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The Experience of a Romanian Veteran in International Missions: A Case Study on Psychosocial Resilience and Post-Military Reintegration

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Abstract

The present study analyzes, through an in-depth narrative interview, the professional career and subjective experience of a veteran of the Romanian Army who participated, within the International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF), in two international missions in Afghanistan (2008 and 2009-2010). The qualitative data resulting from the interview reveal three main analytical dimensions: (1) the formation of professional identity, as a result of distinct operational specializations (sniper and military cook); (2) coping mechanisms and psychosocial resilience developed in theaters of operations and (3) the transition process from military to civilian life and related reintegration after almost two decades of military career. The results underline the importance and role of group cohesion, intensive training, emphasizing institutional support in the management of combat stress, increasing the psychosocial resilience of the military, but also of the group, essentially providing relevant perspectives for military social assistance services.

Keywords: ISAF missions, military career, military social work, post-mission reintegration, psychosocial resilience, Romanian Army, theater of operations.

Rezumat

Prezentul studiul analizează, prin intermediul unui interviu narativ aprofundat, parcursul profesional și experiența substituivă a unui veteran al Armatei Române participant, în cadrul Forței Internaționale de Asistență și Securitate (ISAF), la două misiuni internaționale în Afganistan (2008 și 2009-2010). Datele calitative rezultate din interviu relevă trei dimensiuni analitice principale: (1) formarea identității profesionale, ca rezultat al specializărilor

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operaționale distincte (lunetist şi bucătar militar); (2) mecanismele de coping și reziliența psihosocială dezvoltate în teatrele de operații și (3) procesul de tranziție de la viața militară la cea civilă și reintegrarea aferentă după aproape două decenii de carieră militară. Rezultatele subliniază importanța și rolul coeziunii de grup, al pregătirii intensive, punând accent pe suportul instituțional în gestionarea stresului de luptă, creşterea rezilienței psihosociale a militarului, dar și a grupului oferind, în esență, perspective relevante pentru serviciile de asistență socială militară.

Cuvinte-cheie: Armata Română, asistență socială militară, carieră militară, misiuni ISAF, reziliența psihosocială, teatru de operații, reintegrare postmisiune, veteran român.

1. Introduction

By acceding to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 2004, Romania achieved one of its most critical milestones for national security, „the transatlantic relationship representing the strategic bond that gives coherence and consistency to NATO actions" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs [MFA], 2021). Consequently, Romania became an important and reliable ally within the North Atlantic Alliance, alongside the other 31 members.

Prior to joining NATO, Romania participated with troops in external missions of the Alliance or under the UN aegis:

- IFOR – Implementation Force (1995-1996) and SFOR – Stabilization Force (1996-2004), NATO-led operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Ene, C. 1997);
- KFOR in Kosovo (March 2000) (Ministry of National Defense [MoND], 2000);
- OEF (Operation Enduring Freedom) – the mission in Afghanistan, launched in June 2002, which recorded its first two casualties in 2003 (Comisarul, 2014);
- Operation Alba in Albania (1997) (United Nations, 1997), as well as UN Missions in Somalia (June 1993 – October 1994), Rwanda (August 1994 – March 1996), and Angola (1997-1999) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs [MFA], 2023).

„During its first ten years of membership in the North Atlantic Alliance, Romania participated in operations in the Western Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq, and North Africa. In these

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missions, the Romanian Armed Forces maintained a presence materialized in 40,000 rotated service members within these theaters" (Manciu, 2014).

The mission in Afghanistan (2002-2021) represented the largest and most prolonged external deployment of the Romanian Army since World War II. „In the 19 years of participation with military structures in this theater of operations, 27 Romanian soldiers lost their lives in combat actions, and over 200 were wounded" (Cozmei, 2021).

Following the conclusion of the mission in Afghanistan, the Romanian Army continued to be active in several external operations and missions under the aegis of NATO, the EU, the UN, and the OSCE, with a maximum force of 5,000 soldiers according to the Force Employment Plan for the year 2026, approved by the CSAT (Crasnea, 2026).

The participation of Romanian soldiers in external missions and their exposure to operational risk factors generated systematic needs for social support, both for active military personnel and for veterans and their families. In this context, the recognition of mental disorders associated with military service, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), was consolidated in Romanian legislation through Law no. 168/2020 (Parliament of Romania, 2020). This legislative framework represented an essential step in institutionalizing support for service members, veterans, and their families, establishing a foundation for the advancement of military social work and applied academic research, as reflected in specialized scientific literature such as the Romanian Journal of Military Social Work.

The present study contributes to the specialized literature by examining, from a qualitative perspective, the experience of a Romanian veteran who fulfilled distinct operational roles — sniper and military cook — within the same theater of operations.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

The study utilizes a qualitative case study design, epistemologically grounded in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009). Smith (2009, p.11) defines IPA as „a qualitative approach to research data concerned with examining how people make sense of

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their major life experiences. […] it is phenomenological in that it wishes to explore experience in its own terms."

The primary method of data collection is the semi-structured narrative interview, which allows the participant to reconstruct the lived experience in their own terms, thereby facilitating access to the subjective meanings of the described events.

2.2. The research objectives are:

1. Capturing motivational factors and the formation of professional identity;
2. Analyzing coping strategies utilized under extreme stress;
3. Identifying psychosocial assistance needs in the post-mission reintegration process.

3. Participant and Operational Context

The interviewee — Corporal (Ret.) Slabu Iulian Virgil (S.I.V.) — is a former professional soldier of the Romanian Army, enlisted in October 2002 and discharged into the reserve in 2022, following nearly 20 years of military career. He participated in two international missions in Afghanistan:

- Mission I (2008): deployed to FOB Masoud, Zabul Province, serving as a sniper;
- Mission II (2009-2010): deployed sequentially to FOB Masoud, FOB Mescal, and FOB Lagman, serving as a military cook within the Logistics Company.

Note: FOB (Forward Operating Base) represents an advanced military outpost used by coalition forces in Afghanistan. FOB Masoud in Zabul Province is located in southern Afghanistan, an area known for high insurgent activity; FOB Mescal is an advanced base utilized for regional security through patrolling and counterinsurgency operations; FOB Lagman is a base located in eastern Afghanistan, used in stabilization operations within a strategic area due to its proximity to Kabul and insurgent supply routes.

4. Data Analysis

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The analysis focused on identifying recurrent themes through inductive thematic coding, an exploratory approach to qualitative data where codes and themes are generated directly from the collected data without the use or influence of pre-existing hypotheses or theoretical frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The interview transcript was segmented into units of meaning, subsequently clustered into higher-order analytical categories correlated with military social work indicators and presented in the results section.

5. Results

5.1. The Formation of Military Professional Identity

S.I.V. describes his choice of a military career through the prism of internalized institutional values: *„I chose a military career because I wanted to be part of an institution built on discipline, honor, and responsibility."* This narrative aligns with theoretical models of organizational socialization in military institutions, where exposure to norms, discipline, rituals, and collective experiences shapes professional identity (Soeters et al., 2003).

Attaining the sniper specialization is depicted as a result of individual performance: *„Following the results obtained during training and live-fire exercises, I submitted a request to be selected for specialized sniper training, and after the necessary evaluations, I was assigned as a sniper within the 2nd Company, 3rd Platoon."* This dynamic reflects the significance of merit and performance, core values of military culture, as well as the role of individual agency in building a professional trajectory.

An element of profound analytical relevance for social work is the transition toward the role of a military cook during the second mission, dictated by the *„operational needs of the unit"*, illustrating the identity flexibility demanded of modern soldiers and the importance of logistics functions for operational sustainability: *„An army cannot function efficiently without logistical support. Nutrition directly influences the morale, physical capacity, and concentration levels of the soldiers."*

5.2. Institutional Recognition and Professional Validation

Institutional recognition was the direct outcome of the veteran's participation in international missions, materialized through diplomas, distinctions, and professional commendations based

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on merit, courage, and professionalism: *„For my participation in the two international missions, I was awarded the NATO medal and certificates of appreciation attesting to my contribution to the successful fulfillment of missions conducted under allied command."* These forms of recognition transcend the symbolic dimension of a reward, representing a validation of his professional contribution and his belonging to the military community.

5.3. The International Mission as a Personal and Professional Growth Experience

Analysis of the interview indicates that participating in the missions in Afghanistan represented not only an operational challenge but also an opportunity for personal and professional development: *„Direct experience offers a completely different perspective compared to the one you have prior to deployment"*; *„Through professionalism, respect, sincerity, and shared experiences both during training and missions… the values and experiences acquired have remained a part of my life."*

Exposure to an environment characterized by risk, responsibility, and uncertainty contributed to the development of competencies such as self-control, adaptability, and the capacity to make decisions under stress: *„Patience, self-control, discipline, attention to detail, and the ability to make correct decisions under pressure. A sniper must be calm, balanced, and highly proficient professionally."*

These findings are consistent with specialized literature showing that operational experiences can reinforce psychological resources, foster resilience, and lead to sustainable adaptive mechanisms (Bartone, 2006; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Furthermore, Habib et al. (2018), in a thematic analysis of post-traumatic growth (PTG) experiences, identified six themes among military personnel and veterans: appreciation for life, re-evaluating a sense of purpose, enhanced personal human traits, forging bonds and connecting with others, integration into society, pride in one's heritage, and a sense of value to society.

5.4. Psychosocial Resilience and Coping Mechanisms in Theaters of Operations

From the narrative analysis, several adaptive coping strategies are identified. The first mission (2008) represented the participant's initial direct contact with the inherent risks of the theater of operations — combat mortality: *„we lost comrades and had colleagues wounded."* This traumatic exposure is processed retroactively by anchoring it in professional values and group

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solidarity, essential factors in fostering cohesion and resilience: *„Through preparation, adhering to procedures, and trust in colleagues. Repeated drills prior to deployment built the necessary reflexes to act effectively even in difficult situations."*

5.5. Group Cohesion — A Central Protective Factor in the Military Environment

Research findings by Griffith (2009) indicate that „soldiers' experiences with supportive unit leadership and cooperative peer relations reinforce their identification with the unit, reduce the likelihood of leaving the military, and enhance perceptions of combat readiness."

The presented narrative validates these studies and highlights that mutual support, interpersonal trust, and unit identification functioned as psychosocial protective mechanisms, contributing to the interviewee's successful adaptation: *„total trust in colleagues and the readiness to support each other regardless of the situation"*, while also underscoring the role of repetition in combat stress management: *„Repeated drills prior to deployment built the necessary reflexes to act effectively even in difficult situations."*

6. Multidisciplinary Intervention: The Role of the Military Social Worker vs. Psychological Support

The participant benefited from institutional psychological support following his first mission: *„upon returning to the tank unit, I participated in sessions led by the unit psychologist."* However, for an accurate analysis within the sphere of military social work, it is mandatory to delineate clinical competencies from social ones. It must also be pointed out that within the Romanian Army, the specialized role of a military social worker—as defined in Euro-Atlantic systems (such as the Military Social Work model in the US or UK)—does not currently exist. In the absence of a professional corps of military social workers within combat or logistical structures, responsibilities specific to social case management are frequently fragmented.

7. Transition and Post-Military Reintegration

The process of transitioning into the reserve in 2022, after nearly two decades in military service, is described by the interviewee as a „major change," emphasizing that *„the values and*

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experiences acquired have remained a part of my life," particularly *„discipline, respect, responsibility, integrity, and perseverance."* This identity continuity suggests a high level of adaptability and a functional appraisal of military experience during the transition to civilian life.

The relational dimension formed over two decades in the military environment can generate a persistent sense of loss, reflected in the following statement: *„[I miss] The camaraderie, the team spirit, and the feeling of belonging to a structure unified by a common goal."* This experience can be interpreted as a manifestation of losing the sense of belonging and camaraderie specific to military culture, phenomena frequently reported by veterans during transition phases (Sachdev & Dixit, 2024). The presence of this dimension highlights the imperative need for community support networks tailored for veterans.

8. Discussions

The data presented confirm and further nuance several directions identified in the specialized literature. First, intensive pre-deployment training may constitute a psychological protective factor, reducing the impact of operational military stress and facilitating adaptive functioning under conditions of risk. Such training contributes to increased resilience among military personnel, with significant effects at both the individual and group levels (Bartone, 2006). Second, a high level of cohesion is associated with a greater capacity to adapt to operational stress and with reduced vulnerability to symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (Siebold, 2007; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Brailey et al., 2007).

With regard to post-deployment reintegration, the case presented highlights the fact that length of military service and the deep internalization of military values may function both as valid resilience resources and as risk factors for adaptation to civilian life, particularly due to the difficulty of replicating the level of cohesion experienced within the military environment.

9. Conclusions

The present study offers a valuable qualitative insight into the experience of a Romanian veteran participating in international missions, carrying direct implications for the practice of

military social work. The primary conclusions emphasize: (1) the vital role of preparation and group cohesion as factors of psychosocial resilience; (2) the importance of post-mission institutional psychological support; (3) the necessity of transition programs tailored to the cultural and identity specificities of veterans.

The results concurrently highlight the relevance of military social work in identifying and managing the psychosocial needs of service members and veterans, alongside the development of support mechanisms designed to facilitate family reintegration. In this regard, military social work can contribute to reinforcing individual and family resilience, preventing social isolation, and supporting the adaptation process to civilian life after concluding a military career.

The limitations of the study reside in its monographic single-case design and its reliance on self-reported data, which may be subject to retrospective recall bias. Future research could extend the analysis to larger samples of veterans and integrate comparative perspectives between different military specializations, thereby contributing to the development of specialized knowledge and interventions within the field of military social work.

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Appendix: Interview Transcript

Initial Overview and Career Path

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Question: To begin, please provide the readers of the *Romanian Journal of Military Social Work* with a brief presentation of your military career path. What do you consider to have been the most significant milestones of your career?

Answer: My name is Slabu Iulian Virgil, and I enlisted in the Romanian Army in October 2002, within the xxx-th Tank Battalion, where I was assigned to the specialization of tank gunner-loader. Right from the beginning, I understood that military life demands discipline, responsibility, and a permanent desire for self-improvement. In 2007, I began training to participate in my first international mission in Afghanistan, within the XXX-th Mechanized Infantry Battalion „Sfântul Andrei" Galați. After approximately three months of intensive training, in January 2008, I was deployed to Zabul Province, at FOB Masoud. I was part of the X-nd Company, Y-rd Platoon, and served as a sniper, equipped with the PSL model 1974 semi-automatic sniper rifle, caliber 7.62 mm. During this deployment, I executed reconnaissance, observation, escort, securing, and support missions for humanitarian actions carried out within our area of responsibility. In 2009, I underwent training for my second external mission within the XX-th Mechanized Infantry Battalion „Căpitan Valter Mărăcineanu" from Focșani. In July 2009, I was deployed once again to Afghanistan, Zabul Province, operating at FOB Masoud, FOB Mescal, and FOB Lagman until January 2010. On this mission, I was part of the Logistics Company and served as a military cook, with my individual armament consisting of the 5.45 mm caliber automatic rifle, a chef's knife, and a ladle. For my participation in these two international missions, I was awarded the NATO Medal and certificates of appreciation attesting to my contribution to the successful fulfillment of missions conducted under allied command. In 2022, I transitioned into the reserve after nearly 20 years of military service, a period during which I had the honor of serving my country both in garrison and in national missions, as well as in the theater of operations in Afghanistan, alongside exceptional professionals who left a profound mark on my military and human journey.

About the Military Career

Question: How did you choose a military career, and what motivated you to enlist?

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Answer: I chose a military career because I wanted to be part of an institution based on discipline, honor, and responsibility. I was attracted to the idea of serving my country and contributing to the safety of the community I belong to.

Question: What were the most important milestones of your military training?

Answer: The basic training during the enlistment period formed the foundation of my development. Subsequently, the most significant stages were the live-fire exercises in national shooting ranges and the pre-deployment training for the two missions in Afghanistan—each spanning about four months, with an emphasis on tactics, physical endurance, operational procedures, and cooperation within NATO structures.

Question: How did you come to occupy the role of a sniper in 2008?

Answer: Following the results obtained during training and live-fire shooting sessions, I submitted a request to be selected for specialized training in this field. After undergoing the necessary evaluations, I was assigned as a sniper within the 2nd Company, 3rd Platoon.

Question: What qualities do you consider essential for a sniper?

Answer: Patience, self-control, discipline, attention to detail, and the ability to make correct decisions under pressure. A sniper must be calm, balanced, and highly proficient professionally.

Question: What were the most difficult challenges you encountered in this role?

Answer: Maintaining concentration over very long periods, the harsh climatic conditions in Afghanistan, and the permanent responsibility to protect my comrades and provide precise information for mission completion.

About the Sniper Experience

Question: What does a typical day look like for a sniper in an operational area?

Answer: The day would begin with checking weaponry and equipment, analyzing received intelligence, and preparing for the mission. Depending on the orders, we executed observation, reconnaissance, securing, or escort activities. A large part of our operations was dedicated to surveillance and intelligence gathering.

Question: What role do patience and discipline play in this specialization?

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Answer: They play a vital role. There are situations where you must remain focused and vigilant for hours on end without losing focus. Discipline and patience make the difference between success and failure.

Question: Is there a specific mission that remains etched in your memory? Why?

Answer: I particularly remember the escort and securing missions conducted in Zabul Province. The responsibility was immense because the safety of the entire team depended on the vigilance and professionalism of each individual soldier.

Question: How do you manage stress and pressure in combat situations?

Answer: Through preparation, adhering to procedures, and total trust in colleagues. Repeated drills prior to deployment built the necessary reflexes to act effectively even in difficult situations.

Question: What lessons did you learn as a sniper that proved useful later in your career?

Answer: I learned to quickly analyze situations, pay close attention to details, and remain calm during tense moments. These lessons were useful in all the roles I occupied afterward.

Transition to the Role of Military Cook

Question: How did you come to work as a military cook in 2009?

Answer: Due to the operational needs of the unit, I was assigned to the Logistics Company and served as a military cook during my second deployment to Afghanistan.

Question: What major differences exist between the two roles?

Answer: As a sniper, I participated directly in the operational component. As a military cook, my responsibility was to ensure the necessary sustenance for the soldiers so they could fulfill their missions under the best possible conditions. They are different roles, but equally important.

Question: Why are logistical activity and nutrition important for the success of a mission?

Answer: An army cannot function efficiently without logistical support. Nutrition directly influences the morale, physical capacity, and concentration levels of the soldiers.

Question: How is troop feeding organized under field conditions?

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Answer: Everything is based on planning, supply chain logistics, and the efficient management of available resources. In field conditions, permanent adaptation to the situation in the theater of operations is mandatory.

Question: Was there a situation where your work as a cook had a distinctive impact on troop morale?

Answer: Yes. After demanding periods of operational activity, a hot and well-prepared meal had a visible effect on the soldiers' morale and contributed significantly to maintaining team spirit.

About Combat Missions

Question: How many external deployments did you participate in, and in which areas?

Answer: I participated in two external missions in Afghanistan, both in Zabul Province. The first took place at FOB Masoud, and the second across FOB Masoud, FOB Mescal, and FOB Lagman.

Question: What was the most difficult mission from a professional standpoint?

Answer: The first mission in 2008 was the most difficult because it represented my initial direct contact with the reality of a theater of operations, where we lost comrades and had colleagues wounded.

Question: What impressed you the most during the operations?

Answer: The professionalism of the soldiers and the way people from different countries collaborated to achieve the same objectives—restoring peace.

Question: How does the perception of war change after participating in real-world missions?

Answer: You understand much better the consequences of conflicts and the profound importance of stability and peace. Direct experience offers a completely different perspective compared to the one you have prior to deployment.

Question: What are the most important lessons you learned in the theaters of operations?

Answer: The importance of preparation, adaptability, discipline, and teamwork. No mission can be successfully completed by a single person alone.

Camaraderie and Leadership

Question: What does camaraderie mean within a military unit deployed on a mission?

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Answer: It means total trust in colleagues and the readiness to support each other regardless of the situation.

Question: How is trust built between members of a team?

Answer: Through professionalism, respect, sincerity, and shared experiences lived together both during training and missions.

Question: Did you have mentors who influenced your career?

Answer: Yes. I had commanders (Lieutenant T., Captain F. R., Major T. R., and Captain V. R.), as well as experienced colleagues who provided fine examples of professionalism and leadership.

Question: What advice would you offer to young soldiers at the beginning of their journey?

Answer: To treat every single day of training with the utmost seriousness, to be disciplined, and to never stop learning.

Life in the Reserve

Question: How was the transition from active military life to reserve status?

Answer: It was a major change after two decades of military activity, but the values and experiences acquired have remained an integral part of my life.

Question: What aspects of military life do you miss the most?

Answer: The camaraderie, the team spirit, and the feeling of belonging to a structure unified by a common goal.

Question: How do you view the evolution of the army compared to the period when you were on active duty?

Answer: I believe the army has modernized significantly, both from a technological standpoint and in terms of personnel training.

Question: What values acquired in the military guide you today?

Answer: Discipline, respect, responsibility, integrity, and perseverance.

Personal Reflections and Support Needs

Question: What is the moment in your military career that you are proudest of?

Answer: Participating in the two missions in Afghanistan and the fact that I fulfilled my duties with professionalism, representing the Romanian Army with honor.

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Question: If you could pass on a single message to future generations of soldiers, what would it be?

Answer: To serve their country with honor, to respect their comrades, and to understand that the success of a mission is the result of the entire team's hard work.

Question: How did combat missions change you as a person?

Answer: They made me more mature, more responsible, and far more aware of the importance of every single decision and every human life.

Question: What do military service and sacrifice mean to you?

Answer: Military service means duty, honor, and responsibility toward the country. Sacrifice means the willingness to put the mission, your comrades, and the general interest ahead of personal comfort whenever the situation demands it.

Question: During the missions or after returning to civilian life, did you require any form of professional assistance?

Answer: After my first mission in Afghanistan, upon returning to the tank unit, I participated in support sessions led by the unit psychologist.