



**REDEPLOYMENT AS A RITE OF PASSAGE**



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## **Redeployment as a Rite of Passage**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In August of 2006 members of Charlie Company of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry returned to Canada after serving more than 6 months in Afghanistan on combat operations. This research paper employs classic anthropological theories of rites of passage to analyze the process of this redeployment and to suggest ways that the redeployment process could be improved for subsequent tours of duty.

Rites of passage are rituals that serve to mark the transition of individuals from one social status to another. In the case of redeployment, the shift in status is from deployed soldier to combat veteran. Typically, rites of passage have three phases: separation, liminality and reintegration. These phases during redeployment would consist of: leaving the theatre of operations as the separation phase; the decompression tour in Cyprus as the liminal phase; and the return trip to Canada as the phase of reintegration. Effective rites of passage are critical for easing the adjustment to a new status, both for the individuals involved and for the social units of which they are a part. Each of these phases, however, posed particular problems for the returning soldiers, which, if corrected, could significantly improve the redeployment experience for the soldiers and the unit.

The analysis is based on anthropological field research conducted during this redeployment supplemented with interviews with returned soldiers.

## RÉSUMÉ

Au mois d'août 2006, les membres de la Charlie Company du 1er bataillon de la Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry sont rentrés au Canada après avoir servi plus de 6 mois en Afghanistan sur des opérations de combat. Cette recherche fait appel à des théories de l'anthropologie classique sur les rites de passage pour analyser le processus de ce redéploiement et suggérer des façons dont le processus de redéploiement pourrait être amélioré lors de futures périodes de service.

Les rites de passage sont des rituels qui servent à marquer la transition d'un individu d'un statut social à un autre. Dans le cas du redéploiement, le changement de statut va du soldat déployé au vétéran du combat. Typiquement, les rites de passage distinguent trois étapes : la séparation, la liminalité et la réintégration. Ces étapes, pendant le redéploiement, se composeraient de : la période où on quitte le théâtre d'opérations comme phase de séparation, la période de décompression à Chypre comme phase liminale, et le voyage de retour au Canada comme phase de réintégration. Les rites de passage efficaces sont critiques pour faciliter l'ajustement à un nouveau statut, tant pour l'individu en cause que pour les unités sociales dont ils font partie. Toutefois, chacune de ces phases a posé des problèmes particuliers pour les soldats qui revenaient, et la correction qu'on pourrait apporter à ces problèmes pourrait améliorer de façon significative l'expérience de redéploiement pour les soldats et pour l'unité.

L'analyse est fondée sur une recherche anthropologique sur le terrain effectuée pendant ce redéploiement, à laquelle se sont ajoutées des entrevues avec les soldats qui étaient revenus.

I would like to express my gratitude to the University of Calgary for the University Research Grant #1007103 which supported this research. My gratitude goes out as well to Tim Grant for encouraging me to pursue this research, as well as to David Fraser and Ian Hope for welcoming me to the field. To the soldiers and officers of Charlie Company, 1 PPCLI, I will always be thankful for their extraordinary generosity of spirit, their professionalism under fire, and for keeping me safe. The thoughtful comments and suggestions of the anonymous reviewers were welcome and appreciated.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper analyzes the process of redeployment using classical anthropological theory and suggests that redeployment is usefully conceptualized as a rite of passage. In military parlance redeployment refers to the process of transferring military units from a theatre of operations back to Canada. Anthropologists and other social scientists use the term "rite of passage" to refer to social processes which mark or ease the transition of persons and groups of persons from one social status to another. Rites of passage include initiations into specialized groups, and this one type of rite of passage has been studied in the military context of the initiation of soldiers into elite units by both Weiss and Winslow.<sup>1</sup> But rites of passage are used not only to initiate neophytes into elite groups; they are used universally in any context in which members of society are required to change status. Mortuary rites, for example, and rituals accompanying birth can also be considered rites of passage.

In the case of the redeployment of combat troops from southern Afghanistan, soldiers engaged in redeployment are transitioning from the status of combatants to veterans of a particular operation. Granjo has studied the cleansing rituals used by communities in Mozambique to reintegrate veterans of the civil war. These rituals are not truly rites of passage as they are used, not to bring about a permanent change in status, but to return veterans of a brutal and violent civil war to their pre-war status; in effect, to erase the effects of war.<sup>2</sup> The situation of Canadian combat veterans is different: the rite of passage that is the redeployment process serves to recognize permanent changes in status of the soldiers to ease their reintegration into society in a new status of combat veteran.<sup>3</sup> There is no attempt to erase the experience of war or to return these soldiers to some pre-deployment status.

This paper begins with a discussion of the concept and universal structures of rites of passage before turning to a discussion of the research methods used to collect the data on which the analysis is based. It then provides an analytical description of the process of the redeployment of the members of the Task Force Orion in August 2006. It concludes with some proposed improvements to the redeployment phase suggested by the analysis and by the experience of the soldiers themselves.

## rites of passage

Rites of passage have a tripartite structure in which each part is itself a distinct ritual. The first phase of any rite of passage consists of a "rite of separation" during which participants are removed from their original status in society. The anthropological literature is replete with accounts of rites of separation, most of which involve some form of geographical movement and some change in physical appearance, as, for example, a change of clothing or shaving of heads. The goal of this phase is to detach the participants from their prior identities and position in the social structure.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Melford S. Weiss, "Rebirth in the Airborne," in *The American Military*, ed. Martin Oppenheimer (Aldine, 1971).

Donna Winslow, "Rites of Passage and Group Bonding in the Canadian Airborne," *Armed Forces and Society* 25, no. 3 (1999).

<sup>2</sup> Paulo Granjo, "The Homecomer: Postwar Cleansing Rituals in Mozambique," *Armed Forces and Society* 33, no. 3 (2007).

<sup>3</sup> This permanent change in status occurs among soldiers who serve multiple tours overseas. Each time they are redeployed, they become veterans of their most recent tour in addition to every tour in which they served.

<sup>4</sup> See for example, Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, ed. Victor Turner, *Symbol, Myth and Ritual* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1974) and Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960).

The second phase of the rite of passage is the “liminal period,” from the Latin *limen* for “threshold.”<sup>5</sup> It refers to a period when participants are between statuses and ambiguous with respect to their social identity. They are neither one thing nor another. The liminal period is marked by a flattening or reversal of preexisting hierarchical relationships and by an emphasis on egalitarian interaction. Participants in the liminal phase are often sequestered and liminality becomes a period of disruption of time and space, often accompanied by altered states of consciousness achieved through ingestion of intoxicants or by other means. Participants in liminal phases often describe this stage as being a timeless moment or a period in which normal time is irrelevant. The liminal phase is also a phase during which much deep learning can occur, and in which shared experience contributes to the creation of a new social identity.

The third phase of the rite of passage is the “rite of reintegration” or “rite of reaggregation,” during which neophytes are returned to society in their new statuses.<sup>6</sup> New statuses may be marked permanently on the body through scarification or tattooing, or temporarily through new clothes or body painting. The culmination of the reaggregation phase almost always includes increased responsibilities and new duties in society, and sometimes includes new patterns of body movement.

In some senses the entire tour could be thought of as a rite of passage with the deployment and redeployment as, respectively, the rite of separation and rite of reintegration, and in fact, a number of soldiers suggested this interpretation during retrospective interviews. Some of them also suggested that each operation “outside the wire” could be thought of as a rite of passage. In fact, it may be useful to think of the entire tour as a series of rites of passage, each with its own tripartite structure. This paper, however, focuses only on the redeployment process of, specifically, Task Force Orion in August of 2006. The redeployment of the Task Force included preparation for and leaving the theatre of operations, a “Third Location Decompression” in Cyprus and the return from Cyprus to Canada. Before applying the analytical framework to this process, some discussion of the research methodology is in order.

## METHODOLOGY

The data on which this paper is based were collected primarily in the form of anthropological field notes written during participant observation fieldwork with Task Force Orion. Participant observation consists of sharing as much as possible in the daily life and routines of the research subjects for long periods, all the while keeping systematic and detailed records of observations of normally occurring events. Anthropologists typically stay in the field long enough for their presence to be taken more or less for granted by the research participants. I spent three months (May to August) of 2006 “embedded” with the soldiers of Charlie Company of the First Battalion of the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry (PPCLI) while they were deployed as part of Task Force Orion. The field research began halfway through the rotation and encompassed the rest of the tour, including the entire redeployment process from operations through decompression and the return to Canada. Although this period is quite short by anthropological research standards, I had conducted two previous periods of field research with the same unit, in 1992 and 1995 to 1996, and a number of the Non-Commissioned Members serving with Task Force Orion remembered me from the previous research. Moreover, the intensity of the shared experience in the combat zone meant that my presence came to be taken for granted much more quickly than is usual. I supplemented my field notes with digital photographs as an aide-mémoire, and with digital recordings of conversation (with permission) as well as with informal, open-ended interviews. By the time of the redeployment I had established rapport and relationships of mutual trust

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<sup>5</sup> Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

and indeed affection with the research participants, and this contributed to the validity of the research findings.

In order to determine which aspects of the redeployment had been retained in soldiers' memories, I conducted in-depth retrospective interviews by phone and in person more than a year post-redeployment with serving soldiers and with those who had left the service after the tour.<sup>7</sup> During the interviews conducted in person I relied on photo-elicitation to refresh memories and referred participants to documents I had collected, such as the decompression program guide, tourist brochures of Cyprus, and the list of tourist activities offered by the support staff in Cyprus.

While participant observation field research has strong validity, it is not noted for reliability,<sup>8</sup> and I can make no claims that another anthropologist would achieve the same results and findings as I did, nor can I claim that these results can be generalized to soldiers serving in different units on the same tour or to soldiers serving on other tours. I do note, however, that many of my observations are supported by the research on the same Task Force conducted by Defence Research and Development Canada.<sup>9</sup>

## BACKGROUND

Charlie Company of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, The Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry deployed to southern Afghanistan as part of Task Force Orion in February of 2006 and redeployed to Canada in August of the same year. During the tour, soldiers were involved in combat operations in Kandahar Province as well as in Helmand and other regions. There was significant loss of life during the tour, and a large number of soldiers were wounded. Most of the tour was spent outside the protective confines of the main coalition base in Kandahar Air Field, and at times the unit spent three weeks or more at a stretch "outside the wire." By all measures, the tour was difficult. Because of the stressful nature of the tour, all soldiers were required to participate in a Third Location Decompression (TLD) that consisted of a five-day stopover in Cyprus, the aim of which was to mitigate the strain of returning to Canada.

The policy of a TLD for soldiers returning from stressful deployments was first instituted at the urging of then Lieutenant Colonel Pat Stogran<sup>10</sup> who had commanded the 3rd Battalion of the PPCLI in Afghanistan during Operation Apollo in 2002.<sup>11</sup> LCol Stogran remembered the shock he had felt on arrival in Canada from his tour in Bosnia and thought that because of the increased dangers and changing roles associated with Operation Apollo, the return home from Afghanistan would be even more difficult for the soldiers under his command. He therefore proposed a week long decompression and reintegration period at a location outside the theatre of conflict, but not in Canada, where soldiers, in the company of the rest of their unit, would have a chance to relax and to socialize without the stresses and dangers of combat. There they would also participate in briefings aimed at easing the reintegration into their families, work environment and Canadian society in general. He proposed that some of the time be spent simply relaxing together, followed by briefings about the process

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<sup>7</sup> Interview subjects were recruited through a "Facebook" social group of Afghanistan veterans which I had been invited to join. All the interview subjects were veterans of Task Force Orion and were known to me personally.

<sup>8</sup> Roger Sanjek, "On Ethnographic Validity," in *Fieldnotes: The Makings of Anthropology*, ed. Roger Sanjek (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990).

<sup>9</sup> G.E. Sharpe et al., "First Status Report: Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Third Location Decompression on Reducing Post-Deployment Reintegration Stress and Increasing Psychological Resiliency," (Toronto: Defence Research and Development Canada, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Colonel Stogran is now the Veterans' Ombudsman.

<sup>11</sup> Pat Stogran, Personal communication.

of reintegration into the workplace and family. His proposal initially met strong resistance from his superiors, from the chaplaincy and from medical staff, none of whom believed that there was sufficient scientific evidence to suggest that such a process would be beneficial. LCol Stogran persisted, however, and was able to convince his superiors to authorize the first decompression tour.

## **THE REDEPLOYMENT OF TASK FORCE ORION**

The redeployment of Task Force Orion was at the same time a relief in place, meaning that the Task Force was being replaced while engaged in operations. The fact of the relief in place was an important factor in how the redeployment was organized and experienced by members of the Battalion. Rather than relieve entire sub-units and maintain section or platoon integrity, sections were thinned out and the dismounted infantry were redeployed and replaced first, followed by the vehicle crews (gunners and drivers) and finally, commanders. The thinned out sections continued to conduct patrolling operations in conjunction with members of the unit that were relieving them. Members of the unit understood that operational requirements took precedence, but the disruption of unit and sub-unit integrity created a great deal of additional stress and discontent. This was the most significant negative factor related to the redeployment both at the time and later.

### **Phase 1. Rite of Separation**

For the members of Charlie Company the rite of separation began with the final move from Spin Boldak, where they had been based for the last few weeks of the tour, to Kandahar Air Field. One of the early chinks<sup>12</sup> was fortunate to fly to Kandahar Air Field by Black Hawk helicopter, rather than to travel by road convoy as did the other chinks. Those who travelled by road were concerned about the possibility of an IED (Improvised Explosive Device) attack or an ambush on what was to be their last travel of the tour outside the wire. The anxiety was increased by the fact that the Task Force had suffered a number of fatalities in the weeks preceding the return to KAF, including one casualty just outside of KAF. In fact, all the chinks managed to arrive safely in KAF.

Once back inside the wire there was a bit of time for socializing and relaxing interspersed with the tasks of attending a redeployment briefing, cleaning and returning equipment, accounting for lost and damaged equipment, and packing. No one seemed to have any trouble accounting for losses of equipment, and all the interviewees commented that supply staff seemed to be reasonable about writing off losses of equipment during operations. Although everyone was required to attend a briefing about what to expect emotionally and socially upon returning home, none of the soldiers with whom I conducted retrospective interviews remembered these briefings. Some of them felt that the briefing might have been useful, although they could not remember even having attended or any of the material that may have been covered in the briefings.

Everyone welcomed the opportunity to shower and to visit the boardwalk, one of the coffee shops, or Canada House. Some soldiers made some last-minute purchases of souvenirs to take home. Most got their hair cut. Soldiers were accommodated for these last few nights in Afghanistan in a large tent which housed the entire company group in double bunks. There was more time for sleep than there had been during operations outside the wire, although many soldiers complained at the time and afterwards of being unable to sleep, in part due to the lack of functioning air conditioning in the tents, the crowding and the noise.

Soldiers on the early chinks were able to meet with members of the incoming unit, the Royal Canadian Regiment. Unofficial handover groups emerged, with soldiers who had friends among the incoming troops finding them and giving them advice on how to survive the tour.

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<sup>12</sup> "Chink" refers to an airplane load of soldiers.

A number of the members of the company expressed concern that the incoming soldiers appeared over-confident and unwilling to accept well-meaning advice and cautions. Despite these unofficial handovers, the majority of the members of the company preferred to spend what free time they had with members of their own unit, in particular, with their own company. Although soldiers did frequent Canada House and the boardwalk, most of them not only preferred the company of their comrades, but actively avoided interacting with members of other units, especially support units, unless they had official business with them. For the members on the early chinks, emotions about returning home were ambivalent at best. Although they expressed relief at having survived the tour and pleasant anticipation of returning home, these feelings were overshadowed by worry over and concern for the members of the Company who were still engaged in operations in the Spin Boldak region.

At this point in the redeployment, soldiers were still oriented to their roles as combatants and it was not until the move to Camp Mirage, the Canadian support base for operations in Afghanistan in the Middle East, that the rite of separation would be complete. While in Kandahar Air Field, for example, they were still armed and could potentially have been deployed if a serious emergency had arisen.

During this phase of the rite of passage, attitudes toward the decompression phase in Cyprus were mixed, with some soldiers expressing the desire to go straight home while others were looking forward to having a chance to unwind first. The younger single soldiers tended to look forward to the sojourn in Cyprus, while the married soldiers were more likely to express a desire to go home directly, especially if this was their first tour. Those married soldiers who had been on previous tours without a decompression were divided: some remembered the shock of return and were hoping that the decompression might alleviate that shock while others could not foresee any benefit to a decompression phase.

The beginning of the end of the rite of separation was the flight to Camp Mirage. Before boarding the Hercules, soldiers donned their body armour and helmets for the last time on the tour, removed magazines from their weapons, and cleared the weapons. Although they were still armed for the flight to Camp Mirage, clearing the weapons before getting on the plane contributed to the separation from the combat role. Most of the chinks arrived in Camp Mirage in the middle of the night. The procedure on arrival was for everyone to line up on the tarmac, turn in their weapons, magazines, bolts, and the ballistic plates from their body armour before stripping off their uniforms and changing into the civilian clothes that they had brought with them. They then loaded their unaccompanied baggage on the waiting aircraft themselves before being dismissed to the camp for several hours, during which time they had access to beds, showers, email and telephone facilities, and the mess hall where they could have a meal.

For most of the soldiers the act of ridding themselves of the outward trappings of combat was a highly charged and significant moment. Liam<sup>13</sup> spoke of “shedding Afghanistan” along with his body armour and clothes and feeling a profound sense of relief that the section of men he had been responsible for had all made it out of Afghanistan alive. For Desmond, who had already submitted his release papers and who knew his remaining time in the army was limited, ridding himself of his weapon was particularly poignant, and he spoke of the handing over of the weapon and plates as “the point where you felt it was done.” For Charles, handing in his weapon felt “like handing someone my balls,” because the weapon had been his “constant companion and security blanket 24 hours a day for such a long time.” Not everyone felt the same way. JohnJR felt that being a soldier was a state of mind, that a soldier’s most important weapons are his mind and willpower, and that turning over his weapon did not change him in any significant way.

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<sup>13</sup> All names are pseudonyms either chosen by the participants themselves or by me at their request.

Despite the fact that everyone had showered in KAF just a few hours earlier, almost everyone took advantage of the opportunity to shower, and this represented the final separation from Afghanistan. Returning weapons, changing into civilian clothes, showering, all these physical activities were the final stages of the rite of separation during which these individuals were forcefully separated from their social, if not personal, identity as combatants. During the ensuing hours in Camp Mirage, many ate and noted how much better the food was in Camp Mirage than in KAF, or than combat rations. Some phoned home, others slept. Those who did sleep reported sleeping well, although it was only for a few hours.

## **Phase 2: Liminality**

The second phase of any rite of passage is the liminal phase. Liminal phases are typically periods when the normal social structure is in abeyance, and hierarchical relationships are flattened or reversed.<sup>14</sup> The liminal phase of the redeployment began when soldiers boarded the plane for the four hour flight to Larnica, Cyprus. Their status as liminal persons was marked by the change in clothing from uniforms with badges of rank to casual civilian clothing. Upon arrival in Cyprus, troops were met by the TLD staff who presented them with envelopes containing their hotel assignments, maps of Larnaca, 155 Cypriot pounds for meals, telephone calling cards and a schedule of the 5 days in Cyprus. Soldiers were assigned to hotels alphabetically with no regard to unit affiliations. As they would be sleeping two per room, they were required to choose roommates from among those who had been assigned to the same hotel. Soldiers typically chose someone from their section or at least their platoon to room with. Some soldiers chose roommates on the basis of friendship and shared interests. Several pairs of married soldiers chose to share rooms because they were not interested in "picking up girls" which they expected of the younger and single soldiers.

As soon as they had cleared customs, the troops were transported by bus to the hotel where the educational component of the decompression would take place. They were treated to a buffet lunch before boarding buses to go to their assigned hotels, of which there were three. A number of soldiers recognized that the buffet lunch was a subtle way of ensuring that everyone had a full stomach before beginning to drink alcoholic beverages, as the meal did not include the opportunity to drink alcohol.

At the hotels, the TLD staff briefed them again about the rules governing the decompression. They were reminded that there was no Visiting Forces Agreement with the Cypriot government, so if any soldier got into trouble with the law, he or she would be subject to Cypriot law, not to the Canadian Code of Discipline under the National Defence Act. There were Military Police (MP) assigned to each hotel; however, soldiers were assured that the MPs' role was not to discipline the soldiers, but to act as liaison with the Cypriot police in the event of trouble. It was forbidden for any soldier to rent or drive any type of motor vehicle because of concerns over vehicle accidents. Soldiers were warned to stay in groups. They were warned not to get tattoos or body piercings because of the risk of infection. Attendance policy for the educational component of the decompression was reinforced: Everyone was required to attend the briefings on the mornings of Day 2 and Day 3 of the decompression. Attendance would be taken on the bus as it left the hotels at 0845 each morning, and anyone who missed the briefings would be charged with being Absent Without Leave. Soldiers were on duty for these briefings and were expected to be sober. The afternoons and evenings of Days 1, 2, and 3 were free as was all of Day 4. The Canadian Forces Personnel Support Agency (CFPSA) staff had organized a number of tourist activities which soldiers could sign up and pay for, including octopus fishing, golfing, scuba diving, boat cruises, spa services, and bus excursions to Paphos and Kourion.

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<sup>14</sup> Victor Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage," in *Betwixt and Between: Patterns of Masculine and Feminine Initiation*, ed. Louise Carus Mahdi, Steven Foster, and Meredith Little (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1987).

As soon as the briefing was over, soldiers headed out to the bars and beaches of Larnica. Getting drunk was high on the priority of activities for a large number of soldiers since they had not consumed alcohol since their leave mid-way through the tour, or the two beers that they had been allowed in celebration of Canada Day. Many went to the beaches or to the swimming pools at their various hotels. At this point the assignment of soldiers alphabetically to different hotels became an issue. All of the members of the Company whom I interviewed informally during the decompression itself and in retrospective interviews found it difficult to coordinate meeting up with their comrades who may have been assigned to other hotels quite a distance away. As there was no easy way to contact each other, soldiers were mostly restricted to socializing with those who had been assigned to the same hotel as them or with meeting friends from other hotels serendipitously. All participants expressed a strong desire only to socialize with member of their own unit, and wanted to avoid any interactions with soldiers whose tour had not involved combat.

For a number of the soldiers, picking up girls was high on their list of preferred activities. Some of them were successful in their quest for casual sex, and some patronized prostitutes. Others were less successful, but claimed to enjoy the opportunity to watch scantily clad women on the beaches and in the bars. Not everyone, however, aspired to meet and arrange for dates with local women, and there was not the sexual free-for-all that popular stereotypes of soldiers would suggest.

The next morning all soldiers appeared as required for the briefings, although a large number of them were suffering hangovers from the drinking of the night before, and some had continued drinking almost all night and had difficulty sobering up enough to pass as sober for the briefings.<sup>15</sup> The first compulsory briefing, conducted in the main conference room of one of the hotels, was dedicated to information about the stresses of returning from a tour of duty and about what to expect in reintegrating with family and the workplace. The instructor for this briefing began by saying that she could not imagine what the soldiers present had experienced, but that she was drawing on what previous soldiers had told her and on the research into post-deployment stress. She had only just arrived in Cyprus the day before and apologized for the lack of air conditioning and asked whether it had been “this hot in Afghanistan.” This raised a laugh, since most of the soldiers had found the room quite chilly, about 30° C as compared to 60°C and hotter in Afghanistan. She then suggested that as important as the information she was presenting was, the briefing was intended to meet their needs and if they needed to sleep, they should feel free to do so. Immediately, at least five soldiers got up from their chairs and curled up on the floor and went to sleep. During a retrospective interview, Desmond reported that although he did not remember anything about the content of the briefing, he did remember feeling sorry for the “girl” giving the briefing, because after she told them they did not have to watch the briefing, there were only four or five paying attention, and everyone else was asleep on the floor.

The second briefing, also compulsory, followed a coffee break and consisted of the educational film *Battlemind Training I: Transitioning from Combat to Home*.<sup>16</sup> This film emphasized that the very mindset which contributed to survival in a combat theatre could be dangerous and counter-productive at home through a series of vignettes. Although the film was reasonably well received, a large number of soldiers slept through it and the American

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<sup>15</sup> Since the soldiers with whom I conducted retrospective interviews could remember very little about the educational component of the decompression, this account of the educational briefings is based entirely on the participant observation research I conducted in Cyprus and on the informal interviews conducted in Cyprus. This account, unless otherwise specified, only refers to the chalk on which I was a participant, although the format for the educational component was the same for every chalk.

<sup>16</sup> Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, U.S. Army Medical Research and Materiel Command, *Battlemind Training I: Transitioning from Combat to Home*.

focus was disconcerting for some. One interviewee reported that on his chalk some soldiers walked out of the film, only to apologize afterward.

After this second briefing, the buses took soldiers back to their assigned hotel and the rest of the day and evening was free time. Again many headed out to the bars, some after a short nap, and some took part in one of the organized tours. A surprising number of participants took advantage of the spa treatment, pedicures being especially popular, because of the build up of foot calluses. Liam reported having a full spa treatment, including a facial, pedicure and massage and that this was the final act of getting Afghanistan out of his skin. I interviewed the spa technician about her experience of these soldiers, and she told me that many of them fell asleep during the treatment, and that all of them responded positively to the nurturing touch involved. She also said that many of them opened up to her and spoke about traumatic experiences that they had had in theatre.

Activities for the evening involved yet more drinking, for some on the beach at Ayia Napa, for others at a go-kart track which was very popular, and more attempts, successful or not, at picking up girls by those who were so inclined. Many soldiers who had signed up for one of the tours were distracted by the drinking and chose not to partake in the activity, and forfeited the fee that they had paid when they had registered. Swimming, whether in the sea or the hotel pools, was very popular, and a number of soldiers told me how wonderful it felt to float in water after six months in a desert.

The next morning was very much a repeat of the previous day, with soldiers suffering from the after effects of alcohol consumption the day and night before. The briefings on Day 3 consisted of choices ranging from managing anger to relationships, and each participant was required to attend two of them. There was also a voluntary church service organized by the chaplains that was quite well attended.

There was one briefing identified as a critical incident stress debriefing which I attended, along with most of the soldiers who had served with 8 Platoon of Charlie Company.<sup>17</sup> There were approximately 25 people attending this briefing, which was a larger number than expected by the facilitator, and the room was very crowded. Participants sat in a circle on chairs and were invited by the facilitator to talk in turn about any incidents that they had participated in that they considered to have been stressful. All the participants were self-selected, so there were personnel of ranks ranging from Private to Warrant Officer in the same room as well as soldiers from other units who had spent the entire tour in Kandahar Air Field.<sup>18</sup> They had also had very different experiences of the tour, some of which were distressing enough to reduce the facilitator to tears while she listened to them. There was time only for two rounds of talk, with some participants choosing not to talk at all, and others speaking openly about their experiences. The briefing, however, was cut short because of the large number of participants, and before there was any opportunity to achieve closure or finality, soldiers were told to get on the buses because of the tight timings.

Both immediately after the critical incident stress debriefing and retrospectively, many soldiers felt it was worse than useless. Some of the soldiers were upset by the debriefing because they left it feeling raw and open. Some of them expressed a feeling of betrayal: of having been invited to open up, and then sent on their way without any resolution. Several soldiers commented that there should not be a mix of ranks in such a debrief, since, in the words of Liam, Privates and Corporals did not want to be around people of higher rank. Most participants felt that the critical incident stress debrief should have been conducted at the

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<sup>17</sup> All participants agreed to maintain confidentiality with respect to what was said in the briefing, so what follows relates only to the process, not the content.

<sup>18</sup> Soldiers on other chalks told me that their critical incident stress debriefing included officers who were unknown to them among the participants and that they were particularly unwelcome.

section level, among soldiers all of whom had shared the same experiences, as the disparity in what participants thought of as stressful or traumatic was a problem. During a tourist activity in the afternoon following the debrief, two soldiers independently and spontaneously divulged to me traumatic events in which they had participated but which they did not feel comfortable sharing in the context of the debriefing, in part because they did not want to upset the facilitator or other participants who had not experienced similar events.

After the last briefing on Day 3, participants were invited by the TLD staff to complete an anonymous survey evaluating the usefulness of the TLD experience, and including demographic questions about rank, age, marital status and so on, and a section evaluating the level of stress to which soldiers had been exposed during the tour. Although the survey was meant to be filled out individually, some of the soldiers paired up to collaborate on their answers. One of the questions asked was: "How many days have you worked outside the wire on this deployment?" This question posed some difficulty as the members of Task Force Orion had spent more days outside the wire than within it, and they had to calculate collaboratively how many days that had been. The survey did not distinguish experience beyond outside or inside the wire, so that someone who spent the entire tour in the Provincial Reconstruction Team or in a Forward Operating Base could insert the same answer as a sniper who had spent almost the entire tour outside of any protective base. The question "How many hours, on average, have you worked per week while on this deployment?" was also difficult to calculate, because of the necessity of deciding what constituted work. For example, did sleeping in the shelter of a Light Armoured Vehicle in a leaguer with artillery pieces firing nearby constitute sleeping or working? Most difficult for some was the question that asked: "How many times did you experience the [following] event?" This question was followed by a list which included: being in armed combat; being fired at; being subject to shelling and/or artillery/mortar fire; harming a person. The forced choices were "never, once, a few times or regularly." For the members of Charlie Company the answer to the first three events would have been regularly, but one soldier told me that there was no box for "I don't know." He complained that he thought he had killed people during several fire fights, but did not know for sure, and he found this lack of recognition of the uncertainty of combat distressing. There were no questions addressing the issue of the composition of the groups for the decompression, although there was a general question asking the soldiers' opinions of how to improve the TLD.

On the last morning of the decompression, all soldiers were required to sign a form stating that they had undergone decompression in Cyprus. It was explained that the form would be placed on individuals' personal files, but no explanation was offered as to the purpose of the form. In the absence of any explanation, soldiers speculated about what possible reason there could be for a signed form attesting to their attendance at the decompression. Some suggested that the form could be used to discount any later complaints on the part of soldiers who may suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). One soldier suggested, "ten years from now, you start having flashbacks, they'll say you can't have PTSD because you were on decompression in Cyprus." In fact, there is no research supporting the theory that a third location decompression reduces the rate of PTSD, and none of the TLD staff ever claimed that the aim of the decompression was to decrease the incidence of PTSD. The stated aim, as mentioned above, was to ease the transition from theatre of operations to home. A subsidiary aim was to ensure that all soldiers would recognise the symptoms of PTSD and know where to get help if they needed it.

Although many soldiers interviewed felt that the decompression phase in Cyprus was valuable and should be compulsory for all members returning from a stressful tour, there were some significant weaknesses in the program. The educational components were less than compelling, and the most valuable element for the soldiers themselves was the opportunity to relax with their peers in a safe environment. It was evident that the staff, both medical and CFPSA, did not have a good appreciation for what the combat soldiers had

been through on the tour, although the same soldiers felt that all the staff were highly professional and compassionate. Importantly, none of the medical or CFPSA staff seemed to be aware that those on the early chalks had left their comrades behind, still engaged in combat operations. This put a significant pall on the decompression as soldiers were worried about their friends in theatre. There seemed to be a surprising lack of recognition on the part of the decompression tour organizers of the importance of the primary group in supporting the returning soldiers' transition from combat to home. Despite the rhetoric in the briefings which spoke of the importance of buddies and the primary group bond, in practice, this bond was not only not recognized, but ruptured by the redeployment process.

### **Phase 3: Reintegration**

It was evident that the liminal period was over and the rite of reintegration had begun on the morning of the fifth day in Cyprus when soldiers appeared on the patio of the hotel to board the bus to the airport for the return journey. They looked very different than they had during the tour in Afghanistan when they had usually been dirty, wearing helmets and body armour and fully armed. They were all freshly shaven and dressed in clean combat uniforms wearing berets, rather than the field cap or helmet that they had worn in Afghanistan. They appeared to be different people than they had been during the decompression tour as well as when they were always dressed in civilian clothes, often drunk or suffering from hangovers, and usually unshaven. They looked again like soldiers and their focus now turned to home and the reintegration in their new status as combat veterans.

The flight home was long and uneventful, including a refuelling stop in Glasgow, and finally arriving in Edmonton. Most soldiers interviewed remembered very little about the flight home, as most of them slept the entire journey. Arriving in Edmonton, the flight was escorted by fighter jets flying on the wing tips of the transport aircraft. Some of the soldiers reported feeling touched by this gesture while others suggested that they would have preferred to see the CF18s in Afghanistan rather than in Canada. Without exception, soldiers reported that the customs officials treated them with respect and no one had any difficulty clearing customs. For some, being met by members of the Royal Canadian Legion offering them coffee and doughnuts was greatly appreciated. The first exposure to the Edmonton February temperature was shocking as soldiers boarded the buses for the drive from the airport to the Lecture Training Facility (LTF) where their families and friends were waiting to greet them.

The meeting with families was very poignant; there were many tears of joy and relief as families greeted them. Some soldiers asked their families not to meet them at the LTF because they preferred their reunion to occur in private, fearing that either their families or they themselves would break down. There were also, however, a few soldiers who were not met by anyone, not by choice, but because their wives had left them during the tour. All of the soldiers were changed irrevocably by the tour. Many of them had lost significant amounts of muscle mass, some as much as thirty or more pounds. Others were coming back with scars, both physical and psychological, visible and invisible. Some, despite being warned not to, had received tattoos or body piercings in Cyprus.

The culmination of the rite of reintegration occurred with the change of command parade for the battalion in late August. The soldiers who had been on the early chalks had spent a period of time on leave, others had reduced duties, and some had arrived back in Canada the night before the parade. The parade was the first time Charlie Company was back together as a group since taking a company photograph in Spin Boldak weeks before. The final phase of completing the transition to combat veteran occurred when soldiers were presented with their South West Asia Service Medal, recognizing their contribution to both Operation Enduring Freedom and the International Security Assistance Force.

## DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The institution of a decompression phase as part of the redeployment process is an important improvement in how soldiers experience the transition from the tour to home. Analysis of the process of redeployment and anthropological theories of rites of passage suggest that all three phases, separation, liminality and reintegration, are necessary for a successful change in status from active combatant to combat veteran. The decompression or liminal phase was extremely helpful in mitigating the stress of return for this rotation; however, the process was seriously flawed and could be improved. Whether these findings would be replicable to other rotations is debatable, and, indeed, some of the changes recommended below may have already been made for subsequent rotations.

The first flaw in the process arose because the redeployment treated all soldiers alike, regardless of their role or rank during the tour. This meant that the whole process had a one-size fits all feel to it, which did not recognize the variety of ways the tour was experienced by combat arms soldiers and non-combat arms soldiers, by officers, non-commissioned officers, and non-commissioned members.

Related to the first flaw was the lack of recognition, despite lip service, of the importance of the primary group bond in supporting the transition from combat to home. Soldiers felt strongly that being separated from their comrades who had either left before them or were staying behind in a combat role for as long as a week or more, had a deleterious effect on the transition home. There was a very strong feeling that all members of the platoon should have come out of theatre at the same time, and that at least section, if not platoon, integrity should have been maintained. Moreover, there was strong support for assigning hotels not alphabetically, but by unit, to make it easier for those who had served together to relax and socialize together. Not only were soldiers' comrades the most important support they had after serving in combat, but the group itself needed time, as a group, to relax and come to terms with what it had experienced.

The following specific recommendations for improving the redeployment process are based both on anthropological theory of rites of passage and on the experience of the soldiers themselves.

*Maintenance of primary group integrity:* The most serious and damaging feature of the redeployment process was the rupturing of primary group integrity. If at all possible, future redeployments should strive to maintain integrity of primary groups, at the section level at the very least, and, if possible, at the platoon level. This would permit sections to experience all three phases of the rite of passage as a group, with the leadership intact. Moreover, it would demonstrate to members that the leadership of the CF pays more than lip service to the importance of the primary group in supporting individual well-being.

*Accommodation during decompression:* While it is recognized that it may not be possible to accommodate all members in the same hotel, every attempt should be made to ensure that hotels are geographically close. If that is not possible, every attempt ought to be made to assign participants to hotel by unit, not simply alphabetically. Again, recognizing the importance of the group bond would communicate in actions as well as words one of the lessons that was being taught by the educational component of the decompression: that one's buddies are the most important resource for soldiers' well-being.

*Critical incident stress debriefing:* The intention behind the critical stress incident debriefing was good; however, in practice, it represented both a cause of additional stress, and even trauma for some, and a wasted opportunity. Grouping people who had widely varying experiences in the same debriefing was counter productive. Encouraging soldiers to open up about their potentially traumatic experiences in theatre, only to have the facilitator weep on

hearing of these experiences, communicated to them that it is not appropriate to talk about their experiences even to mental health professionals. Further, ending the session without any form of closure because of having to meet timings communicated to the participants that the bus schedule was more important than their well-being. The Critical Incident Stress Debriefing should be conducted by well-prepared mental health professionals with experience in trauma counseling who have the self-control to hear accounts of trauma without breaking down themselves. Also, the schedule should be flexible enough to allow for meeting individual and group needs. If section integrity were maintained, the Critical Stress Incident Debriefing could be designed to support individuals who had shared traumatic experiences in theatre through their primary group, by delivering to sections rather than to self-selected individuals. The debriefing could be an opportunity to work through group trauma and to resolve any outstanding conflicts within the section.

## **CONCLUSION**

The redeployment of Task Force Orion represented an effective rite of passage for members of the unit from combatant to combat veteran. For the most part, it was well organized and the three phases, the rite of separation, liminality, and rite of aggregation, functioned adequately. A major weakness in the process, however, was the rupturing of primary group solidarity when the sections were split up during the first phase. This disruption affected soldiers negatively through the other two phases of the rite of passage. Despite this serious weakness, the decompression or liminal phase in Cyprus appears to have been a significant factor in easing the transition from combat theatre to home; however, the most valuable aspects of the decompression were not the institutionalized, educational components, but the opportunity to relax with comrades in a safe place betwixt and between combat and home.

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