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# The Biographical Management of Risk and Uncertainty – British Veterans

*Jens O. Zinn*\*

**Abstract:** »Das biografische Management von Risiko und Unsicherheit«. How individuals deal with risk and uncertainties in the context of an organizational culture is a neglected area in the sociology of risk and uncertainty. This contribution reports from an explorative qualitative study (n=14) which examines the intersection of biographical experiences and organizational culture in the perspective of risk and uncertainty.

This study with ex-servicemen of the British Armed Forces shows that coming from different biographical contexts, young adults become soldiers for different reasons and they experience their time as soldiers differently. Some chose the certainty culture of the military as a life perspective; others see it rather as a stage in their life. It is the group which assimilates most into military culture which has serious problems with the transition into civil life. But these problems seem to be rooted in the way in which soldiers adopt the military certainty culture rather than the transition itself. Soldiers who maintain competing interpretations and biographical projects are less assimilated but better prepared to deal with all kinds of issues such as drinking culture, ethical and life and death issues.

**Keywords:** veterans; soldiers; certainty culture; risk; biography; military culture

## 1. Context

The sociological discourse on risk and uncertainty tends to emphasize general social changes on the macro level and how it might affect individual behavior on the micro level and vice versa. This is particularly the case in Beck's work on the risk society (Beck, 1992). As a result, there is a significant lack of understanding how individuals engage and respond to risk and uncertainty on an organizational level even though organizational contexts significantly influence how individuals, such as soldiers, experience society.

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Organizations themselves are subject to significant changes. This is particularly the case with the British Armed Forces. Compulsory service ceased in 1960 and capacity was reduced from 489,600 (1951) to 240,000 (2009) with the UK spending in 2009 about 2.5% of its GDP on the military. These changes are accompanied by sociocultural and technological changes within the military which might influence soldiers' professional experiences.

At the same time, the quality of war has shifted (Bourke, 1999). The new technologies for killing go along with a growing number of civilian casualties (Kassimeris, 2006). This takes place at a time where missions and soldiers' behavior are scrutinized in the media; from the decision of government to go to war against Iraq, to the misbehavior of US-soldiers in Abu Ghraib, and the failure to provide soldiers with proper technical equipment. As part of this discourse there is some awareness of a need to better support veterans (House of Commons Defence Committee, 2005).

Ex-servicemen constitute a large part of the homeless population (ca. one fourth) and are overrepresented in the prison population (e.g. The Mental Health Foundation, 2003) while their well-being is traditionally an area neglected in public discourse and practice. There is a long tradition to downplay mental health issues and traumatic stress of soldiers and veterans, and compared to other countries the UK seems to be particularly slow in establishing strategies to deal with such problems more proactively (Mental Health Foundation, 2003; Dandekker, Wessely, Iversen & Ross, 2003, pp.24-29, 32).

Even though high on the political agenda, a pure medical or mental health approach to soldiers' responses to risk and uncertainty underestimates the social aspects involved in soldiers' experience and responses to high risk and danger in combat situations, and uncertainty in the time dimension (e.g. how long a mission might last, what to do after leaving the services). Clinical psychologists direct attention to the social world with some arguing that a trauma is much more the result of social processes and circumstances than of the experience of a specific event itself (Shay 1998, Zielke, Meermann & Hackhausen, 2003). As a result, post traumatic stress disorder or other mental health problems might appear years after the actual event, triggered by specific later experiences or life styles.

Taking this into account, the article has a position beyond the opposition of predisposition versus terrifying event as sources of mental problems (Jones & Wessely, 2005). It supports the view that it is rather both that constitutes the problems soldiers or veterans respectively face later on: the specific way in which they deal with risk and uncertainty in general and how they cope with a specific "traumatic" event.

Therefore, this article will not narrow the perspective on risk and uncertainty to a medical focus on traumatic experiences. Instead, I will examine in a much broader approach how soldiers and veterans deal with (high) risk and uncertainty in general, assuming that these patterns are structured by the sol-

diers' biographical experiences and occupational socialization (compare for a biographical approach on health and illness: Zinn, 2005). The underlying hypothesis of this article is that such patterns are at the root of some problems soldiers have during duty and when they return to civilian life. The design of the study, however, does not allow the determination of the extent to which they might cause soldiers' mental health problems. Instead, the study identifies core issues and how they might influence soldiers' (biographical) management of risk and uncertainty.

The motives for the biographical decision to become a soldier are influenced by earlier socialization processes and concrete circumstances of living, and these are structured by all kinds of sociostructural (class, ethnicity, region etc.) and individual factors (personal experiences). The hypothesis that the motives of why and how one joins the army differs socially and individually, is supported by research on occupational choice and youth transitions into the labor market (Heinz, Kelle, Witzel & Zinn, 1998; Kelle & Zinn, 1998; Zinn, 2001). There is evidence, that social class socialization guides young adults into specific occupations which fit their "class habitus" (Bourdieu, 1984). For example, Desmond (2006, 2007) argues that country boys' socialization prepares them for the job and the occupational culture of Wildland Fire-fighters.

Socialization processes not only structure what occupations young adults consider as an appropriate occupational perspective. The socialization within an occupation has a huge impact on behavior, attitudes and biographical decision making within and outside work (Heinz et al., 1998; Lempert, 1994; ZINN, 2001).

Taking this into account, the concepts of risk and uncertainty become relevant in three perspectives. For example, soldiers face high risk and uncertainty when they engage in fighting activities during missions. Among others, there is the experience of the death of comrades and the possibility of themselves dying. At the same time the structure of a mission, the clarity of tasks, and the length of a mission impact upon how soldiers respond to them and how they deal with the risks and uncertainties involved (Rona et al., 2007). Finally, being a soldier carries risks and uncertainties regarding biographical decisions, such as planning family life or developing perspectives for life after the service. It is important to note that traumatic experiences and how soldiers deal with them might be connected at all levels since they are connected themselves.

In the following I will explore the general patterns and motives which guided the decision of young adults to become a soldier, how their experiences as a soldier influenced their attitudes towards their job and their biographical planning. I will finally develop an argument regarding the impact of military culture on young adults' biographical management of the life course.

## 2. Research Design and Methods

This article reports from a qualitative research project “The Biographical Management of Risk and Uncertainty – British Veterans” which was carried through from 1st May 2007 to 31st November 2008. The explorative study has examined the biographical experiences of 14 British ex-servicemen by narrative in-depth interviews. The narrative in-depth approach was chosen to give the interviewees as much space as possible to outline and express their experiences in their own perspective and to enable detailed analysis. This method has become prominent in Germany in the 1970s and has been used successfully in a wide range of domains since then (Apitzsch & Inowlocki, 2000) for example with traumatized people (Rosenthal, 1999, 2003, 2004) and in health and illness (Riemann, 1988; Hanses, 1996). For the analysis of the rich data-set produced in this way a strategy, called biographical case reconstruction, has been applied, which combines several methods of qualitative data analysis. The core idea is to contrast the narrated life story with the story as experienced. It starts with the analysis of the formal biographical data and of the structure of self-presentation – how the life is presented as a narrated story. Afterwards the experiences are analyzed, supported by microanalysis which enables the comparison of the experienced life and narrated life story. On this basis, it is possible to identify more general patterns later on – for example how people interpret their war experiences in the context of their general life experiences. The fruitfulness of this approach has already been shown by many studies but is not as common in Britain as in Germany (but compare for example: Chamberlayne, Bornat & Wengraf, 2000; Chamberlayne, Bornat & Apitzsch, 2004). In addition to the case reconstruction method the grounded theory approach of systematic comparison was used (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to focus on specific topics and areas relatively independent of the single case structure. Here the focus is on identifying specific themes and topics across the interview material and compare them systematically in a process of coding from open coding to axial and selective coding.

In order to maximize the richness of the qualitative data a theoretical sampling strategy was used (Glaser & Strauss, 1970; Gobo, 2004). The cases were selected by central factors such as age/generation, different involvement in combat while gender is excluded in this study (only male soldiers were examined) even though it can be assumed that the gender difference has significant impact on the experience of the occupational culture.

Access to interviewees was sought by mixed strategies. Firstly, approaching working veterans in the context of a university; secondly, by using organizations (Salvation Army, Big Issue) to get access to homeless soldiers and in some cases through other research projects and snowballing. The result is a good mixture of different cases which cover a great variety of experiences.

To all interviewees the specific interview technique was explained. They were told that the interview is voluntarily, that they can stop whenever they want and that the interviewer will ask them to tell the “story of their life.” They all agreed to these conditions and nobody rejected the interview offer. However, one interviewee decided after about 15 minutes to stop the interview being overwhelmed by the memories which came up during the interview. Most of the interviews lasted between one and three hours; some took four to four and a half hours. Altogether, 14 interviews were available for further analysis.

Interviewing veterans and possibly traumatized people is a difficult but important activity. Past research has shown that active self-reflection is an important resource in coping with traumatic experiences (Rosenthal, 2003). However, interviewees might become upset during or after the interview. Therefore, interviewees were provided with a list of organizations which support veterans and the process ensured that the interviewees would not be on their own after the interview but would have a friend or other support at hand if necessary.

All interviews were fully transcribed and the formal structure of the life course was extracted from the interview. Interviewees were also asked to list the formal stations of their occupational and family life. These different sources of information have built the basis for the analyses.

### 3. Biographical Experiences

For the presentation of the analysis, I tentatively use the distinction between three stages: firstly, the narrations about the circumstances and contexts of the young adults when they decided to become a soldier. This encompasses the soldiers’ personal situation and the options they considered and the expectations they had. Secondly, the socialization process into and within the military. This is to analyze the experience of becoming a soldier and learning about the reality of the job. Thirdly, I distinguish the preparation for and the transition into civilian life. This can be through a careful planning process but sometimes happens in rather an unprepared way for example as a result of an injury which leads to early retirement.

#### 3.1 Former Background – Why Someone Becomes a Soldier

The data show a broad variety of expectations and situations across the different generations though some typical patterns occur (Dandeker et al., 2003). There is a dominance of working class and lower middle class background. Some of the interviewees come from a violent, abusive or what they call “broken” family setting (Albert, George).

This class bias is reflected in the shock of a middle class soldier (Hans, born 1950) about the

associated company. These people in the recruits and later on in the battalions were individuals I had just never met before in my nice comfortable middle class life and some of them were really thuggish individuals. It's a sort of awful word but they were quite lower class and quite violent and foul-mouthed and uncaring, you know. (Hans, 20<sup>1</sup>)

Some reported that they were influenced by family members who had been soldiers (father, grandfather, uncle) or other significant people (friends, neighbors), and some made their decision despite the resistance of their parents. A typical statement is that they always wanted to become a soldier. This might be seen as a retrospective justification (Witzel & Zinn, 1998). However, it often seems reasonable as the outcome of a socialization process which has started with joining the Air Force Cadets as early as 12 or 13 years old. When the teenagers were asked about their occupational perspective it seems natural to stick to something they have already learned on an adventure basis:

One of my teachers at school asked me what I wanted to do when I left and at the time I was in the Air Force Cadets, the Air Training Corps and I said, 'I'd really like to join the Air Force.' So she got me some details on the Air Force and what different qualifications I'd need. So that gave me a little bit of focus and a drive outside the family and outside relationships etc. Got my head down, got the qualifications I needed to join the Air Force. (Ryan, 2)

Some interviewees emphasized that it was important to them to have a job which is worthwhile, something they could be proud of.

For people to take a look at me instead of me just being oh Ryan Johnson, or little Ryan. I was going to be Aircraftman Johnson. I was in the Air Force and I was doing a job. You know, that was that [...] that was self respect. (Ryan, 4)

Similarly, Albert, an interviewee from a mixed ethnic background emphasized the importance of being respected and to have a place in society.

Interviewees of the older generation emphasized that as a working class adolescent it was natural to go to the army while middle class adolescents went to university, but as John puts it, "that wasn't for us." (John, 8)

Most interviewees were attracted by the expected excitement, camaraderie and male (drinking) culture. They were allured by the expectation of an exceptional profession not just an everyday 8-hour-job. Their motives might therefore be similar to what Lyng (2005) described as being the core motive to take high risks in leisure time activities (e.g. sky divers, base jumpers, free climbers) as well as in high risk professions (e.g. fire fighters, stunt man, soldiers). At least for some young men at this age the prospect of risk taking activities and the perspective of challenges for their own abilities allured them into becoming a soldier.

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<sup>1</sup> The names after quoted narrations are codenames. The numbers after the name refer to the paragraph in the transcribed interview.

These motives reflect different patterns of transition into the military world. It indicates, by the example of soldiers of the older generation, how becoming a soldier was experienced as a normal pattern with little biographical uncertainty involved. It was experienced as something natural, not even a real decision. For a working class boy the biographical decision for an occupation was (and still is) highly pre-structured by class expectations, structural possibilities and tradition.

Early experiences in military recruitment organizations, such as the Air Force Cadets, made some already as teenagers familiar with the military culture and the “exciting tasks” long before they thought about the kind of occupation they would like to take on. It is a kind of pre-socialization into a specific group experience and culture (becoming part of a “big family”).

This is in particular true for those who were keen to leave home because it was experienced as a rather unpleasant and unattractive place with little own space and exposure to violence and abuse and pressure to contribute to family income. Coming from an unstable and uncertain context for many, becoming a member of the armed forces with a secure income and a certain career and social status has been the best and quickest option they could take which needed the least prior educational input (e.g. Tziner, 1983). Similarly, the everyday experiences of being part of an underprivileged and discriminated ethnic group, is another background against which the prospect of a military career seemed attractive with its perception that careers are clearly pre-structured and dependent only on personal achievement (compare the case study of Albert in the second part of the article).

However, there is a tension between the expected support culture of the military which structures everyday life, and the experience of military life as we will see later on.

### 3.2 Expectations and Reality

A well-known problem of the military culture is the significance of alcohol (Dandeker et al., 2003; Jolly, 1996). Independent of their generation, all interviewees experienced an extensive (male) drinking culture in the forces which they either actively sought or learned from the older soldiers when they joined the army. While most enjoyed the drinking culture at the beginning, this turned sour for some when it became a regular habit. Many slipped into alcoholism after they started using alcohol as a means to deal with pressure, high-risk experience or uncertainties or other issues such as boredom (e.g. George, Hans, Jack). Even when the consumption of alcohol did not become a major problem, it was always a topic to be dealt with (e.g. Jo). Some still see and use alcohol as a method of dealing with depression or sad thoughts of the past (e.g. Ryan) and most of the interviewees very much doubt that the military can be thought of without alcohol.



However, Sam who has worked in an Ordinance Corps reported that he actively refused and avoided becoming involved in the drinking culture which he sees as being typical for the fighting troops. The example of Jo (infantry), who gave up his drinking habit when he realized how much it started to reduce his professional capacities, shows how much alcohol is part of the male military identity. Prioritizing his professionalism as a soldier he resisted the cultural pressure of his comrades and had to fight through not to drink alcohol any longer. His story of quitting alcohol is accompanied by justification. He emphasizes how strong he actually is even though he has given up drinking:

That's [drinking] like the steam engine. You pull the cord and out goes the whistle with the steam. [...] But yeah, as for, drinking, drinking was a sociable part. I mean when I was a Sergeant I could stand [...] in the mess and we got through a bottle of whiskey a night. [...] But I was up at 4.30 or 3.30 if I was on remedials and I'd run twice as far as them boys to prove that no effect to me. I had to prove twice as much as them. I had to carry twice as much as they did and prove that I was twice as fit. (Jo, 38)

But yeah the drinking side is a big thing but you just have to stop it. (Jo, 40)

I quit when I was in the army, you know, and that was every night all the boys were going 'oh what are you having?' 'Orange juice.' 'What are you having?' 'Oh I'll have a cup of coffee.' You know what I mean? Even on like St Georges Day and the Queens Birthday. (Jo, 42)

[Interviewer: Why have you stopped drinking?] Well I just had enough. [...] I know my body inside out. My legs were my lifeline in the army because I had to be fitter than the rest of them. I had to keep a certain weight and everything and eventually getting up at 3.30 in the morning I could feel myself sort of slowing down a bit. It was a bit harder to get out of the bed than it should have been. (Jo, 46)

Altogether, drinking is not just an external pressure one has to comply with. As Hans reported, drinking was part of something he wanted and enjoyed when he was a young adult who had just joined the army:

When I first joined the army I got taken aback to all these people I was mixing with. But as you do, you know, in a community you conform or you don't survive I mean at the time it wasn't about conforming or doing something I didn't want to. As a young man some of it actually seemed quite attractive. Certainly the standard thing was, to go out every night and drink as much as you can, and I have to say they were great times as well, we thoroughly enjoyed many of them. So it is an alcohol culture and it's important for bonding and building a team, and so on. And all the macho stuff as well, you know. (Hans, 38)

There seems to be a fine line between just enjoying alcohol and when it causes harm which significantly threatens the abilities of soldiers to do their duty. However, highly trained soldiers such as Marines might become aware earlier of the negative impact of alcohol on their performance while others might slip into addiction as part of their everyday routine or habit.

Most of the interviewees got their excitement and camaraderie when they joined the corps even though it was not always as exciting as expected. John, coming from the older generation born in the 1940s and a working class context summed up and taking it with humor:

And so I went to [...] where the Marines started off. [...] I'd started this sort of new life ... as a junior Marine. I realized very quickly that actually I'd made a bit of a boo-boo and this really wasn't half as exciting as they'd told me. (John, 8)

Hans from a middle class context and born in the 1950s was shocked by how hard the training and selection process were. However those who did special training were proud of what they achieved (e.g. Ryan, Albert).

Coming from a social context where violence, bullying and gang crime seem to be an everyday experience, becoming a soldier is for such young men often experienced as a natural step to do what they do or like to do anyway. Even though training and controlling the emotions have been challenging for Albert he uses a metaphor to describe his experience of joining the army: "I joined the Royal Marines, did 10 months basic training. There started with 70-odd of us, finished with 7 of us, I was one of those 7. I took to it like a fish to water." (Albert, 1). Hans, reflecting on his military experience, comes overall to a similar conclusion as John:

Certainly overall I would say I thoroughly enjoyed it. I don't, you know, classic remark, I don't regret a minute of it. Well, actually you do. There are lots of minutes I can pick out and regret, and certainly I would have done things even within the army differently but overall I thoroughly enjoyed it. You know, obviously towards the end I was disenchanted and that's why I left. (Hans, 20)

However, what Hans might be referring to is that in combat situations, it is often rather about survival than any heroic activity. It is about getting through a high risk situation alive. Patriotic motives are regularly downplayed by the soldiers themselves (compare also: Gibson & Abell, 2004).

But he also comes up with another problem. The excitement at the beginning becomes diminished or supplanted by the reality of combat which causes for some soldiers ethical issues or risks for the integrity of their identity. The question of responsibility looms large and not everybody is able to shift it to superiors.

At the end of his career, Hans became disturbed about his own attitudes towards the enemy when he worked as military adviser for a foreign country.

Looking at it you can see it's very, very easy to go to a completely foreign environment in fighting in combat and I think this may have been some of the issues the Americans had in Vietnam because you go into a completely foreign environment. So the civilians are actually foreign and part of that environment and you see them rather than individuals you see them as part of the battlefield and you do get into very, very unpleasant sort of racist judgments, you know that you would never have you would never have applied those

judgments in Northern Ireland, well they don't matter. You know, if our attack is going through the village it's going through the village. You would never have applied that logic in an environment and a population that you were friendly with or knew. (Hans, 26)

And the other thing is that whilst it is not an excuse it's a fact is that you can get involved in things and you're not necessarily in control of the surrounding circumstances. If an attack has got a certain pace, you know, it's difficult to call it to a halt, you know. (Hans, 26)

There are quite different ways in which soldiers deal with ethical questions while doing their job. Jo claimed that he did not want to become promoted because he would have had to take over more responsibilities which he did not want to do. Instead, he decided to stick to a specific and clearly defined task and tried to fulfill this as well as possible. For him, ethical concerns were damaging for his professional attitude.

The line is really blurry on that. In full combat situations, my rounds must have killed females and children alike, but as far as I was concerned, they're expendable. If it gets a job done, yeah, I could drop in a grenade into a house to clear that house. (Jo, 82)

I stopped active service [...] because I couldn't go any higher [...] than I was. [...] The only way I could go higher was to become an officer and that means I have to think. [...] And the only idea of thinking I wanted to do was keep me and the other 3 geezers alive. (Jo, 130)

Many veterans valued the biographical certainty the military provided them with. The military gave them orientation and stability for their life (Jim). When they decided to join the armed forces, it transformed an overwhelming contingency of an uncertain future into a structured and manageable complexity not only in the sense of biographical orientation but also in everyday activities, where the military provided them with everything they needed. The decision was in some cases relatively dramatic where the military was the last chance to escape imprisonment after the beginning of a criminal career and brought the interviewees "back on track" (Jim, Albert). One interviewee who dropped out the military after his compulsory service very much regretted the loss of certainty and career prospects and never managed to find a stable place within society again (Frank).

For some the corps was not just an institutional background which structured their life. In contrast to his unstable and abusive family background, George described the army even as the only real family he ever had. This included not only economic but also emotional certainty. The metaphor of a big family is shared in a similar way by Jack:

I decided to join the Army Catering Corps. But it was funny because all through my army life, it was like a family to me because I'd never had a family and I'd never had a [...] what you could call a home. And to start with it was great. I was the happiest little soldier in the world. I had good mates all

around me. I had a job. I was learning a trade. You know? I had a career and it [...] it was lovely. (Jack, 8)

Two important aspects come together in these cases: the lack of social support outside the military such as a family they could fall back on if something went wrong, and at the same time the rather enthusiastic description of the military experience and the priority of the military community against civilian social contacts. There is little room for admitting an ambivalence towards the military, or seeing the weaknesses of the military in these descriptions but the expectation that the military would be like a family, the central basis on which to build a life.

Another issue soldiers have to deal with is the possibility of being killed. As long as soldiers are not directly involved in fighting activities or do not fight face to face it seems to be much easier for them to deal with experiences of dying and killing. Witnessing the bloody death of a comrade is exactly the kind of traumatic experience which is difficult for soldiers to cope with.

However, many seem to deal with this possibility, at least at the beginning, with a feeling of confidence that “it will not be me.” The experience of comrades actually dying makes it much clearer to them, that it could also be them and the reality of dying becomes more concrete. Hans has described that in his case this was a slow process during which he became aware of people “actually dying doing this job.” For most of his career he was confronted with only a small number of casualties. This made it relatively easy for him to suppress this reality of the job.

I went straight from passing the recruitment training to the battalion. On the first tour we lost 4 people killed and 2 injured. And I was only actually sort of involved in one of those incidents but they’re all part of a hardening process [...] I presume there are some veterans you’ve spoken to who have a sort of cataclysmic sort of Damascene moment, you know, where they were plunged into huge combat on day one. Looking back on it [...] I got assimilated and gradually drip fed it and so I’ve always felt that by the time I came to sort of major combat that I’d actually been sort of trickle fed it, you know, even when I was a recruit, in fact I remember there was a military funeral of a man who had been shot from 2 Para and, yeah, people actually die doing this and there were all his family were gathered there extremely distressed obviously when the coffin was then taken off to the garrison church. [...] And whilst I was only involved in one of those incidents, you know, they still helped to inure you and cushion you and you know you get a little bit hardened, a little bit casual about things as you go along. (Hans, 20)

For the Royal Marine, Albert, who was much more involved in active face-to-face fighting, the possibility of dying was an everyday possibility. It became, however, even more concrete when he realized that from mission to mission he had become increasingly more seriously injured. What he did was to concentrate on the present and not to plan for a future which might never come. The

biographical horizon was shortened and the uncertainties he dealt with were only the everyday life risks. As a result, the experience of living intensified.

I never thought I would reach a certain age. Each and every time I went away, whatever it was I was doing, whatever deployment I was on I would always come back with an injury and each and every time that injury would be more severe than the one I had previously. [...] There's a phrase we use in the Marines those that have fought for life, have a sense for life greater and above those that haven't and that means that because you realize your own mortality you realize that life is arbitrary, you realize that life is short so everything is grasped between here and there. They don't look towards the future. (Albert, 10)

However, many just hope and are confident that it will not be them as long as they are excellent. But at one point they had to accept that it might be out of their control and they might be the one.

I had good friends. I've lost 3 of them. It was just how it was done, you can only accept it. It's a greedy and a horrible thing but when you're in the middle of a fire fight you hear, I don't know if people have sort of told you, you hear (claps twice) yeah? (claps once) That's the round going off (claps once again), and that's the round landing. It's the most jealous the most selfish idea going that you can sit there and go thank fuck that ain't me and then you can look and it'll be your mate and you just turn around and say sorry mate, it's yours. We are selfish but it's what we do. (Jo, 14)

### 3.3 The Transition Into Civil Life

The transition into civil life is in many respects difficult. Socialization into the military certainty culture meant that almost everything was organized for the soldiers. For many, everyday life became narrowed to military life, where even most friends and social contacts are soldiers. As a result, there is no longer a perspective which goes beyond professional life. Even though courses are offered to prepare soldiers for the transition into civil life, many make the transition relatively unprepared.

Ex-servicemen have to learn to take over full responsibility for their life again with very little direct support. They have to make their own plans, and they have to deal with ambivalence, contradictions and uncertainties of everyday life themselves. There is no longer "the corps" which cares for them. They have to find a new biographical project to focus on and they have to develop or find their own certain life basis. Considering that many had chosen the military as an occupational context which exactly took over the responsibility for all these everyday life decisions or because of the highly structured context the military delivers where many decisions are made by people higher up in the hierarchy, it is not just a process of remembering former competencies. For some, it might even be the first time that they have to learn these abilities after being socialized into a dependency culture at a relatively early stage of their life.

Jolly (1996) argues that soldiers often forget how long and intense their conditioning process through training and advanced training has been. The de-institutionalization process is not easier or shorter. There are a number of ways to leave the army: to retire after the normal time of duty, to be injured and retire early, to develop mental or other health issues (e.g. addiction to alcohol, post-traumatic stress disorder), to develop other interests in life or to develop a distance to the military culture or practice of soldiering. Jolly argues in her qualitative study about the transition of soldiers into civilian life that however soldiers leave the forces there are three steps they have to go through: “confrontation,” “disengagement” and “resocialisation” (pp.10-11, 155). Those indicate a long process of “deconditionalisation” from military life. Some soldiers might manage the steps quicker or slower but for a successful transition everyone has to go through them. Who does not would fail to manage the start of a new life as a civilian? “Confrontation” is the process during which the ex-serviceman acknowledges that there is a need of a change in direction and lifestyle. “Disengagement” stands for the process of questioning older loyalties, judgments and priorities. Finally, “resocialisation” stands for the need to develop a new social identity. The soldier has to find a new place and role in society which is no longer determined by the military identity.

This three-step logic can be found in the presented study as well which shows a broad range of different transitions and stages. Frank never got his life sorted after leaving the compulsory service. He became involved in criminal activities and consequently had no chance to join the forces again. He found a partner who stabilized him for a while but when she died Frank became homeless until he found a place in an accommodation for the homeless organized by a charity.

Jim had difficulties getting his life sorted after he left the services. Jolly (1996) would explain it by his “unwillingness” to disengage with the past and to develop new positive perspectives for the future. His identity is still defined by the military experience and he has not yet recognized that things have to change.

Similarly, George is still occupied by the bad experiences he experienced within the forces which have coined his life. He finally got acknowledgment that his supervisor did not treat him correctly. He has managed his addiction to alcohol, but he is depressive and he struggles to stabilize his life. Being occupied by military issues he has not yet developed a positive attitude towards civilian life.

Chris has just left the forces after 4 years due to an injury and is struggling to come to terms with his experiences. He got compensation “but never heard anything else from the army.” Since he has at least a trade he has some perspective and direction where to go:

I'm an engineer, a machinist. So luckily I've got a trade behind me and I got into machining again. That's what I really wanted obviously with the trade go-

ing down now there's no more sheet steel works anymore. They're all getting made redundant or getting laid off so I've started a new career now. I'm going back to college." (Chris, 18)

However, he has little contacts and the one's he has are ex-serviceman. It is unclear whether he is able to successfully implement his plans for a new perspective in the civilian world since he is still occupied by some "traumatic" experiences and the military life style. Since he has little contact with "civilians," it is not yet clear whether he can leave behind the military life style.

Jo has ambitious plans for his new life but is still driven by his military life style and worldviews. He argues that civilians are "stupid," in his view incompetent and they lack professionalism. When he worked, for example, as security guard for a diamond courier his suggestions to improve security measures were rejected as too expensive. He explains by an example how he dealt professionally with an attempted robbery even though his behavior was not acknowledged but criticized:

When I was a diamond courier I had 2 young [...] gentlemen that wanted to take the diamonds off [...] I just walked up and I went, 'gentlemen it's a real bad idea.' And they said, 'oh yeah, why do you reckon that?' And I just opened up me jacket to take out me 9mm browning and shot one in the knee-cap. I went, 'well that's the first reason.' I said, 'the second reason is your mum will never see you again.' I said, 'because the next 2 rounds are going straight between your eyes.' And they just hands up, up against the wall, and the police arrived and said, 'don't you think that was a bit excessive?' (Jo, 66)

He presents himself as strong and self-controlled. He has great plans for his own enterprise but he has not fully disengaged with his former life and attitudes. Instead, he insists on his military identity and attitude. There is not yet much of an insight that this has to change and he cannot turn it into a positive perspective. The military worldview remains the right standard against which he judges the civilian world:

That's the mentality we have. And I don't care how long you've been out of the forces you've still have that mentality. It's a PMA, positive mental attitude. You have to have it because you can't get through otherwise. Your mate could just drop dead next to ya because a round's hit him. [...] Yeah, it's just that when I was working for the civvies they had no idea like that. They don't use a positive mental attitude. They don't have any idea of security, personal, professional or otherwise and then you just have to adapt and overcome and you shouldn't have to adapt and overcome. (Jo, 66)

It is not clear yet whether and when he will fully engage with civilian life. Ryan seems to have made the step into civil life successfully (I will discuss his case in more detail below). He is engaged in a new biographical project. He is a caring father for his child and with a challenging job at the university. He is occupied with managing his new life even though he is proud about his time as a Legionnaire – he served 5 years in the French Foreign Legion. His service is still part of his new identity but his identity is dominated by his son and his

present job at the university, not by his past as soldier. I will show later on how his valuation of the family structures his biographical decision-making.

Albert's abrupt discharge from the services pushed him into a long phase of confrontation (compare below). His biographical project to come to terms with his failure has helped him to get through higher education. He has transformed from a warrior to a civil person but he is still determined to engage and explain what happened to him. This helped him to engage in an academic career and to acquire educational certificates. He also has a family and has sorted a new second life. Speaking with his wife about his past and reflecting about his experiences has helped him to accept good and bad experiences and what he has done and now values differently. Having said this, at the time of the interview he is still very much driven to explain what is wrong with the military that he has failed when he became discharged because of drugs. He might finally finish with this legacy and find a new biographical project.

Jolly (1996) uses a rather homogenous approach to the three steps soldiers have to go through. The emphasis of the presented research is about the individual differences. Soldiers seem to differ significantly in the reasons why they joined the army and how they experienced the services. In a risk and uncertainty perspective, they differ regarding their approach to biographical (un)certainty. Do they deal with remaining contradictions or ambivalence of civilian life and military culture or do they exclude one side? Do they include biographical uncertainty in their planning or do they exclude the future from their everyday reflections and decision-making? Have they ways or strategies established to deal with pressure, traumatic experiences or other problems (e.g. ethical issues) or do they tend to suppress them with the help of alcohol, for example?

The argument is that it makes a significant difference whether soldiers have chosen the military because of the certainty culture it offers, whether they maintained a civilian life and a civilian biographical perspective or they fully adapted to the military certainty culture. Even when they intensively engage, it makes a huge difference whether they still have their own biographical project or fully assimilate and eliminate every thought about the life after the services.

In the next section, I will support this argument of the impact of proximity and distance to military culture for soldiers' experience of the services by presenting four case studies.

#### 4. Proximity and Distance to Military Culture

Soldiers engage with the military culture in different ways. Some adapt to the expectations which often coincide with what they wanted to do as young men anyway. This includes partying and drinking alcohol and doing all the "macho stuff." In so doing, they become part of the "big family." A number of them seem not to be able to draw a line for when drinking habits must be questioned



because they endanger their professional abilities. They become part of a black and white “male” military culture which allows little weakness and expects strong discipline and tend to support a life that focuses on the military, minimizing external contacts. The black-white perspective of reality helps soldiers to be able to do their duty where doubt and self-reflection might slow down the ability to effectively act as soldier.<sup>2</sup> Where the comrades are priority the family is secondary and might even be endangered. Where the military is the absolute instance of right and wrong there are no resources which could help to deal with problems that are caused by the military itself. This does not question that there are military instances to deal with internal problems which are to a high degree efficient. But when these instances do not work for these soldiers there are no other sources available.

However, another group of soldiers does never forget the world beyond the military they will return to after their military career. They might adapt to the black and white worldview as a need for clarity to act (Jolly, 1996). However, they do not lose some distance to their profession and military life, whether they are ironically questioning everyday practice (John), seeing it as part of personal development (Ryan), criticizing the system and the incompetence of the comrades (Paul), questioning the emotional honesty of what soldiers are doing (Albert), or rather are being pulled out by the expectations of wife and children to engage more with the family (Hans). These are soldiers who might have problems to deal with caused by their job itself (conflicts with colleagues or supervisors, problems to deal with experiences, weakness) but they have sources which help them to do so and give them orientation for biographical decisions which might even lead out of the military.

In the following, I will underpin my argument about the significance of distance and proximity to the military culture as source of problems to deal with risk and uncertainty in everyday life and biographical action, by four case studies.

#### 4.1 Relative Distance to Military Culture

The following examples from two different generations of soldiers, John and Ryan, show a relative distance to the military culture. They might engage in training and might love the job as a soldier but even though they identify with their profession, they are not “absorbed” by it. They have values and orientations which are prior to the military.

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<sup>2</sup> This does not mean that soldiers are uncritical. One described that there might be a lot of discussion before the decision for a mission is made, e.g. whether Britain should go to war to Iraq. If the decision is made, however, the discussions shift. It is no longer about the basis of the mission but how best to do the job.

### *John*

John was born in the 1940s. He lived with his family in the West of Britain in the slum area of a working class town even though his father came from a middle class background. His experiences are in many respects typical for the situation of working class teenagers at the time. When looking for an occupational perspective, the soldier's job gives the possibility to leave home, to see the world and to make career without higher school leaving certificates.

However, John differs significantly. He went to a grammar school and would have been able to pursue a middle class career. Instead, when John was 16, he left school to join the junior Marines. He stayed almost seven years with the Marines. After several injuries, he was finally released from service in his early twenties but without any occupational qualifications.

It is characteristic for John's life story that he stresses the tension between the working class identity he feels attached to and his above working class average education which enabled him to go to a grammar school and to "look through the system" and to criticize incompetent superiors. As a result, he emphasizes his role as a rebel wherever he had to deal with supervisors or superiors.

Originally, it never occurred to him to choose a different job than becoming a soldier. This was what people of his part of the town do and it was the easiest and quickest way out of the living conditions of a huge family with more than 10 children in a small flat where no privacy existed.

I was the only person who went to [...] that grammar school. So they... we didn't sit around talking about books or anything like that and we didn't sit around talking about universities. I didn't know what a university was right, until much later. I [...] I thought teachers were born to [...] you know, they were the other people from the other side of town we called them. They're the teachers, doctors, people like that but that wasn't for us. (John, 8)

John never thought of making a career within the marines. Becoming an officer was not an option in his working class identity.

So it meant that I had the [...] qualifications but no culture [to become an officer]. I was firmly working class and that's all I wanted to be. So if you're working class you hate the officers which I did very well, you see? I hated them for 6 years and of course they didn't like that very much [...] . (John, 8)

As a result he "had occasionally, from time to time to go in front of a board and explain why I wouldn't be an officer you see, because they don't like that." In his life story, John emphasizes this tension between his ability to do the demanding training as a Marine and his intellectual capacity reading the Times instead of the usual tableau press preferred by his comrades and officers. Thus he provoked the officers which do not have the same educational level as he had. Interestingly, even though John emphasized his working class culture he indeed differs systematically. For him there was always a world different from the military and a Marine's job was only a job. He never fully assimilated to

into this kind of culture. He was always different, he did neither fit fully into the working class environment nor in the position of a simple Marine and this was an important part of his identity which helped him to deal with his experiences ironically.

John describes himself as a renegade. He became a renegade when he joined the army and maintained this attitude later on when he left because of an injury and sought a new occupational perspective. As soon as he engaged in a position he questioned the supervisor:

I [...] found life still fairly difficult after the services, and I was always a bit of a renegade before it and I joined and I kept telling them their system was wrong. And I'd go for a drink every lunchtime ..., and I'd be very happy afterwards, they don't like that very much. [...] You were given an allocation and 2 drawers which were cards of all the workers of the factories they'd given you and then they said [...] 'will you count all the people over 50 who you've got', and you'd go through manually. So I counted all of mine so [...] say 120 or something. The inspector came around and said, 'have you got your numbers John' and I said, 'yeah I had.' I had 147 and he looked at it and he said, 'where are the 5 bar gates?' I said, 'what?' He said, 'well there's no 5 bar gates on it.' He said, 'I want to see the 5 bar gates.' That is when you're counting one, 2, 3, 4 and across, 5, a 5 bar gate I said, 'well I've given you the number.' 'I want to see how you've done it.' I went 'oh, bugger.' So off he went and all I did was put 145 5 bar [...] into 5 bar gates. He came back and I said, 'there you are I've done it.' 'Very good.' Well of course, it meant nothing. Well of course, everybody else knew what I was doing, so I was undermining this guy and, you know, his stupidity. (John, 14)

John finally went back into education got access to higher education and became a university lecturer but he never fully gave up this habit to question the superiors and "the system."

### *Ryan*

Ryan was born in the 1960s. John hasn't said much about conflicts at home while Ryan's parents had continuous conflicts until they finally divorced. Ryan disliked school and was much more interested in practical things. At the age of 12-13 he joined the Air Force Cadets and wanted to join the Air Force later on.

[There have been] problems at home, but my [...] my goals of joining the military were to get away from home, to earn some money and see a little bit of the world. Traveling a little bit of the world wasn't a prime consideration because I was only 18 and I felt well I've got the rest of my life to travel the world. But definitely to get away from home and get some money and for people to take a look at me instead of me just being oh Ryan Johnson, or little Ryan. I was going to be Aircraftman Johnson. I was in the Air Force and I was doing a job. You know, that was that [...] that was self respect. (Ryan, 4)

His occupational decision was, however, very much dominated by his parents. He wanted to become a gunner while his parents persuaded him to become an

engineer. With the age of 18, he joined the Air Force and became a Royal Engineer but the job itself left him unsatisfied.

I really didn't want to be an engineer but I had a word with my dad and my dad persuaded me that engineering might be the best way because number one you don't have to live in a hole in the ground. You don't have to carry a gun and get shot at. You get a bedroom. You're always on a base, that's for the aircraft and you've got a trade at the end of the day so when you leave the Air Force you would have a trade so after a bit of persuading I decided to join as an engineer and I joined when I was 18, I joined the Air Force. (Ryan, 2)

After his first year, his parents had huge conflicts. The unsatisfied job and the conflicts at home lead to his decision to go back home.

And my mum and dad started having problems at home. So I was being torn between not [...] really not enjoying the job I was in and torn between trying to go and help out my mum and dad so there were lots of [...] lots of things going on in my mind. (Ryan, 2)

I didn't want to go back home [...] but I went back home for a few months. My mum and dad were still having serious problems and my mum and dad had split up by that time. My mum was living with my sister and my dad was living by himself. (Ryan, 2)

I got a job in a company, boring as hell. [...] You know a really boring job. [...] But it was nice over the Christmas period – I had some work. (Ryan, 2)

In this situation, he referred to an ongoing source of conflict, that he had to do something for his country but he is arguing that he did his part and wants to do something for himself. By then all his occupational decisions were influenced by others (his parents) with the result that he ended up doing things he did not really like to do.

I've done something for my country that you haven't done and for the vast majority of your friends, you know 99% of your friends haven't done. So I think I've earned my right to be able to go and do something else that I want to and that's caused some arguments in the past, you know, a couple of ones. (Ryan, 14)

In the following summer, a friend who was currently working with the French Foreign Legion invited him to France. He was impressed by the stories about the job as a soldier within the French Foreign Legion and the public acknowledgment.

Being down in the south of France, my mate had a beautiful uniform. And we were walking round and about and he's getting [...] the attraction from the women is amazing. And we're walking into bars and [...] and [...] just maybe all the tables are being used and you see the matre'd going [...] they usher him across and clear the table and there's an extra table in the corner for the legionnaire. You know? And just the respect that he seemed to have within that social group I thought was great. He was telling me all the different things he does and he was talking to other legionnaires from [...] from Germany, from Britain, a couple from China and they really enjoyed it and they all had the same things to say about it, how hard it was but the sense of self worth that

they have at the end of it and it's something that I really didn't have at the time. I was demoralized with my job. I felt as if I'd let myself down, let my family down and this was something that I could associate with. (Ryan, 18)

On his way back home, he signed a five year contract with the French Foreign Legion without consulting his parents. This can be seen as an important step he took to detach from his family and become an independent adult. Ryan is very proud about his time at the French foreign legion but finally it is only a stage of his life:

If I'd left the Air Force and gone into engineering work or gone back to XXX, I would be in a 9-5 run of the mill job [...] I would have nothing I could turn around and say I'm proud of this, I'm proud of that. But now [...] I'm extremely proud of my 5 years in France, extremely proud. (Ryan, 4)

On the other hand, when his contracts ended and his girlfriend became pregnant it was no question for him at all to leave the French Foreign Legion (FFL) and to develop a new occupational perspective even though he could have stayed with the FFL.

I can still remember sitting in the kitchen and I had about 2 weeks left to decide what I was going to do, I was starting to fall for this girl and she came back in and she says 'I've got some news for you' and I went 'oh yeah what's that?' She says 'I'm pregnant' and that's it, the decision was made, I don't go back in. She had fallen pregnant. So my decision at that point was made for me. I don't regret my decision, not [...] not for any way, shape or form because I've got my son. If it was anything else she would have told me I'd probably have gone back in. Seriously, if she hadn't fallen pregnant I'd probably have gone back in. (Ryan, 14)

For Ryan the family is a central factor in his decision-making. This became clear in three biographical situations. When he decided to train as an Engineer with the Royal Air Force, when he left the Air Force to help his parents when their relationship broke apart, and when he expresses how the pregnancy of his girlfriend influenced his decision. "My decision at that point was made for me" describes that the impending birth of his son leaves no other option but to stick to the family and to give up soldiering. This indicates strong normative orientations which prioritize the family in his biographical decisions over anything else. This priority, however, does not question his professional involvement in the military.

Ryan vividly describes the professional discipline necessary to do a proper job and the self worth he got from managing this challenging job. He frames his biographical decisions in a kind of developmental logic where his time as Legionnaire has its place without dominating his identity. At the end of a long interview, he summarized his biographical approach as follows:

Fifteen years ago if someone had said, 'you're going to work in a university', 'don't be silly', you know, because none of my family had ever been to university and I was the only one, you know? So there we go. And it is, it's [...] But then again I think that's got a lot to do with me being in the forces. A

challenge was set. And if a challenge is set you either rise to the challenge and you compete with that challenge as much as you can or you don't. And if you don't compete with challenge [...] If you don't compete and you don't strive to better yourself, you may as well just have started your first day at school and stayed there as a 4 year old. You know, because every single thing in life is going to be a challenge; bringing up family, running a household, getting a job teaching, learning more. (Ryan, 18)

As a result he has become the self-confident person he wanted to become:

But now [...] With 5 years [...] I'm extremely proud of my 5 years in France, extremely proud. But because I've been through that, in a different situation, with people that don't speak your language and in aggressive situations I think I can [...] I can turn my hand in just about any role that's put to me and I know that no matter what, I might not be the best person that does it, but I will be so focused and I will drive until I [...] I fulfill that role. So it's given me a sense of direction, it's given me a focus, a determination, that no matter what happens, even if you turned around and you say I've got to climb up the outside of this building using a piece of thread I'll find a way of doing it eventually. You know I might not be the smartest person in the world but it's given me that sense of direction and that I wouldn't have had before I don't think. (Ryan, 4)

## 4.2 Proximity to Military Culture

The army offers support in particular to people who have problems in finding a place in society or to get their life sorted. Frank (1930) makes this argument explicit when he indicates that since he left the forces everything went worse and he was never able to get his life sorted. In the same vein, Jules emphasized how important the military was for him to "cool down." Having been involved in crime and violence the military was for him the last chance to prevent imprisonment.

There are a number of interviewees who are particular vulnerable, some because of their personal experiences, others because of being part of a socially discriminated group or a mixture of both.

The hypothesis is that the lack of alternative interpretations of social reality and the lack of resources from civilian life are central to soldiers' problems in managing the transition back into civilian life. That does not mean that these people ever had established a place within society before they became a soldier. However, being used to living with the support of the military certainty culture they are unable to deal with the challenges of the transition. The following examples show that the problems can start even before they left the forces and have their origins in their military life style<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> This life style is the result of earlier biographical experiences and how they merged with the military culture.

## *George*

George has a working class background. He reported that his brother abused him and he wanted to leave home as soon as possible. Starting a military career seemed to be the best option for him to leave the family without having further school leaving certificates and family support to engage in further education. Another motivation to join the forces might have been his former involvement in the “Army Cadet Force” for 12 to 13 years. He became a physical training instructor and after being with the Cadets he “always wanted to join the army.”

I asked my father when I left school ‘will you sign the papers so I can go in the Army?’ He said, ‘no, you’ve got to get an apprenticeship first.’ And that really hurt me. [...] And I got half way through my apprenticeship and when I was 18 I couldn’t do what I wanted so on my 18th birthday I actually went down to the Army Recruitment Office without my parents knowing and signed on because I didn’t have to have their permission then. And I just walked in one day and said to my mother, ‘there’s a month’s wages I’m off on Monday.’ ‘What do you mean you’re off on Monday?’ ‘I’ve joined the Army. I’m going. You can’t do anything about it.’ And I stayed for 9 year, teaching physical training. (George, 6)

He reports that at his time alcohol was very much part of the everyday culture in the army:

I enjoyed my army career but that one screwed us up. How to spite, how to kill people and how to get drunk (laughs) but not necessarily in that order from my experience; We were serving in the Falklands [...] and my boss says ‘we’ll go into the mess and have a drink when we finish work.’ I said, ‘yeah, OK boss.’ And we went into the mess and he said, ‘what did you [...] what do you want to drink?’ I said, ‘I’ll have a coke to start with because it’s going to be a long night’ and he head-butted us and said, ‘you don’t come into the mess and order coke’ (laughs) and that’s [...] in them days that was the attitude of the army. Once you got [...] you went into the mess you didn’t drink soft drinks or coffee or anything, you drank alcohol, which was fine. (George, 6)

A major trigger for him to drink even more was when “I lost 6 comrades in one night and I was supposed to be one of them which has really done my head in. [...] I was told that I would never, ever serve in combat again.” (George, 6)

However, it seemed to be more the general habit of drinking in the spare time which caused him problems than this particular incident.

While I was in the forces I ended up on 2 bottles of rum a day which was normal for me. And that’s when I decided I’ve had enough; I’m going into rehab because it was ruining my marriage. My wife never knew when I was going to return home. I’d left one Friday morning at half past 7, I didn’t arrive back until the Saturday at 8 o’clock in the morning [...] I’d been to work on Friday and we all went on a [...] out on the booze and we ended up back in the mess drinking. And my time in the forces it was a way of life. It wasn’t frowned upon. But I never missed work through it. (George, 20)

That was life in the army in them days. That’s how you covered your That’s how you got rid of all the memories. That was the military’s way of letting

you [...] why they encouraged it because if you's got your flashbacks you drank and it went away and that's the way life was in the forces. (George, 20)

He stressed in his interview that he had a traumatic experience which caused some problems and he started to drink increasingly more alcohol. Since such experiences are often used to justify failure, e.g. to deal with alcohol properly, we might be careful to judge whether this claim is real. However, what is important is not the experience of a traumatic event but the growing involvement in a drinking habit to deal with the challenges of the job. Drinking with the comrades became ever more important and George eventually became addicted to alcohol.

There are some more hints which might help to understand how George dealt with the army experience. For George, the army seemed not to be a specific stage in his life but a way of living. He loved going out and drinking with the comrades. It might be incidental, but both interviewees, George and Jack, who had serious problems which ended in homelessness and addiction to alcohol, used the metaphor of the family when they spoke about their time in the army. For George, the army was even the only family he ever had. He used a short anecdote to emphasize that the army was always more important for him than his partner. "Yeah. My relationship was with the armed forces. I was married [...] I was happily married. My ex-wife turned around and said, 'are you married to me or are you married to your job?' I said, 'well sorry but my job comes first' (laughs)." (George, 88)

George has never been able to develop a life outside the military. When he was made redundant because of his alcohol problems his partner left him and there were no longer any resources he could refer to. With no contact with his original family, he was on his own after his wife had left him and he became homeless.

There are a number of similar cases. For example, Jack who worked in the army catering services and became a Master Chef after more than ten years service. He felt overstrained but his problems were ignored which led to huge difficulties from alcohol addiction to attempts to commit suicide. Instead of presenting such a case I will discuss the case of Albert who combines a number of factors usually considered as contributing to high vulnerability. However, he managed with some professional help. His case might help to understand what kind of pressures and experiences soldiers have to deal with.

#### *Albert*

Albert was born in the 1960s and comes from a mixed ethnic background. He was brought up by his (single) mother and lived from 13 years onwards in a foster family until he joined the Royal Marines at the age of 16. He describes fundamental problems within the foster family and he was also involved in gang crime activities.



As I'm from a broken background I didn't have a particularly stable life, younger life anyway; different schools, different places in the country. I've lived in foster homes and certain institutions of the state. I was a ward of the state for a number of years. And in between all of that I lived with my [...] my mother who traveled Europe in the [...] in the 60's and the 70's as a single mum [...] just as [...] just as a single woman she did it all by herself so it was a very exciting childhood you could say. There was nothing fixed in it. My horizons were very, very broad because I saw a lot of the world as a young man, different cultures etc. I spoke Italian<sup>4</sup> and went to an Italian school when I was a kid. So that was that. At the age of 13 all that stopped and I lived with a foster family to the age of 16. I had to get out of that situation because things were getting bad. I was going from school to school and I was getting in trouble with the [...] with the police and there were no other black people in school or no other black people in the community so things were difficult in that stage. There was a lot of fighting at school. You either let yourself be bullied or you stand up and fight, so I had learned from my mother to fight so that's what I did. At 16 I wanted to get out of that situation so I joined the services and the best of the services seemed to be the Marines at the time so that's why I joined the Royal Marines. (Albert, 1)

For him, joining the Marines was a way to escape the situation in the foster family and to prevent conviction. A career within the military was a possibility for him to find a position within society where he could be acknowledged as a person:

I had a next door neighbor [...], an old chap who had served in the Second World War [...] he was torpedoed twice and a real hero and he was the littlest man on the estate and very kind and gentle but nobody ever messed with him. [...] Everybody respected him and I wanted that and that was part of why I joined the services. (Albert, 1)

For him as for others coming from a similar unstable sometimes criminalized background, the military seemed to be a "natural" environment and he took to it, as he said, "like a fish to water". (Albert, 1)

He reports some examples to illustrate how he was acknowledged as a black soldier.

You know, there was no racism per se in the Corps. If you had green hair you were called green hair. If you had big ears you had big ears. If you had black skin you had black skin. My nickname was Y and I saw nothing wrong with that for the first 10 years in the Corps. The first day I joined it was like something from the film. I had a Corporal who was allocator. There was 70-odd of us all in this room, sitting waiting, all nervous, all our hair done and everything and he came in and, you know, he says I want each one of you to introduce yourself and he took the piss literally out of each one. I stood up and I said, 'my name is Albert. I come from X. Nobody calls me nigger or we fight', and at this stage, at 16, I'd never lost a fight, you know? [...] But of course the Corporal stands up and says, 'you fucking nigger' and I step to-

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<sup>4</sup> For reasons of anonymity the country and language was changed.

wards him and he puts me on my arse. He picks me up. 'You're a nigger.' I do the same again. He does this 6 or 7 times until I learned that I'm not going to be able to beat him or even get close to him to do it. He sits me down, tells me he likes the size of my balls, tells me to come to the office later on so I can clean [...] and says nothing about it. There's no glee, there's no pleasure, there's no exhilaration, there's no humiliation. It's just a matter if you believe that strongly show me. Beat me you fucker. I don't give a shit. Beat me. That's what he wanted to show and that's what he showed. And at the time I felt no humiliation. It was just [...] Do you understand? It just seemed so matter of fact. And it wasn't just me that had happened with everybody. (Albert, 11)

From the beginning onwards it was clear to him that he would like to become one of the best Marines. He absorbed everything that he was taught and integrated it into a new worldview and judged his own action against this newly acquired moral compass:

The first person I shot was a girl. We were at a check point when a car bashed its way through and I can remember firing 5 rounds, kneeling down and squeezing off 5 rounds at the drivers seat [...] the passengers seat because that was mine, I could fire where I needed to fire and hitting every one of them and getting to the car 150 meters down the road and opening the door and pulling this person out and realizing it was a girl and not being upset because it was a girl or anything like that but being angry that my 5 rounds hadn't killed her. She was still alive. I can remember distinctly being really, really angry that she wasn't dead and what a bad soldier I was. (Albert, 13)

After he had worked several years as a Royal Marine, he started to get problems with his experiences. These worsened when he was transferred to what he called an "office job." He started drinking and consuming illegal drugs. When he was tested positively on drugs, as part of the regular health checks Marines have to undergo, he was discharged from services.

The circumstances by which I left weren't as [...] as well as they should have been. Things hadn't been going well for a number of years in the corps due to some of the experiences that I'd had and this built and built and built. But while I was busy in the corps that was fine, that was OK. It was only when I got to the end of my time when I was sitting in an office job, [...] not doing what I'm good at that I had more time to think and that that led to some problems. (Albert, 1)

The major problem seems not to be the experiences themselves but the way in which Albert understood them against the background of his worldview as a Royal Marine. When he started to revisit what he did and how he felt everything he has lived for was questioned:

I didn't seem to fit the world that I was in. Somebody would shout or pick on a girl at a bus stop and I would step in and stop them. Somebody would be doing something wrong and I would speak up against it. To take a risk for your future is the natural thing. Why wouldn't you take the risk? What's the point of being here? What's the point of being alive if you're not going to take a risk? You can't gain nothing if you're not going to take a risk. And this just

seemed to be completely alien to where I was and where I was in so I had to re-evaluate a few things. The mantras by which I'd led my life, the absolute certainties [...] that's what they were, absolute certainties, the flexible rules to be applied to different situations but in reality the certainties had to be turned upside down. These certainties I believe in to such an extent that I would give my life or take another life for it. That's how much on the explicit level I believed in these certainties and of course they were shattered. I was almost relieved when I had the drugs test because I thought I would get some help. (Albert, 11)

He did not get the help he expected but when he was discharged, he lost "rank, status, money, career, house, identity. [...] everything."

So I had this stigma of what had happened to me, [...] I had this great fall from grace. I [...] I [...] I had got medals and recommendations for bravery etc. etc. which had all made me a good boy, a legend in the corps and of course when this happened to me that legend fell and it brought shame on everybody, including myself.

I then went to [...] to school. I realized that I had to find a way to [...] to come to terms with what experiences that I'd had and at that stage I had no education, I didn't know how I was going to do it or what I was going to do, I just knew that something wasn't right. So I went to night school and did English and Maths so I could get on an Access course and an Access course so that I could get access to higher education. (Albert, 1)

With this process of self-reflection following his discharge from the army a new life started and Albert explicitly interprets these two phases of his life as totally different: "All through that period of 6 years has been like a separation of 2 lives. There's the life previous to June the 10th 1998 and a life after June the 10th 1998 and the 2 people who are involved in [...] in this demarcation are 2 separate entities almost." (Albert, 1)

As part of this process, he questioned and re-evaluated most of his previous behavior, values and attitudes. When he thinks about the girl he shot now (compare above) he has a very different feeling. "I find that incredible, I really do. And it is things like that, that I'm very ashamed of" (Albert, 13).

He met his new wife when he got into university and she became a central resource for him to come to terms with his past experiences and to re-evaluate his former life.

She's been the first person I spoke to about my actual experiences at war. I've never articulated the specifics of [...] of [...] of [...] of [...] killing to anybody. I didn't like myself very much. I didn't feel particularly good about what I'd done so I didn't think it was particularly fair for her, a beautiful innocent young woman to come anywhere near me until she knew what it was I was capable of, what it was I'd done and then for her to make her own decisions. [...] She says well, you know, if we're going to do this, if we're going to be together, you know, you need to tell me some [...] you need to be honest with me and tell me some of the things. You know, I've slept with you loads of times and you keep waking up [...] with these sweats and screaming and stuff, you know, I need to know what these are, you scare me at times. So I just told

her [...] It almost opened the floodgates and everything went from there and we just talked almost about every experience that I'd [...] that I'd dreamt about and keep remembering about and keep recall I used to keep the reaction in my head and that was really difficult to do. It was really difficult to see someone [...] someone's face who loves you and sees you as a kind and gentle man to [...] to [...] you can see the horror, you can see the the shock, you can see it in the expressions on their face and their eyes and the way they talk etc etc. And of course once you get into [...] you know once you've expressed something like that that's been in for so long. it's not pleasurable it's [...] it's [...] it's [...] it almost takes on an act of its own, it almost takes on a story of its own so you don't so much tell the story, you re-live the story as you talk it through so, you know, you've got the smells in your nose, you know, everything's there. There can be no creativity, there can be no love, there can be no understanding of happiness or fulfillment without the damage that is life and the personality isn't shaped by that damaged of life. It's shaped by how you interpret, how you make meaning or how you give meaning to it. What you take from it is your personality, not what is invested in you. And that was a big turning stone. That was a big step to make for me and my wife helped me make that. (Albert, 13)

His wife became the person to confide in and to give him (emotional) support. The following statement also helps to understand how fully the military can supplant normal social support structures such as a good friend or wife who has an external view on a service man's professional experiences and problems:

I don't know what I'd do without that support. I never needed that support before. The Marines was always my support. They would always do the things that they needed to do. But family and that now is astounding because I never thought that would be [...] I could understand [...] I could never understand why people worried about their jobs or getting there on time or what clothes they had or whether they had the right fashion or whether their hair was done or whether they had money or [...] These things just were alien to me completely. They just made no sense. (Albert, 91)

Emotions and controlling his emotions are a central topic in Albert's life story. When he was a child and a teenager he was very in tune with his emotions: "I trusted my emotions. If something made me angry it made me angry, it was wrong and it needed to be fought against and that's what I did" (Albert, 11). Controlling his emotions seems to have been always a problem for Albert; when he was at school, in his foster family, and when he joined the Royal Marines. However, training in the army helped him to control his emotions and to utilize them in combat. He reflects during the interview that he "never got away from that trait, from that headlong trait to step up and fight and to do the things there and then" (Albert, 11). This caused him some problems in the corps as well. However, in combat situations this attitude might have been

rather beneficial while in civil situations that was obviously problematic<sup>5</sup>. He attributes this behavior to his earlier life as a Marine and he is proud that he is now able to control his emotions:

So since leaving the Corps I've had 3 scuffles where I've had to use my hands. Before me leaving the Corps that would have just lead to violence immediately, I mean without conversation. Immediate violence. Immediate how dare you, Bang, and then a conversation. So I'm very proud of myself for not doing that and now I have a relationship that I've been in for 6 years, coming on 7 years, the longest in my entire life. I have a new son. I'm married. I own my own home for the first time in my life. There are some sort of career prospects. And the red button still rises frequently when I'm in a conversation within academia. My refusal to accept or jump through the hoops is a direct response of the bibliography behind me. I can't just sacrifice that as I've sacrificed the lives of the guys who have died. This is how I make sense of it I guess. This is why I need to live a good life, to honor those, because they've been part of the psychological problems that have led to me drugs and alcohol. (Albert, 11)

Albert in his approach to bringing cognition and emotion together in a rational approach is fundamentally different from what most other ex-serviceman reported. They tried to suppress the emotions which are mainly linked to the bad experiences they have had or tried to shift responsibility to superiors. Albert seems to have found an answer to why he failed as a Royal Marine: he was unable to deal with the "emotional dishonesty" in the corps. It is in his view not an honest thing to kill civilians such as children and women even if it is part of a mission. For him, killing itself became morally problematic. He sees a tension between the dirty reality of war and combat and the way in which war is remembered as an honorable activity by the corps and in the public. Speaking about his experiences and what he did as part of his job has become a kind of mission for him to deal with his experiences and to reduce the tension between reality of war and social discourse about war. This response is in line with what he brought to the corps and what might have helped him to become an aggressive but successful soldier. At the same time this contradiction has led to his problems and his "failure" as a soldier. But his approach to re-establishing emotional honesty might have helped him to find his way back into civil life.

Even though Albert failed the army, he did not fail in regard his own biographical project. As Jolly (1996) has outlined, the transition from military life to civil life is a long and difficult path. Albert's experience shows how difficult it is to go down this path if the military is your first point of being socially accepted and how important it is to have learning skills and support on leaving the military. Albert said little about this support. He had contact with an organization which helps veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder. He made

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<sup>5</sup> Dealing with aggression is a common problem among ex-service man. Many become involved in struggles often alcohol related.

contact to students when he started university. After finding his wife at the beginning of his time at the university, she became a central resource to sort out his past and to adapt to civilian life. His survival skills to get that far might not only be the result of his lone warrior socialization in the army but also of what he said his mother taught him when he was younger – to fight even though the odds be against you.

## 5. Conclusion

Ruth Jolly writes in her book “Changing Step – From Military to Civilian Life: People in Transition” that “military service is a unique occupation. It is more than a job, not only a profession; it is a way of life” (1996, p.2). However, military service is different for different people who bring different resources to the services, and who engage in different ways with the corps and the life as a soldier. They immerse into a culture which tends to exclude the public and which frequently draws an idealized honorable picture of itself and its contribution to society. As no institution is perfect, I am arguing that the military is ambivalent in providing chances and dangers alike for its members. In particular for young adults who are attracted by the certainty culture of the military and tend to over-assimilate, this army culture may become dangerous.

When young male adults decide to join the army they are driven by a mixture of motives and needs. They search for their identity as person and man, they quest for an exciting and challenging job and often they would like to contribute something valuable to society. Sometimes, they simply try to find a place within society where they are acknowledged despite lacking educational resources. Likewise, sociocultural and structural contexts (such as regional labor market, class affiliation) can narrow their options and push them towards a military career. By offering a clear career perspective and a safe haven where most things are taken care of by the employer, the military helps in particular young adults from a disadvantaged social group or social context to take a biographical decision. However, the clear perspectives within the military do not necessarily prepare them well for their subsequent civil life.

When young adults engage in military life they do so in different ways. The well-known problems with the drinking culture and machismo might be part of the excitement at the beginning. However, they may become dangerous when they prevent them as soldiers from actively engaging with their experiences and problems. For example, the possibility that they may die and the death of comrades are issues soldiers have to deal with as part of their profession. They cannot be suppressed with the help of alcohol for a long period of time. There are also problems with acknowledging a reality of war that differs from what is usually communicated within society. While some soldiers try to suppress ethical issues or shift responsibility to their superiors, others have serious problems with the contradiction between the reality of war and the way in which

military deployments are publicly and officially communicated. There is a systematic contradiction between the tendency to present relatively clean and clinical approaches to military operations and the reality of war. Kassimeris (2006) emphasizes in "The Barbarization of Warfare" that modern wars have increased the civilians' death rate and the boundaries between soldiers and civilians have become blurred and women and children are more often victims but sometimes also perpetrators of war. As Joanna Bourke (1999) outlines in her "Intimate History of Killing," the reality of war fighting has been much less honorable and clinical than often presented e.g. in the media and closer to bloody slaughter than controlled operation. Soldiers are regularly much more concerned about their own survival than about acting honorably when fighting for their lives. Some of the interviewees touched on such issues but many tend not to speak about them. For one interviewee the memories had been too painful to go ahead with the interview. Albert, among others, gave some examples. One is about a sniper who killed a 12 year old girl, for him a professionally necessary and justifiable act but ethically difficult to live with. Apart from the alcohol culture or traumatic experiences of killed comrades, the question of how the experience of war can be dealt with emotionally and ethically poses a problem for at least some of the veterans. Here might be one reason for the observation Jolly (1996) has made in her study about the transition of soldiers into civil life: Having interviewed a small number of soldiers who had been in extremely life-threatening situations and who had left services relatively far behind, she asked whether it could be "that the actual performance of the tasks begin to undo the conditioning" (p.48) for the services. Seeing more of the reality of war, which might normally be obscured by military myths made it easier for some soldiers (e.g. John, Albert) to change their view regarding their job and to leave it behind more easily. This does not mean that they forget their experiences. However, their disillusion about the military seem to enable them to re-engage with civil life quicker.

Jolly (1996, pp.10-11, 155) argues that everyone has more or less to go through a three step process when leaving services: confrontation, disengagement and re-socialization. Differing to this homogenous approach, the presented study has emphasized the differences of engagement and their effects on soldiers' ability to deal with the challenges and contradictions they experience when they are choosing a military career. The study emphasizes that people engage not just for camaraderie and adventure (p.1), but for a number of reasons, and they experience the services quite differently. Therefore, developing an "appetite for alcohol" (p.6) is nothing accidental or caused by personal weakness, it is part and parcel of the occupational culture and biographical experience. Jolly's study shows some similar patterns as the study presented. Soldiers who do not integrate into the forces to the same extent as some comrades are paradoxically often the "prize-winners and promotees" (p.31) while they often feel to be "on the fringe" of their peer-group. If one wants to be

successful within the forces, it might be good to have skills beyond the ones provided by the professional culture. These soldiers go through the phases easier or quicker because “they are driven” by a project which goes back to their identity (interests, values, motives) and are not routed in the military (p.32). These individual projects might stop them from being captured by the drinking culture and prevent them of locking their own biographical perspective into the military way of life.

The argument that maintaining contacts with the civil world facilitates the way back into civil life is supported by Jolly’s study as well (pp.46-48). I would argue that these contacts and an individual project helps soldiers to maintain a relative distance to the professional culture of the job and provides them with resources to resist becoming fully absorbed by the military life style and certainty culture. They maintain alternative, competing or even contradicting worldviews or uncertainties of life orientation. They do not try to reduce them to a homogenous approach to social reality. These remaining uncertainties seem to be an important resource for the management of problems from within army life and therefore might make them even better soldiers.

## Appendix

	Codename	Date of birth	Situation at interview	Date of interview	Place of interview
1	Albert	1960s	Student	2006	Canterbury
2	Sam	1950s	Full-time employed	2007	London
3	Brian	1970s	Full-time employed	2007	Canterbury
4	Chris	1970s	Education	2008	Sheffield
5	Paul	1950s	Retired	2007	Canterbury
6	John	1940s	Lecturer	2007	Canterbury
7	Jack	1950s	Retired	2007	London
8	Hans	1950s	Full-time employed	2008	London
9	George	1940s	Homeless	2007	London
10	Frank	1930s	Homeless	2008	Sheffield
11	Ryan	1960s	Lecturer	2007	Canterbury
12	Jim	1970s	Homeless	2008	Birmingham
13	Jules	1950s	Homeless	2008	Birmingham
14	Jo	1960s	Homeless	2008	Birmingham

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