

**VETERAN
HUB**



This project is implemented
by Veteran Hub with support
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UAV OPERATORS' RETURN TO CIVILIAN LIFE

A brief overview of the study

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No, no, no, you feel it. You feel it physically. You don't feel like it's a computer game. Well, at least I don't. You don't feel like it's a different reality because when you take off from your position, you see everything from the airstrip:

you fly over these houses, ravines, and rivers — it's all the same. You gradually move from our area to the enemy area. You're standing there, flying as if you had taken off on your own. It felt as though you no longer had legs, but wings.

Veteran, 39 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator



A person's military experience can be significant and influential in shaping their needs upon returning to civilian life. It can also shape how their close circle, service providers, society, and the state can support them during this transition.

A speciality largely determines the tasks a warrior performs and the conditions under which they operate. To better understand veterans' return to civilian life and their subsequent journey, it is also important to examine the characteristics of military service as well as the specifics of different branches, specialities, and operations.

We initiated this research into how military speciality affects a person's journey and return to civilian life by studying the experiences of UAV operators. This choice reflects the fact that this field has developed rapidly and acquired new significance and functions during the current phase of the Russo-Ukrainian war — the full-scale invasion. The extensive use of drones and unmanned systems has become a defining feature of the conflict and warrants closer examination, particularly regarding its impact on various aspects of warriors' well-being and their return to civilian life.

We hope this study will create space for a broader discussion of the experiences of warriors across different military specialities. Every veteran's journey is unique, and its consequences affect their well-being in different ways after returning from service.

Aim of the study

To identify the effects and impact of UAV operation on operators' return to civilian life

Methodology

For this study, we adopted a mixed-methods design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Qualitative instrument:

semi-structured in-depth interviews covering key thematic areas aligned with the objectives of the study.

Quantitative instrument:

the validated WHOQOL-BREF questionnaire (World Health Organization Quality of Life — BREF), for interview respondents to assess their quality of life and level of well-being.

As part of the qualitative component, we conducted **39 in-depth interviews** with veterans between March and May 2026. Of these, 27 respondents had combat experience before working with drones, while 12 had no prior combat experience.

The key inclusion criteria for the sample were:

- + Experience of screen-based operations and piloting
- + Experience in a combat zone
- + Experience of strike missions
- + Discharge from service and living as civilians for up to two years

To compare the experiences of operators and the impact of different mission types during service on their return to civilian life, the sample also included seven veterans without experience in executing strike missions.

Key findings

1 The pathways into military service and the role of UAV operator, as well as the strategies they use to adapt and embrace a military identity, may vary and shape their subsequent service experience

These pathways may also differ depending on the timing of enlistment and the whether individuals had the opportunity to choose a UAV operator role from the outset.

The way an individual adapts to the military environment and embraces a new identity can affect their well-being, behaviour during service, and perception of their experience.

Helpful strategies for adapting to the military environment and adopting a military identity may include:

- Previous experience interacting with military or private institutions
- Personal adaptability and the ability to make decisions quickly
- The presence or absence of extensive civilian experience
- Purposefulness and self-awareness

2 One of the distinctive features of UAV operators' work is its complex, multitasking nature

Multitasking means that, in practice, an operator may pilot a drone and perform other duties, including technical, combat engineering, or driving tasks. The complexity of the role lies in recording and transmitting information about the operational situation, communicating with various parties involved, providing logistical support, accompanying assault groups, conducting strikes against enemy equipment and personnel, and performing analytical work

3 Constant screen-based operations and observing combat through a screen do not create a sense of disconnection from reality

Despite assumptions drawn from international experience, constant screen-based operations do not affect UAV operators' perception of the realities of combat and warfare. Observing the battlefield or conducting combat through a camera feed did not diminish their awareness of what was happening, although in some cases operators employed a psychological defence mechanism by perceiving combat operations as a game. Their sense of involvement in combat was maintained, in particular, through "grounding" in the form of constant contact with reality and communication with command, brothers- and sisters-in-arms, including those from other branches of the armed forces

4 Most UAV operators did not perceive the experience of striking the enemy as traumatic

Respondents perceived strike missions as effective and successful, particularly because they helped save the lives of their brothers- and sisters-in-arms. However, positive emotions and feelings associated with successful strikes may diminish after prolonged involvement in such missions

5 Reconnaissance, surveillance, and support missions for assault teams can be mentally challenging for UAV operators

During such missions, there is no direct engagement with the enemy and no opportunity to strike, which may lead to feelings of powerlessness or helplessness, particularly in crisis situations

6 UAV operators may use various psychological strategies to cope with emotionally difficult experiences and situations

These strategies may include: distancing themselves from the reality of combat by perceiving combat operations as unreal, finding strikes easier to process because of their physical distance from the enemy, and emotionally detaching from their experiences. UAV operators may also show little emotional response to or reflection on missions, including their intensity and consequences,

turn their work into a routine, and dehumanise the enemy.

Some UAV operators may show signs of moral trauma after service. Although the context involves destroying the enemy and various psychological defence mechanisms may come into play during combat missions, the experience of taking another person's life may still conflict with fundamental moral beliefs and values

7 During service, military reality becomes the primary environment for warriors, while civilian life is often perceived as distant and less relevant

Their network of social ties with the civilian world may shrink dramatically, and the success of their return may depend on how many civilian connections they are able to maintain during service.

After discharge, veterans often transfer their social ties from the military environment into civilian life. The success of their return depends on preserving these relationships, as they help rebuild the civilian network that may have been lost during service

8 We identified three possible identities that warriors may adopt after discharge: "service member on pause," "veteran," and "civilian"

"Service member on pause": A warrior for whom returning to civilian life is only one possible future trajectory, as the ongoing war means that returning to military service remains an option

"Veteran": A former service member living in the civilian world. They may not seek to integrate into civilian life at all, may be willing to adapt while remaining part of a distinct community, or may choose not to disclose this identity

"Civilian": A former service member who has returned to traditional roles and clearly distanced themselves from military experience. Veteran identity remains one of the person's various social identities

9 During the initial adaptation to civilian life, veterans may adopt one of two strategies: a prolonged return or a rapid return

The prolonged return strategy is characterised by a "well-deserved rest", often with an undefined planning horizon and a prevailing desire to distance oneself from the war

The rapid return strategy is characterised by a brief pause to address urgent matters, followed by clear plans, the resumption of activities, and a rapid return to civilian life

10 The opportunity to apply military experience acquired during service directly in civilian life may ease UAV operators' return

There is demand for UAV pilots in various sectors, and the skills they have acquired during service are potentially transferable and may, if necessary, form the basis of a civilian career

The main factors complicating UAV pilots' professional fulfilment in civilian life are the uneven geographical distribution of job opportunities, as well as pay levels that do not correspond to their qualifications and workload

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During their return to civilian life, veterans may be affected both positively and negatively by various factors at different levels

Barriers may include:

- *at the individual level* — sleep disturbances, persistent hypervigilance, and cognitive impairment;
- *at the social level* — at the social level — distancing from the civilian environment;
- *at the institutional level* — difficulties in accessing state-provided benefits and securing employment.

Resources for adaptation may include:

- recovery of physical and mental health;
- focusing on helping others and developing a sense of personal responsibility for addressing life challenges;
- social support from family, friends, brothers- and sisters-in-arms, and colleagues.

Additional factors, such as financial situation, state support, and stable employment, also play an important role

Conclusions

UAV operators' return to civilian life is shaped more by their overall military and combat experiences than by the specific characteristics of their role

Veterans with drone operating experience do not have distinctive features of return associated with the nature of their service or the tasks they performed during combat. What may distinguish them from veterans in other military roles is that they possess professional skills that can also be applied in civilian life when needed.

However, it is important to continue researching veterans' experiences of returning to civilian life across different military roles and types of combat experience to better understand how these experiences shape reintegration. The absence of distinctive features among UAV operators does not mean that veterans in other military roles will not have role-specific needs or require different forms of support during the transition to civilian life

UAV operators' service experience has distinctive features, but screen-based operations do not affect their sense of connection with reality

UAV operators' service experience has distinctive features related to their working schedules, the need for screen-based operations, the multitasking and complexity of the role, constant communication, and the high level of concentration required. During service, UAV operators may experience changes in their well-being, including effects on their physical and psychological health caused by sleep deprivation, eye strain, or the broader impact of military service and combat on their psycho-emotional state. However, screen-based operations and conducting combat through a camera feed generally did not cause derealisation or a persistent association with video games among study respondents

The specific nature of the Ukrainian context is that the war is ongoing, and discharge from service may be temporary unless a person has been declared medically unfit

Adaptation programmes should therefore address not only the transition to civilian life, but also the possibility of returning to military service. They should make this process more predictable and ensure appropriate guarantees and social protection for those who are required to serve again



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AND OTHER MATERIALS ABOUT THE PROJECT
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