

MILITARY LIVES AND TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY REPORT

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KEY INFORMATION

1. The current generation of UK older adults are in a distinct position in society, with a higher proportion having served in the military than in subsequent generations. This is due to National Service, which formed the basis of conscription during 1939-1945, and then was enacted as a minimum two years of service from 1948-1960, with conscripts serving until 1963.

2. Over 60% of military veterans are aged over 65; older (aged) veterans are defined by the Ministry of Defence as those born before 1 January 1950. There is interest from government, the third sector and veterans' organisations in ensuring their health and well-being needs are fully met.

3. Our interdisciplinary qualitative research, including engagement with over 100 older veterans in interviews and workshops, aimed to increase understanding of older veterans' lives, self-understandings, and distinctive challenges, to inform future interventions and identify gaps in current supportive services.

4. Drawing on evidence around the benefits of telling and listening to stories, we worked with veterans to think about the way that stories are used in military culture and seen as a tool for connection and improving well-being.

5. Our findings show that older veterans can be isolated by perceived gaps between military experiences and civilian understandings.

6. Understanding the older veteran community, drawing on the principles of cultural competencies, is essential to facilitating positive outcomes in their improved well-being.

7. Older veterans are concerned about keeping the veteran identity alive by telling stories of military experience, connecting with other veterans and supporting a younger generation of veterans.

8. Often, older veterans had not identified a need for support until later in life, at the intersection of age and veteran identity. Service providers should be aware that veterans' needs change over time and be prepared to support these changes.

9. We recommend using peer-led models that acknowledge the importance of older veterans' capacity to discuss their needs and concerns.

10. Using guidance provided in our publication, 'The Understand Older Veterans Toolkit: working with post-military lives' will help those who are not from a military background to communicate with and support older veterans, particularly around story-sharing.



INTRODUCTION

Military Lives and Transformative Experiences: Exploring narratives and aged veterans' well-being was a research project conducted between 2017 and 2019. It brought together academics from medical sociology, philosophy, psychology and health research to consider how older veterans' well-being may be improved by autobiographical storytelling in various forms. Our aim was to consider the impact of personal narrative in connection with wider philosophical questions about flourishing and well-being for older veterans. The project had two strands of data collection:

(1) Interviews with 50 older veterans, focused on the role of personal narrative autobiography and autobiographical accounts and their impact on well-being.

(2) Five workshops conducted in Ashton-under-Lyne, Lancaster, London, Manchester and Preston working with a total of over 70 veterans (approx. 15 per workshop), examining the use of storying prompts, concepts such as transformative experience, and focused on a

particular theme in military life such as enlistment, comradeship or leaving the forces.

Our research acknowledges, and works towards addressing, the challenges that some members of the veteran community may be facing. Veteran stories must be heard for those working with the veteran community to deliver best practice support if required. A valuable part of these stories is knowledge of what veterans enjoyed and valued about service and the impact it had upon their lives both during and after service. Working with older veterans in workshops and interviews, we shared stories from classic martial autobiographies, and heard aged veterans' stories in response, in order to:

(1) Investigate the therapeutic benefits of autobiographical storytelling in response to prompts.

(2) Understand the relationship between aged veterans' storytelling and philosophical analyses of martial autobiographies and of flourishing.

EVIDENCE BASE: SHARING STORIES AND WELL-BEING

Research shows that sharing narratives about life events can benefit people with mental health problems.¹⁻³ Being able to tell a coherent story about the self helps people to make sense of their lives and improves well-being. Similarly, reading about shared experiences has also been identified as having well-being benefits.⁴⁻⁷ Autobiographical narrative—telling one’s own story—is central to well-being, self-understanding, and/or selfhood.⁸⁻¹⁰ Our starting point was to explore these ideas with the older veteran population, who often have poor well-being and experience loneliness and isolation.^{11,12}

By facilitating working with autobiographical texts on military lives, as well as with

extracts from interviews with older military veterans, we were able to mediate encounters between veterans and autobiographical texts. This has practical implications, outlined in our toolkit publication, as well as being of interest to the research community.

We approach the idea of well-being from a philosophical and sociological standpoint, rather than drawing on currently operationalized understandings of well-being such as the New Economics Foundation’s ‘Five Ways of Well-being’, which presents a simplified model of well-being. For more information about our standpoint, see some of our academic outputs available via the Lancaster University website.



THE OLDER VETERAN COMMUNITY

Older (aged) veterans are defined by the Ministry of Defence as those born before 1 January 1950. There is interest in ensuring their health and well-being needs are fully met. Our work aimed to increase understanding of older veterans' lives, self-understandings, and distinctive challenges, with a view to informing future interventions and identifying gaps in current supportive services.



In the UK, an inclusive definition of a veteran has been adopted which includes all former service personnel: anyone who has been part of the armed forces for at least one day of service is considered to be a veteran.¹³ Many of those who fit this definition may not identify as a veteran, believing the term refers to those who served in the World Wars. However, we are now seeing more ex-service personnel begin to take up the veteran identity, especially through wearing the Veterans Badge.¹⁴

Ex-service personnel represent a substantial proportion of the older adult population. The current generation of UK older adults are in a distinct position in society, with a higher proportion having served in the military than in subsequent generations. In 2017, 60% of all veterans (2.4 million) were aged 65 years or over.¹⁵ This figure is a product of the introduction of National Service, which formed the basis of conscription during 1939-1945, and then was enacted as a minimum two years of service from 1948-1960, with conscripts serving until 1963. It should be remembered that a significant number of veterans enlisted voluntarily, and some served for a significant military career (20+ years) before returning to civilian life.

Based on analysis of the sample of veterans who participated in our research, we are confident that the conclusions drawn by our work broadly reflect the older veteran community profile and their concerns. In the UK, veterans are predominantly white (99%) and male (89%).¹⁶ We interviewed 50 veterans; all were white British (English/ Welsh/ Scottish) and 90% were men.

A total of 72 veterans attended one of the five workshops, of whom 65 were male and 7 were female. Like the interviewees, they had a range of experiences from different services, types of enlistment, and roles.

Many joined the services because it provided an escape route out of poverty or opportunity to avoid poor working conditions (such as mining). Some enlisted to escape an abusive home life. Others joined up for the opportunities to travel and other benefits that service offered, such as the opportunity to learn a trade. Some were drawn in by the idea of an exciting life and heroic escapades involved in defending the country, which they had seen in films and read about in comics such as The Eagle.

We spoke with veterans who loved and hated their service (and those who tolerated it), veterans who received significant military honours and those who were dishonourably discharged. As Table 1 shows, not all of those veterans interviewed voluntarily enlisted. Several of those who did National Service explored how they aimed to keep their efforts in this compulsory military service to a minimum.

For the older female veterans, their gender meant that there were additional challenges to military service or post-service life. For example, during military service, a number of the female older veterans that we interviewed experienced sexism, including premature and unfair dismissal. All served during a time when women were legally required to leave the forces when they married.

While previous generations of veterans had more shared or similar experiences – for example, in Europe in World War Two (WWII) – this cohort has a wealth of diverse experiences. This meant that they had diverse experiences of military service, during conflict and more peaceful times. Most had travelled internationally as part of their role.

Service	Army	23
	Navy	3
	Air force	22
	Territorial Army	2
Length of Service	1-2 years	16
	3-10 years	14
	11-20 years	7
	21-34 years	12
	Unknown	1
Type of enlistment	Conscription	1
	National service	20
	Voluntary	29
Age range	68 - 70	15
	71-79	12
	80-89	19
	90-100	4
Gender	Male	45
	Female	5

Table 1: Interview participants by service, age of enlistment, type of enlistment and length of service

Of those in our interviews and workshops, several fought in WWII (including in Burma and as a Japanese prisoner of war) or provided service in its aftermath (e.g. at Christmas Island as part of nuclear testing, in Jerusalem following WWII, in cold-war Germany). Others saw combat in the Malay crisis or the Korean war. Those who joined later were variously posted to Northern Ireland, Kenya, Gibraltar, Cyprus, Oman, Libya, Jamaica, Hong Kong, Singapore and other locations. In addition to the different services, many mentioned specific regiments that they were part of and highlighted regimental identity as an important element of their veteran status.

Despite this diversity of service, veterans frequently talked about an enduring similarity or connection between former military persons regardless of service, role, experiences (of conflict), and age, particularly when compared to those who 'cannot know' (civilians). Our experience of working with veterans as civilians emphasized to us that older veterans also regularly contradicted this sentiment by describing differences (for example, in terms of the conflicts experienced, different postings (national or international), training exercises, rank structures, national service or not). This is highly relevant to some of the practicalities of working with other veterans, particularly when aiming to facilitate discussion, as outlined in our practical toolkit.



IMPROVING WELL-BEING: STORIES OF MILITARY CULTURE

The use of stories as a form of bonding and establishing a sense of belonging in military culture has been widely established.¹⁷ Examining our interviews with this generation of veterans confirms this, with references to 'pulling up a sandbag', 'swinging the lamp' and an open acknowledgement that veterans love to tell stories to willing listeners.

The recognition that not all former comrades 'were still around' was important to note. While veterans may previously have had good social networks and significant contact with their former regiment or colleagues, as they aged, this was less easy to access. Many regimental organisations had closed, and former service comrades had become ill or died. This meant that older veterans had lost a source of support that they may have previously relied upon; opportunities to pull up a sandbag are disappearing. While some veterans are still able to access understanding colleagues to share stories with, others are more isolated.

Within this acknowledgement of the need to tell stories was the need for a willing and listening audience. The feeling that civilians were not interested in military stories was acknowledged. Our work aimed to think about how these veterans may be supported by other veterans and by civilians to overcome this.

“

I think the thing about stories is that the veterans who are listening to the stories by other veterans understand the context. [...] The problem mainly is to get your story in, because everybody else wants to tell theirs! So you've got to be quick. [...] Veterans love to hear stories: they love to tell their own stories.

18: Male, RAF, National Service, served 25 years

“

We always have lunch after a game of golf, and we go out for dinners and various things, and so we do, we swing the light and drag up a sandbag every now and again, you know, and have a chat, and it's quite interesting.

41: Male, Army, Voluntary Enlisted, served 22 years

“

There might be a few comical stories come up about things that have happened to various people at various times; some repeatable, some not. And, you know, it'll be that sort of camaraderie, amusing stories or where are they now type of things and, when you get to my age, asking if they're actually still around, you know!

28: Male, Army, National Service, served 2 years

“

[Civilians'] eyes go blank! Because you're trying to explain the inexplicable, if you like. And conversations, this is an in-depth conversation for a purpose. So, you are interested. But the average person that you talk to, you don't understand.

26: Male, TA, Voluntary Enlisted, served 25 years



OLDER VETERANS' CONCERNS

Alongside an understanding of older veterans' service and use of stories, knowledge of what matters to them is also important when trying to understand the veteran perspective. The interviews that we conducted with veterans highlighted several important themes that both shape the suggested activities in our toolkit and are useful to understand when considering an overview of our research findings. These themes can be summarised as: keeping the veteran identity alive; sharing memories; connecting with others; and intergenerational concerns.

KEEPING THE VETERAN IDENTITY ALIVE

Although their service differed according to the campaigns they were involved in, veterans were united in the way that they spoke about their histories and the need to know and understand veterans' experiences. Often their experiences and contribution were a source of pride, though this was sometimes understated in discussion.

Often, veterans wanted to tell us stories because they are personally important, but at other points they saw their experiences as nationally important. The latter were told from a position of having been involved in significant events that were in danger of being forgotten or misunderstood, both by the general population and by family.

Reading and hearing military stories affects how veterans make sense of their own experiences. Most wanted to hear stories which were similar in background to their own. Talking to other veterans at the workshops who had similar experiences helped to reminisce and 'write a self back in' to a story. Some veterans expressed a preference for reading military histories which helped to inform understanding of the wider political context of service, referring to the facts of events of which they were part, but were not necessarily aware of at the time. Reading these accounts gave a clearer picture of what had happened, building awareness beyond the limited, 'need to know', information provided at the time of service.



“

Interviewer: what is important about the veteran identity to you?

Veteran: That I was good enough; that I was willing; and that I went through it.

48: Male, RAF, Voluntary Enlisted, served unknown

“

I was saying [to my children that] I've walked away from funerals of friends and relations and the eulogy's thrown up hugely important and interesting things that that person [...] had done in your lifetime. And we said what a shame you didn't know that beforehand. And so, with my kids, I resolved to write [...] every now and then. I write them a story about something that's happened to me in the navy, one and a half sides of A4, and send it to them by email, so that during the rest of my life, they're going to get stories about what I did and what I saw and how I managed things, so that when the time comes, they won't be in ignorance.

12: Male, Navy, Voluntary Enlisted, served 31 years



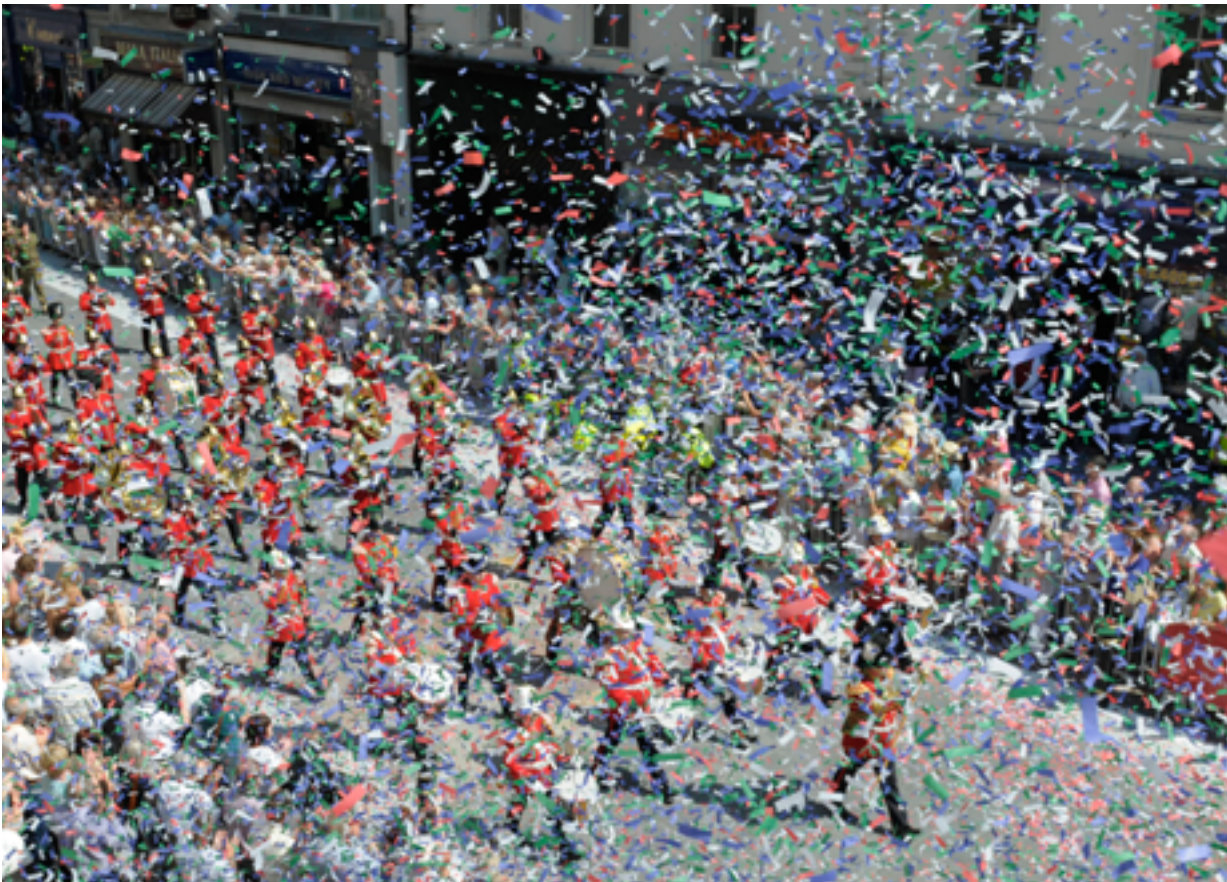
Veterans presented a real interest in sharing stories from their experiences with 'future generations.' Indeed, motivation for participating in the research for some of the veterans was a need to share before stories were lost.

This interest in telling stories of military life 'for the record' may be important in bridging the veteran-civilian gap. The feeling that veterans had been part of cultural events and had a duty to tell these stories was important to them. Many veterans volunteered to participate because they had a story to tell, having been present at a significant military occasion.

Many of the stories told were of ordinary life rather than focused on specific occasions of national import. These stories captured the 'bizarre'; stories which are trivial but present themselves to the veteran as unique, surprising, or funny, such as bumping into someone you knew from your past during an overseas posting. These more 'everyday' narratives may help to forge connection and emphasise shared experience with civilians that have a role in reducing isolation.

Perhaps unsurprisingly remembrance, recognition and respect are central elements of the veteran identity. The bonds forged in military service endure long after leaving the service, and the veteran community regularly come together to make sure no-one's contributions will be forgotten.

This was particularly important to this generation of veterans, who often did not see themselves directly represented in the wider culture of remembrance as experienced in civilian life.



“

I don't know whether you saw the news this morning, did you, about the funeral down in the South? There was this airman who had no family at all, and somebody put online that could anybody attend his funeral, and they had a huge turnout of the RAF and people couldn't get inside the church, even, it was that big.

14: Male, RAF, National Service, served 2 years

“

I had great difficulty getting anybody interested in a wreath for Cyprus for the 50th anniversary. We eventually did, and we got about three-quarters of a minute commentary when they were delivering that wreath, because it's the same time as we were dedicating the memorial in Cyprus to the 371 lads that got killed there, plus the police and any other civilians that died over there. So, I was very pleased with that.

33: Male, RAF, National Service, served 2 years

For this community, service may have occurred a long time ago, but veterans were still keen to be recognized as veterans and drew on items of military visual culture to achieve this. These items included medals, ID cards, small souvenirs and photographs, which were shared with us at events. This sharing of objects was unprompted, and so veterans choosing to bring these treasured items to workshops shows how important they are to veterans.

There were also frequent mentions of the HM Armed Forces Veterans' Lapel Badge, a small enamel pin badge launched in 2004. The badge is available for free to anyone who has served in the UK's armed forces and by April 2016, over 84,500 'veterans badges,' as they are commonly known, had been issued to ex-service personnel.¹⁴

The veterans badge, which contains a composite motif of the army, navy and air force emblems, aims to encourage a sense of unity, recognise contributions and enable public recognition.

“

It doesn't matter where they served, who they served with, it's there: it's still there. You meet people in the street [...] that little badge really goes a long way, and people say, "Oh, you served," and they'll stop and talk, because their friends or their civilian friends don't understand what they're talking about.

04: Male, Army, Voluntary Enlisted, served 22 years



CONNECTING WITH OTHER VETERANS

The desire to keep the veteran identity alive led veterans to value communication with those who they felt would understand their memories and background: other veterans. Some veterans talked about the importance of telling stories to other veterans in order to foster a sense of community/commonality which could mitigate loneliness and the loss experienced through friends and family passing away in their later years. Veterans spoke about how being ex-military personnel created a bond that was maintained over time and distance.

The veterans that we have worked with told us that they found the military autobiography extracts we used in workshops helpful, as they facilitated and framed discussion. Even if the extracts did not reflect experiences in service, there was enjoyable disagreement and the extracts helped to keep conversation open so that everyone could contribute. Personal stories were sometimes quite emotionally powerful, and using the military autobiography extracts helped to explore these topics. We were also able to talk about relationships with civilian society, which was really helpful in terms of thinking about how to support other organisations to support veterans.

We found that for some veterans, opportunities to tell stories and be heard were reducing due to losing contact with former regiments/colleagues, the closing of regimental organisations, and former comrades becoming ill or dying. When we looked across the interview transcripts about why veterans thought talking about military experiences was important, telling stories to build and maintain communities was the most commonly cited reason. Other reasons included wanting to keep old characters alive, for history to not be lost, and for future generations to know about their societies' past.

Although relationships in service served a specific purpose (to protect each other's lives in active combat and ensure cohesion in difficult circumstances) veterans often commented that they did not feel that they had to like comrades they just knew that they could rely on them. These intimate and disciplined bonds did not end when the participant left military service.

“

The emphasis is on it's a family, you are part of a family. [...] The bonding is much more than happening to be in a trench with your guys, the bonding is the social side of life. [...] It lasts afterwards: we still feel that.

26: Male, TA, Voluntary Enlisted, served 25 years



In our workshops and interviews, we found that some veterans were very active in Facebook groups and other online communities as a way of either maintaining connection or reconnecting with old comrades.

Veterans in our workshops particularly enjoyed the coincidental meetings with someone with whom they had something in common. One participant reported that he was very pleased to have met someone who had served in the same location as him as he had never encountered anyone else who had shared this experience before.

These bonds were not just seen to connect individuals who knew each other or had served together. Several participants told a story of being at social events, like weddings, with strangers and sharing a common bond of service.

“

I've been sharing [stories] with colleagues [...] ever since having served in the RAF. [...] with the modern computer era, I'll often get a call from one of the lads saying, "If you look on such-and-such a website, there's a story there about so-and-so," so the websites can also give you that opportunity to find out what some people are [up to]. I think a lot of people after a while think, "Oh, I'll see if I can let somebody know about this, see if there's anybody interested," and it's amazing how many you come across.

21: Male, RAF, National Service, served 2 years

“

I was talking to one man, and he said, "You've served." He says, "The way you're talking, you've served." And I just laughed, and says, "Yeah." He said, "We've all got our own way." And it is: we are a community.

12: Male, Navy, Voluntary Enlisted, served 31 years

“

If you put something on the Internet about something that you did or something, you usually get comments from people that will say, "I remember that," or "When I was there I did this," or something like that. It does keep people together, [...] people that have left recently, people that have left 20 years ago, people who left 30 years ago, have all got different things to say about little incidents. So, it's quite heart-warming, really, because it becomes a bit of a family, you know, and I mean, I'm chatting to people that I've never met, except on there, and it's a friend for a long, long time, we're all comrades.

14: Male, RAF, National Service, served 2 years

“

More so recently, in the last few years, you've been talking about it. When you were younger, you didn't – I mean, I didn't know straight away what you'd done in your life, it's only later on when you started talking about it.

Wife of Participant 07: Male, RAF, National Service, served 5 years

“

I'm pretty open about my military service, but some people, especially veterans before me that really suffered war, they won't talk at all. My dad did six years, right through the Second World War, and then he never spoke about it. At all. And he wouldn't speak about it.

(02: Male, Army, Voluntary Enlisted, served 27 years)

For some veterans in the interviews and workshops, participating in our research was the first time they had told stories about their military experience. There was a strong sense that there had not been a need to speak earlier in their lives, but also that if they were not able to talk about their experiences now, then it would be too late. For some, it was a number of years before they joined a veterans' organisation or began to accept their military service as part of their identity and talk about it with others.

The veterans who participated in our research were also aware of the context in which they had grown up (between world wars, or following WWII, depending on age), and the cross-generational shift that had occurred around being able to talk about experiences. Many referenced their grandfathers, fathers, uncles or others who had served in WWI or WWII and the silence that surrounded this generation of veterans.

This awareness of their position in society as both older adults and military veterans meant that those who participated in our workshops and interviews expressed a need to use their experiences to support and help both their current generation and other, younger veterans.



INTERGENERATIONAL CONCERNS

Veterans expressed a series of concerns about modern society, in particular currently serving military personnel and younger veterans. Part of their interest in sharing memories and stories came from perceiving real differences between 'then' and 'now' not only in terms of military life but also wider society.

Their comparisons of their own experiences with those of veterans past, present (but younger) and future also depend on where they situated themselves. Often, this generation of veterans were raised by family members who served in WWI or WWII, meaning they had heard stories of what service was like. Their concerns were also influenced by their own service, which, as discussed above, was varied. Finally, their concerns were also greatly influenced by reflections on recent deployments in Iraq and

Afghanistan, accessed through personal connections, and news media.

Older veterans were worried for current service personnel; they compared the contemporary context to their experience, with many saying that it is harder for personnel now in terms of them not getting the right equipment, experiencing trauma, and lacking support from civilians.

This is particularly relevant to understand as it informed where older veterans thought that resource and attention should be focused. It was often expressed that they did not see themselves as suffering or in need of help and support, and efforts should instead be focused on younger ex-service personnel and those currently serving.

“

I've been looking forward to this conversation with you because I know that my time now is very limited, and I think the only way we learn anything about anything is by what's gone before us.

20: Male, Army, Voluntary Enlisted, served 16 years

“

I have no direct contact with the regular military at all now, but I read a lot in the press about nasty things going on and my inclination is to turn the page. [...] It was my life. And although I'm still involved with all my surviving ex-boy soldiers, and I'm still very deeply involved with the [military] Association, and I take part in a lot of activities like that, I have ... I really wouldn't recommend any youngster I knew to go into the military.

20: Male, Army, Voluntary Enlisted, served 16 years

“

I wouldn't like to go now, where Afghanistan is concerned, because there's so many young soldiers being put up front, and you hear about that, how the army have cut down on everything: on people, on gear, you know, uniforms, everything, and they're sending 17 year old kids out to fight a war. Alright, they take them to war, but it's a bit different and that, but 17 year old kids doing like ... less than six months' training, then having to go out to Afghanistan.

27: Male, Army, Voluntary Enlisted, served 10 years

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Often, older veterans had not identified a need for support until later in life, at the intersection of age and veteran identity. Service providers should be aware that veterans' needs change over time and be prepared to support these changes.
2. Older veterans are well-placed to talk with service providers about their needs and concerns. By adopting the principle of 'nothing about us without us' to work in dialogue with older veterans, better outcomes will be facilitated.
3. Peer support is very important for veterans and should be supported; this may inform funding priorities for organisations such as the Covenant Trust Fund.
4. Veterans often have established 'spaces' (virtual or face-to-face) for communication, but as numbers of older veterans decrease, access to these spaces is also diminishing. Local authorities and other organisations should be aware of local veterans groups to signpost to, including regimental organisations.
5. Stories of military service are a powerful tool and can help veterans to communicate with other veterans and with willing civilians. Opportunities to conduct story-sharing in a safe and accessible way should be facilitated.
6. Using guidance provided in our publication, 'The Understand Older Veterans Toolkit: working with post-military lives' will help those who are not from a military background to communicate with and support older veterans, particularly around story-sharing.
7. Further research should focus on harder-to-reach groups. Little is known about older veterans from different backgrounds, including female veterans, Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) veterans, and LGBT+ veterans.
8. Older veterans are concerned about the health and well-being younger generations of veterans. Future research should consider how these intergenerational concerns may be harnessed into a supportive intervention.

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