IDENTITY

Military Retirement: Reflections from Former Members of Special Operations Forces

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the impact of military identity and culture on the retirement and reintegration of members of Special Operations Forces (SF) into civilian life. The experience of retirement is explored through interviews with five former members of the SF. These interviews were analysed to identify the shared experience of retirement including the causes, context and consequences. The data indicated that personal attachment to the unit was heightened by key aspects of SF culture (camaraderie, intensity, elitism and distinctiveness from the mainstream community). After leaving the regiment, participants described the experience of grief and subsequently employed a variety of psychological approaches to managing this emotional response and adapting to civilian life. In general, these approaches sought to replicate the military culture in the civilian environment and avoid triggers that would excite or remind former SF soldiers of their past military identity. This study seeks to enhance understanding of military retirement from an SF perspective and recommends further research into the role of replication and avoidance in the retirement experience.
Introduction

Military psychology argues that the unpredictable operational environment requires defence forces to emphasise conformity in behaviour and attitudes, as well as implement a system of beliefs to allow units to operate with optimum effectiveness and reduce the psychological impact of the battle environment.¹ The military unit represents an autonomous entity, deliberately structured to enhance survival and to reduce discontent on deployment and the negative psychological impact of the combat environment. A soldier’s identification with the military is enhanced through the cohesive nature of military units, which shapes the social identity of soldiers and fosters the internalisation of group norms through psychological processes.² The military’s collective identity promotes strong social bonds and an intensified identification with the organisation. These social bonds within the unit and in the military identity are reinforced both through organisational processes and the relationships between soldiers and their leaders.

The organisational processes that serve to strengthen the military identity are also those found in entitativity literature, depicting a social group as a coherent, unified and meaningful entity that influences information processing and social perceptions. The entitative principles which are instrumental in the military setting are proximity, similarity, common fate, and cohesiveness. Members of military units remain in close proximity to one another when training and on deployment. Conformity to military norms is a method of reducing social distance between soldiers by emphasising personal similarities in values, attitudes and behaviour.³ Similarity comprises the internal homogeneity and behavioural consistencies which form a collective identity and promote segregation between groups with differing dynamic characteristics.⁴ Similarity between soldiers can be observed in the wearing of the uniform and the use of military symbolism, separating soldiers from mainstream society and other military groups.⁵ Physical, emotional, cultural and social attributes are shared with a linguistic identity that further segregates military forces from the mainstream. Soldiers share a common fate; having a common group goal or facing a shared threat significantly influences group processes and effectiveness by enhancing intra-group solidarity and reducing the likelihood of internal factioning.⁶ Cohesiveness is observed through shared norms, mutual acceptance, soldiers’ attraction to the collective identity, and resistance to disruptive influences. Strengthening a unit’s cohesion can improve soldier performance and personal satisfaction. However, elevated cohesion can also pressure soldiers into conformity and group-think, as well as raising anxieties when structures change or soldiers leave. The strong discipline
that characterises the military also helps to develop unit cohesion through enforcing standards and norms. Other factors identified in literature that contribute to the cohesive military unit include *esprit de corps* (the spirit of camaraderie and devotion to a goal), the separate and distinctive military discipline systems and a doctrine that binds soldiers to a common purpose.

Soldier identification with the unit is not only influenced by the ideological and organisational factors of the military but also the relationships forged within the unit. A cohesive unit is characterised by trust between soldiers and those in command. Four principal tenets are generally recognised as essential to successful relational bonds. Competence provides an indicator of a fellow soldier's ability to perform his or her allocated tasks. Predictability ensures soldiers can rely on one another's response and gauge the reliability of others. Honesty amplifies the trust among soldiers, in particular the confidence that promises, once given, will be kept. Benevolence represents the likelihood that soldiers will voluntarily provide assistance to their mates.

From a social identity theory perspective, the combination of entitativity and intra-unit relationships reinforces identification with the military identity and culture. The soldiers' personal attachment to the unit and to the military is reinforced by personal socio-psychological investment in the job and relationships. This attachment presents the military career and lifestyle as the preferred choice. However, the drawdown of military forces in the Middle East and the imposition of budget restrictions will have a major impact on soldier retention, and the successful reintegration of soldiers into civilian life must now become a prime consideration.

Previous studies have demonstrated the impact of the military career on personal adjustments to civilian life. These studies identified transition issues associated with the inability to disengage with the military identity, mental health issues, anxiety, grief, and the long-term effects of the combat role on reintegration into civilian life. The populations used in these studies varied in rank and operational involvement; however none focused primarily on SF soldiers.

The effectiveness of SF units is rooted in the comprehensive system of selection, training, infrastructure support, leadership, and organisational culture. Bartone et al. describe soldiers who are successful in SF selection as displaying higher levels of resilience, good health and elevated performance under a range of stressful conditions. They comment that these soldiers demonstrate a strong sense of commitment to life and work, are actively engaged in their environments, and exhibit high levels of belief in their capabilities. Bartone et al. also argue that
these soldiers are internally motivated and able to create their own sense of purpose. These points of distinction between SF and other operational soldiers may point to the need for differences in the exiting processes.

As such, this article aims to explore the personal experiences of soldiers retiring from the SF units which were central to their social identity. SF soldiers represent an under-researched population as their operations are classified and information regarding specific aspects of training and operations is not generally publicly accessible. Most available information comes from secondary sources such as media reports and memoirs. While these provide valuable insight into the nature of SF operations, there are also concerns over the accuracy and validity of information.¹⁵

Methodology

Participants
The participants in this research were recruited for the purposes of a PhD study exploring the experiences of disengagement from a variety of groups. Sampling was based on participants experiencing retirement from an SF unit. Methods of recruitment included the use of personal and professional networks and snowballing. Five former SF members were interviewed, representing three Australian soldiers from the Special Air Service Regiment and Commandos, one from the Israeli SF, and one who had served in both the Australian and British SF.

Interviews
A semi-structured interview schedule was developed to facilitate broad-ranging dialogue exploring the participants’ perceptions of the causes, processes and experiences of retiring from their SF unit. The semi-structured interviews invited detailed descriptions from the participants which emphasised their personal experience of retirement. Participants were asked to provide background information concerning their military service including the duration of that service before describing in detail their experiences of leaving the military. The remaining interview was conducted in a conversational manner to allow the participants to expand on their experience while limiting researcher bias. All interviews were audio-recorded with identifying information removed from the transcripts. On average, interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour.
Data analysis

Data was analysed using a grounded theory methodology that allowed retirement to be understood through the participants’ personal experiences rather than imposing pre-existing theories onto the data. By emphasising the participants’ description of retirement, a substantive theory can be formed around the shared experiences including the causes, context and consequences. Interviews were compared for shared themes and coded to form an integrated and detailed set of variables and hypotheses concerning the conditions and processes of retirement. Throughout the research process memos were used for the comparison of participant experiences, to identify central themes in their experience of the retirement process and to enhance analytical rigour.

Findings

The aim of the study was to explore personal experiences of retiring from the SF. Core themes from the interviews included positive factors relating to personal attachment to units, threats to unit commitment, post-exit psychological responses of grief, avoidance, replication, and the rejection of the military discourse.

The interviews identified four distinct themes relating to personal attachment to the military identity: camaraderie, elitism and significance, distinction from mainstream society, and intensity. Participants described strong relationships with those within their unit, often describing them as family or ‘brothers’. A former Israeli SF soldier described the intensity of the relationships and the predictability of interactions, comparing the bond to love:

To try to be more exact, it’s even the most closest I can tell you about it is love. Why I say love, well because the understanding there is between two people sometimes, only by looking at each other. Only by seeing each other. You know, I can think now what my friend would do and immediately it gives me power. I see now what they going to do and I know what I would do. So this kind of thing, without knowing, what I expect from my friend, I know he will do. So this is why I say it’s like love. You are using another way of communicating. Another way of relationship that you can rely on, that you can trust on and in the middle of the night he is there and I am here, and I know that he is going to do that. I know it, because I know him, and that I know that he know me. Things like this start to happen with us, and only know when I talk to you about it, I never thought about it before, during these things. Its knowing, you know. You know someone love you, you know someone be there for you. So this is what is so sacred about it. Sacred. (SF4)
The bonds within the unit are reinforced through close proximity and the intensified interactions that occur during operations and training. SF groups are separated from the mainstream community and engage in activities that are only truly understood by those in the unit. This bonding provides SF soldiers with a sense of distinction from the community:

The job is so far removed from anything that any normal person does, in the way, the actual requirements of the job and what we have to do and where we are sent is actually so different it can be classed as even being surreal in terms of the reality of the actually job. It’s very hard for most people to comprehend the demands that it puts on you mentally and physically because it is it can be, you know you are fighting a war, so you are fighting, you are in the unit in the most intense time in terms of this conflict that Australia has been involved in and that has been the last 12 years where Australia has been involved in this period and since then and prior to that I think the last time was the Vietnam war. (SF1)

As this former Australian SF soldier explained, the job was regarded as ‘surreal’ compared to the career of the average civilian due to the violent nature of war, as well as the mental and physical demands imposed by such an environment. This distinction between civilian and SF tasks strengthened the identification of the SF soldier as separate from the mainstream community and quite often was accompanied by an emphasis on the intensity of the role:

Just everything, way of life, work, everything you do, your lifestyle is revolved around being part of the unit, which the tempo is really high so everything you do is flat out. Time is always critical. (SF2)

The combination of camaraderie, distinction and significance, and the intensity of operations contributed to the perception of elitism. This elitist view was derived principally from the significance of the unit and its operations:

There is a sense of, I say job satisfaction but that doesn’t quite do it justice, there is a real sense of how important your job is I think, which is huge and just trying to fill that void is really tough. I guess it is sort of job satisfaction and I guess that feeling of how important it is what you are doing. Not in a patriotic way or a helping these people out, I don’t know it is hard to describe it, but filling that was what was the most difficult as there are very few jobs that give you that I think. (SF5)
The participants described their commitment to the unit in various ways but emphasised the role of factors such as camaraderie and elitism when describing their personal attachment to their military role.

### Threats

The participants’ desire to separate from the SF unit was triggered by events or circumstances that initiated the re-evaluation of their role in the military. Participants emphasised long-term physical injuries or illnesses and family commitments as the precursor to evaluating their commitment to the unit and military lifestyle. While the high intensity, physical nature and their satisfaction with the job were described as key motivating factors for maintaining employment, the inability to perform tasks due to injury and illness could lead to negative self-evaluation. Long-term illnesses and injuries prevented participants from achieving the desired level of intensity and physicality. The detrimental effect of their physical condition, coupled with their inability to maintain involvement in their desired team role, threatened the self-image of elitism:

> It was a definitely a shock to the system thinking that I was the fittest, fastest, strongest I’ve ever been and suddenly put on my knees ... Depressing, very depressing. Going from nothing can stop you, physically able to do anything to suddenly being told, or knowing that you can’t do even the most basic thing. (SF1)

One participant required five operations in a year and a half. This meant that he was unable to perform in the operational aspects of his role which led to psychological distancing from other soldiers in the regiment:

> I asked to be put in a job where I wasn’t involved in the operations stuff and I didn’t want to be around the people at work flat out busy because you just feel like you are missing out. (SF2)

This move into an administrative role did not fulfil the personal needs of the participant nor provide the same level of job satisfaction. The lack of physical competence and inability to perform was unexpected and threatened the participant’s self-concept as he was no longer able to achieve previously held standards.

In addition to physical competence, some participants described the conflict between military and family life, with the commitment to long periods away from home causing disillusionment:
It’s very restrictive if you had a family and things like that, so whilst it is was a great life and an awesome job to me it wasn’t really conducive to having a family. (SF1)

All participants emphasised that being away from home for long periods of time conflicted with their desire to establish or maintain the familial role:

I still loved the job but just was six, seven, eight months a year away from home and it was just pretty tough you know. (SF5)

For participant SF5 the time away was only viewed as a negative factor when discussed in terms of family commitments, otherwise he continued to regard his role in the military in positive terms: ‘I reckon I’ll be 60 and going I want to do it, yep one hundred per cent.’ While participants were quick to point out that their partners were supportive of their careers and understood the necessity for time away, changing personal priorities emphasised the conflict between the two salient social identities, military and family.

Post-Exit
Participants were provided with various levels of support in terms of medical assistance, skills transfer and certification, and paid leave in preparation for exiting the military. However, the socio-psychological significance of the military identity meant that retirement produced psychological unease:

It was just, it just felt very, just like something was missing a lot, like I didn’t have the, you know don’t worry there’s a honeymoon period where you know I’m on holidays, how good is this or its different but then reality sets in and you are like, you do start to miss it which is why I was so and have been at various stages, it seems to happen less and less now the longer I go, but very, very tempted to go back all the time, all the time. And even still now, especially, the thing that triggers it now, just really any time I see the guys on the news, especially if someone is hurt or killed over there, the last couple, two that have been killed over there were friends of mine, one in particular and when that happens you kind of, there is a sense of sense of guilt I guess, which is totally ridiculous I understand that but you kind of feel I don’t know, it’s just human nature I think but it comes with the job. There are sort of times when I think about it but earlier on it was kind of virtually daily, and you always kind of remember all the good parts, especially because the army was really the only thing I’ve ever done, you know serious work capacity, I really had nothing else to compare it to. (SF5)
This participant described the common reality observed in this study. Participants reported initial relief when leaving, or described the ‘honeymoon period’ of the initial weeks of leave, but then experienced episodes of grief.

All participants described their experiences of grief post-exit, citing the loss of intense camaraderie, of purpose, and of guilt over fallen comrades.

Participants described their experiences of grief and missing the job as part of a process and employed psychological strategies to help cope with these emotions. They explained their efforts to reduce the psychological impact of leaving the military as a defence mechanism that manifested in two ways: by replicating the military environment and/or engaging in experiential avoidance (the attempt to change, alter or avoid private experiences, for example, staying away from interactions and information relating to the military). Both approaches were observed, with most participants displaying elements of both strategies to reduce the psychological impact of moving towards a civilian identity.

Some participants felt their career options were limited by their Army-based skill set and moved into the security and fitness industries which they considered most resembled their military environment. One participant described this as common within military retirees and emphasised the transfer of the military culture:

>I guess it is a support network. Sometimes it can be a bit double edged in that you’ve left the military, but not really sort of thing because you are still hanging about with ex military people.

>Are they still very military minded?

>Yeah very much so. The way they talk, the way their personalities are. Yeah, it’s very similar. (SF3)

This participant also described how the linguistic identity and behavioural norms of the military culture are transferred to a civilian career. While he recognised the psychological support implicit in maintaining the cultural identity, he also noted that those who maintain the military identity in civilian life ‘have left, but haven’t really left’.

Another participant described his efforts to replicate the activities and military lifestyle he enjoyed while in the regiment:

>One of the things that made working in the regiment good was that we came to work and we were allocated two hours a day to train in the morning. We did our training and we did whatever we did during the day whether it be shooting or fast driving, or parachuting or whatever and then...
at the end of the day I would go back and train before I went home. And then I would ride home from there, so to me that was the perfect lifestyle and I wanted to emulate it. So the best way to do it was to try and set up the exactly the same thing. So we start[ed] a gym where we could rock up to work and train all day and then we started up a security consultancy where we did stuff we were very familiar with during the day and after the end of the day we would train again. And that was the day, so to me we are creating, I am trying to create that same lifestyle that we were so used to, and so enjoyed. And one of the big things about working there but outside the army this time and trying to surround ourselves with similar people who think the way these boys think. And they don’t necessarily have to be soldiers and 6ft 6 and 120kg guys they can be guys and girls now, but the common thing is that they are geared towards doing the best they can and being the best person they can and a lot of these guys that is what they do. So to me the gym is part of this vision. (SF1)

This participant not only tried to replicate the physical intensity and lifestyle of the regiment, but also tried to reproduce familiar relationships with like-minded people. Instead of attempting to reconcile the military identity with a civilian role, his personal attachment to the military was reinforced by his attempts to recreate the military experience in his social environment.

While some participants attempted to replicate the military culture, there was also a tendency to avoid information or interactions that aroused negative emotions. These emotions were prompted by the reminder of military involvement, or reigniting the desire to return to the military role. One participant who suffered permanent injuries from his military career commented that interaction with members of his regiment reminded him of his declining physical competencies:

    Sometimes, depends on who it is. I sort of dread the guys in the regiment that come up, I don’t really want those guys up here, reminds you of where you were at before. I don’t know, and a lot of them are pretty messed up anyway. (SF2)

Another approach to dealing with the emotions of separation was to avoid information relating to the current military context. For those who still maintained a positive attachment to the military identity, the avoidance of media reports and literature helped minimise negative emotions with the reintegration into a civilian identity:

    But it’s still, I now have a real tough time or I just avoid seeing things on the news, if there is an article in the paper about it I just don’t read it, I know that it will stir up those feelings and I just don’t want to have to deal with them
all the time. I used to be a bit of a military nerd, you know reading all the
different magazines and books and all those now I just really, I haven’t read
any army or military books in so long, just because I know it will just get me
excited and I don’t need this so I’ll read other stuff and that will do. (SF5)

These deliberate attempts to control the environment and manage emotional
responses reveal the significance of the military culture in the participants’ retirement
experiences. Replicating the military culture in civilian life reinforced social identity
by allowing the military identity to continue. Despite replicating part of the military
culture, some participants also avoided military interaction and military information.
This conscious avoidance protected the participants’ psychological wellbeing
by increasing emotional stability. However, experiential avoidance suggested
an unwillingness to confront thoughts and feelings, which has been shown to
contribute to future psychopathology, including post-traumatic stress disorder.17
The combination of both replication and avoidance indicates that the participant is
unable to psychologically detach from the military culture.

Rejecting the narrative

Government political agendas provide the basis for the military’s existence and
legitimise the behaviour and actions of soldiers that would otherwise be considered
immoral.18 However, two of the five participants described a cognitive shift away
from the political objectives of the government which determined their military
operations and expressed disillusionment with the resultant operational goals:

In that time, when you are young, you believe more in everything.
You believe in the government, you believe in the goals which today
I totally, it’s totally different. Today I don’t believe so much. (SF4)

I think as you get on a bit you start to question things more than when you
are young and naive. Like Timor I thought it was awesome. We go there [to]
help people and rescue the refugees and stuff. And later you find out it was
all about gas and oil, you know that was the real reason, as a country they
were interested in Timor. You go that was pretty average, but I mean we
still help people so that’s good. Afghanistan is not really, well you don’t go
around helping too many people over there. (SF2)

The rejection of the political narrative that previously supported personal
involvement in the regiment’s operations can have implications for the psychological
integrity of the former SF soldier. For one participant, the disassociation with military
goals and the methods used led to regret over his involvement.
While he acknowledged positive aspects of the job relating to camaraderie and lifestyle, the participant’s rejection of the political ideology led to his questioning the compatibility of his personal values with the military narrative:

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_I like helping people so, if I went back in time I would have joined the Firies [fire brigade] because that is more about helping people. I’m not kind of interested in the whole gung-ho crap and anyone that is probably shouldn’t be in that role anyway because it is not about that, it’s about just getting the job done and quite often you see people that have watched too many movies and they get carried away, they won’t even get in the army, they definitely almost wouldn’t get into Special Forces because they don’t want that. For me I’d rather go out and save people and rescue people rather than go out and kill people for example. (SF2)_

This rejection of the military narrative demonstrates a complete psychological disengagement from the military identity, as opposed to the physical disengagement which sees soldiers move on from military careers but maintain an attachment to the ideological aspects.

**Discussion**

In Australia, the withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan and the imposition of government budget cuts are likely to have implications for the retention of returning SF soldiers. As such, the defence environment can only benefit from enhancing its understanding of the military-civilian identity of former soldiers, particularly those in the SF who are long-term career soldiers and who comprise an understudied population. While these experiences are commonly expressed anecdotally by SF soldiers and other military combat personnel, this study explores SF soldier retirement from a socio-psychological perspective.

Two methods of adjustment were adopted by participants after retiring from the SF in an attempt to reduce the psychological impact — experiential avoidance and replication. Experiential avoidance is an attempt to prevent negative emotional arousal and aims to promote emotional stability. However, experiential avoidance can cause psychological distress and affect quality of life as well as contributing to depression, anxiety and substance abuse. While experiential avoidance is associated with psychopathology, the replication of military culture may serve as a buffer against the negative aspects of retirement. Replication requires only small changes to personal behaviour while core aspects of the organisation, culture and
identity are maintained. Nicholson argues that the peripheral changes in these environments will, over time, promote personal development which can ease reintegration into civilian life.20 There is much to gain from further research exploring the role of replicating military culture and avoidance as coping strategies, as well as the impact of these on the psychological transition after retirement.

The rejection of the military narrative by two participants suggests that former soldiers engage in a post-exit evaluation of the ideological premises which supported their military involvement. The rejection of the military narrative can have implications for the post-military identity and self-esteem, particularly if guilt or shame over military involvement is experienced.

While this study is limited by the small sample size which restricts the general applicability of the findings, it provides a valuable insight into the experiences of former SF soldiers exiting the military. While precautions were taken to reduce researcher bias and obtain accurate information, the information received from the participant is influenced by perceptions and the willingness to disclose personal details:

*I find that with a lot of ex military people, they are not that type of people who open up, sort of thing. Quite stubborn in their emotions, kind of that culture as well. A lot of military people don’t like revealing too much of themselves sort of thing. Maybe it’s pride, or stubbornness or whatever. But I reckon you’d find that with a lot of military people. I think a lot of them are quite humble as well. Kind of the attitude of, we just got on with it, sort of thing.* (SF3)

The interpretation of events and experiences is also subjective and influenced by cognitive processes designed to protect the concept of self. While this limits the use of qualitative methodologies and must be taken into account in the analytical process, it does not discredit the value of the research which explores the personal interpretation of a ‘lived experience’.21
Conclusion

In this study, the majority of former SF soldiers maintained a positive attachment to military culture and their involvement in the regiment. The desire to replicate the military culture demonstrated the personal significance of the military role to their identity and also highlighted their difficulties in adjusting to the civilian environment. The avoidance of reminders indicated a defence mechanism that was not used to negate the military experience but to protect the self from preoccupation with the past career or negative self-evaluation.

This article seeks to highlight the experiences of retiring SF soldiers and facilitate further discussion of the transition from military to civilian life and the impact of the continuing military culture in the civilian sphere. While further research is needed, these participants’ experience of retirement can provide valuable information to enhance the understanding of those working in critical support areas such as veterans’ affairs.
THE AUTHORS

Kira Jade Harris is a PhD student and teacher at Edith Cowan University specialising in psychology and terrorism. This article draws on the research from her PhD thesis exploring the disengagement experience from various ideological social groups including Special Forces, motorcycle clubs, political and religious fundamental groups and cults.

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ENDNOTES


18 Soeters et al., ‘Military culture’ in Caforio (ed.), *Handbook of the sociology of the military*.

