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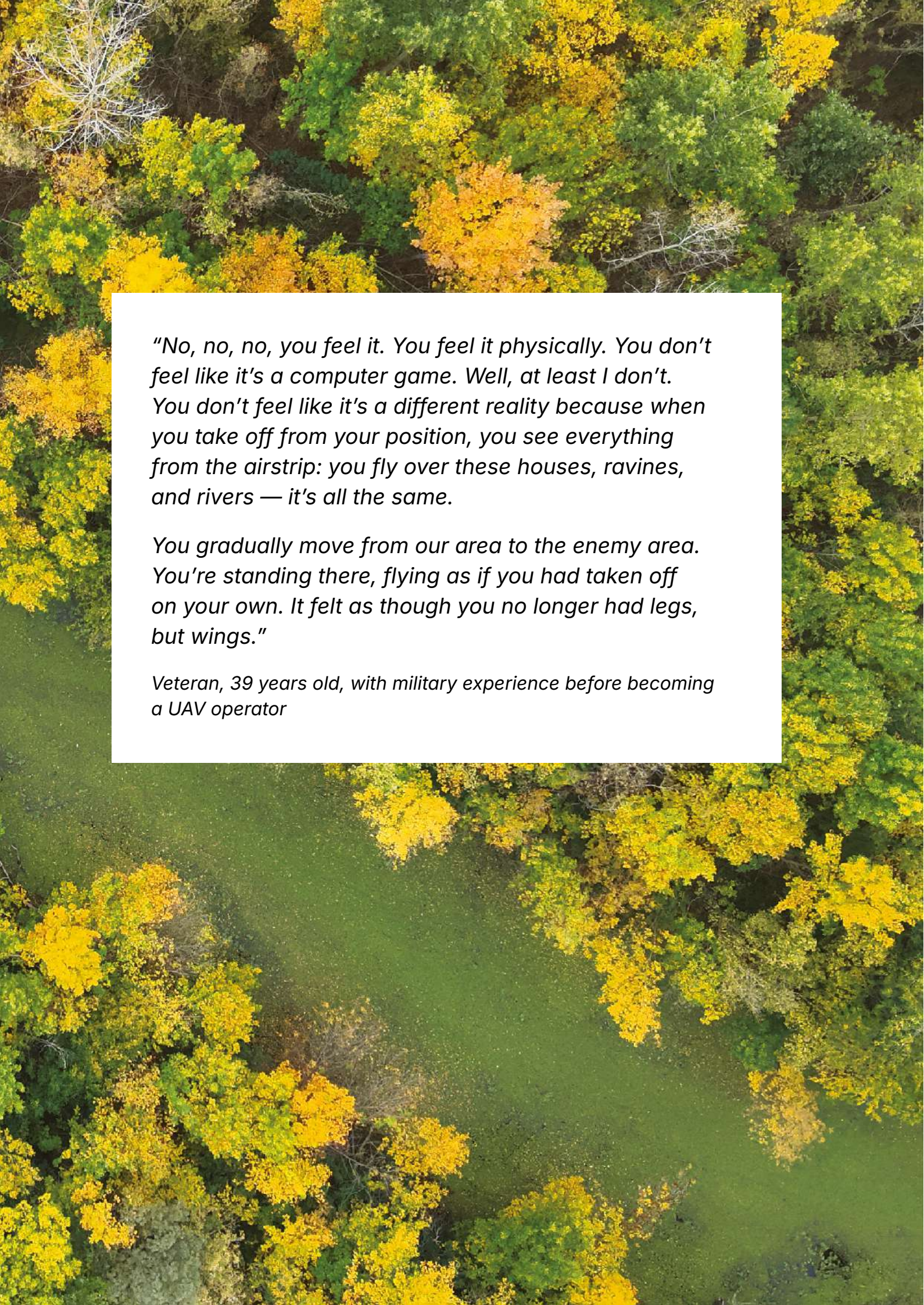
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# ***UAV Operators' Return to Civilian Life***

***Study***

2026



An aerial photograph of a forest. The trees are densely packed, with many showing bright yellow autumn foliage, while others are still green. The perspective is from directly above, looking down on the canopy. A white rectangular box is superimposed on the upper left portion of the image, containing text.

*"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*

# ABSTRACT

We, the team of the Veteran Hub Think Tank, continue to study the diverse experiences of veterans returning from service and the impact of combat experience on various areas of their well-being.

Operating unmanned systems has become one of the defining features of the modern Russo-Ukrainian war. The experience of UAV operators remains under-researched, particularly with regard to their return to civilian life after military service. This analytical report examines how the experience of operating drones affects veterans' health, relationships, identity, and other aspects of their well-being.

The findings of this study contribute to a better understanding of the distinctive features of such service and its potential impact on veterans' return to civilian life. They may serve as a basis for further research and be useful to specialists, service providers, employers, state institutions, and organisations working with veterans.

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The research was conducted between March and June 2026. The main body of the report uses a size 14 font in Inter to ensure accessibility for people with varying vision capabilities.

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# **ABOUT THE ORGANISATION**

**Veteran Hub** is a sustainable support network for veterans and families of warriors. Established in 2018, the organisation provides legal and career advice, psychological support and personalised case management. The network comprises physical spaces in Kyiv and Vinnytsia, as well as Mobile Offices that provide home service delivery in Kyiv and Vinnytsia Oblasts, along with a national Trust Line available by phone at 067 348 28 68.

Drawing on its daily experience of working with veterans and their families, the organisation conducts expert research, advocates for improving their well-being, develops information and media projects, and helps various stakeholders in the field better support service members and their loved ones.

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# **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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We would like to express our special gratitude to the veteran members of the Advisory Board of the Veteran Hub Think Tank, who provided valuable advice during the development of the interview guide and helped us better understand the specifics of UAV operations, refine the focus of the study, and ensure that the wording of interview questions was appropriate for people with combat experience.

We also thank all Veteran Hub staff who provided consultations and feedback to the research team and helped develop the methodology.

Finally, we thank the organisations and media figures who shared information about the study and raised its visibility among potential respondents. Thanks to your support, we were able to engage a broader and more diverse group of participants and explore this topic more deeply.

# **FOREWORD**

The journey of veterans begins the moment they join the military. By making that decision, a person embarks on a path of new experiences and changes. This experience is fundamental to shaping a new identity, needs, and values, and ultimately to the veteran's return to civilian life.

A person's military experience can significantly influence their needs upon returning to civilian life. It can also define how their close circle, service providers, society, and the state can support them during this transition.

Each person's military experience may also vary depending on many factors, including rank, military occupational speciality, the structure and dynamics within their unit or brigade, and the specific conditions of service or combat missions. These and many other factors combine to form a unique experience for every warrior.

**At Veteran Hub, we study the diverse experiences of warriors and veterans during and after military service to better understand this diversity, identify their specifics, determine the kinds of support people may need, and give them a voice and greater visibility.**

A speciality largely determines the tasks a warrior performs and the conditions under which they operate. The impact of military experience on well-being during service may depend on a person's military occupational speciality and specific duties. To better understand veterans' return to civilian life and their subsequent path, it is crucial to examine the characteristics of military service as well as the specifics of different branches and arms, 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 this war and requires closer examination, particularly regarding its impact on various aspects of warriors' well-being and their return to civilian life.

We wish to emphasise that the focus of this study in no way diminishes the significance, importance, or uniqueness of the experiences of service members serving in other specialities.

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.

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# ***LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS***

- AFU** — Armed Forces of Ukraine
- ASC** — Administrative Service Centre
- ATO** — Anti-Terrorist Operation
- PH** — Participant in hostilities
- EPT** — Electric power transmission
- EW** — Electronic warfare
- FPV** — First Person View
- JFO** — Joint Forces Operation
- LMV** — Light motor vehicle
- MIA** — Ministry of Internal Affairs
- MMC** — Military medical commission
- PS** — Personnel
- SESU** — State Emergency Service of Ukraine
- SPA** — Self-propelled artillery
- TRC** — Territorial Recruitment Centre
- UAV** — Unmanned aerial vehicle

# GLOSSARY

**Combat experience/missions** — direct participation in combat operations.

**Identity (military/civilian)** — a person's conception of themselves, their roles, values, and sense of belonging to a specific group. Military identity develops during service and is shaped by military experience, whereas civilian identity is associated with roles and practices outside military service.

**The Journeys of Veterans** — the Veteran Hub's concept and study on the veterans' experiences and needs from the moment of enlisting until the end of life<sup>1</sup>.

**Moral injury** — distressing psychological, behavioural, social, and sometimes spiritual aftermath of exposure to actions, inaction, witnessing, or experiencing events that go against an individual's moral beliefs, values, or notions of right and wrong<sup>2</sup>.

**Psychological adaptation** — the process through which individuals adjust their thoughts, emotions, and behaviours in response to changing environments or circumstances. It includes coping mechanisms, resilience, and the ability to maintain psychological well-being despite stressors or challenges<sup>3</sup>.

**Return to civilian life/adaptation** — the process of transition from military service to civilian life, which encompasses the restoration or rebuilding of daily routine, social relationships, professional activity, well-being, and participation in civilian society.

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<sup>1</sup> Veteran Hub (2023). Exploring the Journeys of Veterans.  
[veteranhub.com.ua/analytics/doslidzhenya-shlyahu-veteraniv-i-veteranok](https://veteranhub.com.ua/analytics/doslidzhenya-shlyahu-veteraniv-i-veteranok)

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for PTSD. Moral injury.  
[ptsd.va.gov/professional/treat/cooccurring/moral\\_injury.asp](https://ptsd.va.gov/professional/treat/cooccurring/moral_injury.asp)

<sup>3</sup> Academia.edu. Definition of psychological adaptation.  
[academia.edu/Documents/in/Psychological\\_Adaptation](https://academia.edu/Documents/in/Psychological_Adaptation)

**Screen-based operations** — the conduct of combat missions using digital surveillance and control tools, in which interaction with the combat area, the enemy, or friendly units occurs primarily through a screen.

**Strike mission** — a flight or other mission involving the use of UAVs to strike enemy personnel, equipment, or positions.

**UAV crew** — a group of specialists responsible for preparing, launching, piloting, landing a drone and executing a combat or reconnaissance mission. Depending on the type of UAV and the mission specifics<sup>4</sup>, the crew may include operators, engineers, mechanics, explosive ordnance disposal specialists, drivers, and other specialists.

**UAV operator** — a service member who works with unmanned systems and operates them directly.

**Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs)/drones** — unmanned aerial vehicles and other unmanned systems used for reconnaissance, surveillance, strikes, logistics, and other missions. In this study, the terms “UAVs” and “drones” are used interchangeably.

**Veteran** — a person who took part in combat operations to defend the Homeland or who participated in combat operations on the territory of other states as part of Ukraine’s international commitments<sup>5</sup>.

**Well-being** — categorisation of various human needs, necessary for a comprehensive analysis of the person’s condition, functionality and level of satisfaction with various aspects of their life<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Command of the Ukrainian Ground Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. DF. [landforces.mil.gov.ua/df](http://landforces.mil.gov.ua/df)

<sup>5</sup> Veteran Hub, Pryncyp, Space of Opportunities, Legal Hundred (2025). Updated Concept of Veteran Policy. [veteranspolicy.org.ua](http://veteranspolicy.org.ua)

<sup>6</sup> Veteran Hub. Well-being. [veteranhub.com.ua/dobrobut](http://veteranhub.com.ua/dobrobut)

# INTRODUCTION

The Russo-Ukrainian war is unique both in the nature of fighting — its protracted duration and extensive use of new weapons and technology — and how it is experienced by civilians and service members alike. Equally unique is the return of veterans to civilian life while the war is still ongoing. The way the experiences of service across different branches and arms affect veterans' return to civilian life holds particular significance and interest.

Drones have become one of the most common types of weapons — and, consequently, one of the most common military occupations — in the modern Russo-Ukrainian war. As a result, the number of service members working with them continues to grow.

Ukraine became the first country in the world to establish a separate branch of the Armed Forces — the Unmanned Systems Forces<sup>7</sup> — which deploy a wide range of unmanned aerial vehicles in combat operations. Given the rapid development and expanding use of unmanned technologies, both the number of drones and the scale of their deployment will continue to increase in modern warfare<sup>8</sup>. Consequently, the number of individuals returning to civilian life with experience of operating drones will also increase.

Globally, UAVs are categorised by their purpose, design, and operating principles. Most UAV crews include personnel who work behind a screen and operators who directly control the movement and flight of the aircraft. During combat missions, this creates a distinct format of interaction: the operator engages with the enemy through a screen while supporting brothers- and sisters-in-arms remotely, for example, by carrying out logistical missions using drones. This format sets the experience of UAV operators apart from that of other branches of the Armed Forces.

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<sup>7</sup> Unmanned Systems Forces. [usforces.army](https://usforces.army)

<sup>8</sup> Zaluzhnyi, V (10 April 2025). How Drones, Data, and AI Transformed Our Military — and Why the US Must Follow Suit. Defense One. [defenseone.com/ideas/2025/04/how-drones-data-and-ai-transformed-our-militaryand-why-us-must-follow-suit/404444](https://defenseone.com/ideas/2025/04/how-drones-data-and-ai-transformed-our-militaryand-why-us-must-follow-suit/404444)

The experience of UAV operators abroad and its impact on mental health have attracted considerable research attention. This is due to the widespread use of UAVs and their proven effectiveness across various military missions and operations before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Existing research, however, has focused primarily on service members' mental well-being during active service. By contrast, there is a scarcity of data on how the experience of operating drones during military or combat missions affects the return to civilian life.

Early international research into the impact of drone operation on mental health relied on the assumption that remotely piloting UAVs and targeting the enemy through a screen might resemble playing a video game, and could therefore result in less severe psychological consequences compared to combat experiences of service members in other specialities<sup>9, 10</sup>.

However, subsequent research refutes this thesis<sup>11, 12, 13, 14, 15</sup> and demonstrates<sup>16, 17</sup> that remote UAV operation also entails adverse

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<sup>9</sup> Enemark, C. (2019). Drones, risk, and moral injury. *Critical Military Studies*, 5(2), 150–167. [doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2017.1384979](https://doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2017.1384979)

<sup>10</sup> Royakkers, L., & Van Est, R. (2010). The cubicle warrior: The marionette of digitalized warfare. *Ethics and Information Technology*, 12(3), 289–296. [doi.org/10.1007/s10676-010-9240-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-010-9240-8)

<sup>11</sup> Hijazi, A., Ferguson, C. J., Ferraro, F. R., Hall, H., Hovee, M., & Wilcox, S. (2019). Psychological dimensions of drone warfare. *Current Psychology: A Journal for Diverse Perspectives on Diverse Psychological Issues*, 38(5), 1285–1296. [doi.org/10.1007/s12144-017-9684-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-017-9684-7)

<sup>12</sup> Campbell, J. M. (2021). Psychological effects on UAV operators and proposed mitigation strategies to combat PTSD. Naval Postgraduate School. [apps.dtic.mil/sti/html/trecms/AD1150884/](https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/html/trecms/AD1150884/)

<sup>13</sup> Wallace, D., & Costello, J. (2021). Eye in the sky: Understanding the mental health of unmanned aerial vehicle operators. *Journal of Military and Veterans' Health*, 25(3), 36–41. [mvh.org/article/eye-in-the-sky-understanding-the-mental-health-of-unmanned-aerial-vehicle-operators/](https://mvh.org/article/eye-in-the-sky-understanding-the-mental-health-of-unmanned-aerial-vehicle-operators/)

<sup>14</sup> Hijazi, A., Ferguson, C. J., Ferraro, F. R., Hall, H., Hovee, M., & Wilcox, S. (2019). Psychological dimensions of drone warfare. *Current Psychology: A Journal for Diverse Perspectives on Diverse Psychological Issues*, 38(5), 1285–1296. [doi.org/10.1007/s12144-017-9684-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-017-9684-7)

<sup>15</sup> Norrholm, S. D., Maples-Keller, J. L., Rothbaum, B. O., & Tossell, C. C. (2023). Remote warfare with intimate consequences: Psychological stress in service member and veteran remotely-piloted aircraft (RPA) personnel. *Journal of Mental Health and Clinical Psychology*, 7(3), 37–49. [doi.org/10.29245/2578-2959/2023/3.1289](https://doi.org/10.29245/2578-2959/2023/3.1289)

<sup>16</sup> Molenkamp, A., Weerdesteijn, M., & Smeulders, A. (2024). A Playstation mentality to killing? Adverse psychological consequences in drone pilots and the stigmatization thereof in the military. *Armed Forces & Society*, 51(3), 840–859. [doi.org/10.1177/0095327X241236221](https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X241236221)

<sup>17</sup> Saini, R. K., Raju, M. S. V. K., & Chail, A. (2021). Cry in the sky. *Industrial Psychiatry Journal*, 30 (Suppl. 1), S179–S181. [doi.org/10.4103/0972-6748.328782](https://doi.org/10.4103/0972-6748.328782)

effects on mental well-being similar to those associated with other forms of combat experience.

**International researchers have also identified other unique experiences that may arise among UAV operators, including:**

- empathy toward the enemy resulting from long-term surveillance of them<sup>18</sup>;
- the exacerbation of moral injury due to being in a safe location while operating the drone with rapid transition between combat duties and daily civilian life as crew members return home after finishing a shift<sup>19, 20</sup>;
- the inability to speak to others about their work, which negatively affects their mental health<sup>21</sup>.

These findings are either irrelevant to Ukraine or require further verification, as Ukraine is embroiled in a war with Russia aimed at defending its territory, and drone operating conditions and the types of unmanned systems used differ from those described in international research. In particular, participants in that research remained safe while operating drones, and the operations they took part in were not liberation campaigns. The patterns and frequency of drone deployment were also distinct.

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<sup>18</sup> Henschke, A. (29 September 2019). Modern soldiers can kill a target on computer, then head home for dinner — and it's giving them 'moral injury'. ABC News. [abc.net.au/news/2019-09-29/unmanned-combat-drone-pilots-moral-injury-warfare-dissonance/11554058](https://abc.net.au/news/2019-09-29/unmanned-combat-drone-pilots-moral-injury-warfare-dissonance/11554058)

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Lawrence, D. F. (10 December 2025). Annual defense policy bill calls for psychological study on drone operators, analysts. DefenseScoop. [defensescoop.com/2025/12/10/fy26-ndaa-psychological-study-drone-operators](https://defensescoop.com/2025/12/10/fy26-ndaa-psychological-study-drone-operators)

<sup>21</sup> Bentley, M. (2017). Fetishised data: Counterterrorism, drone warfare and pilot testimony. Critical Studies on Terrorism, 11(1), 88–110. [doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2017.1399787](https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2017.1399787)

In Ukraine, there is virtually no research on the impact of UAV operator service on the return to civilian life. Research is beginning to emerge aimed at defining key professional competencies for UAV operators<sup>22</sup>. **Articles are also appearing regarding the impact of drone operations on health, including:**

- the negative impact of stress-associated diseases of the digestive organs on the psychophysiological state of UAV operators<sup>23</sup>;
- the development of fatigue in UAV operators and its impact on psychophysiological health indicators<sup>24</sup>;
- the influence of working conditions — including lighting, temperature, and noise —on operators' ability to perform combat tasks<sup>25</sup>.

There is, therefore, a clear need to study the service-induced experiences of UAV operators as they settle back into civilian life.

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<sup>22</sup> Pasichnyk, V., Shyrobokov, Y., & Savchuk. (2023). Psychological features of the activity of operators of unmanned aerial systems of tactical classes and their consideration in the practice of professional training of these military specialists. *The Scientific Journal of the National Academy of National Guard Honor and Law*, 4(87), 113–120. [doi.org/10.333405/2078-7480/2023/4/87/295206](https://doi.org/10.333405/2078-7480/2023/4/87/295206)

<sup>23</sup> Pashkovskiy, S. M., Serheta, I. V., Kalnysh, V. V., Koval, N. V., Bohush, H. L., Tymchyshyn, T. P., & Iskiv, L. L. (2024). The impact of stress-associated diseases of the digestive organs on the psychophysiological state of operators of unmanned aircraft systems. *Clinical and Preventive Medicine*, 3, 27–35. [doi.org/10.31612/2616-4868.3.2024.04](https://doi.org/10.31612/2616-4868.3.2024.04)

<sup>24</sup> Kalnysh, V. V., Trynka, I. S., Pashkovskiy, S. M., Bogush, G. L., & Koval, N. V. (2023). Psychophysiological features of the development of fatigue in operators of unmanned aviation systems. *Ukrainian Journal of Occupational Health*, 2023(1), 11–20. [doi.org/10.33573/ujoh2023.01.011](https://doi.org/10.33573/ujoh2023.01.011)

<sup>25</sup> Kalnysh, V., Shvets, A., & Maltsev, O. (2024). Features of the influence of working conditions on psychophysiological functions of unmanned aircraft systems operators. *Fiziologichnij Zhurnal*, 70(2), 12–25. [doi.org/10.15407/fz70.02.012](https://doi.org/10.15407/fz70.02.012)

The process of veterans' returning to civilian life is a subject of research in both international<sup>26, 27, 28</sup> and Ukrainian contexts<sup>29, 30, 31, 32</sup>.

What distinguishes Ukrainian veterans is that they return to civilian life while the war continues, rather than to a peacetime existence. Moreover, the hostilities take place on the territory of their country, and the war itself is existential. As a result, upon returning from service, veterans may worry about their brothers- and sisters-in-arms who continue to serve, alongside the awareness of the possibility of being remobilised for national defence and military service in the future. Taken together, these factors may complicate the process of returning to and rooting in civilian life<sup>33</sup>.

**In the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, veterans' return and adaptation is examined through the lens of several interconnected factors, including:**

- services related to discharge from military service/demobilisation;
- mental and physical well-being;
- social support and economic recovery.

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<sup>26</sup> Elnitsky, C. A., & Kilmer, R. P. (2017). Facilitating reintegration for military service personnel, veterans, and their families: An introduction to the special issue. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 87(2), 109–113. [doi.org/10.1037/ort0000252](https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000252)

<sup>27</sup> Van der Wal, S. J., Geuze, E., & Vermetten, E. (2023). Long-term risk for mental health symptoms in Dutch ISAF veterans: The role of perceived social support. *Psychological Medicine*, 53(8), 3355–3365. [doi.org/10.1017/S0033291721005389](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291721005389)

<sup>28</sup> Hauser, D., McConnell, C., Lawson, K., Kobe, S., Oakley, R., Harrison, I., Smithey, C., & Yarborough, A. (2025). Community reintegration of veterans after discharge: A qualitative look. *American Journal of Qualitative Research*, 9(3), 61–81. [doi.org/10.29333/ajqr/16535](https://doi.org/10.29333/ajqr/16535)

<sup>29</sup> Veteran Hub (2023). The Journeys of Veterans. [veteranhub.com.ua/analytics/doslidzhenya-shlyahu-veteraniv-i-veteranok](https://veteranhub.com.ua/analytics/doslidzhenya-shlyahu-veteraniv-i-veteranok)

<sup>30</sup> Hrishnova, O. & Lysenko, V. (2024). Reintegration of Combat Participants into Civilian Life: Employment Problems and Ways to Solve Them. *Scientific Notes of KROK University*, 2(74), 146–156. [doi.org/10.31732/2663-2209-2024-74-146-156](https://doi.org/10.31732/2663-2209-2024-74-146-156)

<sup>31</sup> Kravchenko, O., Shvets, V., & Melnyk, L. (2023). The Role of Veteran Organizations in Reintegration and Psychological Rehabilitation of Veterans with Disabilities in the Conditions of War and Post -War Times. *Psychological Journal*, (11), 37–44. [doi.org/10.31499/2617-2100.11.2023.298401](https://doi.org/10.31499/2617-2100.11.2023.298401)

<sup>32</sup> Melnyk, A., & Haliant, T. (2025). Psychological Mechanisms of War Veterans' Reintegration into the Civilian Environment. *Scientific Notes of KROK University*, 4(80), 440–446. [doi.org/10.31732/2663-2209-2025-80-440-446](https://doi.org/10.31732/2663-2209-2025-80-440-446)

<sup>33</sup> Veteran Hub (2023). The Journeys of Veterans. [veteranhub.com.ua/analytics/doslidzhenya-shlyahu-veteraniv-i-veteranok](https://veteranhub.com.ua/analytics/doslidzhenya-shlyahu-veteraniv-i-veteranok)

The current state of this field can be assessed through studies examining post-service adaptation<sup>34</sup>, evaluating veterans' needs<sup>35</sup>, and analysing changes in behavioural models within the veteran community<sup>36</sup>. The findings of this and other studies provide a general understanding of the challenges and barriers veterans encounter upon returning and help identify priorities for improving veteran policy.

If we consider the return in terms of its desired outcome, i.e., a state in which it has been successfully achieved, the question arises of which characteristics can be used to describe it.

**The Well-Being Framework represents one such approach and comprises several components:**

- hedonic well-being — happiness and life satisfaction;
- eudaimonic well-being — having purpose and meaning in life, pursuing passions and meaningful goals, personal growth, self-discovery, autonomy/self-determination, mastery/efficacy, development of skills/talents, accumulation of life wisdom, and movement toward one's full potential;
- psychological well-being — positive self-regard, self-acceptance, resilience/hardiness, a positive belief system, and the absence of mental health symptoms or disorders;

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<sup>34</sup> Machlouzarides, M., Kharchenko, V. & Sereda, P. (2024). Adapting to Civilian Life: Entry Points to Strengthen Veterans' Reintegration in Ukraine. Based on reSCORE Ukraine 2024. [undp.org/uk/ukraine/publications/adaptatsiya-do-tsyvilnoho-zhyttva-klyuchovi-napryamy-dlya-posylennya-reintehratsiyi-veteraniv-ta-veteranok-v-ukrayini-rezultaty](https://undp.org/uk/ukraine/publications/adaptatsiya-do-tsyvilnoho-zhyttva-klyuchovi-napryamy-dlya-posylennya-reintehratsiyi-veteraniv-ta-veteranok-v-ukrayini-rezultaty)

<sup>35</sup> Ukrainian Veterans Foundation (2025). Results of the Sixth Survey by the Ukrainian Veterans Foundation, "The Needs of Veterans". [veteranfund.com.ua/analitics/analiz-potreb-ta-problem-veteraniv-ta-veteranok-za-2024-rik](https://veteranfund.com.ua/analitics/analiz-potreb-ta-problem-veteraniv-ta-veteranok-za-2024-rik)

<sup>36</sup> Ministry of Veterans Affairs (2025). Portrait of a Veteran 2025. [veteranfund.com.ua/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Portret-veterana-2025.pdf](https://veteranfund.com.ua/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Portret-veterana-2025.pdf)

- social well-being — deep and meaningful human connections, positive interpersonal expectations, a prosocial orientation towards others, and faith in others/humanity;
- physical well-being — physical fitness, the absence of illness or disease, health status above expected baselines, and longevity<sup>37</sup>.

This approach broadens the perspective on the factors influencing the return by increasing the number of indicators available to assess the level of adaptation.

This study adopts **another conceptual Well-being Framework**<sup>38</sup> built on the principles of a comprehensive assessment of an individual's potential experiences and challenges. It was developed by the Veteran Hub team in 2023 based on the international concept of veterans' well-being proposed by David Pedlar and James Thompson<sup>39</sup>. **It identifies the following domains:**

- health — physical and mental;
- material needs — finances, income, and legal security;
- relationships and recognition — close social connections and community;
- vocation — work, hobbies, and education;
- life skills and spirituality — spirituality and resilience;
- housing and the physical environment — housing, working environment, and public space.

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<sup>37</sup> Feeney, B. C., & Collins, N. L. (2015). A new look at social support: A theoretical perspective on thriving through relationships. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 19(2), 113–147. [doi.org/10.1177/1088868314544222](https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868314544222)

<sup>38</sup> Veteran Hub (2023). Well-being. [veteranhub.com.ua/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/dobrobut.pdf](https://veteranhub.com.ua/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/dobrobut.pdf)

<sup>39</sup> Thompson, J. M., Vogt, D., & Pedlar, D. (7 April 2022). Success in life after service: A perspective on conceptualizing the well-being of military Veterans. *Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health*. [doi.org/10.3138/jmvfh-2021-0037](https://doi.org/10.3138/jmvfh-2021-0037)

This is the first exploratory study to examine this topic. Its findings provide new insights into the impact and consequences of UAV operation for veterans in civilian life. They offer an important basis for future research into this subject and the impact of combat experience on adaptation and other aspects of life. These findings will also help practitioners and stakeholders gain a deeper understanding of this group of service members' needs and design support programmes and projects tailored to them.

# ***KEY STUDY FINDINGS***



1. The trajectories into the army and the role of UAV operator, as well as the strategies they choose to adapt and embrace a military identity, may vary and affect their subsequent service experience. These trajectories may also vary depending on the timing of enlistment and the opportunity to immediately choose a UAV operator position.

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 the experience.

**Helpful strategies for adaptation and adopting a military identity may include:**

- experience interacting with military or private institutions;
- personal adaptability and a mindset geared toward quick decision-making;
- the presence or absence of extensive civilian experience;
- purposefulness and self-awareness.

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2. The service experience of UAV operators has its own specifics, related to work schedules, types of missions, the need for multitasking, and the complexity of the role itself. This experience affects both physical and mental health during service. Physically, it manifests as eye strain and insufficient sleep and rest, which generally degrades a person's physical condition. Reconnaissance, surveillance, and support missions for assault teams can be mentally challenging for UAV operators. In these scenarios, the lack of direct engagement and the inability to strike the enemy create intense psychological tension and may induce feelings of helplessness, particularly during crises.

3. In addition to the general impact of hostilities on mental health, working through a screen or FPV goggles is a distinctive feature of UAV operations. This means that the operator is physically distanced from the enemy and from the performance of missions. We hypothesised that this mode of warfare might affect their sense of reality and overall perception of the combat operations and their own involvement in them.

However, interviews with our respondents revealed that despite constantly operating through a screen, UAV operators, particularly those executing strike missions, retained a sense of the reality of combat operations and of their own involvement in them. Observing the battlefield or conducting combat through a camera feed did not diminish awareness of what was happening, although in some cases operators employed a psychological defence mechanism by perceiving combat operations as a game. In particular, some respondents noted that maintaining radio contact with brothers- and sisters-in-arms from other branches, such as the infantry, helped them stay grounded and connected to reality.

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4. Alongside the impact of military and combat experience, UAV operators sometimes needed to adapt psychologically and employ various coping strategies, including emotional distancing, emotional numbing, routinisation of work, and dehumanisation of the enemy. Emotionally challenging situations that posed a risk of moral injury included the loss of brothers- and sisters-in-arms or drones, observing the battlefield during missions, and the inability to strike the enemy.

5. The journey of UAV operators returning to civilian life closely resembles that of veterans in general. The only distinct feature identified is that veterans with UAV experience retain the skills to operate drones and unmanned systems even after returning to civilian life. It remains important to continue examining how veterans from different military specialities experience the return to civilian life and how their specific service influences adaptation.

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6. The return to civilian life may be eased when veterans with UAV operating experience can apply the drone-piloting skills acquired during service to civilian professional activities. However, such professional fulfilment may be limited by the veteran's region of residence, and it does not always provide an adequate level of income.

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7. The study identified three identities that veterans may develop following military service: "service member on pause", "veteran," and "civilian." These identities differ in the extent to which an individual adapts to civilian life and how comfortable they feel within it.

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8. According to the respondents, we identified **two strategies of initial post-service adaptation**:

- *prolonged return* — when an individual has an indefinite planning horizon and a desire to distance themselves from the war and live in safety;
- *rapid return* — when veterans quickly resume civilian activities and leave their military life in the past.

During their return to civilian life, veterans may encounter both facilitating and hindering factors at different levels.

**Barriers may include:**

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

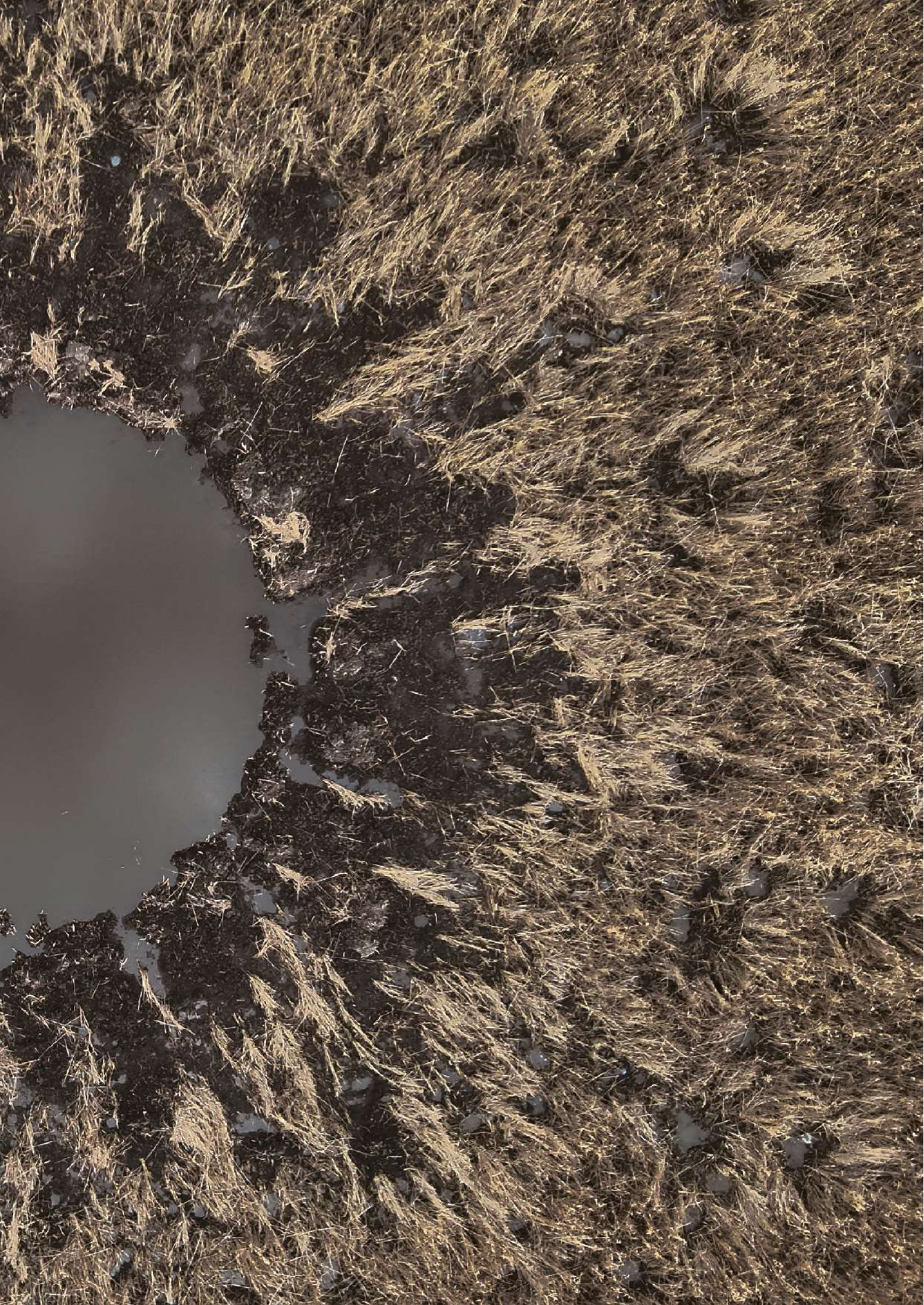
**Resources for adaptation may include:**

- 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.

An aerial photograph of a wetland or marshy area. The landscape is dominated by tall, dry, golden-brown grass that appears to be blowing in the wind. A dark, winding water channel or stream cuts through the grassy terrain, starting from the upper right and curving towards the bottom right. The water is dark and still, reflecting the surrounding environment. The overall scene is a natural, somewhat desolate landscape.

# ***METHODOLOGY***



# ***Aim of the study***

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

## ***Objectives***

1. To identify the specifics of UAV operators' service that arise directly from operating drones.
2. To determine whether specific physical and psychological characteristics arise from working with a UAV screen.
3. To examine the effects and impact of UAV operation on operators' mental and physical health, and to identify how they may manifest across different aspects of daily life.
4. To identify how these effects manifest within social relationships.
5. To identify adaptation trajectories during the return to civilian life, including choice of education/career, and to demonstrate their advantages and disadvantages.
6. To explore how veterans apply their UAV operating experience upon returning to civilian life.

To comprehensively examine an individual's potential experience and the challenges they might encounter, this study applies the conceptual Well-being Framework<sup>40</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> Veteran Hub (2023). Well-being. [veteranhub.com.ua/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/dobrobut.pdf](https://veteranhub.com.ua/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/dobrobut.pdf)

It was crucial to identify how this experience affects three domains considered most influential in veterans' return: health (both physical and mental), relationships and recognition, and vocation<sup>41, 42, 43</sup>.

The remaining three domains — material needs, housing and the physical environment, and life skills and spirituality — are considered indirectly as general factors that affect the return to civilian life.

It is important to note that while the study aims to understand the specific features of the return itself, one of our tasks was also to examine the circumstances and specifics of military service, along with the potential consequences for physical and mental health during active service. This approach provides a deeper understanding of the sequence of impacts by illustrating how experiences during service may shape the outcomes veterans face after returning to civilian life.

## Methods

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

### Qualitative tool

Given the exploratory nature of this study, **in-depth interviews** served as one of the principal tools for data collection. They allow

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<sup>41</sup> Hachey, K. K., Sudom, K., Sweet, J., MacLean, M. B., & VanTil, L. D. (2016). Transitioning from military to civilian life: The role of mastery and social support. *Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health*, 2(1), 9–18. [doi.org/10.3138/jmvfh.3379](https://doi.org/10.3138/jmvfh.3379)

<sup>42</sup> Bond, G. R., Al-Abdulmunem, M., Ressler, D. R., Drake, R. E., Davis, L. L., Meyer, T., Gade, D. M., Frueh, B. C., & Dickman, R. B. (2022). Evaluation of an employment intervention for veterans transitioning from the military: A randomized controlled trial. *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 210(5), 321–329. [doi.org/10.1097/NMD.0000000000001472](https://doi.org/10.1097/NMD.0000000000001472)

<sup>43</sup> Doenges, T. J. (2011). Calling and meaningful work among student military veterans: Impact on well-being and experiences on campus. Doctoral dissertation, Colorado State University. [doi.org/10.25675/3.019791](https://doi.org/10.25675/3.019791)

for a detailed examination of an individual's motivation, feelings, needs, and personal experiences<sup>44</sup>.

We specifically employed semi-structured, in-depth interviews to cover key thematic areas relevant to the research objectives while adapting the conversation to respondents' diverse experiences.

### **Quantitative tool**

To complement the qualitative data, we used the validated quantitative questionnaire for assessing quality of life WHOQOL-BREF<sup>45, 46</sup> (World Health Organisation Quality of Life – BREF). All respondents who took part in the in-depth interviews also completed this questionnaire.

This enabled us to assess respondents' levels of well-being in accordance with the interpretation criteria established by the questionnaire developers. In addition, it compared the findings with prior studies on veterans that employed the same tool<sup>47</sup>.

## **Sample**

In qualitative research, non-probability sampling is used to select participants for the study. In such sampling, units are selected deliberately to reflect particular characteristics or groups within

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<sup>44</sup> Rutledge, P. B., & Hogg, J. L. C. (2020). In-depth interviews. The International Encyclopedia of Media Psychology, 1–7. [doi.org/10.1002/9781119011071.iemp0019](https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119011071.iemp0019)

<sup>45</sup> World Health Organization. (1996). WHOQOL-BREF: Introduction, administration, scoring and generic version of the assessment: Field trial version. Geneva: World Health Organization. [who.int/publications/i/item/WHOQOL-BREF](https://who.int/publications/i/item/WHOQOL-BREF)

<sup>46</sup> For this study, we used an adapted Ukrainian version of the WHOQOL-BREF questionnaire. This version is a translation of the original WHO instrument and has not been developed or officially approved by the World Health Organisation. In the event of any discrepancies between the translated and English versions, the original English version of the questionnaire shall prevail.

<sup>47</sup> Stratcom UA. INVICTUS. (2025). Report on the results of a study into the impact of adaptive sports on the physical, psychological and social well-being of service members and veterans in Ukraine. [stratcomua.org/Content/CmsFile/ua/startpage\\_Report092025.pdf](https://stratcomua.org/Content/CmsFile/ua/startpage_Report092025.pdf)

the population under study<sup>48</sup>. This study employed **a combined non-probability sampling approach**, specifically, **a convenience sample** combined with **a maximum variation sample**.

As service members become UAV operators either directly after enlistment or service in other combat or non-combat positions, **the sample included two groups of respondents:**

- UAV operators who had no combat experience before working with drones — **12 interviews**;
- UAV operators who had direct combat experience before transferring to this position — **27 interviews**.

We also compared the characteristics of these two groups, as the way they mobilised and their prior military experience may influence their subsequent return to civilian life.

The types of UAVs currently used by Ukrainian warriors in the Russo-Ukrainian war can be classified by different criteria.

| By range                                                                                                                                                                             | By purpose                                                                                                                                                           | By type of operation                                                                                                 |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Short-range (up to 25 km)</li> <li>■ Tactical (10–100 km)</li> <li>■ Operational (100–200 km)</li> <li>■ Strategic (over 200 km)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Reconnaissance</li> <li>■ Logistics</li> <li>■ Strike</li> <li>■ Mining</li> <li>■ Relay</li> <li>■ Interception</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Aerial</li> <li>■ Maritime</li> <li>■ Ground</li> <li>■ Unmanned</li> </ul> |

<sup>48</sup> Ritchie, J., & Lewis, J. (Eds.). (2003). Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers. SAGE Publications, 77–78.

However, for this study, the typology of UAVs was not considered central. Instead, **the critical inclusion criteria were the following:**

- **Screen-based work.** The study focused specifically on UAV operators, as their work involves piloting drones and executing missions through a screen. The specifics of their activity may affect both an individual's functioning during service and their subsequent life after discharge.
- **Presence in the combat area.** Depending on the type of UAV and the nature of their missions, operators may work in various locations — close to the line of contact or at considerable distances from it. This study focused on operators who operated drones while deployed in the combat area, including the line of contact and frontline areas, where the level of danger is the highest, and the exposure to combat is the most intense. The experiences of UAV operators serving outside the combat area remain an important topic for future research.
- **Discharge from service and living as civilians.** Since the study focuses on the impact, consequences, and challenges of UAV operators' service in civilian life, participants were required to have been discharged from service and to have already lived in a civilian environment.
- **Post-service period — up to two years.** We involved veterans in the sample who had completed their service no more than two years prior to minimise the risk of losing details during the retrospective account of their combat experience and the course of their return. Furthermore, the types of drones and warfare conditions are constantly evolving, which, in turn, may affect the conditions of service and the return to civilian life.
- **Experience of strike missions.** Veterans may perform various operations, including logistics, reconnaissance, and strike missions. The study was primarily focused on strike missions,

as the operator directly engages with and destroys the enemy, which potentially has a different psycho-emotional impact compared to other mission types.

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

**When constructing the sample, we also considered the following social and demographic indicators:**

- **Age.** The sample included representatives from different age groups to compare their adaptation experiences during the return to civilian life.
- **Family status.** The presence or absence of a family may influence the process of returning to civilian life. On the one hand, families can be a vital source of support and adaptation during the return. On the other hand, family responsibilities, including the need to provide for children, may create additional challenges, such as the need to find immediate employment while simultaneously adapting to and returning to civilian life.
- **Place of residence (type of settlement).** This factor shapes varying access to opportunities and interaction with the community due to cultural insights inherent to the specific type of settlement.
- **Gender.** The sample included both men and women to compare the distinct features of their experiences.

**Exclusion criterion:** veterans with functional limitations resulting from combat-related injuries were excluded, including those who required continuous third-party assistance in their daily lives and were unable to live independently. This exclusion was necessary

because our primary focus was on how operating drones in combat affects the return to civilian life. Significant health-related functional limitations can substantially affect this process and complicate the analysis of how other factors contribute to it.

### **We recruited respondents through several channels:**

- **Veteran Hub social media and partner organisations and media.** We published a post explaining the purpose of the study and inviting discharged UAV operators to participate. The post included a link to the recruitment questionnaire. To reach a wider audience beyond Veteran Hub's followers, we launched targeted advertising.

We also distributed the recruitment questionnaire and information about the study among partner organisations supporting veterans, including patronage and support services for military units and brigades, UAV pilot schools, employers in the defence technology sector, and the media.

- **Veteran Hub clients and the Advisory Boards of the Think Tank<sup>49</sup>.** We shared information about the study with veterans who had received services at the Veteran Hub, as well as members of the Advisory Boards of the Veteran Hub Think Tank, asking them to share it with acquaintances who might be potential participants in the study.

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<sup>49</sup> Advisory Boards of the Veteran Hub Think Tank are consultative bodies comprising veterans and warriors' beloved ones. Members share their experiences and insights to improve the Think Tank's studies and outputs.

The final distribution of respondents by inclusion criteria and additional social and demographic indicators is provided below.

### Age distribution

| Number of respondents | Age group |
|-----------------------|-----------|
| 5                     | 18–25     |
| 18                    | 26–35     |
| 12                    | 36–45     |
| 4                     | 45–60     |
| 0                     | 61+       |

### Gender distribution

| Number of respondents | Gender |
|-----------------------|--------|
| 35                    | male   |
| 4                     | female |

### Combat experience

| Number of respondents | Combat experience |
|-----------------------|-------------------|
| 27                    | yes               |
| 12                    | no                |

### Experience of strike missions

| Number of respondents | Experience of strike missions |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------|
| 32                    | yes                           |
| 7                     | no                            |

# ***Interview guide***

The interview guide was developed based on a review of the international literature on the experiences of UAV operators in other countries, as well as the specifics of service members' adaptation to civilian life. In addition, while developing guide topics and questions, we consulted veterans who had served as UAV operators. This provided valuable insight into the technical aspects of operating unmanned systems, particularly during combat, as well as specifics of service and the return of UAV operators to civilian life.

In addition, the project researcher conducted pilot testing of the guide during mock interviews. Consequently, the research team revised the sequence and wording of certain questions and produced the final version of the interview guide.

**We structured the interview guide around key thematic areas to comprehensively explore the experience of service and the return to civilian life:**

- experience relevant to working with unmanned systems;
- reasons for enlistment and the way to becoming a UAV operator;
- key features of the service experience as a UAV operator;
- changes in physical and mental health and their impact on the return to civilian life;
- changes in relationships/recognition — relationships with close circle and the experience of interacting with civilians;

- vocation (work, education, hobbies) and career trajectories in civilian life;
- other needs and experiences that respondents considered important and highlighted to leave space for issues not previously anticipated in the interview guide.

## ***Interview process***

Selected interviewers and project researchers conducted the interviews. Beforehand, the research team organised training to introduce interviewers to interview procedures and ethical principles, and to review the interview guide. In addition, the interviewers were instructed in psychological first aid.

The interviewing team included two individuals with combat experience — one female veteran and one male veteran — alongside civilian specialists. This approach was informed by an analysis of international experience with peer interviewing,<sup>50</sup> as well as by the Veteran Hub Think Tank's prior experience in engaging interviewers with combat experience.

Interviews took place both online via Zoom and in person at the Veteran Hub space in Kyiv.

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<sup>50</sup> Barker, A. M., Dunlap, S., Hartmann, C. W., Wilson-Menzfeld, G., & McGill, G. (2022). Engaging veterans in the research process: A practical guide. *Journal of Comparative Effectiveness Research*, 11(10), 751–764. [doi.org/10.2217/cer-2022-0010](https://doi.org/10.2217/cer-2022-0010)

# Analysis

The qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews were analysed using a combination of **deductive thematic analysis** and **holistic narrative analysis** guided by abductive logic, integrating both deductive and inductive reasoning<sup>51</sup>.

**The qualitative data analysis was conducted in two stages:**

1. First, the research team comprehensively analysed each participant's individual narrative to understand the logic, distinct features, and context of their experiences.
2. Researchers conducted a cross-case thematic analysis and structured the findings in accordance with the key analytical area of the study.

The abductive approach enabled the researchers to move flexibly between existing theoretical models and the empirical data, adapting the initial thematic areas to new, unanticipated contexts and respondents' subjective meanings.

In addition, the research team conducted a quantitative analysis to complement the respondents' narratives with data on their level of satisfaction with various aspects of life. To assess the quality of life based on the self-administered WHOQOL-BREF questionnaire, the team used **the method of manual calculation of individual scores** and **a method for converting raw scores into transformed scores**<sup>52</sup>.

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<sup>51</sup> Timmermans, S., & Tavory, I. (2012). Theory construction in qualitative research: From grounded theory to abductive analysis. *Sociological Theory*, 30(3), 167–186. [doi.org/10.1177/0735275112457914](https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275112457914)

<sup>52</sup> World Health Organization. (1996). WHOQOL-BREF: Introduction, administration, scoring and generic version of the assessment: Field trial version. Geneva: World Health Organization. [who.int/publications/i/item/WHOQOL-BREF](https://who.int/publications/i/item/WHOQOL-BREF)

The results for each respondent supplemented their narrative with data on their satisfaction with various aspects of life. We did not calculate mean scores or other aggregate indicators across all participants. The only exception was the mean quality-of-life satisfaction score, which was compared with the findings of another 2025 study on the experiences of Ukrainian veterans that also employed this questionnaire<sup>53</sup>.

## ***Ethical principles***

The study is guided by the principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, and the ethical “do no harm” principle, with all questions and activities justified by the study’s needs.

- Members of the Advisory Boards of the Veteran Hub Think Tank, including veterans with combat experience and UAV operators, further reviewed the in-depth interview guide. They ensured that interview questions for respondents with combat experience were ethical, sensitive, and appropriate.
- The in-depth interview guide was deliberately designed to avoid detailed questions about combat losses or potentially traumatic experiences. Instead, it focused exclusively on the technical aspects of UAV operators’ work and their adaptation to civilian life.
- All interviewers completed training on the interview guide, the application of a trauma-informed approach, the provision of psychological first aid, and self-regulation techniques, which are particularly important when interviewing on sensitive topics.
- All respondents provided verbal or written consent to take part in the interviews.

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<sup>53</sup> Stratcom UA. INVICTUS. (2025). Report on the results of a study into the impact of adaptive sports on the physical, psychological and social well-being of service members and veterans in Ukraine. [stratcomua.org/Content/CmsFile/ua/startpage\\_Report092025.pdf](https://stratcomua.org/Content/CmsFile/ua/startpage_Report092025.pdf)

- We informed all respondents about the purpose of the study, its duration, and how the interview data would be processed and used.
- We informed all respondents that they could withdraw from participation at any time, decline to answer any question without providing a reason, and terminate the interview.
- We also explained that, even after the interview, they could withdraw from the study until a specified date, in which case we would delete their data and exclude it from the report.
- The study information sheet provided contact details through which participants could access support if needed, including psychological support at the Veteran Hub.

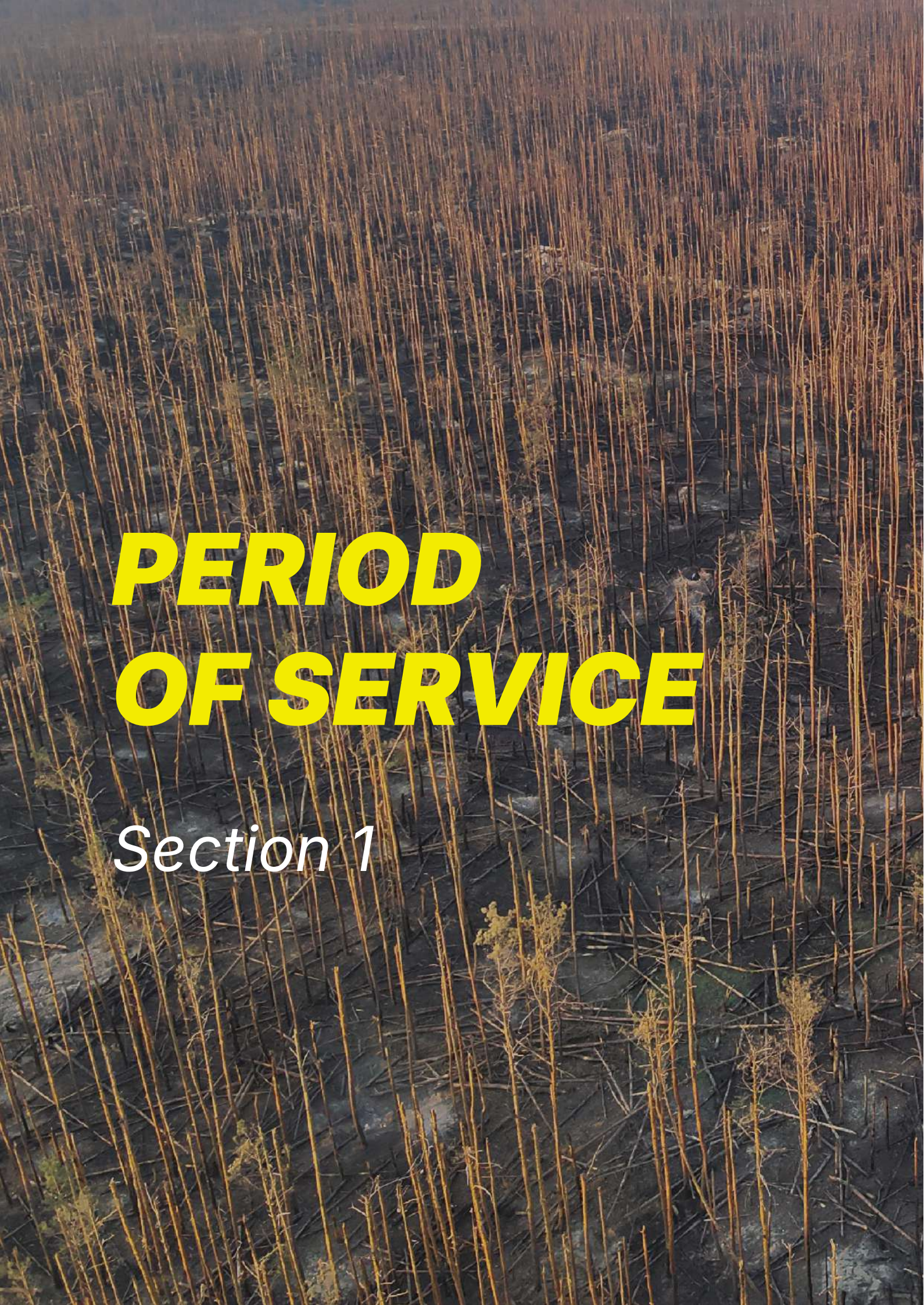
# ***Limitations and challenges***

Below, we outline the key methodological and organisational limitations that may have affected the conduct of the study and the interpretation of its findings.

- This is a qualitative study, and its findings cannot be generalised to the entire population.

We used the quantitative tools solely to complement the main findings, rather than for a comprehensive quantitative analysis, particularly given the limited number of respondents.

- The sample comprised veterans who had voluntarily enlisted in the military at different stages of the Russo-Ukrainian War.
- The sample did not include UAV operators who had not been deployed directly to the line of contact or frontline area while executing their missions.



# ***PERIOD OF SERVICE***

*Section 1*



# ***INTRODUCTION***

This Section examines the journey of UAV operators in the army: from the decision to enlist and the beginning of military life to the direct execution of drone operations.

We outline the pathways to becoming a UAV operator and the specifics of this military role. Based on the respondents' experiences, we analysed how the general characteristics of service and specific aspects of serving in this role affect well-being at this stage, particularly mental health.

Examining the service experiences of UAV operators provides insight into the changes that occur during service, which subsequently affect their return to civilian life.

# ***PATHWAYS TO BECOMING A MILITARY UAV OPERATOR***

Regardless of their subsequent speciality, duties, or trajectory, the decision to enlist is the first step for anyone entering service. This decision often shapes an individual's subjective experience and impressions of service, as well as the nature of the subsequent return to civilian life.

Therefore, it was initially important to understand how UAV operators decide to join the army, what motivates them to take this step, and what their subsequent trajectories look like.

## ***Journey to the army and motivation***

**Based on respondents' accounts, we identified three pathways through which they enlisted:**

| <b>1</b>                                                                                            | <b>2</b>                                                                              | <b>3</b>                                                                   |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Military service before 2022 and return to the troop following the start of the full-scale invasion | Joining the troop immediately after the full-scale invasion in February or March 2022 | Joining the troop later, from mid-2022 onwards, as the UAV sector expanded |

This typology is conditional and helps highlight differences in the experiences and trajectories of UAV operators depending on when they joined the ranks.

Despite differences in timing and circumstances of enlistment, respondents' motivations were largely similar. All respondents enlisted consciously and voluntarily at different times between 2014 and 2025. Regardless of when this decision was made, they predominantly shared a common motivation — **the desire to defend Ukraine**.

For some respondents, the **desire to take revenge on the Russians** was a dominant motivation. Some of them wished to take revenge for the occupation of their hometown or their experience of living under occupation, while for others it was revenge for the loss of a loved one, a family member, or a friend.

We can highlight the experiences of some female warriors, whose primary motivation was to avenge the death of their partner or to continue his mission.

Individuals enlist in the military for a wide range of considerations and reasons, including to serve as UAV operators. However, motivation rooted in the loss of a partner may represent one of the distinctive female military experiences.

Despite the lack of major differences in motivations, respondents' experiences show that the timing and circumstances of their decision to enlist could substantially affect their path within the army. We explore this in detail later.

## ***Pathway to the speciality***

Dynamic hostilities and an ongoing race between the opposing sides — in both types of weapons and combat tactics — characterise the current phase of the Russo-Ukrainian war. The rapid growth in the role of unmanned systems on the battlefield has been one manifestation of these changes.

Veterans who enlisted in late 2022 or later had the greatest opportunity to move directly into working with unmanned systems. By that time, the role of UAVs in combat operations had been reassessed both at the system level and the level of individual commanders. The establishment of dedicated UAV crews and units became increasingly widespread, allowing new recruits to join the ranks directly in relevant positions.

Those who enlisted later also had more time and resources to prepare while still civilians. For example, they were able to complete relevant training courses or seek positions and military units where they already had personal contacts and could effectively apply their skills, knowledge, and strengths.

*"Physically, I'm not exactly a muscleman. So I knew my strengths. These were analytical skills, project management, and working with computers and technology. In one of my civilian projects, I had some experience with UAVs because I had to prepare reports for donors on the progress of the construction project.*

*So, I used a small quadcopter to capture footage for those reports. I actually enjoyed it. When I started looking for a unit to enlist, I came across an interview with a civilian acquaintance. We had worked together on several projects. He mentioned that they were looking for drone operators."*

*Veteran, 36 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Some veterans became UAV operators only after their enlistment, and this choice may have been driven by various factors. To better understand the experiences of UAV operators, it was important to examine how individuals entered this speciality and what influenced their choice.

**We identified two main pathways to serving as a UAV operator:**

**1. Choosing the speciality or even a specific unit — mobilisation, or changing speciality while already in service**

This pathway was common among those who joined the ranks later, from mid-2022 onward, as they had the opportunity to enlist directly into a specific position or prepare in advance. Their choice of this position could be motivated by prior experience or involvement in UAV operations, as well as by personal contacts within military units specialising in unmanned systems.

Veterans with combat experience, who were also able to change their military occupation without obstacles, followed this pathway as well. In these cases, a change of activity could be motivated by an appreciation of the importance and effectiveness of drone operations by personal interest in the field of operating unmanned systems.

Another variation of this choice was less straightforward and more challenging: seeking opportunities to become a UAV operator and transferring despite resistance from the command. This experience was most common among those who had served longer, or who had enlisted at the beginning of the full-scale invasion.

In such cases, commanders justified their reluctance to facilitate training or to establish relevant positions or squads within their units by arguing that such practices did not exist or were ineffective. This kind of resistance was commonly encountered in the early months of the full-scale invasion.

*"I approached my chain of command, my battalion commander... 'Permission to speak, sir! I've got contacts with a foundation. My brothers-in-arms operate drones. Let's get some drones from volunteers and train our lads to fly them. It's a great thing. It would really help.'*

*The battalion commander said, 'I've been in the army for 30 years! Are you going to teach me how to fight? I know better! The main thing here is completing the paperwork and making sure all the logs are properly maintained.' I'm exaggerating a bit, but that's essentially what he said. He said, 'I know better, don't tell me what to do'."*

*Veteran, 37 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Over time, attitudes towards UAVs within the army evolved, including at the systemic level, as their effectiveness was proven in practice. Since 2024, the Armed Forces of Ukraine have included the Unmanned Systems Forces. However, for at least some veterans who wished to change their speciality to become UAV operators, initial resistance from commanders prompted them to seek transfers to other units where they could retrain.

## **2. A pathway of chance rather than conscious choice**

*Within this second pathway, we identified two distinct trajectories:*

- In some cases, future UAV operators were randomly assigned to relevant units or squads, with no opportunity to choose their speciality upon enlisting or transferring to combat units.
- In other cases, veterans were assigned to UAV operator training while already serving.

The demand for trained personnel increased after the start of the full-scale invasion, as unmanned systems became more widely used and many units established dedicated UAV squads or at least positions. Commanders received orders or expressed

a desire of their own to dispatch their service members for UAV training. In such cases, UAV operators could be selected based on minimally-relevant criteria, such as young age or a general understanding of technology, electronics, or computers.

*"I was the youngest — that's one thing. A lot of the lads in my unit were miners. They were grown men, about 35–40 years old. Most of them were working-class men.*

*As for the younger ones, I was the youngest. There was one other person: he worked in IT. He was a machine gunner and wasn't very keen either. Our quite young company commander spoke to both of us. In the end, I said, 'OK, I'll go.' I realised this would probably be more useful, and I'd pick it up faster because time was short, and we were due to deploy on combat missions soon. So I decided to take it on."*

*Veteran, 25 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

# ***Training and mastering the new role***

Regardless of the trajectory by which UAV operators entered this role, training should constitute an important stage in mastering both the new role and its required skills. However, not all of our respondents had the opportunity to undergo such training.

Even those who enlisted directly as UAV operators mostly received only basic military training, while vocational training was either unavailable or considered too brief or ineffective among veterans. The length of training also depended largely on when respondents joined the ranks. Following the start of the full-scale invasion, service members had substantially less time for vocational training than during the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO)/Joint Forces Operation (JFO) period, due to the urgent need to replenish military units.

The shorter basic training may also reflect the nature of the speciality, namely, the dynamism and constant development of the UAV piloting sector. Technologies, types of unmanned systems, and the tactics for their use evolve rapidly, making it difficult to acquire a substantial proportion of the required knowledge and skills during basic training. Under these circumstances, learning during active service, knowledge exchange among service members, and the acquisition of practical skills through combat missions become particularly important.

Overall, respondents noted that they acquired **most of the skills and knowledge required for effective drone operations during active service, primarily through participation in combat missions**. In some cases, they learned from brothers- and sisters-in-arms who had begun working with unmanned systems earlier. They sometimes attempted to gain UAV piloting skills independently, or applied prior experience from civilian life.

In this context, it is important to note that our respondents were motivated to develop their skills, anticipated the growing role of unmanned systems in future warfare, sought to expand their knowledge in this field, and independently looked for additional learning opportunities while on active service.

As previously mentioned, operating unmanned systems takes place in an environment of continuous technological and sector-wide development. Therefore, constant learning and skills development are not only a reflection of UAV operators' personal interest and motivation, but also a prerequisite for the effective performance of their duties.

## ***Civilian experience and skills helpful in the work***

Successfully performing UAV-related tasks may require not only the knowledge and skills acquired through experience and repeated flights but also competencies developed in civilian life. In particular, respondents repeatedly emphasised the importance of prior knowledge of topography and **map reading**. Some had acquired these skills in civilian life, while others developed them during military service. The ability to navigate terrain effectively and interpret maps enhanced their performance in UAV operations by enabling operators to identify the locations of objects and determine directions of movement.

Respondents also mentioned the **importance of technical knowledge and skills**. These included the ability to perform engineering tasks, solder drone components, and repair minor equipment.

There is a widespread assumption that **experience playing video games** gives an advantage to those who become UAV operators. This is based on similarities between certain processes

or mechanical actions, including the use of joysticks or familiarity with screen-based interfaces. However, the findings of this study do not support the view that such experience plays a decisive role.

Respondents with experience playing computer games in civilian life noted that it had little impact on their work as UAV operators. Moreover, some respondents had no gaming experience before enlisting.

Only a few veterans mentioned video games when asked about civilian skills that proved useful when operating drones. One respondent noted that his prior experience playing on a PlayStation console helped him handle the joystick better and pilot the drone during flight. However, he noted that this experience did not significantly impact his service or operational skills. He raised it mainly in the context of the widespread stereotype that video gamers make better UAV operators.

*"As for experience, I had a PlayStation — the only thing I could do was use a joystick. I started flying straight away. They just handed me a Mavic and said, 'Try taking off.' They only showed me how to start it. Thereafter, I basically knew what to do. It's a bit of a running joke that guys who play PlayStation can become UAV operators because they know how to use a joystick. Something like that."*

*Veteran, 25 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Another respondent mentioned that experience with video games contributed to strategic thinking, familiarity with an aerial perspective, and an understanding of battlefield organisation. He believed that this helped him orient himself better and make decisions during combat missions.

*"To be specific, I used to play computer games. Mostly shooters<sup>54</sup>, I think that's what the genre is called. I didn't play flight simulators. I preferred strategies. Perhaps that helped me while working with drones because I was good at navigating unfamiliar terrain using aerial photographs and maps. The perspective you get from a drone and the view you have on the ground are entirely different. You have to orient yourself when you're in the air."*

*Veteran, 42 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Respondents emphasised the **importance of physical fitness**.

In their view, the common perception that the work of UAV operators does not involve physical exertion does not reflect reality. During combat missions, UAV operators, like other service members, must move quickly, take cover in trenches and dugouts, evacuate, or assist in evacuating brothers- and sisters-in-arms.

*"A UAV operator has to be physically fit, whether they like it or not. People are used to seeing thin or thick lads in goggles operating drones. The trend on the frontline is that tactical drones, FPV [first-person view], are now going to cover distances of up to 25 kilometres. Of all kinds and types. You have to cover those 25 kilometres somehow."*

*Veteran, 31 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Overall, the skills respondents mentioned as useful in their work as UAV operators were largely applicable across the military more broadly. In other words, they were important for service members in general, rather than unique to this particular role.

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<sup>54</sup> Shooter is a video game genre, a subgenre of action, where the gameplay is primarily focused on shooting targets.

# ***Shaping military identity***

A conscious choice and decision to join the troop does not imply an immediate transition from a civilian to a military identity. The process of adapting to the environment and embracing a new role varies from person to person and depends on both external and internal factors, including prior experience, mindset, and overall adaptability.

Moving from a military identity to a veteran or civilian identity can be an important step in veterans' transition to civilian life. This stage may depend on how the previous one unfolded — that is, the adaptation from civilian to military identity during initial enlistment. In particular, veterans who successfully adapted to and embraced their military identity may later encounter more challenges during their transition to civilian life, as they might feel they belong to neither the military community nor the civilian one<sup>55</sup>.

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 the experience.

**Based on respondents' accounts, we identified several factors and strategies that helped them adapt to the new environment and develop a military identity. These can be grouped into four key categories.**

## **1. Experience interacting with similar military or private institutions**

This factor facilitated successful adaptation among those who enlisted after 2022 and had previously completed conscript service, or had worked or studied in private institutions, such as the State Emergency Service of Ukraine (SESU) or educational institutions under the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA). Experience interacting

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<sup>55</sup> Miller, A., & Saling, L. L. (2025). Acculturative stress and identity challenges undermine the successful reintegration of Australian veterans. *Psychological Services*, 22(3), 596–607. [doi.org/10.1037/ser0000888](https://doi.org/10.1037/ser0000888)

with organisations of a comparable structure provided a better understanding of how military processes operate and shaped realistic expectations regarding the military and service in general. This primarily concerned the internal organisation of the ranks, its formalised relationships, and hierarchical structure.

*"I forgot to mention that I also completed conscript service back in 2010–2011. It was just like that: I turned 18, got my call-up order, went off, and served. Maybe that's why joining up now wasn't an issue for me. Not in terms of the war, but because of the military environment. I am already familiar with it. It was chaotic back then, and now it's still chaotic... just with different consequences."*

*Veteran, 34 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

These same characteristics of the military system — including the lack of personal autonomy, the obligation to follow orders and assignments, and the inability to express one's opinions — proved challenging for some respondents who lacked such experience. They described one of the most difficult aspects of adapting to military life as the necessity of living "by the rules" and carrying out orders they considered illogical. In this context, prior experience of interacting with similar institutions helped foster more realistic expectations about the military environment and facilitated adaptation.

*"Even back then, and still now, I was already a fully formed person. I'd managed people and knew how these systems work. Excuse my French, but some commanders are idiots. Sometimes, orders would come down from above, and you'd wonder what they were thinking or what it was all about."*

*Veteran, 42 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

## **2. Adaptability: a willingness to embrace change and new “rules of the game” quickly**

Some respondents who reported few difficulties during the transition to military life explained this by noting that they had adapted relatively quickly to the new circumstances and rules. This mindset helped minimise negative emotions and misunderstandings, making it easier to adjust to the military system, comply with orders, and embrace their new role.

In other words, those who chose this adaptation strategy understood that changes lay ahead. They had a realistic sense of what to expect, and felt no surprise or frustration when those changes occurred.

*“I didn’t actually find it difficult because I knew exactly what I was doing. I didn’t have any particular expectations. I’m a realist, so I already knew what was waiting for me there.”*

*Female veteran, 26 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

## **3. Extensive life experience, particularly in civilian life**

This adaptation strategy is more a circumstance than a conscious choice. Some respondents joined the army at a relatively young age — between 18 and 25. As a result, not all of them had a well-established civilian identity, owing to limited career opportunities and, in some cases, fewer social relationships or responsibilities. In transitioning to military life, this could have eased adaptation, as adopting a new identity and accepting new rules required less extensive restructuring of an already-established civilian identity.

## **4. Purposefulness and self-awareness**

This strategy shares certain similarities with adaptability, but is based on a different motivation. In this case, accepting the new “rules of the game” and conditions stems not from psychological

adaptability but from an understanding of one's own motivation and the higher purpose behind these changes. For example, when faced with difficulties in adapting to military life, one female respondent reminded herself why she had chosen this path and why it was worth continuing.

*"The first few months were quite frightening because there were always explosions there. It was especially scary at night. You're alone; you don't know anyone yet, in a place unknown to you. It felt very strange. For the first couple of months, I wanted to leave... But I had a goal, and I believed that soon I'd be doing real work. So, I put up with it."*

*Female veteran, 35 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

It is also worth noting that, despite having varied and significant military experience, not everyone undergoes a transition to a military identity. One of the respondents does not identify himself as a service member and does not associate himself with that role. Instead, he views his time in the army as the experience of someone who was doing useful work.

*"I don't really see myself as a service member or feel that I've grown into that role... I'm just a person who decided to do something useful. That's how I see it."*

*Veteran, 36 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Helpful strategies  
for adaptation and accepting military identity

| Strategy                                                                               | How it supported adaptation                                                              |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Experience interacting with military or private institutions</b>                    | Established realistic expectations of the military environment, its hierarchy, and rules |
| <b>Adaptability: willingness to embrace change and new “rules of the game” quickly</b> | Facilitated the acceptance of changes and reduced frustration                            |
| <b>Extensive life experience, particularly in civilian life</b>                        | Facilitated a more flexible acceptance of a new role and lifestyle                       |
| <b>Purposefulness and self-awareness</b>                                               | Helped overcome difficulties and maintain resilience during service                      |

# ***SPECIFICS AND SERVICE CONDITIONS OF UAV OPERATORS***

The way veterans return to civilian life after combat experience can also depend on the nature of their service. During service, an individual's living conditions, environment, responsibilities, and patterns of interaction with others all change. These factors shape experiences that impact well-being, including physical and mental health.

In this section, we examine:

- certain aspects of UAV operators' work that can be regarded as distinctive features of this speciality;
- the particular impact on the veterans' physical and psychological well-being during military service.

It is important to note that our analysis did not identify any aspects of female UAV operators' work that distinguished their experiences from those of their male counterparts. In addition, this section discusses some service characteristics that are not exclusive to UAV operators, but may also be typical of other specialities or of combat service in general. Accordingly, the impact of these factors on veterans' physical and psychological well-being during their service will also be discussed in general terms.

Since we identified these findings directly during interviews with UAV operators, we included them in this report. As further research becomes available, it will be possible to verify or refute the extent to which these experiences are widespread among veterans of the Russo-Ukrainian War.

## ***Work schedule***

To understand the potential impact of the service on overall well-being and physical health in particular, we asked the respondents about their day-to-day “working” lives as UAV operators, including:

- what their work routine in general and a typical working day looked like;
- what tasks they carried out and under what conditions.

These factors shape the daily service conditions of UAV operators and determine their ability to rest, get enough sleep and food, and maintain their overall physical condition.

In this respect, the respondents’ conditions varied considerably. Their work schedules and typical working days depended on how work was organised within their particular unit or squad. In particular, differences reflected whether the UAV squad belonged to a dedicated unmanned systems unit, operated within a unit belonging to another military branch, or whether the UAV operators held individual positions, for example, within artillery units.

The structure of the unit also influenced the availability of other UAV crews and, consequently, the possibility of organising shift-based work over extended periods or within a single day.

*"It was a battalion, right? There were four batteries. No, three batteries. Three, I think. Yes, there were three of them. A battery means four self-propelled artillery units, then three, and then two. Yes, a battery. There were three such batteries in the battalion. Every battery had drone operators, and they started mixing us. We operated as one group. We had one battalion commander and one reconnaissance chief. We reported to the battalion. We became one combined team and went out on tasks with different batteries."*

*Veteran, 48 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

However, even within an established process and routine in a single squad, the work schedule of a UAV crew could change depending on the operational situation and the types of tasks to be performed at a particular time and on a particular section of the frontline.

*"Sometimes only one of us would go out with the reconnaissance team. Sometimes there were two of us. Sometimes three of ours and one of theirs would go. Sometimes four of ours and one of theirs. It was all quite chaotic. There was no fixed schedule setting out exactly how we were going out. It could change during the day. For example, I was supposed to go today, but then someone else had to go instead, or two of us had to go."*

*Veteran, 34 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Personnel shortages within units was another important factor affecting work schedules. An insufficient number of personnel, including UAV operators, made regular crew rotations impossible. Operators **remained at their positions for extended periods** — 29 days in one respondent's case and nine months in another's

Such situations were not typical of the experience of most respondents and occurred under exceptional circumstances, when rotation was impossible due to the course of the military

efforts, weather conditions, or the need to ensure continuous UAV operations within a particular area.

Most respondents noted that they stayed **for a few days, a week, or two weeks** in the combat area before being able to recover or perform other tasks further away from the combat area, often in frontline cities.

*"There were two of us all the time. Sometimes they gave another person for training because back then, UAV units were starting to expand. It became more common. That was already the beginning of 2024, and we trained the guys directly under combat conditions. We let them fly, taught them everything we knew, and trained them on how to use munitions. That entire operation took us nine months.*

*We had almost no rotations over those nine months. During those nine months, I went to the hospital twice for seven days, and I had one seven-day leave. Roughly speaking, I spent only 21 days out of nine months away from the positions. We spent the rest of the time at the positions."*

*Veteran, 25 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Most respondents also reported having a duty roster or a daily work schedule. That is, UAV operators mostly work **in shifts**: they spend a few days on a combat deployment on positions and then some time at the permanent or temporary station of the unit or squad, or even travel to another city. Within a single team or crew, a shift could last four, seven, or twelve hours, depending on prior arrangements.

*"Our shifts weren't hard. One crew did five days, then the next crew did five days. At that time, that wasn't much at all. It was convenient because those five days in the rear gave you a chance to rest a bit, get out for a while, and have a cup of coffee."*

*Veteran, 25 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

The work schedule and a typical working day of UAV operators also varied depending on available resources, particularly personnel and equipment.

**According to respondents, two work patterns can be identified:**

- **Working from morning until evening** — a schedule that aligns with general ideas of a typical working day: the crew set off for the mission area in the morning, carried out their missions, and returned to their deployment/living location in the evening. Respondents repeatedly emphasised that such a schedule was mostly characteristic of the earlier period of their service. According to their observations and information from their brothers- and sisters-in-arms, this practice has gradually changed: crews are spending increasingly longer periods at positions for security reasons to reduce the risk of being targeted during movement or equipment deployment.
- An **"inverted working day"** — the crew followed a defined work schedule, but at night: their working day began towards the evening, lasted all night, and ended in the morning with a return to their deployment or living location to rest.

# ***Sleep, rest, and recovery***

The work patterns and duty rosters described above directly affected the opportunities for UAV operators to rest and recover. The duration and regularity of sleep, as well as opportunities for adequate rest, depended both on the organisation of the unit's work and on the specific shift pattern and operational tasks.

Working from morning until evening had less impact on the duration and quality of sleep. According to respondents who worked under this regime reported that they did not experience significant changes in their physical well-being.

*"Well, I cannot say it affected [my sleep or physical well-being] in any major way. You get up, go out, do the job, come back, have time to sleep and a proper meal. You get up again the next morning and go out. Then you have a couple of days off, followed by another four working days in a row. It's just like civilian life, you know. Four days on and two days off."*

*Veteran, 34 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

When working in shifts, UAV operators and other crew members had the opportunity to rest between operational periods and alternate between day and night shifts. However, respondents associated this work schedule with poorer sleep quality and disrupted sleep patterns, as it did not allow for consistent overnight sleep or a regular eight hours of rest.

Rest periods were often considerably shorter, while opportunities for sleep depended on shift schedules and operational demands. As a result, difficulties in maintaining adequate, uninterrupted sleep persisted throughout military service and continued even after the return to civilian life.

*"You fly for four hours, then the next operator, who just had some rest, arrives. You brief him on everything that's happened during those four hours. You usually sit down to eat something and then go to sleep. If there is an emergency, they wake you up, and you go back to work. If everything goes well, you sleep for four hours, wake up half an hour before the start of your short shift, have a coffee, have a cigarette, and go to the toilet so you don't need to run off later. You watch your brother-in-arms complete the final flight, ask what issues came up, what the wind is like, what you should pay attention to, whether there were any incidents or any tasks from higher command, and then you get to work."*

*Veteran, 36 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

*"Initially, we worked in pairs for four-hour shifts: a pilot and an assistant pilot. We worked in four-hour shifts. At first, since we were still learning and the work was mentally and psychologically demanding, one person flew for two hours, then we switched, and the other flew for two hours. One was operating the drone for two hours, while the other was maintaining it: changing the battery, checking it, placing it at the launch position, retrieving it after landing, changing the battery, inspecting the drone for any damage..."*

*Then, after two months, we extended our shifts to eight hours at a time. You work for eight hours and then rest for eight hours. You rest or take care of daily tasks."*

*Veteran, 42 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

In addition, even an eight-hour break between sorties did not necessarily mean eight hours of rest. These "breaks" could also include technical support and maintenance of the drones, as well as preparing for the next mission. Respondents reported that adapting to irregular sleep was generally not a major challenge

for them. They did not name these living conditions among the most difficult aspects of serving as UAV operators. Many respondents consider the acceptance of the new reality and new rules of daily life as an important strategy for adapting to these changed living conditions.

However, some respondents noted that sleep disruptions contributed to increasing levels of fatigue, which also affected their diet. One respondent explained that a lack of energy due to sleep deprivation led him to consume excessive amounts of sweets as a quick way to replenish it, as such food was available both during missions and while resting. Another respondent and his brothers-in-arms of his crew gained weight during their service due to constant night work. According to him, this regime disrupted the body's natural rhythm and affected their eating patterns, meal timing, and, consequently, metabolism.

*"You're constantly eating something sweet and things like that. Your blood sugar shoots up, and you've already put on seven kilos... All the lads who came off positions weighed more than when they went in. There is no recovery. You're constantly snacking and keep your blood sugar and insulin levels up, and it's..."*

*So, as for rest as such... It's very difficult to call it rest. You need strong discipline, self-discipline, knowing that you just cannot do that! You cannot do that. You drink two cups of coffee at midnight to stay awake all night. The young lads were constantly drinking energy drinks. I never drink them."*

*Veteran, 51 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Not only long leaves but also **opportunities for regular rest**, which depend on how work schedules are organised, influence physical health and well-being. Most respondents reported having a few days off after deployments, especially under a shift work system.

However, this was a relatively short rest, typically lasting between two and seven days.

Rest and recovery methods varied depending on living conditions, location, and the units themselves. Some respondents had the opportunity for genuine rest, during which they did not have to perform other tasks or did so only by choice. Some UAV operators used their rest periods to refresh or improve specific skills and to acquire new knowledge.

In other cases, these periods involved sleeping after a combat deployment, followed by performing tasks within the unit, such as guard duty or an alert mission at an observation post. Nevertheless, it was still important for overall recovery, as it was when respondents could speak with their families, and in some cases, visit relatives, spend time with brothers- and sisters-in-arms outside combat operations, and recharge in nature or by engaging in activities they found fulfilling, such as cooking, watching movies, playing video games, or listening to audiobooks.

*"I had this feeling that I was truly living at that moment [during rest periods between deployments]. When I was in [a frontline city], it was like I had been sent away somewhere... to my grandmother's house. Like I was 15 again and didn't know anyone in the yard. There were people around, children playing. Those beautiful roses... You could go wherever you wanted, have a coffee... You could afford to do that. It was a bit relaxed. If only there was no shelling, it would have been perfect. It was... a resort area where we were based..."*

*Veteran, 51 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

One respondent recalled that one of the ways he and his brothers-in-arms rested and recovered psychologically was playing football with local children from nearby villages.

*"I always helped him [the political officer] with things in the company... He said, 'Damn, they're doing my head in, they say they need some kind of psychological recovery for them...'  
He said, 'Let's play football... I played football with the children in the villages where we stayed after coming back from the positions. I bought footballs. I got the lads involved, especially my platoon. We all got together and played. It was really great. Mind you, I had to listen to things like, 'You idiots, playing football? Is that how you get tired?' They were completely serious. I defended it until the very end."*

*Veteran, 30 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

The interviews **did not suggest that experience of UAV missions influenced the choice of rest or recovery**. Respondents did not note that they avoided screens during their spare time, wished to spend time in nature, or had less desire to consume a certain type of content.

According to respondents, the availability of days off depended on the specific squad or unit. They noted that the opportunities for rest, that is, its duration and arrangements, often depended on the commander and their understanding of the importance of recovery for maintaining concentration. Some might have unofficial days off or even time to see their families, while others had no such opportunities for rest or a change of scenery.

*"As for sleep, it was fine because... our commander was experienced. We all understood that this was constantly demanding work, and you had to stay focused. So we organised things to ensure everyone had at least 8 hours of rest. Eight hours when you could sleep, eat, or do whatever you want. We tried to do it that way. Even out on the position, I remember our commander insisting on it. Some lads wanted to work six-hour shifts instead of eight, but he gathered everyone*

*together and said, 'No chance. You need to sleep enough because there's a lot of work'."*

*Veteran, 32 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Some respondents reported eye strain from prolonged screen work. However, veterans generally did not speak of any negative impact from performing tasks through a screen, including strike missions. Respondents with more extensive experience operating FPV (first-person view) drones via piloting goggles noted that, unlike working with a screen, this work places additional strain on the vestibular system. In other words, this specific tool for operating the drone is not suitable for everyone.

In addition, using FPV goggles can make the work more challenging because the operator cannot monitor what is happening around them. They are unable to perceive events taking place nearby, which reduces their sense of security, particularly when operating without a partner.

*"When you're wearing goggles, you only see the image. You don't see someone pointing out where you need to fly. The target may already have moved, but you are wearing goggles. You cannot see that people are telling you; you don't watch the Mavic streams; you see nothing. It's much more convenient on a screen."*

*Veteran, 25 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

# ***SPECIFICS OF THE UAV OPERATOR ROLE***

**In addition to service conditions, respondents also described the specifics of the UAV operators' work:**

## **1. Multitasking**

The number of personnel in the unit, squad, and, accordingly, a specific crew is an important aspect of service that affects, among other things, the work schedule and organisation of work. According to respondents, a UAV crew usually consisted of two or three people, sometimes four or more. The roles of its members varied depending on the specific nature of the work and assigned tasks of a particular crew, but generally involved at least one pilot and, in some cases, a navigator who also performed the duties of the second pilot<sup>56</sup>.

Other crew members could be responsible for:

- driving the vehicle;
- combat engineer tasks;
- coordination with adjacent crews and the command post;
- technical support for the aircraft and the equipment to ensure their effective operation;
- route planning, navigation, and analysis of the data collected (navigators).

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<sup>56</sup> Some UAV crews consist of several members: a pilot — the person who directly controls the drone (taking off, guiding it to the target, keeping it in the air, landing it or striking the target), and a navigator — the person responsible for navigation, orientation, target search and tracking, communications, and situational awareness.

In most cases, respondents reported performing a wide range of tasks within UAV crews to support their operations. Those serving as UAV operators within other branches could also be assigned tasks extending beyond drone operations, including participation in assault operations or the evacuation of brothers- and sisters-in-arms.

Based on the interviews, multitasking emerged as one of the defining features of the UAV operators' experience. It should be noted that we do not have similar studies of other military specialities, and therefore cannot conclude that this characteristic is unique to UAV operators. It is also likely to reflect the need to perform additional duties under conditions of personnel shortages.

## 2. Analysis and complexity

In addition to multitasking, the work of UAV operators is characterised by its analytical nature and complexity. The range of a UAV operator's tasks is broad and may cover various types of activities: from fire adjustment and logistics, including delivering food and other supplies to infantry units, to escorting brothers- and sisters-in-arms during assaults or repelling them, as well as direct fire attacks using aerial munition drops.

*"There is this specific aspect of drones that you're constantly dealing with multiple factors. You have to monitor wind changes, EW [electronic warfare] activity or the lack thereof, then the battery charge, the signal, and the battlefield. You have to calculate a lot in your head: battery charge multiplied by distance, wind; in short, that's the task. As things progress, you have to communicate, explain what's happening, and outline the next steps and actions. That is multitasking.*

*Usually, I had a controller in my hand. There was a phone on my knee, a tablet with microphones, another tablet with a map and navigation, and some other devices. I was just like a pianist."*

*Veteran, 27 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

### **3. Continuous communication and information sharing**

Continuous communication and information sharing are among the key tasks and responsibilities of UAV operators. On the one hand, UAV operators must collect and record all essential information to pass it on to the next crew or operator taking over the shift. On the other hand, they communicate with commanders, receive tasks and report on the operational situation.

Another key aspect of communication involves maintaining contact with infantry units during missions, as well as in cases of casualties or when addressing logistical issues. This requires considerable attention and concentration to ensure no important detail is missed. Such constant engagement can be psychologically demanding and emotionally exhausting.

### **4. Technical training**

When answering questions about essential skills for future UAV operators, veterans repeatedly emphasised the importance of technical training. This included both skills related directly to flying and simulator training and a general understanding of the technical aspects of UAV operations: their types, design, and operating principles.

This is a subjective assessment by the veterans who participated in the study and shared their experiences. However, given the frequent need to perform various roles and tasks during service, UAV operators do require a general awareness of the technical aspects of drone operations, proficiency in topography, and, in some cases, the ability to work with explosive elements.

### **5. Sustained concentration**

The need for prolonged concentration and the ability to maintain focus over extended periods distinguishes the work of UAV operators from many other military specialities. Operators' work schedules vary and involve at least several hours of continuous, focused activity. Attentiveness and a good memory are crucial

for UAV operators during reconnaissance or surveillance missions, as these tasks require attention to the smallest details and changes in the environment.

## **6. Physical danger**

The assessment of safety by UAV operators depends on many factors. Veterans who participated in our study noted that, although their work is generally considered safer than serving in the infantry, UAV operators remain a priority target for the enemy. This is because they provide infantry, artillery, and other units with operational and reconnaissance information, making the enemy eager to “blind” Ukrainian forces.

In some cases, physical danger was associated with carrying out missions and the need to recover lost drones. For many respondents, losing a UAV meant losing not just a tool for combat tasks, but also a significant investment of resources. The military did not always have sufficient UAVs to meet demand, so drones were often purchased through volunteers, personal contacts, or with the operators’ own funds. If an aircraft crashed or was lost, operators sometimes had to leave their positions and search for it, crossing open areas that could be under enemy fire or mined.

Awareness of the physical threat to their lives and health was psychologically challenging for some veterans. This was especially true for those who had families, particularly children. Respondents with children more frequently described physical danger as one of the most psychologically difficult aspects of service. One respondent directly linked this experience to the promise he had made to his daughter to return home alive.

## **7. Responsibility**

Another topic that consistently emerged from interviews with veterans was their awareness of personal responsibility. According to some respondents, an increased level of responsibility is one of the defining features of UAV operators’ work. Respondents with

prior combat experience in other roles mentioned this particularly often. UAV operators perform reconnaissance and surveillance missions, and the subsequent actions, health, and lives of infantry depend on the quality of their work.

*"From a moral perspective, you have to understand that you are a priority target. That so much depends on you... So much! Let's just say it goes as far as the breakthrough of the frontline, depending on you, the drone operator. It's no secret that we're currently facing a severe personnel shortage, and there's usually no one ahead of the drone operator. He is the first to encounter the enemy. Even if he's positioned 5, 6, or 10 kilometres away from the line of contact, there is no one ahead of him."*

*Veteran, 35 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Some respondents linked the experience of losing drones during missions with this sense of responsibility. In some cases, such losses were distressing, as they could be seen as evidence of the lack of knowledge or skills that might have prevented the loss of the aircraft.

Most respondents, however, noted that losing drones was not such a difficult experience and considered it the inevitable loss of a working tool. Although these losses were certainly unpleasant, they were an expected consequence of combat missions and, ultimately, a much better alternative to human casualties.

Operators also associated this strong sense of responsibility with the considerable independence and autonomy in decision-making afforded by the role in some units. Commanders did not always specify the exact tasks to be performed. Depending on the organisation of work and relationships within the unit or squad, UAV operators may have substantial freedom to determine priorities and how to execute tasks: where to direct the flight, which targets to engage, or where the enemy or their weaponry might be located.

The experience of serving in command positions was another factor affecting respondents' sense of responsibility and their mental health in general. Respondents who held command positions reported that this role involved an even greater degree of multitasking. In addition to direct participation in deployments, they had to coordinate activities during combat, maintain communication with their own and adjacent crews, and relay critical information.

*"It's a thankless job. Being a commander... Whatever happens, you're the one held accountable. You carry all of this on your shoulders. The quality of the work, the lives and health of your subordinates, and the supply of your crew and unit with what they need. You're already carrying a hell of a lot. Then someone starts acting up, 'I don't want to do that, I won't do that,' like children. Then*

*conflicts begin, or, if they don't, the quality of the work starts to suffer. The quality of the work directly affects someone's life and health, and all that responsibility rests on the commander. You're just sitting there thinking, 'Damn, what should I do?'"*

*Veteran, 31 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

The experience of command intensified the respondents' sense of responsibility for the lives and health of their personnel, for working with them, and for communicating difficult decisions. In interviews, they most often mentioned anxieties related to this responsibility: the complex emotions involved in delivering difficult decisions, the need to communicate effectively with subordinates in a new role, feelings of guilt over losses within their teams, and the need for constant interaction at different levels of command — conveying decisions and orders to subordinates while advocating for their interests and actions before higher command.

## **8. Proactivity and the need to learn and develop**

The need for continuous learning and professional development is one of the defining features of the UAV operators' work. This is driven both by the rapid evolution of unmanned systems and the constant development of tactics and technologies during the war. Over more than 12 years of the Russo-Ukrainian War, the role of UAVs, their types, and capabilities have changed significantly, requiring operators to constantly update their knowledge and skills.

It is worth noting that participants of this study are already highly engaged individuals who were mostly interested in working with UAVs and voluntarily agreed to be interviewed and share their experiences. Their accounts suggest that many of them took a proactive interest in the development of this field, experimented, and were among the first to introduce the use of UAVs within their units, or, through their initiative, became commanders of UAV squads.

According to some respondents, as in the military, UAV operators include both individuals who are eager to develop and expand their skills and those who approach the role as performing assigned duties and simply "doing" their shifts.

### Key features of the UAV operator role

|                                                         |                                                                                                          |
|---------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Multitasking</b>                                     | The need to perform multiple roles simultaneously and combine several tasks                              |
| <b>Analysis and complexity</b>                          | The need to carry out complex tasks while operating the drone and to analyse the operational environment |
| <b>Continuous communication and information sharing</b> | The need to maintain communication and relay information between crews, commanders, and the infantry     |
| <b>Technical training</b>                               | The need for technical competency and understanding of the principles of UAV operation                   |
| <b>Sustained concentration</b>                          | The need to maintain attention over long periods and notice changes in the operational environment       |
| <b>Physical danger</b>                                  | Risks to life and health while carrying out tasks                                                        |
| <b>Responsibility</b>                                   | A sense of responsibility for operational outcomes, decision-making, and the safety of others            |
| <b>Proactivity and the need to learn and develop</b>    | The need to constantly update knowledge, experiment, and develop professional skills                     |

# ***IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH***

Combat experience and the specifics of UAV operators' work may affect their mental health even during active service. Based on respondents' stories, we identified several key features of this military occupation.

## ***Working through a screen***

Operating through a screen or FPV goggles is an important characteristic of UAV operators' work, and their key distinction from other specialities. Regardless of the specific equipment used, this means that the operator is physically distanced from the enemy or the target. Instead of engaging the enemy directly with small arms while observing them through a sight, the operator controls the UAV remotely and monitors the situation through the video feed transmitted by the camera.

We hypothesised that this mode of warfare might affect their sense of reality and overall perception of combat operations and their involvement in them. At the beginning of the study, based on international research and discussions, we assumed that physical distance from the enemy and interaction through a screen might weaken the immediacy of the experience of striking a target — operators might perceive the destruction

of the opponent as less real<sup>57, 58</sup>. In addition, we hypothesised that continuous work with video footage, which visually resembles the experience of playing computer or video games, might reinforce this effect and even provide a sense of derealisation. For this reason, one of the objectives of the study was to determine whether UAV operators do, in fact, experience combat as less real than service members of other specialities.

However, interviews with our respondents revealed that despite constantly operating through a screen, UAV operators, particularly those executing strike missions, retained a sense of the reality of combat operations and their involvement in them. Observing the battlefield or conducting combat through a camera feed did not result in a loss of awareness of what was happening.

When asked directly whether striking a target resembled a computer game, veterans replied that they had not noticed any such similarity. On the contrary, they emphasised that they were fully aware of the reality of the events and the consequences of their actions.

*"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. It's not like you*

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<sup>57</sup> Enemark, C. (2019). Drones, risk, and moral injury. *Critical Military Studies*, 5(2), 150–167. [doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2017.1384979](https://doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2017.1384979)

<sup>58</sup> War at the office, dinner with the kids: The new battlefield is putting ethics to the test (29 September 2019). ABC News. [abc.net.au/news/2019-09-29/unmanned-combat-drone-pilots-moral-injury-warfare-dissonance/115540](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-09-29/unmanned-combat-drone-pilots-moral-injury-warfare-dissonance/115540)

*suddenly appear somewhere else. You feel yourself differently there, like you are already in another area. Then you go out, perhaps to the toilet, and you see this EPT [electric power transmission] on the horizon where the drone had just flown. You think, 'Wow, that's quite far.' But you realise that it isn't that far away. In fact, it appears that it's all right here. There is no sense that this is some entirely different thing. Instead, your senses are more vivid. You're flying; you see nature, branches, and trees. You're focused, but you start noticing every single tiny detail."*

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

Those respondents who mentioned computer games referred only to the similarities in visual imagery and drew analogies to images familiar to them from video games.

*"I suppose so, as I mentioned, the main objective in that game was to destroy your opponent, and it's the same here. There's much more at stake because this is an enemy who has come here and who is trying to kill you. It's the same in a computer game. The opponent running towards you wants to destroy you. It's the same in this war.*

*You go onto the battlefield, and an opponent is trying to kill you, too. In that case, you mobilise all your strength and try to counterattack to prevent that from happening."*

*Veteran, 34 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

In other words, distancing from reality or an altered perception of combat operations that might have been caused by performing tasks through a screen was not found to be a feature of UAV operators' work — it occurred only occasionally. The hypothesis that UAV operators perceive drone piloting in real combat by analogy with video games was also not supported.

Despite visual similarities of certain elements of the imagery, veterans described the experience of combat operations as unquestionably real.

Despite operating through a screen, constant communication between UAV operators and their brothers- and sisters-in-arms may explain their sustained sense of reality. Regular contact, particularly via radio, provides them with a “window” into the lives of brothers- and sisters-in-arms from other military branches, into their combat missions, and into the consequences of battle for others, especially the infantry.

Although UAV operators are physically distant from the battlefield and work through a screen, their constant interaction with other service members may reinforce their awareness of the real consequences of combat and their role in it.

*“It felt real because... It wasn’t just about the screen. We shared a radio channel with the infantry, other teams, mortar teams, etc. We heard everything over the radio, including any action, casualties, or enemy assault. Some guys had served in the infantry before transferring to UAV units, so they got it. They didn’t need any additional motivation. They knew what it was like and that the priority was to help whoever was closest. Others enlisted directly in UAV units, and this shared radio contact with the infantry was crucial because it kept them grounded.*

*Someone could get used to being in a basement where it was relatively warm and comfortable — you could walk around without body armour and so on. The screams, injuries, and news of the fallen reinforced the reality of combat, even for those who had become used to it. Even through the screen, it all felt real because it wasn’t just a picture.”*

*Veteran, 25 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Several respondents noted that working through a screen not only failed to distance them from combat operations, but in some cases even intensified the psychological burden. One veteran shared that he felt completely immersed in what was happening on the screen, so it did not create emotional distance from combat, it heightened his sense of presence.

*"No, it felt like you were inside it. Not like you were just sitting behind a screen; you were inside it. I don't know... It's like tunnel vision: you see nothing but the screen, and that is your world. In fact, wherever you turn the drone, that's where you're looking. Wherever you want your head to turn, that's where the drone is looking."*

*Veteran, 36 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

For another respondent, a psychologically and emotionally challenging aspect of working through a screen was witnessing the destruction of Ukrainian defensive positions, buildings, and cities — sights he would hardly have seen with his own eyes had it not been for his work as a UAV operator.

*"You're flying around and looking at this beautiful land being destroyed. Unfortunately... That's the downside: you see all those tree lines and all those towns being simply wiped out. That was difficult to see."*

*Veteran, 34 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

## **Strike missions**

This study focuses on UAV operators who carried out strike missions. Their experience potentially differs most from that of other UAV operators, as it involves direct destruction of the enemy. To better understand whether this experience affects

well-being, particularly mental health, we also conducted separate interviews with veterans who had served as UAV operators but performed other types of missions and had no experience conducting direct strikes.

Based on these in-depth interviews, it cannot be said that engaging enemy targets was a factor that significantly affected UAV operators' mental health or psycho-emotional well-being, particularly in a negative sense. On the contrary, some respondents without such experience noted that, during their missions, they regretted being unable to strike the enemy in addition to conducting surveillance or reconnaissance.

Although working through a screen mostly did not affect these respondents' perception of reality, it could give rise to feelings of powerlessness, helplessness, and an additional burden of responsibility. While performing reconnaissance or surveillance missions, operators often witnessed combat, but had no way of influencing its course. In such cases, they could see their fellow infantrymen and infantrywomen in difficult circumstances — including being wounded, surrounded, or under fire, — and were unable to help them.

*"Reconnaissance work was quite limited, and those guys I did reconnaissance with all wanted to train on FPV drones to be strike operators and make a tangible contribution."*

*Veteran, 40 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Respondents identified the inability to take action or a lack of direct results from their work, in particular when they were not performing strike missions, as one of the most difficult aspects of operating drones and a significant psychological challenge. This finding echoes international research, which similarly identifies feelings of powerlessness arising from the inability to assist the people

seen through the screen<sup>59</sup> as one of the most challenging aspects of a UAV operator's work.

For the respondents in our study, this was most evident when escorting assault groups to combat positions, or during their evacuation. In such situations, operators could see that something was going wrong, but had no way to directly prevent the injury or death of their brothers and sisters-in-arms. A similar psychological burden may also be characteristic of other military specialities whose duties are not directly related to strike missions. Over time, such experiences may contribute to higher levels of latent PTSD, manifest as survivor's guilt, and result in depression.

*"Supporting assault groups. That was the hardest part... You know every one of the guys you're guiding; you live alongside them. Their lives depend on you, 100% on you. And... if you miss someone... there are moments when they move through shelled tree lines, where the cover is already sparse, and everything is visible.*

*They pass through a green area sometimes and... I told the guys many times that you only notice movement. Even if someone is just sitting in the tree line instead of a dugout, if they're not moving... I won't see them. And... the lives of the assault group depend 100% on the UAV operator."*

*Veteran, 37 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Respondents described the search for fallen warriors as a distinct and psychologically demanding type of mission. Such flights often involved not only locating bodies, but also helping to identify them, making this one of the most emotionally challenging experiences of their service.

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<sup>59</sup> Molenkamp, A., Weerdesteijn, M., & Smeulders, A. (2025). A Playstation mentality to killing? Adverse psychological consequences in drone pilots and the stigmatization thereof in the military. *Armed Forces & Society*, 51(3), 840–859. [doi.org/10.1177/0095327X241236221](https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X241236221)

*"Psychologically, the thing that affected me the most was... I flew a lot... Searching for our fallen, trying to identify who it was, 'Go on, try flying lower, let's have a closer look.' F\*\*\* [damn it — editor's note], I know, damn, it's him, f\*\*\*ing hell [for goodness' sake — editor's note]."*

*Veteran, 30 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

The nature of the work itself may explain the absence of a substantial difference between UAV operators with and without experience of striking the enemy. Even if an operator does not directly strike a target, they may still witness strikes and their consequences. Therefore, operators who did not carry out strikes could see the bodies of the enemy or fallen brothers- and sisters-in-arms.

Prior combat experience sometimes influenced how non-strike operator missions were perceived. In particular, some respondents who had served in the infantry before becoming UAV operators described reconnaissance and surveillance missions as "boring".

They attributed this perception to the lower adrenaline levels and the more measured pace of the work, compared with infantry service.

*"You sit behind a screen, launch a drone, and kill many times more enemies than you ever did as an infantryman. In fact, more than during my entire previous service, which lasted over two years. It's effective work. You cannot help but find it satisfying. Of course, I did miss the adrenaline, the kind of action, as people like to say. Although there was enough of that whenever... Well, when they discovered our position and started shelling us, then there was plenty of it. Or when we had to carry out reconnaissance of another position, or things like that, it made up for it to some extent."*

*Veteran, 25 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

In contrast, other respondents with prior infantry experience were impressed by the efficiency of UAV operations. According to one of them, working with drones felt “like magic,” given their efficiency, their ability to achieve significant results, and their capacity to save the lives of brothers- and sisters-in-arms.

*“At first, it all felt like magic to me. Back in the ATO, I had a pair of binoculars and a machine gun, and nothing else. Something is flying around, and Delta<sup>60</sup> is telling and showing you something — so much information. Just take it and do it. Nothing more is expected of you. It feels incredible to know that no one has to risk anything.”*

*Veteran, 31 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

**We also identified two types of responses to successful target engagement among respondents:**

### **1. Positive emotions, joy, or an adrenaline rush**

Respondents reported that, following a successful strike, they could experience positive emotions or even “euphoria,” as they described it themselves. They associated these feelings not only with the strike itself, but also with the awareness that completing the mission and eliminating the enemy reduces the risks faced by Ukrainian warriors and helps save the lives of their brothers- and sisters-in-arms. For some respondents, these emotions were also accompanied by a sense of retribution for Russia’s aggression and killings.

### **2. Neutral emotions associated with a job well done**

For some respondents, their emotions and feelings following successful strikes changed over time, becoming less intense as combat missions gradually turned into a routine part of their work. This routinisation was more common among veterans with

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<sup>60</sup> Delta is a national military ecosystem that integrates data from various sources (satellites, radars, UAVs, or chatbots) and displays it on a digital map in real time, helping to visualise the battlefield and coordinate strikes against the enemy.

extensive experience performing strike missions. One respondent described this transformation as a gradual shift, from carrying out strikes with anger and excitement to indifference or an almost complete absence of emotion in response to successful outcomes.

*"I felt different things at different periods. There was a period when... I killed them with anger — why did they come here? There was a time of excitement, when you woke up and thought: I'm not having my coffee until I kill a bastard [the enemy — editor's note]. So, straight to the controller, flew the mission, killed the enemy, and only then did I have my coffee. Apathy... It all turned into just... work, that's all."*

*Veteran, 35 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

It is important to note that, although emotional reactions changed over time, the perception of a strike as a well-executed combat mission remained unchanged. Even when positive emotions became less intense or gave way to a routine attitude towards the work, respondents continued to consider successful target engagement as an indicator of effective performance of their duties.

## ***Risks of moral injury***

Although most veterans did not identify performing strike missions against the enemy as one of the main difficulties of this speciality, combat operations were nevertheless a source of profound moral distress for some. Such distress could arise both from targeting and witnessing its consequences, as well as from situations requiring difficult decisions about the use of force. Such experiences can lead to moral injury.

Moral injury — the distressing psychological, behavioural, social, and sometimes spiritual aftermath of exposure to actions, inaction, witnessing, or experiencing events that go against an individual's

moral beliefs, values, or notions of right and wrong<sup>61, 62</sup>. In the context of UAV operations, such distress could arise as a reaction to taking another person's life. Although this involves the elimination of the enemy, and psychological mechanisms help distance a person from this experience, the act of taking a human life, is, for most people, neither a normal nor a logical action. Findings from international empirical research also suggest that people, are not, in general, highly inclined to violence and share a normative aversion to it<sup>63</sup>.

### **Symptoms of moral injury may include:**

- **emotional** — feelings of guilt, shame, anger, sadness, anxiety, fear, disgust, self-blame, emotional numbness, and hopelessness;
- **cognitive** — negative beliefs about oneself, loss of trust in people or institutions, self-condemnation, difficulties with self-forgiveness, disruption of moral beliefs, intrusive thoughts about the event, and identity crisis;
- **behavioural** — social avoidance, isolation, self-harming behaviour, suicidal thoughts or attempts, substance misuse, self-sabotage, and aggression;
- **social** — alienation from others, difficulties in close relationships, loss of a sense of belonging, interpersonal conflict, and social isolation;
- **spiritual/existential** — loss of meaning in life, spiritual crisis, loss or rethinking of faith, existential doubt, a sense of moral brokenness, and difficulty forgiving;

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<sup>61</sup> U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for PTSD. Moral injury. [ptsd.va.gov/professional/treat/cooccurring/moral\\_injury.asp](https://ptsd.va.gov/professional/treat/cooccurring/moral_injury.asp)

<sup>62</sup> Griffin, B. J., Purcell, N., Burkman, K., Litz, B. T., Bryan, C. J., Schmitz, M., Villierme, C., Walsh, J., & Maguen, S. (2019). Moral injury: An integrative review. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 32(3), 350–362. [doi.org/10.1002/jts.22362](https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.22362)

<sup>63</sup> Malešević, S. (2010). *The sociology of war and violence*. Cambridge University Press. [doi.org/10.1017/CBO97805117777335](https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO97805117777335)

- **physical** — sleep disturbances, chronic fatigue, somatic complaints, physical tension, and other stress-related physical symptoms.

The presence of, or risk of, moral injury may affect veterans' returning to civilian life<sup>64</sup>.

Respondents described these experiences in different ways. For some, the deaths of brothers- and sisters-in-arms were the most difficult experience. At the same time, some veterans noted that it was psychologically challenging not only to see the bodies of fallen Ukrainian service members and enemy combatants, but also to live through the experience of striking targets themselves. One respondent explained that, during such missions, he constantly drew parallels with Ukrainian troops, meaning any death triggered thoughts that the same could happen to them. As a result, every strike mission and every encounter with dead bodies was psychologically and emotionally challenging and could potentially cause moral injury.

*"To be honest, I'm against war. I never wanted to kill anyone, but... that is how life turned out."*

*Veteran, 47 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

*"I went to defend my home — for me, it meant destroying the enemy. Roughly speaking, I went to kill. I would never have said that in civilian life. However, when an enemy comes to my country with weapons, shoots at unarmed people, and tries to seize territory that is ours, then I want to kill him."*

*Veteran, 25 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

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<sup>64</sup> Topçu, F., & Dinç, M. (2025). Symptoms of moral injury from a psychological perspective: A systematic review. *Psikiyatride Güncel Yaklaşımlar-Current Approaches in Psychiatry*, 17(4), 760–772. [doi.org/10.18863/pgy.1590616](https://doi.org/10.18863/pgy.1590616)

In addition to the experience of targeting the enemy, UAV operators could face situations in which civilians were present within the combat area. In such cases, they had to decide whether to strike, weighing the risk of harming civilians. These situations were not uncommon among respondents of the study, and were closely linked to issues of moral trauma and its impact on mental health. It was often in such situations that the mechanism of authorisation became most evident. Many respondents noted that decisions regarding such strikes were typically not made by individual operators, but collectively, at the level of the unit, squad, brigade, or another level within the military structure.

In particular, respondents mentioned the rule prohibiting strikes if civilians were within the target area. This rule was established by the command and justified by the need to comply with international humanitarian law. According to respondents, it was not only orders that played an important role in making such decisions, but also humanitarian considerations. They viewed the determination to avoid harming civilians as one of the fundamental differences between Ukrainian forces and the enemy.

*"There were times when they used them as a human shield. For example, ... They were sheltering in a basement while the enemy was in the building. We couldn't strike. The Russians deliberately used them as a human shield, but we still couldn't strike. Whereas the artillery couldn't hit there, drone drops were technically possible. But we didn't because we could have harmed the civilians. We're still human beings, unlike the enemy."*

*Veteran, 25 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

There were also cases when strikes went ahead regardless of the presence of civilians in the target area because, as one participant explained, “the brigade’s mission is to protect its infantry.” Respondents also argued that areas where the military operates are already dangerous for civilians, and civilians assume responsibility for that risk if they do not evacuate.

## ***Psychological adaptation strategies***

Engaging the enemy during combat missions is a general aspect of military service and participation in hostilities. Accordingly, the effects of this experience on mental health and psycho-emotional well-being are not unique to UAV operators alone. However, based on the experiences of UAV operators in this study, **we identified several responses** that may arise due to participating in strike missions and effectively serve as forms of psychological self-protection.

### **1. Emotional distancing**

This may represent a psychological defence mechanism that protects individuals from a certain difficult experience — in this case, engagement<sup>65</sup>. This was a psycho-emotionally challenging experience for some veterans, even though it involved engaging the enemy, so emotional distancing helped reduce its emotional impact.

Among UAV operators, such distancing may develop more easily than among warriors of other military occupations owing to the nature of operating through a screen. On the one hand, while performing their duties, UAV operators remain cognitively connected to reality despite operating through a screen. On the other hand, they may become emotionally detached from that reality, creating psychological distance as an unconscious self-protective mechanism. One respondent who described

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<sup>65</sup> Costa, R. M. (2020). Dissociation (Defense Mechanism). Encyclopedia of Personality and Individual Differences, 1165–1167. [doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-24612-3\\_1375](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-24612-3_1375)

experiencing a sense of detachment from reality noted that this “derealisation” helped him psychologically cope with the tasks he performed and the realities of war. Such a perception enabled him to distance himself from these difficult experiences, avoid becoming emotionally involved, and refrain from overthinking them.

*“That’s the only way I could perceive it [as something unreal]. If I’d taken it all personally, I’d have lost my mind by now and wouldn’t be sitting in this room. I’d be in one with padded walls and my arms strapped down. So I always kept an emotional distance from everything and never internalised it. It was just another tick in a report — target completed. If it’s PS [personnel], then it’s PS. If it’s an LMV [light motor vehicle], then it’s an LMV. If it’s equipment, then it’s equipment. KIA, then KIA. WIA, then WIA. That was it. We recorded it, moved on, and carried on. They are enemies who came to our country to kill us. So what is there to talk about?”*

*Veteran, 38 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Another respondent with prior infantry experience noted that engaging the enemy with a drone felt psychologically easier than doing so directly with small arms. So, in this case, distancing functions as a psychological adaptation strategy in both physical and psychological terms.

*“Killing someone yourself with small arms is one thing: you see the person, you’re shaking, you’re much more frightened. It’s different here [with UAVs]. It doesn’t feel the same... Some people even enjoy this game... I wouldn’t say I liked it very much, but some did.”*

*Veteran, 47 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Emotional distancing was also reflected in changes in the perception of the enemy. One respondent noted that he no longer perceived them as people like himself.

*"Well, you get used to it. You don't perceive them as human beings like you. Maybe that's my... defence mechanism, but you don't perceive them as being like you. That's it."*

*Veteran, 30 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

A shift in focus toward professionalising the strike as a skill is another manifestation of emotional distancing during strike missions. To perform missions successfully, UAV operators must have the relevant skills and experience. One respondent described perceiving this process as a kind of "gamification": he tried striking with different types of weapons and targeting the enemy in areas of varying difficulty. In this way, he developed his professional mastery and his reputation as a successful combat UAV operator. This approach may help create a certain emotional distance from the act of striking, and shift the focus from its psychological consequences to the purely professional skills acquired through performing these tasks.

## **2. Emotional numbing**

The second reaction to the experience of destroying the enemy can be **emotional numbing**, in which feelings and reflection become blunted or completely absent. This may arise due to the high physical and cognitive workload of warriors, as time and energy available, particularly for reflecting on the experience gained or specific events, are significantly limited.

*"I've felt this for a long time that, as the lads say, this line between humanity and cruelty had been blurred, if that's the right way to put it. Most likely, by ignoring that, maybe the body is already trying so hard to get rid of those thoughts about the war, about what is happening, about all that cruelty, that it doesn't evoke any emotions; they are just not there, that's it."*

*Veteran, 27 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Such a psycho-emotional reaction may arise not only in response to the experience of striking the enemy. Based on the experiences of our respondents, it also arose in relation to witnessing the deaths of Ukrainian service members, including via a UAV screen.

*"There were a few situations when I saw the deaths of our lads on my monitor, through my camera, when seven enemy FPVs tore them apart at a time, but there was nothing I could do. What state of mind do you mean? I don't know, probably none. Just... No, I can't explain it, maybe just indifferent. If you think too much about every single brother-in-arms, every service member, I think you lose your mind quickly"<sup>66</sup>.*

*Veteran, 38 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

### **3. Routinisation of work and dehumanisation of the enemy**

Another way of processing the difficult experience encountered by warriors in combat may be the **routinisation of work and the dehumanisation of the enemy**.

*"The perception of death in general, most likely specifically the enemy's death, is the only thing that has probably changed. Because it has become routine. You could take out three or four in a single day... Like, there was a person, and you destroyed them, you killed them, you dropped a munition, you see the body and the muscles being torn apart, you see these heavy streams of blood – in general, this entire process is what any operator working either with drone drops or strike UAVs encounters. Of course, something shifts in your head. You start to perceive things differently.*

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<sup>66</sup> Translated from the original Russian, «Были ситуации, и немало, когда я в свой монитор, в свою же камеру видел и гибель наших хлопцев, када их вражеские FPV-шки разбирали по семь штук, но сделать ничего невозможно было. Какое состояние, вы имеете в виду? Да не знаю, наверно, никакое. Просто... Ну нет, я не могу объяснить, возможно, просто безразличное. Потому что если слишком за каждого своего побратима, бойца, думаю, что крыша съедет быстро очень».

*It's one thing to think about how you are preparing for the army, how you will destroy the enemy, and it's another thing when you actually do it. Destroying the enemy becomes boring. It becomes a kind of routine and completely normal for you to destroy a so-called human being. That becomes normal for you. In that respect, yes. Otherwise, generally speaking, nothing has changed."*

*Veteran, 25 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

*"When you strike... I didn't feel anything at the time. When you see someone standing there, the first time... You've only just started as a pilot — you still have these moral ups and downs, and your feelings haven't been blunted or numbed yet. Then it's like that. Later, you simply carry out the task. I think that's normal. If someone were starting as a pilot, I think they'd go through the same thing. Finally, it all comes down to doing your job."*

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

In addition to these psychological reactions, respondents also described various ways of "unwinding" and distracting themselves in an effort to recover from the physical, cognitive, and psycho-emotional strain associated with combat missions. While methods of psychological relief are individual, we identify several restorative activities mentioned by the respondents. These are not forms of rest or emotional release specific to UAV operators, but they provide useful insight into what generally helps service members cope with difficulties and difficult emotions during service.

Study participants described various enjoyable ways to spend their time, including cooking, drinking alcohol, and riding motorbikes. Such practices helped them temporarily shift their focus away from work, difficulties, and negative emotions.

Some respondents named communication with brothers- and sisters-in-arms, commanders, or loved ones as a vital resource. This could manifest in spending time together and relaxing, as well as having the opportunity to discuss their state of mind, experiences, or everyday matters. For veterans who had families and loved ones in civilian life, relationships could increase psychological strain due to concerns about their families' safety and the inability to be physically present or provide help. At the same time, having loved ones could also help them cope with difficult situations and emotions through ongoing contact and communication.

#### Psychological adaptation strategies during service

| Strategy                                                     | Depression                                                                                                           |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Emotional distancing</b>                                  | Distancing from experiences caused by screen-based work, derealisation of the experience, and psychological distance |
| <b>Emotional numbing</b>                                     | The blunting of emotional reactions due to the intensity of events and overload                                      |
| <b>Routinisation of work and dehumanisation of the enemy</b> | Perceiving strikes and death as part of the daily work and the enemy primarily as a target                           |

# CONCLUSIONS

1. The pathway of UAV operators within the Armed Forces may depend on the timing and circumstances of enlistment. Owing to the rapid development of unmanned systems, veterans who joined the military after the start of the full-scale invasion had greater opportunities to choose their unit or position and to become UAV operators immediately. Veterans who had served since the ATO/JFO period or joined the Armed Forces in February or March 2022 had fewer opportunities to make such a choice.

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2. The following factors and strategies may facilitate UAV operators' adaptation to a new environment and their transition from a civilian to a military identity:
  - experience interacting with similar military or private institutions;
  - adaptability — a willingness to embrace change and new “rules of the game” quickly;
  - extensive civilian life experience;
  - purposefulness and self-awareness.

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3. The duties and work schedules of UAV operators may affect both physical and mental health during military service, particularly regarding sleep patterns and rest. Shift work involving fragmented sleep and the absence of a consistent

eight-hour rest period may adversely affect physical health, hinder adequate recovery, and impair well-being even after returning to civilian life.

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- 4.** One of the distinctive features of UAV operators' work is its multitasking nature and complexity. Multitasking means that, in practice, an operator may pilot a drone while also performing other duties, including technical, combat engineering, or driving tasks. The complexity of the role lies in UAV operators recording and transmitting information about the operational situation, communicating with various parties involved, providing logistical support, accompanying assault groups, directly striking enemy equipment and personnel, and conducting analytical work.
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- 5.** A significant feature of the UAV operator's role is that it may be perceived as less dangerous compared with some other combat specialities. In reality, UAV operators are high-priority targets for the enemy, so their work carries considerable risks to life and health. In particular, the level of danger increases significantly when moving between positions or recovering lost drones.
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- 6.** UAV operators often demonstrate a strong interest in, and a need for, learning and improving their knowledge and skills. This is driven both by the nature of their work and the rapid evolution of unmanned systems, which requires the constant updating of competencies.
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- 7.** Operating through a screen or FPV goggles is an important characteristic of UAV operators' work, and their key distinction

from other specialities. However, despite assumptions derived from international research suggesting that this mode of operation may weaken the sense of reality or alter perceptions of combat, our study does not support this hypothesis. For the majority of respondents, continuous work through a screen did not impair their sense of reality. Their sense of involvement in combat was maintained, in particular, through “grounding” — constant contact with reality and communication with command, brothers- and sisters-in-arms, including those from other branches of the armed forces.

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- 8.** Based on in-depth interviews, there are no grounds to conclude that the experience of striking the enemy alone had a substantial negative impact on UAV operators’ mental health or psycho-emotional well-being. Veterans viewed strike missions as successfully completed combat tasks because they believed such missions contributed to protecting the lives of their brothers- and sisters-in-arms. Positive emotions associated with successful strikes could change or diminish as operators gained experience and executed such missions over extended periods.
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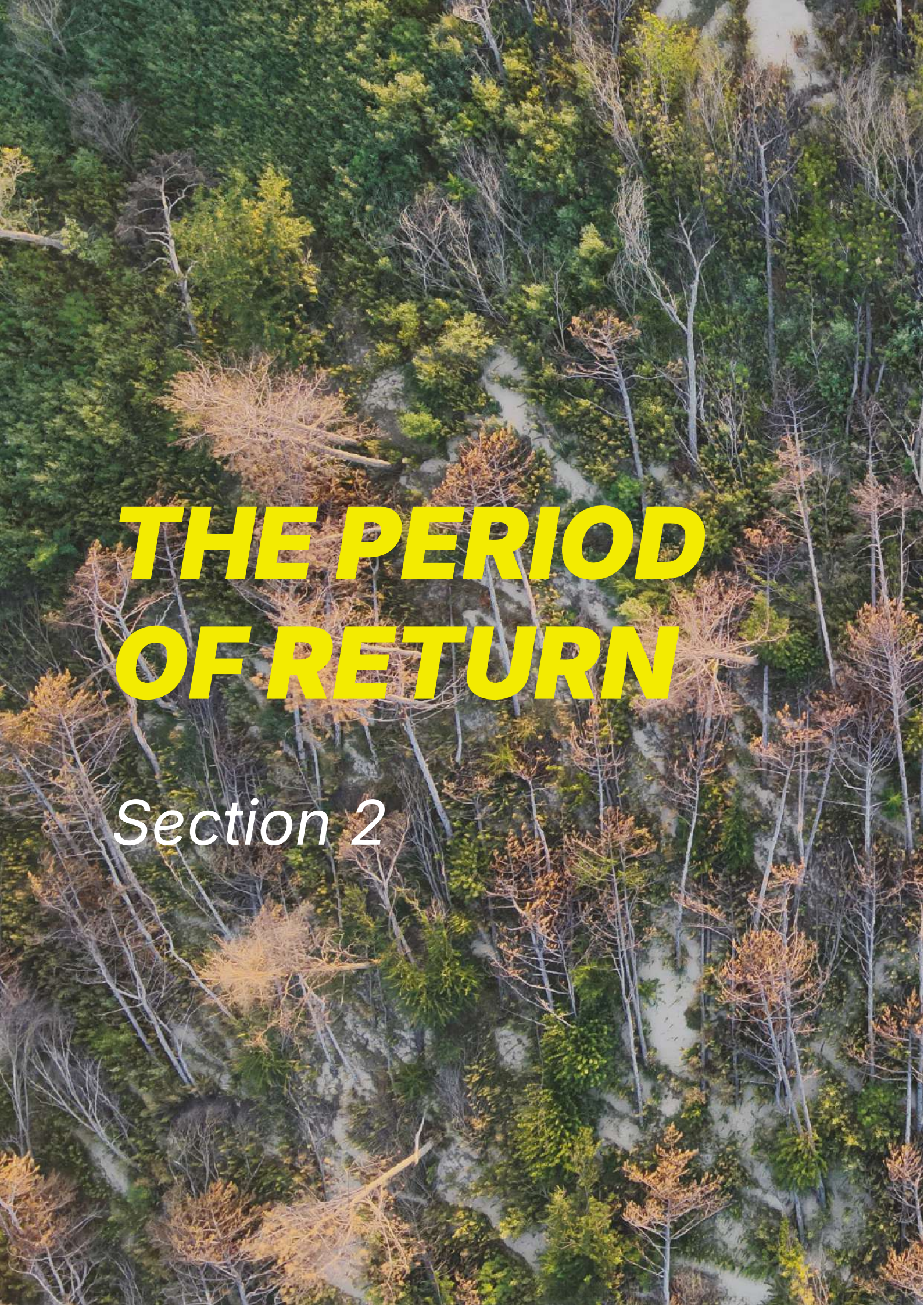
- 9.** Reconnaissance, surveillance, and support missions for assault teams can be mentally challenging for UAV operators. In such cases, there is no direct engagement with the enemy and no opportunity to strike them, which may lead to feelings of powerlessness or helplessness, particularly during crises.
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- 10.** Some UAV operators may show signs of moral injury 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 conflict with fundamental moral beliefs and values. It is precisely this contradiction that may contribute to the development of moral trauma.

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- 11.** One of the psychological strategies employed by UAV operators during service may involve distancing themselves from the reality of combat. This may include perceiving combat as something unreal, finding strikes psychologically easier due to physical distance from the enemy, and emotional distancing more generally. Other possible psychological responses include emotional numbing and a lack of reflection on combat tasks, their intensity, and consequences, as well as the routinisation of work and dehumanisation of the enemy.

An aerial photograph of a forest. The trees are mostly green, but there are several large, bare, brown trees scattered throughout, particularly in the lower half of the image. The ground is visible in some areas, showing a mix of light and dark patches.

# ***THE PERIOD OF RETURN***

*Section 2*



# ***INTRODUCTION***

In this chapter, we examine how UAV operators return to civilian life and analyse the preconditions for successful or unsuccessful adaptation developed while they are still serving.

In particular, we:

- outline key differences between the civilian environment and combat service, and explore how these differences affect the process of return, and what may serve as a precondition for successful adaptation to civilian life;
- analyse different trajectories of return and identify various pathways in the transition from a service member identity to a civilian identity;
- describe the strategies veterans use in the process of adaptation, and identify the potential risks associated with their use — an important consideration when preparing for a return to civilian life;
- identify factors that complicate or support the adaptation process, which is important for improving relevant support programmes for veterans during the transition and in civilian life;
- analyse how experience operating UAVs can influence opportunities for professional fulfilment after discharge from service.

# **THE BACKSTORY OF RETURN**

Before examining the direct experience of UAV operators returning to civilian life, it is important to determine whether there are any particular features among the changes that occurred during service, and that are linked to the specific nature of their activities.

We want to state at the outset that none of our informants identified any specific traits or problems faced specifically by UAV operators. Rather, we can speak of the impact of the war in general, and of variation linked to each person's individual characteristics.

*"There is no such clear distinction in terms of how someone behaves in civilian life, depending on the position I held, once we are talking about combat roles: whether someone is a UAV operator, an infantryman, a mortar operator, or in the navy... It simply depends... on what kind of person you were in civilian life, and the army, or rather the war, the war will... intensify it somehow. Everything you had in civilian life. It will simply intensify it!"*

*Veteran, 37 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

To better understand the backstory of the return to civilian life, we asked informants during the interviews to describe whether they had noticed any personal changes in themselves during service, compared with the way they had been in civilian life.

Unlike the traditional approach, in which researchers focus on what hinders the reintegration of veterans, we also sought to identify positive gains that support the process of return.

## ***War as a separate reality***

One of the changes described by the respondents was a shift in their perception of reality. During service, military reality becomes the primary environment for warriors, while civilian life is often perceived as distant and less relevant.

*"When you spend quite a long time at war, the war becomes your reality. I noticed that when you go to work, come home, and are at home on the weekends... Your life is still centred around your home, because work is something you go to. But there [at war], you live there. It is your reality, it is your home, it is your life. That's it."*

*Veteran, 40 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

## ***Weakening of social ties***

One of the most painful consequences of this rupture with civilian life may be the weakening of emotional ties, even with one's closest circle. Support from loved ones is traditionally seen as an important factor contributing to return. However, prolonged time spent in the military environment is often accompanied by a sense of distance from people who remain in civilian life. As one respondent noted:

*"You distance yourself from the outside world. I mean civilian life, not military service."*

*Veteran, 25 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

This distancing can also affect the closest relationships. Constant focus on service and the need to live according to the logic of war often make it difficult to maintain emotional closeness with loved ones, including a partner:

*"I was less and less involved in the relationship and more and more involved in the war. The war came first for quite a long time. Of course, every wife wants to have an important place in her husband's life. To be honest, I had no idea how to place her there."*

*Veteran, 31 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Problems in personal life may also accumulate and be put off until later. Some of our respondents recalled that they had hoped to return to these issues after completing their service, but such postponement could prove costly:

*"I kept putting everything off, thinking that I would resign, come back from the war, and then we would start putting our family life back together. Well, I didn't make it in time."*

*Veteran, 32 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Thus, service members' relationships with loved ones may not only support their resilience, but also potentially create future difficulties during adaptation, particularly because of ruptures that may occur either during service or after their return<sup>67</sup>.

The success of the return largely depends on how much of one's social network from civilian life can be preserved during service. When a person enlists, they move from a broad world of diverse social connections into a much narrower circle of interactions with those immediately around them, under extreme conditions. Since

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<sup>67</sup> Why the number of divorces in Ukraine is catching up with marriages (5 February 2025). BBC News Ukraine. In the world of war, the civilian world survives only in a very limited form. [nv.ua/ukr/socium/kilkist-rozluchen-v-ukrajini-zroslo-prichini-50487549.html](https://www.bbc.com/news/ukraine-67487549)

civilian life remains outside the realities of service, this network of social ties shrinks significantly.

In the world of war, the civilian world survives only in a limited form. This presents another significant challenge for return, because it is easier and safer for some veterans to remain in a limited version of the civilian world, one based on the social interactions they maintained while in service.

*"I became an asocial person. I don't want to communicate with anyone except my family and those who supported me, and that's it... In my own little world. I built it, more or less, over four years. Now I maintain it."*

*Veteran, 35 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

## **Behavioural and psychological changes**

In addition to changes in social networks, military experience may lead to behavioural transformations that manifest differently depending on a person's individual traits. In particular, some informants noted that they came to **crave constant intense emotions, risk, and stress** during military service.

*"I feel good only when I'm in some kind of stressful situation. When something is threatening me; I have deadlines, we've had an argument, and then I've had my little cortisol hit. I feel collected, focused, and able to work."*

*Veteran, 27 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Some respondents also mentioned losing the ability to act on their own discretion. Prolonged time spent in an executing role, with the need to constantly follow orders, often without any involvement

in decision-making, may lead to a **temporary loss of the sense of control over one's own life**.

*"The habit of waiting for a command. I can't plan what I should do. I mean, I can plan, but... I need a clear plan, clear tasks. There is no clear understanding of what the hell I'm supposed to do, and that's it. There, I got used to a task coming in and just delivering. But here, no one gives you anything..."*

*Veteran, 35 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

This is also linked to the problem of the **planning horizon**. Although war generally creates a situation of uncertainty, this uncertainty operates on a much shorter horizon than in civilian life. Specific combat missions may arise suddenly, and the system assumes that a person must be ready for any order at any moment. Restoring the ability to plan several steps ahead becomes one of the practical challenges on the journey of return.

*"I still can't get used to the fact that now I can plan something for a certain period of time. Not for the next day, but at least for a week ahead. Because the habits are still there, that... Tomorrow everything may change, and now you are telling me to plan something a week in advance."*

*Veteran, 25 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

## **Personal qualities**

Alongside the difficulties, study participants also noted significant positive gains. These included self-confidence, a sense of responsibility, balanced decision-making, seriousness, resilience, the ability to assess situations, emotional control, discipline, and endurance. Overall, service helped them accumulate life experience

and develop new practical skills. At the same time, not everything acquired during service can be transferred into civilian life. As one respondent noted:

*"In the army, I had this kind of openness, quite direct, sometimes sharp and rough, and it does not work in the civilian world."*

*Veteran, 37 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

## Shifts in values

The process of return and adaptation is largely tied to a person's value system. For those who value their own freedom, returning to civilian life may be perceived as an extraordinary advantage — the very possibility of having one's own plans and acting independently of orders compensates for any difficulties.

*"What challenges might one face in civilian life? I am my own commander: no one tells me what to do; I can go wherever I want, and I can do what I want. It is great. A person who has not been in the troop, in the army, does not understand this, where, even though we had some degree of freedom... you understand that you simply cannot manage your own time, yourself, and that is oppressive."*

*Veteran, 38 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Overall, in the interviews, we also identified shifts in values as an important element in the transformation of service members' personalities. Above all, this concerns the **strengthening of the value placed on human life**, which moves to the centre of the value system. Positive attitudes develop around it, supporting the process of return and adaptation, including a willingness to face and overcome difficulties.

*"I reconsidered my views on life. After all, life is quite a valuable thing. No matter how hard it is, you can overcome anything. When there is no life, that is the end."*

*Veteran, 42 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

An important consequence of this centring is the desire to rethink one's own priorities and determine a direction for self-realisation after return. This can be a painful process: what gave life meaning before the war often loses its significance.

*"My priority used to be my professional sport. And now I understand there are many more interesting and emotional things, whereas that barbell used to take up all my time. And I understand that it was not quite what I needed."*

*Female veteran, 35 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Yet this very rupture can open up new horizons. A centring on the values of life, combined with the experience of living through war, gives rise to a desire not to waste one's time, to be useful, and to dedicate oneself to something truly important.

*"Memory is important to me. I realised that I do want to preserve the memory of the people who were killed. So I enrolled in the Faculty of History and will... describe the events of the full-scale invasion. That is probably my key goal in life, the one I want to achieve."*

*Veteran, 25 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

It is worth noting that trajectories of value change are not uniform: their direction depends on a person's overall system of values. If priorities are aligned, a person does not experience a contradiction between the value of life and the value of patriotism — the priority may not be the preservation of one's own life, but the preservation of Ukraine; what

becomes important is not only the length of a life, but also the dignity with which it is lived.

*"You only have one life, so live it as a decent person."*

*Veteran, 25 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

*"Life and honour, the preservation of dignity, that is the most important thing."*

*Veteran, 37 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

According to the conceptual framework of well-being, one of its main indicators is life satisfaction. In this dimension, specific difficulties may arise for veterans who returned to civilian life despite their own desire to continue serving. Sometimes such a decision is made because of family circumstances or a severe injury, and this may generate an internal conflict that continually fuels a sense of dissatisfaction.

*"I understand that I resigned, and that it was my conscious choice, but, you know, there are two halves of me. One half is the conscious half, and the other is the one that cares about personal happiness. My personal happiness is in the next room right now. That is my wife, the person for whom I left the Armed Forces, because she was very worried about me, and I wanted to come back to her alive. And the other part of me understands that you are a citizen of your country and that the war is not over yet."*

*Veteran, 23 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

A conflict between the desire to continue serving and the need to be discharged may also manifest externally, as a sense of guilt toward those remaining in service. Respondents recalled that even

the simple choice to be discharged on legal grounds while the war was still ongoing felt internally contradictory to them, and that, as a result, the return may be accompanied by an emotional burden.

*"The feeling that I was leaving everyone to their fate.  
Yes, that's what I felt."*

*Veteran, 31 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

The conflict between a revision of value priorities and the desire to meet basic needs also warrants separate consideration. On the one hand, respondents stated in the interviews that material things were not important to them:

*"The war, direct participation in the war, changed my values in the sense that all these everyday things, everyday problems, money, and so on, all of that is ridiculous and unimportant."*

*Veteran, 37 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

On the other hand, the same respondent, when speaking about looking for work after discharge, admitted that money was not quite so "ridiculous and unimportant" after all.

*"I don't want to offend anyone, but for me, a salary less than 20,000 is volunteering. And that played a major role. I couldn't go anywhere. And I did go around, but again, the salary had to be 50–60 thousand, I think, and in the end I got somewhere around 30..."*

*Veteran, 37 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

This contradiction is explained by the contextual nature of such assessments. When veterans compare civilian everyday life with their combat experience, they may indeed perceive money as secondary to the value of life. This framing also persists throughout a long period of adaptation: sometimes, even after

returning, veterans continue for a long time to assess civilian problems the same way they did in the military environment during service.

*"After I returned to civilian life again, there was this understanding that civilians have these kinds of problems, like 'I was stuck in traffic', and you are like: 'Come on!' Because you understand the conditions the guys are in over there, and that the problems civilians have now are not important enough for your mood to be ruined because of them."*

*Veteran, 25 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

However, outside this context, when assessing veterans' needs, the key indicator remains the level of satisfaction recorded in quantitative studies. This data, in turn, shows that, among all the types of support veterans need, material<sup>68</sup> support is the most necessary.

At the same time, value changes that take place after service are not always directly reflected in the level of life satisfaction or in the list of current needs. They are manifested primarily in how veterans explain their own experiences, rethink their priorities, and build new life orientations. In this study, a recurring, cross-cutting theme across all the interviews was the special attitude towards brothers- and sisters-in-arms — people who shared a similar experience in the ranks and who, even after returning to civilian life, often remain the basis of a new social circle. This sentiment is rooted in a strengthened sense of trust, developed under conditions of existential threat.

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<sup>68</sup> Ministry of Veterans Affairs (2025). Portrait of a Veteran 2025. [veteranfund.com.ua/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Portret-veterana-2025.pdf](https://veteranfund.com.ua/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Portret-veterana-2025.pdf)

*"The value of trust lies in the moment of trust, because you enter an unfamiliar environment and you find yourself with people you do not know at all, but you need to trust them, because your life may depend on that trust."*

*Veteran, 34 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

It is on this foundation that bonds of particular strength grow. Brothers- and sisters-in-arms may become key figures for veterans in civilian life during the period of adaptation and return to civilian life, not least because it is through communication with them that military identity is maintained.

*"These people are number one in life. I say: 'Even parents, a loved one, move to the second place. Because they were there... in the hardest moments of your life. With you. This is family. This is number one. A brother-in-arms.'"*

*Veteran, 37 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Thus, the experience of service changes not only everyday practices and social ties, but also values, the way one interacts with the world, and one's self-perception. Summarising the respondents' experiences, the following changes affecting the process of return to civilian life can be identified.

## Changes affecting return from service

| Change                                                                                                                                                              | Manifestations                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>War as a separate reality</b>                                                                                                                                    | The military environment becomes the main space of life, while the civilian world becomes distant                                                                                                             |
| <b>Weakening of civilian social ties, distancing from loved ones, narrowing of the social circle</b>                                                                | The number of contacts with people from civilian life decreases, emotional involvement in partner and family relationships weakens, and only a narrow circle of people remains safe and understandable        |
| <b>Need for intense emotions</b>                                                                                                                                    | A habit of high-risk levels and intense experiences                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Temporary loss of the sense of control over your life</b>                                                                                                        | It may be difficult to act at your own discretion; an orientation towards following commands and assigned tasks is developed                                                                                  |
| <b>Short planning horizon</b>                                                                                                                                       | Difficulty planning the future and building long-term plans                                                                                                                                                   |
| <b>Personal qualities: confidence, balanced judgement, seriousness, resilience, the ability to assess situations and control emotions, discipline and endurance</b> | A stronger sense of your own capacity and competence develops; skills of organisation, endurance, and task completion are developed, along with the ability to act under conditions of uncertainty and stress |
| <b>Shifts in values</b>                                                                                                                                             | The value of life, freedom, dignity, and time is strengthened                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>New life priorities</b>                                                                                                                                          | A desire emerges to find meaning, be useful, and fulfil yourself                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>Strengthening the value of trust</b>                                                                                                                             | The significance of bonds between brothers- or sisters-in-arms increases                                                                                                                                      |

# ***CURRENT ASSESSMENT OF SATISFACTION WITH QUALITY OF LIFE***

Before the interviews, all participants completed the Ukrainian version of the World Health Organization Quality of Life Questionnaire, Brief Version (WHOQOL-BREF)<sup>69</sup>. The questionnaire assesses quality of life across four key domains:

- physical health: energy levels, pain, sleep, mobility, and the ability to perform daily tasks;
- psychological health: positive and negative feelings, self-esteem, memory, and concentration;
- social relationships: personal relationships, support from friends and family, and sexual life;
- social environment: safety, financial situation, housing conditions, and access to medical and social support.

Satisfaction is assessed using a scale that translates scores into corresponding levels of satisfaction.

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<sup>69</sup> World Health Organization. (1996). WHOQOL-BREF: Introduction, administration, scoring and generic version of the assessment: Field trial version. Geneva: World Health Organization.  
[who.int/publications/i/item/WHOQOL-BREF](http://who.int/publications/i/item/WHOQOL-BREF)

Quality of life scale  
Overall score from 0 to 100 points



*Scores are converted to a scale from 0 to 100 and aggregated into an overall indicator, represented by the total score across all domains.*

Most respondents rated their quality of life as high (11%) or above average (57%), while 32% rated it as average. No respondent selected the "below average" rating. These findings correspond closely with those obtained in previous studies<sup>70</sup>.



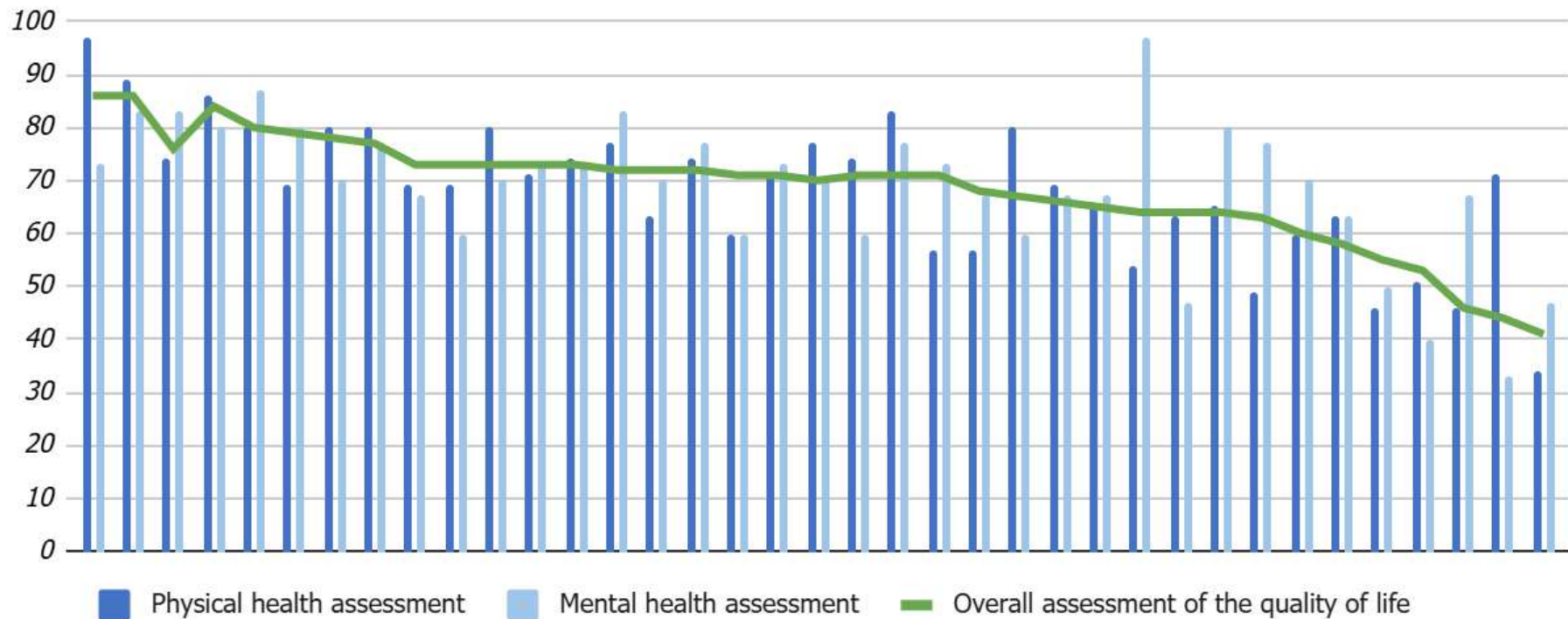
Overall quality of life satisfaction scale  
Overall score from 1 to 5 points



The overall level of satisfaction with quality of life among veterans was **3.6 points**, indicating it was above average.

The figures below present combined charts in which the green line represents data on overall satisfaction, while the bars show satisfaction ratings across the four measured domains.

<sup>70</sup> Stratcom UA. INVICTUS. (2025). Report on the results of a study into the impact of adaptive sports on the physical, psychological and social well-being of service members and veterans in Ukraine. [stratcomua.org/Content/CmsFile/ua/startpage\\_Report092025.pdf](https://stratcomua.org/Content/CmsFile/ua/startpage_Report092025.pdf)



*Fig. 1. Overall assessment of quality of life, physical and psychological health (for each respondent)*

The visualisation shows that a substantial imbalance between veterans' assessments of their physical and psychological health occurs only rarely. In cases where such an imbalance is observed, a higher level of quality-of-life satisfaction is usually associated with better psychological health. At the same time, an average level of satisfaction with quality of life is much more often associated with an imbalance in the areas of social support and social well-being.

We also found that a lack of social support is an important factor in reducing quality-of-life satisfaction. By contrast, a higher level of social support helps maintain satisfaction with quality of life at an “above average” level, even when social well-being is rated lower.

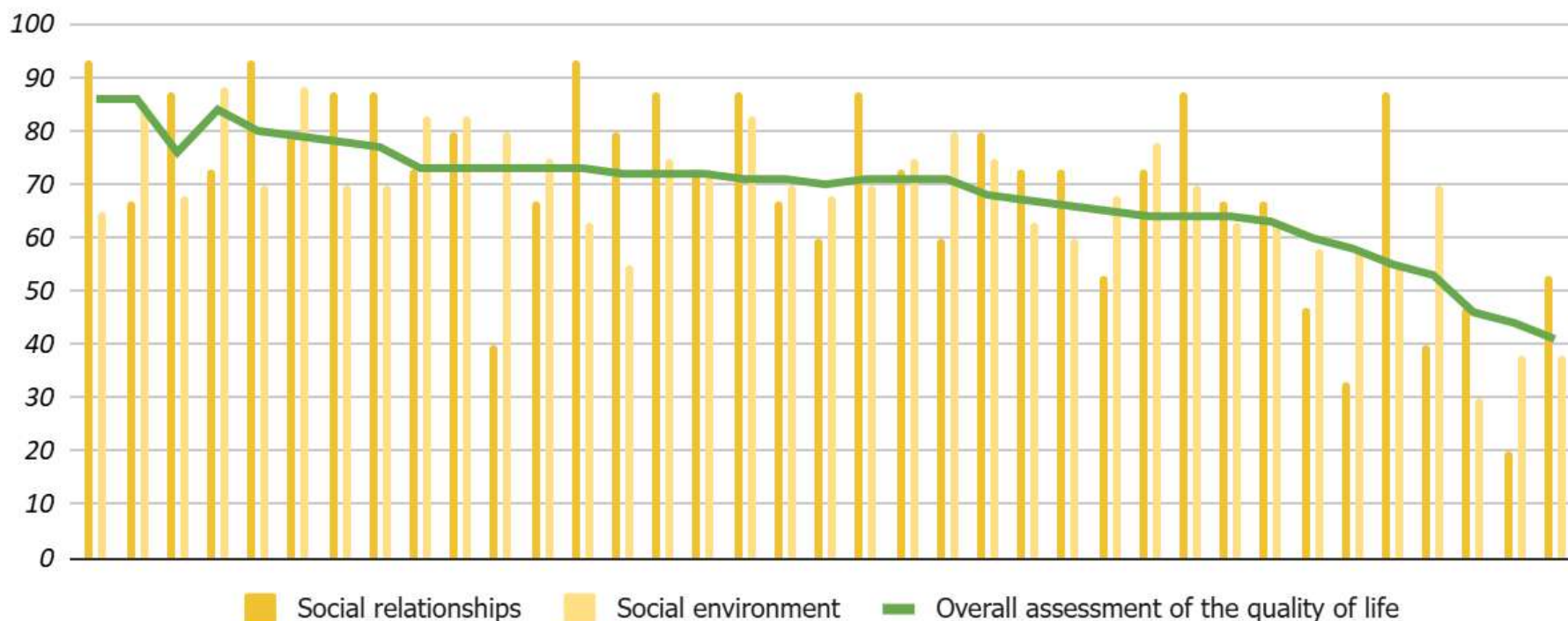


Fig. 2. Overall assessment of quality of life, social support and social well-being (for each respondent)

Thus, an assessment of satisfaction with quality of life does not in itself indicate critical difficulties with adaptation. An average score is more likely to suggest that respondents are undergoing a gradual process of adaptation to civilian life. At the same time, this result does not provide sufficient grounds for conclusions about the factors influencing the subjective perception of quality of life.

In particular, it does not explain why there is such a substantial difference in scores — amounting to almost 40 points — between those who are generally satisfied with their quality of life and those who rate it significantly lower. The indicator itself records the existence of this gap, but does not reveal the reasons behind it. An analysis of narratives helps answer this question, as it is in these narratives that the processes of adaptation to civilian life take on a tangible form. It is also important to understand that the preconditions for a successful or unsuccessful return are established even before a service member is discharged and becomes a veteran.

# RETURN

## Decision-making

The return to civilian life begins with the discharge from service and effectively occurs in two main ways:

1

Based on a conscious decision made in advance, when a person has a choice: to be discharged due to health, family circumstances or age, or to continue serving.

2

Suddenly, due to injury or changes in the eligibility criteria for service, based on which the military medical commission (MMC) declares the person unfit for service. Medical discharge is not necessarily initiated by the service member.

Among our respondents were veterans who, despite significant health problems, made every possible effort to continue serving and left the troop only when they had no other choice.

*"Even before I was discharged from the army, I dreamed of going back. But the doctors simply told me that they were discharging me, and that was that."*

*Veteran, 29 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

At the same time, the decision to leave service is not always related solely to health. Sometimes subjective factors become decisive. Veterans may continue serving for a long time despite health problems, but ultimately leave the ranks because of conflicts within the service, for example, when they are denied transfer to another unit, are denied opportunities for development or, conversely,

are overloaded and expected to do the impossible. One respondent summarised such situations succinctly:

*"I probably left for only one reason: our battalion commander. Everything comes down to the battalion commander, and he was, let's say, a very unpleasant person."*

*Veteran, 38 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

In addition to the two general ways of leaving service, we also distinguish between rational, emotional, and involuntary decisions. The most common shared motivation behind rational and emotional decisions was severe exhaustion and the need for a break, to "catch one's breath and then return with renewed strength".

However, regardless of whether the decision to leave service was voluntary or involuntary, the end of service was a traumatic event for most of our respondents. This trauma accompanying discharge may be rooted in a feeling of having been used. One respondent, who had initially been classified as fit for limited service following an amputation and was later declared completely unfit, commented on his discharge as follows:

*"I did not want to be discharged, but I agreed to it because there had been personnel changes in my unit, and the commander I had originally joined was no longer there. And so... how can I put it? They discharged me. I agreed to it... It felt as if I had simply been thrown away, as if I was no longer needed. That knocked me back for a while."*

*Veteran, 27 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Another possible source of trauma is the experience of guilt or of having failed to fulfil your duty to those who remain in the troop.

*"You have obligations to your brothers-in-arms, you have obligations as a commander, obligations to your soldiers. I did not want to leave because, with my presence, they also felt all right. But when I left, they started being pushed around a bit, and there are still two of them whom I have not yet placed properly. I still need to transfer two of them and get them settled before I can finally feel at peace."*

*Veteran, 29 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

The very moment of transition to civilian life may also be traumatic, as something that had been a person's everyday reality for a long time suddenly comes to an end. Through its clear structure and rules, military service shapes not only a person's way of life, but also a service member's identity — one from which it is difficult to distance oneself. After discharge, the person effectively finds themselves outside this system, even if their sense of belonging to it remains, while the behavioural patterns developed during service do not always correspond to the demands of civilian life. As a result, many veterans experience the loss of a familiar environment and must rebuild their life orientations.

For those whose discharge was preceded by injury and prolonged treatment, adaptation to a new status often takes place gradually. By contrast, service members who leave service directly and return to civilian life often describe the experience as crossing a distinct boundary. One informant described this state as follows:

*"It felt a bit like, suddenly, that was it. You had been doing and doing things, and then suddenly you were unemployed. That was the feeling. And what are you supposed to do with that?"*

*Veteran, 36 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

In fact, the moment of transition to civilian life marks the beginning of a complex journey of identity transformation, during which personal experiences create challenges that are no less significant,

and sometimes even greater, than external difficulties. The first of these is the desire to regain what has been lost, which emerges immediately and may persist for a long time.

*"I had only just received my discharge papers, and that was it; I was a civilian. I did not want to leave. It was pure nostalgia. As I was driving away, I wanted to turn around and go back."*

*Veteran, 26 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

## ***From service member to civilian: journeys of personal transformation***

Everyone discharged from service faces the need to accept and adapt to a new identity. **In this study, we identified three possible forms this transformation can take.**

### **1. The identity of a "service member on pause"**

The first form was common among respondents in our study, and will likely remain relevant for as long as the war continues. This circumstance largely defines the specific Ukrainian context of veterans' return to civilian life. This possibility of resuming service remains open to those whose health allows them it, including through membership in the operational military reserve. Adaptation to civilian life is therefore not the only possible future trajectory for them, but merely one of several. They may continue to consider rejoining the service even after having successfully returned to civilian life.

*"There is no satisfaction with life at all, to be honest. Things do not seem that bad or completely meaningless, but somehow... I have somewhere to live, a car, and a job, but none of it really means anything. It feels as though I simply need*

*to go back there and carry on doing what I was doing. I realised that I just want to go back, I want to return to the war. But I am not ready yet because of my physical limitations. To be honest, I doubt that anything in civilian work will interest me. I feel that I have already found myself in the troop, in all of that, in my specialism. That was the most comfortable environment for me."*

*Veteran, 27 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

For some, returning to service remains a backup option in case they are unable to find fulfillment in civilian life. For others, being in the civilian environment is only a temporary stage needed to recover their health before returning to the ranks. These respondents maintain contact with their brothers- and sisters-in-arms, consider units they would like to serve in, or, in their own words, plan to "simply go back to their own people". As long as the possibility of returning remains open, they perceive civilian life as an interim stage and associate their future primarily with military service. For them, it is not a completed stage of the past, but an anticipated part of the future.

Notably, some of these respondents do not regard the definitive end of the war as a realistic scenario. Instead, they expect a new escalation which, in their view, will bring them back to the troop regardless of their health.

*"I want to rehabilitate my leg and return to the army. I am not finding my place here at all. I am certain that even if I do not restore my leg, I will still fight, because I am convinced that at the end of 2026 or the beginning of 2027, there will be a full-scale Third World War, and we will have to fight anyway. Whether we like it or not. Or rather, no matter whether you can or cannot. So... even with this leg, I will go and fight."*

*Veteran, 37 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Having family obligations and responsibility for loved ones in civilian life does not rule out the desire to return to service. This is demonstrated, in particular, by the experience of one respondent — a mother of three who left her children in the care of their grandparents while serving. She clearly explains her desire to return to the ranks citing motives also characteristic of others who share this identity:

*"Let's face the truth. It is simpler there. It is difficult, there is death, but anyone will tell you that everything there is, you know, straightforward and focused on one task. You are sitting God knows where, everything that can possibly be fired is raining down on you, but you feel completely fulfilled, like, bloody hell, you are a hero."*

*Female veteran, 31 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

## **2. The identity of a "veteran"**

This second form of self-identification involves accepting a veteran identity after completing service. In this case, the person sees themselves as a former service member who continues to pursue personal fulfilment while living in a civilian environment.

**We identified several ways in which respondents understood this identity:**

- **A radical approach: a clear distinction between veterans and civilians**

For respondents who hold this position, military experience is so significant that it becomes the main point of reference in their interaction with society. They may place greater responsibility for establishing mutual understanding on civilians and expect society to recognise, support and take into account the specific nature of veterans' experience.

*"The problem between civilians and service members lies with civilians. So my failure to accept me is their problem, not mine. I am not reintegrating, and I do not intend to"<sup>71</sup>.*

*Veteran, 28 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

## ■ Reintegration in its classical form

This classical model of reintegration assumes that veterans recognise the need to adapt to civilian life, build their own community, support one another, and coexist with civilians<sup>72</sup>. This approach also assumes that a veteran fully transitions to a civilian identity over time. However, in the context of a prolonged war and ongoing hostilities, this scenario is not always possible.

*"I have not disengaged from veteran policy. I helped select veteran support specialists, joined the commission, even remotely, and was offered the position of head of the veteran policy department in the local administration. I have also outlined several projects that I am now implementing, and I provide support and advice on veterans' adaptation and social integration."*

*Veteran, 38 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

## 3. The identity of a "civilian"

This form of self-identification involves a person acknowledging their veteran experience while seeking to make their civilian identity the defining one. At the same time, they may choose not to disclose their veteran status. This way of understanding one's identity takes several forms.

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<sup>71</sup> The quote was translated from Russian: «Проблема гражданских и военных заключается в гражданских. Поэтому мое невосприятие меня, это их проблема, не моя. Не реинтегрируюсь и не собираюсь».

<sup>72</sup> Leal W. E., Tighe J. R. Reintegration struggles: How long after combat exposure does the risk of veteran arrest remain elevated? Criminal Justice and Behavior. 2018. Vol. 45, 9. 1321–1340.

First, it is characteristic of those who joined the military at a young age, before they had the opportunity to build an independent civilian life. Their personal identity was still developing and took shape during service. After discharge, the identity shaped in wartime experience must be reshaped into a civilian one.

In such cases, veteran identity may be perceived as something that complicates the pursuit of an individual path towards fulfilment in a civilian environment. An illustrative example is a respondent who enrolled in university after returning from service and is trying to distance himself from his veteran status.

*"It doesn't matter that I am a veteran. It plays no role now. Well, I understand that there may be certain preferential treatment: either people will pity me or, on the contrary, treat me differently. Who knows? I would rather remain incognito. It may make things easier, or perhaps not... But it is better to try to manage and cope on my own, without preferential treatment."*

*Veteran, 25 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

The second form of this self-identification is associated with concerns about negative reactions from others. Although quantitative studies show that 77% of Ukrainians believe that society respects veterans<sup>73</sup>, the experiences of some respondents indicate that they do not always feel this respect in everyday interactions.

*"I don't know how to talk to people and mention that I was a service member. Who knows how they will react? Some will be understanding, some respectful, while others will reject you. Some think you are mad. They look at you with this hostile stare."*

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<sup>73</sup> Ministry of Veterans Affairs (2025). Portrait of a Veteran 2025. [veteranfund.com.ua/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Portret-veterana-2025.pdf](https://veteranfund.com.ua/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Portret-veterana-2025.pdf)

*Reactions vary, but I still think it is better to tell them if they ask. If they don't, I would rather keep it to myself."*

*Veteran, 23 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Ideally, as a result of successful reintegration into civilian life, veterans should come to identify primarily as civilians. In other words, there should be a transition from military identity to a civilian one. At the same time, veteran identity does not disappear, but ceases to be the defining one. Once the war has ended and civilian life has resumed, civilian identity should become the primary identity even for those with combat experience.

One marker of this transition is a return to the traditional roles a person held before the war. When a veteran clearly defines themselves through these roles, this may indicate the restoration of civilian identity. For one respondent, such restoration primarily meant returning to the roles of husband, father, and head of the household.

*"Now you are not a warrior, not a defender. Now you are a husband and a father! And the head of the household. That's all!"*

*Veteran, 35 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

The respondent's other answers also point to the restoration of civilian-life practices. In this case, civilian identity is not merely declared but is also expressed through everyday actions and habits.

*"When I returned to civilian life, I don't know, it became a fixation of mine that everything had to be clean: clean dishes, clean floors, clean clothes. I really want to live like a civilian. To forget all the conditions in which I lived, slept and so on."*

*Veteran, 35 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Restoring a civilian identity takes time. Ultimately, however, distancing oneself from the experience of hostilities supports adaptation to civilian life. As one respondent noted:

*"I now see myself as a completely civilian person who does not care at all about what is happening at the front. At first, I did care, but now I don't. I think it is a kind of self-preservation mechanism: I have distanced myself from something I cannot influence."*

*Veteran, 27 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

A key condition for returning to civilian life is clearly distancing oneself from military experience. When a respondent distinctly separates their post-discharge life from service and does not seek to maintain ties with the military sphere, this may also indicate a return to civilian identity. In this case, military identity no longer dominates, but becomes integrated into civilian life.

*"Simply draw a line: the war, drones and technology were all before March 2026. After that, I have a civilian life. I want to do something, but I do not want it to be connected to any of that. Because it would still involve communicating with service members and remaining in the same environment, with the same connections, for one thing. And it seems to me that this would not be a complete transition from military to civilian life."*

*Veteran, 38 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Some respondents also feel quite uncomfortable in civilian life, yet do not want to return to the military. In this situation, veterans may find it difficult to find their place. They may lack clear roles that would help them feel useful, or goals they would like to achieve. This group is the population most in need of external support during the process of returning to civilian life.

*"There is this existential vacuum within me now. It is a question of meaning: what am I doing, where am I? The value of my own work, the value of my own experience. And this is what I find difficult to identify in civilian life now, because it is difficult to assign value to any activity when you are not at war. At war, you are involved in defending your Homeland; you are doing something greater, serving a higher purpose, while here... I don't know."*

*Veteran, 27 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Veterans' identity options  
after returning to civilian life

| Identity                                                                                                 | Features                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>"Service member on pause"</b><br>Primarily a service member who is temporarily living a civilian life | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Military experience remains a central part of the person's identity</li> <li>■ Returning to service is a desired or likely scenario</li> <li>■ It may be difficult to find meaning in civilian life; there may be a sense of temporariness and an incomplete transition</li> </ul>           |
| <b>"Veteran"</b><br>A former service member living in a civilian environment                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Service experience remains an important part of the person's identity</li> <li>■ Civilian life is combined with veteran-related activities or involvement in the veteran community</li> <li>■ The person seeks to find their place between the military and civilian environments</li> </ul> |
| <b>"Civilian"</b><br>Primarily a civilian with veteran experience                                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Military experience remains, but does not define everyday life</li> <li>■ The person develops new civilian roles and life plans, searches for new meaning, and may distance themselves from the war</li> </ul>                                                                               |

# Initial adaptation strategies

The first difficulties veterans face in adapting after discharge are often linked to a mismatch between their expectations of return and the realities of everyday life. This mismatch arises regardless of whether respondents' expectations were overly optimistic or, conversely, fairly restrained. It has two main causes:

- psychological and physical exhaustion;
- the inability to shift quickly from everyday practices characteristic of life in the ranks to those that make up civilian life.

In particular, veterans who expected positive experiences and an active, fulfilling life after returning may find that they are not yet ready for them, and need time to recover.

*"I had such a vivid picture in my head that I would train, go hiking, ride my bike, take photographs and work. But then I came back and did not want to do anything at all. Just sleep and eat."*

*Female veteran, 35 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

At the same time, some respondents who expected primarily to rest and catch up on sleep after discharge noted that, at first, they continued to live according to the rhythm developed during service. In particular, they woke up according to the familiar military routine, and encountered a sense of emptiness because they were not yet ready to fill this time with new activities or meaning.

*"I got up at six in the morning during the first week! After four years, I had forgotten what it was like not to have to go anywhere at all, neither to work nor to war. So I stood there,*

*looking out of the window, scratching my beard, thinking, 'What am I supposed to do?' I looked out of the window, walked off, and thought I should switch on the coffee machine to make coffee. I walked straight past the coffee machine, went into the shower, stood there, brushed my teeth, then thought, 'Right, coffee,' went back and switched on the coffee machine. Then I thought I needed to do something else, walked away and forgot about my shoes."*

*Veteran, 32 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Because of the mismatch between expectations and reality, veterans may reassess both the decisions they made and the adaptation process itself.

*"I expected that I would not wish to return to the army so much."*

*Female veteran, 31 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

*"I thought I would adapt very quickly, find my place and that there were people here who could support me, but at first it was very, very, very, very difficult."*

*Veteran, 27 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

For those returning to their families, the initial adaptation period associated with restoring everyday practices may be relatively easier. This is largely because a familiar rhythm of life is restored through interaction with loved ones. This process of interaction proves more important for adaptation to civilian life than fulfilling expectations associated with returning.

*"I had plans: once I was discharged and came home, I would try to go on holiday to the Carpathians and stay there for at least a week. Well, I have not yet fully realised those plans. Some of the joys of family life, as well as everyday domestic and work-related matters, have kept me here."*

*Veteran, 40 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

## **According to the respondents, we identified two strategies of initial post-service adaptation:**

### **1. Prolonged return strategy**

Discharge is perceived as a "well-deserved rest"; the planning horizon is often undefined; the prevailing desire is simply to catch up on sleep, distance oneself from the war, and live freely and safely, using money received upon discharge, and saved during service, to fund this period of rest.

*"I wanted to rest a little, to go to the mountains at least once in my life, and to do things I had never had the chance to do before. I gave myself two months without looking for any work, just to rest, make sense of things, meet people, and deal with all the everyday matters that had piled up over three years, because there were many of them."*

*Veteran, 25 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

The risk of maladaptation when following this strategy arises when rest loses its primary purpose, namely, to serve only as a restorative pause within a life otherwise filled with activities. Rest is always only a temporary state, in both military and civilian reality. If it becomes prolonged because it is not followed by a period of active engagement, the very concept of reintegration loses some of its meaning, as the absence of any desires may reinforce the urge to withdraw from others.

*"You would think that you should want something, strive for something new in life, for development and so on. But I don't know; I have no desire to do anything outside the home, not even just to go down to the entrance for a smoke... In general, it is now difficult to find something that would truly ignite you and make you want to wake up for it. That is probably the main change."*

*Veteran, 23 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

The most constructive way to overcome this state is a gradual return to activity — whether professional, sporting, educational, or hobby-related. This is often observed among veterans who cannot immediately find professional fulfilment, but resume other activities that are meaningful to them.

## **2. Rapid return strategy**

The second initial adaptation strategy is effectively the opposite. Instead of taking a "well-deserved rest," veterans choose the path of rapid return. The essence of this strategy is to return to civilian life through resumed activity, since inactivity itself may be experienced as a source of discomfort and internal tension.

*"Everyone advised me to rest for a month or two, but I sat around for a week doing absolutely nothing and reading the news. Then I realised I had to do something. I had to look for a job, or things would go badly. I had to shift my focus somewhere... I had gained freedom, but I didn't know what to do with it."*

*Veteran, 31 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

This strategy was characteristic mainly of respondents who felt responsible for the well-being of loved ones they had to provide for. Under such circumstances, settling into a normal rhythm of alternating work and rest is simply a necessity of life.

A distinctive feature of the rapid return strategy is a clear separation between life in the military, which remains in the past, and civilian life, which defines the present. This separation occurs not only psychologically, but also in practice, with a rapid return to work serving as one of its markers.

*"The first thing I did was go to the military recruitment office and register. Then I went and resigned from my job... I visited the graves of my brothers-in-arms... I went to see everyone within reach, so to speak. And that was it! Then I started living! We went out for pizza and burgers with my children, walked around and spent time together. I still have not managed to catch up on sleep since being discharged. I have no time."*

*Veteran, 34 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

It is important to understand that the implementation of either strategy depends to a large extent on veterans' physical and psychological health. The initial stage of adaptation is often devoted almost entirely to health recovery. Even in this situation, however, there remains a choice between a prolonged or rapid return strategy.

Neither strategy can be regarded as guaranteeing veterans' successful adaptation. However, understanding their potential risks and advantages should be part of the preparation for returning to civilian life.

Initial adaptation strategies of veterans  
after returning to civilian life

|                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Strategy 1</i><br><b>Prolonged return</b> | After discharge, the veteran gradually returns to active life. Their immediate priorities are rest and recovery, and they use the adaptation period to sleep, restore their health, deal with everyday matters and distance themselves from the war |
| <i>Strategy 2</i><br><b>Rapid return</b>     | After discharge, the veteran seeks to resume activity as quickly as possible by returning to work, family responsibilities or other everyday activities. Activity and a new rhythm of life become the primary means of adaptation                   |

# **FACTORS INFLUENCING ADAPTATION TO CIVILIAN LIFE**

## **Barriers**

### **Individual level**

One important factor influencing adaptation to civilian life is the **psychophysiological impact of service**. The demanding work-and-rest schedule respondents followed during service differed fundamentally from routine civilian practices. This primarily concerns patterns of sleep and wakefulness. Habits developed during service often persist after discharge, which may make returning to work more difficult, since most civilian occupations involve a regular eight-hour working day with short breaks.

*"I have some kind of fatigue. Because of that four-on, four-off schedule, I now like to sleep during the day as well. I mean, I sleep for one, two, three or four hours, and then I become productive again for another four hours."*

*Veteran, 36 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Respondents' experiences indicate that such disrupted sleep patterns may persist for a long time after discharge. One veteran reported sleeping only three hours a day for a year after returning, and only later did his sleep gradually begin to stabilise. At the same

time, sleep disturbances are not always caused solely by changes in routine. For some respondents, they resulted from the psychological effects of combat experience, including traumatic dreams arising in response to the stress they had endured<sup>74</sup>.

*"For six months, sleep was difficult because I would wake up at two in the morning, then at four, and spend the whole day in a sleepy haze. I also had all sorts of nightmares, such as being surrounded."*

*Veteran, 27 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Combat experience may continue to affect people after the end of service, including through dreams, when conscious control is weakened. Veterans may also experience insomnia, waking during the night and other sleep disturbances. The situation improves over time, but almost all of the veterans interviewed felt the negative impact of this factor on the adaptation process.

*"I came to terms with sleeping like that and decided it was enough for me. I could go to bed at three and get up at five... I once dreamed that mines were flying and there were explosions, and I jumped up automatically. Where should I go? Down onto the floor, then I crawled somewhere, right under the wardrobe. Things like that went on for a good three or four months."*

*Veteran, 34 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Sleep difficulties may also appear because service and combat missions required persistent hypervigilance. Although people in civilian life are not under constant threat, veterans may continue to live as though the danger were still present, remaining in a persistent state of tension and unable to relax.

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<sup>74</sup> We do not address here the problems experienced by veterans diagnosed with PTSD. We refer only to psychophysiological states that accompany the transition from military to civilian life and gradually subside in a safe, supportive environment without the need for specialised treatment.

*"Constant tension. I walk a little, go swimming and do various things like that. But you constantly feel tension in your body. You are always braced. You cannot relax. There is no sense of being relaxed."*

*Veteran, 36 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Additionally, the effects of injuries may interfere with normal sleep. As one respondent described the situation:

*"Normal people go to bed and wake up because they have had enough sleep. But now I constantly wake up because of the pain"<sup>75</sup>.*

*Veteran, 38 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

In addition to sleep problems, which appear for various reasons and are typical of the return period, veterans may also experience other impairments in cognitive functioning, including memory deterioration and difficulties with concentration. These impairments do not create major obstacles and are therefore sometimes overlooked, but they still complicate adaptation.

*"I have needed to see a doctor ever since I was discharged. But I really don't want to go... It will now take a huge amount of time, a huge amount of money, a huge amount of everything, and I am still not emotionally ready for treatment. I have not yet recovered from those restrictions enough to start dealing with new ones."*

*Veteran, 31 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Difficulties during the return process may also include disturbances in emotional functioning, manifested in heightened irritability and feelings of anger and rage that require release, even if this release

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<sup>75</sup> The quote was translated from Russian: «Вот люди нормальные, когда ложатся спать, просыпаются от того, что они выспались. А я щас просыпаюсь уже постоянно от боли».

is limited to imagined scenarios of destroying the source of irritation.

*"That was at the beginning. I don't fantasise about it now, but I did then. I mean, I am going through the MMC, and there is a doctor who, in my opinion, is not particularly all right. I walk out and think, 'I wish I could launch about five FPV drones into this building. That would make me feel good.'"*

*Veteran, 27 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

In some cases, respondents described situations in which strong emotional reactions were combined with impulsive actions or an internal sense of losing control over their own responses. Veterans perceived such experiences as potentially risky and as requiring greater attention to their own emotional state.

*"A man with a knife was harassing some girl... I nearly killed him because I also had a weapon on me. Luckily, he was drunk, and I took the knife away from him very quickly... It was the kind of incident that could have ended with me going to prison over something stupid."*

*Veteran, 25 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

As a result of all these challenges, veterans may develop a protective response of avoiding other people. In its most extreme form, this manifests as complete self-isolation from the surrounding civilian world, with other veterans remaining the only safe social environment. This, in turn, blocks the adaptation process.

*"Society makes me extremely angry, and I am afraid that... either someone will kill me in the street or I will kill someone... I try [to stay] at home. Mostly, when my brothers-in-arms come home on leave, I meet up with them."*

*Veteran, 37 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Thus, problems that initially originate in the psychophysiological sphere may extend into the social sphere of interaction and create barriers to adaptation in communication.

### ***Level of social interaction***

Distancing oneself from the civilian environment is one of the most difficult problems that may hinder veterans' adaptation.

It appears for various reasons and may be rooted both in mutual misunderstanding between civilians and veterans and in mutual rejection. The first type of distancing stems from the difficulty of maintaining communication when others do not understand you.

Veterans experience this misunderstanding along two dimensions. On the one hand, civilians may not understand them; on the other, they themselves are not always certain that they understand the civilian world, which became less familiar to them during service.

They may also feel that their very presence reminds others of the war — a subject many people seek to distance themselves from in everyday life.

*"I often feel as though I am behind glass. You are somehow like a shadow, especially among people who have not been at the front... It is not exactly that they feel guilty, but you also feel some kind of guilt for walking among them, for being battered and having been there. In brief, it all feels somehow unclear, as if there are unspoken things hanging in the air, as if people want to distance themselves from this war."*

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

Veterans may experience such problems in every sphere, from communication within the family to interactions at work. Respondents mentioned that many things that had been self-evident to them during service now had to be explained to those around them.

*"Even when you tell your family certain things, they don't fully understand what you're trying to say. They ask you to explain. But you feel as though you are speaking in the language you are used to, and somehow it doesn't quite match."*

*Veteran, 36 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

On the other hand, civilians may consider themselves sufficiently knowledgeable about matters, which, in the view of one respondent, they do not understand at all.

*"You cannot tell people, and I understand rationally that you cannot tell people that their idea is rubbish. You have to explain why it will not work at the moment. And sometimes you have to bite your tongue. Sometimes people make mistakes for no particular reason, simply because they are human. But you want to speak to them as you would to service members, who simply know what needs to be done."*

*Veteran, 31 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

The desire to distance oneself from others may take extreme forms, where veterans create their own closed world within civilian society and maintain minimal contact with civilians. This may be rooted less in their own emotional difficulties than in a rejection of the civilian world itself, a world in which communication is difficult.

*"Even while I was applying for a job, right up until they agreed to hire me, I said directly that I would not work with civilians. They didn't want to hire me, but I explained why, so they found me a partner. Now we work very well together; the lad has become more cheerful and active, and I feel comfortable working with him."<sup>76</sup>*

*Veteran, 28 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

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<sup>76</sup> The quote was translated from Russian: «Даже в процессе устройства на работу я до момента как меня согласились принять прямо сказал, — с гражданскими работать не буду. Меня брать не хотели, аргументировал почему так мне нашли напарника и мы сейчас замечательно с ним работаем и парнишка посветлел, трошки расшевелился, и мне с ним комфортно».

Veterans' desire to distance themselves from contact with civilians may have several causes. For our respondents, the greatest trigger was people's detachment from the war, their attempts to live as though it did not concern them — simply continuing to work, planning holidays, and saving money to buy a car. This desire to continue "living their happy lives" during the war was deeply troubling. When respondents encountered it among people close to them, they could also extend their disappointment to the civilian population more broadly. In such situations, instead of adaptation and reintegration into civilian life, veterans may find themselves undergoing a process of separation and distancing.

*"With every month I spent away from the front, my relationships with civilians became worse and worse... At first, I was like some kind of legend in my town and my family. But when I came back, saw how they were living and began asking them, 'Why is it like this?', they started taking offence. So I distanced myself from them to avoid berating them even more for their cowardice and hypocrisy."*

*Veteran, 25 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Buying an expensive car during the war could also act as a trigger, since, amid the army's constantly unmet needs, some veterans regarded such spending as unacceptable. Civilians' references to regular donations as evidence of fulfilling their duty also failed to convince some veterans, who believe that financial support cannot replace personal participation in defending the country. For this reason, they considered remaining away from the front justified only for people whose work is of maximum benefit in meeting the rank's needs.

*"People have different circumstances. Some mate aged 25 to 30 says, 'I donate, that is enough from me,' and donates one thousand hryvnias a month. Well then, mate, you would*

*be better off going to fight, because no one there gives a damn about your thousand hryvnias... An acquaintance of mine has donated around four million over these four years to the army. I understand that if he is sent to fight, as an intelligent person, he might be useful there, but what he contributes here is no less valuable than if he were flying some drone over there."*

*Veteran, 32 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Another reason for distancing may be a rejection of the arguments some civilians use to explain their unwillingness to defend the country, particularly when they argue that the state does not deserve to be defended. Some veterans perceive such explanations as an attempt to disguise personal fear, which evokes not so much disappointment as contempt.

*"When you start talking to civilians, and they tell you that the country is corrupt and ask why they should go and fight, it starts to really get on my nerves... All right, but what have you done to change it? Why are you making excuses for not wanting to serve because of your fear? After conversations like that, people became more distant from me, and these were people who had been my friends."*

*Veteran, 27 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

One of the strongest triggers that intensified distancing from the civilian environment was the perception of injustice associated with avoiding service. While civilians' detachment from the war caused disappointment, and attempts to justify refusing to serve by pointing to corruption in the state provoked contempt, cases of unlawfully obtaining exemption from mobilisation or disability status could become a source of intense outrage and negative emotions.

*"I feel enormous anger towards draft evaders. I simply cannot stand them. For me, it's not even anger, it is a trigger. When I see some lad who tells me directly, 'There is no f\*\*\*ing way I'm going there,' then I'm sorry, mate. When they come here, you will not be saying that any more. I have a very negative attitude towards male civilians who have no connection to the troop and have never had one."*

*Veteran, 35 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

At the same time, this anger did not develop into behavioural aggression, since it concerned not isolated cases but an impression extended to a large group of civilians. Since civilians currently constitute the world in which veterans have to live, the realisation that changing them is unrealistic only strengthened the desire to have as little to do with them as possible.

*"In my experience of civilian life after service, I have already smashed quite a few hard objects over the heads of civilians who behaved too brazenly. Afterwards, I realised that I could have avoided all of it by not speaking to them and not reacting to their provocations."*

*Veteran, 25 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

It is important, however, to recognise that the difficulties described in communicating with civilians — which stem from a rejection of their values, beliefs and life choices — generally reflect distancing rather than an aggressive pattern of behaviour. Informants emphasised that they found it unpleasant to communicate with people who held different views, and therefore either tried to end such contact or avoided establishing it in the first place.

*"Well, I would not build relationships with any civilians apart from at work. I understand that they are my colleagues and civilians. They are not serving and have never served. The reason does not particularly interest me. It is their choice, and I am not forcing anyone to serve."*

*Veteran, 25 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

On the other hand, when the initiative to distance themselves came from civilians, veterans did not perceive this as a problem, as they themselves were not interested in such contact.

*"Because they don't serve, for instance, they don't know how to speak to me. As a result, they may stop communicating with me. That doesn't hurt me at all. I just don't care."*

*Female veteran, 26 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Despite all their efforts to distance themselves, veterans react acutely to disrespect from civilians. Although some quantitative studies show that 60% of veterans believe that society treats them with respect<sup>77</sup> respondents frequently mentioned challenges associated with society's perception of them. Where they expected respect, they often encountered negative attitudes instead.

*"It has genuinely turned into two parallel worlds: civilians and former service members, or those still serving. They are two different peoples. Honestly, they will never understand one another. A civilian does not even value the person who fought for them while their husband stayed here, while that person sacrificed their health. You didn't even say 'thank you' to them, although no one needs those words any more; no one has*

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<sup>77</sup> Ministry of Veterans Affairs (2025). Portrait of a Veteran 2025. There is a sense that everything you did during the war is being devalued: people lose interest in you the moment you become a former service member. [veteranfund.com.ua/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Portret-veterana-2025.pdf](https://veteranfund.com.ua/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Portret-veterana-2025.pdf)

*expected a 'thank you' for a long time. But on top of that, you use obscene language and insult them"*<sup>78</sup>.

*Veteran, 38 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

For some veterans, the sense of insufficient respect and recognition emerged at the very moment of discharge. They felt that their combat experience and contribution were quickly devalued, and that interest in them disappeared the moment they ceased to be service members.

*"I arrived, and the people I knew at the TRC [Territorial Recruitment Centre] said, 'Wow! You are alive!' Something like, 'Thank you for your service, thank you for coming back alive.' But... the chief recruitment officer did not come out to see me. There should have been something... even just a handshake. With the other lads, it was simply... You came in, handed over your documents, and they recorded some of your details. And that was it. 'You're free!' Go! There was not even a basic 'thank you'."*

*Veteran, 37 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Respondents quite often mentioned cases of disrespect towards their status of the participant in hostilities. Given the potentially difficult psychological state of veterans during the early stages of adaptation, such incidents may induce further psychological trauma.

*"There were hurtful situations... They wouldn't let me use the toilet on the basis of my status of the participant in hostilities, and I didn't have any cash. I felt completely trapped. I didn't*

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<sup>78</sup> The quote was translated from Russian: «Вот реально стало как два параллельных мира, гражданский и бывшие военные, или военные. Это два разных народа. Ну реально, они друг друга не поймут никогда. Гражданский человек не ценит даже человека воевавшего за тебя, пока твой муж сидел тут, а человек отдал здоровье. Ты ему не то что там спасибо не сказала, хотя не надо спасибо, ну, давно никто не ждет этих спасибо. Но еще и выражаешься в нецензурной форме, оскорбляешь».

*want to use my entitlement, but I had to. Then they said to me, 'People are just buying these documents on the status of the participant in hostilities now,' and I immediately burst into tears. I remember every moment. I'm trying to go to the toilet, and this elderly woman is shouting that I bought my status. It felt so hurtful; I don't know, like I felt such injustice inside me. After that, I didn't show it to anyone for a long time."*

*Female veteran, 35 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

At the same time, respect and recognition from civilians do not always change the sense of a boundary between military and civilian experience. For some veterans, this boundary begins to fade only when civilians themselves acquire service experience, or directly encounter the realities of combat.

*"To hear a man say 'thank you' to me. What the hell do I need your 'thank you' for? Go and replace my brothers-in-arms... For me, 'thank you' means that he takes up a weapon."*

*Veteran, 37 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Overall, the return to civilian life at the level of social interaction remains a complex process and requires work with both service members and civilians. Above all, this means overcoming mutual stereotypes and prejudices that may hinder the development of mutual understanding between veterans and their social environment.

### ***Institutional level***

Survey findings indicate that almost 80% of veterans believe that the state is generally failing to fulfil its obligations towards them<sup>79</sup>. During the interviews, informants consistently highlighted difficulties in interacting with public authorities. The institutional

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<sup>79</sup> Ukrainian Veterans Foundation (2025). Results of the Sixth Survey by the Ukrainian Veterans Foundation, "The Needs of Veterans".  
[veteranfund.com.ua/analitics/analiz-potreba-problem-veteraniv-ta-veteranok-za-2024-rik](https://veteranfund.com.ua/analitics/analiz-potreba-problem-veteraniv-ta-veteranok-za-2024-rik)

barriers encountered during the return to civilian life were primarily associated with applying for benefits and obtaining the documents required to access them. Veterans were frustrated by the very fact that they had to fight for what the state had guaranteed them.

*"In general, I believe that the state is doing everything it can to destroy Ukrainian volunteers. It is the attitude itself: why should I, for example, have to fight to receive the payments I am entitled to, to obtain certain benefits and stuff like that? To me, this entire veteran policy is ineffective. This is what the Ministry of Veterans Affairs is doing."*

*Veteran, 37 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Respondents devoted a great deal of effort to these processes, primarily because there was no clear procedure to follow, obtaining the necessary information was difficult, and they had to spend long periods waiting in queues. All of this could worsen their psychological state and complicate adaptation.

*"Civilian life is probably what infuriates me more. I have been discharged for a month and a half now, running around collecting all these certificates, and I still cannot get anything done... 'We cannot accept you without this certificate.' 'We cannot do this for you'... It makes you want to, f\*\*\*ing [damn it — editor's note], shoot someone... Surely it could be arranged so that once I have come out of that hell, gone to the military recruitment office and registered, that's it. Nothing else should be required of me... On paper, you supposedly have rights, as though you have repaid your debt to the Homeland, so the Homeland should give something back. On paper,*

*it supposedly should, but for the Homeland to give me anything, I still have to collect another pile of documents”<sup>80</sup>.*

*Veteran, 38 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Bureaucratic difficulties accompanied our respondents' interactions with virtually all public institutions, from applying for a one-off cash benefit to registering for housing and undergoing an MMC. Regardless of the particular procedure, veterans encountered a similar pattern of interaction:

*“When I was going through the MMC, you know, it was simply bureaucratic hell. A certificate, a piece of paper, an authorization, a stamp, this man, that woman, people on leave.”*

*Veteran, 27 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

In addition to bureaucratic difficulties, respondents also noted the sometimes purely formal nature of state support for veterans — assistance could amount to little more than being redirected from one institution to another.

*“I contacted a veterans' assistance centre. They give you a 50-page booklet listing all these services scattered across the city. I understand that, all right, I still have both arms and legs. But when I think about my brothers-in-arms who have amputations, it is basically just an information desk giving you addresses around the city.”*

*Veteran, 36 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

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<sup>80</sup> The quote was translated from Russian: «Мабуть бесит більше цивільне життя. Вот я уже полтора месяца звільнених, бегаю с этими справками и не могу ничего добиться... То без справки мы тебя не возьмем. То мы то не сделаем... Так и хочется, б\*\*ть, кого-то пристрелить... Ну неужели нельзя сделать, чтобы когда я вышел уже с этого пекла, прийти в военкомат, стал на учет, и все. I от меня больше ничего не надо... Ты по бумагам вроде как имеешь права, как бы, отдал долг родине, ну это ж родина должна вернуть. Она вроде как и должна па бумагам, но щоб эта родина мне шота вернула, я еще пачку документов должен собрать».

Difficulties encountered while looking for work may also significantly complicate adaptation. Although vocational retraining opportunities exist at the institutional level, veterans do not always view them as a realistic route to employment. This is particularly relevant to small communities, where there is a shortage of jobs that would allow veterans to support their families financially.

*"There are no professions that would allow you to support a family right now. Something interesting with decent pay. They offer 15,000 to 20,000. Try living on that. Especially when you have children, you need to earn twice as much"<sup>81</sup>.*

*Veteran, 31 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Respondents who participated in the programmes offered would also encounter problems when subsequently seeking employment. In particular, one respondent described a negative experience after completing a training programme for people wishing to work in central or local governments.

*"I applied to the Ministry of Veterans Affairs... They never replied... And when I met Kalmykova [Minister of Veterans Affairs], she said, 'We simply do not have an HR specialist or recruiter who could deal with this. Write to me directly'."*

*Female veteran, 26 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Organising support to help veterans identify suitable employment pathways after returning to civilian life is an extremely important component of adaptation and reintegration support. Veterans do make use of such services: among the informants were people who had received grants to start their own businesses, taken up educational opportunities, and consulted specialists about possible

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<sup>81</sup> The quote was translated from Russian: «Нема таких профессий, чтоб именно содержать семью сейчас, в данный момент. И цикаво, и чтобы оплата была нормальна, то что они предлагают, 15-20 тысяч, еще попробуй на них прожить. особенно когда дети есть, то надо в два раза больше зарабатывать».

employment pathways. At the same time, the institutional support offered may inadvertently create social integration problems of its own. In particular, veterans are encouraged to present themselves to employers by emphasising aspects of their military experience that may increase their effectiveness in civilian roles. However, this approach merely highlights the boundary between the veteran and the civilian world, a boundary that the veteran is expected to overcome on their own.

*"When they talk about employment, they say: 'You need to translate your army skills into civilian ones.' Why not make civilians understand military skills instead? This constant need to adapt to civilians is really frustrating."*

*Female veteran, 26 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

An important institutional addition to support veterans' professional adaptation could be a dedicated programme for employers that explains the value of recruiting veterans for particular roles where their experiences would be beneficial. Thus, based on the interview analysis, we identify three interconnected levels of adaptation difficulties: the individual level, the level of social interaction, and the institutional level. Each presents specific challenges that influence the process of returning to civilian life.

Barriers identified during the return  
to civilian life at different levels

| Individual level                                                                                      | Level of social interaction                                                                                                                                        | Institutional level                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Sleep disturbances</b><br>Insomnia, waking during the night, traumatic dreams                      | <b>Distancing from the civilian environment</b><br>A sense of not being understood, communication difficulties, avoidance of contact                               | <b>Difficulties in accessing guaranteed entitlements</b><br>Lack of a clear procedure, inability to get the necessary information, queues, waiting periods, and bureaucracy                           |
| <b>Persistent hypervigilance</b><br>Tension, a sense of danger, inability to relax                    |                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <b>Impairment of cognitive functions</b><br>Deterioration in memory and concentration                 | <b>A sense of alienation from the civilian world</b><br>Perception of civilian life as "foreign", and a lack of understanding of civilians' values and way of life | <b>Difficulties in finding employment</b><br>Lack of jobs that meet the family's financial needs, employment difficulties after training, and employers' lack of understanding of military experience |
| <b>Disturbances in emotional functioning</b><br>Irritability, anger, difficulty controlling reactions |                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <b>Protective avoidance response</b><br>Self-isolation and distancing from others                     |                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                       |

# Resources/support

## Individual level

Supporting adaptation at the individual level primarily involves restoring a comfortable physical and psychological state. The transition to civilian life begins with returning to familiar routines of sleep, nutrition and physical activity. Paying attention to these processes and monitoring one's health, including undergoing the necessary examinations and treatment, is the first step towards successful adaptation.

*"Through regular physical activity, proper nutrition, training and all of that, I gradually got myself back into a more or less normal state."*

*Female veteran, 35 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Overall, settling into the rhythm of civilian life is an important precondition for adaptation. The transition from extreme pressures of constant stress to a more measured and relatively safe life helps psychological tension gradually subside.

*"Everyday life and routine drew me in and helped me relax. I no longer feel that kind of anxiety."*

*Veteran, 40 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Respondents emphasised that sport is an important element of physical and psychological recovery. For them, physical activity is a way to release accumulated negative energy and maintain emotional balance.

*"I go to training and hit people. Thai boxing. It helps me cope with uncontrolled aggression."*

*Veteran, 31 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

The adaptation process is also supported by shifting attention away from one's problems and towards helping others, primarily brothers- and sisters-in-arms, as well as other people. By providing such support, veterans develop confidence in their ability to overcome life's challenges on their own.

*"Helping others genuinely makes me feel better. I like helping people, even when it brings me no benefit at all. It still makes me feel good because I have managed to help someone in some way."*

*Veteran, 25 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Participants in the study repeatedly noted that, after returning from service, they encountered numerous bureaucratic obstacles. However, by navigating this process independently, they regained a sense of personal responsibility for resolving life's challenges, something that may be partly diminished in the military environment, where everything is regulated by other people's orders. This also helped restore communication skills and confidence in their ability to resolve problems on their own.

*"When you are discharged, all of this begins. A paperwork mess... I could calmly go there and ask: 'If you cannot help me, just tell me whom I should speak to and who might be able to help.' And so, from person to person, from office to office, I learnt how to deal with documents... I began speaking more about things I had previously kept silent about. I also began taking on more responsibility. And it became easier to deal with these problems."*

*Veteran, 27 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Adaptation is gradual at the individual level. Over time, combat experience may recede into memory, while civilian life is no longer perceived as something that contrasts with service in the ranks, but simply as ordinary, everyday life.

*"At first, it seemed to me that none of it was real. The city was so alive, and I thought: 'Wow, it is as though I have entered another reality.' I felt almost invisible, walking through the city, with children running around and everything carrying on as though there was no war... But then you get used to it, especially once you begin doing things."*

*Female veteran, 35 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

## **Social support**

Social support is considered one of the main factors contributing to veterans' successful reintegration into civilian life<sup>82, 83</sup>. It can be received in various ways, but the most effective support is that provided within a veteran's closest social circle — by family and friends.

Support received within the family meets a person's fundamental needs for safety, love and acceptance<sup>84</sup>. It is particularly valuable at critical moments, including after severe injuries.

*"My wife was very supportive when I was injured. Emotionally and psychologically. Because I saw lads who had no one, or whose families had abandoned them, and those first few months are critical. After a severe injury, when you feel completely helpless. Some people cope, while others fail. They either start drinking alcohol or taking drugs."*

*Veteran, 42 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

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<sup>82</sup> Demers, A. (2011). When Veterans Return: The Role of Community in Reintegration. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, Vol. 16. No. 2. Pp. 160-179. DOI: [doi.org/10.1080/15325024.2010.519281](https://doi.org/10.1080/15325024.2010.519281)

<sup>83</sup> Van der Wal, S.J., Geuze, E., & Vermetten, E. (2023). Long-term risk for mental health symptoms in Dutch ISAF veterans: The role of perceived social support. *Psychological Medicine*, 53(8), 3355-3365. [doi.org/10.1017/S0033291721005389](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291721005389)

<sup>84</sup> Stoddard-Bennett, N.A., Coburn, J., Dufur, M.J., Jarvis, J.A., & Pribesh, S.L. (2023). Family structure and child behavior problems in Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(3), article number 1780. [doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20031780](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20031780)

Family is one of the most important values and is a source of a responsible attitude towards life. Unlike a professional career, which often needs to be rebuilt after service, family frequently remains intact, providing additional support during the return to civilian life.

*"My family genuinely gave me a great deal of support. My children, my wife. Without them, I don't know what would happen. At the very least, I wouldn't have left the service if it hadn't been for them... I joined because of my family, and I returned because of my family."*

*Veteran, 35 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Understanding that other people's well-being depends on them, and that no one can replace them in this role, may give veterans strong motivation to adapt quickly.

*"Apart from me, no one will take care of this task: supporting the family and everything else. So, somehow you have to pull yourself together and keep going."*

*Veteran, 36 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Support from friends is also important. However, the situation may differ significantly between those who have maintained their friendships and those who have lost them. When a social circle remains intact, it can become a valuable resource, particularly when it is based on shared experiences and values.

*"All my friends, every one of them, went to fight. And two of our friends were killed. My best friends since childhood."*

*Veteran, 32 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

For most respondents, however, friendships in civilian life were either lost entirely or became strained. The breakdown of former friendships was most often rooted in attitudes towards military

service. Veterans may find it difficult to accept the position of those who have not served and do not want to enlist. Sometimes, however, a long-standing friendship survives this test. A kind of exception is made for a close person, who remains within the social circle despite not meeting the clear criteria for belonging to "one's own people."

*"I have only one friend left, my best friend... Because we have been friends for several decades, we still have... a good relationship, even though he is a civilian and his position is somewhat cowardly... He is probably the only civilian I respect. And I can see that, although he is a coward, he genuinely wants to help in some way and does keep his word."*

*Veteran, 25 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

For most informants, the foundation of their new social circle consists of brothers- and sisters-in-arms with whom they share military and combat experience. It is important to note that having such a circle positively affects return and adaptation, particularly for veterans experiencing psychological difficulties, as support from brothers- and sisters-in-arms is an effective resource<sup>85</sup>. Moreover, these friendships are not short-lived and often continue even after the final return to civilian life<sup>86</sup>.

*"I have a brother-in-arms from my contract-service days, from the time of the ATO. We keep in touch. There are also several other brothers-in-arms from the ATO... These days, I mainly communicate with brothers-in-arms from my contract-service period. That's all. I do not communicate with anyone else."*

*Veteran, 25 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

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<sup>85</sup> Hundt, N. E., Robinson, A., Arney, J., Stanley, M. A., & Cully, J. A. (2015). Veterans' perspectives on benefits and drawbacks of peer support for posttraumatic stress disorder. *Military Medicine*, 180(8), 851–856. [doi.org/10.7205/MILMED-D-14-00536](https://doi.org/10.7205/MILMED-D-14-00536)

<sup>86</sup> Romaniuk, M., & Kidd, C. (2018). The psychological adjustment experience of reintegration following discharge from military service: A systematic review. *Journal of Military and Veterans' Health*, 26(2), 60–73. [doi-ds.org/doi/10.2021-33613133/JMVH](https://doi-ds.org/doi/10.2021-33613133/JMVH)

Some respondents' social circles also include colleagues from their civilian jobs. Although these relationships are maintained mainly in the workplace, such social interactions made a positive contribution to veterans' adaptation. This was often linked to the extent to which colleagues had continued to support them during service. For some respondents, colleagues who stayed close and provided support while they were serving became part of their trusted inner circle. In terms of significance, these relationships came close to bonds between brothers- or sisters-in-arms.

*"My job was kept open for me, and the company supported me. That was an incredible advantage, and I am grateful to the company. My brothers-in-arms from work also supported me during service. Not only morally, through phone calls, but materially as well. They sent me small drones they were producing at the time, which we used for training and crashed. They pooled their own money, sent it to me, and I used it for training, crashed it, and gained experience."*

*Veteran, 40 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Thus, the social support veterans receive within their closest circle is multifaceted. All respondents currently remain in contact with their brothers- and sisters-in-arms, and most have close relationships with a spouse or partner. Despite often difficult relationships with civilians, this support contributes significantly to the adaptation process. However, its effectiveness varies, particularly depending on the psychological state in which a person returns to civilian life.

### ***Additional factors affecting adaptation***

In addition to internal factors that affect adaptation and social interactions that support it, veterans' return also depends on factors unrelated to either their internal state or communication processes. One of the key factors is their **financial situation at the time of discharge**.

Overall, respondents in our study reported that their financial position was stable upon their return from service. All respondents completed their service with some savings. Many mentioned investments or purchases made during service, including a mortgage, a house or a car, while some used their savings to start a business. All were able to afford a break lasting anywhere from two or three months to six.

Veterans who were entitled to a pension applied for it despite bureaucratic obstacles, allowing them to gradually replenish the financial safety cushion they had built in advance.

Families with more children, who needed to find a job with an appropriate salary quickly, faced the most difficult financial situation. Respondents identified a substantial gap between the level of pay they had received during military service and the salaries offered by civilian employers after their return as the main problem encountered when looking for work.

*"There is a huge gap here when they tell you that 20 grand is a very good salary... and you think about that 20k. What can you do with 20k as a man these days? Can you support anyone? No. I have two children, and my wife has another child, so three altogether... What can I do with that 20k? Nothing. The gap is enormous."*

*Veteran, 47 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Some respondents who returned to jobs that had been kept open for them did not experience any financial difficulties. However, returning to work also meant they were unable to make a full recovery.

Respondents in the most difficult financial situations were those who had no financial obligations to loved ones that would compel them to seek a stable income, no desire to return to their previous job, even if it had been kept open, and no clear plans for future employment. The lack of an external need to find work quickly

could lead to a prolonged search for direction, accompanied by frequent shifts between activities that ultimately proved not to be what they wished to pursue.

*"Over a year and a half, I've tried almost everything in civilian life, from working as a manager to working as a mountain guide. I tried different jobs... Of course, I didn't really try physical work because I could not be bothered with it. I tried working as an instructor and as an engineer, including at critical enterprises producing drones. Nothing seems to work for me anywhere... So I decided to enrol in the university."*

*Veteran, 25 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Thus, **the transition to stable employment** is the second important factor in successful adaptation. However, after discharge from service, only some veterans manage to secure suitable employment. Prolonged uncertainty about their professional future may lead to maladaptation, particularly among younger veterans who had not acquired substantial professional experience before service.

A third important component that may positively influence adaptation is **state support**. Despite the considerable bureaucracy and formalism mentioned by respondents, they also provided examples of assistance received from public institutions. In particular, this concerned obtaining the necessary documents.

*"I went to the ASC [Administrative Service Centre], where they had a separate service window. The women there said, 'Let's help you... Let's issue you this electronic ticket for a free appointment.' Okay. So they did. Then they said, 'Make sure you submit an application for a land plot. What are you entitled to? We'll show you everything now.' So I did that. There was also support for the injured, because if a city resident sustained an injury, even a minor one, they provided some assistance."*

*There are notices everywhere in hospitals saying: 'We kindly ask you to allow service members and persons with status of the participant in hostilities to be seen without queuing.' I didn't abuse it, but I understand that it genuinely works."*

*Veteran, 30 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Such support also helped resolve the employment situation of one respondent, who had found it difficult to decide what he wanted to do after service.

*"I spent the first six months just relaxing; I didn't want to work at all. Then I thought I would look for a job. Well, it was very difficult. I attended interviews, wandered around and could not find a job that interested me... because I had no idea what to do. What I studied at university was a load of rubbish. Tourism, seriously, especially in this country? She [the career adviser] asked, 'Have you ever worked as an instructor?' I said yes. She told me there was a centre recruiting veterans for instructor positions. So I went to work there. I became more or less socialised again."*

*Veteran, 29 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Thus, state support can be effective and genuinely facilitate veterans' return to civilian life.

## Resources for adaptation after returning to civilian life

| Individual level                                                                                                                                                                        | Social support                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | Additional factors                                                                                                                     |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Restoration of physical and psychological well-being</b><br>Restoring healthy sleep, nutrition and physical activity, and monitoring one's health                                    | <b>Family support and a sense of responsibility towards the family</b><br>Safety, love, acceptance, and emotional and psychological support at critical moments; family as an important value, a source of purpose and motivation for rapid adaptation | <b>Financial position</b><br>Savings, a financial safety cushion, and the opportunity to rest after discharge                          |
| <b>Moving beyond one's own internal difficulties and shifting attention towards helping others:</b> confidence in one's ability to overcome life's challenges through one's own efforts | <b>Support from friends</b><br>Maintaining friendships through shared experience, common values and acceptance                                                                                                                                         | <b>Transition to stable employment</b><br>Returning to work, pursuing professional fulfilment and determining one's future career path |
| <b>Gradual restoration of a sense of personal responsibility for resolving life's difficulties</b>                                                                                      | <b>Support from brothers- and sisters-in-arms</b><br>Shared experience of war, a close social circle and effective support during the return process                                                                                                   | <b>State support</b><br>Obtaining documents and services, and receiving employment assistance                                          |
|                                                                                                                                                                                         | <b>Support from colleagues</b><br>People who provided support during service became part of a trusted inner circle                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                        |

# **USING UAV OPERATING EXPERIENCE IN CIVILIAN LIFE**

During service, UAV operators acquired knowledge, skills and professional experience that may also be applied after their return to civilian life, including in their future employment. Most respondents expressed interest in applying this professional experience, while some had already linked their work to the production or use of drones.

According to respondents, the labour market in this field demonstrates demand for specialists with a range of competencies, from UAV operators and instructors to engineers and technical specialists.

*"I looked through the vacancies: many employers are looking for pilots, engineers, people who understand firmware, and people who can simply operate UAVs. Many are looking for fixed-wing UAV operators. Many are looking for operators of heavy bombers. I also saw many vacancies for instructors. Manufacturers like to have their own training schools, so they are looking for many instructors. Essentially, there is currently a shortage of everyone in the field."*

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

Participants in this study explained that the experience of working with UAVs acquired during service can be applied in various forms of professional employment. In particular, respondents:

- established their own UAV production businesses;
- founded a training centre for drone pilots;
- found employment at companies manufacturing drones;
- worked as drone training instructors;
- piloted new types of UAVs during the development stage;
- worked with UAV crews at civilian production facilities;
- advised and supported other veterans who are UAV operators.

Respondents whose current work is not related to the use of UAVs also considered the skills they had acquired potentially useful, as they could be applied in civilian life if no other employment were available, for example, in the agricultural sector. At present, however, this field is the least attractive to respondents, and only one study participant works in it. Most employment is connected with MilTech (military technology).

It is particularly valuable that veterans are scaling up their experiences in both drone production and pilot training. This is important both for supporting the troop and for creating new opportunities for veterans with UAV operating experience.

*"Poor-quality equipment was being supplied, and I had a goal, which I succeeded in achieving. Within five months, I became one of the top 20 manufacturers and ranked fifth among FPV drone manufacturers."*

*Veteran, 34 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

*"I wanted to scale up all my knowledge and skills specifically in the field of drones. I realised that being alone in the trench was one thing. I wanted to scale my knowledge through other people. That is how the FPV piloting course came about."*

*Female veteran, 31 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

It is also extremely important that veterans who sustained severe injuries have opportunities to work using the experience they acquired during service. For respondents, continuing to work in this particular field helped them maintain their psychological well-being and experience life satisfaction through self-fulfilment, personal growth, and the search for meaning.

*"I was very worried that I would never be able to fly again. After all, I had fallen in love with the sky. I was declared completely unfit for service and discharged from the ranks of the Armed Forces due to my health. But an opportunity appeared: I'm now working as a UAV instructor and teach children."*

*Veteran, 42 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Despite their interest, not all respondents were able to establish themselves professionally in this field after discharge from service. **Study participants identified several factors that may complicate professional fulfilment in this sector:**

### **1. Employment opportunities are concentrated primarily in certain regional and territorial centres**

For veterans living in other regions, or those who are unable or unwilling to relocate because of family, housing or other circumstances, this may significantly limit employment opportunities.

### **2. The level of pay offered**

Study participants noted that some vacancies in the sector did not meet their expectations in terms of remuneration or the level

of responsibility and workload involved. As a result, veterans did not consider even professionally interesting opportunities to be realistic employment options.

*"It was a really interesting project and a promising start-up. The role seemed like a good fit for me. It was interesting. Then we moved on to finances. They said, 'Well, we can offer you a deferment from mobilisation and a salary of seven thousand a month.' I said, 'I don't actually need the exemption, but seven thousand a month is what a cleaner earns. Perhaps even less than a cleaner, I don't know'."*

*Veteran, 36 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Because of the conditions offered, veterans did not regard such work as their main employment. However, some respondents continued to collaborate with unmanned systems developers as a secondary or voluntary activity because they wanted to be useful.

*"They are developing something useful for defence. I fly the drone so that they can see how it performs and continue improving it. At first, they paid me, but then I noticed that someone was transferring the money to me from their personal bank card. I realised that they were sending me their own money, so I told them to stop paying me."*

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

### **3. High employer requirements**

Although veterans consider themselves relatively competitive in this labour market, particularly because of their recent experience of using drones in real-world conditions, employers' requirements remain demanding.

Some respondents reported having to undergo multi-stage selection processes and testing while looking for work, only to be rejected in the end. In some cases, conversations with

potential employers provoked a strongly negative reaction. One veteran described such an interview as follows:

*"They told me, 'You know, you would be suitable for a circuit-board soldering position.' I said, 'Lads, my experience is not in soldering circuit boards. I am a UAV operator, and I believe I have solid experience. That's my subjective opinion, and I'm not going to argue about it, but still.' They said, 'You know, when you join us, you will have a three-month probationary period as a circuit-board solderer, then one month as a battery technician, and one month as a motor technician...' I said, 'So only after six months might I become an operator here?' They said, 'Yes, you have understood correctly.' I would lose all my skills over those six months. There were many situations like this. Thirty-two responses to my CV ended with a similar conversation or followed a similar pattern"<sup>87</sup>.*

*Veteran, 28 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

At the same time, not all respondents wanted to link their future professional activities to the UAV sector. This was due to several circumstances, including burnout, with respondents saying that they had "done enough work with drones," or the fact that they had a high level of expertise in another field to which they wanted to return.

Nevertheless, experience of working with drones continued to influence both respondents' professional employment and their leisure activities. In particular, they mentioned seeking opportunities to apply the UAV knowledge and skills they had acquired in the sectors in which they currently worked. Some respondents also

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<sup>87</sup> The quote was translated from Russian: «Они мне говорят: 'Знаете, вы нам подходите на вакансию пайщика плат'. Я говорю: "Ребята, у меня досвид не пайщика плат. У меня досвид оператора БПЛА, и я считаю, что у меня неплохой досвид. Мое субъективное, я не буду спорить по тем не менее". Они: "Знаете, вы когда придете к нам у вас будет трехмесячный испытательный срок, срок на пайщика плат, потом месяц на аккумуляторщика, месяц на моториста..." Я говорю: "Так что, только через полгода я стану у вас, возможно, оператором?" Они такие: "Ну да, вы все правильно понимаете". За эти полгода я потеряю вообще любые навыки. И подобных ситуаций было очень много. 32 отклика на резюме моё закончились подобным диалогом или вектором подобного диалога».

remained interested in the development of unmanned technologies, including the field's rapid technological progress and innovative nature, and continued to follow developments even after discharge.

For many study participants, flying drones is an important leisure activity and a source of satisfaction and happiness. It therefore makes a significant contribution to their well-being and supports a successful return to civilian life.

# ***WHAT CAN BE IMPROVED IN PREPARATION FOR THE RETURN TO CIVILIAN LIFE***

An important source for improving veteran policy may be proposals developed by veterans based on their own experiences of returning to civilian life. Previously, as part of the Coalition of Organisations Supporting Veterans and Their Families, Veteran Hub developed Public Policy Concepts<sup>88</sup>. In these documents, we set out a shared vision of the principles of public policy, approaches to building a system of recognition, and key areas of support.

In this study, we asked veterans what changes in veteran policy or what specific forms of support would have helped them during their return to civilian life. Below is an analysis of their responses and views. Overall, the proposals can be divided into two groups:

## **1. What should be done at the institutional level**

First and foremost, respondents emphasised the need to **formalise the process of returning to civilian life**. Before discharge from service becomes widespread, it is important to develop and test all components of this process.

Respondents viewed the process through the lens of their own experiences and stressed that the person concerned must be actively involved in it. In their view, veterans should get clear

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<sup>88</sup> Veteran Hub, Pryncyp, Space of Opportunities, Legal Hundred (2025). Updated Concept of Veteran Policy. [veteranspolicy.org.ua](https://veteranspolicy.org.ua)

information about all the necessary next steps as soon as the discharge process begins.

*"When a person begins the discharge process, they should be monitored, registered and supported. First of all, I should be given an information sheet. As a veteran. Mate, these are your rights as a veteran; these are your responsibilities as a veteran. You need to register for medical care, see a psychologist and so on."*

*Veteran, 51 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Since the journey to discharge begins within the unit, veterans paid particular attention to **improving the organisational aspects of this stage**. First and foremost, the person should receive clear information on which reports to submit, the relevant deadlines, and how responsibility for preparing documents should be divided between the individual and the unit. Existing information materials developed by civil society organisations should also be used and provided to service members before the process begins, not after discharge.

*"They should actually give you something like your roadmap"<sup>89</sup>.*

*Veteran, 36 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Until these procedures are improved, veterans believe that legal assistance remains one of the practical solutions.

*"A good lawyer saves you a great deal of time and stress."*

*Veteran, 27 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

**Simplifying bureaucratic procedures** remains extremely important. For example, recommendations by US researchers on reducing the

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<sup>89</sup> This refers to the printed version of the Journeys of Veterans map.  
[veteranhub.com.ua/analytics/doslidzhenya-shlyahu-veteraniv-i-veteranok](https://veteranhub.com.ua/analytics/doslidzhenya-shlyahu-veteraniv-i-veteranok)

stigmatisation of veterans in Ukraine include a separate section on simplifying interaction with public services<sup>90</sup>. At the same time, respondents' experiences show that obtaining the necessary documents still requires excessive effort. In their view, this process should be made as simple as possible.

*"Please just give me what I'm entitled to. If you say I'm entitled to that property or land, then just give it to me without any fuss."*

*Veteran, 34 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Veterans believe that public policy should place much greater emphasis on how people with combat experience adapt to civilian life. In particular, some veterans **need support mechanisms** that monitor their adaptation for at least a year after their return. In other words, support should not depend on the veteran taking the initiative, but should involve continuous guidance throughout the initial adaptation period, since the assistance provided by veteran organisations during this time is not sufficient for everyone.

*"A person is discharged, and the state thinks, 'Well, whatever, did they return or not?' I understand that no one is going to send me to a rehabilitation centre, although I probably wouldn't refuse... This has to be a matter of public policy. Have you returned? Have you adapted? Which is more difficult? Unfortunately, none of that exists at all."*

*Veteran, 30 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Veterans also see **guaranteed financial support for a period of six months to one year** as a possible tool for improving adaptation, accompanied by external oversight to ensure that the funds are used for their intended purpose. This would allow veterans to recover calmly and return to civilian life gradually.

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<sup>90</sup> The Ukrainian Veterans Foundation. Stigmatisation of Veterans: The Situation in Ukraine and the US Experience. [veteranfund.com.ua/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Styhmatyzatsiia-veteraniv-i-veteranok.pdf](https://veteranfund.com.ua/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Styhmatyzatsiia-veteraniv-i-veteranok.pdf)

*"A person is discharged and doesn't immediately look for a job. They have six months or a year during which they receive some stable social welfare support. Let it be one and a half thousand dollars... That is financial support for a year! So the veteran is financially secure! They don't have to worry, but they sign an undertaking that they will not drink heavily, because someone could receive the money and drink it all away. That they won't misuse it... The money could even be held in a dedicated social account. Veteran hubs could be assigned to them, so to speak, and become centres providing this support."*

*Veteran, 51 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Veterans also consider introducing a statutory **right to up to two weeks' leave after discharge** to be a necessary step in supporting adaptation.

*"A law allowing people to have at least a week or two after discharge to recover would be very appropriate and useful for those who then need to start looking for work and adapting."*

*Veteran, 40 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Veterans also regard **psychological support** as an important factor in successful adaptation, since all service members experience stress during service, which may negatively affect their psychological state. For this reason veterans recommend treating psychological support as part of adapting to civilian life and not something to be neglected.

*"Many charitable organisations provide psychological support when needed. I would advise people to use it, almost as though it were compulsory."*

*Veteran, 25 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

## 2. What veterans should pay attention to

Respondents address the second group of proposals to other veterans returning to civilian life. These proposals are based on an analysis of their own experiences: veterans share the mistakes they believe should be avoided, as well as what helped them most during adaptation.

The initial adaptation process can be structured as a certain algorithm comprising the essential stages of entering civilian life. The first stage is **rest, which is necessary for recovery** and was emphasised by respondents themselves.

*"Rest, go somewhere, change your surroundings, give yourself time, do not start looking for work immediately, and allow yourself to adapt. Begin looking for a job only once you have dealt with all the social and everyday matters that have piled up, because once you start working, you may not have time to deal with them, and they will continue to bother you."*

*Veteran, 25 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

When reflecting on their own experiences of returning, informants also repeatedly emphasised the importance of **defining life goals**.

*"Find something for yourself to do. Decide clearly whether you'll return to the civilian job you had before, whether you no longer want to go back, or whether you want to do something of your own. Make a decision! What you are going to do is probably the most important thing."*

*Veteran, 35 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

According to veterans, this is extremely important because returning may be accompanied by a feeling that one's journey through life has been interrupted. For them, putting life on hold means losing time that can never be recovered. Although this loss

cannot be compared with the losses of war, it is nevertheless experienced very acutely.

*"The main thing is to do something. When you do nothing, foolish thoughts creep into your head and consume you... Remember that you had a hobby, something you wanted to accomplish but never did. At this point, you have... a chance to do it, to try. Find something for yourself. And then, for real, you begin to feel a little different. At least in that moment. Our lives are made up of moments. And to some extent, it still depends on us whether those moments are positive or negative, whatever happens."*

*Veteran, 36 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

**Maintaining communication with others** is an important component of successful adaptation. Drawing on their own experiences of returning to civilian life, veterans note that, despite all the difficulties of interacting with civilians, they should not isolate themselves from those around them, as such interaction supports adaptation.

*"The key thing isn't to close yourself off. Try to find at least some common ground. No one from civilian life will truly understand you, whatever they may say, because they haven't lived through this experience. But there's no point in distancing yourself because of that. It harms both you and those around you, and above all, of course, it harms you."*

*Veteran, 25 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Another important point to understand even before returning is **how the civilian world will actually receive a veteran, and what that world will be like**. Veterans emphasise the importance of abandoning the illusion that the civilian world will be waiting for heroes and will be unconditionally grateful for everything they have

done, since unrealistic expectations significantly complicate the transition from military to civilian life.

*"I didn't understand that it was a myth that you return and everyone makes a fuss over you, everyone understands your contribution to defending the country, everyone calls you a hero, everyone loves you, respects you enormously and so on... Everyone should understand that this is a myth. In reality, it's not like that. You return, and you are simply a civilian. Of course, you have certain preferences, but often they are not even respected."*

*Veteran, 25 years old, with military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Addressing those who will return in the future, veterans share their own experiences, which show that returning home is not a return to the past, but an encounter with a new present. War changes everyone, both those who fought and those who did not see the frontline. People who stay in the civilian environment become accustomed to living without those who left to fight. However, this does not mean that there will be no place for veterans in their lives. That place simply needs to be created anew, and this requires a joint effort.

*"You'll never be the person you once were. You will have to get used to people, and they will have to get used to you. For example, one trigger for me was... I returned home, and there was a coat rack in the corridor. Every hook held my wife's or my child's things. There was no hook for me. And that immediately gave me the thought that there wasn't even a hook left for me at home."*

*Veteran, 36 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Veterans suggest **paying attention not only to the return to civilian life, but also to the reverse process of joining or potentially returning to service.** 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 are therefore needed not only for civilian life, but also for military life.

*"I think a great deal of attention should be paid to service members who have been discharged, including whether they plan to return and what they think about it. If they are returning or want to return, then how and in what role? It doesn't always work in such a way that a discharged service member becomes entirely civilian or adapts to current norms. The war is still ongoing, and many people may return, either because circumstances force them to or because they choose to."*

*Veteran, 23 years old, with no military experience before becoming a UAV operator*

Thus, all respondents' reflections on what to consider when preparing for the return to civilian life are addressed separately to both institutional structures and veterans themselves. These two types of recommendations require different methods of implementation.

- 1. Institutional changes** require the involvement of various actors, including civil servants, representatives of military structures, and members of parliament. Civil society organisations, the media, opinion leaders, and veterans may act as mediators in this process. Veterans may influence the implementation of change externally through their own organisations, as well as internally through interaction with brothers- or sisters-in-arms who continue to serve.
- 2. Recommendations for veterans** are important, but it is considerably more difficult to determine how they can be communicated to the target audience. At a time when discharges are not occurring on a mass scale but on an individual basis, veterans themselves may become important mediators. Civil society organisations could collect their experiences and

present them as video messages. Bloggers who are popular within the ranks could also act as mediators. In addition, such guides for veterans should include brief summaries and links to dedicated videos in which veterans share their own experiences of adaptation. Developing this type of content by civil society organisations could become a separate area of support from donor organisations, while distributing it through popular media could provide an effective means of implementation.

# **CONCLUSIONS**

- 1.** 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 connections from civilian life they are able to maintain during service.

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- 2.** After discharge, veterans often carry their network of social ties from the military environment into the civilian world. The success of their return depends on preserving these ties, as they help rebuild the network of civilian interactions that was previously lost.

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- 3.** In civilian life, the planning horizon is generally much broader than it is for service members, who must be ready to carry out any order at any moment. The success of their return depends on regaining the ability to adjust their planning horizon freely.

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- 4.** During a war of liberation, service members prioritise preserving their country over preserving their own lives. For those discharged not because they are medically unfit for service, but on other lawful grounds, returning is often complicated by feelings of guilt towards those who remain in the military.

5. In this study, we identified **three possible forms of identity** that warriors may adopt after discharge.

- **“Service member on pause.”** Returning to civilian life is only one possible future trajectory, as the ongoing war means that returning to the military remains an option.

- **“Veteran,” a former service member living in the civilian world.**

In its radical form, the person does not seek to integrate, but instead expects the civilian world to recognise their role and create special conditions for them.

In its moderate form, the person is prepared to adapt to civilian life while remaining part of a distinct community whose members support one another and coexist peacefully with civilians.

In its concealed form, the person retains a veteran identity, but tries not to disclose it.

- **“Civilian.”** This identity involves returning to traditional roles and clearly distancing oneself from military experience. Veteran identity remains one of the person’s various social identities.

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6. Some veterans remain in a state of uncertainty, in the “neither integration nor return” status, and require external support during the return process.

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7. Veterans use **two strategies during initial adaptation.**

**The prolonged return strategy** involves a “well-deserved rest,” often with an undefined planning horizon. The prevailing desire is to distance oneself from the war.

**The rapid return strategy** involves a short pause to address urgent matters, followed by clear plans, a resumption of activity, and a rapid return to civilian life.

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- 8.** The opportunity to apply the 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 are potentially useful and may, if necessary, form the basis of a civilian career.

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

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- 10.** 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 predictable and ensure appropriate guarantees and social protection if a person is required to serve again.

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