Revista Română de Asistență Socială Militară
Romanian Journal of Military Social Work (RJMSW)
Revue roumaine d'assistance sociale militaire (RRASM)
ISSN: 3120-2179
Vol. 1, Nr. 3, July - September 2026
https://rrasm.ro/ redactie@rrasm.ro

Military Film and Documentary as Analytical Tools in Military Social Work

Trauma Experience, Resilience, and the Reintegration of Service Members and Veterans

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Abstract

Military service represents a field characterized by high responsibility, organizational discipline, institutional belonging, and exposure to potentially traumatic situations. Participation in international missions, exposure to operational risks, and transition back to family and community environments create individual and social challenges requiring specialized interventions. Military social work aims to identify, assess, and address the social consequences of military experiences affecting service members, veterans, and their families. Within this framework, military films and documentaries can represent complementary instruments for analysis, research, and professional training. This article examines how military cinematic productions reflect issues such as combat trauma, post-traumatic stress, loss of comrades, transformation of professional identity, military-family relationships, and social reintegration. Through qualitative thematic analysis, representative films and documentaries are explored in order to highlight their relevance for military social work practice. The findings suggest that responsible use of cinematic materials may contribute to professional empathy, improved understanding of beneficiaries, and more effective interventions for military personnel and veterans.

Keywords: documentary film, military family, military personnel, military social work, resilience, social reintegration, trauma, veterans.

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1. Introduction

The military institution occupies a unique place in the structure of society because it involves assuming responsibilities that go beyond the framework of an ordinary occupation. The service member does not merely fulfill a professional function, but becomes part of an organization based on values such as discipline, loyalty, solidarity, and constant readiness to accomplish the mission.

This specificity determines the existence of distinct professional experiences, some of which can have a significant impact on the individual. Participation in external missions, contact with risk situations, the loss of colleagues, and exposure to traumatic events can influence how service members relate to themselves, their families, and society.

Returning from a theater of operations is not just a geographical change, but a complex process of transition. Service members must readapt to the family environment, the community, and their previous social roles. In certain situations, this transition may be accompanied by emotional, relational, or social difficulties.

From the perspective of military social work, these aspects require a multidimensional approach. Service members must be evaluated not only through the lens of their professional status, but as individuals integrated into a system of family and community relationships.

In recent decades, military films and documentaries have become important means through which society can understand the experiences of those who participate in conflicts and international missions. Unlike strictly institutional descriptions, cinematographic productions bring the human dimension of military service to the forefront.

2. Military Social Work - Theoretical Approach

2.1. The Specificity of Social Intervention in the Military Environment

Military social work represents a specialized field that combines the general principles of social work with the particularities of the military organization. The specialist's intervention aims to maintain a balance between the service member's professional requirements and their personal and family needs.

The main directions of intervention include:

- evaluating the service member's social situation;

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- identifying individual and family risk factors;
- supporting adaptation after missions;
- facilitating access to services;
- family counseling and guidance;
- supporting the social reintegration process. (Glicken, 2011)

An important characteristic of this field is the fact that service members may manifest difficulties in expressing personal vulnerabilities, because the military organizational culture values endurance, self-control, and the ability to cope with difficult situations.

2.2. Military Trauma and Social Consequences

Trauma associated with combat experience should be analyzed within a broad context that encompasses psychological, social, and family dimensions. In addition to physical trauma, another form of profound psychosocial suffering discussed in the specialized literature is moral injury, often referred to as the "invisible wounds" of war (Litz & Kerig, 2019).

Shay (1994) highlights the fact that the experience of war can affect an individual's relationship with their own values, with their group of belonging, and with society.

Some social consequences of traumatic experiences can include:

- withdrawal from social relationships;
- communication difficulties within the family;
- modification of self-perception;
- adaptation problems after returning from a mission;
- difficulties in transitioning to civilian life.

In this context, the role of the military social worker is to identify these modifications and to contribute to building efficient support mechanisms.

3. Film and Documentary as Tools for Social Analysis

Cinematographic imagery represents a form of communication capable of capturing complex human experiences. In the social field, film can be used not only as a cultural product, but also as an educational and research tool.

For military social work, the main advantage of the documentary consists in its proximity to the direct experience of the service member. Interviews, images from the

operational environment, and personal accounts allow for the observation of aspects that cannot always be captured through quantitative methods.

The use of film in the training of professionals can contribute to:

- the development of empathy;
- the understanding of the beneficiary's perspective;
- the analysis of crisis situations;
- the identification of vulnerability factors;
- the development of reflective thinking.

However, cinematographic material must be analyzed critically, because any production represents an interpretation of reality, influenced by the author's perspective, cultural context, and purpose of creation.

4. Research Methodology

The present analysis utilizes a qualitative methodology based on the thematic analysis of audiovisual content, applied to cinematographic and documentary productions relevant to the military environment and military social work.

Within the research, a corpus of four representative productions was selected:

1. The documentary ***Restrepo*** (2010), for the analysis of camaraderie and group dynamics in the theater of operations;
2. The documentary ***Wartorn: 1861-2010*** (HBO, 2010), for the examination of "invisible wounds" as well as the historical evolution of war trauma;
3. The documentary ***The Wounded Platoon*** (PBS, 2010), through which the identification of challenges associated with returning to the civilian environment was pursued;
4. The feature film ***American Sniper*** (Eastwood, 2014), to illustrate identity rupture and the corrosion of family dynamics.

The selection of materials took into account the following criteria:

- relevance to the military experience;
- presentation of the social consequences of the conflict;
- approach to the post-mission return period;

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- pedagogical and analytical utility for the training and practice of military social work.

The themes tracked in the analysis of the productions were:

- traumatic experience (visible and invisible);
- the service member's relationship with the family system;
- the role of cohesion and camaraderie;
- the transformation of professional and personal identity;
- the challenges of social reintegration;
- the necessity of specialized intervention.

Although it is not part of the main corpus of productions subjected to detailed thematic analysis in this research, the feature film directed by Bigelow (2008), The Hurt Locker, is worth mentioning as a complementary cinematic reference capable of illustrating the extreme tension and psychological pressure associated with engineering and mine-clearing missions.

PART II - Applied Analysis, Implications for Professional Practice, and Conclusions

5. Analysis of Cinematographic Productions Relevant to the Military Experience

5.1. "Restrepo" - Military Camaraderie and the Collective Experience of Combat

The documentary *Restrepo* represents one of the relevant productions for understanding the human dimension of armed conflict. The material follows the experience of an American military unit deployed in Afghanistan and captures the relationships between service members in an environment characterized by uncertainty, risk, and psychological pressure.

A central element of the documentary is military camaraderie. Under operational conditions, the group becomes a fundamental source of emotional and social support. Relationships between service members contribute to maintaining cohesion, managing stress, and consolidating the sense of belonging.

From the perspective of military social work, this dimension is essential because it highlights the fact that a service member's adaptation does not depend exclusively on individual resources, but also on the existence of a social support network.

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Upon returning to the civilian environment, the loss of this framework of solidarity can generate adaptation difficulties. Service members may feel the difference between the intensity of relationships developed in the operational environment and ordinary social relationships in the community.

For the military social worker, this situation underlines the importance of supporting the transition process and identifying new forms of social integration.

5.2. "Wartorn: 1861-2010" - Invisible Trauma and the Memory of War

The documentary *Wartorn: 1861-2010* analyzes how the psychological effects of war have been understood over time.

One of the fundamental ideas of the production is that war produces effects that are not limited to the conflict period. Some consequences appear after the service member returns to the family and social environment.

The concept of the "invisible wound" is relevant to military social work because it draws attention to problems that are not always immediately observable:

- relational difficulties;
- behavioral changes;
- social isolation;
- feelings of loss;
- adaptation difficulties.

In this context, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) represents one of the most severe "invisible wounds" in the military environment. Its effects extend beyond the strictly clinical dimension, profoundly affecting veterans' social integration, professional lives, and family relationships (Sava, Sava, Bârzan, & Oprina, 2026).

This perspective supports the necessity of long-term intervention, based on periodic evaluation and monitoring of the service member's social situation.

5.3. "The Wounded Platoon" - Coming Home and the Veteran's Challenges

The documentary *The Wounded Platoon* presents the experiences of service members returning from Iraq and the difficulties encountered after returning to the civilian environment.

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The production highlights the fact that completing a mission does not automatically mean completing the adaptation process. Service members may continue to be influenced by experiences lived during participation in the conflict.

The main themes addressed are:

- the difficulty of reconnecting with the family;
- behavioral change;
- the feeling of being misunderstood;
- the necessity of specialized support.

The difficulties encountered by military personnel when leaving a conflict zone and adapting to family life are extensively analyzed by Hoge (2010), who demonstrates that the transition from combat to civilian life requires specialized guidance and support.

For the practice of military social work, this example highlights the importance of interdisciplinary intervention and the existence of integrated services for service members and veterans.

5.4. "American Sniper" - Military Identity After Returning from Mission

The film *American Sniper* offers a cinematographic perspective on the difficulty of separating military identity from civilian life.

The main character illustrates the conflict between the role of a service member and the family role. Operational experience continues to influence how the individual relates to family and society.

From a social perspective, the film allows the analysis of themes such as:

- the difficulty of transition;
- perceived responsibility toward comrades;
- the relationship between military service and personal life;
- the impact of extreme experiences on the family.

6. The Experience of Romanian Service Members in Theaters of Operations

Romania's participation in international missions under the aegis of the United Nations, NATO, or the European Union represented an important stage in the evolution of the Romanian military institution.

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Romanian service members participated in missions in the Western Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq, and other areas of strategic interest, contributing to peacekeeping, stabilization, and international security operations.

With regard to maintaining operational capability, official reports emphasize that the psychological health and resilience of personnel are major strategic priorities at the allied level (NATO, 2019).

These experiences implied adaptation to different cultural contexts, the assumption of operational risks, and the management of complex situations.

From the perspective of military social work, operational experience must be analyzed through the prism of its effects on:

- the service member;
- the family;
- the community;
- the reintegration process.

Service members returning from a mission may go through a readaptation process in which they must reconcile the experience accumulated in the operations zone with the demands of daily life.

Doca and Oprina (2026) highlight the fact that post-military reintegration and the transition to civilian life do not occur spontaneously, but rather involve a complex process of mobilizing psychosocial resilience and community support networks in order to counteract the risk of veteran isolation.

7. The Service Member's Family - A Central Element of the Reintegration Process

The family represents one of the most important sources of support for military personnel. Participation in overseas missions generates a range of collateral challenges for the family environment, requiring specialized interventions focused not only on the individual but on the entire system of family relationships (Honcu & Oprina, 2026).

At the same time, the family can be indirectly affected by the military experience through:

- long periods of separation;

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- modification of responsibilities;
- stress associated with professional risk;
- communication difficulties after return.

Efficient reintegration presupposes the involvement of the family in the support process. The military social worker can have the role of mediator and facilitator of communication between the service member and family members.

An approach centered exclusively on the individual can ignore the fact that the service member is part of a relational system. Therefore, intervention must include the family and the close social environment.

8. The Role of Film in the Training of Military Social Workers

The use of films and documentaries in the professional training process can constitute an efficient method for developing competencies.

Cinematographic materials allow for the analysis of complex situations and facilitate discussions about:

- intervention ethics;
- vulnerability;
- resilience;
- professional communication;
- the specialist-beneficiary relationship.

Within training, film can be used together with case studies, specialized literature, and practical experience. The goal is not to replace professional methods, but to complement them through an experiential perspective.

9. Development Directions for Military Social Work

The analysis of the experiences presented highlights several important directions for the development of the field, ranging from integrated collaboration to prevention and professional retraining:

9.1. Strengthening Interdisciplinary Intervention

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Addressing complex cases in the military environment cannot be achieved through a single professional specialty but requires institutional collaboration. The specific needs of military personnel and veterans require close cooperation among:

- social workers, responsible for assessing relational environments and community resources;
- psychologists, who provide interventions aimed at managing trauma and post-traumatic stress disorders;
- medical professionals, who address physical injuries and medical comorbidities;
- military structures, which can ensure continuity of institutional support as well as logistical and organizational assistance;
- military priests and chaplains, who can play a catalytic role in providing spiritual support and moral counseling, addressing existential suffering and profound war-related trauma, including situations involving bereavement or the loss of comrades;
- veterans' organizations, by providing a framework of solidarity and understanding based on shared combat experiences;
- community services, which facilitate effective reintegration into civilian life.

9.2. Developing Preventive Programs

Effective intervention should not be limited to managing acute crises but should begin before such crises emerge. Accordingly, the implementation of periodic assessment mechanisms, combined with social health education programs, can significantly contribute to the early identification of vulnerabilities and to reducing the risks of marginalization or the chronicization of trauma.

9.3. Supporting Veterans in Professional Transition

The transition from military to civilian life represents a major turning point, often characterized by difficulties in identity and professional adjustment. This stage should be supported through structured programs focused on career guidance, labor market integration, and the recognition and utilization of skills acquired during military service.

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10. Discussions

The analysis of films and documentaries with military themes highlights the fact that the experience of military service must be understood from a complex perspective that goes beyond the strictly operational dimension. Service members are not just participants in missions or members of a professional organization, but individuals integrated into a system of family, social, and community relationships.

The results of the analysis support the idea that the main challenges associated with the military experience appear, in many situations, in the period after the conclusion of the mission. Coming home presupposes an adaptation process in which service members must reconstruct their balance between the professional identity acquired in the military environment and their previous social roles.

An important aspect highlighted by the analyzed productions is the difference between the visibility of physical risks and the less obvious character of the social and emotional effects of conflict participation. Physical wounds are easy to identify and treat, while difficulties related to trauma, loss, behavioral change, or family difficulties can remain hidden for prolonged periods.

From the perspective of military social work, this observation underlines the necessity of developing intervention models oriented toward prevention and early identification. Support granted to service members must not be limited to crisis situations, but must include periodic social evaluation, monitoring of post-mission adaptation, and the consolidation of protective factors.

The analysis also highlights the importance of the family in the recovery and reintegration process. The family can represent the primary source of stability for the service member, but can in turn become affected by the consequences of experiences lived during the mission. Therefore, the intervention of the military social worker must include a systemic approach in which the family is considered an indirect beneficiary and a partner in the support process.

Another element resulting from the cinematographic analysis is the role of military camaraderie. Relationships developed between service members during missions represent an important resource of resilience. However, the loss of this framework after returning to the

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civilian environment can generate adaptation difficulties. This aspect highlights the necessity of developing mechanisms through which veterans can maintain their sense of belonging even after the conclusion of their military career.

The use of film and documentary as educational tools for military social workers represents a direction with significant potential. Cinematographic materials allow for proximity to the subjective experience of the service member and can contribute to the development of professional empathy. However, they must be used critically, as complementary tools, alongside scientific research, professional evaluation, and specialized practice.

In the Romanian context, the experience of service members participating in international missions confirms the necessity of continuously developing support services for military personnel and their families. Adapting intervention models to the national cultural and institutional specificity represents an important condition for the efficiency of military social work.

Therefore, military films and documentaries should not be viewed solely as forms of artistic representation of war, but also as resources for research, professional education, and reflection on how society supports individuals who have performed military activities.

Military films and documentaries represent valuable tools for understanding the human dimension of the military profession. Through individual stories, they allow for the exploration of complex social realities: trauma, loss, solidarity, family, and reintegration.

For military social work, these productions can constitute important educational and analytical resources. They contribute to the development of a person-centered perspective and to a better understanding of the needs of service members and veterans.

The military experience does not end with the completion of a mission or career. It continues through how the individual adapts, reconstructs their identity, and finds their place in family and society.

The role of the military social worker is to support this process through professionalism, empathy, and intervention based on the real needs of the beneficiary.

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