models are needed for transitioning soldiers to practically demonstrate successful transition is possible.
- 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.
- Support programmes need to avoid creating a 'culture of dependency'. Dependency has the potential to deplete or undermine the skills necessary for successful transition. Support programmes should also avoid 'transitional naivety' through garnering unrealistic expectations of post-deployment employment prospects.
- 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.
- 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. The 'politics of

chosen trauma' should be avoided in which organisations competing for resources contribute toward a narrative of hieratical trauma.

- It is important to avoid a blame culture developing where the military is scapegoated for transition issues that are not its fault or making.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

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