



## Military to Civilian Transition: A Family-First Approach

by Darryl G. Cathcart

~ Ben, study participant, 2017

## Introduction

**F**or many, uniformed service in the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) is a family affair where military spouses, partners, and children are immersed in a unique sub-culture that does not exist in any other profession in Canada. Military families are subjected to extended separations due to individual training requirements, unit exercises, and deployments in both a domestic setting or internationally in unforgiving environments. Throughout a service member's career, each family member is living in an ever-changing household where parenting duties are not always shared equally, in a setting where long-range domestic event planning is often unpredictable, and under an omnipresent umbrella of stress that manifests in various forms throughout the household. When a military member leaves the CAF, whether voluntary or otherwise, a confluence of factors must be considered to ensure the conditions for transition success are met, including the needs of one's immediate family.

The military-to-civilian transition impact upon families is of great concern, considering that 77 percent of over 2750 Veterans released between 1998 and 2015 self-identified as married, or in a common-law relationship.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, a 2011 Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) survey reported that one-quarter of the respondents indicated that their families experienced a difficult adjustment to civilian life.<sup>2</sup> The effect of retirement implicates the entirety of one's family as external influence shifts from military service to family goals. Further, the number of current releasing service members who are married or in a common-law relationship highlights the requirement for a family-first approach to transition.

## Relevant Literature

Service members may face a wide variety of stressful situations throughout their careers, ranging from exposure to physical and psychological trauma, international missions dealing with a litany of humanitarian concerns, austere and geographically-isolated postings, along with extended time away from family due to training and deployments.<sup>3</sup> The constant need to deal with ambiguity cultivates desirable personal traits such as adaptability, flexibility, and selflessness that members may be able to call upon during their transitional phase.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, a recent federal government report emphasized the importance of the stabilizing function that families provide during transition.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, when researchers note that military families move "...three-to-four times more often than their civilian counterparts,"<sup>6</sup> the cumulative impact of uniformed service upon the household becomes more quantifiable. For medically-released personnel, they may no longer be able to employ those aforementioned traits that ensured their military

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and personal success due to persistent health limitations and concerns. This further emphasizes that successful reintegration into civilian society is highly individualized, and decision-making criteria should be determined by each aviator in relation to their own situation.

In 2016, the Veterans Ombudsman identified that a supportive family structure is an essential requirement for a successful transition. The implication of this finding has manifested into the creation of programs and services designed, especially for family members. Additionally, research in Western Canada headed by psychologist Dr. Marvin Westwood and his associates underscore the familial challenges faced by Veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as evidenced by the reports of domestic violence, depression, and substance dependency issues. Dr. Tomika Greer, a Human Resource Development professor at the University of Houston, focused upon the impact with respect to female Veterans, given the probable change in their family role, from full-time service member inclusive of deployments, to potentially "becoming a primary caregiver in their home."<sup>7</sup> Additionally, not-for-profit groups, such as the Military Family Resource Center (MFRC), offer transition services aimed at the entire family.<sup>8</sup> These

MFRC services provided throughout Canada have recently been augmented by federal government funding, \$147 million in the next six years,<sup>9</sup> that will allow amenities to be accessed by Veterans and families after release. Using direct language, Doctoral Scholar in Political Science at the University of Alberta, Leigh Spanner, stated that the "...civilian family becomes subservient to the soldier and to the military as an institution."<sup>10</sup> Therefore, an implication of greater access to geographically-dispersed MFRCs may provide a consistent conduit of reliable information and special-

ized programming that military family members can readily access. The depth of complexities surrounding Veterans' families warrants due and specific consideration in research.

## Canadian Context

Fundamentally, the administrative process of release shares similar stages regardless of type; medical, voluntary, end of terms of service, or disciplinary. Aspects of military service are not limited to a daily regime of '9-to-5' work. Rather, service extends beyond the uniform, affecting family and



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The first group of soldiers, mostly from 5 Canadian Mechanized Brigade Group, return to Canada after completing Rotation 6 of Operation UNIFIER, 4 April 2019, Jean-Lesage Airport, Quebec.



friends, and it is truly a unique way of life. A condition of military employment is that members and families must move to various Canadian Forces Bases and Wings located in both major metropolitan areas, with the associated high cost of living, to rural locations, with limited prospects for spousal employment, school choices for children, reduction of some community services offered in either French or English, or readily-available access to family health care.

The release process follows three distinct phases, posited here as the post-military preparation, synchronization of efforts, and realization of potential stages. Each of these *individual* but *mutually-supportive* periods provides the opportunity to consider the needs of the family as it relates to transition. In other words, a main influence upon family life, the military, is replaced by a broader range of considerations when looking forward to life after the service. For the CAF, where approximately 5,000 service members are released annually, (inclusive of the 2,000 who have been medically released), post-military planning becomes more family-centric. This is particularly noteworthy considering Department of National Defence (DND) data indicated that 67 percent of releasing service members between 2012 and 2017 were in a recognized relationship with children (married or common-law) at the time of release.<sup>11</sup> DND figures, coupled with results from VAC's longitudinal Life after Service Studies (LASS) program, clearly indicate that service members will continue to be in committed relationships when transitioning to civilian life.

While this study program was driven by five research questions that examined the individual-decision making process of Veterans faced with a medical release and the policy that best enabled transition, one question pointedly focused upon the personal support structure that aided transition. This particular research question was: "What support structures were identified that better enabled transition?" During the semi-structured interviews, participants were asked about the composition of their immediate family, their role in the family before and after transition, post-military family considerations such as geographic moves, and partner employment factors. Additionally, both interview and questionnaire participants were asked if they belonged to any national, regional, or local Veteran associations, and how this connection supported transition.

## Methods

The flexibility afforded by qualitative research best enabled a narrative approach in studying the phenomenon of being medically discharged from the Regular Force component of the Canadian Armed Forces. Further, the sub-culture associated with military service implicates the entirety of the service member's family and loved-one support network, which led academics to regard narrative analysis as a valuable form of research, given the overlapping and interpretive nature of qualitative studies.<sup>12</sup> This is of particular interest for those researching a military-linked theme, given the formative role

that sociability, sub-culture, family, friends, and tradition factor into shaping the perspective and outlook of service members.

Data collection in this study consisted of two parts: Semi-structured interviews and an online questionnaire. Immediate and initial responses for study participation signaled a great amount of interest in the subject area, wherein more than 55 participants contacted the author. Participants were selected, based upon those who met the study criteria of being medically released from the CAF within the last five years (2012–2017), had served more than 15 years, were an officer or non-commissioned officer, male or female, and had served in any environment. The first five who both met the criteria and contacted the researcher were selected for the interview, while the remainder of the participants were offered the opportunity to complete the online questionnaire. Of note, participant pseudonyms were used in an effort to protect participant confidentiality.

Data analysis was enabled through the use of Atlas.ti, version 8.0. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and member-checked which contributed to the overall reliability of the study. The coding of questionnaire and interviews resulted in five distinct themes; (a) decision-making considerations, (b) family, (c) leadership, (d) post-military, (e) transition programs and policy.

## Results

The overwhelming consensus indicated that participants, in both the questionnaire and interview pools, benefited from having access to an emotional support structure during transition. Support was mainly manifested through close family members, but a number of comments indicated the importance of continued association with friends and former colleagues. The type of connection maintained, whether familial, a Veteran association, or informal local groups, all contributed to the well-being of releasing service members. The outcome of data analysis led to the finding that family was one of five themes that positively contributed to Veteran transition.

### Family

Each interview participant expressed the importance of an emotional support structure during transition, where this was frequently articulated as a statement of responsibility to gainfully contribute to their immediate family. In one case, Ben's, the financial stability of his family was the paramount concern. Ben stated that he "...was in scramble mode. The bills needed to be paid and I really wish now that I made a different decision, but I was panicked and needed to have security right then and right there. So, I took the job I took." While Ben chose to seek immediate employment, he did so at the peril of his own sense of professional purpose, thereby elevating the family's needs above his own. Another interview participant, Mitch, considered himself as one of the "very lucky people," and that was amplified when he stated that "...the fact that my marriage survived, you know, I consider that a huge success." Cindy, a Royal Canadian Navy Veteran who was geographically

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Private Sean Rogowsky, an Airborne Electronics Sensor Operator from 14 Wing Greenwood, is greeted by his daughter after returning from Operation MOBILE in 2011.

separated from her partner, requested a posting so they could be co-located in the same large metropolitan city. This outcome provided familial stability that aided during her medical release. For Cindy, the simultaneous intersection of growing her young family and terminating her career led to a firm foundation that helped her adjust and prepare for post-military life. When Cindy went back to work after maternity leave, her "...immediate family had in mind that [she] was not going to be at work for long."

military service can flourish. Overall involvement in these associations is declining, as exemplified by the RCL status report<sup>13</sup> that noted a total membership of 265, 804. While this may appear high, these numbers reflect the downward trend in membership rates that have resulted in a 66 percent drop since 2005.<sup>14</sup> Arguably, the RCL is the nation's most recognizable Veterans group, and their membership rates are telling. This study further underscores the decline in Veteran's groups, with only 40 percent of interview participants who stated that they joined an organization despite 100 percent of respondents indicating that they strongly

Online questionnaire participants noted that there was a realization that retirement has an impact upon individuals situated around them, whether it is a partner, spouse, children, or a network of friends. When participants were asked if having an emotional support structure of family and friends was a significant contributor to a successful transition, over 87 percent of the Veterans acknowledged that having reliable personal support during transition was moderately helpful or better. Only one contributor indicated that a support structure was not a significant influence in a successful transition.

### ***Veteran Organizations***

There has been a marked decline in membership rates in national Veteran organizations where the rejuvenation of a civilian identity may be aided through the experiences of other members. Currently, the National Council of Veterans Associations in Canada lists more than 60 different organizations. These groups, some of which date back to the end of the First World War, include the Royal Canadian Legion (RCL) and the Army, Navy and Air Force Veterans in Canada (ANAVETS), both of whom offer complimentary one-year memberships for retiring service members. In conjunction with national non-profit organizations, many military regiments and branches have well-established associations that aim to unite, assist, and provide a place for Veterans to gather. While there are competing interests, political leanings, and motivations among the ex-service member's groups, there are unifying features, such as Veterans advocacy, and a venue where the reaffirmation of camaraderie cultivated through

identify as a Veteran. It appears that contemporary Veterans in this study are relying upon alternate types of associations to establish their civilian identity, as was supported through both interview and questionnaire responses.

When questionnaire participants were queried about the establishment and growth of a post-military identity, there is a consistent theme of pride in acknowledging military service. When asked if participants self-identify as a Veteran, 100 percent agreed. However, less than half joined a Veterans group or military association after being medically released. Many CAF messes (rank based social centres steeped in military tradition) offer a one-year free associate membership, in addition to the gratis membership offered by the RCL and ANAVETS.

## Discussion

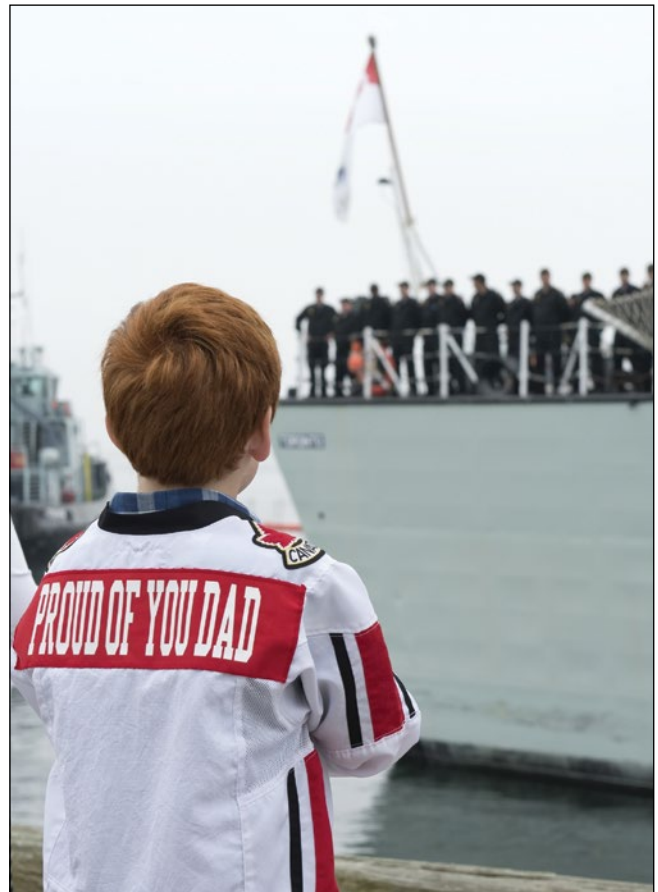
As part of this study's participation criteria, emphasis was placed upon soldiers, sailors, aviators and officers/ non-commissioned officers, who have served for a minimum of 15 years of service, in part, because it was hypothesized that those Veterans would face a different set of challenges as compared to service members with less time served. Inclusive in this assumption was that the greater amount of time served in the military would equate to more transition consideration factors, such as spousal employment, geography, children, significant financial commitments, reconstruction of a civilian identity, as well as post-military retraining and education constraints. Several common themes emerged with participants, and one of the most significant centered upon individual access to an emotional support structure.

### Family-First Transition

Military vernacular refers to those leaving the service as being released, and in the case of a health-related release, this departure is termed a medical release. Study results indicated that Veterans experienced a wide range of emotions when faced with a medical release. Participant comments such as "...it becomes more than just a job, it is your identity, it is who you are," spoke to a sense of loss. When referring to how her military identity is interpreted in a large urban city, Cindy, in a dejected tone, stated: "I just find people are very ignorant [about] it." These types of emotions also led to a downplaying of individual contributions that was best expressed by one Veteran who explained that when civilians hear the term 'Veteran,' "...people think of World War One and maybe World War Two, and that is about it." Additional participant remarks reflected that there was a workplace marginalization experienced during the member-to-civilian transition. Simultaneous with the notion of crafting a Veteran identity is the emerging and more dominant role service members take with respect to their families. Personal efforts shift from contributing to their former occupation, and these energies are re-invested into a family-first transition.

During uniformed service, interview participants averaged 6.5 moves in their career, wherein *self-reliance* became the essential ingredient cultivating *familial* resilience. Geographic moves, referred to as postings in the military, impact the member's family

in a multitude of ways ranging from spousal employment, schooling options for children, financial stress as a result of housing needs, acclimatization requirements in densely-populated urban centres versus the austerity of more rural postings, and separation from a network of extended family and loved-ones. On a move to a rural Alberta base, Jake, an interview participant, experienced a strengthening of the bond with his partner. Jake stated: "We [his immediate family] were on our own, away from [original] family, 16 hours was the nearest family. It was great. It was a great way to start my career." The underlying theme remains the notion that the entirety of the Veteran's support structure is implicated in military moves from the partner, spouse and children, to extended family and friends. Separation from extended family is a scenario that many service members must face, and the outcome produces mixed results. There is potential for emotional growth and for strengthening one's *immediate* family, noted in Jake's comments, as compared to increased familial anxiety and stress, which may contribute to the demise of the relationship. Neil, an interview participant, faced numerous isolated postings in the far north, which resulted in the dissolution of his first marriage after several extended separations. For CAF members, the divorce and separation rate at time of release between 2012 and 2017 ranged between 11 percent and 12 percent in all release categories.<sup>15</sup> While these figures may be somewhat comparable to the overall Canadian population,<sup>16</sup> this may not be a generalized assessment, given the complexities of accurately comparing the relationship status between the two populations.



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## Civilianization

The Canadian Armed Forces receives regular force recruits as young as 17 years of age, as both a non-commissioned member, or as a cadet at the Royal Military College of Canada. The indoctrination period that follows enrollment is lengthy and challenging, and it immerses new service members in the sub-culture of the Canadian military. Initial exposure to the history and traditions of the military can last up to 15 weeks<sup>17</sup> and continue for many months, dependent upon the branch of service and occupational specialty. The fusing of a young adult's developing identity into complete acceptance of an organizational ethos espoused by the CAF occurs at a formative time for most members. The data from this research supports the notion that one's personal military identity does not evaporate concurrent with release. Rather, the pride in service continues after the final days in uniform. In perpetuity, soldiers who are released will continue to be known as Veterans regardless of their previous occupation, and yet, there are no resources allocated to the civilianization of identity. Currently, there is minimal institutional investment in a civilianization process, generally leaving Veterans and their families to deal with the challenges of returning to civilian life, some for the first time as an adult.

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In the absence of a formalized civilianization process, Canadian Veterans appear to be finding alternative methods of associating with their peer group as opposed to gravitating towards long-established Veteran organizations where the transition may be better facilitated. A limited probe of social media platforms provided initial indications that a litany of general-concern and issue-specific Veteran groups have been created. While many Veterans groups are increasingly becoming more family-centric by offering services to both the service member and their partner, access to emergency funding, and even providing scholarship opportunities for children, the construct of a community Veterans' centre appears to be eroding. American studies have found that a lack of understanding on the part of releasing Veterans as to how to engage business and industry leaders is an impediment to future employment opportunities,<sup>18</sup> where Veteran organizations may be one area where ex-service members and spouses can participate in networking opportunities with similarly-oriented individuals. By continuing to explore family-centric engagement strategies, Veteran organizations may be better armed to deal with the multi-generational Veteran.



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## Limitations

This study discovered that there is a research opportunity across a greater range of releasing Veterans. The 15-year minimum service criterion applied in this research implied that there may be more family-focused considerations when facing an *unanticipated* release from the CAF. In doing so, study recruitment produced a large number of potential participants who served less than 15 years in the military with similar challenges. Further, while participants were never questioned about the cause of their medical release, the nature of this study may have deterred potential participants, given the sensitivity of surrounding a personal diagnosis.

## Conclusion

The central research question in this study focused upon the decision-making process of those Veterans facing an unexpected release from the CAF. However, a reoccurring discovery was the importance of family as well as access to an emotional support when Veterans transition from military service. While participants indicated that achieving a balance between the military and domestic objectives was a main consideration during service, this was not always achievable as a result of geographic moves, deployments, and

the requirement to be separated from family, due to individual training obligations and collective unit exercises. Upon release, the exigencies of military service are replaced with a greater focus upon family goals and objectives as an outcome of the reordering of external priorities that previously influenced familial life. This creates an opportunity for a *family-first* transition to occur. Additionally, this study uncovered that Veterans experience difficulty with respect to the civilianization of their lives, where resources offered through membership in Veteran's groups are not being fully explored. Memberships are on the decline. Therefore, alternate forms of camaraderie are being sought. The implications of this finding are wide-ranging, and they could be explored through multiple approaches. Continued research into the challenges of transition should consider the impacts upon spouses, children, and friends who provide front-line support to transitioning Veterans, thereby better synchronizing programs and services. Additionally, the development of specific civilianization curriculum offered during mandatory workshops and seminars may enable a *family-first* transition approach.



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