



# Trained Perspective: Connected Between Boot Camp and the Civilian-Military Divide

**ANTHONY PALOMADO AGUTOS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this paper is to explore the lasting effects that boot camp has and to argue its contribution to the civilian-military divide. Drawing from first-hand experiences of veterans, as well as using analysis from individuals engaging with these topics, I outline why it is difficult for veterans to fully reconnect with their civilian lifestyles, while also discussing the hardships that come to those who are able to successfully reintegrate themselves. Finally, I end by offering my potential prescriptions for the issue presented.

## **CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:**

**Anthony Palomado Agutos**

[aagutos@uci.edu](mailto:aagutos@uci.edu)

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There are a total of six branches in the US military that employs 1.3 million active duty and an additional 800,000 people in the National Guard and Reserves (US Department of Defense, 2020). There are also countless more retired veterans who have served the country as a member of one of those branches. A commonality shared by each of these individuals is the process of becoming a soldier.<sup>1</sup> This process is called boot camp and is quite rigorous as a result of breaking individuals down to their core and building them back up as soldiers. Through this experience, each individual is conditioned to adopt a set of values that align with a team-oriented mindset, which include but are not limited to: selflessness, courage, discipline, and solidarity. Recruits are taught to put their individual needs or desires aside in order to benefit the group or the greater good, and in this period of time, the lessons they learn are meant to prepare them for any challenge that may arise during their time in service. The process, on average, lasts between 8–12 weeks (Hammons, 2016), but its effect on the individual, last a lifetime.

The implications of the lifetime effects of boot camp are especially relevant in veteran efforts to return back to civilian life. There is this phenomenon that exists within the veteran experience called the civilian-military divide. The divide stems from and is defined by the inherent differences between the average veteran's experience versus the average civilian experience. As outlined previously, in discussing boot camp, veterans learn to live with a tribalistic mentality, putting the needs of the group over the needs of the individual, whereas civilians are encouraged to be more independent and individualistic. Thus, contrasting perspectives arise.

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## THE WARRIOR CLASS

A significant event in history for our military, is when we converted from a draft system to an all-volunteer force. In the past, there existed a draft system in which individuals were called to the line of duty and the decision of who was in the military was in the hands of the government. Today, the decision ultimately lies with each individual. In a

podcast that explores a variety of topics and experiences of veterans called *Home/Front*, when discussing the transition of recruitment into the military, Warner (2021), the host, stated “It’s a choice that few people make ... which means more than ever before in America we have a kind of warrior class” (7:00). By saying this Warner believed that the hardships that come with going through boot camp, being in the military, or being in war are things that no longer cross most people’s minds.

This is significant to the phenomenon of the civilian-military divide, because we end up with a small percentage of the population experiencing a really high percentage, if not all of the hardship, associated with serving the country. This small percentage of the population is what Warner (2021) referred to as the warrior class. The effects are polarizing because, in any society that is class-based, you are either part of the group or not. Veterans go out and sacrifice their lives to serve the country, and many times, we as civilians fail to recognize their efforts and are completely ignorant of the realities that they face.

This warrior class goes through this transformative process in boot camp and countless other events throughout their time in service. In his book, *The Veteran Comes Back*, Willard Waller (1944), a US Navy WWII veteran and sociologist who studied the sociology of the military, shed light on the irreversible change that occurs during their experience in the military where “a soldier can never quite be a civilian again” (p. 18). Waller’s point is that this person adopts a whole new mentality and perspective on the world, and because of this, would really have a hard time connecting with those who don’t share the same experience. For instance, in the introduction of the first episode of Ives’ (2021) docuseries *American Veteran* a veteran stated, “There is a very stark line between before boot camp and after boot camp and you are never the same” (0:33), which supports the idea that boot camp is a transformative process experienced by our veterans. One veteran, in particular, is Private First Class Regionald “Malik” Edwards who was featured in an oral history in the book *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans* by Wallace Terry (1984). Edwards described his own experience in boot camp in the following line: “The best thing about the Marine Corps, I can say for me, is that they teach you personal endurance, how much of it you can stand” (Terry, 1984, p. 5). In other words, what Edwards was trying to emphasize is how close to their limits someone in the military boot camp pushes themselves, and it is something that not many civilians are willing to apply to their own lives.

These conclusions add weight to the argument that the shift to an all-volunteer force led to the emergence of a warrior class in our society where the alternative used to be

that almost anyone could be called to serve at any time and that not only kept the military relevant in daily life, but also encouraged civilians to respect/acknowledge how lucky they are to have someone fighting for them. At first glance, civilian matters and veteran matters may seem necessarily separate, but by taking this alternative approach there would cease to be different classes, ultimately narrowing the civilian-military divide and striving towards a more cohesive society.

## THE NEED FOR SOLIDARITY

A unique and powerful consequence of joining the military and going through boot camp is the camaraderie that is built between the individuals. The principal value of selflessness is at the core of this experience and is something that is hard to find in civilian life. In a lecture featuring Dr. Eric Hodges, who is a veteran himself, Hodges talked about the importance of solidarity when referencing the works of Willard Waller (1944), and he said, “solidarity is the one basic human need that civilian society has a hard time meeting that the military can actually supply” (Hodges, 2021, 11:46). In other words, Dr. Hodges believed that there is a unique feature that separates the military from any experience you can have as a civilian. This is significant to the discussion of the civilian-military divide because the implications raise questions on if the divide is a wicked problem (Grohowski, 2023), one that has so much complexity that it’s unsolvable, and what stakes or contributions to the military must civilians make to gain access to this seemingly social necessity?

Solidarity is defined as the agreement of feeling or action; especially among individuals with a common interest. Regardless of the nuances of one’s duties within the military, the common interest is always towards the service of the country; the same cannot be said for civilians. This point is illustrated well by one of the participants in the *Home/Front* podcast where a veteran described their experience talking with civilians about their time in the military. They expressed “an uncomfortable incuriousness” (Warner, 2021, 8:50) where the civilian seemed to not want to engage in the conversation because it wasn’t interesting or they did not relate to the conversation. In this case, the civilian’s lack of common interest with the veteran led to a difficult realization for both parties involved. Although speaking to like-minded peers may seem of concern to only a small group of veterans, it should in fact concern anyone who cares about bridging the gap in the civilian-military divide.

This interaction has important implications for the broader domain of polarization within our society where

individuals aren’t spending enough time genuinely trying to understand one another and settling their differences. Here you can see that there are certain groups within a population that simply do not want to associate themselves with veterans and it forces the veterans to conceal a huge part of their identity. Connecting back to the previous section about the warrior class, this is why veterans always say that “civilians just wouldn’t understand” because there aren’t many signs to show veterans that civilians care enough to explore veterans’ experiences, and therefore veterans believe that they can only really talk about their traumas with people who also experienced what they experienced. It is because of this that Paula Caplan (2011), who was a clinical and research psychologist, advocated for civilians to give veterans “a chance to tell their stories and be listened to intently” (p. 2), encouraging behavior that will allow veterans to feel more respected and feel safe to share the experiences that they’ve never talked about. To put it bluntly, we as civilians also play into the divide by not challenging ourselves enough in our daily lives so that we can draw upon our experiences of hardship and prevent occurrences like the one described by the veteran in the *Home/Front* podcast.

## MILITARIZATION VERSUS DEMILITARIZATION

Since there is a required process to join any branch of the military (boot camp) where civilians learn to become soldiers, and we have established that this process has significant effects when it comes to the resocialization of veterans after service, logically and conversely, there should be a required process in which veterans learn to become civilians. The discussion thus far has been predicated on the idea that boot camp and the military experience have lasting effects on the lives of our veterans, yet this may not always be the case. Admittedly, there are instances where veterans seem to easily reintegrate themselves back into society and civilian life, and by this logic, some may say that the militarization of individuals through boot camp is not as significant to the civilian-military divide as I have laid out.

In his chapter about art-making groups for veterans, Benjamin Schrader (2019) defined militarization as “the step-by-step process by which something becomes controlled by, dependent on, or derives its value from the military as an institution or militaristic criteria” (p. 140). The process of militarization is parallel to boot camp, and in making this connection, Schrader is trying to convey the importance of having a contrasting process (demilitarization) for post-service life, as the efforts to

become a soldier need to be matched with a process to reintegrate back into society. A strategy for demilitarization is for veterans to repurpose their mission, where they are able to keep their sense of purpose in serving the country, but do it in an alternative way that involves less trauma. A good example of this is Duery Felton Jr. who is a Vietnam War veteran that reckoned with post-military identity with his work in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Collection. In the docuseries *American Veteran* “Episode 4: The Reckoning,” he talked about how he “wanted to be sure that everyone that was affected by the war was reflected in this collection” (Williams, 2021, 15: 35). Felton achieved this by using his distinct knowledge to identify and organize items that were left at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC; therefore, being able to continue to serve his country by educating civilians. Not only is this an example of demilitarization in the sense that Felton was able to find a new mission, but also his efforts play a huge role in closing the civilian-military divide.

On one hand, I concede that there are many examples like Felton (as featured in Williams, 2021), where a veteran is seemingly able to reintegrate themselves back into society and narrow the gap between civilian and military. But on the other hand, I still insist that there are lasting lifelong effects from one’s time in the military, and despite their efforts to change their lives, veterans suffer from a unique hardship that we as civilians may never understand. In the docuseries *American Veteran* “Episode 3: The Return,” a veteran supports my assertion by saying “You realize that the war followed you home and that you can’t escape it” (Williams, 2021, 42: 10). Asserting that there are certain experiences that veterans go through that will always be a part of their lives, even after service. Furthermore, Schrader (2019) admitted something that many veterans suffer from: “A recurring theme in the attempt to return to normalcy was the use of different crutches, from drugs and alcohol” (p. 138) and that “twenty-two veterans, on average, commit suicide every day” (p. 148). This is significant because it highlights the fact that many veterans, regardless of their ability to reintegrate into civilian life, suffer from issues such as substance abuse and suicide. This is an indication that psychologically, due to their unique experiences, veterans are dealing with things that we (civilians) never have to. The implication is that demilitarization may narrow the civilian-military gap, but there will always be a divide between us.

## CONCLUSION

The veteran experience is unique for many reasons. The emergence of a modern-day warrior class (Warner, 2021)

as well as the human desire for true solidarity (Hodges, 2021) creates the need for practices such as demilitarization (Schrader, 2019). These experiences have lasting effects on individuals’ lives and although an argument can be made for better or worse, there is no doubt that such experiences play a part in the social polarization of civilians and veterans. Civilians may never have to deal with the things veterans do, and we may never truly understand what they are going through.

Regardless of this fact, any lack of understanding between individuals or groups has the potential to create conflict. I believe it’s our civic responsibility on both sides to try and bridge the civilian-military divide as much as possible. Veterans like Duery Felton Jr. (in Williams, 2021) should continue to share their knowledge so that the general public may learn about the different nuances of military life; but, as civilians, we need to step up and play our part too (Caplan, 2011). There should not be a time when we tell our veterans that we do not want to hear about their experiences on the basis that we cannot relate to them. I think that if we take on as much responsibility as we can in our own individual lives to challenge ourselves and to always strive for self-improvement, we can in some ways relate to veterans who’ve transformed their lives through boot camp (Waller, 1944). Our responsibility to grow as individuals will help cultivate a more understanding society and reduce unnecessary conflicts, which oftentimes is the cause of the demand for our military.

## NOTE

- 1 I use the term “soldier” throughout as a catchall term for all members of the armed forces, regardless of the military branch and respective titles used by specific branches.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## AUTHOR INFORMATION

Anthony Agutos is a fourth-year student at the University of California, Irvine where he is pursuing a degree in Psychology. He enjoys weight training in his free time, but also volunteers in his community; he participated in the Justice for Filipino American Veterans (JFAV) March, which is an advocacy effort dedicated to help Filipino Veterans who served in WWII get compensation for their service. Upon completion of his undergraduate studies, he plans to become a Certified Personal Trainer (CPT,) as he finds

passion in helping others live a more active and healthy lifestyle in the pursuit of self-improvement.

## AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Anthony Palomado Agutos

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