

Military Lives and Transformative Experiences  
Exploring narratives and aged veterans' well-being

Final report  
October 2019



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## Background

### The older veteran community

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

In the United Kingdom (UK), an inclusive definition of a veteran has been adopted which includes all former service personnel: anyone who has been part of the armed forces for at least one day of service is considered to be a veteran (1).

Many of those who fit this definition may not identify as a veteran, believing the term refers to those who served in the World Wars. However, we are now seeing more ex-service personnel begin to take up the veteran identity, especially through wearing the Veterans Badge (2).

### Our research

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

Working with aged veterans in workshops and interviews, we shared stories from classic martial autobiographies, and heard aged veterans' stories in response, in order to:

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

Previous research shows that storytelling and narratives can benefit people with mental health problems (3). We have extended this work, first to the specific population of aged veterans; and second by adding framed prompts from classic martial autobiographies, connecting up academic work on narrating experiences and with that on therapeutic reading (4). This has

increased understanding of the well-being of aged veterans, and informs the toolkit we have created to help others work with this community. It is hoped that this toolkit can form the basis of larger-scale future interventions.

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

Classic autobiographies display repeated patterns—battlefield education, comradeship—and we have explored how those patterns resonated with, and are challenged by, the experiences of individual aged veterans.

Our academic interests combine a diverse body of previous research, both with veterans and with other vulnerable groups. In particular, we have drawn on the philosophical literature on transformative experiences, a technical term from philosophical theory used by L. A. Paul which describes the concept of a person undergoing something that changes the person who experiences them in two ways (5).

First, transformative experiences change what people know. By living through a transformative experience, a person gains knowledge only available by that first-personal experience. The claim is not that nothing can be known by others about these and other experiences; it is that not everything can be known that way. For the context of this project, one repeated theme of interviews was that participants want to tell us about their experiences, but come up against limits—they say 'you cannot know what it was like if you were not there'. This tends to unite veterans and to distinguish them from non-veterans, that they share knowledge only available through their distinctive experience. The consequences of this view will be discussed in the findings.

Second, transformative experience changes who people are. This is not becoming 'someone else' in the sense of having a new body, a new history, or a new name, but perhaps new personality traits and priorities, and maybe a new self or self-concept. Looking back on the self before a transformative experience may lead to a feeling of distance, or an awareness that there is a more complex, alienated and perhaps uncomfortable relationship with the person. This leads to the idea that time is split by living through transformative experiences, with a person having lived two distinct lives, or had two distinct selves. We focused on this in our workshops and interviews by taking a life course approach, and by highlighting moments of potential change such as joining and leaving the services.

Examples of transformative experiences include having children, going to war and becoming chronically ill. The concept of transformative experience is a

repeated theme of military autobiographies such as Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* and *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*. Sassoon shows his life as a transition from innocence to experience; from the pre-war fox-hunting Sassoon, to the author Sassoon who has lived through fighting in the trenches. Using this concept has been helpful in increasing understanding of the aged veteran experience.

We drew on the principles of action research in healthcare, to ensure that the project evolved to be responsive to new learning from aged veterans (6,7). This meant that every interview and workshop we conducted refined our approach to working with the aged veteran community, and allowed us to consider how aged veterans benefitted from exploring their experiences and responses to prompts in narrative interviews and workshops. We also gathered valuable insights into the concerns of this community, and the challenges they face.

Based on the data collected, we shaped a toolkit which can be used to mediate encounters between veterans and autobiographical stories and helps health sector, third sector and other service providers to understand community concerns. This toolkit is designed to be delivered at scale and we hope it will provide benefit to aged veterans nationwide. The project has also delivered academic benefits; we and other academics across health research, policy, philosophy, and other disciplines who are interested in the lives and well-being of aged veterans, the benefits of narrative and narration, and in the nature of flourishing, have learned more about aged veterans' lives and concerns.

Drawing on current knowledge about how individuals come to understand themselves and their lives, and to make the case for ways in which the ways their life has gone well or badly, we considered these processes of self-discovery and self-construction. The focus was on producing outcomes with relevance to current aged veterans rather than recording oral history narratives, though our research demonstrated the importance of historical stories to veterans. Our work aimed to provide the following four outcomes.

1. Improvements in well-being for participating aged veterans;
2. Evidence of whether and how narrating military experience, prompted by classic martial autobiographies, has well-being benefits;
3. Increased understanding of aged veterans' lives, their self-understandings, and the distinctive challenges they face, which will

inform future wider interventions and identify gaps in current supportive services;

4. Increased understanding of the role of autobiographical narrative in making sense of one's own life and in living a flourishing life, in particular for aged veterans.

## Research Methodology

The project used qualitative research techniques in combination with philosophical concepts to work closely with older veterans to understand their perspectives on their military lives and mental health and well-being. The project had two strands of data collection:

- (1) Interviews with 50 older veterans, focused on the role of personal narrative autobiography and autobiographical accounts and their impact on well-being.
- (2) Five workshops conducted in Ashton-under-Lyne, Lancaster, London, Manchester and Preston working with a total of over 70 veterans (approx. 15 per workshop), examining the use of storying prompts, concepts such as transformative experience, and focused on a particular theme in military life such as enlistment, comradeship or leaving the forces.

From this, we have produced analytical accounts of how, when, and the ways in which aged veterans use autobiographical accounts and storytelling in their lives to improve their mental health and well-being. Analysis was used to inform the design of an intervention toolkit to help organisations and individuals who work with the veterans' community, as well as to further current knowledge about the effects and impact of military experiences (of all kinds) on former service personnel.

### Detailed overview of work conducted

#### Interviews

We met our recruitment target of 50 interviews with aged veterans in March 2019. Using the principle of being guided by information power (8), we are confident that we have achieved analytical rigour which has transferrable relevance. The interview data represents a significant body of data providing generalizable insights on aged veterans and their lives (both in and after military service).

Interviews were conducted in participants' homes, or via telephone (depending on location of participants), and lasted between 30 and 150 minutes, with most lasting around 60 minutes. Because we interviewed participants by telephone, we were able to include veterans who were based in remote rural locations who were not able to travel to workshops, so have accessed a community that is not necessarily represented in previous studies of veterans.

All interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. Data analysis was conducted using a constant comparative method (9) which took a grounded approach to generating codes from the data which were then refined by the research team to produce a coding framework that was applied to all the data. From this initial coding, dominant themes were further considered by the research team and the data was again interrogated to ensure that this was adequately captured in the analytical process.

#### **Interview participants: demographics**

Participants in our 50 interviews were mostly been male (45), with five female participants (table 1). The age range of participants was between 69 – 100 (born 1917-1949) with majority between 70 and 86. Almost half (24) were from the north-west of England. This is probably a facet of sampling rather than a reflection of the veteran population per se.

Of those interviewed, over half (27) declared a disability. Half of the participants were married or living with a partner (25), with the remainder living alone – divorced, separated, widowed or single. The majority (47) identified as heterosexual with two identifying as a gay man and one preferring not to say. All participants (50) identified as white British, white English, white Scottish or white Welsh and most (38) stated their religion as Christian.

No statistics are available for the aged veterans community specifically, but according to the *Annual population survey: UK armed forces veterans residing in Great Britain 2016*, there are approximately 2.5 million UK Armed Forces veterans (10). Of these veterans, 63% were aged 65 or over, and thus potentially part of the community involved in this research.

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

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

Within the overall community, veterans were estimated to be predominantly white (98%) and male (90%). Therefore our current sample is representative of the veteran community, though with a slightly lower number of women than is representative, and a slightly lower ethnic diversity than expected. The *Annual Population Survey* does not include information on veteran sexualities. Though we targeted particular community groups to try to increase the diversity of our sample, we were not able to recruit these communities to the project for interview. Nevertheless, we are confident that the conclusions drawn by our work broadly reflect the aged veteran community profile and their concerns.

Ex-service personnel represent a substantial proportion of the older adult population. At time of last estimate, they equated to around 1 in 8 older adults (aged over 65) in the UK population (11,12). The current generation of UK older adults are in a distinct position in society, with a higher proportion having served in the military than in subsequent generations. This figure is a product of



the introduction of National Service, which formed the basis of conscription 1939-1945, and then was enacted as a minimum two years of service from 1948-1960, with conscripts serving until 1963. However, comparison of the most recent surveys of the veteran community show a significant decline in the number of veterans: there were over 99,000 fewer veterans in 2017 than there were in 2016 (13). It is presumed that this is because of deaths of older veterans, rather than significant changes in numbers of current military personnel. This is of obvious relevance for the aged veteran community.

### Interview participants: service history

As part of our research, we have extensively examined the service lives of aged veterans. While previous generations of veterans had more shared or similar experiences – for example, in Europe in World War Two (WWII) – this cohort has a wealth of diverse experiences. Most had travelled internationally as part of their role and had served during conflict and more peaceful times.

Twenty-three veterans had served in the army, three in the navy, 22 in the RAF and two in the territorial army. Many mentioned specific regiments that they had been part of; others had different experiences (including administrative roles). For those who had been in regiments, regimental identity was still important.

Of those in our interviews and workshops, several served in WWII (including in Burma and as a Japanese prisoner of war) or provided service in its aftermath (e.g. at Christmas Island as part of nuclear testing, in Jerusalem, in cold-war Germany). Others saw combat in the Malay crisis or the Korean war. Those who joined later were variously posted to Northern Ireland, Kenya, Gibraltar, Cyprus, Oman, Libya, Jamaica, Hong Kong, Singapore and other locations.

Most had joined the forces aged between 18 and 21. The majority (29) had voluntarily enlisted, with one WWII conscript and 20 veterans who had undertaken national service. National service typically lasted two years, and most of the veterans (15) had served for this long, with one serving for 1.5 years. Of those in national service, four had had served longer than the minimum requirement. Others, who had enlisted voluntarily or were conscripted, served for between three and 34 years.

Many had joined the services because it provided an escape route out of poverty or opportunity to avoid poor working conditions (such as mining). Others had joined up for the opportunities to travel and other benefits that service offered. The opportunity to learn a trade was occasionally mentioned as a motivation. Others still had been drawn in by the idea of an exciting life, defending the

country (mentioning cinematic depictions of military exploits). Of course, not all of those veterans interviewed voluntarily enlisted. Several of those who did national service explored how they aimed to keep their efforts in this compulsory military service to a minimum.

Reasons for leaving the military also varied and were not always positive. This did not affect whether ex-service personnel saw themselves as a veteran. Several of others those interviewed had been medically discharged from the services, either after injury or following a suicide attempt.

For the few women in our sample, experience of being female and in the services did not always have a positive end; one was unfairly dismissed, with two others having to leave on marriage. All served during a time when women were legally required to leave the forces when they married.

Following service, veterans had gone on to work in a variety of trades. Many of these trades had been learned during service – for example, electrical engineering. Others had been pathways laid out by government (such as going into teaching) or folklaw (going into other service-based occupations such as the police, ambulance or prison services).

Tracing the history, training and multiple locations of all the veterans included in the research, telling the stories of their service, could in itself be a book-length text. However, it is relevant to consider in brief as it helps to de-homogenise this group and explore which experiences they have in common and which may be more diffuse. Despite this diversity of service, veterans frequently talked about an enduring similarity or connection between former military persons regardless of service, role, experiences (of conflict), and age, particularly when compared to those who ‘cannot know’ (civilians). Our experience of working with veterans as civilians emphasized to us that older veterans also regularly contradicted this sentiment by describing differences (for example, in terms of the conflicts experienced, different postings (national or international), training exercises, rank structures, national service or not). This is highly relevant to some of the practicalities of working with other veterans, particularly when aiming to facilitate discussion. Overall, despite these differences, difficulties, life changes, and regardless of length of service, veterans still saw an important connection between their current lives and their military service.

## Workshops

Five workshops were conducted in Ashton-under-Lyne, Preston, Lancaster, London, and Manchester working with a total of over 70 veterans (on average 15 per workshop), examining the use of storying prompts, concepts such as transformative experience, and focused on a particular theme in military life such as enlistment, comradeship or leaving the forces.

The workshops were structured to trial activities which encouraged aged veterans to reflect on others' narratives, and to engage with the philosophical concept of transformative experience. As a research team who have not served in the armed forces, our interest was in part exploring the dominant narrative that one cannot understand military experience unless one has participated in service. Thus, we presented the workshops to aged veterans with the framing that we were interested in military service but not experienced ourselves. Part of our rationale was that we wanted to present veterans with stories that would relate to, but not necessarily directly mirror, their experience. We theorised that this would help veterans to use their personal accounts and diverse perspectives to build a picture of different experiences. The goal was to reflect on the question of whether telling stories of experiences leads to greater self-understanding, and to investigate whether sharing these experiences is beneficial.

### First workshop

The first workshop was conducted in April 2018, in partnership with Tameside Armed Services Community (TASC). The workshop brought together 16 aged veterans (14 male and two female) from the Greater Manchester area. We did not collect further demographic data from this group. The workshop focused around the broad theme of joining the armed forces, and drew on the following topics identified from the interview data:

- Feeling like a cog in the machine and comradeship
- The physicality and materiality of basic military training – drill, exercise, weather, uniform and changing bodies
- Motivations for joining up, including the recognition that this may not be a choice (conscription)
- Becoming a part of the 'family' of military service personnel

The workshop was two hours plus lunch, and organised into two discussions in small groups of five to six people, with a facilitator per group. In activity one, we discussed excerpts from military autobiographies on basic military training and enlistment. In the second activity, we introduced the concept of transformative experience and discussed with aged veterans whether this was a helpful concept

in exploring the stories of their lives. For the first activity, we worked with five extracts from military autobiographies (appendix 1).

Though we mainly used American authors in workshop 1, the extracts were chosen because of the rich and evocative quality of their narratives around joining the military. One theme emerging from interviews was that while aged veterans have had very different experiences in military service, aged veterans professed to have a lot in common. One participant said that 'a soldier is a soldier' regardless of where they have served and whether or not they have been in battle. Using American extracts helped us to further test this concepts. The themes in the extracts were also ones common in military autobiographies more widely:

- The Romantic ideal of the hero in comparison with the sometimes dreary reality of service
- The innocence of the new initiate into the military
- Adopting a military ideal
- Conversion
- Remaking oneself vs being remade by others
- Resistance to becoming involved in the military
- Hating being a soldier but carrying on with it
- Individuality in comparison with being a member of a group
- Reasons for joining up
- Conducting drill

The autobiographical extracts and explanation of transformative experiences elicited a great deal of discussion, which was recorded by group facilitators. Several of the aged veterans had also brought materials relating to their experiences, which they shared with the facilitators, including books of photographs and narratives they had made, and objects such as identity cards and records of service. Evaluation of the workshop was broadly positive, with aged veterans stating that they valued getting together to share stories.

### Second workshop

The second workshop was conducted in June 2018, in partnership with the Royal Air Forces Association (RAFA) Wings Centre in Preston. Despite being publicised by both the project team via social media, and Wings Centre staff, only four male aged veterans were able to attend. We did not collect further demographic data from this group. The workshop focused around the broad theme of comradeship in the armed forces, and drew on the following topics identified from the interview data:

- Friendship as private vs comradeship as public
- Becoming a part of the 'family' of military service personnel
- Comradeship across enmity
- Feeling like a cog in the machine and individuality
- Resisting comradeship
- War and soldiering as another, closed world; not being able to explain to people who were not there

Similar to the first workshop, we used a structure of two hours plus lunch. However, the workshop was timed to run earlier in the day (before lunch, rather than having lunch in the middle). Some participants were not able to attend until later in the day due to caring commitments, and we theorised that this is one reason that attendance was lower at this event. We ran one small group discussion with all participants facilitated by the research team. In activity one, we discussed excerpts from military autobiographies on comradeship (appendix 1). In the second activity, we introduced the concept of transformative experience and discussed with aged veterans whether this was a helpful concept in exploring the stories of their lives.

In this workshop, despite the small number of participants, it was difficult to keep the conversation focused on the autobiographical extracts and explanation of transformative experiences, though there was still a great deal of relevant discussion which was recorded by group facilitators. Lessons learned included:

- Several of the participants had travelled relatively long distances to attend in comparison with the previous workshop, which was conducted in a bigger centre of population. Practical difficulties including travel arrangements need careful consideration.
- Timing of workshops should take into account caring responsibilities that aged veterans may have. One participant was not able to attend until later in the workshop because of this. This may have particular relevance for other activities/ organisations such as breakfast clubs.
- Framing workshops to ensure that participants are aware of the focus of discussion is important to guide the discussion. This workshop was in a more informal setting and conversation reflected this. Due to the informal nature of this workshop, we did not formally evaluate it.

### Third workshop

Following our second workshop, we planned some changes for our third workshop, which we conducted in October 2018. Changes we introduced for this workshop included:

- A longer workshop starting with lunch and continuing into the afternoon, providing more time for general discussion before activities
- A formal sign up process and formal invitations to veterans, ensuring greater attendance and greater awareness of the topics for discussion
- A structure with three activities, opening up conversations about current experiences as well as stories of military life

The workshop was held in Lancaster, in the Private Dining Room at Lancaster University. Eighteen participants volunteered to participate, though two had to cancel on the day, leaving 16 attendees (all male). Demographic data was collected from fourteen participants in advance (two were recruited later and so did not contribute in advance), showing that those who participated in the workshop were again representative of the general veteran community. This workshop focused around the broad theme of comradeship in the armed forces, and drew on the same topics identified from the interview data as in workshop 2. For the first activity, we worked with extracts from military autobiographies, as per workshop 2 (appendix 1).

In a change to our previous two workshops, we ran the workshop over an afternoon, with an hour for lunch and general discussion to start the workshop, before three exercises of 45 minutes each, with a break for afternoon tea. This structure was popular with the veterans, who appreciated the informal opportunity to chat as well as the structured exercises. They commented in evaluation forms that they were pleased to be treated well, with a hot lunch and afternoon tea. We ran four small group discussions with 3-5 participants per group and 1-2 members of the research team. For this workshop, we aimed to make the discussion groups smaller than in the first workshop and so recruited extra facilitators from the wider research collaborative to assist with this. By providing a formal structured timetable to participants, we were able to focus discussion around three activities, exploring comradeship, exploring change and exploring comradeship in post-service life.

This workshop was a great success and demonstrated the value of our approach to working with aged veterans. The excerpts helped to keep conversation on track as a point of reference; this was important as participants had previously expressed dissatisfaction if they felt that the conversation was deviating too far away from the stated aims and enabling the telling of 'rehearsed' stories. On reflection, we felt that the workshop could have been made slightly shorter, to help keep conversations more focused.

Facilitators agreed that the conversations were very productive, particularly the first exercise, and that the format of the workshop enabled inter-service camaraderie, banter and was demonstrably good for veterans' well-being. Several participants talked about the loneliness and social isolation they were experiencing, and there was some sharing of knowledge of local services, initiatives to help veterans (including other Aged Veterans Fund projects like Project Semaphore).

One theme that this workshop highlighted was that all the veterans we were working with had moved into a successful alternative career post-service. This post-military work was a theme that had also emerged from the data collected in interviews. In discussions of change, in workshops and interviews, veterans expressed the idea that 'the day they left was the biggest change,' and this led us to use the themes of leaving the forces and post-military work for our fourth workshop.

#### Fourth workshop

The fourth workshop was conducted in London at the Union Jack Club, in April 2019, building on the successful third workshop. In response to previous feedback from veterans, we introduced two new elements: veterans were given the opportunity to stand up and introduce themselves and their service, plus they were asked to fill in a short form to fill in and pin to the wall, which also give a short service history.

Eighteen participants volunteered to participate and all were able to attend. Demographic data was collected from all participants in advance, showing that those who participated in the workshop were again representative of the general veteran community. This workshop focused around the broad theme of leaving the armed forces.

We again ran the workshop over an afternoon, with an 45 minutes for lunch and general discussion to start the workshop, before two exercises of 45 minutes each, with a break for refreshments. This shorter length was in response to veterans' and our own reflections on workshop 3; however, some veterans commented in evaluation that they would like a longer workshop.

Due to team members availability and illness, we ran three slightly larger group discussions, and again used a formal structured timetable focus discussion. For the first activity, we worked with extracts from military autobiographies (appendix 1). Exercise 2 used interview quotes from the research, and both the autobiographical extracts and interview quotes provoked significant thoughtful

reflection. This workshop enabled very rich conversations and participants were very engaged.

### Fifth workshop

The fifth workshop took place in central Manchester in June 2019. As the workshop was conducted on the fiftieth anniversary of the WWII D-Day landings, we started the workshop with a minute's silent reflection. Eighteen participants volunteered to participate and all were able to attend. Demographic data was collected from all participants in advance, showing that those who participated in the workshop were again representative of the general veteran community. The structure of the workshop was the same as the fourth workshop (lunch followed by two exercises), but we trialled a new format: using two themes, and using only interview extracts to generate discussion.

This workshop focused around the two broad themes of joining the armed forces, and leaving the armed forces, as significant transformative experiences. Due to team members availability and illness, we ran three slightly larger group discussions, and again used a formal structured timetable focus discussion. While discussion still flowed well, we found that the poetic and reflective nature of the autobiographical extracts often generated more debate and reflection, whereas participants often agreed with the interview extracts and did not always consider them as fully. This suggests that interview extracts need to be selected to encourage disagreement and debate to facilitate in-depth reflection.

### Project reach

We aimed to work with 150 veterans over four workshops and 50 interviews. In total, we have worked with 108 different aged veterans (some attended a workshop and took part in an interview, which accounts for the slight disparity in numbers), and had significant contact with other members of the veteran community.

Some veterans who were not formally signed up to participate in the interviews or workshops sent us letters outlining their stories. Others shared details on Facebook. An interesting source of information, which we have fed back to the RBL during project steering group meetings, was commentary from aged veterans who did not want to be part of the project due to perceptions of negative experiences with veterans organisations. This enabled us to contribute to increased understanding of veterans lives and concerns, even if they were not formally part of the research project and enrolled as a participant. We estimate that in total, around 150-160 veterans have been part of the project in some



capacity, though news of the project will have been shared significantly more widely, and will continue after our funded period has finished.

### Outputs and dissemination

Dissemination of academic and other outputs from our research is ongoing. We aimed to submit three academic journal articles, alongside contributing to wider debates and policy where appropriate. We maintained a significant public presence throughout our research and we made contact with a significant number of veterans online, mainly via our Facebook page and our twitter account @MilitaryLives, and to a lesser extent via our project website.

We recruited participants through organisations including local RBL branches, national RBL newsletters, Tameside Armed Services Community (TASC), the RAFA Preston Wings Centre, Westfield War Memorial Village, and Age UK. As part of this work, TASC wrote up details of our workshop in their Tameside Signal newsletter.

Information about the project has also been shared via various sources, including the RBL national newsletter, the Lancaster University staff network, and with the Imperial War Memorial research group, who shared information with their learning volunteers. We have also promoted the project via the Champion for Armed Forces and Veterans across Lancashire, County Councillor Alf Clempson.

The first peer-reviewed academic journal article, *A point of connection? Well-being, the veteran identity and older adults*, has been resubmitted and is currently under review with the academic journal *Ageing and Society* following positive reviews from anonymous reviewers and edits in response.

The second article, which has the working title *Understanding military veterans: difference, experience, and dialogue* will be submitted to *Critical Military Studies* and aims to enrich the debate about understanding veterans beyond what has been published to date by using a different theoretical framing of 'experience'. The article uses data from interviews to be critical of modes of research that produce knowledge about certain marked-out communities who are designated as 'vulnerable' and 'in need,' a perspective which has been taken up in military research, most notably by Bulmer and Jackson(14). Echoing the tenet of the disability rights movement, 'nothing about us, without us', Jackson (a veteran with PTSD and researcher) and Bulmer (an academic), discuss the limits of current research on veterans. We position the findings of our research alongside

this work, considering how to facilitate listening to veteran voices and how to communicate effectively across a perceived military-civilian gap.

The third journal article, which has the working title *The role of reminiscence in military veterans' healthy ageing* reviews the role of military autobiography in reviewing personal history. Healthy ageing is an international priority, focused on ensuring that older adults maintain cognitive and physical functioning. Successful reminiscence and life review, looking back over a life lived, are considered by many gerontologists to be an essential part of healthy ageing. This paper considers what reminiscence in healthy ageing looks like in a community of military veterans who may feel marginalised by their experiences. We plan to submit this paper to *Age and Ageing* or the *Journal of Ageing Studies*.

We also hope to write at least two further papers: one outlining the 'headlines' from our empirical work in relation to the concept of cultural competencies, which will contribute to knowledge about aged veterans experiences and concerns, and one focused on post-military work and lives in this cohort. Further papers will be identified as more data analysis is conducted. The body of data is rich and we anticipate being able to continue to disseminate outputs over the next few years.

We have also been presenting our work to the academic and other communities, including:

- Seminar at the Changing Character of War project in Oxford.
- Interview on local radio (BBC Radio Lancashire, which has 164,000 listeners per week according to RAJAR figures) about the project and our findings. The interview looked at loneliness among veterans as part of the Ministry of Defence strategy to combat social isolation, with veteran John Jones who worked with the project.
- Presentation at the 15th biennial ERGOMAS conference: Military Studies in a Post-Truth Society: Challenges and Perspectives in Lisbon, Portugal.
- Two presentations at the British Sociological Association MedSoc conference in York.
- Response to the *Strategy for our veterans: UK government consultation paper* in February 2019.

- Summary of findings for participants
- Executive summary report for dissemination to organisations

Finally, we have drafted a toolkit that organisations who work with older veterans can use to inform their practice. This includes national and local charities, organisations aiming to work with the veteran community more broadly, health service providers, residential or care organisations and educational organisations aiming to support older adult learning. The toolkit contains practical recommendations to working with older veterans, including considerations of accessibility and a guide to delivering activities that enable civilians to support older veterans, with the aim of improving their wellbeing.

The toolkit is formed from analysis of interview transcripts and interactions with aged veterans in the workshops. As the extensive outline of the workshops above shows, the reflection and learning from working with over 70 veterans in workshops trialling activities that encouraged discussion and sharing.

## Research Findings

Our project aimed to achieve the following four outcomes, which will be used as a structure for the findings section:

1. Improvements in well-being for participating aged veterans;
2. Evidence of whether and how narrating military experience, prompted by classic martial autobiographies, has well-being benefits;
3. Increased understanding of aged veterans' lives, their self-understandings, and the distinctive challenges they face, which will inform future wider interventions and identify gaps in current supportive services;
4. Increased understanding of the role of autobiographical narrative in making sense of one's own life and in living a flourishing life, in particular for aged veterans.

The findings section will be structured around these outcomes to demonstrate the effect of the project on the aged veteran community.

### Improvements in well-being for participating aged veterans

We theorised that working with aged veterans directly as part of the research project would lead to improvements in well-being. Our understanding of well-

being is that it is a complex concept that does not lend itself to measurement, so we have not administered surveys to veterans or quantified well-being. Instead, we have listened to veterans about their own understanding of well-being and have sought their feedback on what well-being means to them. Having worked with over 100 veterans, all involved have responded positively to being able to participate in workshops and interviews. Others have also expressed a wish to be involved but have been unable to for practical reasons (e.g. time/ availability). As noted above, some other veterans also found benefit in outlining their reasons for not engaging with the project at this stage/ in this format.

From the perspective of those involved in the research, reported benefits include decreased loneliness, enjoyment in connecting with other veterans and valuing being asked to tell stories. Feedback from veterans in response to workshop evaluations highlights how they appreciated the opportunities this research provided (table 2). It also highlighted some of their other concerns, which feeds into our aim to increase understanding of aged veterans' lives, and the distinctive challenges they face.

*Table 2: Aged veteran feedback from workshops*

<i>"As it is already, it was structured was fine, as far as I was concerned. A relaxed style and staff that encouraged discussion." (workshop 3)</i>
<i>"Each session held real interest, no total boredom (often a feature of academic and church study days)" (workshop 3)</i>
<i>"The course is very informative and I really enjoyed it. Speaking about our past services in the armed forces was a great thing." (workshop 1)</i>
<i>"This is a great exercise which should at sometime in the future extend to ex-force people beyond this age group." (workshop 1)</i>
<i>"This is my first involvement in anything of this type. I am impressed. I hope the researchers accept that there is a huge gulf between elements in each of the services, i.e. between service in wartime and peacetime, between those in action, and those behind in supply services." (workshop 1)</i>
<i>I found the form the programme took to be fitting and it was interesting to hear other views from other services. [...] Some of the topics gave food for thought, which were quite interesting. I, hopefully, was able to contribute to the discussions. (workshop 4)</i>
<i>It will have already become apparent how 'old soldiers' of whatever flavour recognise shared experiences and have a natural affinity for one another. (workshop 3)</i>
<i>The quotations from the autobiographies proved provocative and related to our own experiences. We were quite surprised to learn that the first ones were written by T.E. Lawrence and Siegfried Sassoon so many years ago. They were still remarkably relevant. (workshop 4)</i>
<i>Thoroughly enjoyable and educative – I am leaving with good vibes resulting from the group work. (workshop 4)</i>

Veterans spoke about how being ex-military personnel created a bond that was maintained over time and distance, and our workshops were able to facilitate communication between groups of people who had no previous connection, who all felt welcome to join in the conversation. As has been reported elsewhere in the literature, being part of the military involved joining a community and becoming part of a 'family' (15). We have added to understanding by demonstrating that this fictive kinship did not deplete over time. Although relationships in service served a specific purpose (to protect each others' lives in active combat and ensure cohesion in difficult circumstances; veterans often commented that they did not feel that they had to like comrades, they knew that they could rely on them), these intimate and disciplined bonds did not end when the participant left military service and adopted a veteran identity.

*The emphasis is on it's a family, you are part of a family. [...] The bonding is much more than happening to be in a trench with your guys, the bonding is the social side of life. [...] It lasts afterwards: we still feel that. (Participant 26: male, 1936, TA, Voluntary Enlisted, 25 years served)*

These bonds were not just seen to connect individuals who knew each other or had served together. When talking with other veterans, the trope of 'not having to explain yet being understood' (16) was present in many of the stories that veterans told about engaging with other veterans. Several participants told a story of being at social events, like weddings, with strangers and sharing a common bond of service.

*I was talking to one man, and he said, "You've served." He says, "The way you're talking, you've served." And I just laughed, and says, "Yeah." He said, "We've all got our own way." And it is: we are a community. (Participant 12: male, 1948, Navy, Voluntary Enlisted, 31 years served)*

These stories were seen to resonate across experiences, even when the person had not served in the same location or event. Memories were shared, even though experiences were not.

*You're a member of a very elite club, and it never leaves you, and [...] it's OK to talk to some absolutely strange person in the street who's ex-forces, and they'll get you. They understand. (Participant 09: female, 1949, RAF, Voluntary Enlisted, 3 years served)*

Being able to facilitate these connections had a positive impact on participating veterans. Veterans in our workshops particularly enjoyed the coincidental meetings with someone with whom they had something in common. One

participant reported that he was extremely pleased to have met someone who had served in the same location as him, as he had never encountered anyone else who had shared this experience since his service. Through workshops, aged veterans were able to access each other as a resource for listening and sharing. Many expressed a desire to continue the conversation with those they had met after the event. While we were able to facilitate some ongoing communication, General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) limited our ability to enable this more fully.

Throughout the research interviews, although we sometimes encountered a reluctance amongst our participants to talk in detail about emotional experiences, these bonds of service between veterans were openly acknowledged and it was acceptable to talk about the ongoing importance of them.

*There was a question that was asked the other day on Facebook, "Do you miss the people you served with?" and there was within 20 minutes, there was 40 replies, "Yes." So, there you are: it says it all. (Participant 04: male, 1945, Army, Voluntary Enlisted, 22 years served)*

The experience of military service was a uniting factor that, for some participants, went beyond individual service experiences. Social networking was identified as a tool that maintained connections over time, and between veterans who had not previously been connected.

*If you've got a problem, you can go on Facebook - any of the sites - and put something on and say, "I've got a question to ask," and you'll get lots and lots of advice. [Interviewer: Would you call it a community?] It's still family. We are a family. And we're not just talking about the army, we're talking about the whole of the armed services. You'll find the navy, air force, royal marines, you know, and everybody's talking on there. (Participant 04: male, 1945, Army, Voluntary Enlisted, 22 years served)*

In considering the role of stories of experiences and their effect on aged veterans, we were able to highlight the impact of loneliness on this community. Our interview data showed that the interviews themselves functioned as a source of contact and comfort with a willing listener; something that improved well-being. The impact of loneliness on health and well-being, including the impacts on cognitive and physiological functioning, has been widely reported (17,18). Using narratives of military experience to connect, both in the telling of a story and by having an audience for the story, was used to overcome loneliness.

In interviews, few aged veterans spoke about isolation and loneliness directly. Instead, references were made to friends who had died, funerals attended, and to the difficulty of talking with other people who had not been part of military services. One participant did raise the issue directly, stating that:

*The only thing that I think ought to be covered when you do these interviews is what's the state of mind of veterans now? [...] I haven't spoken to anybody for about four days... And people that live on their own, especially veterans, loneliness is a terrible thing, and although I've got friends, they're about eight or nine miles away. You might meet them once a week, that's OK, and I never tell my friends that I'm lonely or anything like that. [...] But people like me, and there are a lot of veterans that live on their own, they can be desperately lonely. (Participant 14: male, 1939, RAF, National Service, 2 years served)*

The isolation caused by older age comes across clearly in this comment. Other veterans articulated this loneliness less clearly. For example, a note on a transcript reads:

*After the recorder turned off he said he had been lonely, and speaking to me this morning had lifted his spirits. (Participant 17: male, 1938, RAF, National Service, 1.5 years served)*

Other participants also talked about the death of close friends in interviews, and how it affected their previously strong ties with particular groups.

*We're running short of members now. In fact, one of our closest friends died just about a month ago [...] We're all ageing a little bit, I'm in the mid-80s now. So it's down to, in fact now that he's died, there was about four of us regular over the last two or three years, and because of deaths and, as I say, getting older, it's now down to, there's only really two of us, after happenings in this year alone. (Participant 21: male, 1932, RAF, National Service, 2 years served)*

Perhaps unsurprisingly remembrance, recognition and respect are central elements of the veteran identity. The importance of this common bond was comforting; the connections of military service meant that one's contributions would not be forgotten, and the veteran community would look after each other in times of need.

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

*(Participant 14: male, 1939, RAF, National Service, 2 years served)*

The reassurance that even in death the bond of service meant that people would pay their respects and recognise you as a family member reinforces the idea of the importance of being a veteran. Having the ability to share these thoughts with the research team also presented benefits to veterans, allowing us to highlight the importance of this to other organisations.

As discussed above, while the research project was taking place, the number of veterans in the UK significantly declined. This means that our attempts to facilitate communication between remaining veterans presents a timely intervention, which may become more necessary as this trend continues and veterans lose previously established support networks. It may also speak to themes presented below, regarding aged veterans concerns regarding other, younger generations of veterans.

### **Exploring whether narrating military experience has well-being benefits**

Through our interviews and workshop interactions with over 100 veterans, we have clearly contributed to the evidence base around the uses and limitations of military autobiographies. As the above quotes from the evaluations (table 2) show, in some cases they are useful in facilitating and framing discussion which has well-being benefits. However, interview data shows that in general, these classic martial autobiographies are not read by many veterans. Instead, veterans often read military history; this will be discussed later in the report. However, we found benefits for well-being and self-understanding both in the use of autobiographical extracts to prompt discussion and in the narration of military experience.

The use of autobiographical extracts to structure discussion in the workshops helped aged veterans to consider the impact of joining the armed services, leaving the services, and relationships with comrades both during and after service. Veterans reflected on situations they had never expected to find themselves in, the role of discipline and basic training. Using prompts allowed the workshop facilitators to guide the conversation along a particular reflective theme and to draw aged veterans into talking about their experiences, even if they did not find the prompts represented their experiences. The autobiographical extracts were not presented as statements of fact, but as points for clarification, and provoked strong disagreement with some of their themes. In particular, ideas around military service providing an opportunity to be heroic



were rejected, leading us to consider the role of military mythology and popular narratives.

Throughout the autobiographical prompts, the evocative descriptions of comradeship, across different cultures and languages, and the differentiation between comradeship and civilian friendship in these texts mirrored data from the interviews. One theme frequently found in interview data was that aged veterans value their military comrades, and also identify with other former armed services personnel even when they have not shared experiences directly. Using these autobiographies to drive the discussion forward allowed for in-depth discussions about comradeship and reflections on its value.

Using autobiographical extracts focused on leaving the forces was particularly productive in terms of encouraging discussion and improved mood amongst the veterans. Originally, finding relevant accounts of leaving service proved challenging, but those we located covered a number of relevant issues that enabled reflection on happy memories. By sharing autobiographical extracts that evoked retrospective emotions like pride, guilt, shame, bitterness, as well as regret at losing comrades, comradeship, and purpose, the conversation was able to be reflective, cathartic and inclusive without becoming overly personal.

Extracts which touched on the idea of transformative experience, or being a different person from the one who left home, not fitting in anymore, and not knowing these familiar people generated particularly productive discussion. We found a sense that 'soldiering' is a discrete chapter of a life, not related to or consistent with other chapters, and therefore that the story is complete in itself without homecoming context. However, 'being military' continued throughout post-service lives, and was an on-going concern. Alongside this, we were able to use the autobiographical extracts to cover well-known post-military issues such as veterans feeling owed thanks, praise, a hearing by civilians and that debt being paid or not paid.

This shows that it is not only working with veterans to share positive stories that can be said to be beneficial. Even when discussion had been quite emotionally powerful or in depth, veterans still stated that they had enjoyed their workshop experience and responded to the researchers with thanks for giving them a platform and a structure for sharing experiences. We posit that it is this structure that helps to keep productive conversation flowing, rather than opening the door to less beneficial discussion of individual grievances. Using a neutral third party (the autobiographical extract) as a 'jumping off point' for discussion took away some of the personal context while still maintaining the emotional engagement.

### Narrating military experience

It became clear during many of the interviews that the veterans had specific reasons why they wanted to tell their stories to other veterans, friends and family, the wider public and our interviewers. Also, many veterans who attended the workshops organised by the research team cited various reasons why they wanted to tell their stories and the importance of having the opportunity to do so. It has become quite apparent that the veterans participating in this research project have chosen to do so not only just to contribute their perspectives and experiences but also to satisfy their own desires to tell their stories. As part of our analysis, we started to classify why veterans had chosen to come forward and tell their stories (table 3).

Table 3: Veterans reasons for telling stories about military life

Reasons veterans want to tell their stories	Number [%]
Support each other: Community building/maintenance	14 [28%]
Keep stories, characters and history known/alive	14 [28%]
Enjoyment and/or to reminisce [which can be connected to community building]	12 [24%]
People want to know	8 [16%]
To educate/inspire others	7 [14%]
To talk about wider non-military interests	5 [10%]
Truth-telling	4 [8%]
Enough time has passed so now willing to speak about experiences	3 [6%]
Increase recognition of veterans' needs	1 [2%]

The use of stories as a form of bonding and establishing a sense of belonging in military culture has been widely established (19). Examining our interviews with this generation of veterans confirms this, with references to 'pulling up a sandbag', 'swinging the lamp' and an open acknowledgement that veterans love to tell stories to willing listeners.

*I think the thing about stories is that the veterans who are listening to the stories by other veterans understand the context. [...] The problem mainly is to get your story in, because everybody else wants to tell theirs! So you've got to be quick. [...] Veterans love to hear stories: they love to tell their own stories. (Participant 18: male, 1933, RAF, National Service, 25 years served)*

*We always have lunch after a game of golf, and we go out for dinners and various things, and so we do, we swing the light and drag up a sandbag every now and again, you know, and have a*

*chat, and it's quite interesting. (Participant 41: male, 1949, Army, Voluntary Enlisted, 22 years served)*

*There might be a few comical stories come up about things that have happened to various people at various times; some repeatable, some not. And, you know, it'll be that sort of camaraderie, amusing stories or where are they now type of things and, when you get to my age, asking if they're actually still around, you know! (Participant 28: male, 1933, Army, National Service, 2 years served)*

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

Telling stories to build and maintain veteran communities was one of the most commonly cited reason for veterans wanting to tell their stories to each other (28%). This purpose was highly valued by many as it was considered a key feature in developing supportive communities post-service to mitigate loneliness, alleviate worries/stressors, and to enjoy themselves. Sharing stories with other veterans created a sense of community as there was an enduring feeling that service-lives, no matter the time of service or role, are connected and experiences can be shared and empathised with. These stories were shared at social/community groups and also online using social media.

*"Do you remember so-and-so?" and "Yeah, do you remember when this happened?" "Do you remember when so-and-so missed the last bus back to camp in Cyprus?" for example, "and so he stole his own and then got shot in the foot by a Cypriot policeman?" "Oh, yeah, I remember that, there he is, he's over there," you know. "How's your heel?" "Bloody sore still!" and all that sort of stuff. Yeah, it's all reminiscences. And in many ways, I think that's quite cathartic [...]. (Participant 42: male, 1948, Army, Voluntary Enlisted, 16 years served)*

Wanting to keep stories, characters and histories alive and known by future generations was another of the most commonly cited reason for veterans wanting to tell their stories, especially to our researchers and younger generations. Many responded to questions by reeling off numerous stories about colleagues in the military providing details of personalities and military exploits. Others were worried that their stories would be lost if they did not tell them now due to old age – one wanted to make sure deployments he was involved with were understood by future generations, others wanted their families to know more about themselves, and others thought it was quite simply important for history to not be forgotten. Stories veterans wanted family members to know did not only relate to the military, but also to how they lived in the past – wanting future generations to value what they have now.

*[Interviewer: So you're living history, basically.] Yes, that's how it feels. It's my job really to share it with people so it's not lost, before we all die off. (Participant 37: male, 1924, RAF, Voluntary Enlisted, 3 years served)*

*I've been looking forward to this conversation with you because I know that my time now is very limited, and I think the only way we learn anything about anything is by what's gone before us. (Participant 20: male, 1933, Army, Voluntary Enlisted, 16 years served)*

Many veterans enjoyed telling their stories as it was an opportunity to reminisce about exciting times and this was also one of the more commonly cited reason for veterans wanting to tell their stories to each other and our researchers. For some veterans, their military lives were highly enjoyable and contributed to their own sense of self and accomplishments in their post-military lives. Talking about service gave them a sense of pride, increased feelings of camaraderie (which some found hard to come by post-service), and made them laugh as they could tell jokes considered impolite in non-military company. For some they enjoyed telling stories as it helped them to remember their own histories they had not wanted to forget – especially valued when a forgotten memory re-surfaced.

Data analysis shows that aged veterans regard being listened to as very valuable, and deem sharing stories to be a beneficial activity. The academic literature on storytelling and understanding military experience shows that veterans have a complex relationship with talking about their military experience, and how they use it to understand their lives: 'what they tell, how they tell it, and what they choose to keep to themselves, will always vary according to experience, memory, and sense-making' (20). However, veterans still use the telling of stories about

military experiences as a mode of recovery from their experiences (21). This can be therapeutically beneficial (22), leading to both healing and educational benefits, or not necessarily therapeutic, as experiences are not recognised by others (23). The sharing of experiences, only to have them rejected by others, is a known risk in storytelling.

*It is important to get it down, listen to them. Get it down. It could be important for your health, your mental health, doing that, a history. People I have and talked to, they can't understand that that is their life, they need to get it out; if they don't get it out, then, I'm sorry, but I can't help you. I can so far, but I can't.  
(Participant 08: male, 1945, Army, Voluntary Enlisted, 2 years served)*

Nevertheless, according to Davies, 'narrating military experiences can be a collective and socially situated phenomenon, which has impact on psychological outcomes of being involved in military service' (24). One consideration here, which is highlighted by this research, is that to find value in telling stories, there must be an audience for the tale; a 'willing listener' (25).

*It's a massive positive [talking to the interviewer] because ... you're talking to somebody that's listening, and it's like reminiscing, it's going back through your career, and what you've done before the army, what you've done in the army, what you've done since you came out of the army, how you've transgressed from coming out of service into civvy street. (Participant 27: male, 1948, Army, Voluntary Enlisted, 10 years served)*

Some veterans wanted to tell their stories because people, very simply, wanted to know, as here. They valued this as it enabled them the opportunity to feel heard, listened to and maybe even understood. This hints to the fact that veterans do not often feel listened to or understood by civilians particularly. Willing audiences were identified as schools, some family members, younger generations, and the interviewer. Veterans valued time and space being created for them to tell their stories. By interviewing some of those who had participated in workshops, we were able to capture some of the benefits that workshop participants identified in greater depth.

*You're able to talk to someone who is interested in listening, about your experiences, who wants to hear about your experiences and actually tries to bring them out of you. It's therapeutic in a way, I would think: that's the way to put it. It*

*gives you an opportunity to hopefully talk to someone who's sympathetic or even like-minded, if you like, and with the sort of forum we did in [location], that gives you a chance to get with other people who are definitely like-minded. (Participant 26: male, 1936, TA, Voluntary Enlisted, 25 years served)*

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

*I was saying [to my children that] I've walked away from funerals of friends and relations and the eulogy's thrown up hugely important and interesting things that that person [...] had done in your lifetime. And we said what a shame you didn't know that beforehand. And so, with my kids, I resolved to write [...] every now and then. I write them a story about something that's happened to me in the navy, one and a half sides of A4, and send it to them by email, so that during the rest of my life, they're going to get stories about what I did and what I saw and how I managed things, so that when the time comes, they won't be in ignorance. (Participant 12: male, 1943, Navy, Voluntary Enlisted, 31 years served)*

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

Linked to this need for a willing listener was an awareness of an increasing memorialisation in British culture, particularly important for aged veterans whose knowledge and experiences are dying with them. For some veterans in the interviews and workshops, participating in our research was the first time they had told stories about their military experience. There was a strong sense that there had not been a need to speak earlier in their lives, but also that if they were not able to talk about their experiences now, then it would be too late.

Many participants had not immediately seen themselves as a veteran following their service. For some, it was a number of years before they joined a veterans' organisation or began to accept their military service as part of their identity and talk about it with others.

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

*you started talking about it. (Wife of Participant 07: male, 1939, RAF, National Service, 5 years served)*

The later acceptance of a need to connect with other veterans was also seen to relate to the immediate pressures of coming out of service and into civilian life, needing to find employment and establish or re-establish family life. The connections between age, time, and community can be seen clearly in participant narratives, with a benefit on the need to re-establish links with others later on.

Previous research with World War II veterans has explored what coping strategies were used by those traumatised by war experiences; it identified that social support was key in managing in post-war civilian life (25). Sources of social support included previous military comrades, veterans' associations and wives and family (25). It highlighted that as veterans aged, they seemed to call on veterans associations more as they started to experience more distress. By trying to consider the role of time and distance from experience in understanding traumatic events, our analysis highlighted the effect of ageing on an ex-service population (26). As Phil Klay, an American veteran and author states, it took 'years to untangle' to get to a point where he felt able to give an account of his military experiences (27). A small number of veterans in our study wanted to tell their story as they had not done so before and felt that enough time had passed for them to be comfortable in doing so; stories here sometimes related to specific deployments and mental health.

*[Interviewer: Did you feel like you could talk about those experiences?] No, I didn't talk about the Falklands for nearly 30 years, or 25 years at least. [...] I can't really understand it, I just know that that's how I felt, and that's what happened. I haven't been able to analyse the detail. (Participant 12: male, 1943, Navy, Voluntary Enlisted, 31 years served)*

*[Interviewer: have you talked like this with people before?] Well, not really, no, no. Only my partner – I tell stories to my partner now, you know ... but I've never talked to anybody personally about things, about my army career and since I've come out and all that. I mean, after a couple of years, when I come out, I couldn't settle. I could not settle. I just don't know what it was: I couldn't settle. (Participant 27: male, 1948, Army, Voluntary Enlisted, 10 years served)*

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

*I'm pretty open about my military service, but some people, especially veterans before me that really suffered war, they won't talk at all. My dad did six years, right through the Second World War, and then he never spoke about it. At all. And he wouldn't speak about it. (Participant 02: male, 1948, Army, Voluntary Enlisted, 27 years served)*

This awareness of their position in society as both older adults and military veterans meant that those who participated in our workshops and interviews expressed a need to use their experiences to support and help both their current generation and other, younger veterans, which will be explored in the following section. By considering whether and how narrating military experience, prompted by classic martial autobiographies, has well-being benefits we have started to understand more about how aged veterans use stories and value them as a mode of communication that extends beyond the individual experience into the creation of a shared experience or memory. In reviewing their relationship with military stories, we have started to understand what veterans concerns are at this stage of life and how we might address them.

### **Increased understanding of aged veterans' lives, their self-understandings, and the distinctive challenges they face**

The data that we collected clearly contribute to increased understanding of aged veterans' lives, their self-understandings, and the distinctive challenges they face, including how some of the challenges are not distinct to aged veterans. The research team were able to contribute some of this learning to the recent UK veterans strategy consultation. More practically, where specific gaps have been identified by veterans in supportive services provision, we have reported these gaps at our regular steering group meetings with the RBL. As part of our final contact with veterans, we have sent information about the project findings and Veterans' Gateway to all veterans who participated.

Throughout our project, our ethos has been to work with veterans using some key principles from the language of cultural competencies, which is a framework for working with people from different ethnic or cultural backgrounds in



healthcare. Cultural competencies literature encourages the idea that knowing about, and understanding, different needs will improve healthcare and ultimately improve outcomes for a community (28,29).

By acknowledging the similarities and differences in the challenges faced by a community (in this case aged veterans) in comparison with others, we have created a toolkit that shares the culture of learning that we work in. It reflects diversity and can be used accordingly adapt interventions that aim to improve health and wellbeing outcomes. As part of our work, we have identified three values that we feel encourage best practice in being culturally competent with the older veteran community:

**Dignity:** Older veterans are a diverse community with different values, experiences, views and choices. By seeing each veteran as an individual, we are able to reach a position of understanding but not make assumptions.

**Respect:** Many veterans are proud of their military service. Even if they have later questioned the justification for the actions that they took as part of that service, they feel a need to be treated with respect for their willingness to make a personal sacrifice for the country.

**Listening:** The veterans that we worked with often had concerns about being understood. They sometimes felt that there was a divide between those who had served and those who had not. Often there was a perception that civilians were not interested in veterans. We found that listening to these concerns and ensuring that stories and experiences were heard enabled us to become culturally competent. By using different tools to elicit stories, we developed techniques that enabled a dialogue and overcame some perceived gaps.

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

*[Interviewer: what is important about the veteran identity to you?] Veteran: That I was good enough; that I was willing; and that I went through it. (Participant 48: male, 1947, RAF, Voluntary Enlisted, unknown)*

Often, veterans wanted to tell us stories because they were *personally* important, but at other points they saw their experiences as *nationally* important. The latter

were told from a position of having been involved in significant events that were in danger of being forgotten or misunderstood, both by the general population and by family. This was particularly important to this generation of veterans, who often did not see themselves directly represented in the wider culture of remembrance as experienced in civilian life.

*I had great difficulty getting anybody interested in a wreath for Cyprus for the 50th anniversary. We eventually did, and we got about three-quarters of a minute commentary when they were delivering that wreath, because it's the same time as we were dedicating the memorial in Cyprus to the 371 lads that got killed there, plus the police and any other civilians that died over there. So, I was very pleased with that. (Participant 33: male, 1935, RAF, National Service, 2 years served)*

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

There were also frequent mentions of the HM Armed Forces Veterans' Lapel Badge, a small enamel pin badge launched in 2004. The badge is available for free to anyone who has served in the UK's armed forces and by April 2016, over 84,500 'veterans badges,' as they are commonly known, had been issued to ex-service personnel (2). The veterans badge, which contains a composite motif of the army, navy and air force emblems, aims to encourage a sense of unity, recognise contributions and enable public recognition. In particular, informal networks formed by the wearing of the veterans' badge were important in connecting older adults. Participants talked how wearing the veterans' badge helped them to identify others who had also served.

The badge was seen as a way of opening a conversation about shared experience that was valued. These conversations helped to maintain ties of fictive kinship and to provide access to what could be described as a mutually beneficial audience-storyteller relationship. Asking someone about their service provided an opportunity to talk about one's own experiences.

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

*friends don't understand what they're talking about. (Participant 04: male, 1945, Army, Voluntary Enlisted, 22 years served)*

Wearing the veterans' badge also created a form of social support, including practical insights and information sharing.

*People that know that you were in the services, if you wear the badge, they can pick you out and see you're a veteran. [...] I always make a point of introducing myself to somebody if they've got a veteran's badge on, because there may be something that they need, some question that they want answered. (Participant 16: male, 1932, RAF, National Service, 2 years served)*

The impact of the tri-service badge and other visual symbols of identity for aged veterans is clear. In particular, it helped veterans to connect with other veterans. Aged veterans really valued this communication with others who they felt would understand their memories and background.

Discussion in workshops and interviews, and comments in workshop evaluations also demonstrated some of the concerns of aged veterans, particularly their concerns about younger veterans and the issues they face after leaving the forces. Specifically, when our first workshop focused on enlistment and joining the services, there were some strong voices present who wanted a focus on demobbing. Leaving the services was where aged veterans saw the causes of most health and well-being issues arising. The increased awareness of the presence of younger veterans in the prison population, along with bullying, suicide and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) were great concerns for the aged veteran population. Although engaging with younger veterans was outside the scope of this project, considering the relationship between aged and younger veterans and their well-being may be relevant to the longer-term outcomes and interventions.

As highlighted in previous sections, veterans' reflections on attending military colleagues' funerals and the loss of family and community showed the decline in available resources to draw on for support. It was here that aged veterans again highlighted concerns about younger veterans. Many aged veterans stated that immediately after being demobbed from the armed forces, they had often not initially seen the value in joining organisations related to the veteran identity such as the Royal British Legion. Instead their initial concerns were with constructing their civilian lives in terms of family, employment and housing. It was only later on in life, following a period of adjustment, that they began to reflect on the value of belonging to organisations associated with the military.

Based on their own experiences, there was a feeling that ensuring that younger veterans identified the organisations that they could draw on for support was a priority, even if they did not immediately engage with them.

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

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

*I have no direct contact with the regular military at all now, but I read a lot in the press about nasty things going on and my inclination is to turn the page. [...] It was my life. And although I'm still involved with all my surviving ex-boy soldiers, and I'm still very deeply involved with the [military] Association, and I take part in a lot of activities like that, I have ... I really wouldn't recommend any youngster I knew to go into the military. (Participant 20: male, 1933, Army, Voluntary Enlisted, 16 years served)*

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

*I wouldn't like to go now, where Afghanistan is concerned, because there's so many young soldiers being put up front, and you hear about that, how the army have cut down on everything: on people, on gear, you know, uniforms, everything, and they're sending 17 year old kids out to fight a war. Alright, they take them to war, but it's a bit different and that, but 17 year old kids doing like ... less than six months' training, then having to go out to Afghanistan. (Participant 27: male, 1948, Army, Voluntary Enlisted, 10 years served)*

This is particularly relevant to understand as it informed where older veterans thought that resource and attention should be focused. It was

often expressed that they did not see themselves as suffering or in need of help and support, and efforts should instead be focused on younger ex-service personnel and those currently serving. From the point of view of designing future interventions, service providers should consider how they may be received by a community who do not see themselves as 'in need'. The toolkit that we have designed presents a light-touch, low-cost and low-key way of working with this community, which may mean that it is accepted as an appropriate level of intervention for this community by the community itself.

### Increased understanding of the role of autobiographical narrative in making sense of one's own life

Alongside our empirical work runs our ongoing philosophical analysis, combining the literature on sense-making and story-telling with data collected in workshops and interviews. As well as helping us to draw conclusions about the role of narrative in the lives of aged veterans, it is also presenting challenges and expanding understanding around concepts such as transformative experience. As we have noted above, perceptions of experiences of military service as somehow unique or transformative (one cannot understand military service unless one has undertaken military service, and one is fundamentally changed by military service)(5) have led to an insider/outsider divide between veterans and civilians. Those who have undertaken military service tell a story about their experience that they feel cannot be understood by those who have not had a similar experience, affecting relationships with people who have not undertaken military service (civilians).

We found that directly using the concept of transformative experiences was constructive to work with aged veterans as it encouraged reflection on the changes associated with military service. It also helped to prompt discussion of what it was that made understanding of military life inaccessible to those who had not served. Some aged veterans agreed with the idea of transformation in relation to the notion that 'we grew up' on joining the forces. Narratives of self-reliance and independence were shared, alongside a feeling of growing in confidence. Alongside this idea of *independence* were stories of *interdependence* and sharing. In military housing, where colleagues were in close proximity at all times and there was no privacy, there was an opportunity to know people in a different way to in civilian life. These intense relationships which formed when people

lived and worked together were seen as a crucial aspect of forming a new identity.

Thus joining the military was still seen as a transformative experience that fundamentally changed a person and continued to affect their identity after leaving the forces. This sharing, or resonating, of experience overcame more widely-accepted barriers to belonging to a community.

*I don't know how to describe it, actually, but it was a life-changer, that's all I can say. But I think any entrance into the forces is, because it's a different world, and unless you've actually done it, you can't understand, and you can't explain. But if I met someone and I found out they were ex-forces, immediately there's a bond, even if it's male-female. (Participant 09: female, 1949, RAF, Voluntary Enlisted, 3 years served)*

*Once you have been in the service, you're different, because from then on, for ever, you're a former serviceman or ex-serviceman. You can't do anything about that: you are. [...] Because it does change you: it does change you, and once you've been changed, you feel a certain need to associate with other people who've been changed. (Participant 18: male, 1933, RAF, National Service, 25 years served)*

These extracts highlight a particularly way in which military lives were transformed – they changed the ways in which veterans interacted with others both inside and outside the service community. From this, we can start to consider more about how the role of autobiographical narrative can affect how people make sense of their lives.

### **Autobiographical understanding and the role of military history**

As noted in previous sections, while we asked all those interviewed about what they read, not all enjoyed autobiography. Some veterans were interested in the autobiographical accounts of others, but mainly those who were very similar in background to themselves.

*I read a lot, and I'm very interested in the autobiographies of contemporaries who talk about national service. (Participant 15: male, 1932, Army, National Service, 2 years served)*

*No, the ones that are, the only ones really that I bother to read are those written from personal experience. (Participant 20: male, 1933, Army, Voluntary Enlisted, 16 years served)*

Others were more focused on reading autobiographical accounts for wider learning about the experiences of others.

*My wife's brother in law, his experiences have appeared in two books, [...] so that's a fantastic, not just about him, but as a story. So I do, mainly, I must admit, mainly about the RAF, but I still pick up anything that looks interesting, I'll read. [...] As I said, it's really interesting to read all the experiences that other people have had. (Participant 21: male, 1932, RAF, National Service, 2 years served)*

Where autobiography or biography was read, it was often with a wider focus on understanding the broader military context.

*I'm looking at the reasons why they made the decisions they made, and how they thought these decision through, for right or for wrong, you know. So as far as that's concerned, my mind's wide open to all levels of ... military leaders or political leaders, like the latest one's on Winston Churchill and the way he's come up, so you look at the reasons why he had to do what he had to do, and things like that. (Participant 05: male, 1937, Army, National Service, 2 years served)*

One interesting way in which veterans used their own personal autobiographical accounts (or life stories) was in relation to wider and broader histories of military culture. Veterans read, and then referred to stories from military history to inform their understanding of their own lives, drawing on factual accounts of the events that they had been part of. These veterans often rejected others' military autobiographies.

*[Interviewer: So you're less interested in what they've experienced in the military.] Well, I know what they've experienced in the military. [Interviewer: So you don't need to read about it really there?] Yes. (Participant 11: male, 1942, RAF, Voluntary Enlisted, 15 years served)*

Instead, reading military histories was preferred. These texts provided understanding of their own experiences and the events that they had been part of in a way that seemed very significant. In service, the predominant model is one of acceptance of military command regardless of explanation; one is sent to a location, told how to behave and what to do, and do not always have a clear picture of what the purpose of this is. In reading military history, particularly

that focused on understanding command decisions, veterans were writing themselves back into the broader cultural narrative of events.

*I also read a lot of war history, even World War One, of course, and I do, I have to say that understanding what's going on does enhance the reading, you know, quite a lot. (Participant 18: male, 1933, RAF, National Service, 25 years served)*

*Very much so: I've got a library full of them. [...] Oh, [it's] just a military interest, I think, both air force and army, and from the enemy point of view [history not first person accounts]. I mean, I was in [regiment] I've read an awful lot about [regiment]. (Participant 24: male, 1936, RAF, National Service, 12 years served)*

Work on healthy ageing has demonstrated that self-understanding through life-review is particularly important as people age. Butler (30), the founder of modern gerontology, saw it as a natural 'next step' that older adults would both read history, and read and write memoir. For veterans, military history filled in this gap in encouraging life review.

Often, when asked in interview to reflect on what they thought, how they felt or what emotions were present at a particular time, they instead told factual stories – who was there, where they were, what the context was. This recounting of tales occasionally related to the perceived importance of the events that had been occurring around the story. Often tales were joyful, playful and concerned bonding experiences with others, but the claim to speak about these often quite ordinary stories was founded in the wider context of geopolitical events. The legitimisation of 'interest' in a tale could be seen to be related to the need for what Barron et al (2008) called 'acknowledgement from wider society'.

Our research also allowed veterans to share experiences and 'write themselves back in' to narratives, particularly by putting them into contact with others who had similar experiences. Previous research has concluded that facilitating access to group reminiscence as a form of 'conversational remembering' (31) might represent a significant intervention in veterans lives. However, as has been discussed throughout this report, not all veterans have access to resources to enable them to reminisce with other veterans (for example, those in remote/rural locations; those with health problems; death of comrades). By perpetuating the idea that veterans can only talk with other veterans, veterans are potentially limiting their engagement with other audiences. As veterans age



and die, the opportunities for collective and conversational reminiscence may also decrease. One of the key findings from this project is that as we acknowledge the role of autobiographical and other accounts, and the wider use of stories and narrative in improving well-being, then we need to facilitate communication across these accounts and across time and location to ensure that the benefits can be widely accessed.

## Recommendations

The project has revealed rich and interesting themes about how aged veterans' well-being are affected by the use of autobiographical accounts and storytelling in their lives. It has also highlighted some current concerns and very practical lessons for organisations and policy makers regarding improving aged veterans' well-being.

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

veterans, Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) veterans, and LGBT+ veterans.

8. Older veterans are concerned about the health and well-being younger generations of veterans. Future research should consider how these intergenerational concerns may be harnessed into a supportive intervention.

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## Appendix 1: Autobiographical texts used in workshops

Workshop 1	James Salter, <i>Burning the Days: Recollection</i> (Random House 1997)
	Tim O'Brien, <i>If I Die in a Combat Zone</i> (Calder and Boyars 1973)
	Philip Caputo, <i>A Rumor of War</i> (Pimlico 1999)
Workshop 2 and workshop 3	George Orwell, <i>Homage to Catalonia</i> in Peter Davison ed., <i>Orwell in Spain</i> (Penguin 2001)
	J. Glenn Gray, <i>The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle</i> (Harper and Row 1970)
	Tim O'Brien, <i>If I Die in a Combat Zone</i> (Calder and Boyars 1973)
	Philip Caputo, <i>A Rumor of War</i> (Pimlico 1999)
	Keith Douglas, <i>Alamein to Zem Zem</i> ed. Desmond Graham (Faber and Faber 2008)
Workshop 4	T. E. Lawrence, <i>The Mint: A day - book of the R.A.F. Depot between August and December 1922</i> (Penguin Classics 1990)
	Siegfried Sassoon, <i>Siegfried's Journey: 1916-1920</i> (Faber and Faber, 1982)
	Robert Mason, <i>Chickenhawk</i> (Corgi, 1984)