

# Understanding Military Culture and the Role of Art in Healing



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## Reintegration

### *Defining Reintegration*

The homecoming process and what follows is commonly summarized within the single word: reintegration. According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary the verb reintegrate is defined as, “To integrate again into an entity : restore to unity.” When considering this in relation to service, it applies on several levels. For returning service members, whether it be from a deployment, or even from a stateside operation, there are a sequence of returns, restorations, or reintegrations that occur. **For most, the sequence unfolds in this order— return to family, return to work, return to self, return to community.**

For most, the first return is to family. The media depicts this as an emotionally filled scene where the service member slowly walks down the steps of a plane while his or her family members eagerly await their embrace, holding up handmade signs, eyes filled with tears of joy and bodies perked up with long awaited suspense. For some, there are elements of this. But for many the initial return can be anticlimactic or fraught with mixed feelings including apprehension, confusion, excitement, anxiety, worry, joy, and for many, a sense of detachment or surrealism. These and other mixed feelings apply both for the service member and family. Consider if, tomorrow, you suddenly had to leave your family and community because your boss gave you a temporary assignment far away, working 60+ hour weeks. The internet is unreliable in this new office and you won't be able to communicate regularly. How would you feel? What would you miss most? How would you begin to describe the last year upon returning home?

When looking at adjustment and transitions, esteemed retired Army Colonel, Chaplain Eric Olsen said, “Returning home is like canoeing down a long winding river as a family. The service member gets out of the canoe halfway downstream. The family's journey continues, as the flow of water naturally brings them along. When the service member returns to the shoreline to board the canoe at the same location, the family is no longer there.” There is no doubt that many return to happy healthy homes with loved ones who are supportive, open, understanding, and welcoming— and that many returning veterans are just as open to receiving and giving that warmth. The inherent challenges within any family dynamic are important to consider when a service member moves from one extreme to the next, often after extended periods of time away, filled with experiences that are far removed from what we would consider everyday family or home life.

The rebound effect that occurs when service members return to family and home is partly due to this convergence of contrasting worlds, and partly due to other factors as well. Let's take a brief look at the in-processing and out-processing steps that take a service member from civilian life to active duty, and from active duty to detachment or retirement. After this, we will explore the remaining three levels of return— to work, to self and to community.

### ***Pre-Deployment***

Pre-Deployment refers to the time period from when a person is notified of their upcoming deployment until that deployment begins. A deployment can be overseas or domestic. The timeframe of any given deployment varies based on branch of service, location of deployment, and nature of a given conflict. Most people think of deployments as lasting six to twelve months, which is a typical timeframe although variations do occur, with some deployments in the Post 9/11 era surpassing 18 months. Within the family system the pre-deployment phase is a highly charged and strained period of preparation. Families use this time to get affairs in order in respect to finances, caretaking responsibilities, childcare responsibilities, and general household duties. Arguments are common and normal during this phase as individuals feel pressured and anxieties emerge both outwardly and unconsciously. **With the anticipation of distance and the fear of loss, we as human beings are programmed to react with a combination of intimacy and detachment.** Family members may express feelings of sadness, fear, anger, or detachment in regard to the upcoming separation. Unresolved family issues may surface and when children are involved, emotions can be heightened. Families often outline and discuss what they develop as the new routine that will be set in place during the service member's absence. This can help to give everyone involved a much needed sense of control, as well as assist in managing expectations on both sides. While in most cases active duty service members are given several months' notice, Guardsmen and Reservists are often activated and deployed with very little time to prepare, adding additional strain and stress to an already uneasy process.

### ***Deployment***

Deployment refers to the time period when the service member leaves home and lasts throughout their time away. **Common feelings during this time can range from confusion, sadness, relief, emptiness, excitement and focus, to numbing, loss, adrenaline, and emotional detachment.** Each deployment is met with different hazards— depending on where, when, and the duration. Keep in mind that a deployment can occur stateside, overseas, or even on a ship (as is most common in the Navy). Examples of hazards include exposure to Agent Orange, toxins and burn pits, extreme climate, natural disasters, exposure to illness, and risks related to battle such as injury or death. Let's also remember the family that is still in that canoe, heading downstream, continuing their routine. Consider cultural triggers that may affect family members while their loved ones are away, including current events, news stories, and politics. Family members often become particularly sensitive to and in tune with these topics, even if they never had before, as worldly issues become personal.

### ***Post-Deployment***

Post Deployment refers to the timeframe when the service member returns home from deployment. The specifics of this process vary depending on the circumstances. When an active duty service member is returning from a deployment but not leaving the military, they are debriefed. This means going through a process of questions that determine each service

member's adjustment back, as well as readiness to re-deploy if needed. The process is relatively brief but does not necessarily mean that the person will return home right away, as they may still be stationed with their unit (away from home) for a period of time. There is no guarantee that a service member will get 'leave' or vacation after a deployment, though oftentimes there is a brief period granted for that person to spend time with family before resuming their active duty responsibilities. For active duty service members, although they have returned home and resumed their usual work, they can be deployed again. This status can keep an individual and their family in a state of constant underlying anxiety, as they are always ready to start the process over again. Reserve and Guard troops return home faster and sometimes even abruptly. **An important tip for supporting families and service members is to first understand the circumstances of their post-deployment narrative, as well as the universal fact that these individuals face a state of continuous instability.** The sacrifices for both service member and family, whatever the details, are indisputable.

### ***Demobilization***

For active duty, Guardsmen, or Reservists, when a service member's contract is up they are fully demobilized through a process called the Transition Assistance Program. This process serves to transition them from service member to civilian, after which the term veteran becomes appropriate. All separating and retiring service members fill out a series of documents and checklists, identifying their intentions and areas where they predict they may need additional support or resources. **In theory, this process is a great way to assess and identify needs, but in reality, most service members are so eager to get out that they do not answer the questions with full clarity and honesty.** This, combined with the delayed onset of symptoms related to Post Traumatic Stress, Traumatic Brain Injury, and Moral Injury, make for a process that falls short for most.

There are two other means by which service members separate from the military— medical separation and other than honorable or dishonorable discharges. Medical separation occurs when a service member is no longer able to fulfill their duties. When medically separated, the discharge is considered honorable and a veteran is entitled to the same benefits as any other service member who completed their military contract without premature separation. This can be due to a physical injury or mental health condition. Even though this type of separation is honorable, veterans who undergo it often feel a sense of interrupted duty or stigma associated with their inability to finish their length of time in the service.

In contrast, other than honorable or dishonorable discharge statuses occur when a service member commits infractions that go against the Uniform Code of Military Justice and thereby lead to the determination to have them discharged. The severity of the offense will determine whether or not the discharge status is other than honorable (less severe) or dishonorable (more severe and comparable to having a felony conviction). Either one has lasting effects on a

veterans access, or lack thereof, to benefits such as VA healthcare or with certain non-profits that work with veterans— not to mention the stigma and shame often associated with the status. Worth noting is the fact that other than honorable discharges have been given to service members who identified as LGBTQ (prior to the Don't Ask Don't Tell repeal, and currently in the case of transgender service members) and to veterans who had certain mental health conditions that inhibited their ability to serve and were deemed pre-existing. In some instances service members that developed mental health concerns while in-service and who turned to substance use as a coping mechanism also face these circumstances. Many veterans who received these discharges still carry resentment today, as policies have shifted towards more acceptance of LGBTQ populations and sensitivity to mental health. Due to this, some veterans have the ability to repeal their status and receive a discharge upgrade, however, this is an arduous and lengthy process that requires assistance from a legal team. The process alone deters many from even considering their own case.

### ***Returning Home***

If you recall, we began this section on reintegration discussing four returns— return to family, return to work, return to self and return to community. Return to family brought us into topics of in-processing, out-processing, and deployment cycles as family is so deeply and continuously affected by the initial departure, time away, and the return.

**In the return to work, service members go through a process where they take on another mission, passion, or career track— no easy task.** There are reasons why statistics for veterans are much higher than their civilian counterparts in relation to divorce, unemployment, homelessness, suicide, mental health, and addiction rates. Let's consider why this is. In broad terms, the warrior experience— the indoctrination into military life, with or without deployments— can chip away at one's identity. While the military can build a person's sense of purpose and empowerment, military careers are often interrupted or end long before what we consider retirement age. Therefore this return to work, to exploring next steps, goals, and career options, can be a huge undertaking. Some veterans have access to benefits like the GI Bill, which assists in pursuing higher education after service. Many companies offer incentives and receive tax deductions for hiring veterans, which can also be helpful in terms of expanding the job market for returning veterans. Even with these potential opportunities, it often takes veterans time to navigate through their own return, while financial and other pressures take hold far too fast, forcing them into choices and decisions they may not be ready for.

If you speak to a veteran about their resume and military experience, they will bring up the notion of transferable skills. Many veterans embody certain traits and skills that for some pre-exist and are reinforced by service, and for others, are conditioned during service. As much as we reinforce the importance of avoiding a one size fits all mentality with veterans, there are some universal truths that emerge in terms of personality traits and skills. As an example, think

of the healthcare field which includes social workers, nurses, and therapists. Generally, we say that healthcare professionals are empathetic, compassionate, solution focused, nurturing, and able to multitask. **Similarly, many veterans are problem solvers, action oriented, able to lead, hold high standards, meet deadlines, are driven, expect follow through and accountability, appreciate communication, want to be informed and can operate well in teams.**

One barrier veterans face is in translating their military skills into civilian terms. If you have a veteran who was an expert sniper, or helicopter mechanic, or tank operator, the amount of highly tuned skills needed for many of these jobs is impressive. However, how do you identify, outline, and translate those skills for a bank manager position, a teacher, or a cosmetics salesperson? Also consider the survival skills that are needed in military training and combat operations but which may be a disservice at home and at work. Hyperarousal might have served a veteran in combat but at home it becomes intrusive, distracting and tense. Aggression may have served a veteran during training but confrontation may be too direct and alarming for the civilian workforce. Being mission oriented may have helped a veteran stay focused and sharp overseas, but at home it may create an all or nothing mentality with no room for compromise. Predictability is important to service members, but can lead to inflexibility and a controlling attitude back at work. Service members are expected to react and make quick decisions, where at home this may appear volatile or impulsive. A well thought out strategy and blueprint is necessary for military operations, but for your child's birthday party, or errands with a spouse, it may lead to over thinking and analyzing every detail to a fault. Focused and detached survival skills can appear numb and distracted at home. Vigilance may look like distrust and suspicion. Adrenaline filled experiences can lend themselves to thrill-seeking patterns at home or work, which civilians may find alarming, dangerous, or out of the ordinary.

As we go on to look at the return to self, all of these factors, as well as the history of the individual, play a role. Author Ed Tick's "Warrior's Return" sums up the reintegration process best by saying, "The reshaping of woman or man into warrior is dependent on the warrior's preparation and code. It is dependent on the traditions out of which it was born and operates. It is dependent on the particular cause for which warriors fight and for which they are asked to take life and offer their own. It is dependent on the number, length, intensity, and kinds of traumatic experiences before service and while in the military and the war zone. And it is dependent on a society's use of and care for its warriors before and during service and deployments and for the rest of their life span."

### ***Civilian Identity and Return to Self***

This ties into our next return—the return to self. Generally speaking, our selfhood is determined by what we do. There is a consistent version of self that we carry with us from job to job, relationship to relationship, choice to choice and location to location. We often label ourselves

based on the roles we play— student, teacher, mother, father, daughter, son, caregiver, social worker, doctor, actor, etc. **Military service is so all-consuming that many veterans end up identifying with their time in service and with their veteran identity in a way that is difficult to separate, even years after service.** Some may feel a type of identity crisis when they initially return to self, trying to navigate who they are now and who they want to be as a civilian. In “Warrior’s Return” Ed Tick identifies that there are two components in the return to self that are required in order for veterans to have a healthy transition. He identifies “spiritual warrior” and “elder” as necessary roles, which imply a need for several things— a warrior identity, spiritual connections, and a sense of wisdom and respect. Veterans can go a lifetime without satisfying these needs, which may explain some of the interruptive patterns and statistics we mentioned earlier. **In summary, the need of the military & veteran community to forge the way for healthy transitions back to self may be distant, seemingly unattainable, or challenging to attain, creating unforeseen barriers in adjustment.**

### *Return to Community*

Finally, let’s look at the return to community which refers to personal and local communities as well as society at large. As many know, the return to community for Vietnam era veterans was less than pleasant. Persian Gulf and Post 9/11 era veterans were generally welcomed home, thanked for their service, and held in high regard. Yet, every reintegration is loaded with potential risks and larger societal issues still weigh heavy on veterans of all eras. In “Tribe” Sebastian Junger states, “Today’s veterans often come home to find that, although they’re willing to die for their country, they’re not sure how to live for it. It’s hard to know how to live for a country that regularly tears itself apart along every possible ethnic and demographic boundary. The income gap between rich and poor continues to widen, many people live in racially segregated communities, the elderly are mostly sequestered from public life, and rampage shootings happen so regularly that they only remain in the news cycle for a day or two.” Junger goes on to say, “It’s complete madness, and the veterans know this. In combat, soldiers all but ignore differences of race, religion, and politics within their platoon. It’s no wonder many of them get so depressed when they come home.” The more unified a community is, the smoother the reintegration to society. This is why local neighborhoods matters.

Veterans do notice if flags are hung and displayed at homes, in places of work, or in theaters. The expressions of gratitude and respect often matter and are in stark contrast to what Vietnam veterans experienced. However, we must also move past these easier expressions of gratitude. The phrase ‘thank you for your service,’ although well intentioned, is not always well-received by a veteran. The reason for this is that veterans sometimes find it superficial. **While flags, parades, and expressions of thanks are an improvement from what we saw in the Vietnam era, some feel that civilians engage in these activities without pursuing a deeper understanding of what it means to serve.** Whether they were drafted or volunteered, veterans often feel a deep sense of responsibility towards their service and their country even after

service. We can see this reflected in data from the United States Census Bureau, which reports that veterans turn out to vote in elections at higher rates than their civilian peers. Veterans generally appreciate being asked questions about their service. Try changing your phrasing to “I appreciate that you served,” or “I’m glad you made it home,” and follow up with questions that show curiosity and interest.

### ***Barriers***

Reintegration is crucial in a veteran’s journey home. The more supportive and smooth the reintegration is in all areas (family, work, self, and community) the better. There is potential for significant strides to be made throughout the reintegration process. What this section highlights is the window for error that also exists, and the fact that interruptions in the return process can have lasting negative impact. **Keep in mind that according to DoD and VA records, less than 1% of the US population currently serves and veterans make up less than 2% of the entire population. The vast majority of people do not share their experiences, making veterans feel inherently disconnected from the larger community.**

Our next section covers areas for support and goes in depth into trends associated with Post Traumatic Stress (PTS), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), and Moral Injury (MI), all of which perpetuate barriers for returning veterans. Other barriers worth noting are stigma, the veteran civilian divide, and delayed onset of transitional challenges. An overall lack of understanding for the veteran experience, and therefore a lack of sensitivity to it, is an underlying and unfortunately consistent barrier. Trainings and educational manuals such as this one are a great way to improve competency and understanding. **As you are reading this, give yourself credit for diving into this material. It is the first step towards bridging the gap.**

A frequent source of frustration for veterans is the benefits system, whether it be with their insurance, the VA, disability benefits, or healthcare in general. There are many competing systems operating in a parallel but segregated manner. A veteran may have disability benefits that deem them unemployable, and therefore if they try to return to work, they lose significant financial and health benefits. Veterans with housing or financial struggles sometimes do not meet income criteria for government programs due to the disability benefits they are receiving, leaving them in a perpetual cycle of unmet needs. Veterans often seek healthcare in the private sector or even seek support through the non-profit organizations simply because it is more accessible.

In “Warrior’s Return” Ed Tick describes homecoming as a potential source of trauma in itself by saying, “Neglect and its consequences can last a lifetime,” and continuing with, “Initiation through ordeal and return is meant to prove worth and earn membership and belonging. But for many in our modern era, this path has led to loneliness, abandonment, neglect, silence, and despair instead.” Tick reinforces the importance of a social contract by stating “The proper relationship and implicit social contract between warriors and civilians are interchangeable

concentric circles of protection and caring. Society is responsible for warriors' well-being in preparation before, support during, and tending after conflict. This includes how society uses its warriors, takes responsibility for their actions during and provides for their well-being afterward. Whether and how this happens can itself account for the traumatic wound." Keeping this in mind, we move on to look at trends in relation to PTS, TBI, and MI.