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# Transition home : an exploratory study of the transition from military to civilian life among veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom

Jillian Madgel Early

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Jillian Madgel Early  
Transition Home: An Exploratory Study of the  
Transition from Military to Civilian Life  
Among Veterans of Operation Enduring  
Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom

### **Abstract**

This study was undertaken to explore the experience transitioning out of the military for veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. The study paid particular attention to the role of meaning in life in this transition.

Twelve veteran participants were recruited to participate in this qualitative study through posting of call for participants through veterans organizations, craigslist volunteer ads, and snowball sampling methods. The study collected demographic information, military service history, responses to the Meaning in Life Questionnaire, and qualitative responses to a semi-structured interview consisting of six questions. The interview topics included: Describing experience in the military, thoughts and feelings upon separation, supports and challenges in transition, impacts of service, and meaning in life.

The major findings of this study focused on veterans' experiences transitioning from the military to civilian life. Returning to school played an important role for these veterans in their transitions. All participants had utilized veteran education benefits since transitioning out of the military. Family, friends, and faith can serve important supportive functions, especially when these functions support the veterans' integration of their military service into a broader identity. Feelings of difference and resulting isolation were common among these veterans as a result of their combat experience, and all veterans noted it is impossible not to change after serving in combat. Some veterans shared their combat experiences helped to mature and crystalize their understandings of meaning in their own lives, while others shared they were searching for a sense of meaning or purpose in life.

TRANSITION HOME: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE TRANSITION FROM  
MILITARY TO CIVILIAN LIFE AMONG VETERANS OF OPERATION ENDURING  
FREEDOM AND OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM

A project based upon an independent investigation  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2011

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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

The United States military has been engaged in overseas combat operations since October 2001, when Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) began in Afghanistan. As of December 31, 2010, there were 85,600 and 103,700 active duty service members deployed in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) (renamed Operation New Dawn, OND, though referred to as OIF in this paper) and OEF respectively (Department of Defense, 2010). The U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs, National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) website states, "VA data show that from 2002 to 2009, 1 million troops left active duty in Iraq or Afghanistan and became eligible for VA care. Of those troops, 46% came in for VA services. Of those Veterans who used VA care, 48% were diagnosed with a mental health problem." In a summary of PTSD studies to date, Litz and Schlenger state that studies show 10-18% of OEF/OIF combat troops have probable PTSD after deployment, and that the prevalence does not decrease over time.

With greater numbers of veterans seeking services through the VA system and in other mental health settings, it is essential that social workers are able to provide competent care to assist the veterans and their families with the transition back to civilian life. This research seeks to explore the transition experiences of veterans of OEF and OIF, with a specific focus on how meaning in life plays a role in this transition. This research will be of interest to social work practitioners and other mental health clinicians working with veterans, service members and their families, and may have implications for policy makers.

Meaning making commonly refers to the processes through which an individual goes to “make sense” of an experience. It is generally agreed upon that finding meaning in a traumatic event is an integral part of recovery from traumatic experiences (Decker 2009; Solomon 2004). Military service members are exposed to a range of potentially traumatic events, including seeing dead bodies, being shot at, being attacked/ambushed, receiving rocket or mortar fire, knowing someone killed/seriously injured, and experiencing military sexual trauma (VA National Center for PTSD). Posttraumatic stress disorder is sometimes conceptualized as a result of a traumatic event that shatters core beliefs that enable people to establish meaning in life (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). It is estimated that 67 to 70% of combat veterans deployed in OEF/OIF will be exposed to some form of combat trauma (Milliken, Auchterlonie, & Hoge, 2007). However, not all service members who experience one of these events will develop PTSD, depending greatly on the protective and risk factors surrounding the individual, including resiliency and social supports. The following literature review will explore theory pertaining to military culture, trauma, and reintegration and existing research exploring PTSD, depression, and meaning making among veterans and civilians, with an emphasis on studies focusing on returning soldiers and veterans.



## **Chapter Two**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Military Culture**

Service members undergo a significant transformation from a civilian identity to that of a member of their particular branch of the military: soldier, airman, sailor, or Marine. Each branch has its own culture, though there are some aspects of military culture that apply across all branches and are important for civilian clinicians to recognize. Christian, Stivers and Sammons (2009) identify collectivism, hierarchical orientation, being situated in both a here-and-now training environment and having a sense of unit, division or branch history and core values of duty and sacrifice in service of one's country. The authors go on to state their belief that identity changes due to vocational choice and experience are "especially true within the military, which makes a conscious effort to systematically change an individual's values and behavior to conform to the organization's culture...through a socialization and an indoctrination process" (p. 38). Combat veterans are changed not only as a result of their combat experience, but also before ever entering combat, through this process of indoctrination and socialization.

In his book *On Killing: The psychological cost of learning to kill in war and society* (2009), Lt. Col. Dave Grossman describes one aspect of the indoctrination process, learning to kill. Grossman proposes humans are reluctant to kill other humans, even in the context of war, citing studies that found between 80 to 85 percent of soldiers in World War II did not shoot in battle. He explores the methods now used to train service members to kill, which began in

training for the Vietnam War and are used still today. He describes a conditioning process used to train these service members to shoot and kill reflexively and on command, “without thinking.” This training process dehumanizes the enemy, using language of “engagement” in place of more accurate descriptions of killing, thus allowing some psychological distance for the service member who does the killing. Grossman finds that even those service members who have never killed can find themselves “sharing the guilt of killing” due to knowing they were ready and able to kill at any time, should the opportunity have arisen.

The reverse process of transitioning from military culture back to civilian culture does not have the same intentionality, and one can expect the adjustment to be difficult for many service members, especially those who leave due to circumstances beyond their control. These service members may experience “distress, guilt and anxiety about returning to the civilian world” (Christian, Stivers, & Sammons, 2009, p. 46). It is important to remember that as with most things, service members experience their military identities on a continuum; those service members who feel “they no longer have much in common with civilians and service members who cannot wait to leave the military system and regain the freedom they felt they had lost” (Christian et al., 2009, p. 47). The transition from the military to the civilian world not only includes leaving a job that has no real civilian equivalent, but also leaving a culture and a group of people with the knowledge to understand the experience of serving in the military.

Combat veterans in particular face challenges returning home. Tick (2005) details the cultural shifts that have occurred in the relationship between warriors and their communities in his discussion of the spiritual impact of combat in *War and the Soul*. Tick describes traditional rituals of purification, interpretation, and representation of battles, all of which allowed the community to participate in and share the burden of the warrior’s experience. Indeed, in the field

of international humanitarian and development assistance, programs funded by the U.S. Department of State designed to aid communities in healing from communal violence purposively include culturally relevant cleansing and acceptance rituals in the demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) process (Bragin, 2010). While communities abroad benefit from attention to these processes of community reintegration, within the United States, service members are faced with return to a civilian world that largely remains ignorant of the experience of war.

Despite these challenges, most service members are able to return home and reintegrate with their families and communities, and lead productive, healthy lives (Moore, Hopewell, & Grossman, 2009). The factors correlated with resilience and reintegration have been very well researched; themes from this research are discussed in the next section.

### **Resilience and Reintegration**

Resilience is a concept used to characterize a constellation of psychological characteristics that affect an individual's ability to adapt or change in the face of adversity, and has been found to be a protective factor against the development of combat-related PTSD in veterans (Pietrzak et al., 2010; Drescher et al., 2009). A meta-analysis of risk factors for posttraumatic stress disorder found a number of characteristics preexisting the traumatic event were linked to higher rates of PTSD, including younger age, minority racial/ethnic status, female gender, less education, lower socioeconomic status, and lower intelligence (Brewin, Andrews, & Valentine, 2000). These preexisting characteristics interact with other internal characteristics that contribute to the overall picture of resilience. Other internal factors that have been found to influence resilience include positive emotions, cognitive flexibility, meaning-making, coping style, and "hardiness" (King et al., 1998; Pietrzak et al., 2010). Social supports, including family,

friends, coworkers, community, spirituality, and unit support have also been suggested as important protective factors contributing to resilience (Drescher et al., 2009; King et al., 1998; Pietrzak et al., 2010). While preexisting characteristics cannot be changed, there has been much focus on understanding how psychological factors and social supports can be strengthened to increase resilience and recovery from combat trauma.

Potential stressors and problems with readjustment in the post-deployment period are the focus in coping skills programs and books for returning service members, such as *Battlemind Training*, which is a curriculum used within the military and the VA system, *After the War Zone: A Practical Guide for Returning Troops and Their Families* (Friedman & Sloan, 2008), and *Courage After Fire: Coping Strategies for Troops Returning from Iraq and Afghanistan and Their Families* (Armstrong, Best, & Dominici, 2006). These guides focus on helping returning service members and their families deal with the challenges that arise in the postdeployment period. Themes in these materials include: Adjusting to a new role in the family, loss of unit cohesion/support, isolation, job search/unemployment, and recognizing symptoms of posttraumatic stress, depression, anxiety and substance abuse.

Some challenges of reintegration are easier to address than others. However, the disruption to a sense of meaning or purpose that combat can create can pose a more tenuous issue. On the process of reintegration, Basham (2008) writes:

Many soldiers wrestle with shame over their actions and survivor guilt in response to the loss of the ‘buddies.’ Although many veterans move past the horrors of their traumatic memories, their greatest challenge is to feel a sense of purpose for their wartime sacrifice and a sense of social vindication.

Edward Tick (2005), a clinician with over 30 years experience working with veterans, proposes that PTSD be seen not merely as a stress disorder, but rather as a disorder of identity itself. He

references Erik Erikson's work with "war neurosis," which Erikson referred to as an identity disturbance.

There is a significant body of work that speaks to the impact of serving in combat, including: the spiritual component of PTSD in *War and the Soul: Healing our nation's veterans from post-traumatic stress disorder* (Tick, 2005); the identity changes that result from having been faced with the prospect of killing or being killed in *On Killing: The psychological cost of learning to kill in war and society* (Grossman, 2009); and the challenges that face service members in battle and on the journey home in Jonathan Shay's *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat trauma and the undoing of character* (1995) and *Odysseus in America: Combat trauma and the trials of homecoming* (2003). Clearly, military service and combat experience can significantly change the service member, the challenge remains, what can be done to help these service members integrate this experience as they move forward in their civilian lives after leaving the military?

### **Characteristics of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom**

Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, are considered to be fundamentally different from previous wars fought by the United States. There is a greater reliance on National Guard and reserve forces and they are the longest-running wars with an all-volunteer military. There is a faster pace of deployment, including the length of deployment, the number of redeployments, and the shorter length of time at home between deployments, referred to as "dwell time." In addition, the type of warfare, the type and prevalence of injuries, and the effects on service members, their families, and communities differentiate these wars from their predecessors (IOM, 2010).

Quantitative research examining correlations of social and environmental factors and PTSD and depressive symptomology has been conducted among veterans of OEF and OIF. Resilience, unit support, and postdeployment social support were found to buffer against PTSD and depressive symptoms, and against psychosocial difficulties up to two years after deployment in one cross-sectional, correlational study (Pietrzak et al., 2010). Lapierre, Schwegler & LaBauve (2007) conducted a quantitative study of 4,089 volunteer participants recruited within the context of a reintegration training program for service members returning from OEF/OIF, collecting demographic information and administering instruments to measure symptoms of post-traumatic stress, depression, and satisfaction with life. In this study, three variables emerged as the most reliable predictors of posttraumatic stress and depressive symptoms, including: being separated or divorced (as opposed to being married), junior level enlisted rank, and having sought counseling since redeployment.

In this study, female soldiers were found more likely to report depressive symptoms than men among OIF soldiers, but gender was not correlated with other symptoms. There were relatively few female participants in the study, so the authors hesitate to draw solid conclusions from these statistics (Lapierre, Schwegler, & LaBauve, 2007). The cross-sectional study was limited in that pre-deployment symptomology is unknown, so correlation with combat exposure cannot be made, though other studies (Vasterling et al., 2010; Owens et al., 2009) have drawn correlations between combat exposure and symptomology.

For veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), Vasterling et al. (2010) administered pre- and post-deployment tests, finding deployment-related stressors contributed to longitudinal increases in PTSD symptoms after controlling for baseline symptoms. Combat severity was more strongly associated with symptom increases among active duty soldiers with higher baseline

PTSD symptoms. Additionally, the study found that among deployed soldiers, those in the National Guard experienced greater increases in PTSD symptoms from pre- to post-deployment than their active duty cohort, though the severity of PTSD symptoms was equal between the two groups.

Generally, the service members deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan are older, more likely to be married, and more likely to have children than previous wars. There are fewer casualties resulting from the OEF and OIF wars, due in part to changed style of warfare, improvements in equipment, evacuation abilities, and immediate treatment available. However, this means there are more service members returning home with severe injuries including traumatic brain injury and lost limbs (IOM, 2010, p.29). There are more service members reporting mental health issues upon return from these two wars than from other deployments, and this is likely underreporting itself, as it is thought that many service members will not develop symptoms of mental illness for six months to a year after return. In fact, there are Vietnam Veterans who only now, facing retirement and life stage changes, are having a return or first experience of intrusive symptoms of PTSD (National Center for PTSD, 2010).

With the 2008 expansion of the GI Bill, which increased tuition benefits for veterans, greater numbers of veterans are enrolling in higher education than ever before. Veteran students are more likely to be older, have more experience, and may be dealing with physical and mental health impacts of their service, so it is expectable that veteran students will have specific strengths and needs in returning to school. In a qualitative study (n=25) of the needs of student veterans on college campuses, Ackerman, DiRamio, and Mitchell (2009) found that the veterans' deployment and war zone experience impacted their experience in school after returning from deployment, with changes including difficulty concentrating, difficulty sitting still for a full class

period, and hearing problems noted. Additionally, relearning study skills and how to be a student were found to be a challenge in this study. Dealing with the dual bureaucracy of the college campus and the Veteran's Administration posed an additional challenge, and the researchers found veteran-friendly campuses were those that assisted the veteran students in navigating both systems.

Another qualitative study of student veterans focused on veterans in the National Guard, Reserves, and ROTC, and their transition experience back to school after their college career was interrupted by deployment (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). This study, consisting of three interviews with six veterans, demonstrated that these veterans had a range of experiences related to their return to school, including for many a sense of increased maturity and perspective, which set them apart from their classmates. This study focused on the experiences of service members deploying during their college education, and it could be expected that veterans transitioning out of the military might have similar experiences returning to school.

### **Meaning in Life and Traumatic Experience**

Meaning and satisfaction in life have emerged as salient themes among empirical studies investigating depressive and PTSD symptomology and access of services among veterans. The National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study (NVVRS) found Vietnam veterans who experience a loss of meaning, or “the shattering of a fundamental assumption about the nature of the world,” are more likely to seek help from clergy and VA mental health professionals (Fontana & Rosenheck, 2005). Negative views of the world and self were found to be important predictors of PTSD symptoms when controlling for exposure to trauma in a correlational study among a non-clinical sample of 475 voluntary college participants (Cromer & Smyth, 2010). An associational study of 272 OEF/OIF veterans measuring resiliency and symptoms of PTSD and



depression showed the biggest difference between PTSD and non-PTSD groups was found in the area of personal control, which included “the extent to which an individual feels in control of his or her life, knows where to turn for help, and has a sense of purpose in their life” (Pietrzak, Johnson, Goldstein, Malley, & Southwick, 2009).

Additional recent studies have examined correlations between depressive symptoms, posttraumatic stress symptoms and meaning in life or satisfaction with life in service members upon return from combat. In a cross-sectional study, meaning in life was associated with lower PTSD severity when depression is low or moderate, though it did not moderate PTSD severity when it occurred with higher severity depression. This study also found that a greater sense of meaning in life can act as a buffer for depressive symptoms, though no causal relationships could be drawn (Owens, Steger, Whitesel, & Herrera, 2009). A large quantitative study of recently returned service members from OEF and OIF (n=4,089) echoed the correlation of depressive and posttraumatic symptoms with less satisfaction in life. Participants reporting higher depressive and PTSD symptoms indicated less satisfaction with life, with no statistical difference between demographic groups (Lapierre, Schwegler, & LaBauve, 2007). While neither of the studies mentioned above can support a causal relationship between meaning in life and depressive or posttraumatic stress symptomology, it is clear that a greater sense of meaning or purpose in life is correlated with fewer symptoms.

In summary, there have been many quantitative studies conducted to assess correlations between combat exposure, PTSD and depressive symptomology, and various protective factors including meaning in life, resiliency, and social supports. Theoretical literature proposes that transition from military service to veteran status may be a difficult time for some service members, especially if the separation was due to circumstances beyond their control. Meaning in

life has been found to correlate with lower incidences of depressive and PTSD symptoms among veterans, though little has been written about the subjective experience of OEF and OIF veterans with regard to the role of meaning in transition. This study seeks to explore the transition from military to civilian status for OEF and OIF veterans, with the focus on better understanding the veterans' subjective experience of presence of or search for meaning in life within this process. The next section will outline the methodology for a mixed-methods study to explore these issues.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Methodology**

#### **Study Purpose and Questions**

This study explored veterans' experience during their transition from active duty or reserve military status to civilian status. The research seeks to understand the subjective experiences of the participants in their transitions to civilian life, including the challenges the veterans have faced, where have they found support, and what role meaning in life has played in their transitions. The analysis explored any possible linkages between tenure in the military, reasons for joining or leaving the service, age, gender, or educational level achieved.

#### **Research Method and Design**

This exploratory study primarily used qualitative methods, with the addition of a ten-item Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) and collection of demographic information. Narrative data was elicited from participants using a six-item semi-structured interview. The MLQ was selected to provide an assessment of the participants' level of search for and presence of meaning in life. It has been evaluated for internal consistency, temporal stability, factor structure, and validity (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). The MLQ has previously been used in a study of veterans exploring relationships between depression and PTSD symptomology, age, exposure to combat, and meaning in life, results of which indicated that meaning in life may be an important treatment concern for veterans with PTSD symptoms, particularly at higher levels of functioning (Owens, Steger, Whitesell, & Herrera, 2009). This questionnaire was selected due to its validity

testing and ability for participants to respond based on their subjective definitions of meaning in life. Permission to use this questionnaire was granted by Dr. Steger in email correspondence with this researcher.

In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted, recorded, transcribed and analyzed for salient themes. This qualitative component was selected to provide an opportunity for participants to relate their subjective experiences of transition, to allow for a more nuanced and richer exploration of the factors that have impacted their transitions in either positive or negative ways, and to gain a sense of their subjective understandings of meaning in life.

### **Sample**

This study included twelve participants. Selection criteria for this convenience sample included: OEF/OIF veteran status, fluency in English, and location within a 100-mile radius from Boulder, CO. Participants were recruited through area college campuses, including veterans student organizations and veteran service offices, and online. Study participants were encouraged to refer other veterans who may have been eligible for the study through a snowball sampling method. It was through this method that eight of the twelve participants were recruited. With regard to diversity and representation, reasonable efforts were made to recruit a diverse sample, both in terms of racial and ethnic identification and gender identification, though because of the nature of a convenience sample, it is not representative of the military as a whole.

### **Data Collection**

The study took place in Eastern Colorado. Potential participants contacted the researcher via phone or email, and an initial screening was conducted. The purpose of the study was explained, and participants were screened for selection criteria. In-person or remote (phone or Skype) interview appointments were set with eligible, interested participants, and the letter of

informed consent was sent to the participant ahead of the interview to provide ample time for review. The consent was reviewed prior to the beginning of the interview, when signature was obtained, and the participant was provided with a copy of the consent form. Telephone/internet participants agreed to sign and email a copy of the signed consent form to the researcher ahead of the interview, and the consent was again reviewed prior to beginning the interview.

Participation in this study was voluntary. Participants were be advised they would be able to decline to answer any question they see fit, to end the interview at any time, and to withdraw from the study at any point through March 31, 2011 by contacting the researcher. No participants chose to withdraw from the study; had a participant done so, all associated material would have been destroyed.

Interviews were conducted in locations agreed upon by the participant and researcher, including library and coffee shop sites affording adequate privacy. Two interviews were conducted remotely, one via phone, the other via Skype. All participants consented to audio recordings of the interviews, to be used for later transcription by the researcher. Audio files did not contain the participant's name, and were coded to protect confidentiality. Detailed notes were taken following each interview to capture impressions and additional thoughts that may not have been captured in the audio recording. Data was stored separately from identifying information and informed consent letters. This researcher was the only individual with access to the data for transcription. The data was available to research advisor after identifying information was removed. Data is stored on a password-protected computer in password-protected files. All data and recordings will be stored in a secure location for a minimum of three years or until the time they are no longer needed, at which time they will be destroyed.

The total time required for participation ranged between forty and 80 minutes.

Participants answered a brief demographic questionnaire including age, sex, racial identification, ethnic identification, employment status, relationship status, number of children in household, religious/spiritual affiliation, and education level. They were also asked to indicate branch of military service, length of military service, length of time since discharge from the military, rank, and reason for leaving the military.

Participants also filled out the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ), a ten-question survey which asks participants to respond to questions about meaning in life on a scale from 1=Absolutely Untrue to 7=Absolutely True. The questions include two sub-scales measuring search for meaning in life and presence of meaning in life. Qualitative data was collected to elicit narratives from the participants about their military service, discharge, and transition process. The interview schedule, demographic information form, and MLQ appear in Appendix B.

This methodology allowed for gathering a rich narrative from all participants, permitting the exploration of their subjective experiences of their military service, transition experience, and meaning in life. It allowed for exploration of themes that emerged in the qualitative data, and the possibility to look for correlational trends between themes, demographic data, and meaning in life. Scores from the MLQ were examined in relation to the qualitative data gathered.

Limitations to this approach include limited generalizability, as the sample is small and convenience-based, with broad eligibility requirements and a limited geographic scope. Individuals responding to calls for participants may have had a greater interest in issues of meaning in life, may be more open to thinking about and discussing transitional experiences, and were likely to be more highly functioning. Participants were drawn from three branches of the military, Army, Marines, and Air Force, including Army and Marine Reserves. The experience

of Coast Guard and Navy service members are thus unexplored in this study. With only one female participant, it is difficult to predict how similar other female veterans experiences may be.

### **Data Analysis**

Descriptive statistics were used to understand the qualities of the participants in the study, such as average age, length of military service, etc. Due to the small sample size, inferential statistics were not used. Qualitative data was coded and analyzed for thematic material. Responses to the MLQ were scored and interpreted based on the interpretation guidelines provided by Dr. Steger in correspondence with this researcher (Steger, 2010).

## **Chapter Four**

### **Findings**

This study was undertaken to explore the subjective experience of transitioning out of the military and into civilian life for veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. There have been many quantitative studies conducted assessing correlations between resilience, meaning, and mental health symptoms, though little in the way of exploring how veterans experience meaning in the transition from the military back to civilian life in qualitative studies. With thousands of service members transitioning out of the military every year, mental health service providers will be increasingly called upon to facilitate the return process. This study seeks to bring to light the veteran's subjective experience of transition.

This chapter presents data collected from qualitative interviews conducted with twelve veterans who served in Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan), or both conflicts. Demographic information was collected from each participant addressing their age, racial and/or ethnic identification, sex, relationship status, education level and service history. Participants also completed the Meaning in Life Questionnaire, which measures search for and presence of participants' subjective meaning in life. Qualitative data was elicited around the following themes: Experiences in the military, reflections on thoughts and feelings upon separation from the military, supports and challenges during transition, personal changes resulting from military service, and meaning in life.



## **Demographic Characteristics of the Sample**

Participants in this study included one female and eleven male veterans of the armed services, including Air Force (two participants), Army (eight participants), Marine Corps (one participant), and Marine Corps Reserves (one participant). One participant had reenlisted in the Army Reserves since leaving the military, though with no active duty requirement until 2013, and another was completing his service obligation to the Army in the Inactive Army National Guard. Ten participants had served in Operation Iraqi Freedom, one in Operation Enduring Freedom, and one had been deployed in both conflicts. Nine of the participants had one conflict zone deployment, three were deployed twice, and one participant deployed three times to conflict zones. While this study focuses on veterans who had deployed in a combat situation, these veterans also had been stationed and deployed to non-combat zones throughout the world and country. The participants ranged in age from twenty-three years old to thirty-nine years old, had served between three and a half and thirteen years in the armed services, and ranged from one to seven years of being out of the service. All participants had attended some college and/or graduate school since leaving the military; only two of the twelve were not currently enrolled in a graduate or undergraduate program.

## **Describing Experience in the Military**

Participants were first asked to describe their time in the military, including their job and their motivations for joining. Participants included four members of the infantry, three combat medics, two forward air controllers who served as liaisons between Air Force and Army, one combat engineer, one helicopter pilot, and one reservist whose primary job was as a cook, though while on deployment, “we were just assigned to convoys and assigned to a security team. So we were basically infantry men; infantry men with less training.” The descriptions given by

participants ranged from mostly positive, with characterizations such as: “overall it was a good experience,” “beneficial,” and “enlightening,” to more mixed characterizations: “the absolute best and worst times of my life,” “Intense. Hardcore would be another word that comes to mind,” and “there were some good camaraderie experiences, but there were some really, really horrible things.” Some veterans reported enjoying their jobs in the military, others found benefit in being able to lead and work with other skilled people.

**Joining the military.** The veterans were asked about their initial reasons for joining the military, and data was gathered on their ages and the years they enlisted in the military. Eight of the twelve participants enlisted in the military while in or just out of high school. One of these had joined the ROTC in high school, and transitioned to active duty following graduation. Two of these veterans enlisted in non-active duty forces, one in the Marine Corps Reserves and one in the Army National Guard. This allowed these two veterans to attend college and maintain civilian employment during this involvement with the military. The veteran who joined the National Guard later went on to join the active duty Army, following the World Trade Center attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. One additional veteran initially joined the Army National Guard and shortly after joining, transitioned to active duty Army in order to be stationed and deployed with his spouse, who was active duty. Of the remaining three veterans, two enlisted after having graduated college at the ages of 23 and 30, and the third enlisted at age 31, stating, “I needed the money for college...I couldn't afford to do this if I hadn't done the service.” In fact, education benefits were cited by seven of the twelve participants as the reason or part of the reason they joined the military, and all of the participants had used or were using these benefits at the time of interview.

Half of the participants stated they had considered joining the military from a young age, for reasons of patriotism and excitement about the military. One participant shared how his decision to join was rooted in his experience growing up:

I really believed in the Army and its values and I believed in our country, and, I really wanted to serve our country...I really felt like I owed America something from me as a way to give back, and so that's why I initially joined the military.

Similarly, another veteran stated, "I grew up in a small, patriotic town...I've always had a kind of a leaning toward joining the military, ever, as long as I can remember, as a little kid." Other participants entered the military as a way to find direction: "I just knew I needed to get out of the house," "I didn't really have a direction in my life," "I had to get out of the school setting for awhile and kinda figure out who I was."

Gaining skills for career change or advancement was also cited as a motivation to join by some veterans. One veteran cited a newfound interest in becoming a helicopter pilot; "we determined that the only way I could afford to learn how to fly a helicopter was to join the military, so that's what I did," and another was already working in pre-hospital medicine as an EMT before deciding to join:

I looked at the Army medic program and all the stuff that they did. You know, and I wanted to be on the line with like a regular unit. I was thinking I wanted to join the Navy, but they put you on a ship somewhere in the middle of the ocean and you don't do anything, you know, except for hand out Motrin and cough syrup or something. So I chose the Army so I could be on the line.

Some veterans joined intending to leave after completing their term, as indicated by the veteran quoted above. Others joined intending to make it a career, and were taken off this course due to injury or a change in perspective. Still others joined unsure where their military careers might take them.

**Job description and deployment.** The participants varied in the depth to which they described their military and combat experience. When asked about their job in the military, most participants went on to describe some of the functions of the job they held. The job each veteran performs is a foundational component of his or her experience in the military, and important to how the veteran processes the experience. One participant, an Army infantryman, described the difference in this way; “We even look at our mechanics or our cooks, or our supply guys, all those people – we look at them completely differently.” Another participant described how his job as a medic shaped his experience in the Army:

I wasn't focusing on killing, I wasn't focusing on even why we were doing things, I just focused on here's an injured person, let me use my skill to make this person better. And so that carried over to Iraq, because it didn't matter who I was working on. It made no difference to me if it was an Iraqi civilian, and Iraqi soldier, or one of my own. My, like in my mind, my job was the same, and it was, I did the best I could on whoever I was working on. So it helped me process the Iraq war a little differently than some of the other guys who were being shot at and shooting people or seeing their buddies die, and that kind of thing.

This veteran found that his experience as a healer protected him from many of the possibly traumatic events other service members experience, especially as related to the aspect of killing. Another veteran shared his experience as an infantryman facing the possibility of death:

It was a tough time, but by the end of the first month, most of us had sat down and determined that we weren't going to make it. Just by, I think we had lost four or five guys in the first month, so, at that point, out of a company, at that point we had about one hundred guys, we figured we'd be lucky to make it out alive.

For this veteran and his company, it was easier to expect the worst, that they would not return alive, illustrating the very real threat many service members face while deployed in combat. Another veteran spoke about how he was able to stay numb and keep doing his job, even when faced with near misses such as a rocket landing right in front of him on base, which

fortunately did not detonate. This veteran described a process of “thawing out” now that he is out of the military, and of only now realizing the impact or potential impact of these experiences.

Deployment impacted many of the participants’ views of the military. Looking back, one veteran described how being in the military provided a sense of purpose:

Before, I was serving humanity in a lot of different ways. Maybe people wouldn’t consider that – you know, you’re fighting a war, that’s not serving humanity. But we – we actually did so much humanitarian work, that it sometimes didn’t feel like we were at war. So, we were, we did so much, helping Afghans and um, while we were in Afghanistan, and then you know, we spent, we were kind of some of the first responders to the Pakistan earthquake in 2005. And I think that was, that was a real pivotal period in my military career, was that, that month that we were there. Um, because, you know like we saved so many people’s lives. We helped people get through an almost impossible winter, you know, after their whole world was destroyed.

This veteran’s job and deployment resulted in being involved in a massive life-saving operation, which provided a real sense of meaning and purpose to the training and deployment experience.

Another veteran described enjoying his job, and how he would have preferred to redeploy rather than return to base, “I had a great time over there in the desert, and I wouldn’t have minded going back.” Because this veteran could not redeploy quickly, he chose instead to leave the military and return to school.

### **Leaving the Military**

The participants were asked why they left the military and to reflect on some of their thoughts and feelings when it came time to leave. All participants received an honorable discharge from the military, entitling them to full veterans benefits. Seven of the twelve veterans interviewed had declined to renew their contracts once their obligation was filled, three received a discharge due to medical reasons, one left the military to attend graduate school and has since rejoined through a scholarship program and is in the inactive reserves, and one is finishing out his commitment with the Army National Guard on an inactive status.

**Relationships and a “normal life.”** Relationships played a big role in many of the veterans’ decisions to leave the military. Some veterans cited existing relationships as their motivation to leave the military, others spoke of a desire to have a relationship and a family and “a normal life” as their reasons to get out. One veteran shared that in addition to being frustrated by the leadership and bureaucracy in his service, “I was basically given an ultimatum by my wife because my job requires me to be gone a week out of the month... so, the ultimatum was given: either stay in and I [wife] leave, or I [veteran] get out.” Another veteran shared:

I had the desire to have a relationship and I never really wanted that during, while I was in the military ‘cause I saw what happened to other people. Some families worked through it just fine, but I didn’t want to go through that, I didn’t want to put anybody that I loved through that. I saw more benefits in getting out than I did staying in.

Similarly, another participant described, “I joined the military knowing I would leave....It was understood from the very beginning. But my main reason probably for leaving was just because you couldn’t really have a normal life being in the military.” Even for this veteran, who had no intention of staying in the military when he enlisted, he still noted some hesitation to leave, “at the same time, being, like an E-5 is like a supervisor, so you finally have your own guys that you’re in charge of. I felt like, um, what am I doing leaving now?”

**Shift in perspective.** Some veterans left the military after having a significant shift in perspective resulting from their military experiences. One veteran described his reason for leaving, “I just lost all, um, sense of my moral bearing, um, and so I just, I just didn’t feel that I could continue to serve, like that.” Another shared how his disillusionment about the Iraq war led him to separate from the military rather than renew his contract:

So, a lot of us were upset about the military at that point, I mean the whole, like I said, I didn’t believe in the whole Iraq adventure in the first place, I had some serious problems with that, along with many of my friends.

Despite these reservations about the mission, this veteran and others interviewed felt a sense of duty in fulfilling their obligations. The veteran quoted above went on to say:

Coming toward the end of my time, I'm like 'get me the hell out of here, I've had enough.' You know, I didn't mind the military, but the people making the decisions obviously were doing stuff I didn't agree with, and it was my time to get out. And I could have been a conscientious objector, but decided against that just because, I joined the military full well knowing that I had to do what they said, so I wanted to fulfill my term, of which I did and more, so, I had the chance to jump, I jumped.

While some veterans interviewed noted disillusionment with the mission in Iraq, others shared their negative perceptions of the leadership were influential in their decisions to leave the military. One participant characterized the leadership as "a bunch of idiots." Another noted that after being injured in an attack there was no time to get evaluated due to the strenuous mission cycle and it felt as though "the leadership just didn't care." Another veteran noted the change in leadership from when he enlisted in the military to when he came home, "the cowboys were in charge back in 2004, and all those retired, and you had a new breed of officers who were all about not helping you out, but making themselves look good." Similarly, another veteran noted that with change in leadership after he deployed, "they were more worried about getting their next rank than they were worried about us doing well and actually advancing in our jobs."

**The military's stop-loss policy.** Three veterans shared how they were impacted by the military's stop-loss policy, which allowed service members' active duty obligation to be involuntarily extended beyond the expected end date of that service, through the end of their contractually obligated service. All three veterans shared that the stop-loss policy had influenced their decisions to leave the military when they did, rather than extend their contracts. One veteran shared his experience of deciding to leave:

They'd given, basically given us a window, knowing that we had already been stop-lossed, many of us for at least five months, I knew guys who had been stop-lossed for a

year and a half or more at that point...if we didn't get out at that point, we were going right back into stop-loss. So we would have been stop-lossed again, knowing we were going right back to Iraq, probably within the next 6 months.

Another veteran shared that he was already home from active duty and out-processed from the military when the Iraq war started and he was called up by the Army and told he had to report for duty three days later, per the stop-loss policy. He served another year of active duty, and felt “caught between a rock and a hard place” in terms of his decision to stay in the military or separate after serving the additional year. He noted he was an E-5 (Sergeant), which meant he was supervising his own unit, and enjoyed that aspect of the service. However, due to worries about the undefined commitment of renewing his contract, he decided to separate from the military, as he had already been stop-lossed a year beyond his expected service, summing it up with “so it was like, you wanna get out when you can, that sort of thing.”

A third veteran, who was discharged close to the end of his enlistment time with an anxiety disorder, shared how his worries of being stop-lossed further contributed to the anxiety he was experiencing, “I was sort of biting my nails the whole time, even the last few months, whether or not they would force me into another two years of service, which would've been mostly deployment. Which definitely contributed to some of the anxiety.”

**Discharge based on medical or mental health issues.** Three veterans left the military on a disability discharge of some degree. Two of these veterans expressed how the medical discharges felt out of their control and shared negative perceptions of their experiences, while the other reported he was “overjoyed” to find out he would be able to leave the military on a disability discharge. One veteran, who received a medical discharge for post-traumatic stress disorder, shared that the experience of leaving the military was “humiliating. Majorly



humiliating.” The veteran went on to share that the stigma that went along with a PTSD diagnosis made it even worse:

It was scary because you know, as an aviator, you can't say that you have PTSD, because that's just being, I mean, it's just as much saying – its kinda like just saying well I'm being a coward. And if you're a coward, then you get kicked out because you're a coward, because you know, one of the key parts about being in the military is that you have to have courage. Um, and so, that was really tough on me.

Another veteran shared his experience of returning home after being “volun-told” he would deploy for a second time to Iraq. He had returned home from this second deployment with the intention to renew his contract; however, he developed “a series of really bad migraines” so he “couldn't finish staying in, so I pretty much got out.” He noted that he didn't share with the military everything that was going on for him at the time, he just “finished the paperwork and got out.” He later reenlisted with the reserves for a short period, sharing, “I kinda felt like, I was like forced out, but not – it wasn't my own decision, cause of medical stuff.”

### **Returning to Civilian Life**

After getting out of the military, veterans face the process of reintegrating with their families and communities as a civilian. The participants were asked what was helpful and what was stressful in this transition. Many veterans interviewed shared their immediate thoughts and feelings after leaving the military included, “it was the best thing ever,” “I was overjoyed,” “this real big sense of elation,” “I was happy to be out,” and “all this excitement.”

For others, leaving the military was, “scary...not scary like oh, I can't deal with it, but scary like just the feeling of not knowing,” “like the fear of the unknown coming out,” and “I just remember not feeling anything at all.” For many veterans interviewed the initial excitement at being out of the military was followed by “a crash” or a sense of “being totally overwhelmed” by the unknown. One veteran described the shift from always knowing what came next in the

day to day as well as in training and career trajectory to, “when I got out, like, I didn’t know what to do with my life.”

Another veteran shared it was hard for him to readjust to the change of pace, “because you’re going from military life to civilian life, and its kinda weird not having somebody to come bang on your door and wake you up, or have to do this, have to do that, consistently, 24/7.”

Losing the structure of the military was a challenge in transition for many veterans. The veterans were asked to expand on where they found support and what their challenges were during this transition period.

**Family and partners.** Most of the veterans interviewed cited family and partners as helpful in their transition home, though some found family and relationships to be more stressful than helpful, or found themselves unable to connect with family and friends; “there's just kind of a numb feeling. I don’t feel close to them either, you know, my family. You know, you try, yeah, I dunno, there's just kind of a numbness.”

Some participants spoke of wanting to be seen as more than their military experience.

One veteran shared he found his family supportive because they saw him as more than a soldier:

I connected with them just because they were my family a little bit, but it was also because they weren’t focused on, the fact that I was in the military. Like to them, it didn’t matter, I shouldn’t – It mattered that I was in the military, they were proud of that, but it wasn’t as, oh, you were the guy that was in the military. You’re the guy that deployed.

Another veteran shared the respect her partner shows for what she did while in the military, and the patience he had shown as she has worked through some of the issues relating to her service, had been incredibly supportive.

One veteran, whose spouse is currently finishing her own active duty obligation, shared that this relationship had been both supportive and stressful. The veteran shared it was helpful to

be able to talk with his wife about any issues that come up related to military or transition, though their separation of approximately 150 miles due to her continued service is a stressor, especially as this veteran is caring for their two young children in addition to going to school. However, he does find support from his parents, who provide childcare for the children while the veteran attends classes.

Among the veterans who have found family and partners to be more stressful than supportive, one veteran shared why he's reluctant to be around family, "it's just like putting up a mirror and having to remind yourself that you're no longer the same. And it was the same thing with my wife. You know, she was always pointing stuff out." Another veteran found his close-knit family to be too intrusive:

I needed to get away from there, you know, cause they were all trying to ask all the questions and try to catch up, they're trying to take the less than 30 days to try to catch up for four and a half years... I mean I appreciate them, and I appreciate them more than I did before, but, you know, it's just, it's like things like that definitely – I think I'd rather now, just be left, not left alone, but I just want to live life for what it is today.

Another veteran reflected on whether his service impacted his marriage, which ended in divorce a few years after his separation from the military, "I think it did, simply because I don't feel like she understood where I was coming from and I don't think she gave me enough credit and respect for it, and so I was kinda angry in that sense."

**Friends.** About half of the participants noted that friends have been an important and helpful part of their transition. Some noted having battle buddies or friends they were stationed with close by had been helpful in transition. One veteran found having his military friend close by helpful because his friend "understands where I'm coming from." Another veteran reflected on having two close buddies he served with in Iraq living in the area:

It took years for us to actually tell each other that we had issues or problems of any sort, and all of us knew what we'd gone through, and we would rarely if ever – we'd talk about the Army, all the time – but not about the events. So, I think for me, I'm just lucky, I'm really lucky having those two guys who live here.

While having friends who were in the service and who may have served alongside the veteran was a source of support for some, for others it was friends who had not served in the military who were helpful in transitioning back to civilian life. One veteran shared how, on a retreat with two long-time friends, the friends encouraged him to talk about his experience in Iraq. He described this experience:

After the first two days of me getting really upset with them, which I'm not used to doing, they got to me, and they, like I just broke down, and I started rambling. Like a hundred miles a minute, like I was crying and my heart was racing, and I went through like exactly how I felt. And it was the first time hearing myself.

This veteran shared that this was the first time he'd shared anything about his experiences with anyone after a few years of being home, and being able to open up about it led to significant changes in the way he dealt with his experience of combat.

Other participants spoke of finding it difficult to share their combat experience with old friends, “we've never really talked, but I think they're scared to ask, they're scared to bring it up. And, I don't like to talk about it with people who, who weren't there.” Another veteran recognized his tendency to isolate rather than engage, with friends and family both. He stated, “I still can't see myself being around my family right now. Or being too close with my friends.” The female veteran who participated in this study shared how she had a hard time making friends, especially with women, as she feels she “can't relate to women.” She attributed this to having served for seven years in the military with mostly men.

**Faith or religious practice.** Eight of the twelve participants interviewed stated they had a religious faith, four of these stated they were practicing in this faith, all Christian. Three

participants stated they had no religion or were atheist, and two identified as agnostic. Three of those practicing in their faith described it as being helpful in their transition back to civilian life. Two of these veterans stated that being involved in their church helped reduce isolation, one by “helping me socialize” and the other because it “pushed me to be involved at least a little bit with other people.” One veteran spoke of his faith and his church as helping him “75% of the way” with regard to his struggles in transitioning out of the military and making sense of his experiences. He shared how his involvement with his faith had recently grown:

It had only been recently because I think – I don’t know, it’s just a series of like, enlightenments that I’ve had at church about self-forgiveness I think, and learning to, I think I’m in the process of forgiving self, but I think initially it was more about acknowledging and accepting, you know. That we can’t really do anything about what’s happened, you just gotta kinda accept it and learn how to deal with it and move on, and just kind of learning to forgive yourself, and just kind of learning to forgive others, that kind of thing.

Motivated by the support he had received through his involvement with the church, this veteran was beginning to consider returning to school as a seminary student. For all the veterans in this study, returning to school was an important part of their transitions to civilian life.

**Returning to school.** As stated in the participant description, all of the participants in this study had utilized GI Bill benefits by going back to school for undergraduate or graduate studies after leaving the military. As such, school emerged as an important issue in these veterans’ transition back to civilian life. Six of the twelve participants were currently enrolled in an undergraduate program, one had completed two years of college and was not currently enrolled, four were currently enrolled in graduate programs, and one had completed a graduate program.

For many participants, school proved to be both a support and a stressor during transition. Many veterans interviewed shared that it was difficult to adjust to being back in school due to the workload and large classes, and they reported trouble concentrating. One veteran shared, “it was

really hard. I think I had a panic attack every day for the first month and a half. Yeah. It was scary, like, because I didn't think I was smart enough to be back in school." Another found school challenging because it was a different way of thinking than he had been used to in the military, "I had to learn how to be a student again. 'Cause you actually have to think, unlike the Army, where they just think for you. I had to think on my own."

The structure of classes was found to be helpful by some participants, and others noted that school was helpful to reduce isolation, with one veteran stating that school was helpful because "I have to go interact with people." One veteran noted he had no intention to return to school for his undergraduate degree after leaving the military, and began work in the financial industry. After working four years in this field, the financial crisis and economic recession hit in 2008, which greatly impacted the industry. The veteran returned to school at this point, starting with community college and then transferring to a four-year school to pursue a bachelor's degree.

The veterans attended a range of colleges and universities. Regardless of location, most veterans in the undergraduate programs noted finding it difficult to relate to the traditional college student coming from high school, summed up by one veteran, "what do I have in common with any of these eighteen year olds? Nothing, nothing." Another veteran shared his experience as an older undergraduate student:

I was frustrated that I couldn't just enjoy learning, you know I was picking everything apart, I was looking around and seeing kids daydreaming, and I was getting a little bit angry that I didn't, that I couldn't somehow get them more involved because the information to me was so important.

Those enrolled in graduate programs more than undergraduate programs noted that they had made some good friends or gotten to know some people in their programs after the first year,

which helped to improve their experience in school. Other graduate students spoke of knowing their programs were exactly what they wanted to be doing, and finding that helpful to their transition.

### **Impact of Service**

The participants were asked about any changes they had noticed in themselves as a result of their service, and to reflect on any changes that others had commented on since their return. Many veterans shared their views that one could not be deployed or in the military and not have changed as a result of the service. Most veterans indicated they had learned a lot about themselves as a result of their service and deployment. Notably, when asked what changes others may have noticed in the participant since returning home, many participants stated they had not discussed those issues with their friends and family, while others had specific examples of what others had made note of as having changed. The changes noted by veterans in this response to this question captured issues individual to the veteran as far as personal growth and daily functioning, as well as issues related to the veterans' engagement and interaction with others and the world around them.

**Intrapersonal impacts.** In response to this question, many veterans described the physical, behavioral, and emotional changes that they've noticed as a result of their service. For two veterans who reported sustaining traumatic brain injuries, trouble sleeping and memory problems were two major changes noted. Another veteran noted that after returning home, while sleeping with his wife, "I would freak her out because I would just jump out of bed and not know where I was at for a little bit." He also described an occasion where, while asleep, he started choking his brother who was sleeping next to him. The veteran shared when he found out about it, it "really freaked me out." He noted this was one of the reasons he preferred to isolate himself

from family and friends. Two veterans also noted problems driving, one adapting by scheduling classes and commutes for non-busy times, and the other noting “I don’t like to drive on the freeway. If I have to drive...let's see, I think this year, I've maybe driven on the freeway once. I pretty much avoid that.”

Avoidance is a primary symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). While participants were not explicitly asked about mental health in the interview, five participants endorsed experiencing some degree of PTSD since their separations from the military. Other veterans endorsed symptoms of PTSD, including hypervigilance, numbing, and irritability. One veteran shared the impetus behind his seeking counseling for readjustment issues:

I guess I’d had issues with the usual PTSD or whatever, you know, whatever, the gambit of, of emotional issues that, that guys have coming back and stuff. And my, I was lucky my boss was an old infantry guy, and he actually grabbed me one day and said hey, you gotta do something, you gotta see somebody or whatever.

This veteran went on to seek counseling from a Vet Center, which he described as “cathartic.”

Many participants also endorsed experiencing depression, anxiety, anger, and guilt since leaving the service.

Some participants reflected on how their military service had impacted them in positive ways by increasing maturity, confidence, drive, and dedication. One veteran described the changes he noticed in himself, “I did notice that I gained a lot more confidence...I have a whole lot more respect for most people...determination. I'm much more determined than I ever was.” He noted that he was “really young” when he joined the service, right out of high school, and felt that his time in the military met his expectation that it would “make me a man.” Another veteran described how the military had helped him to mature and find a purpose in life:

I grew up. So, um, really didn’t have any, I mean, I feel like I matured a lot. Relationship-wise, responsibility-wise, my outlook on life, I think has completely changed. I don’t I



don't think of it as like, I'm just here to have fun, find something to do to support what I want to do to have fun. I think it's now, it's I feel like I have a purpose in my life, I feel like I'm doing what I want to do, what I'm passionate about. It's no longer doing something to support fun; it's I'm doing what I want to do now.

While some veterans described this maturational experience as a positive outcome, others noted the impact of this new knowledge and perspective on their ability to navigate the world. One veteran shared how it feels like an additional burden to have the combat experience:

A combat veteran has to reconcile those things, in addition to just the everyday stresses that everyone else faces. You know, but they're starting in kinda a deficit if you will, in terms of their ability to handle just day-to-day things, because they're, you know, at the forefront of their mind and every part of their being, there's this overwhelming sense that, hey I know something, I'm, I'm different, my innocence is definitely gone, my eyes have been opened, the blinders are off, and it's just, you know, it's almost exhausting, and I can almost see where, a lot of the guys who come back can't handle it.

Many veterans echoed these feelings of loneliness and difference as a result of their experiences in the service, often impacting the way these veterans experience the world around them and connections with others.

**Interpersonal impacts.** A major theme that emerged among the participants is a sense of isolation and loneliness resulting from their military service. Most participants made reference to how much they learned about the world and the impact of being faced with life and death situations, and feeling as if no one could understand that experience when they returned home.

One participant, who had also had the most deployments of the veterans interviewed, described it this way:

Having come home from four [deployments] was, you know, there were a lot of changes that happened. And so you can't, you can't explain it to people. That, and usually because they're not really that interested. They think they are, but they're really not. And, because how can you process something that you can't, I mean, how can you be interested if you can't relate. So, it's not their fault, it's just that, you know, I wouldn't be interested, you know, I wouldn't be interested, I mean if someone started talking about physics to me, or you know, I think I'd be interested, but I'm really not because I can't, I can't really conceptualize what they're talking about.

Not only does this veteran struggle with explaining the experience of war to civilians, there is also a sense that civilians couldn't be interested in understanding the truth of war. Another veteran echoed this sentiment, "I'm not gonna sit there and talk to them for an hour and a half when I don't even know if they care or not."

For many veterans, there was also an element of protecting civilians and loved ones from the experiences and the knowledge gained while deployed. Some veterans shared how they only give part of the story to family members or friends, "I definitely gave her [spouse] an idea of what Iraq was like from the idea that I would give my mom or grandma," because it wouldn't do anyone any good to hear all the details, "I don't think that they need to know. I don't think it would help me and I don't think it would help them any." One veteran described how he holds back from sharing his experience with non-veterans:

Part of me doesn't want to tell people what I know because I kinda see their life, and how they live, and how they just, you know, kinda go about their day, and the biggest thing in their life is you know something that I probably wouldn't consider to be that big of a deal, and I don't want to take that away from them and make them – I don't want to force them to go to the depths that I've gone, you know mentally, emotionally and all that stuff. I just kinda feel like that's, that's my burden to bear.

This veteran described how having gone to "the depths" had made him different from civilians and how isolating that can be, having a "burden to bear" as a result.

For some participants, sharing their combat experience with others had been helpful in encouraging connections with others. One veteran shared that her partner knows a lot about her experiences, and though he cannot understand everything, sharing with him had allowed him to be an even better support. This veteran reported that she often uses her ongoing therapy to explore how to share her experiences and their impact with her partner. Another veteran described how it feels good to share with people he is close with:

I find myself once in awhile when I'm comfortable around someone close, that I'll just share everything. You know, and um, its good, you know, feels good when I do it. And, they're not even crazy Rambo stories or anything, but it's just like little things that stood out to me, you know, the feelings of thinking I'm gonna die, to you know, the one time I fired my weapon, that only happened once, or the time that I came close to firing my weapon.

It was helpful for this veteran to be able to share his real experiences with people he is close to, though it's not often nor with everyone that he is able to do so.

Many veterans shared how their experiences in the military had shifted their perspective about other people and the world. Some reported becoming more cynical, while others described feeling like other people "don't get it." One participant described his experience upon returning home:

The most stressful thing is the initially, I think was the feeling that um, a very strong feeling that people [civilians] don't get it. Like, don't really get what the world – what is going on in the world. They're very closed off, even though they talk about what they know is going on in the world, they don't know what's going on in the world.

This veteran described how connections with people in his church community helped him to better understand and relate to civilians. Another veteran similarly shared how his experience has made him more skeptical:

I've become much more critical of everything – I don't trust anything at face value, at all. Um, like I don't care about this [the interview], I trust this, but for the most part, like when I was in Iraq we saw the news one time, and the news was telling people that we had taken over Baghdad International. And that was our mission, and I knew we didn't do it, and there were all these things that I saw that the news was telling you guys that just weren't true.

This participant had experienced first hand the disconnect between the reality of war and the way it is portrayed in the media and to the community he returned to, which has made it more difficult for him to trust in the government and media since being out of the military.

## **Meaning in Life**

The participants were reminded of the meaning in life questionnaire (MLQ) they had filled out at the beginning of the interview, and asked to expand upon their sense of what is meaningful at this point in their lives. The MLQ measures the presence of and search for meaning in life for the respondent. Among these twelve participants, scores for presence of meaning in life ranged between 15 and 32, and scores for search for meaning in life ranged between 9 and 34, both scales out of a total possible score of 35, with higher scores indicating more presence of or more searching for meaning.

Steger (2010) presents the following rough categories for interpretation of MLQ presence and search scores: (I) both scores above 24 points; (II) presence greater than 24 and search less than 24; (III) presence less than 24 and search greater than 24; (IV) or both scores less than 24 points. In this study, two veterans scored in category I, four veterans in category II, and six veterans in category III. No veterans scored in the lowest category. Interestingly, as the questionnaire was developed by Steger et al. (2006) to allow for independence of these two scales, the two veterans with the highest scores for presence of meaning in life also had the lowest scores for search for meaning in life; presence: 32 and 31 and search: 11 and 9, respectively.

When describing the places they find meaning in civilian life, many veterans cited family, spouses, children, and friends, and noted that since their military experience they have found these relationships to have much greater meaning. One veteran shared that what he finds meaningful are, “my kids, and my wife. Um, I think, just having them in my life, I don’t know, they’re the greatest things in the world. So being a dad or being a husband.” Another veteran described how his faith had provided him with meaning and purpose in life:

Participant: Obviously faith is a big thing, as far as meaning in life, I think that really is, is probably the, a key to what I believe is my meaning, or where it comes from, I'd say it comes from my beliefs. Uh, um, I would definitely say the military, uh, made that more, more real....I never felt like I was, uh, without, without purpose. I may have been lost as far as direction, like, what am I gonna do for school as far as like what major am I going to take, that's, as far as a purpose in life, I feel like I've always had an ultimate purpose for my life because of my faith, so yeah.

Interviewer: Do you have words for that?

Participant: As far as my purpose? Um, I don't know. I'm not great with putting it in words. Uh, I guess I might have to say, relational, um in the sense that it's based off of a relationship, and relationship with others.

Some veterans interviewed shared that finding meaning had been a struggle since leaving the military. One veteran shared how after leaving the military, she felt a significant "loss of purpose." She later stated that she felt as if she were "preparing for a meaningful life" by going to school. For this veteran, finding a way to give back and contribute to the world as a civilian was meaningful. Other veterans echoed this veteran's desire to give back; three were enrolled or had graduated from graduate-level counseling programs, two were pursuing graduate degrees in helping sciences, and many enrolled as undergraduates spoke of being interested in fields where they felt they could make a difference. Though most of the participants interviewed were able to identify some meaning in their lives, one veteran spoke of finding it hard to have meaning at all:

That's the thing, it's just that, even with this college thing right now, I'm just faking it. Nothing is as enjoyable as it should be, like, just things that you'd normally do to have fun, it's not fun. So then you just, well, I might as well go back home, close the doors and lock everything up. So it's hard to have that kind of enjoyment about things.

This veteran had joined the military with the intention to use the GI Bill for college, and found it frustrating to now be out of the military and able to attend college, but not able to enjoy it. His experiences of not enjoying the things he used to or that he wants to enjoy have led this veteran

to continue isolating, even though he shared that he knows that's the least helpful thing he could be doing.

### **Additional issues**

At the end of the interviews, the veterans were asked if there was anything else they would like to share with regard to their service or transition experience. Many veterans used this opportunity to provide feedback on accessing services at the VA and to provide advice to other veterans in transition. One veteran shared his reflection and advice:

I think having friends to confide in and being able to confide in somebody, just being able to talk to somebody, and if you need further help from a psychologist or psychiatrist, to definitely seek that. And understand that there's [sic] more people out there that appreciate and understand what the military does. And are not against it and that think, they definitely support what the military does. I think picking the right friends helps.

While many participants recommended others to seek services if needed, many veterans in this study had not sought mental health or readjustment services, "I think part of it's probably, you know, just not wanting to deal with stuff." One veteran who had recently begun seeking mental health services shared that he still didn't like the words "mental health" or "PTSD," a carryover from his time in the military:

[In the military] you go to mental health and you're basically screwed for your career, it doesn't matter. You know, it's, I was never prompted to go see them before, I had sleep problems, but you know, that stigma is not there anymore, so my wife's making me go. I think it's a good thing though.

Fortunately, this veteran had support from his wife to seek mental health treatment and found the stigma to be lessened by being out of the military, though he still felt uncomfortable with the words mental health and PTSD.

While there was only one female participant in this study, the issue of gender arose in interviews with some of the male veterans as well. Some of the male veteran participants noted

that when they talked about experiences with “the guys,” they truly were reflecting on their experiences in the infantry, where the units are male-only. One veteran shared how he felt about having his wife exposed to the military:

I’ve tried to keep her from the military as much as possible. So when I got married, we lived off-post, I just...first of all, just Army, like in the infantry it’s all men. So you have one female and they are elevated to like the most beautiful girl in the whole world. So you have like 300 guys just staring at you. Like if my wife walked on base she probably felt like she was being undressed, or she just felt like a goddess, because they’re not used to women being around them on a day-to-day basis, so I was like, okay, none of that.

This veteran felt uncomfortable with the amount of attention his wife would receive from the male soldiers, were he to expose her to that setting. The female veteran interviewed in this study shared her mixed feelings about her experience in the military with regard to her gender:

I would say that, I mean, I wouldn’t trade it. And, you know, I do have a lot of pride in, in what I did. But I, I honestly don’t know that I would recommend to another woman to join the military.... I just don’t think I would ever want to send in another woman through what I, through that trauma of dealing with the chauvinism that I dealt with, because it was pretty bad.

While this experience cannot be generalized to all women in all positions in the military, it is certainly notable that this veteran experienced substantial amounts of sexual harassment while in the service, so much so that she would not recommend another woman join the military.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Discussion**

Meaning in life is a focus of psychological literature most often found in the areas of existential therapy, logotherapy, and positive psychology. It has also been found to be an important factor in trauma and recovery. This research sought to explore meaning in life in transition from active duty military to civilian status, through qualitative interviews of veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. With thousands of service members leaving the military and transitioning back to civilian life each year, it is important for social workers, other helping professionals, and communities to have an understanding of the experiences of veterans during this time.

Assessing search for or presence of a subjective meaning in life is an informative step that can guide clinical intervention, and may be of particular use in working with veterans transitioning from the military. This research explored the issue of transition by gathering narratives from twelve veterans about their military service, their thoughts and feelings upon separating from the military, challenges and supports during transition, the individual and interpersonal impacts of service, and where they find meaning in life.

### **Key Findings**

**Describing experience in the military.** Study participants included twelve military veterans who served in the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan, with representation from: Air Force (two participants), Army (eight participants), Marine Corps (one participant), and Marine Corps Reserves (one participant). Participants included one female and eleven male veterans, and



eleven enlisted service members and one officer, ranging in age from twenty-three years old to thirty-nine years old. The veterans interviewed described a variety of experiences in the military, ranging from overall positive descriptions to more mixed perceptions of the experience.

There was variation among the participants with regard to their age of enlistment and reasons for joining the military, though the majority joined within a year of graduating high school. Many participants cited GI Bill educational benefits as a factor in their decision to join the military, and additional reasons cited included patriotism, sense of duty or obligation, a desire for more world experience, or as a way to find direction. Similar findings are cited in a qualitative study of student veterans by Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell (2009). As seen in the Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell study, coming from a military family is also often cited as a reason for joining; however, only one participant in this study reported a family history of military service.

**Leaving the military.** Participants described their thoughts and feelings upon separation from the military ranging from excitement and being overjoyed to being overwhelmed and humiliated. Most veterans described an unhelpful out-processing from their branch of the military, contributing to this sense of overwhelm and isolation. Previous discussion on this issue has shown that many service members report “zoning out” or minimizing issues (consciously or unconsciously) they may have in this out-processing period, as they are eager to get home to family and friends and/or experiencing a culture shock of reintegration. (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Mitchell, 2009; Bragin, 2010).

Three veterans cited the military’s stop-loss policy as influential in their decisions to leave the military when they did, concerned that if they renewed their contracts, they would be redeployed indefinitely. The deployment cycle for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq has sped up

and places large demands on service members and their families. Many participants described wanting to have relationships and a “normal life,” something they felt was not possible while serving in the military. The stresses of deployment, reintegration, and redeployment for service members serving in Afghanistan and Iraq have been well documented; these wars are the longest running wars, with an all volunteer military, with the most rapid deployment cycle and shortest “dwell time” of any previous war (IOM, 2010). Understandably, these extra stressors placed on service members and their families contributed to the decision to leave the military for many veterans in this study.

**Returning to civilian life.** One expected finding in the transition experiences of participants included the constellation of supportive factors and challenges. The challenges and supports described by the participants in this study are in line with those cited in previous studies (Drescher et al., 2009; King et al., 1998; Pietrzak et al., 2010). Social supports including family, friends, and faith were described by participants as helpful in their transitions. In quantitative studies conducted correlating PTSD and depressive symptomology with demographic and supportive factors, no causal relationship could be established between fewer symptoms and more supports, and the question remained, what is so supportive about social supports (Drescher et al., 2009; Pietrzak et al., 2010)? The semi-structured qualitative interview conducted in this study allowed for more depth to explore these issues.

Participants often cited significant relationships with family, partners, and friends as very helpful as the veteran transitioned out of the military. These relationships were found to be most helpful when they contributed to the veterans’ senses of integration of their military and civilian identities, rather than focusing on, “oh, you were that guy in the military. You were that guy who

deployed.” Veterans also reported continuing relationships with battle buddies or other military veterans helped to normalize adjustment responses during transition.

On the other hand, those veterans who shared their relationships tended to be more stressful than helpful noted the challenges arose when the veteran and friends, family, and community members related primarily around the veteran’s experiences in the military. Numbing and a sense of being different also interfered with some veterans’ ability to connect with family and friends following their military service. Faith proved to be an important support for some veterans, whether as something that was continuous throughout the veteran’s time in the military, or a return to faith during the transition period. Faith was important for these veterans as a way of connecting with a bigger purpose and reducing isolation.

An expected challenge reported by the participants was the loss of structure and purpose that a military career provided. Due to the characteristics of the sample population, the significant issue of return to higher education emerged as an important theme among the participants interviewed for this study. Most participants reported spending some time exploring future directions and next steps after leaving the military and before enrolling in school, with the exception of one participant who had left the military to directly enroll in a graduate program. All participants had utilized GI Bill educational benefits at some point since leaving the military, and at the time of interview, only two of the twelve participants were not currently enrolled in a graduate or undergraduate program. Two veterans had been able to attend college while in the Reserves, meeting educational goals while serving. Many veterans spoke of having college in their plans “from the beginning,” while others returned to school in part searching for purpose or meaning in their lives through education and career. Most veterans spoke of wanting to be involved in a career where they could make a difference or make an impact in the world.

The experiences of the veterans interviewed in this study in returning to school were similar to the findings of a qualitative study of six National Guard, Reserve, and ROTC members who had been deployed during their college education (Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Both studies found veterans' sense of maturity and perspective resulting from combat experience created feelings of difference and detachment from their (typically) younger classmates. However, the veterans interviewed in Rumann and Hamrick's study were current members of the Reserves, National Guard, and college ROTC, meaning that some of their participants could expect to be redeployed during their studies, or upon graduation. Many of the veterans in the Rumann & Hamrick study planned to make a career of some kind in the military. Contrastingly, all but one of the student veterans participating in this study were not planning to return to the military; therefore, education likely carries additional importance in part to aid them in transition to the civilian workforce.

**Impact of service.** The participants described a variety of intrapersonal and interpersonal impacts of their time in the military. Some veterans described the emotional and behavioral changes they and others have noticed since returning home, including anger, irritability, depression, anxiety, guilt, hypervigilance, urges to isolate, difficulty concentrating, and numbness; feelings and behaviors that fall under the broad category of stress reactions and are well documented in quantitative studies elsewhere (Lapierre, Schwegler & LaBauve 2007; Owens et al., 2009; Pietrzak et al., 2010; Vasterling et al., 2010). It is helpful to consider these impacts within a framework of normal reactions to extraordinary situations. Indeed, this perspective is endorsed within the military as well. The U.S. Army Medical Department's Army Behavioral Health website includes a description of Combat and Operational Stress Reactions

(COSR), emphasizing these “are expected and predictable emotional, intellectual, physical, and/or behavioral reactions from exposure to stressful event(s).”

Echoed by many participants and found in the literature is the understanding that one cannot have served in combat and not change as a result of the experience (Bragin, 2010; Shay, 2003). Bragin draws on literature including Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* (1913) and Shay’s *Odysseus in America: Combat trauma and the trials of homecoming* (2003), which describe the impact of participating in and witnessing the violence of war on an individual, and the challenges this can cause for a warrior returning to his community. Most veterans interviewed in this study spoke of having gained a “knowledge” from their combat experiences, about the world, about people, and about life and death. When coupled with the civilian community’s lack of exposure to the OEF and OIF wars, the veterans’ senses of being different were only heightened, furthering a sense of isolation, described by one veteran as “You feel like you’re an island, surrounded by this sea of everybody else that kinda has the same characteristics. And they don’t have the same concerns or the same burdens.”

**Meaning in life.** Participants completed the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006), measuring search for and presence of meaning in life, and described where they find meaning in their lives today. For some veterans, they felt as if they had lost some meaning and purpose in their lives after leaving the military, while others described their faiths as grounding them in a purpose or meaning in life throughout their combat experiences and the ups and downs of transitioning back to civilian life. Participants fell in three interpretive categories of the MLQ, two with scores above twenty-four in each category, four with scores above twenty-four in presence and below twenty-four in search for meaning in life,

and six with scores below twenty-four in presence and above twenty-four in search for meaning in life.

In a previous quantitative study conducted using the MLQ and data gathered on mental health issues and demographic information, it was found that greater sense of meaning in life was associated with fewer PTSD symptoms for mild to moderate PTSD, and could act as a buffer against depression, predicted as especially likely for higher-functioning veterans (Owens, Steger, Whitesel, & Herrera, 2009). While the study presented in this paper did not seek to diagnose or assess for PTSD or depressive symptomology, the study sought understanding of how presence of or search for meaning in life may serve to impact a veteran's transition to civilian life, which in turn may contribute to mental health issues. For many veterans in this study, their combat experience did not necessarily change their perceptions of meaning in life, but rather served to highlight and reinforce the importance of their relationships with others as lending meaning to their lives. Veterans spoke about "growing up" as a result of their service, and having a shift to a more mature perspective. Many veterans spoke of how they appreciate the little things in life more since transitioning out of the military, and many also spoke of searching for a purpose or direction in life that would allow them to give back in some way.

### **Study Strengths and Limitations**

This study was designed to collect in-depth descriptions from veterans about their individual experiences transitioning out of the military and into civilian life, with a focus on meaning in life as a part of this transition. The study captured demographic information about the participants, as well as information about their military service history. It gathered quantitative data in response to the meaning in life questionnaire, and in-depth qualitative data about the transition experience using a six-question semi-structured interview. The semi-structured

interview allowed for deeper exploration of the subjective experience of the participants during their transitions out of the military and into civilian life. Additionally, this structure allowed for adaptation based on the issues that emerged throughout the interview process, in particular, the issue of the role of higher education in the transition process.

While providing a thorough picture of the participants' perceptions of their military experiences and transition home, the contextualization of the transition experience in this way prevented the study from being focused specifically on the role of meaning in transition. The findings of this study are also limited in their generalizability, as there were few eligibility requirements placed on potential participants due to the exploratory nature of this study and in order to facilitate the recruitment process in the short time frame available for this research. Twelve participants are adequate for a masters-level qualitative study, and the quantitative data gathered supplemented the qualitative data findings. The sample size is too small to make any generalizations based on quantitative data alone, though this research was not intended for this purpose. Interviewing veterans about their experiences in transition provided expert data, as the veterans shared their own experiences in the interviews.

Many studies had previously been conducted that correlated symptomology among veterans after returning from combat with supports and demographic information (Lapierre, Schwegler & LaBauve, 2007; Pietrzak et al., 2010; Owens et al., 2009; Vasterling et al., 2010), though there had not been as much attention paid to how the transition has been experienced by veterans of the recent wars outside this focus on mental health diagnoses. The field of social work is grounded in a person-in-environment perspective, and it is essential for social workers to become familiar with the transition experiences of veterans, as social work services will be called upon with greater frequency as more veterans return home and grapple with readjustment.

There is rich opportunity for collaboration among mental health workers, community and faith-based institutions, colleges and universities, and veterans organizations around this issue of transition.

One of the themes that arose from many of the veterans interviewed in this study is a sense that civilians cannot understand their combat experiences, and perhaps would rather not know. Throughout the interviewing process, most participants asked why I would be interested in these issues, wondering about my connection to the military. I shared with the participants that I was a civilian completing my second year internship at a Veteran's Affairs Medical Center in outpatient mental health, and that my passion for doing this work and conducting this research grew out of a commitment to honor and serve those who have served my country. While there is no way for me to truly understand the experiences and sacrifices these veterans have made, I hope this research can provide an opportunity to continue these important conversations.



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## **Appendix A**

### **Informed Consent Form**

Dear Participant,

My name is Jillian Early. I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work, and I am writing to ask for your participation in my study, which is to explore the experience of reintegration during the transition from military active duty or reserve to veteran status. The study will aim to explore the presence or search for meaning in life as part of the transition event. The population under investigation will be male and/or female combat veterans who have been deployed to Iraq and/or Afghanistan. I am interested in what has helped and not helped, what has been a struggle, and what has been successful during re-entry into civilian life. The data from my survey will be used for my thesis, part of the requirements for the masters of social work degree at Smith College, and possibly for future publications and presentations.

I am inviting Veterans from all branches of the military who have served in OEF/OIF to participate in this study. I will gather demographic/personal information about you (gender, race, educational degree, military service history, employment status, marital status). I ask these questions so that I will be able to describe my participants accurately. The interview will be conducted either face-to-face in a public area (i.e. coffee shop, or library) or over the phone, and will take approximately one to one and a half hours depending on your answers. The interview will be audio recorded with your permission. I will ask a number of open-ended questions about your experience in the military and transition back home, and I will give you a ten-question survey to complete. At your request, I can provide you the interview guide in advance.

The potential risks of participation in the study are that you may feel emotional distress or discomfort when recalling your experiences in the military or upon return home from

overseas. Should the interview become too stressful, you may choose to take a break, end the interview, or withdraw from the study at anytime. Additionally, I will provide you with a list of resources to turn to for further assistance around these issues.

While I am unable to provide financial compensation for your time, your participation in this study may benefit you in other ways. Researchers who have worked with Veterans in the past have found that Veterans often benefit from sharing their experiences with others. You may also benefit from the satisfaction of knowing your participation will also provide assistance and insight regarding the reintegration experience, which may in turn assist other Veterans, social workers, mental health clinicians and community members in having a better understanding of this experience. Your insight could assist clinicians, individuals and agencies that work with Veterans in developing and implementing improved resources, wrap-a-round services and treatment interventions.

Participation is voluntary and you are free to refuse to answer any questions, end the interview, and/or withdraw from the study at any time prior to March 31th, 2011. If you decide to withdraw, I will immediately remove and destroy all data pertaining to your participation. If you agree to participate, all of your information, as required by Federal Guidelines, will be kept securely locked for a minimum of three years after I complete my thesis. After these three years, the data will remain secured until I no longer need access, at which time all data and audio recordings will be destroyed. My thesis advisor will have access to the data after I have coded all the narrative data and disguised all identifying information.

If you have additional questions or are concerned about your rights or any aspect of this study please contact me at [yearly@smith.edu](mailto:yearly@smith.edu) or the Chair of Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at (413) 585-7974.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

**YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATION IN THE STUDY.**

Participant's Signature:

Date:

Researcher's Signature:

Date:

Please retain a copy of this document for your records.

Researcher Contact Information:

Jillian Early  
[JEarly@smith.edu](mailto:JEarly@smith.edu)

**Appendix B**  
**Interview Guide**

**Demographic Questionnaire**

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Race: \_\_\_\_\_

Religious/Spiritual identification: \_\_\_\_\_

Relationship status: \_\_\_\_\_

Education level: \_\_\_\_\_

Employment status: \_\_\_\_\_

Military Service History

Beginning date/age of service: \_\_\_\_\_

Branch: \_\_\_\_\_

Rank: \_\_\_\_\_

Time served: \_\_\_\_\_

Deployed to: \_\_\_\_\_

End date/age of service: \_\_\_\_\_

Reason for leaving military: \_\_\_\_\_

## Interview Questions

1. How would you describe your time in the military? What were your reasons for joining? What was your job in the military?
2. What were some of your thoughts and feelings when it came time for you to separate from the military?
3. Can you describe your life since you've left the service? What has been stressful? What has been helpful? (Family, friends, work, worship, education, etc).
4. What changes have you noticed in yourself or have others noticed about you, if any, as a result of your military service?
5. You answered some questions about meaning in life before. Could you tell me a little bit about the things and experiences you find to be meaningful in your life? Have you noticed changes in your sense of what is meaningful?
6. Are there any questions that I should have asked you or topics that I missed that you would like to address?



## The Meaning in Life Questionnaire

**MLQ** Please take a moment to think about what makes your life feel important to you. Please respond to the following statements as truthfully and accurately as you can, and also please remember that these are very subjective questions and that there are no right or wrong answers. Please answer according to the scale below:

Absolutely Untrue	Mostly Untrue	Somewhat Untrue	Can't Say True or False	Somewhat True	Mostly True	Absolutely True
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

1. \_\_\_\_\_ I understand my life's meaning.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ I am looking for something that makes my life feel meaningful.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ I am always looking to find my life's purpose.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ My life has a clear sense of purpose.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ I have a good sense of what makes my life meaningful.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ I have discovered a satisfying life purpose.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ I am always searching for something that makes my life feel significant.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ I am seeking a purpose or mission for my life.
9. \_\_\_\_\_ My life has no clear purpose.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ I am searching for meaning in my life.

MLQ syntax to create Presence and Search subscales: Presence: 1, 4, 5, 6, & 9-reverse-coded  
Search: 2, 3, 7, 8, & 10

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## Appendix C

### Human Subjects Review Committee Approval Letter

January 29, 2011

Jillian Early

Dear Jillian,

Your revised materials have been reviewed and they are fine. We are happy to give final approval to this most interesting study. My age mates were all in WW II and when they came home, most of them wouldn't say a word about their experiences. It was OVER. Of course, they had been overseas three or more years with no trips home and there was no phone contact, only letters. They no doubt felt more completely cut off and alienated. Occasionally, some stories would be told.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Maintaining Data:** You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your study.

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.  
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Cara Segal, Research Advisor