



Veteran Transition in the Media: Final Report

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Introduction

The Government of Canada estimates that there are around 620,000 Veterans of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF). Around 25,000 served in World War II or the Korean war, while around 40,000 served in the recent Afghanistan conflict. A 2014 Senate report indicates that over 5,000 CAF members are released per year.

The seminal ‘Survey on Transition to Civilian Life’ indicates that around 25% of Veterans reported a difficult adjustment including factors such as chronic health issues, low social support and disability. That said, 62% of Veterans reported an easy adjustment, and rates of unemployment and low income amongst Veterans were not higher than the Canadian general population.

To our knowledge there has been no research examining Canadian media coverage of the transition from CAF member to civilian life. This is a notable gap in the literature, as a large corpus of research indicates that the media plays a key role in shaping public beliefs, opinions and attitudes towards groups such as Veterans.

On the one hand, the media can create and perpetuate stigma and stereotypes about a social group by providing narrowly focused and sensational stories. On the other hand, the media can be an important vector in providing educational information about services and programs, while raising awareness about related social issues. Such information may be helpful for Veterans, their families and service providers.

Importantly, the phrase ‘media’ is an umbrella term that covers many different mediums of information, including print newspapers, on-line web news, specialist media and video/TV news. Research indicates that all these different forms of media may discuss social topics differently, implying a need for stratified analysis in any research study examining media coverage of a social group or social issue. Again, to our knowledge there has been no such stratified analysis of the transition.

To address this knowledge gap, the Chronic Pain Centre of Excellence for Canadian Veterans (CPCoE) commissioned Dr Rob Whitley (McGill University) to conduct a new research study examining Canadian media coverage of the transition from CAF member to military Veteran over a six-month period.

The overarching aim of this study is to assess the tone and content of Canadian media coverage of the transition from CAF member to CAF Veteran. The first objective is to document and analyze the prevalence of different themes and topics in Canadian media articles about the transition. The second objective is to compare media coverage between the mainstream Canadian media and specialist media emanating from Canadian military organizations.

Methods

We collected and coded news media pieces including newspaper print articles, on-line text news, news videos and articles from specialist media about the Veteran transition over a six-month period (October 1 2021-March 31 2022). In total, we identified and searched 77 news sources comprising of:

- (i) **Mainstream media:** 56 major English and French language Canadian news sources, comprising of 3 national newspapers, 12 on-line news websites and 41 metropolitan/ regional newspapers (see Appendix One).
- (ii) **Specialist media:** 21 specialist publications, comprising of publicly available CAF community newspapers (see Appendix Two).

Mainstream media newspaper and on-line textual articles were gathered using Factiva, an extensive online news database containing a wide range of Canadian news media sources. Articles from specialist media were accessed directly from the individual webpages of each source. Moreover, the 12 on-line news sites within the ‘mainstream media’ category (see Appendix One: sources 1-12 on-line) also frequently contain news videos. These video news reports were also gathered directly from Factiva, as well as from the webpages of individual news sources.

Specifically, all articles and videos in the above-described sources mentioning the word ‘Veteran*’, ‘military’, ‘army’, ‘navy’ or ‘air force’ from English sources and ‘Veteran*’ or ‘ancien* combattant*’ from French sources from October 1st 2021 to March 31st 2022 were retrieved for sorting. This retrieval process led to a long list of items that needed further human screening to create a short-list of articles that were relevant to the study aims. Items were excluded from the short-list if they (i) used the word ‘Veteran’ outside the military context, e.g., ‘a veteran politician’; (ii) mentioned Veterans only in passing; (iii) consisted of an advertisement, table of contents, classified section or similar immaterial listing; and (iv) did not discuss any aspect of the transition from CAF member to civilian. Duplicate items were also excluded. The remaining items were included in the short-list for coding.

To meet the research objectives, we designed a tailor-made coding schema inspired by the existing literature on media coverage of Veterans, as well as wider literature on the transition. This coding schema aimed to measure the presence or absence of key content, including aspects of mental and physical health, as well as the seven domains of well-being that have been identified as critical to a successful transition by other Canadian literature. This included codes about financial issues, education, housing, social integration and health or social welfare interventions aimed at helping the Veterans in transition. We used binary coding for most variables with values defined as (1) yes-present in article/video, and (0) no- not present.

Included news items were then carefully read or watched, and coded for content and characteristics. The codes and basic information for each item were recorded in Excel, with frequency counts calculated for each variable at study completion.

Results

The above-described screening process led to a total of 177 unique news items included in the final coded sample. In temporal terms, it should be noted that there was a concentration of items in November 2021 due to Remembrance Day, with 100 of the 177 (56%) items published that month.

As can be seen in Table 1, there was a heterogeneity of themes, and only a few themes were repeated regularly throughout the dataset or dominant across the time period. The most common themes include social integration, PTSD, employment, housing and physical environment issues. Less common themes included financial issues, depression, substance use, and danger, violence or criminality. Of note, only around 1 in 10 items mentioned chronic pain (either physical or mental). Interestingly, 8 of the 36 (22%) items on PTSD, and 15 of the 24 (62%) items on suicide discussed a single anomalous incident (the Lionel Desmond murder-suicide and subsequent inquiry)

Table 1. Thematic content of news items covering Veteran transition.

<u>Themes</u>	n	%
<u>Mental health</u>		
Suicide	24	13.6%
PTSD	36	20.3%
Depression/anxiety	2	1.1%
Substance use/addiction	5	2.8%
Chronic mental pain	21	11.9%
Multiple/other/general	10	5.6%
<u>Other health and social issues</u>		
Danger, violence or criminality	16	9.0%
Shortage of resources or poor quality of services	29	16.4%
Employment or unemployment	34	19.2%
Financial issues	12	6.8%
Physical health, chronic physical pain or pain relief	24	13.6%
Education or acquisition of life skills	23	13.0%
Social integration	50	28.2%
Housing or physical environment issues	32	18.1%

We also measured further content indicators in news items about Veteran transition such as (i) content of Veteran transition stories; (ii) quotation of Veterans, their loved ones and experts; (iii) discussion of interventions aimed at facilitating the transition to civilian life. Results are given below in Table 2.

Table 2. Content of news items covering Veteran transition.

<u>Content indicators</u>	n	%
Discusses a Veteran(s) transition story (or stories)		
No	50	28.2%
Yes, successful	62	35.0%
Yes, unsuccessful	46	26.0%
Yes, mixed	19	10.7%
Quotes Veteran or figure from Veteran's organization		
No	62	35.0%
Yes	115	65.0%
Quotes other experts, officials or community leaders		
No	100	56.5%
Yes, health/education/social services	23	13.0%
Yes, civil servant	6	3.4%
Yes, politician/elected leader	19	10.7%
Yes, other/multiple	29	16.4%
Quotes family relations or close friends to a Veteran		
No	149	84.2%
Yes	28	15.8%
Discusses health, educational, or social service/social welfare intervention		
No	75	42.4%
Yes, official intervention	25	14.1%
Yes, peer organized intervention	70	39.5%
Yes, both	7	4.0%
Discusses service, program or intervention specifically aimed at Veteran transition		
No	85	48.0%
Yes	92	52.0%

As can be seen, around 1 in 3 articles discuss a successful Veteran transition story, while a quarter discuss an unsuccessful transition. Around two-thirds quote or paraphrase a Veteran in their publication, while less than half referred to an expert,

official or community leader and very few quoted a relative or close friend of a Veteran. Around half of the articles explored a health, educational, or social service/social welfare intervention. Interestingly, most of these discussed a peer organized program rather than a program located within the official educational, health or social service system. The majority of interventions discussed were specifically aimed at assisting with the transition to civilian life.

Consistent with the second objective, we compared media coverage between specialist publications emanating from military organizations and the different elements of the mainstream media. Results can be seen in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Thematic content of news items covering the Veteran transition stratified by platform.

	<u>Mainstream Newspapers</u> (n=54)		<u>On-line web news</u> (n=48)		<u>Specialist publications</u> (n=30)		<u>Mainstream news videos</u> (n=45)	
<u>Themes</u>								
<u>Mental Health</u>								
Suicide	3	5.6%	16	33.3%	0	0.0%	5	11.1%
PTSD	10	18.5%	18	37.5%	0	0.0%	8	17.8%
Depression/anxiety	1	1.9%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	2.2%
Substance use/addiction	3	5.6%	2	4.2%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Chronic mental pain	2	3.7%	8	16.7%	5	16.7%	6	13.3%
Multiple/other/general	2	3.7%	6	12.5%	0	0.0%	2	4.4%
<u>Other</u>								
Danger, violence or criminality	1	1.9%	14	29.2%	0	0.0%	1	2.2%
Shortage of resources or poor quality of services	11	20.4%	16	33.3%	0	0.0%	2	4.4%
Employment or unemployment	13	24.1%	6	12.5%	10	33.3%	5	11.1%
Financial issues	6	11.1%	1	2.1%	3	10.0%	2	4.4%
Physical health, chronic physical pain or pain relief	10	18.5%	6	12.5%	4	13.3%	4	8.9%
Education or acquisition of life skills	13	24.1%	2	4.2%	11	36.7%	6	13.3%
Social integration	12	22.2%	19	39.6%	11	36.7%	8	17.8%
Housing or physical environment issues	17	31.5%	7	14.6%	0	0.0%	8	17.8%

As can be seen, the content of articles in specialist publications was quite different from the other media platforms. On the one hand, none of the 30 articles in the specialist media discussed PTSD, suicide, substance use or danger, violence or criminality, while these issues were discussed quite frequently in the mainstream

media, particularly in the context of a single anomalous case (Lionel Desmond). On the other hand, articles in the specialist media were much more likely to discuss social factors such as employment, education and social integration, in comparison to mainstream media.

To give a flavour of such differences, emblematic headlines from the mainstream vs specialist media are given in Appendix Three. These illustrate some of the key issues being discussed in the two types of media, as well as typical content of mainstream media articles during the month of November, the one month of the year when Veteran issues come to the fore. Appendix Four contains emblematic content of articles, again split by the two different forms of media. As can be seen, the specialist media often contained more focused and descriptive content about concrete programs, while the mainstream media often focused on anecdotal (and frequently tragic) stories of individual Veterans.

Finally, we present some miscellaneous information about content below in Table 4. As can be seen, there are disproportionately few articles about certain types of Veterans including female Veterans, Royal Canadian Navy Veterans, and Royal Canadian Air Force Veterans. Most articles were not focused on individual Veterans, and most articles did not specify a particular deployment. When deployment was mentioned, around 1 in 5 articles focused on Afghanistan, while less than 10% focused on World War 2.

Table 4. Miscellaneous information about news items covering Veteran transition.

Miscellaneous Characteristics	n	%
Platform		
Mainstream newspaper	54	30.5%
On-line web news	48	27.1%
Specialist military publication	30	16.9%
Video news	45	25.4%
Subject		
Individual	73	41.2%
Group/not an individual	104	58.8%
Gender		
Not specified/ N/A	78	44.1%
Male	86	48.6%
Female	13	7.3%
Multiple	0	0.0%
Rank		
Not specified/ N/A	141	79.7%

Commissioned officer	9	5.1%
NCO	4	2.3%
Other	23	13.0%
Multiple	0	0.0%
Deployment		
Not specified/ N/A	109	61.6%
Afghanistan	37	20.9%
Korean War	0	0.0%
WWII	14	7.9%
Foreign peacekeeping	3	1.7%
Home service	0	0.0%
Multiple deployments	9	5.1%
Other	5	2.8%
Type of service		
Not specified/ N/A	176	99.4%
Regular	1	0.6%
Reserve	0	0.0%
Branch		
Not specified/ N/A	117	66.1%
Canadian Army	50	28.2%
Royal Canadian Navy	2	1.1%
Royal Canadian Air Force	7	4.0%
Other	1	0.6%

Conclusion

This brief study gives a snapshot of media coverage of the transition from CAF member to a civilian Veteran. The results reveal a heterogeneity of themes spread over various topics, with PTSD, employment issues and social integration being the most common themes. Suicide (and to a lesser extent PTSD) were frequently discussed in the content of a single anomalous murder-suicide (Lionel Desmond). This could be considered a negative sign as it may mean that more comprehensive stories of recovery, PTSD treatment, suicide prevention and hope are not being communicated by the media. However, danger, crime and violence were rarely mentioned outside the context of the Lionel Desmond incident, which should be considered a positive sign, as such coverage can contribute to stigmas and stereotypes that all Veterans are prone to anti-social behaviour and aggression. Interestingly, issues around chronic pain only emerged in around 1 in 10 articles, In terms of further content, most articles discussed transition stories and quoted a Veteran, while almost 50% of articles quoted an expert, official or community

leader. These should be considered positive signs, as such quotations can humanize and contextualize media pieces about the transition. Moreover, over 50% of articles discussed health, educational and social programs for Veterans, which again is positive, given that these articles may provide information which may be helpful for Veterans, their families and service providers.

We conducted a stratified analysis, which was hampered by small sample sizes. Nevertheless, this provisionally reveals that specialist media tend to discuss the transition differently from the mainstream media, with less focus on mental health and more focus on practical aspects of the transition and support programs. This indicates that the specialist media may need to focus more on mental health, while the mainstream media may need to focus more on the practical aspects of transition, given that both are equally important in making a positive transition.

To conclude, this study shows some positive trends, as well as some room for improvement in media coverage of the transition. To catalyze such improvement, three courses of action could be taken. First, educational resources and guidelines could be created to help journalists better report the Veteran transition. Second, such resources could be purposely shared with journalists through outreach and dedicated events, seminars and/or webinars. Third, specific educational efforts could be focused on journalism students at the many different journalism schools across Canada. All this could ensure that the Veteran transition is covered in a more comprehensive, accurate and balanced manner in the media, leading to better informed Veterans and a better informed public. This could ultimately foster Veteran well-being.

Appendix One – Study media sources, by format.

Print			On-line	
1. Globe and Mail	16. Victoria Times Colonist	31. Peterborough Examiner	1. CBC.CA News	
2. National Post	17. Winnipeg Sun	32. The Guardian	2. CTV National News	
3. StarMetro	18. Waterloo Region Record	33. Owen Sound Sun Times	3. CTV News (Toronto, Windsor)	
4. Toronto Star	19. Calgary Sun	34. Barrie Examiner	4. Global News	
5. Toronto Sun	20. Windsor Star	35. Niagara Falls Review	5. La Presse.ca	
6. Vancouver Sun	21. Edmonton Sun	36. Guelph Mercury	6. La Tribune	
7. Vancouver Province	22. Ottawa Sun	37. Kelowna Capital News	7. Le Devoir	
8. Hamilton Spectator	23. Saskatoon StarPhoenix	38. Prince George Citizen	8. Le Droit	
9. Calgary Herald	24. Regina Leader-Post	39. Welland Tribune	9. Le Soleil	
10. Winnipeg Free Press	25. The Telegram	40. Sudbury Star	10. Métro Montréal	
11. Edmonton Journal	26. Thunder Bay Source	41. Sault Star	11. Radio-Canada	
12. Ottawa Citizen	27. St Catharines Standard	42. 24 Heures Montréal	12. TVA Nouvelles	
13. Chronicle-Herald	28. Lethbridge Sun Times	43. Journal de Montréal		
14. Montreal Gazette	29. Brantford Expositor	44. Journal de Québec		
15. London Free Press	30. Kingston Whig Standard			

Appendix Two – Military publications.

Publication name	Military base/wing or branch and publication frequency	URL
The Vortex	3 Wing Bagotville; monthly	http://www.vortexbagotville.com/
The Totem Times	19 Wing Comox; bi-monthly	https://www.cafconnection.ca/Comox/In-My-Community/Newspaper-Totem-Times.aspx
The Courier	4 Wing Cold Lake; TBD	https://couriernews.ca/
The Western Sentinel	CFB Edmonton; regularly	https://www.canada.ca/en/departement-national-defence/corporate/news/regional-news/western-sentinel.html?q=&=163293576
The Lookout	CFB Esquimalt; weekly	https://www.lookoutnewspaper.com/
The Post Gazette	CFB Gagetown; regularly	https://gagetowngazette.com/
The Aurora	14 Wing Greenwood; every 3 weeks	http://www.auroranewspaper.com/
The Trident	CFB Halifax; bi-monthly	http://tridentnewspaper.com/
The Shield	22 Wing North Bay; monthly	https://www.cafconnection.ca/North-Bay/In-My-Community/Newspaper/The-Shield.aspx
The Petawawa Post	CFB Petawawa; weekly	http://www.petawawapostlive.ca/
The Shilo Stag	CFB Shilo; bi-monthly	https://www.cafconnection.ca/Shilo/In-My-Community/Shilo-Stag-Newspaper.aspx
The Servir	CFB St Jean/Montreal; bi-monthly	https://www.connexionfac.ca/Region-Montreal/Ma-Communaute/Journal-Servir/Votre-actualite-militaire.aspx
The Adsum	CFB Valcartier; bi-monthly	https://www.connexionfac.ca/Valcartier-fr/Ma-Communaute/Journal-Adsum/Votre-actualite-militaire.aspx
The Voxair	17 Wing Winnipeg; unscheduled	http://www.thevoxair.ca/
Esquimalt MFRC Activity Guide Magazine	CFB Esquimalt; seasonally	https://esquimaltmfrc.com/category/mfrc/
Kingston Garrison Life Magazine	CFB Kingston; seasonally	https://issuu.com/garrisonlife
The Edge Wainwright Newspaper	3 CDSG Garrison Wainwright / CFB Wainwright; weekly	http://starnews.ca/
Canadian Military Journal	Canadian Armed Forces; seasonally	http://www.journal.forces.gc.ca/subscriptions-en.html
The Royal Canadian Air Force Journal	Royal Canadian Air Force; seasonally	http://www.rcaf-arc.forces.gc.ca/en/cf-aerospace-warfare-centre/elibrary/journal/about-the-journal.page
Your Navy Today	Royal Canadian Navy; monthly	http://www.navy-marine.forces.gc.ca/en/news-ynt/2021/06-your-navy-today.page
Canadian Army Journal	Canadian Army; biannually	http://www.army-armee.forces.gc.ca/en/canadian-army-journal/index.page

Appendix Three – Headlines: mainstream vs specialist media.

Mainstream	Specialist
Rescued dogs from Afghanistan come full circle, helping veterans deal with PTSD February 25, 2022 Global News	Coding for Veterans career caravan stop October 12, 2021 The Totem Times
Immersive VR therapy considered helpful to vets with PTSD in Alberta study November 11, 2021 CTV News	Veteran Family Program February 1, 2022 The Shield
Desmond inquiry: Nova Scotia has no specific mental health program for Black people November 29, 2021 Welland Tribune	Making it work: New Workforce Reintegration Program offers help to military members and veterans March 21, 2022 The Trident
Veteran on how ketamine changed his outlook October 20, 2021 CTV News	Transition Programs and Resources Fall 2021 Esquimalt MFRC Activity Guide Magazine
Nova Scotia veteran struggles with 'broken and flawed system' getting help with PTSD November 4, 2021 Chronicle Herald	Une retraite pour planifier votre vie January 26, 2022 The Servir
Remembrance Day: Veteran mental health November 11, 2021 CTV News	Volunteers sought for socially connected physical activity studies March 24, 2022 The Petawawa Post
Psychological autopsy found Desmond had 'severe' homicidal thoughts November 1, 2021 Canadian Broadcasting Corporation	Operation Freedom Paws: Empowering veterans to restore their freedom to live life November 9, 2021 The Totem Times
Veteran Dennis Mackenzie Discusses the Healing Power of Music November 11, 2021 CTV News	IT training for veterans - Unique program aids transition February 28, 2022 The Lookout
Service dog program to help vets with PTSD November 12, 2021 Vancouver Province	Valley funding supports range of veteran women's programming March 28, 2022 The Aurora
Veteran who killed family, himself would have been criminally responsible, inquiry told November 2, 2021 Canadian Broadcasting Corporation	VETERANS & THEIR FAMILIES March 24, 2022 The Petawawa Post

Appendix Four – Content: mainstream vs specialist media.

Mainstream	Specialist
<p>“I lost many friends overseas, but I’ve lost even more to suicide.” - Veteran Dennis Mackenzie Discusses the Healing Power of Music November 11, 2021 CTV News</p>	<p>“By teaching veterans to train their own dogs to gain certification as a service dog team, Operation Freedom Paws Canada is changing lives.” - Operation Freedom Paws: Empowering veterans to restore their freedom to live life November 9, 2021 The Totem Times</p>
<p>“The memory still haunts him, he said. “I’ve been trying to get out of the engine room for 52 years, can’t seem to get out, can’t forget it.” Gourley said many of the survivors got PTSD.” - 52 years later, survivors of HMCS Kootenay disaster find strength through each other October 23, 2021 Global News</p>	<p>“The VFP assists medically releasing Canadian Armed Forces members, medically released veterans and their families by helping them navigate the complex process of releasing, the challenges that may arise, and the sometimes unexpected impact on the social, emotional, and financial wellbeing.” - VETERANS & THEIR FAMILIES March 24, 2022 The Petawawa Post</p>
<p>“That evening, Lionel Desmond, 33, entered his in-laws' home in Upper Big Tracadie, N.S., armed with a rifle he'd purchased that afternoon and a knife he'd bought the day before. The Afghanistan veteran fatally shot his wife, Shanna, his daughter, Aaliyah, and his mother, Brenda, before turning the gun on himself.” - To prevent more deaths, N.S. urged to follow changes called for by Desmond inquiry November 4, 2021 Canadian Broadcasting Corporation</p>	<p>« En tant qu’anciens militaires, nous avons vécu toutes sortes de choses au cours de notre carrière. La coopérative nous donne l’occasion de parler entre nous. Entre pairs, on sait qu’on trouvera toujours de l’écoute et de la compréhension. » - Une coopérative recourt au savoir-faire de vétérans pour augmenter le réalisme des scénarios d’entraînement November 24, 2021 The Adsum</p>
<p>“He struggled to adjust to society upon returning home from war and serving 22 years in the army. “I have complex PTSD that I got back in Cyprus in the 70s, I was diagnosed in 2012 and I'm suicidal, I don't like crowds, I can't bear to hear loud noises and physically my body is deteriorating," Federation said.” - Calgary volunteers deliver more than 150 Christmas hampers to veterans in need December 18, 2021 CTV News</p>	<p>“To support transitioning members and their families, SISIP offers a financial planning workshop to help individuals and families plan their finances as they approach their release and prepare for their transition to post-service life.” - Transition Programs and Resources Fall 2021 Esquimalt MFRC Activity Guide Magazine</p>

<p>“The provincial fatality inquiry has heard Desmond served in Afghanistan in 2007 and was later diagnosed with severe post-traumatic stress disorder, major depression, a borderline personality disorder and borderline delusions about his wife’s fidelity.”</p> <p>- Ex-soldier who killed his family in N.S. knew what he did was morally wrong: doctor</p> <p>November 2, 2021</p> <p>Global News</p>	<p>“Since the program started about two years ago, it has guided veterans into a second career, one that will help them find purpose, financial stability and utilize a unique skill set.”</p> <p>- Coding for Veterans offers training for second career in tech sector</p> <p>November 11, 2021</p> <p>The Petawawa Post</p>
<p>He returned to civilian life in 2015, after 18 years in the army. But leaving the life he loved brought its own traumas, reopening old wounds he and his second wife Amanda thought had healed. "I started having nightmares. I wasn't sleeping well ... insomnia, super hyper-vigilant. I was a disaster. I wasn't drinking daily, but I would still, you know, have a good time, and I'd look for it, and I would still use it. And at the time, I was on a lot of medications that you're not supposed to drink with. I was not in a good place at all."</p> <p>- N.B. clinic brings psychedelic drug to mainstream to treat PTSD</p> <p>February 22, 2022</p> <p>Canadian Broadcasting Corporation</p>	<p>“Bernie's career included 15 years in Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry and 11 as an engineer - construction technician. He served on tours in Cyprus, Alert, England for the Queen's Guard, and Germany on Umpire staff. These days Bernie can be spotted in a red safety vest, looking at the fire alarms and suppressions systems, as the manager of the Fire and Life Safety ITM (inspection, testing and maintenance) contract.”</p> <p>- Quilts of Valour - A handmade hug, stitched with love and gratitude by grateful Canadians</p> <p>March 1, 2022</p> <p>The Totem Times</p>