

**The Bill Blackwood  
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**From War Fighter to Peace Keeper:  
Returning Officers to Duty Following Military Deployment**

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**A Leadership White Paper  
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## **ABSTRACT**

With wars and rumors of wars making daily headlines across the nation, many citizen soldiers will be answering the call to defend this nation's peacekeeping missions around the world. As in previous conflicts, many of those citizen soldiers will come from the ranks of the full time law enforcement personnel who are still serving their country while serving the local community. Often these officers are asked to rapidly change from a "protect and serve" mentality to one of "fight and defend." The difficulty of this transition is most often seen when the officer returns from deployment.

In order to facilitate the return to duty for the officer, departments should offer a multi-faceted, well-rounded reintegration program to allow the officer to acclimate himself once again to civilian law enforcement prior to resuming full time duty. Departments who have put programs in place prior to the officers' deployment give the officer some peace of mind in knowing what to expect upon return rather than being surprised to learn that they will need to requalify with their firearm or attend department training that they missed while they were deployed. The ultimate goal is to ensure that when these officers return to full duty they are in the best position possible to resume their duties and fulfill their mission as a local law enforcement professional.

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## INTRODUCTION

The events of 9/11 left scars that have forever changed the complexion of this country. So shaken were its citizens that men and women from all walks of life flocked to military service to take up arms in the fight against terrorism. As the towers fell, American's resolve to win the war on terror blossomed. Today, the United States is waging war in as many as nine separate theatres around the world all directly linked to ferreting out and destroying strongholds held by those responsible for the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon (Lee, 2013).

As of August 2011, the Department of Defense (DOD) reports more than 1,436,497 active military members are currently serving around the world ("Active Duty," 2011). Due in part to the similarities in the skill sets learned in the military service, many soldiers have made the natural progression from military service to law enforcement upon their separation from the military. This has led to large numbers of combat veterans serving in domestic law enforcement positions (Gupton et al., 2011). Further, a significant number of these law enforcement officers still maintain their reserve status within their chosen branch of military service. The Department of Justice (DOJ) estimated that 23% of the law enforcement agencies in the United States employ 11,380 full time sworn officers who were called to active duty status in support of military efforts around the world in 2003 (IACP, 2010). Multiple deployments are common among these groups. Nearly one third of the troops who have served in combat areas, such as Iraq and Afghanistan, have done more than one tour of duty, often rotating stateside for nine months or less between deployments (Slone & Friedman, 2008).

Upon their return from combat, citizen soldiers in law enforcement positions may find it difficult to transition from war fighter to domestic peace keeper. They find that not only have things changed in their local department during their time away, but they have returned a different person than they were when they deployed. For this reason, law enforcement agencies should provide support for their officers returning from combat deployment in the form of a reintegration, retraining and reevaluation phase in order to help them transition back into their roles as law enforcement professionals. A well planned, multi-faceted program which addresses the needs of the returning soldier will help ease the transition back into civilian life and ensure that the advanced leadership, critical decision making, and tactical skills obtained on the battlefield are best utilized for both the department and the officer.

The deployment of an officer serving in a military reserve unit impacts both the department and the individual officer. The department will immediately feel the loss of an officer for a period of up to a year while they are deployed. The Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Act of 1994 (USERRA) provides for job protection for the soldier officer while they are deployed (U.S. Department of Labor, 1994). In short, the Act ensures that the officer's status is maintained with the department during the entire length of their activation for military service. Further, the Act mandates that upon the officer's return, they are to be returned to the position that they would have attained had they not been deployed. This includes any seniority, status, pay or rank (U.S. Department of Labor, 1994). The best way for the department to absorb this immediate impact is to begin planning for the deployment prior to the officer leaving. Further,

planning for the officer's return prior to their departure can also help with successful transition upon their eventual return to duty.

## **POSITION**

While the impact to the department is significant and certainly worth noting, the focus of this writer's research is on the impact to the individual officer both in their role as war fighter as well as their successful reintegration back into their role as civilian peace keeper. Regardless of what the soldier's role is during deployment, there is a difference between the missions and goals of military peace keeping and those of a domestic law enforcement officer. There are different rules of engagement for a soldier than for an officer. While there is a chain of command structure in both, the officer/soldier's rank may differ between the two thus resulting in differing levels of decision making and direction. The officer acquires and develops new skills as a result of the deployment experience. Combat offers real world application to training that could not be duplicated even with the most intense training scenario. Finally, addressing the lasting effects of the combat experience itself with all its associated horrors is crucial for the future health of the officer as well as his/her role within the community.

As a soldier, the officer must transition from that of a friendly, community policing oriented servant to that of a war fighter. One of the challenges of contemporary warfare is that, unlike earlier conflicts in our nation's history such as the World Wars, the enemy is far less defined. They no longer wear distinctive uniforms to distinguish the good guys from the bad guys. Battlefields have moved from specific geographically delineated areas to urban settings where civilians intersect with fighters. This lends itself

to an inherent distrust of anyone other than those they know are their fellow soldiers (IACP, 2010).

While officers are taught to observe caution when approaching a vehicle on a traffic stop, they may experience a heightened sense of caution post-deployment due to their experiences in their combat roles. Vehicles were frequently used as Improvised Explosive Devices (VBIED) causing soldiers to treat all oncoming vehicles as a threat (Slone & Friedman, 2008). Veterans report similar apprehension when dealing with large crowds as enemy suicide bombers frequently hid themselves among crowds of innocent bystanders (IACP, 2010). In field research conducted by the IACP and Applied Research Associates, Inc., Klein Associates Division (ARA/KAD), one veteran officer reported, when dealing with a large crowd in California following his deployment to Iraq, he felt a higher sense of anxiety as a result of his experiences in Iraq (IACP, 2009). On his training for crowd control in Iraq the officer explained that it was practice to fire warning shots in the air in order to disburse a crowd. He stated, "but here [the response] would be to push the yellow tape back and request backup. It is hard for your mind to transition from a military to a law mode" (IACP, 2009, p.37).

While the methods of crowd control likely vary from department to department, one would be hard pressed to find one that advocates the practice of firing warning shots into the air as a method of crowd dispersal. Additionally, the rules for dealing with the individuals encountered in these examples may also vary greatly from soldier to officer. An acceptable level of force for a soldier may be to physically detain anyone they feel is suspicious without articulable facts or to kick doors and make entry into a home with little probable cause or a warrant. These relaxed rules of detainment and

warrantless entry may be problematic for an officer once they return to the street (IACP, 2010). Further, soldiers may develop a sense of distrust for certain ethnic groups or people of a specific nationality based on those they encounter during deployment. This distrust may manifest itself upon return as a more intense awareness of those individuals when they are encountered in law enforcement situations. Making that mental shift upon return may take effort for some officers, especially if they have experienced multiple deployments to the same areas for extended periods of time.

An officer's rank and leadership authority within the police department may vary greatly from their rank in a military uniform. For many, they have obtained a higher rank as a soldier than what they have as an officer. In its studies supporting the production of the program "Law Enforcement Leader's Guide on Combat Veterans", the IACP found that 41% of those involved in the study had a military rank of E7 or above while 98% were above the rank of E4 (IACP, 2010). Those who had a rank of E5 or higher exercised roles within the military of leadership and decision making authority (IACP, 2010). Upon return to their departments, they may not have earned rank beyond officer, which in many cases gives them very little decision making authority or opportunities for formal leadership roles. This disparity can lead to problems accepting orders as a police officer when just a short time ago they were the one who was giving the order to the soldiers under their command and care. Loss of rank and authority can also lead to distrust of those leaders who are, in their mind, not as competent in their positions as those that they encountered in the military.

Officers who have been deployed to combat areas return with training and skills that cannot be duplicated outside of the combat zone. While many departments have



robust training programs that aim to closely mirror real world experiences, nothing can duplicate the experience of actually being there as many of these are developed as basic survival skills in combat. Some of the enhanced skills an officer might return with are increased physical fitness, expert level marksmanship, and tactical proficiencies, enhanced performance in stressful situations, and a greater sense of discipline (IACP, 2010). There are other survival skills that are developed, however, that may lead to some difficulties in the transition. Combat driving is one skill that, while essential in a combat zone, can be problematic in the civilian world. Soldiers are taught to drive aggressively rather than defensively. The style of driving is full speed ahead, middle of the road, avoidance of potholes which often concealed Improvised Explosive Devices [IED], and lane changing under bridges to avoid ambush situations (IACP, 2010). With regard to this style of driving, returning to driving in a marked police unit without making a mental shift from Main Street, Baghdad to Main Street, USA brings citizen complaints, accidents, and, in some cases, tickets for officers when off duty.

Soldiers returning from the battlefield may also experience lasting psychological effects from their time in combat which should be addressed in the reintegration process upon their return to their job as a law enforcement officer. While life threatening situations are often a part of an officer's job, there are few times when they must be on guard 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for months on end, as they do when they have been deployed. A study published in "After the War Zone – A Practical Guide for Returning Troops and Their Families" (Slone & Friedman, 2008) examined common experiences among US Army soldiers and Marines who had served in Iraq and Afghanistan. According to the study mentioned above, as many as 93% of soldiers who

were in Iraq reported being shot at. Another 89% of respondents reported being involved in an attack or ambush. Still another 86% reported “receiving incoming fire” (Slone & Friedman, 2008, p. 2). Due to the constant nature of the threats that they were experiencing, they were never able to let their guard down. When returning to civilian life, many soldiers experience difficulty with the transition from the “hyper vigilance” or “high alert” to that of normal function. Veterans returning to police work may find that they feel they still have to be on guard at all times. They may experience difficulty concentrating or be quick to anger. Sleep problems are common as officers often feel that they can’t relax or come back down enough to either fall asleep or stay asleep (Slone & Friedman, 2008). Returning soldiers may also experience feelings of fear both for the safety of themselves or others that were not previously present prior to their deployment (Slone & Friedman, 2008).

## **COUNTER POSITION**

In order to properly reintegrate the soldier back into police work, the program needs to be multi-faceted and comprehensive. One of the biggest obstacles to implementing a retraining program that encompasses all the different aspects that should be addressed is the cost to the local agency. Most agencies, especially small ones, would not have adequate resources to fund and staff such a venture. The department has already been without the officer for a period of time and needs to return them to duty status as soon as possible in order to regain the value of the employee. For an agency the size of the Los Angeles Police Department, which currently offers such a comprehensive program, the implementation and maintenance of their Military Liaison Program costs the department around \$300,000 per year to maintain (Hink,

2010). With manpower stretched and revenue at a premium, most agencies could not, on their own, staff such a venture.

There are many resources, however, that local agencies can tap into if they are unable to hire staff to manage the program strictly in house. The Veteran's Administration offers a broad range of services to the individual soldiers for a period of up to five years following their deployment (VA, 2010). The Readjustment Counseling Service is available to assist both the veteran and their family through no charge, confidential services (VA, 2010). The IACP has developed several best practice/model program agencies around the country that are available to assist local agencies with their program development as well (IACP, 2010). Further, agencies who are part of CALEA (Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies), can access programs and guides that they have established for their network of departments across the country (O'Toole, 2010). Additionally, agencies may reach out to other departments in their area for asset sharing in order to ensure that officers are returned to duty healthy and whole.

Another obstacle that presents itself when discussing matters of retraining and reintegration is that of the stigma that many officers may feel when being told that they need to go back through a training program rather than being immediately returned to duty on the street. As was mentioned earlier, the USERRA provides for job protection for the officer while he/she is deployed so that, upon their return, they are returned to the same rank, status and seniority that they had earned prior to their deployment in addition to any promotion or increases they were entitled to during their time away (U.S. Department of Labor, 1994). Knowing that they are legally entitled to step back

into the role that they occupied when they left may meet with some resistance when returning soldiers are told that they must now complete another training program prior to being returned to full duty. They may feel stigmatized or like the department views them as being “broken” or “unfit” to return to the job that they likely once excelled at. Further resistance may be met when officers are told that a mental health evaluation is a component of the return to duty program. Law enforcement officers have, as an industry, traditionally been resistant to the idea of seeking out help for mental health issues whether job related or as a result of personal issues (Delprino, 2002). USERRA further protects the officer from what they refer to as “a blanket fitness-for-duty evaluation or any mandated medical assessment...as a prerequisite for return to duty” but rather any evaluations should be included as part of an overall program of reintegration (IACP, 2010, p. 4). When this aspect of the training program is properly framed as just one step in the process which is implemented as part of the department’s policies and procedures, officers are more likely to be accepting of the evaluations when seeing it as part of the overall program to return them back to full duty status.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Based on the variety of experiences that returning law enforcement officers may have following combat deployment, agencies should implement programs that will assist their officers in the transition back from the battle field to their roles as domestic peace keepers. The greatest asset of any law enforcement agency is its human capital in the form of the men and women who are employed there. In order to protect those assets and ensure that officers are given every opportunity to return to full duty as quickly and safely as possible, the programs offered to returning soldiers should focus not only the

physical person but take a holistic approach by addressing training, retraining, reintegration and mental wellness.

There are some free and low cost programs that are offered through the VA and other veteran's support agencies such as the Readjustment Counseling Service, Military OneSource, and Veterans Transition Assistance Programs (Slone & Friedman, 2008, p.14). These programs do not, however, specifically address the returning law enforcement officer who will have needs that are unique to this industry. Based on extensive research conducted by individual law enforcement agencies, IACP, CALEA and private research firms through the "Employing Returning Combat Veterans as Law Enforcement Officers" project, the programs that are the most successful are those that are designed within the officer's individual departments and focus on the reintegration back into their specific role in that agency (IACP, 2009, p. 46). The need to bring officers back up to speed on changes in department policy, updating them on any mandatory training they may have missed while deployed such as firearms proficiency or tactical training, geographical changes within the area they work, refocusing of skills learned while deployed and attending to the mental shift from soldier to officer necessitates that the program be multi-faceted and of sufficient length to ensure that the officer is completely comfortable when they are returned to full duty.

While veteran officers may be resistant to the idea of returning to the agency only to be enrolled in what they believe to be remedial training, a properly formatted program will reduce the resistance by offering the returning soldier a more advanced level of retraining than what they experienced as rookies. The veteran officer also needs to embrace the idea that a mental health component is necessary to ensure their overall

well-being. The program should not only be implemented prior to deployment but the officer should have the department's policy specifically outlining each of these phases before they leave so that they will know what the expectation will be upon their return.

Several model programs have been developed around the country that can be reasonably adapted to each agency based on their needs. In 2003, the Los Angeles Police Department created their Military Liaison Program. This program begins taking care of the officer and their family prior to deployment by giving the officer a central point of contact within the agency for all deployment related issues to include pay issues, leave time, insurance, promotions or transfers. Further, the liaison program provides the necessary reintegration training as well as mental and physical health evaluations upon the officer's return (Hink, 2010).

Another agency with a successful program is the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department (LASD). In 2001, they implemented their Military Activation Committee as a response to the issue of officers' deployments. Since 2002, they have seen approximately 500 of their 10,000 sworn personnel deployed to military service (Hink, 2010). Upon the officers return, they attend a 4-day reintegration program in which they receive updates on department policies and procedures, a refresher course of tactical skills training, firearms qualification, a welcome home meeting with the unit commander, and a meeting with a department mental health professional (Hink, 2010). In addition, the LASD also offers a "Vets for Vets" program to give officers a human resource for guidance and assistance beyond the reintegration program (Webster, 2008)

Smaller agencies may modify programs such as these to a manageable scale based on their needs and budgetary constraints. The Santa Monica Police Department

(SMPD) has had a smaller, more informal reintegration program since 2001 (Hink, 2010). The SMPD program is a 7-10 day “reacclimation period” that includes many of the aspects of the previous two programs such as technology updates and mandated training updates as well as the opportunity to work with a partner officer when returning to the street (Hink, 2010).

The IACP has also developed a training program curriculum for officers returning from combat. Their program suggests a flexible time schedule of one to two weeks. The training should start with an assessment of the current needs of the individual officer such as where they were in the department’s training cycle prior to deployment. In addition, there are several other areas that they suggest departments focus training on: reprogramming of muscle memory (drawing from holster, defensive tactics, etc...), review of use of force policies, driver training, core training for specialized units (SWAT, K9, bike patrol), a peer level ride along with another veteran, an ethics and cultural language review, and a meeting with a department psychologist or mental health professional to discuss any combat related concerns (IACP, 2010).

The importance of a reintegration program for the returning veteran cannot be understated. Regardless of duration, format or what specific training takes place during the process, agencies should take the time and invest the resources to properly address the specific needs of their veteran officers prior to their return to full duty. By attending not only to the officer’s needs but to those of their families while they are deployed, this will add to the overall success of any program. The investments that are made through these measures will return dividends to the officer, the department, and to the

community as a whole for many years to come.



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