

RESEARCH ARTICLE

A meaningless war? Norwegian veterans' meaning-making after failure in Afghanistan

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Abstract

This study examines Norwegian veterans' construction of meaning of the war in Afghanistan with two main objectives. A first aim is to add empirically to research on veterans' meaning-making, querying into veterans' construction of meaning after failure in a recent military operation. A thematic analysis of interviews with fifteen veterans illustrates how, despite their own admission of the war's limited overall achievements, Norwegian veterans rendered the war meaningful. They emphasised that they had done their job, realised themselves as individuals, experienced community, made a difference 'then and there', and served their country. Working towards a second aim – to enhance scholarly understanding of civil–military dynamics in relation to veterans' experiences – the study discusses implications of this meaning-making for Norwegian civil–military relations. Two main arguments are set forth: (1) a significant discrepancy in the construction of meaning among veterans compared to the Norwegian public illustrates a societal–military gap in evaluations of the war and (2) a reciprocal distance between veterans and politics and society demonstrates a weakness in civilian control of the Norwegian Armed Forces. By way of conclusion, the study reflects on consequences of its findings.

Keywords: Afghanistan; civil–military relations; meaning-making; Norway; veterans

The fall of the Afghan government and the return of the Taliban to power after the final withdrawal of coalition troops in 2021 epitomised the failure of the Western coalition after twenty years of attempted counter-insurgency and state-building in Afghanistan. The lost war raises many questions, including: does the war become meaningless from the perspective of those who served? If not, how do they render it meaningful?

This qualitative interview study examines the meaning-making of Norwegian Afghanistan veterans with a twofold purpose. First, the study aims to contribute with empirical knowledge on if and how veterans construct meaning after failure in recent military operations, which has hitherto attracted limited scholarly attention.¹ It finds that, despite failure in war, Norwegian veterans rendered the war in Afghanistan meaningful on an individual, professional, and local level. Second, the study aims to bring forward knowledge on Norwegian civil–military relations by discussing implications of veterans' meaning-making in this regard. Existing literature has already established

¹There exists some research on Dutch veterans' experiences after failure to prevent genocide in Srebrenica. See for instance Siri Driessen, 'Making sense of war memories: An analysis of Dutch veteran return trips to former Yugoslavia', *Ethos*, 49:2 (2021), pp. 152–70; Tine Molendijk, 'Soldiers in conflict: Moral injury, political practices and public perceptions' (PhD diss., Radboud University, 2020).

valuable knowledge about certain aspects of the relationship between the Norwegian military and society in relation to narratives of war. This includes examples of civilian disengagement with the Norwegian Armed Forces, military opposition to civilian narratives, and mismatch between civilian and military narratives.² The study draws on this literature to synthesise an argument that there is a military–societal gap in evaluations of the war in Afghanistan and a reciprocal distance between veterans and society in Norway. These findings, moreover, add to a nascent field of research that explores how the military's experiences of missions shape civil–military relations.³ Such research has previously shed light on civil–military dynamics in which armed forces reach into society and politics in various contexts. Harig and Ruffa have for instance studied military reactions to being 'pulled' into politics in France and Brazil, whereas Brooks and Erickson have examined why and how the US military contests civilian decisions.⁴ Besides supplementing existing research with a discussion of civil–military relations in a small, social-democratic state, the case of Norway illustrates a different civil–military dynamic in which there is a civil–military separation after war.

The article begins with some clarifications regarding the concept of meaning-making and how it relates to civil–military relations. An explanation of the study's method follows. The article then analyses the main themes identified in veterans' meaning-making: doing the job, realising oneself, experiencing community, making a difference 'then and there', and serving the country. Next comes a discussion of implications for civil–military relations as veterans construct meaning of the war in a notably different manner than civilian society and as veterans distance themselves from politics. Finally, the article offers some reflections on the ramifications of these civil–military relations.

Meaning-making

Meaning-making is an ambiguous concept in scholarly literature, reflecting the miscellaneous semantics of 'meaning' itself. Park and Folkman have pointed out the manifold conceptual and operational approaches to meaning-making in psychological literature – an unclarity that has also characterised psychological studies on veterans' meaning-making.⁵ Presumably in an effort to rectify this, Schok, Kleber, and Boeije identified 'two construals of meaning making': 'to make sense of the event' and 'to find personal significance in the event'.⁶ While claiming that these two different forms of meaning-making have independent roles in how one processes experiences cognitively,

²Elin Gustavsen, 'The construction of meaning among Norwegian Afghanistan veterans', *International Sociology*, 31:1 (2016), pp. 21–36; Elin Gustavsen and Tore Witsø Rafoss, 'Soldiers without a war? Public and private framings of Norway's engagement in Afghanistan', *Acta Sociologica*, 62:3 (2019), pp. 284–96; Torunn Laugen Haaland, 'Krigsminnet Afghanistan', *Nytt Norsk Tidsskrift*, 35:2 (2018), pp. 165–77; Heidi Mogstad in Heidi Mogstad et al., 'Forum: The self-realising soldier: Post-heroic reflections from Norwegian Afghanistan veterans by Heidi Mogstad', *Public Anthropologist*, 6:1 (2024), pp. 79–124; Roxanna Sjöstedt and Erik Noreen, 'When peace nations go to war: Examining the narrative transformation of Sweden and Norway in Afghanistan', *European Journal of International Security*, 6:3 (2021), pp. 318–37; Vilde Opdan Yttereng, 'Constructing meaning of military failure: The Afghanistan war in Scandinavian public debates following withdrawal', *Critical Military Studies*, advance online publication (2025), pp. 1–24.

³A notable example here are articles published within a special issue of *European Journal of International Security* on 'Military organizations in a changing world: How new operational experiences shape civil–military relations'. For an overview, see Christoph Harig, Nicole Jenne and Chiara Ruffa, 'Operational experiences, military role conceptions, and their influence on civil–military relations', *European Journal of International Security*, 7:1 (2022), pp. 1–17.

⁴Risa Brooks and Peter M. Erickson, 'The sources of military dissent: Why and how the US military contests civilian decisions about the use of force', *European Journal of International Security*, 7:1 (2022), pp. 38–57; Christoph Harig and Chiara Ruffa, 'Knocking on the barracks' door: How role conceptions shape the military's reactions to political demands', *European Journal of International Security*, 7:1 (2022), pp. 84–103.

⁵Crystal L. Park and Susan Folkman, 'Meaning in the context of stress and coping', *Review of General Psychology*, 1:2 (1997), pp. 115–44; Michaela L. Schok et al., 'Meaning as a mission: A review of empirical studies on appraisals of war and peacekeeping experiences', *Clinical Psychology Review*, 28:3 (2008), pp. 357–65.

⁶Michaela L. Schok, Rolf J. Kleber, and Hennie R. Boeije, 'Men with a mission: Veterans' meanings of peacekeeping in Cambodia', *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 15:4 (2010), pp. 279–303 (p. 280).

these scholars did not, however, clearly establish the relationship between them.⁷ Identifying several themes and sub-themes from their interviews with Dutch Cambodia veterans, the scholars, moreover, did not distinguish clearly between the two in their analysis. As a result, these scholars do not provide a clear operationalisation of meaning-making despite their attempt to define the concept.

What is more, the small but emergent body of sociological literature dealing with the meaning of war as described by veterans lacks a consistent conceptualisation and operationalisation of meaning-making. Some studies' use of the concept is more in line with an understanding of meaning-making as synonymous with sense-making. Ruffa and Sundberg, Gustavsen and Rafoss, and Ruffa and Rietjens, for instance, have studied how veterans interpret or define military missions.⁸ More attuned to veterans' own personal accounts, Driessen argued that Dutch veterans make sense of their war experiences by confronting or complementing their memories and understanding of the war during return visits to their former deployment area in former Yugoslavia.⁹ In a related vein, Lomsky-Feder conceived of veterans' meaning of war as recollections of war experiences and interpretations of war's place in one's life story.¹⁰ Aiming to engage with the work of Lomsky-Feder, Gustavsen defined meaning-making as 'a cognitive process that enables service members to connect their experiences to something greater, to comprehend and organize their understanding of both ordinary and dramatic events, and to reintegrate these experiences into their lives in a purposeful manner'.¹¹ Gustavsen operationalised this definition by identifying what she termed military, societal, and personal frameworks of meaning among Norwegian veterans. However, looking at her empirical analysis, a more accurate description of the findings would be the military, societal, and personal significance of the veterans' deployment as her informants describe the military relevance, the societal so-called patriotic value, and the personal impact of their deployment.¹² Followingly, Gustavsen's approach differs from that of Lomsky-Feder, who focused on how veterans situate war within the broader story of their life. Finally, Bartone has also grappled with meaning in the sense of significance, although using the term 'positive meaning'. He contrasted this with 'existential boredom', which he claims 'really has to do with a lack of meaning – questioning or doubting the significance and importance of what you are doing'.¹³ I would, however, claim that if the opposite of positive meaning is lack of meaning, then rather than terming it 'positive meaning', one could simply talk of 'meaning'.

My assertion of the inconsistent and unclear conceptualisation and operationalisation of 'meaning' and 'meaning-making' is without disparagement of the significant insight the above-mentioned literature offers into how veterans narrate their war experiences. Meaning-making can indeed be understood as a process that involves the construction of 'meaning' in several senses of the term: one has to make sense of an event before evaluating its significance.¹⁴ This means that different parts of the meaning-making process can be considered separate, although related,

⁷ Schok, Kleber and Boeije, 'Men with a mission', p. 280.

⁸ Gustavsen and Rafoss, 'Soldiers without a war'; Chiara Ruffa and Sebastiaan Rietjens, 'Meaning making in peacekeeping missions: Mandate interpretation and multinational collaboration in the UN mission in Mali', *European Journal of International Relations*, 29:1 (2022), pp. 53–78; Chiara Ruffa and Ralph Sundberg, 'Breaking the frame: Frame disputes of war and peace', *Acta Sociologica*, 61:3 (2018), pp. 317–32.

⁹ Driessen, 'Making sense of war memories'.

¹⁰ Edna Lomsky-Feder, 'The meaning of war through veterans' eyes: A phenomenological analysis of life stories', *International Sociology*, 10:4 (1995), pp. 463–82; Edna Lomsky-Feder, 'Life stories, war, and veterans: On the social distribution of memories', *Ethos*, 32:1 (2004), pp. 82–109.

¹¹ Gustavsen, 'The construction of meaning'.

¹² Gustavsen, 'The construction of meaning'.

¹³ Paul T. Bartone, 'The need for positive meaning in military operations: Reflections on Abu Ghraib', *Military Psychology*, 17:4 (2005), pp. 315–24 (p. 319).

¹⁴ Ronnie Janoff-Bulman and Cynthia M. Frantz, 'The impact of trauma on meaning: From meaningless world to meaningful life', in Mick Power and Chris R. Brewin (eds), *The Transformation of Meaning in Psychological Therapies: Integrating Theory and Practice* (Wiley, 1997), pp. 91–106.

constructions of meaning. Followingly, I maintain that we as researchers need to seek conceptual clarity and make explicit what form of meaning-making we refer to, in order to increase the analytical value and comparability of our findings.

For the purpose of this study, with an interest in if and how veterans render war meaningful after its failure, I understand meaning as significance, relating to questions of value and worth.¹⁵ In this study, meaning-making thus refers to evaluating how the war in Afghanistan was of value or worth, that is, assigning it a meaning and hence rendering it meaningful. If veterans do not attach any significance to it, the war is, conversely, rendered meaningless.

Veterans' meaning-making has previously been studied based on the assertion that it has implications for their well-being or their relationship with the military organisation.¹⁶ However, their meaning-making is also interesting in a civil–military relations perspective, which this study explores in two ways. First, veterans' meaning-making can be compared to the meaning that civilian society assigns to war. The congruence of civilian and military evaluations of the war can inform us qualitatively about 'societal–military (dis)integration', that is, similarities and differences between society and the military.¹⁷ Second, veterans' evaluation of the war reveals how veterans reflect on the failure of the war. These reflections can then be analysed in terms of how veterans understand the military's role in war and by extension in society.¹⁸ This again informs us about civil–military relations in terms of civilian control of the armed forces, understood in a broad sense to include not only military subordination to civilian authority but also the prevalence of civilian political preferences.¹⁹

Method

The study is based on interviews with fifteen Norwegian Afghanistan veterans. This sample size was pragmatically determined. The relative homogeneity of the group led to an estimated sample of ten to twenty veterans prior to the interviews, and the final number was settled as similar patterns within the content of the interviews were recognised.

The interview sample was composed of veterans who had been deployed at least once to Afghanistan with the Norwegian Army and who currently held a military rank of no higher than Lieutenant Colonel (OF4) or Master Sergeant (OR8).²⁰ The interviewed veterans included both active (10) and former (5) service members.²¹ Reflecting the overwhelming majority of males among Norwegian Afghanistan veterans and military personnel in general, they were all men.²² They had between one and six deployments to Afghanistan in the period between 2003 and 2014 as professional or enlisted soldiers. Although Norway contributed troops to both Operation Enduring Freedom and Resolute Support Mission, these veterans had all deployed to International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). While they had served in various contingents and held different roles,

¹⁵ Janoff-Bulman and Frantz, 'The impact of trauma on meaning'.

¹⁶ Gustavsen, 'The construction of meaning'; Ruffa and Sundberg, 'Breaking the frame'.

¹⁷ For societal–military (dis)integration, see Risa A. Brooks, 'Integrating the civil–military relations subfield', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22 (2019), pp. 379–98.

¹⁸ Harig, Jenne, and Ruffa, 'Operational experiences, military role conceptions, and their influence on civil–military relations', pp. 7, 12–3.

¹⁹ Brooks, 'Integrating the civil–military relations subfield', p. 385.

²⁰ These veterans were among the around 9,000 professional and enlisted soldiers that Norway deployed to Afghanistan in the period between 2001 and 2021. The majority of Norwegian troops were contributions of the Norwegian Army.

²¹ This is line with the Norwegian definition of veterans, which includes both former and active service members who have been deployed abroad; see Vilde Opdan Yttereng, 'A Scandinavian veteran policy? A comparative study of Norwegian, Swedish and Danish veteran policies since 2000', *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies*, 6:1 (2023), pp. 135–50.

²² Around 92 per cent of personnel that deployed to Afghanistan with the Norwegian Armed Forces were male. In 2023, the percentage of males employed in the Norwegian Armed Forces was at around 80 per cent of all personnel. Forsvaret, 'Kapittel 2 – Undersøkelsen og populasjonen', available at: <https://www.forsvaret.no/aktuelt-og-presse/publikasjoner/afghanistan-undersokelsen-2020/kapittel-2-undersokelsen-og-populasjonen>, accessed 20 October 2025; Forsvaret, 'Personell', available at: <https://www.forsvaret.no/om-forsvaret/forsvaret-i-tall/personell>, accessed 20 October 2025.

they all had experience from combat and missions outside of military camps. They had served primarily in Kabul or in northern provinces of Afghanistan, and many had been affiliated with the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Meymaneh, which Norway led between 2005 and 2012. The interviews were held in the winter months of 2023/2024, that is, about two and a half years after the withdrawal. The interviews were conducted and transcribed in Norwegian, and direct quotes cited in the text have been translated to English by the author.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, which meant that all interviews covered similar topics and questions, but also that there was room to explore different issues that arose during the conversation. Most questions were somewhat generic and related to the veterans' experiences during deployment and after homecoming. The veterans were also asked directly whether they experienced their deployment as meaningful and why, but this study's analysis of their meaning-making is based on an interpretation of the totality of their accounts.

To sort and interpret the interview material, inductive thematic analysis similar to Braun and Clarke's approach was employed as follows.²³ Each of the transcribed interviews was coded separately. The empirical codes were then grouped together thematically. Finally, the groups of codes that reflected a majority of the interviewed veterans' evaluations of the war's significance were conceptualised as themes before existing literature was recurrently drawn in to support the analysis. Because the analysis indicated no substantial difference between active and former service members, the study does not differentiate between these two categories.

The study acknowledges that the interviews reflect individual accounts. Still, it is possible to identify patterns in the material with broader relevance. Interviews can be a source of information about how individuals want to be perceived, reflecting established narratives within their profession.²⁴ Through the interview data we not only get an understanding of how veterans ascribe meaning to the war but can also explore the underlying shared narratives and understandings of the military and its role.²⁵ On this note, a possible objection to the method outlined above is that my position as a civilian researcher may have affected the responses from the interviewed veterans. However, like Duncanson, I contend that 'the issue of whether [they] are telling "the truth" or not is perhaps less relevant than what they reveal about identities'.²⁶

Main themes in veterans' meaning-making

Five main themes were identified in the material and are analysed following some initial reflections. Notably, the interviewed veterans were generally negative towards or uncertain about what the war had achieved on an overall level. Some asserted that they never had much faith in the project: 'To think that one, with the support of NATO forces, will democratise Afghanistan and create a functioning society, I don't think many of us believed it very much. [...] I think we considered it more demanding than public opinion and the politicians at home did.' Others were more upset. One veteran who still worked in the Armed Forces expressed his deep frustration with the withdrawal, stating that 'it feels extremely meaningless when we suddenly flip the switch and go home and say we are done. It was infuriating.' Yet he also stated that he would have deployed again if given the opportunity. The sections below illustrate how veterans assigned meaning (i.e., significance) from

²³Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3:2 (2006), pp. 77–101.

²⁴Marte Mangset, 'Hva slags data får vi av intervjuer? Hvordan gripe praksis, taus kunnskap og mer enn forskjonnende selvpresentasjoner med intervjuer', in Marte Mangset, Hanna Marie Ihlebæk, Tanja Nordberg, and Anne Birgitte Leseth (eds), *Tett på profesjon, arbeid og politikk: Kvalitative metodeutfordringer og verktøy for å løse dem* (Cappelen Damm Akademisk, 2024), pp. 47–68.

²⁵See Harig, Jenne, and Ruffa, 'Operational experiences', p. 9; Pascal Vennesson et al., 'Is there a European way of war? Role conceptions, organizational frames, and the utility of force', *Armed Forces & Society*, 35:4 (2009), pp. 628–45 (p. 630).

²⁶Claire Duncanson, *Forces for Good? Military Masculinities and Peacebuilding in Afghanistan and Iraq* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 55.

their own experiences and the perceived outcomes of their deployment despite the overall result of the war.

Doing the job

Most commonly, the veterans constructed meaning of war in terms of doing the job inherent to the military profession. This is hardly surprising given the military focus found in Afghanistan veterans' narratives in existing research.²⁷ In the interviews, a large majority of the veterans described their deployment as a part of their job in the Armed Forces. One veteran for instance stated that:

You know what. I was there because it was a job. I worked in the Armed Forces. The Armed Forces needed people. I was there, then I left. When the Armed Forces wanted me to go, I went. That was it.

Reflecting on the changing security situation in Afghanistan, another veteran emphasised that 'the mission is a political direction that is given. And you have the choice: Either you resign, or you do as the job demands.' In such a manner, deployment was rendered significant as a fulfilment of their commitment to the job.

The war was, moreover, considered a valued experience for the veterans as military professionals. Several portrayed it as carrying out their profession in real life rather than just training. Reflecting on whether he would deploy again if given the opportunity, one veteran concluded among other things that 'I get the chance to do the warring part of my job and do what I have trained for and used my entire career to build experiences and competence for'. For him, it was about using his abilities, whereas for others it was about doing more than the routine at home, 'not just practice, train, repeat'.

The veterans also valued their deployment as a mission that was completed and a job that was done well. Reflecting on the accomplishments of the operations, one veteran declared that

First and foremost, I think that we who were there did as good as we could to solve the mission. And one can discuss whether the mission was correct or if it could have been done differently, but we did our job as well as we could.

This is substantiated by statements like 'we or I or Norwegian soldiers, we could not have done much differently' or 'we have done what we were supposed to'. By evaluating the war as a well-completed mission, veterans' meaning-making implied a lack of consideration of the Armed Forces' role in Afghanistan and in achieving the political goals of the military operations. This appraisal of the military effort reflected their view of their deployment as a result of political decisions, illustrated by a veteran's statement that 'one can think whatever one wants of the war and stuff, but in a way, veterans have only done as the government or the Storting [Norwegian parliament] have said'. With limited reflections on the role of the military effort for the outcome of the war, the failure was, moreover, rather attributed to the political level. For instance, several advanced criticism of the Norwegian government's approach of separating civilian and military efforts, and some voiced their belief that more could have been accomplished had these efforts been better integrated. Other factors that, according to interviewed veterans, contributed to failure included the coalition strategy, features of the Afghan society, and the withdrawal of troops.

Realising oneself

Another theme that frequently arose in the interviews was that of self-realisation. This theme is characterised by considerations of what the war had brought the veterans personally as individuals.

²⁷ Gustavsen, 'The construction of meaning'; Gustavsen and Rafoss, 'Soldiers without a war'; Yvonne de Reuver, 'Veteran under construction: Identification processes among Dutch veterans who served in military missions in Lebanon, Srebrenica, and Uruzgan' (PhD diss., Radboud University, 2022), pp. 112–16.

Besides being a valued experience for them as military professionals, deployment was also regarded as an experience in mastering the demands of the job. One veteran expressed it like this, reflecting the sentiment of several others:

And then there is, a hundred percent, some self-realisation, that you get to go out and be a soldier for real and all that. [...] At least the first round, I was like 'Will I manage this?'. You think you will handle it and master it and everything, but you don't really know before you are in the middle of it.

In this sense, deployment had allowed the veterans to test themselves and their standard as soldiers in a war. Others saw the experience of mastery in a broader light. These veterans described a sense of resilience – knowing that they could handle challenges – as the most cherished personal outcome of their deployment.

Existing literature offers different interpretations of whether this form of self-realisation is conditioned by socialisation within the military profession and community or rather reflective of motivations of the veterans prior to military service.²⁸ However, only one of the veterans interviewed for this study stands out in his description of his deployment as an 'exhilarating experience' that he had 'dreamt of daily since perhaps middle school and at least since 9/11'. Other veterans tended rather to portray the deployment experience as their military training being put to the test. The interviews thus substantiate the claim that 'this notion of self-realisation through desiring and experiencing combat is not really about the self – it is about an assimilated self culturally positioned within the institutional context of the military'.²⁹

Still, another element of self-realisation was conveyed in the interviews. All but one of the veterans outlined personal growth due to their deployment. For most, it was a sense of having gained new perspectives and an appreciation of life in Norway and the daily, little things in life. At the same time, some described a disinterest for what they deemed trifles that were exaggerated in Norwegian society and media. It was particularly the experience of Afghan society and its contrast with Norwegian society to which the veterans related this experience of growth. One veteran put it like this:

I can tell you that it strikes you how lucky we are to be living in Norway. I have to say, the things that we complain about here, an Afghan would never complain about, to put it like that. So we are incredibly lucky. In every way.

Experiencing community

Beyond professional and individualistic considerations, the veterans also valued their experience of community with fellow Norwegian soldiers during and after deployment. These relations were described as partly collegial. Several recounted doing the job and solving tasks together with close colleagues and feeling safe knowing the skills of one's colleagues. For most, it was also something more: a comradeship characterised by team spirit, loyalty, and close bonds. Some claimed that this comradeship was built on trust and mutual dependence during the mission. Several also emphasised the joint experiences of demanding situations and both misery and adventure. This sense of comradeship appears to be particularly connected with deployment experience. Many described it as something they missed or as a particular strong memory.

At the same time, several described lasting bonds that are distant yet strong after deployment. A veteran who had attended an anniversary celebration for his former military unit said that:

²⁸ Gudmund Waaler, Gerry Larsson, and Sofia Nilsson, *Voldsbruk og livsfare: Norske og svenske soldaters krigserfaringer fra Afghanistan* (Cappelen Damm Akademisk, 2019), p. 113; Mogstad in Mogstad et al., 'Forum: The self-realising soldier', p. 124.

²⁹ Jeni Hunnicutt in Mogstad et al., 'Forum: The self-realising soldier', p. 116.

It is people who I haven't seen for 10–15 years, and it is sort of like I saw them yesterday. Because – one can banter about it – you forge close relations through shared misery and one thing and the other, but even if I do not speak with these people daily, I know that if I need it, I can call any of them and chat.

The perceived fellowship post-deployment can be further described as a 'community of experience', a sense that other veterans share and understand your experiences. One veteran explained that 'we are a group, a certain type of people who have experienced something not many others have experienced. We can get understanding and acceptance from our surroundings, but no one gets it completely without having been there themselves, right.'

While several seemed to relate to also others who have been deployed to Afghanistan, it was evident that the perceived community was especially rooted in one's military unit. This substantiates the notion of a 'band of brotherhood' described by Schok, Kleber, and Boeije or Woodward's notion of 'mateship', both describing a perceived bond within a team reflecting the reliance on one another.³⁰

In addition to considering it as an outcome of military training towards unit cohesion, Woodward has read this mateship as veterans' self-affirmation in opposition to perceived marginalisation by civilian society.³¹ Corroborating this argument, veterans in this study both implicitly and explicitly excluded others without the same deployment experience from their community. The alienation towards civilian society is particularly evident.³² Several veterans disassociated themselves from civilians who in their eyes cannot understand or relate to their experiences, to the extent that some described experiencing a dissonance after homecoming and facing civilian life in Norway upon return. Rather than expressing a contempt for the lack of civilian interest in or engagement with the military effort, as Woodward found among British veterans, or a sense of moral superiority, as Stanar has argued exists among Western militaries, the Norwegian veterans expressed a sentiment of superiority in terms of understanding, experiences, and maturity.³³ This corresponds to Mogstad's and Reuver's findings of a sense of civilian ignorance and naiveté among Norwegian and Dutch Afghanistan veterans respectively.³⁴ To some extent these findings resonate with what Harari coined as 'flesh-witnessing' to describe the self-proclaimed authority of veterans' personal experiences of war.³⁵ However, there is no empirical evidence in the material to claim that veterans expressed a standpoint that civilians 'have no authority to speak about the war'.³⁶ Nevertheless, by emphasising the military community, civilian opinions are ultimately rendered less relevant. This is underscored by the statement of one veteran, who had left the Armed Forces years ago, that the public debate in Norwegian media following the withdrawal made him once again think that civilians do not understand.

Making a difference 'then and there'

The veterans also constructed meaning of the war looking to what they deemed positive achievements in Afghanistan. Many were positive of having made a difference for certain individuals or

³⁰Schok, Kleber, and Boeije, 'Men with a mission', p. 289; Rachel Woodward, "'Not for queen and country or any of that shit...': Reflections on citizenship and military participation in contemporary British soldier narratives', in Deborah Cowen and Emily Gilbert (eds), *War, Citizenship, Territory* (Routledge, 2008), pp. 363–84 (p. 376).

³¹Woodward, 'Not for queen and country or any of that shit', pp. 376–8.

³²Gustavsen makes a similar observation in her study of Norwegian veterans. Gustavsen, 'The construction of meaning', p. 28.

³³Woodward, 'Not for queen and country or any of that shit', pp. 377–8; Dragan Stanar, 'A problem in the Huntingtonian universe: The military side of the gap', *Armed Forces & Society*, 51:4 (2025), pp. 1165–84 (p. 1167–8).

³⁴Mogstad in Mogstad et al., 'Forum: The self-realising soldier'; Reuver, 'Veteran under construction', pp. 147–50.

³⁵Yuval Noah Harari, *The Ultimate Experience: Battlefield Revelations and the Making of Modern War Culture, 1450–2000* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Yuval Noah Harari, 'Armchairs, coffee, and authority: Eye-witnesses and flesh-witnesses speak about war, 1100–2000', *The Journal of Military History*, 74:1 (2010), pp. 53–78.

³⁶Harari, 'Armchairs, coffee, and authority', p. 77.

groups themselves, through creating stability and security in certain areas, through enabling social development, or through human interactions in which they were able to show compassion. As an illustration, one veteran explained that when ‘you very directly can contribute and see a difference, see the local population for instance be pleased about something you do or contribute towards or have done, then of course it feels meaningful’. For most, it was a perception of having made a difference ‘then and there’ for individual people and communities rather than for Afghanistan as a whole, reflecting the negative outlook on the results of the war. One veteran stated that:

Whether it made a difference for the population that we were there or not, maybe not. But at the same time, we experienced multiple times that the population appreciated that we were there and that they had a better everyday life in the periods that we helped them.

Another veteran who stated even more pessimistically that he is unsure ‘whether we overall have contributed to anything else than people dying in the years we have been there’, also said it did not feel futile on a personal level due to having made a difference for individuals. For him, meeting civilian Afghans and aiding them with small things in their everyday life was a treasured memory. Interestingly, these quotes illustrate that despite being pessimistic or even negative about the overall outcome of the war, the veterans were able to interpret meaningful outcomes for Afghans resulting from their own deployment.

Molendijk has interpreted such perceptions among veterans of having made a difference in specific cases as a form of justification or rationalisation, enabling the veterans to ‘explain their conduct as right or excusable’.³⁷ She argued that “‘doing good” is not only satisfying in itself, but serves as compensation when bigger accomplishments are hard to identify’.³⁸ This is corroborated by findings in this study. One veteran put it into words, stating that, among other things, ‘thinking that one can make a difference in some cases’ was a ‘small solace’ when one struggled to perceive the mission as meaningful. Another veteran reflected on his intention to ascribe meaning to his deployment in this manner, saying that:

I might be a little naïve. Because I hope and think that it has made life better for some. And then that is my motivation to keep it going and being a bit blue-eyed and so be it. At least then I can live with peace of mind.

While the focus on positive achievements may be an intentional strategy for some, as Gustavsen has claimed in previous research, it nonetheless illustrates that veterans did not express an ‘aversion to idealism’³⁹ or an ‘emotional and moral detachment’,⁴⁰ which other researchers have pinpointed among veterans.⁴¹ In a Norwegian context, Mogstad found that in their post-deployment reflections veterans ‘fervently distanced themselves from humanitarian values and motivations’.⁴² However, it is important to stress the difference between motivations, which Mogstad addressed, and meaning-making. In fact, although some endorsed a conception of the war as an attempt to do good for Afghanistan, idealism did not play any significant role in my interviewees’ talk of motivations, and a few even explicitly emphasised that it was not a motive for deploying. This does not, however, repudiate the veterans’ emphasis on it as an ultimately meaningful outcome. Whatever their initial motivations, ‘small-scale achievements’ in relation to Afghan society were salient in

³⁷Tine Molendijk, ‘Moral coping or simply uncomplicated soldiering? How soldiers avoid moral injury through simplification, justification, rationalization, and compartmentalization’, *Armed Forces & Society*, 50:4 (2024), pp. 977–99 (p. 988).

³⁸Molendijk, ‘Moral coping or simply uncomplicated soldiering’, p. 988.

³⁹Mogstad in Mogstad et al., ‘Forum: The self-realising soldier’, p. 97.

⁴⁰Molendijk, ‘Moral coping or simply uncomplicated soldiering’, p. 990.

⁴¹Gustavsen, ‘The construction of meaning’, p. 27.

⁴²Mogstad in Mogstad et al., ‘Forum: The self-realising soldier’, p. 97.

their construction of meaning after the war.⁴³ This is also in line with research on other contexts, in which personal experiences of helping and interacting with the local population are accentuated by veterans.⁴⁴

Serving the country

Finally, the veterans assigned meaning to the war seeing their deployment as a service on behalf of Norway. Only two veterans expressed patriotic sentiments explicitly, talking about ‘a wish to serve my country’ or choosing to do it ‘on behalf of society’. Deployment was rendered meaningful as a personal effort on behalf of Norway more implicitly by multiple veterans. The significance of their effort emerged often in response to questions regarding recognition from Norwegian society, indicating a transactional view of their service. Some considered medals and medal ceremonies upon homecoming as important recognition from Norwegian authorities of their effort. Others expressed a wish for more recognition efforts, for either their own sake or the sake of other veterans. One veteran stated that:

Well, I think that when you deploy on a mission for the state, and you put your life at risk and expose yourself to a relatively high risk [...] Norway has asked you to serve. Then you deserve recognition in return.

This national orientation among veterans was, as in Gustavsen’s study of Norwegian veterans during the war, mostly ‘phrase based’, that is, lacking of broader reflections.⁴⁵ This conciseness illustrates, as Gibson and Abell have pointed out, that while references to national service may not loom large in veterans’ narratives, it is hard to deny the national aspect of being members of a nation’s armed forces.⁴⁶

Moreover, while many veterans valued their effort on behalf of the state, there are some indications that they separate between out-of-area deployment and direct territorial defence. Some veterans denigrated their own efforts by clearly distinguishing between themselves and World War II veterans whose experiences and efforts on Norwegian soil, they argued, far surpass their own deployment abroad. This supports existing literature arguing that military service in international operations is not considered a ‘heroic sacrifice’ by most soldiers.⁴⁷

Veterans’ separation from civilian meaning-making and politics

The sections above have examined how Norwegian veterans assigned meaning to the war in Afghanistan after its ultimate failure, attributing their deployment significance in terms of the military profession, self-realisation, experiences of community, local achievements in Afghanistan, and as service on behalf of Norway. The following sections discuss this meaning-making with regard to implications for Norwegian civil–military relations.

To begin, it ought to be emphasised that veterans’ meaning-making illustrates that Norwegian veterans are integrated within civilian society. Their construction of meaning is surely situated

⁴³The term ‘small-scale achievements’ is used by Hellman to describe what Swedish veterans, quite similarly to Norwegian veterans, focused on having achieved daily, locally, and even individually during their deployment; see Maria Hellman, ‘Milblogs and soldier representations of the Afghanistan War: The case of Sweden’, *Media, War & Conflict*, 9:1 (2016), pp. 43–57 (p. 50).

⁴⁴Annika Bergman Rosamond and Annika Kronsell, ‘Cosmopolitanism and individual ethical reflection – the embodied experiences of Swedish veterans’, *Critical Military Studies*, 8:2 (2022), pp. 159–78; Molendijk, ‘Moral coping or simply uncomplicated soldiering’; Schok, Kleber, and Boeije, ‘Men with a mission’.

⁴⁵Gustavsen, ‘The construction of meaning’, p. 29.

⁴⁶Stephen Gibson and Jackie Abell, ‘For queen and country? National frames of reference in the talk of soldiers in England’, *Human Relations*, 57:7 (2004), pp. 871–91 (pp. 885–6).

⁴⁷Molendijk, ‘Moral coping or simply uncomplicated soldiering’, p. 985; see also Mogstad in Mogstad et al., ‘Forum: The self-realising soldier’.

within the specific socio-cultural context in which it takes place, in accordance with findings of existing research.⁴⁸ For instance, the veterans' emphasis on self-realisation and their transactional perspective of military service reflects broader trends of self-orientation in Western societies.⁴⁹ The claim of having made a difference during deployment also harmonises with humanitarian narratives that have been used to politically legitimise the war domestically.⁵⁰ Followingly, the veterans did not appear disconnected from society at large.

Nevertheless, the above findings imply a societal–military gap in evaluations of the military deployment to Afghanistan. A notable trait of veterans' meaning-making was the focus on their own deployments and experiences, rendering the war meaningful despite its outcome. In contrast, a study by Yttereng showed that there was a substantial focus on ISAF's ultimate failure, with few claims of any valuable outcomes among civilians, except a few politicians, participating in Norwegian media debate in the immediate aftermath of the withdrawal.⁵¹ Although that study conceptualised meaning-making more as sense-making, the focus on failure in the media debate, arguably, promoted a clear sense of meaninglessness. The evaluation that prevailed in Norwegian media shortly after the withdrawal thus stands in stark contrast to the professional, personal, and local value attributed to their deployment by veterans. These findings are in line with research that has previously established a discrepancy between civilian and military narratives of the war in Afghanistan in the Norwegian context.⁵² One possible explanation for such a gap could be, as Gustavsen has argued, that 'veterans must invent their own strategy for how to evaluate and organize the experience [of war]' due to the lack of shared interpretations within Norwegian society.⁵³ However, this study contends that there is also a military side to this gap as veterans distanced themselves from civilian opinions of the war. This assertion is supported by Mogstad, who has found that Norwegian veterans contrasted themselves with "naïve" civilians far from the battlefield.⁵⁴

What is more, in their meaning-making, veterans distanced the military effort from politics. Although veterans viewed the war as a failure, they found their deployment meaningful. Significant in a civil–military relations perspective, they conceived of it as a well-completed job and placed responsibility for failure on the political level. Echoing a Huntingtonian view of military service and objective control of the military, veterans hence separated between military and political areas of responsibility. In this view, politicians are responsible for political decisions, whereas the military ought to act as a loyal instrument of the state and obey orders.⁵⁵ The military are considered accountable for the conduct of war, but, as an instrument of the state, not for political or strategic goals.⁵⁶ Veterans were with this perspective enabled to distance themselves from responsibility for the outcome of the operations. Rather, they could accentuate the completion of the military mission and claim that it was performed sufficiently or well. In this perspective, they 'have done what Huntington's norms require of them – applied their expertise to achieve the military goal set before them.'⁵⁷

⁴⁸See for instance Gustavsen, 'The construction of meaning'; Lomsky-Feder, 'The meaning of war through veterans' eyes'; Lomsky-Feder, 'Life stories, war, and veterans'.

⁴⁹Fabrizio Battistelli, 'Peacekeeping and the postmodern soldier', *Armed Forces & Society*, 23:3 (1997), pp. 467–84; Gustavsen, 'The construction of meaning'; Erik Hedlund, 'What motivates Swedish soldiers to participate in peacekeeping missions: Research note', *Armed Forces & Society*, 37:1 (2011), pp. 180–90; Mogstad in Mogstad et al., 'Forum: The self-realising soldier'.

⁵⁰See Pia Bergmann, 'Derfor er Norge i Afghanistan', *Internasjonal Politikk*, 73:1 (2015), pp. 89–101.

⁵¹Yttereng, 'Constructing meaning of military failure'.

⁵²Gustavsen and Rafoss, 'Soldiers without a war'; Sjøstedt and Noreen, 'When peace nations Go to war'.

⁵³Gustavsen, 'The construction of meaning', p. 23.

⁵⁴Mogstad in Mogstad et al., 'Forum: The self-realising soldier', p. 102.

⁵⁵Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil–Military Relations* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1957).

⁵⁶Risa Brooks, 'Paradoxes of professionalism: Rethinking civil–military relations in the United States', *International Security*, 44:4 (2020), pp. 7–44 (pp. 36–7); Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*, p. 73.

⁵⁷Brooks, 'Paradoxes of professionalism', p. 37.

This distance from politics is not an unanticipated stance considering that political goals of achieving security and stability in Afghanistan can be perceived as quite unattainable for the small Norwegian forces. It also bears reminding that the Huntingtonian perspective paradoxically not only separates the military and political spheres but also ultimately links these spheres through the service of the former to the latter. The interviewed veterans did indeed express a commitment to adhere to political decisions. This can be read as what Ryan termed ‘the argument to democratic duty’.⁵⁸ This argument entails that the preservation of democracy requires soldiers to fight wars that democracy has decided to wage and follow orders regardless of their personal convictions.⁵⁹

Still, distance from politics within the military represents a weakness in the civilian control of the armed forces in a broad understanding of the term. As Hoffman and later Brooks both have demonstrated, civilian control can be understood as more than solely civilian authority and military compliance.⁶⁰ Rather, it is also characterised by civil–military dialogue and synergy, in essence ‘civil–military relations [that] operate in a positive manner by promoting civilian preferences and political goals’.⁶¹ This necessitates that the relation between military efforts and political goals is considered by the military. It is significant then that other studies illustrate that a disregard for political goals extends to Norwegian veterans beyond this study.⁶²

The separation of the military and political spheres is, moreover, not limited to veterans. There is also a civilian side to this separation, with Norwegian politicians having shown limited interest in the conduct of the Armed Forces in Afghanistan. This was evident when a governmentally appointed committee in 2016 evaluated Norwegian participation in the Afghanistan war in the period 2001–2014 without substantially scrutinising Norwegian military efforts.⁶³ A recent evaluation of Norwegian efforts in the years 2015–2021 asserted that twenty years of war in Afghanistan ended in ‘defeat’ but maintained, with limited substantiations, that Norwegian military efforts were of little importance for the outcome of the war.⁶⁴ Research has additionally illuminated how the discourse in Norwegian public debate in the immediate aftermath of withdrawal was focused on the failure of NATO and US strategy in Afghanistan and did not consider the Norwegian military contributions in any significant degree.⁶⁵ This lack of engagement entails that as much as the military may distance itself from politics, Norwegian society is not in control of whether the use of military force is set up to meet political-strategic ends.⁶⁶

Concluding remarks

From the perspective of veterans interviewed for this study, the war in Afghanistan was meaningful in several regards despite its ultimate failure. Their deployment was considered an inherent and valued part of the military profession. In addition, it had personal significance to them as they had experienced both individual self-realisation and soldier community. The veterans also looked beyond themselves to find value: having made a difference for individuals in Afghanistan and having made an effort on behalf of Norway.

⁵⁸ Cheyney Ryan, ‘Democratic duty and the moral dilemmas of soldiers’, *Ethics*, 122:1 (2011), pp. 10–42.

⁵⁹ Ryan, ‘Democratic duty and the moral dilemmas of soldiers’, pp. 20–1; see also Iselin Silja Kaspersen, ‘The moral career of soldiers’ identity: A Norwegian case’, *Armed Forces & Society*, 50:4 (2024), pp. 1000–20.

⁶⁰ Brooks, ‘Paradoxes of professionalism’, pp. 25–6; Frank G. Hoffman, ‘Dereliction of duty redux? Post-Iraq American civil–military relations’, *Orbis*, 52:2 (2008), pp. 217–35 (pp. 218–9).

⁶¹ Brooks, ‘Paradoxes of professionalism’, p. 26; see also Hoffman, ‘Dereliction of duty redux?’

⁶² Gustavsen, ‘The construction of meaning’; Gustavsen and Rafoss, ‘Soldiers without a war’; Mogstad in Mogstad et al., ‘Forum: The self-realising soldier’.

⁶³ NOU 2016: 8, ‘A Good Ally: Norway in Afghanistan 2001–2014’, available at: {<https://www.regjeringen.no/en/dokumenter/nou-2016-8/id2503028/>}, accessed 15 May 2025; see also Haaland, ‘Krigsminnet Afghanistan’.

⁶⁴ NOU 2025: 9, ‘Defeat – Norway in Afghanistan 2015–2021’, p. 128, available at: {<https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/nou-2025-9/id3136337/>}, accessed 25 November 2025.

⁶⁵ Yttereng, ‘Constructing meaning of military failure’.

⁶⁶ Brooks, ‘Paradoxes of professionalism’, pp. 30–4.

These findings are notable because they not only further scholarly understanding of veterans' meaning-making after failure but also contribute towards shedding light on Norwegian civil-military relations. Significantly, this study has, by synthesising its findings with previous research, illustrated civil-military separation in meaning-making after war. It has argued that veterans' meaning-making differed from that of the Norwegian public, manifesting a societal-military gap in how the war is evaluated. Moreover, it has found a reciprocal distance between veterans and politics, which demonstrates a weakness in civilian control, broadly understood, of the Norwegian Armed Forces. The study hence also expands scholarly understanding of how the military's experiences can shape civil-military relations, identifying a different dynamic than the involvement of armed forces in society and politics that hitherto has been the focus of this research field.

Due to the qualitative nature of the study, findings cannot easily be generalised. However, as detailed in the methods section above, veterans' narratives can be considered to be revealing of collective understandings that already exist within the Norwegian Armed Forces. This is supported by correspondence between this study's findings and existing research on Norwegian veterans. The ramifications could be great.

Weaknesses in civilian control of the military can, for instance, have operational consequences. Scholarly literature on American efforts in Afghanistan has previously argued that the notion of separate civilian and military spheres among American civilian and military leaders during the war contributed to failure in Afghanistan.⁶⁷ There are also indications of similar disjunctions in smaller ISAF-contributing states, including Norway. A study of the Swedish-Finnish PRT in Mazar-e Sharif claims that the military character of the PRT's efforts, at the expense of a comprehensive approach, was due in part to a lack of a clear political strategy from domestic governments and preferences for a military approach within the armed forces.⁶⁸ Examining Norwegian efforts, Ekhaugen's research has showed how military commanders in Afghanistan in practice bypassed national political directives.⁶⁹ At the same time, the politicians were well aware of this bypassing, but had their attention directed elsewhere most of the time and accepted it as long as the political directions were adhered to by the letter, but not in practice.⁷⁰ Whereas this previous research has shed light on how weak civil-military interaction affected how the war was carried out and ultimately ended, the findings of this study suggest that civil-military separation persists into meaning-making after war. Given that meaning-making reflects evaluations of war, this entails that such separation not only has had consequences for the conduct of previous wars but might also affect the lessons that are drawn in preparation for the next. More research is needed to establish whether this is also the case for other countries than Norway.

What is more, a civil-military gap in how operations are evaluated could ultimately entail that the military and civilians draw different lessons from the same operation. However, neither the veterans interviewed for this study nor the public debate in the immediate aftermath of withdrawal offered substantial critical consideration of Norway's military contributions to the operations in Afghanistan.⁷¹ Whereas the public debate focused on the failure of NATO and US strategy in Afghanistan, Norwegian veterans concentrated (largely uncritically) on military efforts in isolation from the larger picture of what happened in Afghanistan. The result is the same: as the use of the state's primary instrument of force is not closely examined, it raises the question of what lessons are drawn both within the Armed Forces and by Norwegian society after twenty years of war in

⁶⁷ Will Atkins, 'Who lost Afghanistan? Samuel Huntington and the decline of strategic thinking', *Armed Forces & Society*, 49:4 (2023), pp. 965–81; Adam Barsuhn, "'We don't negotiate with terrorists' – Afghanistan, bargaining, and American civil-military relations', *Armed Forces & Society*, 49:4 (2023), pp. 953–64.

⁶⁸ Jan Willem Honig and Ilmari Käihkö, 'The likely lads: The joint Swedish-Finnish provincial reconstruction team in Mazar-e Sharif', in Bernhard Chiari (ed.), *From Venus to Mars: Provincial Reconstruction Teams and the European Military Experience in Afghanistan, 2001–2014* (Rombach, 2014), pp. 209–20.

⁶⁹ Lene Ekhaugen, 'Discretion and military frontline workers: Investigating civil-military relations policies in Afghanistan', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 32:8 (2021), pp. 1394–1417.

⁷⁰ Ekhaugen, 'Discretion and military frontline workers'.

⁷¹ See Yttereng, 'Constructing meaning of military failure'.

Afghanistan. Yet those who live in glass houses should not throw stones. A recent literature study has illustrated that the same shortcoming is present within Norwegian academia.⁷² This calls for further research on Norwegian military efforts.

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⁷²Victoria Ciobanu Austveg, ‘Forsvaret i Afghanistan – En litteraturoversikt’, *IFS Insights*, 7 (2024), pp. 1–255.