



The Evolution of Germany's Veteran Culture: Lieutenant Colonel Marcel Bohnert on the Changing Role of Veterans in German Society

INTERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Germany's post-Cold War military engagements, particularly in Afghanistan, marked a turning point for the *Deutsche Bundeswehr* (German Armed Forces) and its veteran community. In this interview, *Oberstleutnant* (Lieutenant Colonel) Marcel Bohnert reflects on the challenges faced by returning soldiers, the slow societal and political recognition of veterans, and the efforts to establish a German veteran culture. He explores how combat deployments have reshaped perceptions of military service, the role of veteran organizations in advocating for soldiers' rights, and the significance of the recently established National Veterans Day. Bohnert also addresses the Bundeswehr's internal struggle to integrate veterans' experiences into its institutional memory and the broader implications of shifting European security dynamics. His insights highlight the ongoing transformation of Germany's military identity, and the work still needed to ensure lasting recognition for its veterans.

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Oberstleutnant (Lieutenant Colonel) Marcel Bohnert began his military career in the *Deutsche Bundeswehr* in 1997 as a mechanized infantryman who deployed to Kosovo in 1999. He was commissioned as a lieutenant in 2002 and studied at the University of Hamburg and Connecticut State University in the United States (US). Throughout his career, *Oberstleutnant* Bohnert has served as a platoon leader, and in 2011, he commanded an infantry company task force in Kunduz, Afghanistan. After the General Staff Officer Course, he assumed responsibilities within the German Ministry of Defense, focusing on social media and marketing strategies for the *Bundeswehr*. In 2021, he was elected Vice Chairman of the *Deutsche BundeswehrVerband* (DBwV), the primary advocacy organization for German service members.¹ In 2023, he deployed with the Combined Joint Task Force to Baghdad, where he trained Iraqi soldiers in the use of social media for combat operations against the Islamic State.

Jeff Montrose is an author and former US Army infantry officer who served in the Iraq War (OIF). He is a researcher and lecturer on US foreign and security policy at the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, Germany, and has written on military ethics, international relations, and the moral dilemmas of war. Montrose is the author of the book *In der Wüste des Wahnsinns (In the Desert of Madness)*, which reflects his wartime experiences and the psychological impacts of combat. The following interview was between Jeff Montrose (JM) and Marcel Bohnert (MB) and was held at the headquarters of the *Deutsche BundeswehrVerband* in Berlin, Germany. The views, thoughts, and opinions expressed by *Oberstleutnant* Bohnert are his own and do not represent the views, thoughts, and opinions of the German Ministry of Defense, The German *Bundeswehr* or the *Deutsche BundeswehrVerband*.

JM Colonel Bohnert, thanks for taking time today to talk to me.

MB Thank you Jeff, it's a pleasure.

JM I want to start off by asking what the veteran community in Germany looked like before the deployments to Afghanistan or even Kosovo.

MB So, there was no real veteran community in Germany before the *Bundeswehr's* out-of-area missions. While some World War II veterans' clubs existed, they were largely marginalized and isolated from mainstream society. Former soldiers would occasionally form local social groups, gathering for barbecues and informal meetups, but it wasn't a cohesive veterans' culture. In many ways, they were seen as 'outlaws' or 'underdogs.' It wasn't until the Afghanistan mission that a genuine and unified veteran culture began to take shape in Germany.

JM And how so?

MB When the *Bundeswehr* first deployed to Afghanistan, it was presented to the public by politicians as an 'out-of-area' mission, primarily for peacekeeping, so no combat. But around 2006, the situation on the ground started to change, and soldiers returned with extreme experiences, but they never found a real place in society. This turning point roughly marks the start of the veteran movement, but it took a lot of years to take shape.

JM What specific challenges did this new generation of soldiers face when reintegrating into German society? Do you think there are any difficulties unique to German soldiers?

MB In Germany, the military remains a sensitive topic often avoided in public discourse. Politicians found it difficult to speak openly about the realities of Afghanistan, especially as combat operations escalated between 2006 and 2012. To maintain public support, they downplayed the severity of the mission, sugarcoating the situation out of fear that society, still largely skeptical of anything military-related due to the legacy of World War II, would reject it.

As a result, returning soldiers were often met with indifference and, in some cases, even hostility. Those who were wounded or suffered from PTSD frequently encountered dismissive attitudes. People questioned why Germany was involved in Afghanistan at all or implied that the soldiers were to blame for their suffering since they had volunteered for the mission. This lack of understanding and empathy created additional barriers for veterans trying to reintegrate into society.

JM Do you think there have been any changes in how veterans are perceived?

MB Change has been slow, very slow. There were two key events that played a pivotal role in raising public awareness about Germany's involvement in Afghanistan. The first was the Kunduz bombing in September 2009, when a German commander ordered an airstrike on a hijacked fuel truck, resulting in the deaths of between 30 and 160 people. He wanted to protect his soldiers, but this incident triggered widespread debate, with many questioning whether it constituted a violation of humanitarian law. This was the first time that people really started to ask, 'What the hell are we doing in Afghanistan?'

The second major event was the Good Friday firefight in 2010, the most intense combat engagement for German forces since World War II, lasting some 9 hours. Three German soldiers were killed, and six were seriously wounded. This, and the Kunduz bombing, brought Afghanistan straight into the media spotlight.

So, the change was slow, but these events highlighted the growing disconnect between returning soldiers and society. Many soldiers returned traumatized or wounded, and the families of the fallen struggled to find support. They were left without a voice, without a place in society. This lack of recognition and indifference became the catalyst for the formation of the first veteran associations, born out of a need to stand together and be heard.

JM You mentioned PTSD, which many soldiers experience upon returning from conflicts. Has society's attitude toward soldiers changed, particularly regarding the perception of war? For example, in Robert Sedlatzek-Müller's book, he clearly suffers from PTSD, but some statements on social media argue that he didn't experience a 'real war'; like, say, his grandfather might have on the Eastern Front. Do you think societal perceptions of war and how soldiers experience it have evolved?²

MB The perception that Afghanistan wasn't a 'real war' is still common. While strategic perspectives may differentiate between types of conflicts, for soldiers who have experienced combat, those distinctions mean little. Trauma doesn't depend on the scale of a war. For the soldier, it's always deeply personal whether it's thousands killed or just those around him, it doesn't matter to the soldier. The emotional impact on those directly involved is profound.

In Germany, soldiers are often viewed primarily as victims, a perspective that is surprisingly prevalent and broadly accepted. While society recognizes the importance of supporting wounded and traumatized soldiers, it struggles to see them as heroes. This is especially evident when it comes to discussions about our new Veterans Day or the idea of military parades. There is significant societal resistance to publicly honoring soldiers, which complicates the relationship between the military and civilian life. Acknowledging the heroism and sacrifices of soldiers is essential for building a healthier, more respectful connection between the military and society.

JM Focusing on the relationship between the German military and society, has the role of the *Deutsche BundeswehrVerband* and similar organizations changed in response to the Afghanistan conflict, such as reintegration challenges and the other issues we've discussed?

MB On the one hand, there are legal and medical issues, and on the other, there are matters of acceptance and values. The first big issue for soldiers wounded or killed in out-of-area missions was in 1999 when a soldier in Albania died after driving a tank off a bridge. His wife sought compensation, but the case revealed that both the German Parliament and the *Bundeswehr* were not making distinctions between accidents in missions abroad

and those occurring within Germany. This incident marked the first time that the *Deutsche BundeswehrVerband* successfully pressured politicians and high-ranking officers to address the unique needs of deployed soldiers. It was a crucial step toward improving medical care for those wounded or traumatized on missions.

The deployment to Afghanistan obviously later became the real game changer in this regard. Today, we have an excellent system in place for supporting traumatized and wounded soldiers, at least from a legal perspective. The problem is more or less the practical.

JM What do you mean by practical?

MB So this is the second part, the focus on the values of our soldiers in society. This is, as I said, a critical topic in Germany, and the level of interest is quite low for a lot of politicians and great parts of the media. They did not want to accept it.³ It took a long time for us to connect with smaller veteran associations and shift our focus toward societal acceptance. The Russian attacks in Ukraine changed a lot, and research now shows that society is more willing to support initiatives for soldiers. After February 2022, we immediately began prioritizing efforts that advance veteran culture as a whole.

JM I want to jump on this idea of a veteran culture. There is a diverse group of civilian veteran organizations throughout Germany. I can probably think of at least 20 such groups.

MB There's more; it's around 27 involved at the national level.

JM Are there any issues that you see with so many organizations trying to come together to create something like, for example, a national Veterans Day?

MB So, at the beginning of 2022, we had momentum. It was very tragic what happened in Ukraine, but it forced our politicians and our society to wake up. Plus, there was a special moment, with the Invictus Games in 2023.⁴ This combination (the war in Ukraine and the Invictus Games) was a special moment for us. A trigger for us to do more for veterans.

We, as the *Deutscher BundeswehrVerband*, began uniting smaller veterans' associations, projects, music initiatives, cultural endeavors, and more. We noticed that while everyone was doing great work, our efforts were scattered. So, we asked, 'What if we strengthened ourselves by working together, shoulder to shoulder, to show that we are already a powerful community?' In response, we created the so-called 'veteran's flyer'—a document outlining 14 key claims for a robust German veterans' policy. This collaborative approach worked out quite well because, in September 2023, the Invictus Games in Germany attracted 140,000 visitors.

Around the time of the Invictus Games, one of our key initiatives, the idea of a national Veterans Day, began to gain traction at the political level. Our Minister of Defense and members of Parliament gradually started to recognize the growing veteran community. By the end of 2023, the first official statements supporting a national Veterans Day emerged from our political leadership. To put this into context, in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany, there has never been a Veterans Day, and the first comprehensive definition of what constitutes a veteran wasn't established until 2018. It's a late development, with the Veterans Day only announced in April 2024.⁵

JM I was rather shocked when I learned that there wasn't a Veterans Day in Germany because you just assume this is a normal thing. Can you tell me a little bit about your thoughts on why this changed?

MB It was a significant effort, with many associations advocating the importance of this day, but the political and societal lobby remained relatively small. The withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2022 may have served as another crucial trigger because it sparked a strong sense of responsibility and even guilt among many, particularly our younger politicians.⁶

Currently, around 225,000 Germans have served in various out-of-area missions. It's a significant group within our country. A series of trigger events, including the disastrous end of the Afghanistan mission, the unfolding situations with Ukraine and Russia, the Invictus Games held in Germany, and a veteran community that raised a strong voice, all had to come together to persuade politicians that it was time for change. Yet the prevailing political narrative still suggests that society remains inherently skeptical of the military, a lingering notion from World War II. Recent research shows that this is not true and no longer reflects the true sentiments of our people (Graf, 2024).

The problem isn't society, it's politicians and the media. These groups often exhibit a deep skepticism toward the military, either because of their own doubts or because they believe society demands it. In reality, it's the younger generation of politicians who have challenged this outdated narrative. Their support was instrumental in the recent passage of legislation for a National Veterans Day. This development clearly shows that when given the opportunity, new political voices are ready to stand up for our military and our veterans.

JM Concerning Veterans Affairs, what challenges do you see in the coming years or generations?

MB Firstly, establishing a national Veterans Day represents a major milestone for the German veterans' movement. It's one that future generations will recognize as the starting

point of our shared journey. This success is not guaranteed, and we have to actively engage society and fill Veterans Day with meaningful content because it is the community that lives it. The next generation has to carry on our work with a strong, unified voice.

At the same time, there is a risk that the veterans' movement could fragment due to differing claims, roles, and individual identities. It's important to note that while the era of 30 years of out-of-area missions isn't entirely over, it has largely faded from public focus, increasing the danger of marginalization. Likewise, the shifting dynamics in European defense, especially along the eastern flank, present new challenges for veterans' culture, prompting us to rethink our strategic role. Essentially, two scenarios seem likely: if conflict remains low-intensity, public awareness may decline as people tend to forget when there is no visible combat or casualties. But if hostilities escalate, thousands of wounded or fallen soldiers may return, and the veterans' community must be prepared to support them.

JM With fewer large-scale deployments, the generation of German veterans who served in Afghanistan face a unique role in shaping both veteran culture and public perception of the military. How do you see their influence on the *Bundeswehr* and broader society, perhaps as mentors or as a defining chapter in Germany's military history?

MB It has to play a role, but it remains a challenge. Over the past two years, we've moved forward quickly with this veteran culture, faster than we anticipated. This was largely triggered by key events I've mentioned but now is not the time to relax and lean back, as there's still a real risk of losing these hard-won achievements. I hear it from other veterans and experience it myself: their stories and lessons no longer play a significant role. The *Bundeswehr*, as an institution, struggles to preserve these experiences. We often find ourselves starting from zero repeatedly.

Veterans, ex-soldiers, and retirees show great interest in the Veterans Day initiative, but active-duty soldiers don't often see its relevance. Their focus is on the tasks immediately before them. They're highly trained professionals, young and full of strength, often not yet considering what military life might mean for their future. This is why it's crucial for military leaders to introduce veterans' culture to the army, reminding soldiers: 'You too will one day be veterans. You may face combat, injury, or trauma. One day you will leave the military.'

It's important to acknowledge and support those who have already left the service. We must not forget them or leave them isolated. One vision for Veterans Day is to foster these connections so active-duty soldiers invite older veterans, sharing experiences and listening to their stories. Unfortunately, much of the media and many politicians

overlook this need. We, as soldiers, must take the lead to learn from our past experiences and show respect for those who came before us.

JM Looking back on your 25 years of service from Kosovo to Afghanistan and Iraq, how has your understanding of being a soldier and veteran evolved as you advanced from enlisted to Lieutenant Colonel?

MB As an infantryman deployed to Kosovo early in my career, I quickly learned what life as a soldier truly means. It aligned closely with my expectations and felt right for me. However, as I rose in rank, I began to notice that not all higher-ranking soldiers and staff share the same understanding. Many rose in rank during the Cold War, a time when real combat operations were absent, and not every soldier is a highly trained rifleman. So, some branches have little direct connection to combat, and it can be challenging to engage with soldiers who approach their role with a mindset that feels very civilian.

I believe the relationship between society, politics, media, and the *Bundeswehr* is improving, though it still remains largely superficial. Our leadership philosophy emphasizes unity, ‘we are all one.’ Through my work publishing and giving interviews with researchers and others, I have seen encouraging progress, yet I often hear statements like, ‘Everything is fine. We are all united. The leadership philosophy is not just theory; it works perfectly.’ While these ideas reflect optimism, there is always room to further align theory with practice. We need to ensure that what we do in reality reflects the unity and effectiveness that we strive for in our leadership philosophy.

My deployments, first in Kosovo, then especially in Afghanistan, and most recently two years ago in Iraq, have been the defining moments of my military career. These experiences shaped my military identity and gave me the confidence to speak out with conviction. It drives me every day to stand up for my fellow soldiers and veterans. Together, we must continue to build a culture of respect and solidarity, ensuring that our experiences are recognized, our voices heard, and our legacy honored. We have a responsibility to shape the future for the next generation of soldiers, and I am proud to be part of this journey. I now advocate loudly and firmly, particularly here in the *Deutsche Bundeswehr Verband*, because I am convinced that our profession is something truly unique and deserving of recognition.

AFTERWORD

The author would like to thank Marcel Bohnert, the *Deutsche Bundeswehr Verband*, and all the many various veteran

organizations across Germany for their persistent support of Germany’s veterans. For more information about the German Veterans movement, see [Bohnert, 2024](#).

NOTES

- 1 The DBwV is Germany’s Soldiers’ Association, with 206,000 members, and serves as a powerful lobby and advocacy group that aims to strengthen soldiers’ voices and improve their social and professional conditions. Additionally, it plays a key role in security policy discussions.
- 2 *Soldatenglück: Mein Leben nach dem Überleben* English: Soldier’s Luck: My life After Surviving by Robert Sedlatzek-Müller; a German soldier explores the impact of war trauma after surviving a rocket explosion in Afghanistan. The book highlights his fight for recognition of PTSD as an occupational illness and against societal indifference.
- 3 For many years, the word *Krieg* (war) was taboo for the media and politicians in Germany when discussing the reality on the ground for German troops. The deployment was often labeled as a peacekeeping or development mission. It wasn’t until the Good Friday firefight in 2010 that the defense minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg broke the taboo by describing the situation as one with *kriegsähnliche Zustände* (war-like conditions).
- 4 The Invictus Games is a global sporting event for wounded and injured military personnel, both active and veteran. It was held in Düsseldorf, Germany, in September 2023.
- 5 Veterans Day in Germany is observed on June 15th and on a weekend day if the 15th falls on a weekday.
- 6 When the very last German soldiers returned from Afghanistan in 2022, not a single politician, member of the Parliament, member of the federal government, Defense Minister, or even the President were there to greet them. The public backlash was swift and harsh. Unexpectedly, the media also took note, for example, in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, a major daily newspaper, leading with the article “Fußballspieler kann man so behandeln – Soldaten nicht”—You can treat football players that way, not soldiers.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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