The "Transition" to Civilian Life From the Perspective of Former Serving Australian Defence Force Members

NATHAN C. KERR (iD)

SHELLY J. LANE (iD)

RONALD C. PLOTNIKOFF (iD)

SAMANTHA ASHBY (iD)

*Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article

ABSTRACT

It is well recognised that the transition from the military to civilian life can create challenges. This study explores the multiple and dynamic experiences former serving Australian Defence Force members report in their transition to civilian life. A narrative inquiry methodology with two rounds of interviews was used to collect the data from 12 former serving Australian Defence Force members. Narrative thematic analysis was used to interpret the data. Our results indicate that transition for each participant is a unique experience that continues in the years following separation. For those who joined in early adulthood and served in high-tempo and/or combat roles, transitioning was complicated by military identity challenges. Their ongoing transition was related to the need to develop an individual civilian identity for civil society, challenged by the development of a collective identity as a member of the Australian Defence Force. We conclude that transition is the process of identifying as an individual following a collective identity, and for those still transitioning, was best supported by their military peers.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Nathan C. Kerr

The University of Newcastle, AU

nathan.c.kerr@uon.edu.au

The transition from military-to-civilian life is associated with challenges including identity and employment, establishing meaning and purpose, family and personal relationships, and financial hardship. This can lead to harmful behaviours, including suicide (Danish & Antonides, 2013; Kleykamp et al., 2021; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Morin, 2011; Orazem et al., 2017; Ravindran et al., 2020; Shue et al., 2021). To counter these challenges there is an increasing recognition that military personnel need improved support during the transition from military-to-civilian life. A key step in the development of effective supports is to better understand transition from the perceptions of those who have experienced the process.

The foundational knowledge about the transition from military-to-civilian life is based on the experiences of current and former serving US military personnel and their return home after service in Afghanistan and Iraq (Institute of Medicine, 2010; Morin, 2011; Sayer et al., 2010). For those leaving the US military, transition experiences are shaped by access to educational benefits (G. I. Bill) following active-duty and to centralised health care provided by the Veterans Health Administration (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2022a, 2022b). The majority of Australian reporting on transition and reintegration draws on this international research data to advance knowledge of the military-to-civilian transition. This is problematic because this body of research considers all groups (i.e., post-deployment personnel and former serving personnel) as homogenous and assumes transition experiences are similar, despite the differences in services and supports. The major differences between the US Armed Forces and Australian Defence Force (ADF) is that service does not provide access to tertiary education or automatic access to centralised military specific health care. Only ADF members with service-related health conditions accepted by the Department of Veterans' Affairs have ongoing health care provided after service.

Since 2017 the focus of multiple Australian reports has been on the health and well-being of current and former serving ADF members, including the impact of the transition to civilian life (Bryant et al., 2019; Department of Defense, 2021 [DOD]; Department of Veterans' Affairs [DVA] & DOD, 2018; Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade, 2019 [JSCFADT]; National Mental Health Commission, 2017 [NMHC]; Productivity Commission, 2019b; Van Hooff et al., 2018). Additionally, in 2020 a Commission was formed to better understand the transition knowledge gaps, and how transition can lead to poor wellbeing and suicide (Interim National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention [INCDVSP], 2021). The known challenges for ADF members include changes in identity, diminished social networks, cumulative effects of trauma and stress, moral injury to beliefs and expectations, stigma, and impaired help seeking (Bryant et al., 2019). Collectively, these Australian studies and reports argue that transition should be centred on the needs of the member and their family, and examine all transition related processes from a whole-of-life perspective. Thus this exploratory study investigated the transition experiences of former serving ADF members. In doing so, the experience of transition was explored through their narratives, sharing their perspective of the military-to-civilian transition. Their perspectives highlighted themes not before reported, including the commonality that separation type (i.e., voluntary or involuntary) influenced transition, or their narration of an ongoing transitioning experience.

METHODS

Ethical approval was granted by the Australian Departments of Defence and Veterans' Affairs' (DDVA) Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) and the University of Newcastle's (UON) HREC in August 2020.

PARTICIPANTS
Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants to ensure they could provide rich narratives about their military-to-civilian experiences. The study consisted of 12 participants who met the inclusion criteria: (a) served in the Permanent (full-time) ADF for a minimum of 2 years (minimum service obligation), and (b) had separated from the ADF.

DATA COLLECTION
Data collection commenced in September 2020 and concluded in August 2021. Data were gathered in two rounds of interviews, with all 12 participants participating in both interviews. The interviewing techniques and questioning style employed were based on an narrative inquiry approach utilised to elicit stories from the participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The intention was to provide participants a forum that encouraged and invited their personalised understanding of the topic under study in a supportive and validating interaction (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Holloway & Freshwater, 2007; Riessman, 2008). Prior to each interview, ongoing verbal consent was obtained from each participant. Should any participant have experienced distress during data collection, ethical procedures would have commenced the arrangement of immediate counselling services. The counselling services of

Open Arms (DVA), Beyond Blue and Lifeline were listed in the participant information statement, as were the contact details for each service.

Interview One

The first interview asked participants to share their transition story, including a summary of their military experiences. The first author encouraged participants to share both the positive and negative aspects of their experience. For member checking and quality auditing, the transcripts were sent to each participant. Data analysis commenced during each interview, noting moments of emphasis on a story and initial ideas. The coding of the first-round interviews, combined with review of the contemporaneous interview notes, led to emerging themes. These themes were discussed and explored further in the second round of interviews. The 12 interviews totalled 23 hours, ranging from 55 minutes to 2 hours and 37 minutes, averaging 1 hour and 55 minutes.

Interview Two

The preliminary analysis informed the basis of the second interview. Thus the second interview clarified and further developed information gathered in the first interview and took place after data coding of the first interview. Participants were asked to note any developments in their transition since their first interview. As part of the member checking process, participants commented on the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the themes identified. Participants were then asked to consider the initial themes posited by the researcher. Interview two collected 21 hours of data, ranging from 55 minutes to 2 hours and 56 minutes, averaging 1 hour and 48 minutes. In total, the first and second interviews gathered over 43 hours of data.

DATA ANALYSIS

The initial interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the first author, with identifiable participant details removed and pseudonyms allocated. Follow-up interviews were not recorded, with notes taken recording the participants' thoughts and responses. Data analysis utilised the software NVivo (QSR International). This offered data organisation and coding, and assisted with analysis and interpretation. The analysis considered patterned themes across the 12 participants' narratives in their transition from the ADF to civilian life.

RESULTS

DESCRIPTION OF PARTICIPANTS

Table 1 (below) presents the participant demographics. All three ADF Services were represented: Navy (2 participants), Army (7 participants), and Air Force (3 participants). Of the 12 participants, there were 4 women and 8 men. To preserve the anonymity, the participants' roles in the ADF

PSEUDONYM	GENDER	JOINED/SEPARATED	YEARS OF SERVICE	TIME SEPARATED	SERVICE	RANK	TRANSITION TYPE
Carlos	Male	19/37 yrs	2001-20	7 months	Army	E-4	Voluntary
Dave	Male	19/31 yrs	2001-13	8 years	Army	E-4	Involuntary
Din	Male	21/28 yrs	2003-09	11 years	Army	E-3	Voluntary
John	Male	17/25 yrs	2006-13	7 years	Army	E-4	Involuntary
Kylie	Female	32/48 yrs	2005-20	2 months	Navy	O-3	Voluntary
Maka	Female	19/25 yrs	2002-08	13 years	Army	E-4	Voluntary
Marjorie	Female	19/25 yrs	1996-02	1 year	Army	E-4	Voluntary
		25/39 yrs	2002-14	7 years			Voluntary
Mick	Male	17/22 yrs	2003-09	11 years	Army	E-3	Voluntary
Naomi	Female	17/31 yrs	2007-20	3 months	Air Force	O-2	Voluntary
Rob	Male	22/28 yrs	2001-07	13 years	Navy	E-3	Voluntary
Rowan	Male	17/50 yrs	1979-12	3 years	Air Force	W-5	Voluntary
		52/58 yrs	2015-20	1 year			Involuntary
Will	Male	20/28 yrs	2002-10	5 years	Air Force	E-4	Voluntary
		33/37 yrs	2015-20	8 months			Voluntary

Table 1 Participants.

are not presented as the combination of demographics and roles could be used to deduce their identities. Pseudonyms were allocated to maintain anonymity. Their collective years of service in the ADF totalled 159 years, ranging from 6–38 years, and averaged 13 years of service. In total the participants had experienced 73 years of transition, ranging from 2 months to 13 years, and averaged 6 years since separation. Three participants had transitioned from the ADF twice (Marjorie, Rowan, and Will); Rowan had experienced a voluntary (1st) and involuntary (2nd) transition.

THEMES

Table 2 presents the five themes and their subthemes that emerged from the data. The themes are presented in the chronological order they were discussed in participant narratives. Thus the type of separation (voluntary or involuntary) is discussed first. The final theme presents the impact of peers in transition to civilian life.

A Voluntary Separation and Transition

A voluntary separation is defined by the ADF as occurring when a current serving member submits a request to separate. The term voluntary implies this type of transition is associated with choice. Yet for the 9 participants who had left the ADF following voluntary separations they were clear that their choices were limited, or that they felt they had no choice but to leave the ADF. Aware the ADF would not compromise for her, Marjorie felt "forced out," and commenced her apparent voluntary separation disappointed and questioning her service. For the participants who separated voluntarily, reaching a "breaking point" initiated their separation. They perceived their transitions had begun with a sense of grief and some reported feelings similar to a relationship break-up, or heartbreak. Din explained, "It's like this grieving process

that happens." His transition also highlighted that the subthemes of "burn-out" and "a personal-professional tug" are not mutually exclusive, and often combined leading to a voluntary separation.

Additionally, voluntary separations were often prompted once the participant perceived they were unable to maintain tempo, and/or could no longer prioritise their military peers over family to enable ADF "capability." Staying in the ADF would lead to diminishing the capability, letting peers down, and continuing their family's second-class prioritisation. When a participant had come to these conclusions, they reported the need to quickly voluntarily separate to avoid "poisoning" their peers, or experiencing their peers disappointment in their decision to separate. An unplanned hasty voluntary separation was also perceived to decrease the negative impact on the ADF's capabilities, to stop their family's sacrifice, and/or end their physical and mental health issues. It also resulted in the least amount of time to feel guilt over leaving peers and ADF capability. This sequence of events led the participants' voluntary separations to feel like a break-up. For the participants, this was a break-up between them and the ADF, their military peers, and Australia's military capability, leading to further emotional challenges to commence transition.

Physically and Mentally Burnt Out. The subtheme of physically and mentally burnt out describes the mounting or ongoing health issues which impacted participants and their roles. When participants identified that separating from the ADF was the only option available, they submitted a prompt request to separate. This occurred once they perceived their military roles to be unmanageable because of physical and/or mental exhaustion and feeling "burnt out." This was particularly true for Din, Rob, and Will who served in combat and combat support roles. The tempo of Will's combat support role in the Air Force led to his second voluntary separation:

THEMES	SUBTHEMES
A voluntary separation	Physically and mentally burnt out
	Personal-professional tug
An involuntary separation	
Experiencing transition, reintegration, and integration	Transition
	Reintegration
	Integration
	Retraining – Re-humaning
Transition and transitioning	
Peer support in transition: The power of peers	

Table 2 Transitioning Themes.

[By the] end of second year, I deployed... Third year I was deployed... And then fourth year deployed... I was really burned out and I ended up going to a psych [psychologist] and talking to him about it. I'd just been under so much stress and wasn't sleeping much at all. I wasn't happy. I wasn't sad. I was just existing... I didn't really have time to do much at all except for work.

He had been trained to prioritise his role and always prioritise ADF capability. When he felt he could no longer do this, Will requested separation. He began his transition exhausted and with decreased mental health.

For Din and Rob, their combat roles in the Army and Navy (respectively), had them operating at a "fever-pitch tempo." Over time, maintaining operational readiness left them "burnt out" and "taxed." Subsequently, they submitted prompt transition requests as they regarded leaving the ADF as the only option to rest and address their compounding health concerns. Din explained:

About 5 years into it [service] I was really starting to struggle with the pace... [operational and standby roles]. It was very taxing... I decided I'd had enough and put my discharge in [request for separation] and got out... I was feeling pretty, like burnt out and a little bit scarred from all the experience that I'd had up to that point.

In addition to feeling "burnt out" he also had an ill mother. Din's decision to voluntarily separate from the ADF was prompt and unplanned, as he initiated his transition to address his health, and to support his mother. Although these were personal factors, he also reported that this decision was to avoid decreasing ADF capability or the negative impact his fatigue might have on his peers.

Personal-Professional Tug. The subtheme "personal-professional tug" highlighted that the ADF's capability demanded the prioritisation of work over personal needs and family. The participants repeatedly reported that the prioritisation of capability over personal interests and family was known to be required in military service. This prioritisation advanced military careers and enabled strong military bonds, consequently suppressing personal and family interests. However, once the participants identified that their personal life needed attention, or that their families needed them, the request to separate was submitted. The prioritisation of capability up to this point kept them committed to military capability but left little to no time or desire to plan a transition. Naomi highlighted the compounded effect of prioritising the ADF:

Along the way [military career], I had these moments of, this is no longer serving me in the ways that it should anymore...There's this personal-professional tug when motherhood comes along... It was just like, I'm on the way out... There was [*sic*] all these little flags along the way... then certainly when things snowballed... and suddenly the job and the profession, it just wasn't aligning with life and everything else, [I] 110% believe that my transition started while I was on maternity leave and a few big things happened in my personal life... I was so checked out by the end that I didn't even care... I just went. There're more important things right now. Priorities... My family needs me.

Naomi's experience demonstrated the tug between managing a personal life, the advancement of her military career and enabling ADF capability. Her story highlighted the influence of parenthood on transition, noting the competing interests of military service and parenting. Similar to Din, once she perceived that personal and family issues required intervention, she made a prompt decision to initiate a voluntary separation which led to an unplanned transition. Carlos summarised the point at which his personal-professional tug meant he was no longer willing to prioritise ADF capability over his family:

It's life and death [military service]. It's the only thing that matters. That's why it supersedes family and the rest. If you're not at your kids first play at school, your kid isn't going to die... [But] I got to a point in my life with family and dissatisfaction in the job, that it was time to get out.

All participants noted that the required prioritisation of their work over family was appropriate and necessary for ADF capability. This thought lasted for years, but at varying stages, based on military roles, tempo, or family tipped the scale. As such, participants reported their voluntary separation left them feeling resentment. Kylie stated, "I ended up having a lot of resentment and shame at the end of my career." As a result she perceived that her transition commenced poorly, reflecting negatively on her service in the ADF.

An Involuntary Separation and Transition

An involuntary separation occurs when the member is told to leave the ADF. For Rowan, his second transition occurred when he reached retirement age. Aware he was approaching transition, his involuntary separation was anticipated, offering him the opportunity to plan his

transition. However, for Dave and John, their involuntary separations were unexpected and unanticipated. Their transition experiences included the negative effects of an immediate loss of jobs, and workplace relationships and social networks. For both participants, their unplanned separations and sudden exits were accompanied with a sense of shock. Their transition experiences began negatively and this shaped their ongoing transitions.

A pivotal difference between Dave and John's involuntary separations, shaping their transition experience, was how their specific type of separation began. For Dave, his involuntary separation commenced when the ADF took disciplinary action against him. He was then removed from work on administrative grounds and told that his service was no longer in their interests. Unlike a medical separation, this lack of ADF interest was expressed through a third party, and was done while isolated from work and peers. Further, Dave's transition began with the avoidance of commanders and rejection from support services due to the stigma of a disciplinary separation. His involuntary separation resulted in family disowning him, and the permanent loss of military peers concerned about the consequences of contacting him by the ADF. The stigma associated with a potential disciplinary separation also restricted his access to health care with the DVA, as a health provider refused to support his service-related claims, aware that he originally faced disciplinary action and was separated on administrative grounds. Isolated from family, friends, and military peers, struggling financially, he began to use illicit drugs. He added, "I can't read and then comprehend... because I'm too tired, too fatigued... On top of that I'm running low on funds, I'm losing good mental, sound mental health pretty quickly. And PTSD like symptoms started to appear." Dave shared that this led to suicidal ideations and attempts.

In contrast, as John was medically separated and labelled medically unfit, he was informed by the ADF that his injury precluded his ongoing service. His career was recognised by commanders and peers and commenced with the necessary additional supports. Yet, like Dave, John did experience an immediately diminished peer network to enable transition. His unexpected medical separation led to a sense of feeling lost. He stated, "The start of my transition, was a normal day... but the day the doctor told me this is a dischargeable condition, I lost my compass." John summarised his disorientation from an involuntary separation:

Being a soldier to being a civilian is that someone turns the lights off before you got to look at the room. You don't know how big that room is. And then they close the door and you're literally feeling around the dark. The only wall you know is what's behind you. You have no idea what's in front of you. And so, you're trying to figure out how big this room I'm in is. Is [*sic*] there walls? Are there steps? What the f—k do I do here? Where am I going?

Feeling lost, John reported "alcohol abuse" and "smoking weed every opportunity I could to disconnect... And then, my relationship absolutely broke down. My partner left." John's medical involuntary separation still impacts him. He added, "I've been out for seven and a half years now and I'm still transitioning, but I think that is so normal."

Experiencing Transition, Reintegration, and Integration

Participants were asked their perception of the common words used by the ADF and research. Their perspective was that one word could not encapsulate the unique experiences of all former serving ADF members. It was clear that the words used by official sources to describe the process of separating from the ADF do not always resonate with former serving members.

Transition. All 12 participants considered transition to be a "civilian" term used by people that had not separated from the ADF. This is illustrated by Din who described that "The word transition is very civilian. When I first got out, I wouldn't have known what you meant. I would have said, do you mean discharge or separation?" The term discharge was frequently reported by all participants as the more accurate word for their experience. Kylie explained:

Discharge for me is a much more fitting term. Discharge means I close the door. It allows me a boundary. It allows closure. That means I can take the next step. Transition makes me feel like it's never ending. It makes me feel sick. Well, when the f--k does it finish? ... Transition to what? It's such and airy-fairy word.

Reintegration. Of the participants, only John used the term "reintegration" once to describe his separation from the ADF. However, when asked in his follow-up interview to describe how he would define reintegration, John stated:

I think that reintegration is the wrong terminology... because reintegration is taking you back into something you already had... I never knew who I was before I joined the military [ADF]... I was way too young to even think about that... I think integration is something to aim towards.

For context, John joined the ADF at age 17 and narrated that he only separated from the ADF because he was injured

(involuntarily transition). When the other 11 participants were asked about the relevance of reintegration to their experiences, only Kylie agreed with the term. Kylie explained that joining the ADF at 32 offered her the opportunity to establish a civilian self and that she was able to maintain this sense while serving. Thus reintegration to civilian life was relevant to her experience. Supporting the relation between reintegration and age, Mick, who also joined the ADF at 17 explained:

> It's reintegration for people that have experienced the civil life. I feel that if you join very young then it's actually integrate [integration]. You've never actually been in civil society. If you've never had an adult life as a civilian before, then in fact, you're integrating to civilian life. Not reintegrating, because you've never had an adult life as a civilian before... I didn't reintegrate into civil society, I integrated.

Integration. It was clear that integration held greater relevance to the participants over reintegration and was related to their age at the time of joining the ADF. The three participants (Kylie [reintegration], Carlos, Rowan) that reported to disagree with integration in relation to their experience, felt the term lacked a sense of "control" (Rowan) or cast him as an "outsider" (Carlos). The remaining participants agreed that their lack of experience in civilian life before joining the ADF required their integration to civil society. Din summarised, "Integration is taking the experiences that I had within the military [ADF] and folding them into the life that I'm going to lead, or now am leading." Din was 21 years of age at the time of joining the ADF.

Retraining – Re-humaning. When asked about his experience in relation to integration, Carlos suggested that for people who join the ADF in early adulthood, "retraining" would be better to describe the experience. He explained:

> Integration is the wrong word, it's almost retraining... It [integration] also has a connotation... that we're coming from some weird place or that we're outsiders... Reintegration would imply that I was integrated to start with, but I [knew I] was joining the Army at 14... but I had to wait till I was old enough. So, I was probably never a member of society.

Carlos's use of "retraining" to describe his experience, was similar to Din's "re-humaning" to describe what was required for his military-to-civilian transition. Both participants considered they needed new skills to enable them to successfully live outside the ADF. This required

them learning to become a new person. Din considered re-humaning to include learning to experience emotions (anger, aggression or sad) outside of those which he had previously "compartmentalised" during his service. In context, both Carlos and Din served in Special Operations impacting their separation experience. Yet, the effects of joining the ADF in early adulthood were recognisable by all the participants, regardless of the terms used, their role or reason for separation.

Transition and Transitioning

Transition did not resonate with the individual experiences of the 12 participants. However, transitioning did express their ongoing adjustments and adaptations required in the military-to-civilian transition. Dave explained the continuation of his transition experience:

> There is [*sic*] three different transitions. [a] One is what the paperwork says... words on paper. Official discharge date... So, on paper, that's transition over. That's you out of the military [ADF] on paper... [b] Now you're actually working as a new title, as a new person, doing new things... Like vocational, professional employment... And the third [c]... Feeling of not being part of the military anymore... The feeling of feeling like I've transitioned... Still going... And that, I think will never fully go away.

For Din, his ongoing transitioning experience related to his awareness that he had not yet transitioned from the ADF, 11 years after his separation:

> Every time, I've thought... I'm complete now. I'm definitely transitioned out of the military [ADF]. There's something else that happens, and I go, was I though? Was I really transitioned out? Because it is something that stays with you for the rest of your life.

Carlos described transitioning as the need for ongoing psychological adaptation after separation from the ADF. Yet, physically, he was aware that he had completed transition as he had discharged from the ADF:

> I still haven't mentally transitioned... So, I guess transition from that perspective, for myself, it's not complete yet... It begins, physically, once you put your discharge form in... [Though] I don't know what the transition is, or how it ends.

For Maka, it was the ongoing reminders about the differences between military and civilian life which led to her believing that transition may never end:

> Maybe it doesn't ever end… because people that haven't had [military] training don't have that same mentality… I find that hard. You meet people that can't deal with little minor problems… you are thinking, oh, well, that wouldn't be the case if I was in the Army.

Rowan shared that his transition experience was ongoing because of the need to address service-related health issues and the positive and negative experiences that marked his service:

> You're never not part of it [ADF]. Despite what you do. Whether you are actively transitioning all of your life because you're either fighting DVA [Department of Veterans' Affairs] or you're fighting Defence [ADF] for something, or you're always reflecting back on something that happened in your service career… I'm always going to be constantly reminded. Never allowed to forget maybe. That's a better way of putting it… So, you're always doing it. I don't think I've ever met anyone that has completely transitioned away from the association [with the ADF].

Summarising an ongoing, transitioning experience, Naomi shared, "I definitely am transitioning because it's all I've known," joining the ADF at 17. In contrast, Kylie shared that she expected her transitioning experience to end, "when I leave the Reserves… When I leave the ESO [Ex-services organisation], that will be my end point with the military." She reported that joining older and having "a career before the military" enabled an expected end state to her transition. Additionally, Kylie reflected that in comparison to the other participants, her ADF role did not demand a "hardcore officer" military identity that would result in an ongoing transitioning experience.

Peer Support in Transition: The Power of Peers

The key theme that benefited the participants transition to civilian life was the power of their relationships with military peers. Yet, the availability of peer support varied depending on how participants separated from the ADF. For Carlos and Mick, who separated voluntarily their farewells enabled them to feel valued at the commencement of transition. Carlos was presented a parting gift and thanked by his peers. Similarly gifted and thanked by his peers, Mick stated, "It was a really, really good day." Both commenced transition with acknowledgement from their current serving peers.

However, it was the participants' former serving peers, already in the civilian world, who provided the greatest transition support. Din referred to this power as "creating a safe space for military people to come out into society." Carlos explained, "You transition from serving friends to your discharged friends once you are discharged." However, this experience in transition was complicated for the female participants. Naomi shared, "something that has happened to me as well, some people that I thought I'd stay connected with, I haven't." Reporting to serve with few other women, Kylie and Maka comparatively lacked peers support in their transition to civilian life. Yet all participants reported that their former serving ADF peers could share their experiences from civil society and enabled civilian job prospects, civilian networks, engagement in recreational activities, and modelled successful transitions. These peers acted as mediators, and offered transitioning guidance, relating how military service, skills and experiences could enable civilian life. Following their separation from the ADF, participants felt that mediating the civilian world for their peers was validating to their own transitions and the progress they had made personally since separation.

In relation to an involuntary separation and peer support, Dave's sudden, unplanned, and stigmatised departure created a loss of current and former serving peers. Struggling with suicidal ideations and attempts, Dave was left with only other former serving ADF peers struggling with suicidal ideation. He stated:

> One of the people who was kicked out… tried taking his life twice. One of the other people who was also kicked out, I was on the phone to him while he was in the process of taking his life… Another one of them, he spoke to me one day about ending his life as well. And I just had to sit there and listen to him… All of them had a very similar discharge process; zero transition.

DISCUSSION

Focusing on the voice of former serving ADF members, this study advances the Australian perspective on the transition from the ADF to civilian life. It highlights the importance of acknowledging that transition is a unique individual experience and is not a term universally embraced by ADF members. It is shaped by the type of separation, a person's age, and life experience at the time of joining the ADF, their military experience, and access to peers to enable transition. The following discussion addresses how a greater understanding of these factors can enable the ADF to take key steps to make the experience smoother, easier, or less uncertain.

A VOLUNTARY SEPARATION AND TRANSITION

This study provides insight into the experiences of those who voluntarily separate from military service. They are not typically referred to in transition reporting with prioritisation of research and resources on those who involuntarily separate as "medically unfit" (Bryant et al., 2019; DOD, 2021; DVA & DOD, 2018; JSCFADT, 2019; NMHC, 2017; Productivity Commission, 2019a; Van Hooff et al., 2018). Although it is initiated by the Individual, the narratives demonstrate that a voluntary separation can feel "forced." Separating to address compounding personal or family health issues resulted in a separation that mimicked the feelings of a break-up. This was complicated from the prioritisation of themselves or their family over ADF capability or their military peers. In an effort to address feelings of disappointing military peers or diminishing ADF capability, separation is requested with little to no planning, further complicating the transition to civilian life.

This greater understanding of a voluntary separation highlights the factors that can decrease the opportunity for ADF members to experience a "good transition," defined by The Forces In Mind Trust (2013) as one that "enables ex-service personnel to be sufficiently resilient to adapt successfully to civilian life…" (p. 5). These findings about what triggers separation from the military builds on the work of Kleykamp et al. (2021). These authors found that for US military personnel the circumstances leading to separation, combined with the strength of a military identity, shaped the planning and preparation to enable transition to civilian life.

The experiences of ADF members indicate that the military-to-civilian life transition may benefit from the adoption of a whole-of-life perspective, also highlighted in "A Better Way to Support Veterans" (Productivity Commission, 2019a, 2019b). This aligns with Romaniuk et al. (2020) who designed the Military-Civilian Adjustment and Reintegration Measure (M-CARM) "to assess psychological adjustment and cultural reintegration following permanent separation from the military" (p. 3). The authors specifically note that the tool may be used for all separations, including voluntary and medical separations. The inclusion of those who voluntarily separate in the M-CARM aligns with the finding that a voluntary separation does not automatically lead to a smooth transition experience. The assessment of "animosity towards the military and their experiences of service and separation" (p. 9), validates and enables the processing of unresolved resentment and regrets related to service. Thus the tool acknowledges the importance of individuality in transition, found in this study to be critical to enable the transition to civilian life. Yet the absence for consideration of an involuntary separation for disciplinary or administrative action does not align with our finding that this type of separation represents an individual most vulnerable in the transition to civilian life.

AN INVOLUNTARY SEPARATION AND TRANSITION

The study confirmed that involuntary separations often adversely impact the well-being of former serving members (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2021; NMHC, 2017). This is due to the unexpected nature that commences this type of separation (Jones et al., 2020; Productivity Commission, 2019a). In particular, medical separations bring immediate challenges to a combination of military identity and physical health. This study provides a better understanding of why a medical separation increases the risk of suicide following separation from the ADF (AIHW, 2021). However, within this study, separation for disciplinary action which evolved into an administrative separation appears to be the most problematic, shaping the military-to-civilian transition. Indeed, US research identifies that those involved in disciplinary or administrative separations face the stigma associated with "dishonorable" or "less than honorable" separations (Branson, 2016; Zoli et al., 2015). Our study highlights that the stigma associated with a disciplinary or administrative separation from the ADF can cause immediate loss of access to military supports and military peers, and results in an increased exposure to individuals also experiencing a compromised health and well-being from transition. This illustrates the need to better examine the mental health and well-being of those who separate involuntarily for non-medical reasons. To date, little is reported on the impact of a transition from the ADF initiated by disciplinary or administrative action, yet a relationship between non-medical separation and suicide has been identified by Australian authors in international research (Productivity Commission 2019b).

TRANSITION TERMS THAT ACKNOWLEDGE INDIVIDUALITY

While the term transition dominates Australian reports, programs, and policy (Bryant et al., 2019; DOD, 2021; DVA & DOD, 2018; JSCFADT, 2019; NMHC, 2017; Productivity Commission, 2019a; Van Hooff et al., 2018), it did not resonate for those experiencing the military-to-civilian transition in this study. They preferred terms such as "discharged" or "separated" from the ADF and felt these better represented their experiences. Researchers argue that reintegration is the preferred term because it incorporates the psychological and physical health, family, employment, housing, financial, education, legal, and spiritual domains to support policy, health care professionals, and researchers to enable the transition to

civilian life (Elnitsky, Blevins, et al., 2017; Elnitsky, Fisher, et al., 2017; Romaniuk et al., 2020; Romaniuk & Kidd, 2018). Despite this only one person in the current study perceived the term reintegration reflected their experience. This was because they had joined the ADF in their 30s as a deliberate career choice and had a civilian life to reintegrate in to after service.

The term integration was considered to represent the transition experiences for those whose transition was challenged by their lack of experiences as an adult in civil society prior to joining the ADF. It also encouraged the "folding" of military experiences into their civilian life. As such, integration represents a sense of individuality that reflects the lack of experience as an adult in civilian life or of that in military service. This support Richards (2018) who argued that words matter and promote power differentials. For these participants, the use of integration over the ADF's transition offered them the power to become individuals. In contrast, integration has historically been utilised in the context of community integration, and is less favoured in the literature (Elnitsky, Fisher, et al., 2017). For those reporting the impact of deployment experience in this study the terms "retraining" or "re-humaning" better reflected their learning to process emotions as an individual, supporting the notion that the military to civilian transition is a process of becoming an individual.

Though no single term best described the 12 participants' experience to leaving the ADF, with all terms considered, transition was the most utilised as the majority of participants narrated a "transitioning" experience. Additionally, transition is the term used by key stakeholder's (e.g., DOD & DVA) developing policies and programs to enable transition. As such, transition is used to acknowledge the ongoing transitioning experience of participants and to align with stakeholders responsible for the military-to-civilian transition. However, the adoption of language which reflects and respects personal ranges of experiences is a key step (Meyer, 2015) for those involved in supporting the military to civilian transition. Individual tailored language needs to be utilised when preparing people for transition and during the military to civilian transitioning. As military training and culture is known to reduce individuality (Atuel & Castro, 2018; Productivity Commission, 2019a; Thompson et al., 2017), the transition from military service to civilian life should support the discovery of personal interests to enable individuality.

TRANSITIONING: AN ONGOING EXPERIENCE

While the term "transitioning" lacks precision (Schultz et al., 2022), the ongoing adjustments and adaptations to civilian life are required following separation from the ADF. The continuous nature of transition relates to the reason for separation, service nostalgia, service-related compensation, and constant reflection on cultural differences between the ADF and Australian civil society. Indeed the ongoing experience of successful transitions is reported by the Canadian Armed Forces Transition Group (2020), who state "transition is not a finite period of time, It is an ongoing life process" (p. 19).

Joining the ADF later in life, in a role that did not require a "hard-core" military identity, and with life goals beyond military service appears to enable and forecast an end to transitioning. This supports Kleykamp et al. (2021) who found that for U.S. personnel, "those with weak military identities planned for their transition early, often because their long-term career path treated military service as a stepping-stone to other goals" (p. 372). In turn, Truusa and Castro (2019) argue that "competence or capital as a grown-up outside the military" prior to serving, positively influences separation from military service (p. 9).

The ongoing nature of transition for some participants was related to constantly "reflecting back" on their military experiences. Mobbs and Bonanno (2018) termed this service-connected nostalgia, highlighting that it offered protection and enhanced a positive self-concept. Yet it is also negative as in service-related nostalgia when associated with continued "fighting" for service-related compensation following separation from the ADF. For the Australian military community injured in their service, liability of a service related injury must be accepted by the Australian DVA (Productivity Commission, 2019a). As this process may take years, their ongoing conflict to be compensated perpetuated the transitioning experience.

PEER SUPPORT: THE POWER OF PEERS

Key to enabling the participants transition was their peers and included both current and former serving peers. Across their time in the ADF, the participants noted the importance of peers from their initial training course and deployments as the most beneficial and long lasting. The most beneficial peer mediators were typically those who separated before the participant. However, peer mediators could also come from a peer with less time in civilian society, able to translate how they had or were addressing differences between military and civilian cultures. In turn, the participants become senior mediators for their peers with less time since separation. However, in relation to women and their peers, the small number of women in the ADF offered them less peer support at the time of separation and in the years that followed.

Previous research has identified peer support as a key strategy in enabling the military community, leveraging off the comradery formed in military service (McCormick et al., 2019). For our participants, their bonds with former

serving peers highlighted the importance to offering a "safe space" for each other, prior to and in the years following separation. Now as former serving members, the participants hold a space for their current serving peers contemplating separation as they approach their threshold of personal sacrifice for ADF capability. Gustavsen (2016) argued that peers offer methods to construct meaning from military experiences that civilian friends are unable to from a lack of shared experience. The importance of shared experience within the military community to enable transition was highlighted (recommendation 7.3) by the Australian Interim National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention (2021), reporting that both the positive and negative experiences of transition be shared in a mandatory pre-discharge course, prior to separation from the ADF. Additionally, peer support can address identity challenges, as peers offer a relatable social identity outside the military (Thompson et al., 2017). Yet these authors warn that informal peer support lacks assessment and may result in identity foreclosure.

This finding supports the need to educate current serving military members on the importance of establishing and maintaining peers in service. The key to enable this transition support will be to advocate for continued connection once separated. Additionally, some roles in the military may not encourage the development of peers as a result of rank, compartmentalisation (for secrecy), or Corp, and as such, should be targeted at the time of separation. This also applies to transition type, as highlighted Dave's involuntary separation. To measure post-separation cultural and psychological adjustments, Romaniuk et al. (2020) produced the Military-Civilian Adjustment and Reintegration Measure (M-CARM). This tool aims to address the known challenges of transition and can be utilised irrespective of time since separation.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This is an exploratory study and limitations are acknowledged. Firstly, while the study only recruited a small portion of the former serving ADF community, the 12 participants were interviewed twice, offering narratives and responses that provided great depth to the military-to-civilian transition experience. As such the findings might not be generalisable to the thousands that transition from the ADF each year, as individual experiences clearly shape the transition to civilian life. Additionally, the Australian perspective, including the military culture and Australian societal factors, may limit the study findings to transition from the ADF. Yet this perspective may be found to better align with other Coalition partners with similar military service, deployments, tempo, culture, or civil society.

CONCLUSION

The participants' transition narratives made evident that separation from the ADF is an individualising experience, best enabled by their former serving ADF peers. For those with deployment experience, transition felt more like "re-humaning," involving retraining to become a civilian. With no known end in sight, transition became transitioning, signifying a separation in progress. Their ongoing experience was also complicated by events from military service, leading to their type or reason for transition. Future transition research should explore how peers act as mediators to the civilian world and how military service can ensure a peer network to enable transition.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

Due to restriction from ethics approval and at the requests of participants, data from this study is not shared publicly, thus supporting data is not available.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

FUNDING INFORMATION

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

NK is the researcher of this project, conceptualised the study, conducted the literature review, designed the

method, collected data, conducted analysis, and authored the manuscript. SA supported and supervised the project's method, data collection and analysis, and assisted in manuscript preparation and review. RP and SJL supported and consulted the project and assisted in manuscript preparation and review. All authors reviewed, amended, and approved the final manuscript.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Nathan C. Kerr orcid.org/0000-0003-3797-8996
The University of Newcastle, AU

Shelly J. Lane orcid.org/0000-0002-3689-1760
The University of Newcastle, AU

Ronald C. Plotnikoff orcid.org/0000-0002-3763-8273
The University of Newcastle, AU

Samantha Ashby orcid.org/0000-0002-7675-6133
Colorado State University, AU

REFERENCES

Atuel, H. R., & **Castro, C. A.** (2018). Military cultural competence. *Clinical Social Work Journal, 46,* 74–82. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-018-0651-z

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2021). *Final report to the independent review of past Defence and Veteran suicides* (PHE 295). https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/e83ffc3c-292d-4d31-9b82-4b3f8b5baca7/aihw-phe-295.pdf.aspx?inline=true

Branson, Y. (2016). The world of the military: Culture and transitions: Military cultural competency. In J. Beder (Ed.), *Caring for the military: A guide for helping professionals* (pp. 3–9). Routledge. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315652276-1

Bryant, R., Lawrence-Wood, E., Baur, J., McFarlane, A., Hodson, S., Sadler, N., Benassi, H., Howell, S., Abraham, M., Iannos, M., Hansen, C., Searle, A., & **Van Hooff, M.** (2019). *Mental health changes over time: A longitudinal perspective: Mental health and wellbeing transition study* (P03639). https://www.dva.gov.au/sites/default/files/mental-health-changes-over-time-a-longitudinal-perspective-report.pdf

Canadian Armed Forces Transition Group. (2020). *My transition guide: Transitioing from military to civilian life.* Government of Canada. https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/my-transition-guide.html

Clandinin, D. J., & **Connelly, F. M.** (2000). *Narrative inquiry: experience and story in qualitative research.* Jossey-Bass.

Creswell, J. W., & **Poth, C. N.** (2018). *Qualitative inquiry & research design* (Fourth ed.). Sage.

Danish, S. J., & **Antonides, B. J.** (2013). The challenges of reintegration for service members and their families. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 83*(4), 550–558. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/ajop.12054

Department of Defence. (2021). *Defence Annual Report 2020–21.* https://www.defence.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-10/AR-2020-21.pdf

Department of Veterans' Affairs, & Department of Defence. (2018). *Transition taskforce: Improving the transition experience.* https://www.dva.gov.au/transition-taskforce

Elnitsky, C. A., Blevins, C. L., Fisher, M. P., & **Magruder, K.** (2017). Military service member and veteran reintegration: A critical review and adapted ecological model. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 87*(2). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000244

Elnitsky, C. A., Fisher, M. P., & **Blevins, C. L.** (2017). Military service member and veteran reintegration: A conceptual analysis, unified definition, and key domains. *Frontiers in Psychology, 8,* Article 369. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00369

Forces In Mind Trust. (2013). *The transition mapping study: Understanding the transition process for service personnel returning to civilian life.* https://www.fim-trust.org/wp-content/uploads/transition-mapping-study.pdf

Gustavsen, E. (2016). The construction of meaning among Norwegian Afghanistan veterans. *International Sociology, 31*(1), 21–36. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580915613191

Holloway, I., & **Freshwater, D.** (2007). *Narrative research in nursing.* Blackwell Publishing. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444316513

Institute of Medicine. (2010). *Returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan assessment of readjustment needs of veterans, service personnel, and their families.* National Academies Press. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK220072/pdf/Bookshelf_NBK220072.pdf

Interim National Commissioner for Defence and Veteran Suicide Prevention. (2021). *Preliminary Interim Report.* Commonwealth of Australia. https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20220816132250/https://www.nationalcommissionerdvsp.gov.au/publications/interim-national-commissioner-defence-and-veteran-suicide-preventions-report

Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade. (2019). *Inquiry into transition from the Australian Defence Force (ADF).* Commonwealth of Australia. https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/TransitionfromtheADF/Report

Jones, K., Varker, T., Stone, C., Agathos, J., O'Donnell, M., Forbes, D., Lawrence-Wood, E., & **Sadler, N.** (2020). *Defence Force and veteran suicides: Literature review.* Phoenix Australia – Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health. https://www.nationalcommissionerdvsp.gov.au/system/files/2020-11/Defence-and-Veteran-Suicides-Literature-Review.PDF

Kleykamp, M., Montgomery, S., Pang, A., & **Schrader, K.** (2021). Military identity and planning for the transition out of the military. *Military Psychology, 33*(6), 372–391. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/08995605.2021.1962176

McCormick, W. H., Currier, J. M., Isaak, S. L., Sims, B. M., Slagel, B. A., Carrol, T. D., Hamner, K., & **Albright, D. L.** (2019). Military culture and post-military transitioning among veterans: A qualitative analysis. *Journal of Veterans Studies, 4*(2), 278–298. DOI: https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v4i2.121

Meyer, E. G. (2015). The importance of understanding military culture. *Academic Psychiatry, 39*, 416–418. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/s40596-015-0285-1

Mobbs, M. C., & **Bonanno, G. A.** (2018). Beyond war and PTSD: The crucial role of transition stress in the lives of military Veterans. *Clinical Psychology Review, 59*, 137–144. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2017.11.007

Morin, R. (2011). *The difficult transition from military to civilian life*. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2011/12/08/the-difficult-transition-from-military-to-civilian-life/

National Mental Health Commission. (2017). *Review into the suicide and self-harm prevention services available to current and former serving ADF members and their families*. Commonwealth of Australia. https://www.dva.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/publications/health/Final_Report.pdf

Orazem, R. J., Frazier, P. A., Schnurr, P. P., Oleson, H. E., Carlson, K. F., Litz, B. T., & **Sayer, N. A.** (2017). Identity adjustment among Afghanistan and Iraq war Veterans with reintegration difficulty. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy, 9*(S1). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0000225

Productivity Commission. (2019a). *A better way to support veterans. Volume 1* (No. 93). Commonwealth of Australia. https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/veterans/report/veterans-volume1.pdf

Productivity Commission. (2019b). *A better way to support veterans. Volume 2* (No. 93). Commonwealth of Australia. https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/veterans/report/veterans-volume2.pdf

Ravindran, C., Morley, S. W., Stephens, B. M., Stanley, I. H., & **Reger, M. A.** (2020). Association of suicide risk with transition to civilian life among US military service members. *JAMA Network Open, 3*(9). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2020.16261

Richards, V. (2018). The importance of language in mental health care. *Lancet Psychiatry, 5*(6), 460–461. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(18)30042-7

Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Sage Publications.

Romaniuk, M., Fisher, G., Kidd, C., & **Batterham, P. J.** (2020). Assessing psychological adjustment and cultural reintegration after military service: development and psychometric evaluation of the post-separation Military-Civilian Adjustment and Reintegration Measure (M-CARM).

BMC Psychiatry, 20, 531. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-020-02936-y

Romaniuk, M., & **Kidd, C.** (2018). The psychological adjustment experience of reintegration following discharge from military service: A systemic review. *Journal of Military and Veterans' Health, 26*(2), 60–73. https://jmvh.org/article/the-psychological-adjustment-experience-of-reintegration-following-discharge-from-military-service-a-systemic-review/

Sayer, N. A., Noorbaloochi, S., Frazier, P., Carlson, K., Gravely, A., & **Murdoch, M.** (2010). Reintegration problems and treatment interests among Iraq and Afghanistan combat veterans receiving VA medical care. *Psychiatric Services, 61*, 589–597. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1176/ps.2010.61.6.589

Schultz, K. M., Caterino, A., Fox Garrity, B. K., & **Damly, D. D.** (2022). Seven connotations of the word "transition" in student literature. *Journal of Veterans Studies, 8*(1), 15–28. DOI: https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v8i1.273

Shue, S., Matthias, M. S., Watson, D. P., Miller, K. K., & **Munk, N.** (2021). The career transition experience of military veterans: A qualitative study. *Military Psychology, 33*(6), 359–371. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/08995605.2021.1962175

Thompson, J. M., Lockhart, W., Roach, M. B., Atuel, H., Bélanger, S., Black, T., Castro, C. A., Cooper, A., Cox, D. W., de Boer, C., Dentry, S., Hamner, K., Shields, D., & **Truusa, T.-T.** (2017). *Veterans' identities and well-being in transition to civilian life—A resource for policy analysts, program designers, service providers and researchers*. Veterans Affairs Canada. https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2018/acc-vac/V32-279-2017-eng.pdf

Truusa, T.-T., & **Castro, C. A.** (2019). Definition of a veteran: the military viewed as a culture. In C. A. Castro & S. Dursun (Eds.), *Military veteran reintegration: Approach, mamangement, and assessment of military veterans transitioning to civilian life* (pp. 5–17). Elsevier. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-815312-3.00002-4

US Department of Veterans Affairs. (2022a). *About VA health benefits*. https://www.va.gov/health-care/about-va-health-benefits/

US Department of Veterans Affairs. (2022b). *GI Bill and other education benefit eligibility*. https://www.va.gov/education/eligibility/

Van Hooff, M., Lawrence-Wood, E., Hodson, S., Sadler, N., Benassi, H., Hansen, C., Grace, B., Avery, J., Searle, A., Iannos, M., Abraham, M., Baur, J., & **McFarlane, A.** (2018). *Mental health prevalence, mental health and wellbeing transition study*. Commonwealth of Australia. https://www.dva.gov.au/sites/default/files/twrp_mhpr.pdf

Zoli, C., Maury, R., & **Fay, D.** (2015). *Missing perspectives: Servicemembers' transition from service to civilian life—data-driven research to enact the promise of the post-9/11 GI Bill*. Institute for Veterans & Military Families, Syracuse University. https://surface.syr.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1006&context=ivmf

Journal of Veterans Studies is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by VT Publishing.

VIRGINIA TECH.
PUBLISHING