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The things they carry : a study of transitional object use among U.S. military personnel during and after deployment

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore how transitional objects are used during and after combat, and whether their use promotes resilience, reduces the effects of combat-related stress, and helps service members with "coming home" from war. The research looked for possible ties between objects with emotional significance that were carried during deployment and the effect the items had on service members' mental health and wellbeing,

Sixty-six combat veterans of World War II through the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan completed an online survey consisting of multiple-choice, open-ended, and Likert scale questions that were used to capture their experiences with transitional objects. An additional six combat veterans took part in a structured focus group designed to gather more detailed, nuanced perspectives about the role that objects played for these veterans.

Results indicate that the majority of veterans carried a special possession during combat and found it to be soothing or psychologically helpful in times of stress. Service members who used an object found it was more useful during their transition into combat than during their return home. Participants who did not carry an object stated they wanted to keep home and work separate, or did not feel the need to bring something along for comfort. Most survey participants indicated they have positive feelings when they think about their object today, while one-third indicated that the object is no longer important to them. Suggestions for future research were given, as well as implications for clinical practice with veterans and military couples.

THE THINGS THEY CARRY: A STUDY OF TRANSITIONAL OBJECT USE AMONG U.S. MILITARY PERSONNEL DURING AND AFTER DEPLOYMENT

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Countless soldiers, airmen, sailors, and Marines have carried something personal with them while serving in combat, often as a protective amulet or as a reminder of loved ones back home. Whether they are called good luck charms or transitional objects, these small items may be as psychologically important to service men and women as their body armor (Butler, 2006; Koppel, 2003; Kozyrev, 2006; May, 2008; McKinzie, 2007; O'Brien, 1990; Reinhardt, 2008; Smith, 2010; Svan, 2006; Van Geete, 2009).

The purpose of this study was to explore how transitional objects are used during and after combat, and whether their use in some way promotes resilience, reduces the effects of combat-related stress, and helps service members with "coming home" from war. The research looked for possible ties between objects with emotional significance that were carried during deployment and the effect the items had on service members' mental health and wellbeing. Specifically, the current study addressed the question: *Does the use of transitional objects help combat veterans with healing and reintegration?* Literally, what do warfighters hold onto, mentally and physically, to get them through combat? And once home, does having used these objects during combat help re-entry into civilian life?

This study aims to expand the knowledge base about post-traumatic stress and resiliency factors associated with military combat by exploring how transitional objects are used during deployment. Currently, there is a gap in the literature in this area. With continuing public

attention on the deleterious effects of combat-related post-traumatic stress, anecdotal stories of U.S. troops using personal objects as "good luck charms" during their deployment, and indications that social support and positive attachments are helpful in mediating the effects of combat exposure, there is value in advancing the proposed research question. For example, there may be several benefits in exploring how the use of D. W. Winnicott's *transitional object* helps maintain a symbolic attachment to loved ones during wartime separation and afterward. Study results might offer clinicians new insight into wartime experiences so they can tailor treatment interventions to better help service members—and their families—as they prepare to deploy overseas or return to civilian life. Accordingly, the study is relevant for individual clinicians and agencies that serve service members and veterans and their loved ones, researchers, and the public at large.

The mental and physical toll that military deployments take on service members and their families has been well studied and documented. In the decade since the United States has been at war with Iraq and Afghanistan, more than 2.4 million Americans have been deployed at least once in overseas combat, with many service members returning for multiple tours of duty. The strain of recurrent deployments and absence from home, coupled with the unique stressors associated with combat exposure, have been a catalyst for numerous psychosocial and readjustment difficulties, which can exacerbate problems that already exist in a service member's life (APA, 2007; Hosek, Kavanagh & Miller, 2006; Pols & Oak, 2007; Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008; Shay, 1994).

Suicide, one heart-wrenching consequence of war, has become an epidemic among veterans and active duty service members, affecting troops deployed not only in support of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), and Operation New Dawn

(OND), but also veterans of Vietnam and earlier wars. A U.S. military veteran takes his or her life every 65 minutes—an estimated 22 each day, according to a report by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA; Kemp & Bossarte, 2012); this is an increase from the previous year when 18 veterans died from self-inflicted wounds each day. Suicide among active duty troops reached an all-time high in 2012. According to a preliminary report by the Pentagon, 349 service members across all service branches committed suicide in 2012, up 15% from the previous year (Burns, 2013; Dao & Lehren, 2013). However, deployment alone cannot account for the rise within the military; data for the past three years show that more than half of the service members who completed suicide were never deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan, and more than 80% never saw combat.

Veterans who return home from combat often struggle with the decision to seek professional mental health services (and potentially face the stigma that often goes with it), or deal with their emotional pain and psychological problems on their own. According to data from the VA, more returning veterans are seeking treatment. Approximately 1.6 million troops left active duty in Iraq or Afghanistan and became eligible for VA healthcare between 2002 and 2012; of those troops, 56% came in for VA services. Of the 899,752 OEF/OIF/OND veterans who accessed VA services, 54% were diagnosed with a mental-health condition such as post-traumatic stress, depression, or substance use disorder (Epidemiology Program, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs [DVA], 2013). In addition to these recent veterans, some 850,000 of the 2.7 million Americans who served in Vietnam through its conclusion in 1975 are estimated to be alive today; many of these veterans continue to grapple with war-related mental health issues (DVA, 2012).

It has been well documented that returning Vietnam veterans faced significant readjustment issues at home and in the community, their homecoming darkened by a failure by many Americans to show appreciation, respect, or compassion for those who fought in Vietnam. While public sentiment toward returning Iraq and Afghanistan veterans was more welcoming, veterans of these wars face their own struggles with reintegration. With respect to these newer veterans, Milliken, Auchterlonie, and Hoge (2007) estimated that 67% to 70% of service members deployed in OEF/OIF would be exposed to some form of combat trauma, although the prevalence of those who eventually develop PTSD will depend on individual protective and risk factors, such as resiliency and social supports. The Mental Health Advisory Team Report IV in 2003 reported that as many as 38% of veterans who served in OEF and OIF were diagnosed with some form of mental illness upon return from duty (Castro, 2009). The prevalence ranged from 18.5% to 42.7% in multiple studies reviewed by Seal, Cohen, Metzler, Gima, Bertenthal, Maguen, and Marmar (2010). Recent research among OEF and OIF veterans has been encouraging, with findings indicating that resilience, unit support, and social support were buffers against PTSD and depressive symptoms. Relatedly, a central question of the current study is whether using transitional objects in combat can help defend in some way against the adverse effects of war by helping to mediate negative feelings or maintaining a positive connection to a loved one back home.

The research that will be presented was gathered using a mixed method research design that included an Internet survey to collect descriptive data about the use of transitional objects from a broad sample of veterans and active duty service members; and a focus group to gather more detailed, nuanced perspectives about the role that objects played for a group of combat veterans.

For the purposes of this study, a *transitional object* is defined as an item that serves a soothing function during life transitions and periods of sudden change, loss, and separation. Transitional objects are used across the lifespan to reduce anxiety and other feelings of discomfort. Examples of tangible transitional objects can include photographs, written letters, a journal, jewelry, insignia, tattoos, and articles of clothing. Examples of intangible transitional objects can include music, wishes, stories, dreams, and smells. A *life transition* is defined in this study as a significant change in a person's social or personal environment that has the potential to cause stress in positive or negative ways. For the purposes of this study, life transitions, change, loss, and separation will refer to deployment to a war zone and returning home.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to explore how transitional objects are used during and after combat, and to discover whether their use in some way promotes resilience, reduces the effects of combat-related stress, and helps veterans readjust to civilian life. The analysis explored possible ties between cherished personal objects carried during combat and the effect they may have had on service members' mental health, particularly the object's potential to provide comfort when the bearer felt scared, homesick, or anxious.

Given that it was a pilot study, one of the challenges of conducting this research was the dearth of peer-reviewed empirical literature on the use of transitional objects, or comfort objects, by military service personnel. Much of the existing literature on transitional objects is theoretical in nature or involves studies that focus on the psychopathology associated with the use of transitional objects. A *transitional/comfort object* or *special/transitional possession* is defined broadly in the current study as an item that serves a soothing function during life transitions and periods of sudden change, loss, and separation, and which "psychologically reconnects the individual to the comfort of the situation prior to the change and becomes the means of negotiating loss and separation" (Gregorio, 2005, p. 28).

To gain a better understanding of the relationship between the use of transitional objects and deployed service members' psychological wellbeing, the researcher looked at the interrelated parts of the research question. She accessed multiple academic databases covering social

sciences, the humanities, arts, and sciences (including EBSCO, JSTOR, PubMed, and ProQuest), and found numerous literary sources, news accounts, and popular media that referenced the use of special objects or "good luck charms" in combat. These examples are discussed in the first section of this chapter, which puts the use of objects by warriors into a historical context. The second section outlines the psychological theories of development that explain how using objects might help service members fill a need to be comforted or soothed while deployed. The third section reviews previous studies that most directly address themes related to this study's central question. The fourth section explains the thinking behind superstitious rituals and beliefs, including the use of lucky charms, which is one way that service men and women describe the personal objects they bring with them on deployment. The final section briefly examines psychosocial issues that affect veterans who are returning from a war zone.

History

Soldiers have carried symbolic objects for protection for as long as there has been war. In the first century, the Roman historian Tacitus described how people of northern Europe believed the image of the boar provided protection and guardianship on the battlefield; in the Middle Ages, the boar was used again as a symbol of tenacity and fearlessness ("Guardians and good luck charms," n.d.).

In modern military history, while there have been a variety of ritualistic behaviors among the service branches, it is the practice of carrying or displaying objects that is the most widespread (Wallrich, 1960). Soldiers fighting during the First World War carried religious medallions and "lucky charms" as protective amulets against physical danger or sickness. During World War II, soldiers carried a rabbit's foot for good luck. Aviators in that war, as well as the ensuing conflicts in Korea and Vietnam, had their own rich lore of flying superstitions and good

luck charms, right down to the art painted on the nose of their aircraft. Airmen (and soldiers and Marines) carried photographs of sweethearts and children with them on missions, as well as a variety of amulets, talismans, or special possessions like silver dollars, baby shoes, horseshoes, dolls, caricature figurines, and coins (Klesius, 2010; Wallrich, 1960). Klesius posits that service members might have been trying to maintain a sense of command with these behaviors, and that "superstitions emerge[d] as mental hedges against danger in situations where so much is beyond a person's control" (2010, para. 5).

According to Wallrich (1960), these superstitions are part of the larger cannon of military folklore, and likely developed in response to the stress that service members were under:

> Superstitious beliefs and actions breed best at times of great danger or of great physical and/or emotional stress. That there has been such a rapid accretion of Air Force superstitions is no doubt due in most part to the inherent physical dangers attendant on early day aircraft and aviation. Other factors include the emotional type of individual drawn to aviation as a career, the divergent backgrounds of those who came into the Air Force during the vast and rapid buildup periods brought about by three wars, and the constant awareness and presence of death in all its many and varied forms—whether in time of peace or war. (p. 11)

America's troops continued the practice during the Vietnam War. They carried tokens for good luck, made special "in-country" patches, and decorated their cloth helmet covers with political, religious, and personal slogans (Burke, 2004, p.16). Helmet graffiti was one of the biggest "signatures" of the Vietnam War, giving soldiers and Marines a canvas to express their feelings, draw cartoons, write poems and sayings, and keep a "short timer's calendar" to count their remaining days left in country (Leepson, 2010). One could argue that these customizations

turned helmets into something more than armor, that writing the names of loved ones and distant hometowns, or sticking special objects and reminders behind helmet bands, actually helped troops maintain a symbolic connection to home while deployed.

"The Things They Carried"

Along with the empirical research and theoretical frameworks that will be discussed later in this chapter, there is a novel about soldiers in war that is central to understanding the use of objects in combat; this novel in fact was an inspiration for this study.

The Things They Carried (O'Brien, 1990) is a classic volume of interrelated stories about a platoon of American soldiers in the Vietnam War, woven together by a fictional narrator named Tim O'Brien. The stories were based on the author's personal experiences as a young Army infantry soldier in 1968; they touch on both the physical objects and the emotions that soldiers carried with them during the war. Along with the heavy gear and weapons they humped through the jungle, soldiers shouldered the intangible burdens of duty, God, and country. "They carried all they could bear, and then some, including a silent awe for the terrible power of the things they carried" (O'Brien, 1990, p. 7). And, too, soldiers were laden with the emotional and psychological burdens that accompany war.

> They carried all the emotional baggage of men who might die. Grief, terror, love, longing—these were intangibles, but the intangibles had their own mass and specific gravity, they had tangible weight. They carried shameful memories. They carried the common secret of cowardice barely restrained, the instinct to run or freeze or hide, and in many respects this was the heaviest burden of all, for it could never be put down, it required perfect balance and perfect posture. They carried their reputations. They carried the soldier's greatest fear, which was the fear of blushing. Men killed, and died, because

> they were embarrassed not to. It was what had brought them to the war in the first place, nothing positive, no dreams of glory or honor, just to avoid the blush of dishonor. (O'Brien, 1990, p. 21)

At the same time, it is clear from the following passages that soldiers carried objects that provided positive, emotional connections to people and places back home.

> First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carried letters from a girl named Martha, a junior at Mount Sebastian College in New Jersey. They were not love letters, but Lieutenant Cross was hoping, so he kept them folded in plastic at the bottom of his rucksack. In the late afternoon, after a day's march, he would dig his foxhole, wash his hands under a canteen, unwrap the letters, hold them with the tips of his fingers, and spend the last hour of light pretending. (O'Brien, 1990, p. 3)

When O'Brien's character Lieutenant Cross receives an object from home, not only is it a physical reminder of his girlfriend, but it also is a transitional possession that has the ability to mentally transport the soldier from the jungles of Vietnam to a place far away.

> It was a simple pebble, an ounce at most. Smooth to the touch, it was a milky white color with flecks of orange and violet, oval-shaped, like a miniature egg. In the accompanying letter, Martha wrote that she had found the pebble on the Jersey shoreline, precisely where the land touched the water at high tide, where things came together but also separated. It was this this separate-but-together quality, she wrote, that had inspired her to pick up the pebble and to carry it in her breast pocket for several days, where it seemed weightless, and then to send it through the mail, by air, as a token of her truest feelings for him. . . .

He loved her so much. On the march, through the hot days of early April, he carried the pebble in his mouth, turning it with his tongue, tasting sea salt and moisture. His mind wandered. He had difficulty keeping his attention on the war. On occasion he would yell at his men to spread out the column, to keep their eyes open, but then he would slip away into daydreams, just pretending, walking barefoot along the Jersey shore, with Martha, carrying nothing. He would feel himself rising. Sun and waves and gentle winds, all love and lightness. (O'Brien, 1990, pp. 8-9)

O'Brien also describes how some of what was carried in Vietnam was determined by superstition. Lieutenant Cross carried his good-luck pebble. Another soldier carried a rabbit's foot. One of the men in the company wrapped his girlfriend's pantyhose around his head as a form of protective magic. In a 1990 interview with National Public Radio's Terry Gross, O'Brien reflected on his personal experience with special possessions during the war.

Ms. Gross: Did a lot of the men you know have something like that? Did you have anything like that yourself?

Mr. O'Brien: No, I didn't carry pantyhose, but there were talisman that men carried in war and the kind of talismans that touch on peace. That the pantyhose business that's wrapped around a fellow's neck as a kind of comforter is a reminder of all he doesn't have—his girlfriend and the peace that that girl represents for him. And, you know, like some men carried letters from home, some men carried coins their father may have sent them. A lot of us carried photographs, some carried lockets of hair.

Ms. Gross: What were the things that you carried with you to remind you of who you were and what it was that you loved?

Mr. O'Brien: I carried odd things. I carried, you won't believe this, I carried a book of German grammar. I wanted to learn German while I was in Vietnam.

Ms. Gross: That seems like such a remote thing to . . .

Mr. O'Brien: What an odd thing to be saying, you know, (*foreign language spoken*) trying to get the accents right and then learn the, you know, the grammatical structures of German after, you know, marching all day long through really horrible things. It was a way—a lot of us, you know, by pushing the war aside if even for a few moments.

Ms. Gross: Well, I guess it was also a way of like affirming that you had a life of the mind—that there was more besides your body in the war.

Mr. O'Brien: Yeah. I think that was a great part of it and a way of just touching on civility and civilization . . .

Ms. Gross: What else did you carry?

Mr. O'Brien: Oh, gee. Oh, I carried so much. I carried cans of orange juice that my father had sent me from Minnesota. These were as precious to me—he sent me 12 cans and they were heavy. And it wasn't the orange juice that I craved. It was the fact that these cans of orange juice had come from my dad from so, so, so far away. And I gave myself one month for each can. One can a month.

Ms. Gross: So you measured your whole tour of duty by those cans.

Mr. O'Brien: By those cans of orange juice.

Ms. Gross: Did you ever try to travel light?

Mr. O'Brien: Yeah. I mean eventually you have to. I think you discard things. You discard odd things as a soldier. You discard things like hand grenades and belts of ammunition, the things you think you'd keep, claymore mines. We were so burdened by

stuff that we were like giants lumbering through that countryside hauling along with us the whole, you know, all of the resources of the American war chest. (Gross, 2010)

Object Relations Theory

D. W. Winnicott's pioneering work around *transitional objects* (1953), which greatly contributed to object relations theory, provides a framework for understanding why service members might benefit psychologically from bringing meaningful personal items with them into combat as a means of solace during times of transition and physical separation from loved ones. The ability to use transitional objects for self-soothing and comfort during stressful times is developed in infancy. As will be discussed later in this section, many researchers and theorists maintain that transitional object use continues throughout the life cycle and helps stabilize the ego during times of stress.

According to object relations theory, human development is rooted within the context of relationships between child and parent; in large part, an adult's behaviors, thoughts, and emotions are influenced by how well the child was able to internalize objects. The theory has provided several fundamental concepts for understanding psychological development, including the basic human need for attachment; the importance of being able to be both alone and with others; and the idea that a child's inner world is shaped by internal representations of others (Flanagan, 2008, pp. 158-159). In object relations theory, *object* refers to the significant person that is the focus of the child's (or adult's) feelings or intentions; *object relations* refers not only to external relationships with others but also includes "a whole internal world of relations between self and other, and the ways in which others have become part of the self. This can be seen in people's fantasies, desires, and fears, which invariably include images or representations of other people" (Flanagan, 2008, p. 122).

In Winnicott's view, the way an infant experiences his or her early caregivers has a profound effect on how the infant relates to other people or situations as an adult. Winnicott (1960) focused on the importance of the mother's (or caregiver's) role in providing a safe "holding environment" during the infant's development. His concept of the "good-enough mother" describes how a caregiver's recognition of and response to the infant's biological, psychological, and social needs helps the infant experience "subjective omnipotence," or a sense of being the center of all-being. Without this illusion, the infant does not develop a sense of trust. If development progresses along a healthy course, the infant/child and caregiver will pass through a range of experiences that help the child develop a sense of self, of others, and of reality (awareness of "me" and "not me"); a concern for others; the capacity to self-regulate and tolerate frustration; and the ability to use transitional, or comfort, objects as a way to self-soothe in the absence of an important object (i.e., substituting a teddy bear for caregiver). In addition, if the infant receives enough love and protection he or she will be able to internalize the personal object (mother/other) and begin to develop a "true self." Without that early bond, the child can have difficulty maintaining a reliable sense of individual identity in adulthood, and can experience problems with separation and individuation.

Separation-Individuation Process

Margaret Mahler's theory of the separation-individuation process describes the phases that infants and toddlers must go through to experience themselves as being separate from their mother or primary caregiver (Mahler, Pine & Bergman, 1975). Mahler's concept of the separation-individuation process has four developmental subphases: *differentiation* (4 to 10 months of age, where the infant begins to separate himself from the representation of his mother/caregiver); *practicing* (10 to 16 months, where the infant begins to use his new-found

ability to crawl and walk to explore the world, as long as the child can be reassured that the mother is still there for support and protection); *rapprochement* (16 to 24 months, where the child is able to move away yet come back comfortably to home base). This subphase is characterized by what Mahler called "ambitendency" (the conflicting wish to be close to the caregiver and also autonomous), and by the child's conflicting fears of abandonment and engulfment. The final subphase of the separation-individuation process, called *on the road to object constancy* (24 to 36 months), is marked by the child's ability to internalize a constant inner image, or representation, of the mother or caregiver, and recognition that the caregiver and the child have separate identities.

The importance of the transitional object increases during the separation-individuation process as the infant begins to separate from the mother, using the object both to self-soothe and to serve as a reminder or representation of the lost object. As will be discussed later in this section, many psychological theorists and researchers maintain that the separation-individuation process, particularly the rapprochement subphase, continues throughout later stages of development (Blos, 1967; Colarusso, 2000; Downey, 1978; Mahler, Pine & Bergman, 1975; Myers, 1988; Quintana & Lapsley, 1990; Tolpin, 1971), as does the use of transitional objects (Applegate, 1984; Coppolillo, 1967; Downey, 1978; Kahne, 1967; Modell, 1988; Tabin, 1992; Tolpin, 1971).

Transitional Objects and Phenomena

Perhaps one of the best-known transitional objects is Linus's blue blanket from the Charles M. Schulz comic strip, *Peanuts*. Linus's thumb-sucking and intense attachment to his "security and happiness blanket" often led to ridicule by his peers, but he nonetheless refused to

give it up. Like many young children, Linus experienced a visceral reaction when his transitional object was missing or its fate was in jeopardy. According to an entry in Wikipedia:

> In the earlier strips, Linus's relationship to his blanket was one of intense emotional attachment to the point of manifesting physical symptoms if deprived of it even for a short while. He suffered weakness and dizziness, for example, when Lucy took it from him only long enough to have it laundered, spontaneously recovering when it was restored to him. . . . On another occasion, Lucy snatched his blanket away and buried it in an effort to break Linus of his habit. Linus literally dug up the neighborhood for days trying to find it—until Snoopy dug it up. Lucy won a first prize in a school science contest when she took Linus' blanket away and recorded his "withdrawal symptoms"—and as proof, she entered Linus and his blanket as an exhibit. ("Linus van Pelt," 2013, para. 4)

Whether or not Schulz intended the blanket to be a transitional object, one could argue that its soothing effect on Linus and his consternation at its loss fits with the traditional definition. Winnicott found that infants and young children would rely on a cherished item during times of separation and anxiety, stress or frustration. The object could be anything—a corner of a blanket, piece of wool, teddy bear, or even a word or tune. He believed that as a whole, these *transitional phenomena* are an important defense against anxiety, becoming "absolutely necessary at bed-time or at time of loneliness or when a depressed mood threatens" (Winnicott, 1953, para. 18). The mother or caregiver comes to understand the object's intrinsic worth, letting it "get dirty and even smelly, knowing that by washing it she introduces a break in continuity in the infant's experience, a break that may destroy the meaning and value of the object to the infant" (Winnicott, 1953, para 16). Over time the child's reliance on the object may

fade, but the need for a particular object or behavior pattern can reappear if the child is confronted with loss.

Transitional Objects Across the Lifespan

Various researchers and scholars maintain that the use of transitional objects or transitional possessions continues into adolescence, and are used during the second-individuation process much as they are in infancy and early childhood (Applegate, 1984; Blos, 1967; Downey, 1978; Myers, 1988; Tabin, 1992; Tolpin, 1971). Colarusso (2000) has described how they are used in varying ways in the third, fourth, and fifth individuations, which span young adulthood through late adulthood. According to Tabin (1992), patterns for dealing with feelings that began in toddlerhood continue throughout the life cycle, with transitional objects providing adults with a sense of control, an opportunity to re-affirm their sense of self, and validation that during periods of stress and transition the individual continues to be their own person. "Even as adults, people often 'feel like themselves again,' after moving into a new place of residence, only when they have particular favored possessions near them at last. There is always self-defining significance to the particular objects that give such relief" (Tabin, 1992, para. 17).

This concept was explored further in several small-scale studies that looked at the use of transitional objects in a variety of contexts. Though sample size and methodology limit the generalizability of some of the results, these studies shed light on how transitional object use can be beneficial. In a study of military dependents adjusting to college life away from home, De Mayo (1991) found that the use of transitional objects was “a normal aspect of coping with adjustments, crises and developmental change” (p. 88), and that it was particularly useful for this population, who considered their families as transitional objects during childhoods marked by frequent moves and environmental change.

Similarly, Gregorio (2005) examined the anxiety-reducing qualities of old-school "mixtapes" during life transitions for young adults. The study findings suggested that these thematic song compilations connect the listener to the emotional experience of previous life transitions, in a possible attempt by the listener "to establish a stable sense of self amidst times of turmoil. Participants often stated that they found a familiarity that was comforting when they listened to their mixtape" (Gregorio, 2005, p. 29). According to the author (citing Tabin, 1992; White, 1988), young adults in the study had the chance to gain control over and lower their anxiety by listening to music that served them well during previous life transitions. This was achieved through the process of *projective identification* (getting rid of unmanageable or unwanted feelings by assigning them to another person, or an inanimate object), or through *externalization* of problems, a narrative therapy technique that separates persons from problems (in this case, unwanted feelings) as a means of coping. "In this way, the participants could projectively identify with the mixtape, as if it were another person, and work through their anxiety by repeatedly listening to it" (Gregorio, 2005, p. 31).

Several studies looked at the relationship between transitional objects and the grieving process and found their use promoted healing, self-soothing, and connection. Schiffrin (2009) addressed the use of tattoos as transitional objects in her exploration of the function of memorial tattoos for bereaved individuals. She found that the majority of her participants regarded their tattoos as tools for connecting with the dead, and half of the participants described how the tattoos created gateways to talk about their grief experience. In addition, Schiffrin's participants expressed how their memorial tattoos served as a connection to others during their grief process and provided a symbolic representation of their loss.

An earlier study by Levine (2005) supports Schiffrin's conclusion that transitional objects promote healing and connection. The author examined the experience of child loss and parental grief, focusing on the parent's use of transitional objects following their child's death. Five themes emerged from Levine's 15 interviews with parents, who reported using memorabilia and artifacts associated with their children as a reminder of life memories; as a means of spiritual connection; for self-soothing and comfort in times of acute pain; to include their child in ongoing life events; and to remind them of the love and encouragement they received from others in relation to their child's illness and death. The following section examines research on the use of transitional objects in clinical settings.

Transitional Objects and Psychopathology

Numerous studies have addressed the use of transitional objects by adolescents, with a focus on individuals who were diagnosed with borderline personality disorder or borderline traits (Cardasis, Hochman & Silk, 1997; Erkolahti & Nyström, 2009; Hooley & Wilson-Murphy, 2012; Schmaling, DiClementi & Hammerly, 1994). However, relatively few studies have looked at transitional object use by adults, and even fewer have focused on non-clinical populations. Studies carried out in psychiatric or medical settings have examined the relationship between the use of transitional objects and the presence of borderline personality disorder; as a result, much of the research has focused on the behavior of possessing a transitional object rather than on the important past relationship that the object may or may not represent.

Nevertheless, a study by Cardasis et al. (1997) did conclude that the psychiatric inpatients in their sample who were diagnosed with borderline personality disorder may have brought a transitional object into the hospital to help remind them of home or to provide soothing during separation from home. The authors suggest that transitional object use occurs most among people

with borderline personality disorder or borderline traits because those individuals lack a sense of object constancy, which involves the ability to evoke the inner image of an important person in their absence. People diagnosed with borderline personality disorder share several distinct traits, including intense and unstable interpersonal relationships, extreme anger and mood reactivity, and fear of abandonment and aloneness (Allen, 2001). Some researchers, including Cardasis et al., theorize that the use of transitional objects helps soften the desperate feelings of abandonment and vulnerability in these individuals.

Superstitious Rituals and Beliefs

While the current study is focused on the use of *transitional objects*, which have a specific definition and role within psychodynamic theory, it is important to recognize that many people who use transitional objects are likely to call them by another name and ascribe different properties to their use. Because service members (and civilians) may label their objects "good luck charms" and engage in ritualistic behaviors, it might therefore be helpful to briefly examine the literature relating to superstitious beliefs and the use of good luck charms, to help put superstitious behaviors into the context of the present study's research question.

Researchers and academics, especially anthropologists and social psychologists, have long been interested in how rituals relieve stress and help individuals cope with challenges they face, particularly those where the outcome is uncertain. Malinowski (as cited in Burger & Lynn, 2005) was one of the first scholars to describe how individuals, in this case Pacific Islanders fishing in dangerous seas, engaged in magical, superstitious behaviors as a way of coping with stress from uncontrollable conditions. According to Womack (as cited in Schippers & Van Lange, 2006), people use repetitive, rigid behaviors because they believe they will have a positive effect, but there is no causal link between the behavior and the outcome of an event.

Looking at the association between thoughts and behaviors more closely, Irwin (2007) identified several themes that occur in the literature on folklore and superstition. *Positive and negative superstitions* are situational contexts that may bring an individual good or bad luck, such as having the last bite of an apple, breaking a mirror, or walking under a ladder. Also of relevance to this study, Irwin described *sorcerous superstitions*, which involve rituals that are expected to change the future in some way, such as through chanting, or carrying, wearing or displaying amulets or talismans. According to Irwin (2007), these rituals may be carried out for protection or to ensure good fortune or personal advantage.

A Look at Superstitions and Control

Researchers and scholars have addressed whether "positive" superstitions may serve different psychological functions than "negative" superstitions (Irwin, 2007; Schippers & Van Lange, 2006; Wiseman & Watt, 2004), with the thought that positive ritual beliefs may be psychologically adaptive rather than maladaptive. Similarly, researchers have examined the role that the *illusion of control* plays in superstitions and behavior (Langer, 1975; Langer & Roth, 1975; Schippers & Van Lange, 2006; Taylor & Brown, 1988). The idea here is that people tend to overestimate their ability to control events that they actually have no influence over. While this could be considered maladaptive in some circumstances, such as gambling, psychological theorists have stressed the importance of the individual's ability to feel like he or she has control over life events. Taylor & Brown (1988) maintain that these positive illusions are adaptive and promote psychological wellbeing.

Researchers have examined the psychological benefits of superstitious rituals in several contexts, most notably in sports. Schippers & Van Lange (2006) were interested in the tension-regulation function of superstitious rituals in professional athletics. The authors recruited 197 top

male and female Dutch sportspersons to examine what kind of ritual behaviors they engage in before games and whether there were individual differences that accounted for the need to carry out these rituals. The researchers found that within their sample, superstitious athletes were less self-confident and felt a higher level of psychological tension before a game than their less-superstitious counterparts. Relevant to the current study, their findings indicated that rituals can play a role in reducing psychological tension for athletes, and that ritual commitment is greater when the outcome or stakes are high and when uncertainty is high, circumstances that are prevalent in war zones.

Similarly, in a study of 77 major league baseball players from Japan and the United States, Burger & Lynn (2005) found that the majority of players in both countries reported engaging in specific behaviors before or during games, although they expressed little confidence that the behaviors actually affected outcomes. Nevertheless, the authors found that the more a ballplayer believed that luck affected what happened during the game the more he engaged in superstitious behavior. According to the authors, this finding is consistent with the *uncertainty hypothesis,* which maintains that the more a person attributes outcomes to chance or luck, the more likely it is that he or she will turn to superstition or a particular behavior. "In essence, the superstitious individual is trying to transform some of the uncontrollable forces into controllable forces and thereby increase the likelihood of obtaining the desired outcome" (Burger & Lynn, 2005, p. 71). Of particular relevance to the current study, the authors also suggest that these behaviors may serve another function, in that the players might find a comfort in performing the ritual.

Limitations

In the previously discussed studies in this section, researchers have shed light on how transitional objects are used across the lifespan, and whether their use is beneficial during times of stress or emotional pain. However, one limitation is that many of these studies focus solely on the psychopathology associated with the use of transitional objects. While important for the broader context of transitional object use, another limitation of some of the previous studies is that while they do focus on non-clinical populations, the sample sizes are small and not representational of the larger population, which lessens the generalizability of the results. The current study specifically looks at the use of transitional objects by adult military service members in a nonclinical setting. The final section briefly reexamines psychosocial issues that affect these men and women who are returning from a war zone.

PTSD and Coming Home from War

The current study explores how transitional objects are used in combat, and whether using objects helps in some way during and after deployment; by extension it also encompasses combat-related stress and readjustment issues, concerns that have touched countless veterans going back to Homer's *Iliad*, a story of a soldier's return from war.

Present for ages in civilians and warriors alike, posttraumatic stress is a debilitating anxiety disorder that results from exposure to combat, disaster or any other traumatic event that causes sufferers "to stay constantly aroused, as if emotionally and physically prepared to fight or flee *at all times*. This arousal, which was useful and maybe even vital at the time of the trauma, is now a source of distress" (Armstrong, Best & Domenici, 2006, p. 16). Posttraumatic stress is unique in that it is one of the few mental health struggles that develop in response to an external or environmental event, such as war. It wasn't until 1980 that the clinical diagnosis of PTSD was

included in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III), paving the way for greater assessment, treatment, research and understanding of the condition (DVA, 2012).

PTSD symptoms are grouped into four types: intrusive memories, avoidance, numbing, and increased anxiety or emotional arousal (hyperarousal). Individuals with posttraumatic stress may experience flashbacks, nightmares and severe anxiety, as well as uncontrollable thoughts about the event. They also may have feelings of hopelessness, shame, or despair; depression; rage; problems with drugs or alcohol; and difficulties with relationships or employment (DVA, 2012).

Not everyone who serves in combat will develop chronic symptoms that lead to a formal diagnosis of PTSD; many of those who experience an acute stress response from their exposure to combat will see their nightmares, irritability, and mood instability abate within months. However, it is inevitable that veterans will return home with changes in the way they see themselves, others, and the world.

According to Dr. Matthew Friedman of the VA National Center for PTSD, the process of reintegration is also one of the dangers of going to war. Friedman (2006) cautions that in addition to the exposure of traumatic events during deployment, the abrupt separation from one's military unit and reinsertion into the family environment can create vulnerability and a complicated and difficult transition for the veteran. As a buffer, military leaders and lawmakers are taking measures to ensure soldiers receive the help they need pre-deployment and in the field through resiliency training—support their counterparts in World War II or Vietnam did not receive. The DVA is also trying to reduce barriers to medical and mental-health care, and has established integrated care clinics at many of its medical centers for soldiers returning from

deployment. Current research on this issue is promising. Pietrzak, Johnson, Goldstein, Malley, Rivers, Morgan, and Southwick (2010) looked at correlations of social and environmental factors and PTSD and depressive symptoms among veterans of OEF and OIF. Their study found that resilience, unit support, and social support were found to buffer against PTSD and depressive symptoms. Relatedly, a central question of the current study is whether using transitional objects in combat can help defend in some way against the adverse effects of war by helping to maintain a positive connection to a loved one back home.

The research being presented was gathered using a mixed method research design that included an Internet survey to collect descriptive data about the use of transitional objects from a broad sample of veterans and active duty service members; and a focus group to gather more detailed, nuanced perspectives about the role that objects played for a group of combat veterans. The following chapter describes in further detail how the research was carried out.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

With continuing public attention on the adverse psychosocial effects of combat, anecdotal stories of U.S. troops using personal objects as "good luck charms," and indications that social support and positive attachments are helpful in mediating the effects of combat exposure, this study sought to explore new ground by examining transitional object use by war-zone veterans. A review of the literature found very little research on how using special possessions might impact service members' mental health and wellbeing. This study therefore aimed to expand the knowledge base about post-traumatic stress and resiliency factors associated with military combat by exploring how transitional objects are used during and after deployment. This information is important because it might offer new avenues for research and novel approaches for clinical practice with veterans and military couples. Specifically, the current study addressed the question: *Does the use of transitional objects help combat veterans with healing and reintegration?*

This mixed methods study was both exploratory and descriptive. The research design included two data collection points: an online survey to gather descriptive data about the use of transitional objects from a broad sample of veterans and active duty service members (N=66); and a focus group to gather more detailed, nuanced perspectives about the role that special possessions played for a group of combat veterans (N=6). The survey collected quantitative data through multiple-choice and Likert-scale questions, and qualitative data through comment boxes

and an open-ended closing question that allowed participants to describe in their own words their experiences with using objects. The researcher hoped that veterans who carried objects and those who did not would take part in the survey so comparisons could be made between the two groups regarding the use of objects and coping methods.

The rest of this chapter describes the research methodology from start to finish, broken down into the following sections: sampling and recruitment, ethics and safeguards, data collection, and data analysis.

Sample

The target sample for this study was active duty service members, National Guard and reserve members, and veterans from all branches of the military who have served in conflicts ranging from World War II to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. To be included in the survey, participants were screened on the basis of three questions. Eligibility criteria required that individuals were: (1) 18 years or older, (2) able to read and write in English, and (3) had served, or were currently serving, in any branch of the U.S. military in a direct combat or combat operations/support service role. Potential focus group members were screened on an additional question, (4) whether they believe they suffer, or have suffered, from a self-reported diagnosis of service-related acute or post-traumatic stress. Exclusion criteria included no deployments in support of a U.S. war, conflict, or peacekeeping mission.

This study relied on non-probability purposive sampling rather than random selection, which is more practical to implement but often is less desirable because it leads to a non-representative sample. However, snowball sampling made it feasible to recruit a large number of people for the online survey, since potential participants were asked to refer friends, family, and colleagues to the study. Since this was a pilot study, the aim was to reach as many potential

participants as possible. With respect to the focus group, purposive sampling was used to recruit veterans in Western Massachusetts who are affiliated with a nonprofit veterans education group. The researcher anticipated that the focus group interviews would generate a rich set of data related to the use of special possessions in combat, in part because of the participants' experience sharing their personal stories of war and homecoming with schools and the community.

The researcher hoped that using an online survey instrument with the potential to reach a national audience would help recruit a sample with diverse racial, ethnic, and sociocultural backgrounds. To further promote diversity, the survey was open to all participants, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion, and physical ability. Participants in both samples were asked to answer demographic questions that would allow for comparisons on such important variables as age, gender, race, education, military service history, and marital status (Appendix A).

Survey participation: Of the 121 individuals who started to take the survey, 52 were disqualified because they did not consent or did not meet the criteria of having served overseas in a direct combat or combat/support service role as a member of the U.S. Armed Forces. An additional three participants were removed from the study because they left all fields blank after consenting. Various participants skipped numerous questions throughout the survey, but they were left in the study because they did answer most of the questions. The desired sample size for the online survey was 50 or more participants; the final sample was 66 participants. More than half of the survey participants were between the ages of 18 and 44, and the majority identified as White males. Complete demographic information is reported in Chapter 4 (Findings).

Focus group participation: The focus group was comprised of six male veterans from Western Massachusetts who ranged in age from 30 to 89. Four subjects identified as White, one

as Latino/Hispanic, and one veteran preferred not to list his race or ethnicity. Eight veterans initially indicated they were interested in taking part in the focus group; however, one veteran had a scheduling conflict and another veteran was not able to attend on the day of the event. Thus, six veterans comprised the total sample. The desired sample size for the focus group was 8 to 10 participants.

Limitations and biases. It is important to consider potential sample/recruitment biases, study design weaknesses, and researcher biases that might affect the study results. For example, sampling biases inherent in this study include self-selection and accessibility. Since participants chose to take part in this study, respondents will not represent the entire target population. In addition, participants needed computer knowledge, and access to a computer and email; survey participants also needed to be able to navigate an online questionnaire. These sampling issues might have a bearing on who participated—and who did not.

There are also limitations with the survey instrument, which was designed by the researcher without a formal means of establishing whether it was reliable (consistent) and valid (accurate). However, the researcher attempted to be as careful and objective as possible in developing the questions. Before the survey was released, the researcher asked a retired service member with combat and administrative experience to review the questionnaire. This step helped ensure that the directions and questions were clear and made sense. Still, there is the possibility that questions were not understood, or that participants abandoned the survey due to its length. Participants also could have been uncomfortable with or disinterested in the questions once they began the survey, which would affect sample size. In addition, the anonymous nature of the online survey has its strengths and weaknesses. Some participants might have been more honest

and provided a wider variety of responses because of the anonymity, but this element made it impossible for the researcher to ask follow-up questions for additional information.

Lastly, it is important to consider the role of potential researcher bias with respect to how the study was designed and carried out, and how its findings were interpreted. The researcher's late father was a Vietnam veteran who had a long career in the U.S. Air Force, and she grew up on military bases in Europe and the United States. With that background, and the experience of working with combat veterans during a clinical internship, she is very familiar with military culture—factors that could have impacted how questions were asked and interpreted. In addition, the researcher acknowledges having a prior relationship with The Veterans Education Project, which helped recruit participants for the focus group. There is also the researcher's interest in the Tim O'Brien novel, "The Things They Carried," which inspired the current study. It is possible that any of these factors could have had a subtle or significant impact on the course of the study. However, it is hoped that acknowledging these potential biases has reduced the chance of them affecting the outcomes of the current study.

The process for recruitment was carried out as follows.

Recruitment: Online survey

The recruitment process for the online survey involved promoting the study via social media and networking sites (Facebook) and online community forums (craigslist.org, allmilitary.com, military.com, etc.); and sending emails to personal and professional contacts of the researcher. The Facebook and community forum advertisements, as well as the snowball sampling email, included a description of the research study and a link to the questionnaire, with a request to help with recruitment by forwarding the link to other people or posting it on their Facebook profiles (Appendix B).

Following the link brought potential participants to an online form with screening questions. Individuals who did not meet inclusion criteria were redirected to a screen that explained that they were ineligible to participate in the study and thanked them for their time. Participants who met study inclusion criteria were directed to a page with informed consent information, and were asked to agree with participation (Appendix C). From there, participants were directed to the survey instrument (Appendix D). At the end of the survey, participants were again asked to share the questionnaire link with other individuals who met the eligibility criteria and could potentially take part in the study.

Recruitment: Focus group

The sample population for the focus group was recruited from within the larger population of the Veterans Education Project (VEP). The nonprofit VEP (www.vetsed.org) is known for its work in advancing storytelling as a means of educating people about the personal costs of war; VEP has a pool of veterans of all ages who go into schools and public venues in Western Massachusetts to share their stories. The researcher had a prior relationship with VEP in that she volunteered with the organization for a community project in 2011-2012 that was undertaken as part of her master's program. VEP directors included information on both the online survey and the focus group in their regular correspondence with membership, alerting them to the research study and asking them to forward the information to other veterans who they thought would be interested in participating. An email announcement was sent to potential participants describing the study and asking them to consider participating in the focus group (Appendix E). Potential participants who contacted the researcher were asked four screening questions to determine if they met study inclusion criteria. When possible, informed consent

forms (Appendix F) were emailed to veterans who met inclusion criteria; forms were also available at the focus group for participants to review and sign before the event.

Ethics and Safeguards

This study was designed and undertaken with approval from the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee (Appendix G). Risks and benefits of participation were evaluated according to the ethical principles and guidelines for the protection of human subjects of research.

Risks of participation. This study posed a moderate risk to participants, who were all combat veterans. Because they were asked to recall their experiences in the military and their return home from the theater, there was a chance they might feel emotional distress or discomfort. All participants were given a list of professional mental health referrals with the informed consent. There were several built-in protective factors associated with the focus group, namely that veterans associated with VEP are practiced in talking about their combat experiences, and many veterans in general are comfortable talking about their military service with peers. In addition, this group was intended to provide a forum to talk about war-related phenomena, but was not a group with any clinical purpose or intent. Finally, focus group participants were assured that if the session became too stressful, they could take a break, end the interview, or withdraw from the study at any time.

Benefits of participation. There were no tangible rewards for the participants' time, but their involvement in the study could have generated non-monetary returns. For example, participants may have received personal benefit from expressing their opinions and sharing their knowledge and experience about the use of transitional objects during deployment and its impact on their return home. In addition, their contribution to this study could have been personally

validating; many veterans have found that sharing personal narratives can promote healing and public understanding (Wilson, Leary, Mitchell & Ritchie, 2009).

The voluntary nature of participation. Participation in the study was voluntary and participants could skip or refuse to answer any question. Due to the anonymous nature of the online questionnaire, it was not possible for participants to withdraw from the study once they submitted their survey, since it was impossible to identify the participant. Focus group members were informed that if they decided to withdraw and left the group before the end of the session, it wouldn't be possible to remove the data they already provided before they left. However, the researcher would destroy all materials related to the participant, including correspondence, signed consent forms, and self-report surveys.

Precautions taken to safeguard confidential and identifiable information.

Anonymity for survey participants and confidentiality of study participants were protected in the following ways.

Safeguards: Survey. Survey participants' anonymity was guaranteed by the SurveyMonkey software, which does not track or collect names, email addresses, IP addresses, or identifying information. Additionally, the website is firewalled, password-protected, and encrypted. Because SurveyMonkey automatically assigns a code number to each participant's set of responses, there was no way for the researcher to determine who completed surveys. Participants were advised during the informed consent process to not disclose identifying information in the open-ended questions. Neither the research advisor nor the research data analyst working on the current study were allowed to see any data until after the researcher reviewed all open-ended responses and removed names or place names that could potentially disclose the participant's identity.

Data was stored electronically and protected by password and encryption. All research materials will be stored securely for three years as required by Federal regulations. After that time, the data will be destroyed or will continue to be kept secured as long as the researcher needs them for research purposes. When the data are no longer needed, they will be destroyed.

Safeguards: Focus group. Confidentiality of the focus group participants was ensured in the following ways: when setting the ground rules, participants were encouraged to refrain from discussing information raised during the focus group outside of the session. The demographic questionnaires were assigned numbers for identification, and identifying information revealed during the interviews was not included in the transcribed narrative.

All research materials, including the data, self-report surveys, audio recordings, and analysis were stored electronically and protected by password and encryption; the informed consent will be kept in a secure location separate from other collected materials. All research material will be stored securely for three years as required by Federal regulations. After that time, the data will be destroyed or will continue to be kept secured as long as the researcher needs them for research purposes. When the data are no longer needed, they will be destroyed.

Data Collection

The researcher gathered quantitative and qualitative data in the following ways.

Online survey. Data collection using the SurveyMonkey instrument took place between February 12, 2013 and April 8, 2013, at which point the survey was closed. Participants who met the inclusion criteria and gave their consent to participate were directed to the full survey via the SurveyMonkey link. The questionnaire had four sections, and took approximately 20 minutes to complete. The first section asked about personal and military service history, information that could be used to compare participants across multiple variables. These demographics included:

gender, age, highest level of education, marital status, religious affiliation, race or ethnicity, branch of service while deployed, conflict or war they were deployed to support, method of recruitment, military status while deployed, military occupation, combat-related position, number of overseas combat deployments, number of total months deployed overseas, current military status, and whether they believed they suffer(ed) from acute or post-traumatic stress related to their deployment.

The next three sections contained multiple choice and Likert scale questions, and qualitative questions with an open-ended closing question, all related to the use of transitional objects in combat and what effect the object had on service members' mental health and wellbeing during deployment and upon returning home. In Section A, participants were asked if they carried an object of sentimental value or personal meaning with them during any of their deployments. If they responded affirmatively, participants were asked a series of questions about the object: What it was, how they got it, how long they have had it, how they viewed its purpose (good luck charm, reminder of home, religious / spiritual, reason to stay alive, other), and what precautions they took to keep the object safe during deployment. Section B explored the impact the object had on participants' behavior, mental health, and wellbeing during deployment, and how they perceived the object since returning home. These questions asked veterans and service members to assess how helpful the object was in times of stress; how often they turned to it for comfort; whether they became anxious when it wasn't with them; how likely they were to go back and get the object if they realized it wasn't with them; whether they gained a sense of control when they used it; whether it was helpful during the transition into combat and, later, in their transition home; whether the object helped them deal with sadness, homesickness, anxiety, fear, loneliness, or other feelings; whether they felt better or comforted

when they looked at or used the object; and whether they have positive, neutral, or negative emotions when they look at or use the object today.

All participants, including those who responded in Section A that they did not carry a special possession during deployment, were directed to Section C. This part contained 16 statements about coping methods, loosely based on the Coping Orientations to Problems Experienced (COPE) scale (Carver, Scheier & Weintraub, 1989); the scale's authors have made the instrument available to the public for use without permission and have given their permission to adapt the text as needed. Participants were asked to check boxes that described how they typically respond when experiencing a stressful event, falling into the broader categories of: self-distraction, active coping, denial, substance use, use of emotional support, use of instrumental support, behavioral disengagement, venting, positive reframing, planning, humor, acceptance, religion, and self-blame.

The section on coping methods was followed by an optional open-ended question that asked participants to describe in their own words why they did or did not use a transitional object during combat.

Focus group. The focus group was organized with support from the VEP. Potential participants were encouraged to contact the researcher by telephone or email to discuss their interest and to determine if they were eligible to participate in the study. Additional information regarding the nature of the research, how the collected data would be used, potential risks and benefits of participation, confidentiality safeguards, how long the interview would take to complete, and other important factors were explained. The researcher emailed the consent form and a list of professional mental health referrals to those who were eligible to participate, and

scheduled a mutually agreeable time, date and location for the focus group to take place. Interviews were conducted in a location that ensured privacy and confidentiality.

The researcher moderated the session, which audiotaped using a digital recorder. The session began with introductions, an overview of the study, ground rules for the participation, and a brief outline of the open-ended questions contained in the semi-structured interview guide (Appendix H). The nature of the research question lent itself to this qualitative approach, which is more likely to tap into the deeper meanings of particular human experiences and generate theoretically richer observations (Rubin & Babbie, 2013). Using a semi-structured interview format allowed the researcher to meet her interest in gaining rich and detailed information in the participants' own words. Questions centered on the transitional object, its use during deployment, and the affect the object had on participants' mental health and wellbeing during combat and upon returning home. Using open-ended questions with the opportunity for clarification and follow up is an approach that allowed participants to fully share their experiences in their own words. In addition, the collegial nature of the focus group created an environment that fostered open discussion and generated meaningful data that the researcher did not originally address.

Data Analysis

Online survey. All survey data was collected anonymously and electronically via SurveyMonkey.com and was analyzed with the assistance of a research data analyst with Smith College School for Social Work. After the survey was closed, the data was downloaded into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and sent to the consultant for statistical analysis. The consultant cleaned the data, created an SPSS file, attached frequencies for all variables, and provided descriptive statistics on ratio-level variables (i.e., number of overseas combat deployments). The

consultant also included responses to the open-ended questions. The results were sent to the researcher to review for errors. Analysis of the survey data was divided into three parts: descriptive statistics for both the demographic information and Likert scale questions, and thematic content analysis of the open-ended responses.

Data collected via the demographic questionnaires was used to create descriptive tables, charts or graphs. Some inferential statistics, such as correlation and differences in groups, were also used to further explain the needs of this population, but due to the small sample size, the use of inferential statistics was limited.

Focus group. The majority of the qualitative data for this study was in narrative form. The researcher transcribed the audio recordings of the interviews verbatim into a word processing program on the computer; she then reviewed the raw data to help determine an initial focus for analysis. The researcher used the "constant comparison" aspect of grounded theory methodology to fully analyze the data, and it is through this method that she made the most sense of the qualitative data collected. The researcher followed a standardized process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to code the data, determining a unit of analysis (such as words or passages of text), and looking for themes, ideas, or common categories among the responses. This allowed for a better understanding of how the participants made meaning of their personal experiences in combat, specifically, their use of transitional objects. The sample size (N=6) was not as broad as anticipated, but it nonetheless was a diverse group that offered an opportunity to draw inferences, characteristics, and meaning from the study data.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

This chapter contains the findings of two data collection efforts: a structured focus group with six combat veterans who were interviewed in Western Massachusetts about their use of transitional objects during and after deployment, and an online survey that gathered qualitative and quantitative data from veterans who deployed in support of conflicts ranging from World War II to Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), and Operation New Dawn (OND).

Participants were asked to describe the things they carried with them into combat, how they used the objects, and the effect the articles had on them during times of stress. The findings show that the majority of participants carried a special possession during combat and found it to be soothing or psychologically helpful. Service members who used an object of special meaning found it was more useful during their transition into combat than during their return home. For those participants who did not carry a transitional object during their deployment, the stated reasoning fell into two categories: a desire to keep home and work separate, or not having the need to bring something along for comfort. Many participants said their dog tags have come to have special meaning, and for others, objects they received while overseas—from caring strangers or other service members and foreign military—are significant transitional objects today.

The findings in this chapter are organized into four sections. The first section contains data from the online survey: demographic information about the participants, and responses to the multiple response and Likert questions related to their objects. The second section contains narrative responses to the open-ended survey question about the objects. The third section offers descriptive and inferential statistics used to more closely examine relationships between data points. The fourth section focuses on the narrative data from the interviews with the six combat veterans, covering similar territory to that of the online survey but giving participants the chance to more fully share their personal insights into their use of transitional objects.

Online Survey

Of the 121 respondents who started taking the online survey, 66 continued to the end. Some participants skipped questions throughout; in the demographic section, for example, the number of total responses for a given question ranged from 59 to 66. The following section summarizes the data on the participants' personal background and military service history.

Demographic Data

Age. More than half of the participants (60.7%, N=40) were between the ages of 18 and 44. Of the remaining subjects, 23 (34.8%) were between the ages of 45 and 74, and three (4.5%) were older than 75. The age distribution included two spikes between the ages of 25 and 34 (37.9%), and between 65 and 74 (27.3%).

Gender. Most of the participants in this study, 86.4%, identified as male (N=57), with 13.6% of the subjects identifying as female (N=9). This question included two additional options where participants could indicate, "prefer not to answer" or "other," with a box to record a comment; no one chose either response.

Race and ethnicity. The majority of participants, 74.2%, identified as being White (N=49). Seven subjects (10.6%) identified as White, non-Hispanic; four (6.1%) identified as Hispanic/Latino/Spanish; and two (3%) identified as Black or African American. The remaining service members and veterans (N=4) identified as either Asian, American Indian/Alaska native, multiracial, and "other," each making up 1.5% of the sample.

Religious affiliation. Cognizant of the fact that service members are known to wear religious medals on their dog tags (and acknowledging the proverb, "*There are no atheists in foxholes*"), participants were asked to identify their religious affiliation. Twenty-five respondents (38.5%) described themselves as Protestant Christian, followed by 20% of the sample identifying as Roman Catholic (N=13). Ten participants (15.4%) stated they had "no preference;" nine (13.8%) indicated they had "other" religious affiliations (e.g., Unitarian Universalist, atheist, agnostic, deist, secular humanist, pagan); six participants (9.2%) identified as either Evangelical Christian or "other" Christian. The remaining two service members (3.1%) described themselves as Buddhist.

Education. Participants were asked to indicate the highest level of education completed. The largest representative groups within this sample, 15 participants each, respectively, reported they completed some college or held a bachelor's degree (45.4%). Thirteen subjects had a master's degree (19.7%), while nine participants each, respectively, reported they had obtained an associate's degree, completed high school, or earned a GED (27.2%). Beyond that, four participants (6.1%) held doctoral degrees, and one veteran working toward a doctoral degree had completed everything but the dissertation.

Marital status. The majority of participants in this sample were married (N=49, 74.2%), followed by 16.7% who reported being single (N=11), and 7.6% who were divorced (N=5). One subject reported being in a domestic partnership.

Military Background

Participants were next asked to provide information about their military service. Again, not all subjects answered all 10 questions in this section; the number of total responses for a given question ranged from 59 to 63.

Branch of service and unit type. Recognizing that service members sometimes change branches during their military careers, participants were asked to indicate all branches of service they belonged to during their deployments. The majority of service members who took part in this survey, 43.9%, were Army soldiers (N=29), followed by 16 Marines (24.2%), 8 who served in the Air Force (12.1%), and 6 who served in the Navy (9.1%). No one indicated they had served with the Coast Guard, although it was one of the possible responses to this question. Participants were also asked if they had been part of reserve or National Guard components in addition to their active duty service. Of the sample, 9.1% indicated they had been part of the reserves (N=6), while 7.6% had served as a member of the National Guard (N=5).

War-zone deployment. The veterans who took part in this survey spanned several generations and combat eras. Two participants served during World War II (3%). An equal number of participants, 31.8% respectively, were deployed in support of the wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan (N=63). Four participants served during the Gulf War (6.1%). Veterans who deployed in support of the Libya, Panama, former Yugoslavia, and Kosovo conflicts made up 1.5% of the sample respectively, each represented by one service member. One additional

participant indicated that his or her deployment was related to drug smuggling interdictions, but did not specify the combat era.

Recruitment and rank. Service members were asked if they volunteered or were drafted into the military. An overwhelming majority of those who answered this question, 96.8%, said they volunteered (N=61), while the remaining 3.2% were drafted (N=2). Service members were also asked if they were commissioned officers or enlisted personnel. The majority of respondents, 79.4%, indicated they were enlisted (N=50), while 20.6% said they entered the service with a commission (N=13).

Military occupation. Service members were asked what job classification or occupational field they held while deployed. This open-ended question yielded a variety of answers within its 59 responses, including advisor, armor, aviator, air traffic control, civil affairs, clerk, infantry, field artillery, construction, engineering, logistics, mechanic/maintenance, medic/medical support, military intelligence, military police, quartermaster, radio operator/signal corps, special operations, and weapons/ordnance.

Combat-related position. Similarly, service members were asked to describe their combat-related role while deployed. The majority of respondents, 71.7%, reported having jobs that were directly involved with combat (N=43), while 28.3% reported non-combat duties, such as pay clerk, supply, emergency medical staff (N=17).

Number of times and number of months deployed. Service members were asked how many times and for how long they were deployed overseas with the military. The majority of respondents, 55.9%, reported being deployed once (N=33), followed by 22% reporting three deployments (N=13), 10.2% with two deployments (N=6), 8.5% with four deployments (N=5), and 3.4% of the responding service members reporting five deployments (N=2). The length of

those tours ranged from six months or less to more than three years. Of the service members who responded, 50.8% indicated they were overseas a total of 7 to 12 months (N=31), followed by 18% who were overseas 25 to 39 months (N=11). Of the remaining service members who responded, 14.8% indicated they served 6 months or less (N=9), 9.8% served 13 to 18 months (N=6), and 6.6% served 19 to 24 months (N=4).

Current status in the military. Service members were asked to describe their current military status. Nearly three-quarters of the respondents indicated they had been discharged from the military, with 53.2% saying they had separated (N=33) and 21% saying they were retired (N=13). Of the remaining respondents, 24.2% were still serving on active duty or as a member of the reserve or National Guard (N=15). One service member indicated he or she was continuing to fulfill their military obligation under Individual Ready Reserve (IRR) orders (1.6%).

Self-report on combat-related traumatic stress. Service members were asked to respond to the question: "In your opinion, do you believe you suffer(ed) from acute or post-traumatic stress related to your deployment?" Of those who answered, 41% indicated they agreed with this statement (N=25), 39.3% indicated they disagreed with the statement (N=24), and 19.7% said they were not sure (N=12).

The Use of Transitional Objects in Combat

Participants were next asked to provide information about their use of transitional objects while overseas. Subjects skipped some of the 20 questions in this section; the number of total responses for a given question ranged from 42 to 62.

Those who carried and those who did not. Service members were asked if they carried an object of sentimental value or personal meaning with them during deployment. Of the 62

respondents, 77.4% indicated they did carry an object (N=48) while 22.6% reported they did not (N=14). The participants who responded "no" were asked to skip to the final section.

The object and how it was obtained. Service members were asked in an open-ended question to describe the object they brought with them into combat. To analyze the data more clearly, the researcher grouped the 41 items described in the 36 responses into seven categories. The majority of respondents, 41.5%, indicated they brought a Bible or other religious item on their deployment (N=17). Twenty-two percent of the respondents brought photographs (N=9); 16.6% brought insignia, customized dog tags, or other military items (N=6); 12.2% brought handmade bracelets or pieces of jewelry (N=5); 7.3% brought a weapon (N=2); and one service member was issued a piece of clothing that became a transitional object (2.4%).

Service members were also asked how they obtained the object. Of the 44 responses, 29.5% indicated they received it from a parent/sibling/other immediate relative (N=13); 27.3% received it from a spouse or partner (N=12); 15.9% got it for themselves (N=7); 13.6% got it from a friend or military counterpart (N=6); 9.1% received it from a religious source, such as a priest, chaplain or their church (N=4); and 4.5% reported it was something that was issued to them by the military (N=2).

Length of time they had the object and frequency of use before deployment. Service members were asked how long they had the object. Of the 43 participants who answered, the greatest responses fell into the ranges of 2 to 4 years at 34.9% (N=15), and 11 years or more, at 32.6% (N=14). From there, 18.6% of the respondents indicated they had the object 5 to 7 years (N=8), 9.3% had it less than one year (N=4), and 4.7% had it 8 to 10 years (N=2). Service members were also asked if they had or used the object before they went overseas. The sample

contained a proportionate number of service members who carried it before deployment (45.5%, N=20) and those who did not (54.5%, N=24).

Reasons for using the object. Table 1 and Figure 1 (Appendices I and J) illustrate service members' thoughts on how likely they were to use their objects for the following purposes while deployed: as a good luck charm, memory or reminder of home, religious or spiritual reasons, or a reason to stay alive. The majority of service members who answered this question, 73.1% (N=30) reported that they always (N=24 or 58.5%) or often (N=6 or 14.6%) carried the object as a memory or reminder of home.

Keeping the object safe. Service members were asked to indicate how frequently they took precautions to keep the object safe while overseas. Of the 44 service members who responded, 63.6% said they always did things to keep the object safe (N=28); 20.5% said they "often" took precautions (N=9); 6.8% said they sometimes took precautions (N=3), while another 6.8% said they seldom did; and one service member said precautions were never taken (2.3%).

Service members were also asked to describe the actions they took to safeguard these special possessions. The researcher grouped the narrative responses into three categories. Of the 42 responses, the majority of participants, 73.8%, indicated they always had it with them (N=31); 14.3% kept it hidden and/or waterproofed (N=6); and 11.9% kept it back at their bunker or living quarters (N=5).

Responses to Questions Measuring the Object's Impact

The survey included one multiple response and 10 Likert scale questions designed to gauge service members' perceptions of how their object may have impacted their mental health and wellbeing during deployment and upon returning home. Eight of the questions were intended to measure how using the objects in combat affected the individual service member's

psyche and levels of stress while deployed. Three questions focused on the service member's perception of the object's role during life transitions, and their attitude toward the object today.

Stress relief. When asked to consider whether their objects made a difference during times of stress, more than half of the participants (69.8%) indicated that using an object was either extremely helpful (N=15, 34.9%) or very helpful (N=15, 34.9%) during combat. Of the remaining participants who responded, 25.6% found object use moderately beneficial (N=11), while 4.6% did not think it helped during stressful conditions (N=2).

Feel better. When asked to reflect on how their objects made them feel overall, a clear majority of service members (N=37, 86%) either strongly agreed (N=8, 18.6%) or agreed (N=29, 67.4%) with the statement, "You felt better when you looked at or used this object." Fourteen percent (N=6) were neutral on this question, and no one indicated they disagreed with the statement.

Comfort. Similarly, a majority of service members (N=35, 79.5%) either strongly agreed (N=11, 25%) or agreed (N=24, 54.5%) with the statement, "You found a familiarity that was comforting when you looked at or used this object." Of the remaining participants who responded, 20.5% were neutral (N=9); none disagreed with the statement.

Separation from the object. Service members' responses were split when they were asked to consider how they felt when they were separated from their object. More than one-third of the participants (37.2%) either strongly disagreed (N=4, 9.3%) or disagreed (N=12, 27.9%) with the statement, "You became anxious when the object wasn't with you." However, just over one-third of the respondents (34.9%) concurred with the statement; 11.6% strongly agreed (N=5) and 23.3% agreed (N=10). Twelve service members (27.9%) expressed a neutral opinion.

Relatedly, service members seemed to indicate that their object did have somewhat of a hold on them. When asked to consider the question, "If you realized the object wasn't with you, how likely were you to go back and get it?" more than half the respondents (58.1%) indicated it was extremely likely (N=13, 30.2%) or very likely (N=12, 27.9%) that they would go back to get it. Conversely, 37.2% of the respondents indicated they were not very likely (N=7, 16.3%) or not at all likely (N=2, 4.7%) to go back to get their object if they discovered it wasn't with them. Less than a quarter of the respondents (20.9%) said they were moderately like to go get it (N=9).

Frequency of use. More than half of the participants who carried an object indicated that they used it regularly. Service members were asked, "How often did you turn to this object for comfort?" Twenty-three participants (53.5%) indicated they turned to it often (N=20, 46.5%) or always (N=3, 7%) for comfort. Just over one-third of service members (N=15, 34.9%) said they sometimes used it for comfort, while 11.7% of the participants said they seldom (N=3, 7%) or never (N=2, 4.7%) used it for comfort.

Sense of control. Service members were divided over the statement, "You gained a sense of control when you turned to this object." More than one-third of the participants (37.2%) indicated they seldom or never felt a sense of control from their object (N=16). However, just over one-third of the respondents (34.9%) concurred with the statement; 11.6% said they always felt like they gained a sense of control (N=5) and 23.3% said they often felt this way (N=10). Twelve service members (27.9%) said they sometimes gained a sense of control from their object use.

Managing feelings. In a multiple choice question, service members were asked to identify difficult or challenging feelings they experienced while deployed and to consider whether the object helped them cope (Appendix J, Figure 2). Of the 44 service members who

answered this question, half indicated the object helped them deal with feelings of anxiety, fear and loneliness (N=22, 50%). Eighteen participants (40.9%) indicated the object helped them deal with homesickness, while 16 participants (36.4%) said it helped them cope with feelings of sadness. Four respondents (9.1%) answered "none of the above," while nine participants indicated the object helped them deal with "other" feelings. In their narrative responses, some participants connected their feelings to family members who were missing them and worried about their wellbeing, and their own feelings about soldiers who had died and were unable to return home safely. One participant said the object helped him cope with "doubts of doing the right thing. Doubts of faith."

Life transitions. Two Likert scale questions asked service members to consider what role the object played during life transitions, with results indicating the object was more useful to service members as they went into combat than it was during their coming home. The majority of respondents (N=28, 65.1%) either strongly agreed (N=3, 7%) or agreed (N=25, 58.1%) with the statement, "The object was helpful during your transition into combat." Ten participants (23.3%) were neutral on this question, while 11.7% either disagreed (N=3, 7%) or strongly disagreed (N=2, 4.7%) with the statement.

Results were more mixed with respect to the statement, "The object was helpful in your transition once home," with over a third of the respondents indicating it wasn't helpful and a comparable number giving a neutral response. Seventeen service members (38.6%) either strongly disagreed (N=3, 6.8%) or disagreed (N=14, 31.8%) with the statement, while 36.4% (N=16) were in the middle. Eleven participants (25%) either agreed (N=8, 18.2%) or strongly agreed (N=3, 6.8%) that it was helpful during their post-deployment.

The object today. Service members were asked to rate how they feel when they look at or use the object now. Just under half of the participants (N=21, 47.7%) indicated they have positive emotions with respect to their object today, while 18.2% said they have negative emotions (N=4) or neutral emotions (N=4). Fifteen service members (34.1%) indicated that they no longer have or use the object today.

Methods of coping. All participants, including those who indicated they did not carry a special possession during deployment, were directed to a multiple response questionnaire that contained 16 statements about coping methods, loosely based on the Coping Orientations to Problems Experienced (COPE) scale (Carver, Scheier & Weintraub, 1989). Participants were asked to check boxes that described how they typically respond when experiencing a stressful event, falling into the broader categories of: self-distraction, active coping, denial, substance use, use of emotional support, use of instrumental support, behavioral disengagement, venting, positive reframing, planning, humor, acceptance, religion, and self-blame. The majority of responses fell into two categories: "Focus on trying to do something about the situation," or "Focus on work or other activities to take your mind off things." The least popular response was, "Admit that you can't deal with things and give up." Results are shown in Table 2 (Appendix I), which also breaks out responses by those who carried an object (N=62) and those who did not (N=14).

Among the key differences between the two groups: participants who indicated they did not carry an object were less likely to say they used substances to make themselves feel better; to get upset and let out their emotions; to get upset but keep their emotions to themselves; or to draw on past experience if they had faced a similar situation before.

Narrative Responses to Question on Special Possessions

The final question on the survey was optional; it asked participants, "Please share anything else you would like the researcher to know about your use of special possessions/transitional objects, including (a) Why you did not use an object during deployment; or (b) issues this survey did not cover, or a point you would like to tell us more about, relating to your special possession and its use." Of the 66 participants in the sample, 40.9% (N=27) offered narrative responses to this question. After reading all of the comments, the researcher conducted an analysis of the written responses and grouped the data into categories. Several themes emerged and are described below.

Service members who did not carry a transitional object. Fourteen participants (22.6%) indicated at the start of the survey that they did not carry an object with sentimental value or personal meaning with them during their deployment. Within the 27 responses to the final open-ended question, 6 participants (22.2%) indicated that they did not carry an object while overseas. The reasons for not carrying an object fell into two categories: a desire to keep home and work separate (N=2), or not having the need or foresight to bring an object with them (N=4). "When the going gets tough, the tough get going," one participant wrote. "I had a wife and family to take care of." Said another participant, "It never occurred to me and would (does) seem foolish. I figured if I get hit, I get hit...luck of the draw. Keep my head down, don't volunteer, don't be stupid, that's all one can do." Another participant expressed an equally pragmatic approach:

> I had no time to think about a special object. I guess that all I wanted to do was my job and how to do it without getting injured. I was an Adviser to the Vietnamese Navy in the

Delta. I was there to assist them in their fight against enemy forces. To provide weapons, training and medical assistance where I could.

Comments from service members who carried transitional objects. Several themes emerged from the responses to this question, primarily focusing on the reasons why they carried objects, what they carried, and how carrying objects affected them. Responses fell into the following categories.

Reassurance. The majority of respondents (N=7, 33.3%) indicated that they carried an object because for them it offered a sense of hope, familiarity, and comfort. Said one participant:

> I believe that the use of an object was a sense of familiarity for me. When experiencing a stressful combat situation or when viewing the extremely violent results of something you did it brings you back to a neutral state. Most commonly I would run my hand over the item just to remind me that this current state of reality is only temporary and not the norm. I was cautious not to let my mind or the temperament of my guys to boil over into a tendency to classify the enemy as non-human. The item allowed me to do this.

For another participant, the object also provided a sense of grounding:

> For me the object gave a sense of hope and something to hold onto that could take your mind off everything going on around you. It didn't distract from the mission but no matter how bad something seemed it somehow made me feel as though everything would be all right.

Reminders of family and home. Many of the narratives recalled positive reactions from being able to physically touch or see an object that belonged to or reminded them of a family member or partner. As one participant stated, "I got great comfort by looking at my father's picture, knowing he would do the same as I was doing—making the same choices." Said

another, "Knowing my Aunt's father wore the Butter Bar in WWI and returned safely to the U.S. was comforting. I liked to rub the bar between my fingers because it was very smooth."

Good luck charm. Another common theme was bringing an object along for good fortune. Said one participant, "I think that when you feel lucky a couple of times people start to get superstitious and look for consistencies in what they have or did. For me it was a religious medallion a dying man gave me." Another participant's response endorses the notion that luck can be conferred along the way.

> We were walking back from a 48-hour patrol and the whole squad was beat; we had no water left and pretty much ran out of everything. We were 3K from the COP [command observation post] so we were optimistic. Ambushes occur at sunset, usually. I had pulled out my necklace, looked at it, and kissed it when right then we were ambushed. We were caught on the flank in a tactical column; all the rounds skipped around me and I wasn't hit—not just once—3 times. Nobody was killed or injured during that fight. I don't believe in a Higher Power but I do think that it was quite amazing that I survived today.

To make others feel better. Another common theme was that of agreeing to take an object, as a religious article or good luck charm, to allay the concerns of family members or friends. Said one veteran, "Mine was more for the people that gave it to me. It made them feel better knowing I had it. I personally could've cared less about a good luck charm. I found that more religious guys did that sort of thing." Another service member echoed this theme, but also shared how over time she began to disconnect and distance herself from the world back home.

> I kept the necklace on my vest more for my mom than myself; she asked that I keep it with me and thought it would help keep me safe. I did not really believe this but it made

me feel better knowing that she knew I had it with me every time I left the wire—although subconsciously it may have been for myself, too. As far as pictures go, I had a few postcards of home that were sent to me. I initially had them hanging up in the tent, but looking at them often made things more difficult so I took them down and kept them put away. Same thing with getting online and phone calls. I would often turn down the chance to get online and make phone calls because it was easier to stay completely disconnected from the rest of the world.

Inferential statistics

Due to the dearth of literature on the use of transitional objects during and after active duty, this was a pilot study designed with exploration in mind. Once the data was gathered, descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the 66 survey responses. Descriptive statistics, as we have seen in the findings above, allow the researcher to compare the characteristics of a sample or the relationships among variables (i.e. personal background, military history, use of the object) and then summarize that data for presentation. Inferential statistics can help rule out chance as a reasonable explanation for findings; they enable the researcher to make judgments or conclusions about the larger population from which the sample was drawn and assess whether a relationship seen in the data has statistical significance (Rubin & Babbie, 2013, pp. 332-333). Statistical tests were run to answer several research questions, noted below. However, because of the small sample and frequency of missing responses, it was impossible to conduct all of the analyses that were desired.

Primary Hypothesis

Service members who carried an object will have a lower incidence in self-report of PTSD. This theory was based on the thinking that having a comfort object to turn to during

stressful or difficult times would serve as a positive coping mechanism and potentially help reduce the symptoms of post-traumatic stress. A chi square test was performed and a significant relationship was found between self-report of PTSD and whether or not a service member carried an object while overseas, X^2 (2, N = 61) = 9.012, p =.011. Crosstabulation was used to look at the relationship between these variables; it was found that 84% of service members who said they had PTSD said they carried an object; 58.3% of those who said no to PTSD carried an object; and 100% of the group that said they were not sure whether they experienced PTSD symptoms carried an object.

Secondary Research Hypotheses and Questions

Female service members will carry objects at a proportionally higher rate than men. This hypothesis was based on the thinking that female service members might be more inclined than male service members to maintain an emotional connection with friends and family through the use of a special object. A crosstabulation of these two variables (gender and carrying an object) found that 100% of women carried an object compared to 73.6 % of men. A chi square analysis, to test if this difference was significant, could not be run due to the assumption that the minimum expected count should not be less than five for more than 20% of cells. In this case, this assumption was violated and the analysis could not be run. Relative to the issue of significance of difference, it is important to underscore the fact that there were far more than women than men in this study.

Do differences exist between service members' coping styles based on whether or not the individual carried an object? To assess whether these differences existed, crosstabs were run between the 16 coping methods questions and the "carry" independent variable. Results are reported in Table 2 (Appendix I). For 11 of the questions, chi square analyses to test if

differences were significant could not be run because more than 20% of the cells had expected values less than 5, which violates an assumption of chi square. Chi square tests were run on five variables, but no significant differences were found.

Relationship between how long a service member had an object and the extent to which he/she found it psychologically helpful in times of stress. The hypothesis for this test was that there would be a positive correlation between the two variables. Spearman rho correlations were run; no significant associations were found.

Relationship between how helpful an object was perceived going into combat and how helpful it was perceived during the transition home. The hypothesis for this test was that there would be a positive correlation between the object's usefulness pre- and post-deployment (i.e., the more helpful the object was during deployment, the more helpful it would be coming home). Spearman rho correlations were run; no significant associations were found.

Relationship between direct or non-direct combat roles and how objects are used. The hypothesis for this test was that service members in direct combat positions who used objects were more likely to use them as good luck charms or reasons to stay alive. T-tests were run to determine if there were differences between service members who were in direct-combat (frontline) positions and those with non-direct (combat support) positions responded to Likert scale questions related to how objects were used (e.g. good luck charm, memory/reminder of home, religious/spiritual, reason to stay alive). No significant differences were found.

Focus Group with Combat Veterans

This section contains the findings of a 90-minute focus group that brought together six combat veterans who used transitional objects during their deployments and who self-identified as having had some level of post-traumatic stress as a result of their war-zone experience.

The interviews took place during an afternoon in March 2013 at the office of the Veterans Education Project (VEP). Most of the participants were familiar with each other through their involvement with VEP, and had camaraderie from their respective combat experiences. As they discovered over the course of the interview, they also shared a common experience with respect to using transitional objects while deployed.

Participants were asked to describe their transitional object and explain its purpose during deployment. They also were asked to consider how using the object might have affected their mental state while overseas, and to assess any benefits and costs associated with its use in combat and since coming home. Participants were encouraged to expand on questions as the session progressed; as a result, some of the important themes presented in these findings were not among those anticipated by the researcher.

Presentation of the findings begins with a brief summary of the demographic data, followed by five sections that discuss the themes and sub-themes drawn from the data analysis, such as the role of the object or the emotional or psychological need it fulfilled. Photographs of several of the veterans' special possessions are found in Appendix K (Figures 3-6).

Demographic characteristics of the sample. The six participants in the focus group spanned generations and had fairly diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. All were all male, ranging in age from 30 to 89. Four subjects identified as White, one as Latino/Hispanic, and one veteran preferred not to list his race or ethnicity. Four of the participants are married, one is separated, and one is single. With respect to religious affiliation, three participants indicated they are Roman Catholic; one is Christian, and one is Episcopalian. Most of the participants (N=5) continued their academic careers after high school, with two earning master's degrees, two receiving bachelor's degrees, and one earning an associate's degree.

Military service history. Four of the focus group participants were veterans of the Army, with one each from the Navy and Marine Corps Reserve. One participant served during World War II, three served in the Vietnam War, one participated in the invasion of Panama and the Persian Gulf War, and one served during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Two of the participants were drafted, the rest volunteered to serve; all were enlisted personnel who had direct combat roles. Their deployments ranged from 7 months to 26 months; all have since left the military.

One of the criteria for participating in this study was self-identification as having had some level of post-traumatic stress as a result of a war-zone experience. Four of the focus group participants indicated they currently believe they suffer from acute or post-traumatic stress related to their deployments, while two indicated they do not.

The Veterans and Their Objects

All of the participants had more than one transitional object, which they brought themselves or were bestowed by others. These include religious medals, a bible, a brand of Dutch candy, a fallen high school buddy's paratrooper "jump wings," a lock of a wife's hair, favored weapons, and a pair of hair clippers. There was fishing tackle left by a North Vietnamese medic for the American medic whose unit was the next to use their abandoned firebase. There were articles stuffed inside care packages from schoolchildren and strangers back in the United States. There were intangibles, such as memories of home or music, which united soldiers of different races in underground bunkers in Vietnam. And at times participants made decisions to not carry anything at all because of the fear of what would happen if the object were lost.

What They Carried

Veteran One spent 13 months in Vietnam as a combat infantry medic. His transitional objects include his dog tags, still covered today with the rubberized plastic that kept them from

banging together and signaling the enemy. He has a St. Christopher medal given to him by another soldier he met on his way to Vietnam. His most cherished possession is the Army Airborne Parachutist Badge, aka "jump wings," given to him by his best friend from high school.

> He went in first, and before he went over, it was in March of '67, and we came home from some intense drinking, and he was going to Vietnam the next day. It was raining like hell out. And we never really got emotional or anything; in those days men didn't do that with each other, but before he left we were both like crying and he said, "You know what, I've got to give you something. Here." And he takes my hand and he squashes them, and he says, "Those are my blood wings."
>
> The tradition for a paratrooper is to either give it to your girlfriend, or fiancé, or wife, or—he didn't have any of those so I was his best friend. So he says, "You hold onto those and I'll come home." And he was killed with 53 days left.

Veteran One wore the wings around his neck or stuffed deep in his pocket during missions. "I had it with me all year," he said. "I was hoping I wouldn't lose it."

Veteran Two served 26 months as an engineer aboard a World War II destroyer escort in the North Atlantic and Mediterranean seas, protecting convoys of ships carrying military supplies, and seeking out German submarines, or U-boats. He recalls having three transitional objects: a religious medal given to him by a friend who was worried about him going off to war; Dutch candies given to him by an aunt, which he carries with him to this day for good luck; and a sweater knitted by a troop-supporter that was issued to him by the Navy.

> When I was getting ready to ship out, two different things happened. An aunt of mine . . . gave me some of these Kopiko (*Koffiebonbon*), little chocolate coffee-candies from the Netherlands. As long as I have these with me I'm going to be safe. . . . I figured it can't

hurt, I certainly don't want to hurt her feelings, so I took them, and for some reason or other I've been hanging on. [*laughter from group*] The other thing, which I don't have with me: I had become friends with a young nurse in Boston. . . . She presented me with a St. Christopher's medal. I said, come on. She said, "Look, I know you don't believe in that, I know that. I do." She insisted. OK, so she's weeping already. "Promise me that you're going to wear it." So I did. I promised and I did it. And after the war, I came back, gave it to my son and he had it for quite a few years. And then he lost it and he was really, really unhappy about it, reporting that to me, that it had made it through the war and everything. And I explained to him that that's the whole purpose of St. Christopher's medal; that someone, some needy traveler is going to find that and it's going to bring them a safe voyage someplace, so don't worry about it.

Veteran Three served two tours of duty as an Army paratrooper during the invasion of Panama and the first Gulf War. He had two transitional objects: a bible and St. Jude medal, worn by many for guidance during difficult or desperate times. Over the years, as he will describe later in this section, his dog tags became his most salient comfort object.

My father was in the Korean War as a paratrooper and he had a bible. Now we weren't religious in my family . . . but the old man gave me his little pocket bible that the Army passes out. Remember you used to get that little bible, right? And I remember I was real happy to have that, and I'm in jump school and for whatever reason somebody steals it out of my wall locker. I was devastated at the loss of that so I've kind of refused to become attached to things. . . . But when I went back in (reenlisted) I don't know why but I got a St. Jude medal, the patron saint of lost causes [*laughter*] and for some reason that

> appealed to me. And I put that on my dog tags. Of course I'm not Catholic, but it's the point that it's the patron saint of lost causes; I fit right into that category, pal.

Veteran Four served a year in Vietnam as a radio operator. Today, he considers his dog tags to be a transitional object from his time in combat; during deployment he didn't want to carry anything personal or meaningful that he could lose.

> To me, the situation I was in was so intense that good luck charms for me was a distraction—because I'm gonna want to know where it's at. I don't want to lose it. Did I put it under my pillow? Did I put it in my bag? Where is it? You know what I mean? And I knew that with my character, I would be obsessed with wanting that thing to be near me that I've got so much emotional investment in. And that was just a little too much of a price for me to pay. Because up to now, when I lose something, because I have PTSD, it really is a distraction, it makes me mad, it sends me into another [. . .] So, when I get attached to something, and I want it around me and it's gonna bring me good luck, it always ends up that I lose it. And then when I lose it, I'm distraught, and I'm mad and I'm upset. Why did I lose it? Who took it? Let me follow my steps. Where was I the last time that I had that? And up to now, I still go through that.

So instead, Veteran Four's transitional objects were intangible. Foremost, there was music from the United States, which he describes later in this section, and there were memories of family and friends, places and things. "What I think I carried is home," he said. "That's basically what I carried." He thought of the things he was grateful for, characteristics about himself that he would change, the girls he would finally talk to if given the chance.

> Because sometimes, for me the lucky charm thing is not just *protecting* you, it's *giving* you something, some new character, some new power. That's how I looked at it. Being in

Vietnam gave me a sense of: You know what, if I make it through this, there's no way I should be scared of anything back here.

Veteran Five went to Iraq with his reserve unit, deactivating mines as a combat engineer. His transitional objects included rap music and passport-size photos of his mom and great-grandmother, as well as his trusty Ka-bar, a traditional Marine Corps knife. Each item served a slightly different purpose, but all reduced his anxiety and increased his sense of security. As he describes here, the clippers he brought along to cut hair became significant for the milieu they helped create. He would see about 20 customers a day, shooting the breeze, asking about their day, creating the "High and Tight" buzz cuts that service members required.

But in my bunker, I was an engineer, so I also built stuff. So I made a little barber chair, made it like a barbershop for the guys to come in and get their hair cut. That was the best thing I ever did for my platoon, and for myself, because that time of week was just relax and feel like you're at home. I'd put on music, Biggie, some guys would come in with alcohol that they had gotten in the mail, and they would share it with everybody. I'd just cut hair, and it made everything seem OK for that half hour that we were in my bunker cutting hair.

Veteran Six was teaching school when he was drafted into the Army. He trained as a Special Forces medic before going to Vietnam, leaving an expectant wife and young son behind. He carried three transitional objects during combat, all tied to home.

So I was really family-oriented. One of the things that I brought that I'd forgotten about but my wife reminded me: what they gave us in the 173rd was these wallets. And these wallets had pouches in them, and they had these sealed locks on them, so they were completely waterproof. So my wife gave me a lock of her hair, so I carried that with me

all the time. That was very meaningful. And not as a good luck charm—I just felt close to her.

And then when she was having our second child, my wife is a seamstress, and she was sewing something for our baby and so she sewed this; she sent me this little patch. And in the infantry you had that band around your helmet and you'd wrap all kinds of stuff, you'd stick all kinds of stuff, in there. And I had this wrapped around my helmet. But it wasn't a good luck charm but it was just a matter of feeling close. So those were the things.

This veteran recalled that he and his wife wore two halves of a locket that had been given to them by a military couple. "And then when I came back the idea was that you gave it to somebody else; so you gave it to another married couple. . . . So there were different kinds of things, but they were very family-centered, wife-centered."

Reasons for Using the Object

Interviewees were asked to think about the object's purpose during deployment—why and how it was used. Uniformly, all six participants said their objects provided some form of comfort or reassurance; one subject went further to say he also carried objects to make others feel better. Two subjects regarded their objects as good luck charms. Three subjects carried an object as a function of tradition, in that it was something that had been passed among service members. One participant said the items he carried made him feel connected to his wife, so important to him given the difficulty of communicating with front during the Vietnam War.

Comfort and reassurance. The most common theme among participants was that their objects conferred a sense of hope, familiarity, and comfort. Though not used for religious

purposes, the medallions that four of the veterans carried imparted feelings of safety and comfort. This was the case for Veteran Two, as he describes his St. Jude medal.

> And I remember having that the whole time, and I never—it was more of a comfort object rather than a ritualistic anything. Of course you always have your dog tags on, so I never worried about it. Every morning I'd touch it to see that it's there, but I never touched it like before going out on a mission or anything like that. My comfort was in knowing that it was on my dog tags.

Veteran Five said his special objects were the extra military equipment he brought along, which reduced his anxiety. "It wasn't like a good luck charm," he said. "I feel it was more of like things I just needed to have. . . . While I was there, they just made me really secure. Felt like: all right, nobody can mess with me because I have my flashlight and my Ka-bar."

At least one participant found himself carrying an object to make others feel better. Veteran Two has described wearing his St. Christopher medal at the insistence of a friend, and similarly bringing along his aunt's Kopiko candies to ease her worries about his safety.

Good luck charms. That participant's Dutch candies and medal also filled the role of good luck charm. "You know, I don't know if it was the wrapper or the candy. I guess I could've just saved one wrapper and that would have been it. Everyone on my ship was lucky. We all – no numbers came up. We all survived under pretty intense conditions, and everybody probably had their own lucky rabbit's foot. This was mine, and that medal."

Veteran Three, who wore his St. Jude medal for comfort, said it was hard to ignore the "lucky charm" atmosphere that pervaded his unit. He recalls a tense flight out of Fort Bragg, N.C., on the way to Panama, after a freak ice storm delayed takeoff.

> I'm sitting in the aircraft and we're about an hour from jumping, and the guy next to me pulls out a rabbit's foot, the other guy pulls out a four leaf clover, and the other guy pulls out a family photo, and I'm thinking what the F is wrong with you guys? For personally speaking I thought it was foolish, especially the rabbit's foot guy. I was like, what is wrong with you guys?

Traditions. Four participants said some of the objects they carried and used for comfort or connection were meant to be passed along to others. Veteran Six has described the locket he and his wife shared during his deployment, received from and then passed on to another military couple, which continues to hold great significance for him. Similarly, Veteran One has described how another solider gave him a St. Christopher medal on the way to Vietnam.

> A guy said, "You need to have something to go along with," so he gave me this. I took it through, and I forgot to give it to somebody when I left. That was kind of the tradition, St. Christopher, the traveling saint, or whatever he is.

Veteran Five has since passed his Ka-bar on to other Marines; at the time of the interview a friend serving in Afghanistan was using it. Veteran Two gave his St. Christopher medal to his son, and continues the Kopiko tradition to this day. "Now it's been forever. My kids, when they go away, they know that someplace in one of their pockets or a suitcase they're going to find some of these little candies, right here [*takes out of pocket*]. And it's just that simple."

The Comfort of Strangers

Another common theme was the caring of strangers—half of the participants have enduring memories of the ways in which adults, schoolchildren, and at times "the enemy" reached out to them overseas.

Veteran Six acquired a special object during his tour of duty in Vietnam that holds deep personal meaning for him today.

> We talk about transitional objects here, and there's just one little story that I'd like to share that was a little bit different. We had a firebase that we used to sort of trade. It was right in a valley and the Americans would occupy it and then we would leave it and then the North Vietnamese would occupy it. And the last time when I left, the medic pulled me aside and said, "Now when you pull out of here make sure you leave something in the medic hooch for the medic"—for the North Vietnamese medic. So that was a tradition that I don't know how long had been going on, but the thing is we didn't destroy that firebase. For some reason we just abandoned it and they would come in they would take it over and the medics would leave. . . . I left penicillin for him. And the guy that I came in after left me some fishing line and little bobbers. Because there was a big river that went down below this firebase . . . I love fish, so it was really quite meaningful to have that.

Veteran Three remember the support from the home front during the first Gulf War: the care packages and "any serviceman" letters he and his fellow Marines received, as well as the uplifting notes factory workers sent inside cases of MRE (Meal, Ready-to-Eat) field rations. "You looked forward to a letter from a stranger—I did—more than I did from my mother. It was something that was comforting, the fact that the country was behind us."

Veteran Two, who spent just over two years at sea, tells the story of a navy blue sweater, issued to him out of survivor's gear, which became one of his most cherished possessions from the war.

On it, it had a little label that said, "Made for You By Gladys Schultz of Glendale, CA." OK? I was very touched by this, to hear that people back in the real world were concerned and doing it [for us]. And clearly whoever she was, she gave it to the Navy to give to someone who needed it. She didn't have a clue who was going to get it. And I didn't have a clue how to find out who this person was. But I kept it. I brought it home and I wore it and wore it and wore it—until my wife said, OK, enough! [*laughter from the group*] She understood what it was but that was enough.

Veteran Five, the most recent participant to return from combat, agreed that letters and packages from strangers were motivating and helped shorten the distance between Iraq and home.

Yeah, we would get letters from schools, like little kids. Some schools would send us leaves, like maple leaves, dirt. In one package they sent us grass.

Veteran Three: The good kind, or? [*laughter from the group*]

Veteran Five: No, cut grass in a Ziploc bag. And they're like: oh this is for you so you can remember what it smells like.

But one of the stories I tell all the time is the story of tape. Like how when you would open up a care package, and like if you smell the tape, it smells good, right? Like masking tape, right. So one day I was telling the story at one of the schools and I was like: hey, do you know what America smells like? And they're like, no. I was like: it smells like tape. [*laughter*] And they were like, what? And I was like, yeah, when you open the care packages the first thing you smell is the tape.

Transitional Space and Creating Home Away from Home

Veteran Five has described how setting up a mock barbershop in his bunker helped create an atmosphere of being "home," allowing him and fellow Marines to relax and socialize in a transitional space that was apart from the war in Iraq. Veteran Four described a similar experience from his time in Vietnam, where music filled several roles: it instantly brought him back to the life and people he missed in New York; being somewhat reserved, music was a magnet that helped him open up and be social. "Because you didn't hear anything American outside of a little English, so it meant a lot," he said. "Music was a big draw, a big coming together."

> Yeah, music was . . . that's bringing home. And it just happened to be with guys. When you see the picture "Platoon" and the guys in the bunker, that's exactly it. We were in a bunker and I mean guys dancing with guys, because we were dancing to Motown music, black and white. We were just happy to be in an area where we didn't have to worry about the shelling; well, we still did—but we were in a protected bunker—and that music was a big, big part of release.

The Objects Today

As participants described their special possessions during the interview, it became clear that some objects had been lost and some were kept until they became too worn or broken—like Veteran Two's knit sweater, and an old knife that Veteran Four received from a Vietnamese villager as a thank-you for food. Other cherished items never made it home, like Veteran Three's family bible and the "Any Marine" letters he found so uplifting, which were saved along with "anything that showed support from back home," but lost when his duffle bag was stolen on the trip home. Four of the six participants were in strong agreement that their dog tags and other

military insignia became transitional objects while overseas and continue to fill that role today. But as one participant recalled, there can be times when strong negative emotions connected to former feelings of pride and self-worth conflict with the positive emotions that were associated with the object.

> To this day my dog tags are still a great comfort. I used wear them at first, but I've got this substance abuse and PTSD, and I was very disappointed with myself, knowing in my heart I'm a soldier . . . and I disgusted myself with the substance abuse, you know. And I used to wear my dog tags all the time when I got out, because it was comforting, but I ended up taking them off because I hated myself over what I had become through substance use and the PTSD. But I never threw them away. They are still on my bureau, in visible sight; I see them almost every day. As long as I see them it makes me feel comforted.

Veteran Six reported having positive memories associated both with the objects he brought with him to Vietnam and the ones he brought home. After he agreed to take part in the current study, he and his wife brought out the old Airborne wallet. "It was happy, fond memories. Good memories," he said. There is one other collection of items that Veteran Six believes could be transitional objects: the daily letters his wife sent to him in Vietnam. The couple shared some of the letters with their two adult children during the holidays last year, providing a window into what life was like in the siblings' early years, and reconnecting the couple to memories and feelings they shared during the year they were apart.

Summary

This chapter presents and summarizes the findings of two data collection efforts: a structured focus group with combat veterans (N=6) who were interviewed about their use of

transitional objects during and after active duty, and an online survey that gathered qualitative and quantitative data from veterans (N=66) who deployed in support of conflicts ranging from World War II to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Veterans described their experiences using transitional objects during and after active duty, and the effect the articles had on them during times of stress. The findings show that the majority of participants carried a special possession during combat and found it to be soothing or psychologically helpful. Many participants said their dog tags have come to have special meaning, and for others, objects they received while deployed hold special meaning for them today.

The following chapter will discuss these findings and their relevance to the previously reviewed literature. In addition, the chapter will review implications of the study data, highlight the relationship to clinical social work practice, and identify possible areas of future research.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to explore how transitional objects are used during and after combat, and whether their use in some way promotes resilience, reduces the effects of combat-related stress, and helps service members with "coming home" from war. The research explored possible ties between objects with emotional significance that were carried during deployment and the effect the items had on service members' mental health and wellbeing. In addition, veterans who took part in the online survey were asked to complete a multiple-response questionnaire that explored how they typically respond when experiencing a stressful event.

Previous research has shed light on how children, adolescents, and adults use special possessions to temper feelings of anxiety, aloneness, stress, and emotional pain. However, the majority of these studies have focused on the psychopathology associated with the use of special objects. This pilot study took a different path. It was among the first to specifically explore whether service men and women use transitional objects in combat, and whether using these special items buffers the adverse effects of war by helping troops to maintain a positive connection to a loved one back home. This chapter reviews the main findings of the study in the following order: 1) key findings; 2) implications for clinical practice; and 3) directions for future research.

Key Findings

Overall, many of the study's key findings were common both to veterans who took part in the online survey and those who took part in the focus group. The results indicate that the majority of participants did carry a special possession during combat and found it to be soothing or psychologically helpful. Service members who used an object of special meaning said they found it was more useful during their transition into combat than during their return home. For participants who did not carry a transitional object during their deployment, the stated reasoning fell into two categories: a desire to keep home and work separate, or not having the need to bring something along for comfort. Most of the survey participants said they have positive feelings when they think about their object today, but a full one-third indicated that the object is no longer important to them.

Use of the object. The quantitative results of this study suggest that for the veterans and service men and women who were surveyed: (a) nearly three-quarters of the respondents brought objects with emotional significance along on deployment; (b) the majority of items were religious in nature given to them by a relative, or were photographs of family members; (c) objects most often were carried as a memory or reminder of home, and least often for spiritual or religious reasons; and (d) many veterans said they felt it was important to keep the object with them at all times.

Impact of the object. Participants were asked to consider how the object affected their psyche during deployment and upon returning home. Survey respondents indicated that: (a) using the object made a difference during times of stress; (b) they felt better when they looked at or used the object; (c) they were comforted when they looked at or used the object; and (d) they did not feel anxious when the object wasn't with them.

Managing feelings. Survey participants were also asked to consider whether the object helped them manage their feelings or emotions while deployed. Their responses indicated that the objects helped them deal primarily with feelings of anxiety, fear and loneliness, followed by homesickness and sadness.

In the survey's final open-ended question, and during the focus group interviews, veterans had the opportunity to share their thoughts on whether or not having a special possession with them during deployment provided any psychological benefit. The main themes that emerged from service members' responses indicated that this was the case, and that the objects provided the following: 1) a sense of reassurance or comfort; 2) a source of good luck; 3) a connection to family; 4) a sense tradition; 5) a way to make others feel better.

The object today. It was also interesting to note that 47% of the sample that took part in the survey said they have positive emotions today when they look at or think about their object, a sentiment that was shared by all of the focus group participants. The remaining responses to this question indicated there were neutral or negative feelings associated with the object (18.2%); while 34.1% said they no longer have or use the object today. Some veterans described losing objects over time, which is expected, but this finding raises the question of whether some veterans put objects aside when they are no longer needed to help manage negative emotions, or when they returned home and were reunited with the person with whom the object helped them connect. Future research could explore this question more deeply.

Findings and literature

Both the survey and focus group generated interesting results that begin to expand the understanding of the use of transitional objects in combat. The qualitative and quantitative responses showed that service members do bring cherished objects with them into combat, that

they tend to keep the objects with them, and that having the objects close by is at times more important to them than the material nature of the object itself.

The study allowed veterans to reflect more fully on how using their special possessions did or did not impact their mental health and wellbeing during deployment. The findings were in accordance with the theories of psychological development put forth by Winnicott, Mahler, Pine & Bergman, and the researchers and scholars who followed. The main themes that emerged from service members' responses supported the literature that suggest transitional object use helps mediate feelings of anxiety and emotional turmoil, and facilitates coping with adjustments and crises (De Mayo, 1991; Gregorio, 2005; Levine, 2005; Schiffrin, 2009). However, it should be noted that relying on an anonymous survey such as the one used in this study makes it impossible to know the participants' psychosocial and developmental backgrounds, and therefore it is not possible to make informed inferences or offer deeper explanations about their responses.

The veterans' comments relating to their reliance on objects as good luck charms were somewhat consistent with the literature that suggested ritual and superstitious behaviors give an individual the ability to feel like he or she has control over life events (Burger & Lynn, 2005; Irwin, 2007; Schippers & Van Lange, 2006; Wallrich, 1960; Wiseman & Watt, 2004), and that positive illusions are adaptive and promote psychological wellbeing (Langer, 1975; Langer & Roth, 1975; Schippers & Van Lange, 2006; Taylor & Brown, 1988). Participants were divided when asked if using the item gave them a sense of control. This finding is interesting in light of some of the narrative responses, which indicated that veterans did feel a measure of control by having the object with them. In addition, it is generally consistent with answers given on the coping methods questionnaire (Table 2, Appendix I). The most-cited coping strategies fell into two categories that indicate a propensity toward motivation and control: "Focus on trying to do

something about the situation," and "Focus on work or other activities to take your mind off things." Perhaps not a surprising revelation from a military population, the least popular response was, "Admit that you can't deal with things and give up."

Limitations of the Study

This study had several limitations that have a bearing on how the findings can be interpreted. For example, there was a relatively small sample size for both the online survey (N=66) and the focus group (N=6), which may contribute to sampling bias. Within both samples, the majority of participants were White males. This could be attributed to sampling bias, but it might also reflect the fact that until recently women have had a limited role in combat. While some commanders bent the rules to allow women to bear arms and support combat units in Iraq and Afghanistan, military leaders are only now edging closer to opening more combat roles to women. By 2016, women could be permitted to train for most combat roles, including infantry and artillery positions (Whitlock, 2013).

Another limitation is that all subjects were recruited using non-probability, purposive sampling, a methodology that was based on availability and feasibility rather than a desire to have a sample that was representative of the entire U.S. veteran population. As a result, the ability to generalize information about this population is weakened. However, in the case of a pilot study such as the current project, a non-probability sample is useful because it allows the researcher to more easily recruit a sample to obtain basic data and look for trends. It is hoped that in the future, researchers will be able to replicate, validate, and expand on this study with a larger, more representative sample.

Similarly, while the study yielded rich descriptive statistics and narrative data, the Internet survey's small sample size significantly hindered the researcher's ability to use

inferential statistics to make judgments or conclusions about the larger population from which the sample was drawn and to assess whether a relationship seen in the data has statistical significance. As one example, the researcher hoped to highlight differences between service members' coping styles based on whether or not the individual carried an object. Insufficient data from the coping questionnaire at the end of the study made it difficult to make these comparisons.

Implications for Clinical Social Work Practice and Future Research

By its nature as a pilot study, the research presented here produces as many questions as answers. While there are limits to how much the findings can be generalized, the results offer exiting possibilities and directions for future research on this topic and for clinical practice with veterans and military couples. More research is needed, but the results of the current study seem to indicate that introducing the concept of transitional objects—or special possessions—can be a useful tool when working with this population.

Beginning to explore how service members use special possessions to manage feelings and emotions, or to stay connected to cherished people and places they left behind, opens a window into the subjective experience of the war-zone veteran. What service members bring with them on deployment, the meanings they ascribe to the objects they carry, and the effect the objects have on their hearts and minds, are all questions worth asking. Raising the topic with clients in therapy would be a novel approach to help them process the thoughts and feelings they have related to their military service. This in turn might generate deeper reflection and conversation that leads to meaning making, recovery, and healing. Similarly, therapists could use the concept of transitional objects or *linking objects* to help clients process unresolved grief and loss that result from their combat experiences. Volkan posits that adult mourners use linking

objects (physical objects that once belonged to the person who died) to maintain a connection to the deceased (Berzoff & Silverman, 2004; Levine, 2005). While Volkan described linking objects as pathological, others see their value in helping to build psychic structure within the mourner. Therapists might use objects in this way or perhaps help the client frame the object as a positive memorial to fallen friends and comrades; this might be especially appropriate for veterans who have memorial tattoos (Schiffrin, 2009; Van Geete, 2009).

Additionally, therapists might learn more about their clients' attachment and relational issues by exploring why a veteran did or *did not* carry an object—particularly those veterans who state they prefer to keep work and home life separate. Bringing special objects into the room, both literally and figuratively, might open up a space to work creatively with military personnel and spouses who face a range of emotional and interpersonal difficulties relative to deployment and coming home, such as adjusting to role changes, talking about war experiences, and restoring and improving intimate relationships. While all couples have disagreements, military couples in particular can expect an increase in tension and conflict after an extended deployment (Armstrong et al., 2006). For example, through her work with traumatized military couples, Basham (2008) explored the concept of combat trauma as an attachment rupture, with particular attention to how deployment stressors impact intimate partnerships and other family relationships, and how multiple separations and tours of duty contribute to cyclic patterns of disrupted attachments. Encouraging military couples to use transitional objects during service-related separations could ease distress or other emotions during their time apart, ease their reunion, and keep a vital connection that might not have existed in previous deployments. For example, one participant described several objects he carried in Vietnam that kept him emotionally connected to his wife, including a lock of her hair. "That was very meaningful. And

not as a good luck charm—I just felt close to her." As a further symbolic connection, the soldier and his wife wore two halves of a locket that had been given to them by another military couple.

Conclusion

By sharing their stories, many of the 72 veterans who participated in this study allowed others to witness a deeply personal side of their time at war. While not all veterans brought special possessions with them on deployment, those who did offered moving stories of how the objects helped them cope with the chaos around them and kept them connected to cherished people, places, and memories. As one veteran said, the object he brought along provided a sense of hope in difficult times, "something to hold onto that could take your mind off everything going on around you. It didn't distract from the mission but no matter how bad something seemed, it somehow made me feel as though everything would be all right."

The implications of this study will hopefully contribute to a deeper understanding of the experiences, challenges, and strengths of combat veterans, and will inspire therapists, social workers, and all who know and work with returning veterans to effectively and compassionately help them return home from war.

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Appendix A: Demographic Questionnaire

The following questions will ask you about yourself and your military service. You may skip any question you are uncomfortable answering. Please answer the questions to the best of your ability.

A. PERSONAL HISTORY

1. What is your gender?
□ Female
□ Male
□ Prefer not to answer
□ Other (please specify): **(Comment box)**

2. What is your age?
□ 18 to 24
□ 25 to 34
□ 35 to 44
□ 45 to 54
□ 55 to 64
□ 65 to 74
□ 75 or older

3. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
□ Less than high school
□ High school / GED
□ Some college
□ Two-year college degree (Associate's)
□ Four-year college degree (BA/BS)
□ Master's degree
□ Doctoral degree (Ph.D, D.Phil, Th.D., etc)
□ Professional degree (doctor, dentist, optometrist, lawyer, etc.)
□ Other (please specify): **(Comment box)**

4. What is your current marital status?
□ Single
□ Married
□ Domestic Partnership
□ Separated
□ Divorced
□ Widowed

5. What is your religious affiliation?
□ Protestant Christian

□ Roman Catholic
□ Evangelical Christian
□ Jewish
□ Muslim
□ Hindu
□ Buddhist
□ Other (please specify): **(Comment box)**

6. What is your race?
□ White
□ White, non-Hispanic
□ Black or African American
□ Hispanic / Latino / Spanish
□ Asian / Pacific Islander
□ American Indian or Alaska Native
□ Multiracial
□ Prefer not to answer
□ Other (please specify): **(Comment box)**

B. MILITARY SERVICE HISTORY

7. Please select the branch of service to which you belonged at the time of deployment(s). Check all that apply.
□ Air Force
□ Air Force Reserve
□ Air National Guard
□ Army
□ Army National Guard
□ Army Reserve
□ Coast Guard
□ Coast Guard Reserve
□ Marine Corps
□ Marine Corps Reserve
□ Navy
□ Navy Reserve
□ Other (please specify): **(Comment box)**

8. During which conflict(s) were you deployed? Check all that apply.
□ World War II (1941 – 1946)
□ Korean War (1950 – 1955)
□ Vietnam War (1964 – 1975)
□ Lebanon (1982 – 1984)
□ Grenada (1983)
□ Libya (1986)
□ Panama (1989 – 1990)

□ Gulf War (1990 – 1991)
□ Somalia (1992 – 1993)
□ Haiti (1994 – 1996)
□ Former Yugoslavia (1992 – 2001)
□ Kosovo (1999)
□ Afghanistan (2001 – present)
□ Iraq (2003 – 2011)
□ Other (please specify): **(Comment box)**

9. How were you recruited into the armed service?
□ Draft / conscription
□ Volunteered

10. During your deployment(s) were you:
□ Enlisted personnel
□ Commissioned officer
□ Other (please specify): **(Comment box)**

11. What was your military occupational specialty, job classification, or occupational field while deployed? (Comment box)

12. Describe your combat-related position while deployed:
□ Direct (ex., infantry)
□ Non-direct (ex., cook, supply, emergency medical staff)

13. How many times were you deployed?
□ 1
□ 2
□ 3
□ 4
□ 5
□ 6
□ 7+

14. How long were you deployed? (Please round to the nearest month.**) If you were deployed more than once, use the comment box to specify the number of months for each deployment, and where you served. (Comment box)**

15. What is your current military status?
□ Active duty
□ Separated from the military
□ Retired from the military
□ Other (please specify): **(Comment box)**

16. In your opinion, do you believe you suffer(ed) from acute or post-traumatic stress related to your deployment?

□ Yes
□ No
□ Not sure

Appendix B: Recruitment Materials—Survey

(1) Facebook

Facebook Friends!

Are you active duty military, a reservist, or a veteran who served in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan or other conflicts dating back to World War II? Do you have a family member, significant other, or close friend who served in combat? If so, you could help me out with my Master's thesis. It is a brief survey that looks at how special possessions (articles that provide you with good luck, psychological comfort, or reminders of home or loved ones) are used during deployment, and whether having one with you helped in some way during and after your active duty experience.

Please click on this link (or copy and paste it into your browser) to take the survey:
https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/NH7SFHT

You may also share this posting with other people you know who may be eligible to take part in the study. Thank you! Your participation and feedback are important!

(2) Online Community Forums

Participants Needed – Research Study on Use of Good Luck Charms, Other Objects Carried in Combat

Are you active duty military, a reservist, or a veteran who served in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan or other conflicts dating back to World War II? Do you have a family member, significant other, or close friend who served in combat? If so, you could help me out with my Master's thesis.

It is a brief survey that looks at how special possessions (articles that provide you with good luck, psychological comfort, or reminders of home or loved ones) are used during deployment, and whether having one with you helped in some way during and after your active duty experience. Examples of these objects can include photographs, written letters, tattoos, music, pieces of clothing, insignia, religious articles, or other items that have special meaning.

Please click on this link (or copy and paste it into your browser) to take the survey:
https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/NH7SFHT

You may also share this posting with other people you know who may be eligible to take part in the study.

I am looking for individuals who:

- Are 18 years or older;
- Have served overseas in a direct combat or combat operations/support service role as a member of the U.S. Armed Forces;
- Can read and write English.

The questionnaire will take about 20 minutes to complete. There will be no identifying information asked on the survey, and all responses will be anonymous and confidential.

Thank you! Your participation and feedback are important!

(3) Recruitment Letter to Friends and Colleagues for Snowball Sampling

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

I am writing to let you know about a research study I am conducting for my Master's thesis at Smith College School for Social Work. I am exploring how service members use objects (articles that provide psychological comfort, good luck, or reminders of home or loved ones) during deployment, and whether the use of objects helped in some way during and after their wartime experience. For this study, examples of these objects include photographs, written letters, tattoos, music, pieces of clothing, insignia, religious articles, and other items that have special meaning.

I am looking for individuals who:

- Are 18 years or older;
- Have served overseas in a direct combat or combat operations/support service role as a member of the U.S. Armed Forces;
- Can read and write in English.

I would greatly appreciate your help in my recruitment process! Please consider sharing this email with family members, friends, colleagues, professional connections, etc., who you think might be interested in participating. If YOU answered yes to these questions, please consider taking the survey. It should take about 20 minutes to complete. All responses will be anonymous and confidential. No identifying information will be asked on the survey.

Please click on this link (or copy and paste it into your browser) to take the survey:
https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/NH7SFHT

Thank you! Your participation and feedback are important!
Julia St. George, A13
MSW candidate
Smith College School for Social Work

Appendix C: Informed Consent and Referrals—Survey

Dear Potential Participant,

My name is Julia St. George. I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work in Northampton, MA, and the daughter of a retired military service member. I am conducting research to learn how service members use "transitional objects" (articles that provide you with good luck, psychological comfort, or reminders of home or loved ones) during deployment, and whether the use of objects helped in some way during and after their wartime experience. This study has been approved by the Smith College SSW Human Subjects Review Committee and will be presented as a Master's thesis. It may be used in future presentations, publications or dissertations.

Your participation in my study is voluntary. You are being asked to participate in an Internet questionnaire via the web site SurveyMonkey.com because you are 18 years or older; are fluent in English; and have served overseas, or are currently in service overseas, in a direct combat or combat operations/support service role as a member of the U.S. Armed Forces. You may refuse to answer any or all of the questions. The survey will first ask you some general questions about you and your military service history. You will then be asked several multiple-choice questions and an open-ended closing question about your experiences using objects during and after deployment. The questionnaire will take about 20 minutes to complete.

Participation in this study may bring up difficult feelings in regards to recalling your experiences in the military and upon return home from deployment. If you feel that you would like additional support at any point during your involvement in the questionnaire or following your participation, I have provided a list of mental health resources at the end of this letter that you may use at your convenience.

Although there is no financial benefit for participating in this study, your responses to the questionnaire will allow you to share your unique knowledge and experience about having served in a war zone and its impact on your return home. It is my hope that your responses will provide insight on the impacts of deployment for mental health workers, social service providers, and researchers. In turn, I hope that further understanding of how the use of transitional objects helps maintain a symbolic attachment to loved ones during wartime separation and afterward will lead to a better understanding of the needs of service members and veterans like you and the development of programs to address these needs. Your participation in this study is very much appreciated.

This survey is totally anonymous. Your confidentiality will be protected in a number of ways. The survey software does not collect names, e-mail addresses, IP addresses, or any other identifying information. Your responses will be available only to me through the use of password protection. My research advisor and a statistician employed by Smith College School for Social Work will have access to the data after any identifying information has been removed from the write-in responses; however, we do ask that you not disclose identifying information in the open-ended questions. In any publications or presentations the data will be presented as a whole, in

brief illustrative quotes or vignettes; no identifying data will be presented. All data from the questionnaire will be kept in a secure location for a period of three years, as required by Federal guidelines. After that time, the data will be destroyed or will continue to be kept secured for as long as the researcher needs them for research purposes. When the data are no longer needed, they will be destroyed. Data stored electronically will be fully protected with password and encryption. If the material is needed beyond a three-year period, it will continue to be kept in a secure location and will be destroyed when it is no longer needed for research purposes.

If you choose to participate in this questionnaire, you have the right to refuse to answer any question. You may also withdraw from the study at any time by navigating away from the web page on your Internet browser. If you do this, any answers you provided to any previous questions will be immediately deleted. However, once you complete and submit your answers to the full questionnaire, it will not be possible to withdraw because you will not be able to be identified.

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

Referral Sources

1. Veterans Crisis Line – a confidential 24/7 resource that connects service members and veterans in crisis and their families and friends with qualified Department of Veterans Affairs responders through a toll-free hotline, online chat, or text.

Website (with links to veterans and military chat): http://www.veteranscrisisline.net/
Toll-free hotline: 1-800-273-8255 and Press 1
Text message: 838255

2. Give An Hour – a non-profit organization that offers free mental health services to anyone who is or has been affected (indirectly or directly) by the conflicts in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Website (link is under "For Visitors"): http://www.giveanhour.org

3. Military OneSource – an organization that provides resources for military members and their families, including face-to-face counseling, telephone consultations, and online consultations.

Contact a consultant: 1-800-342-9647
International/overseas calling options: 1-800-3429-6477 or 1-703-253-7599
Website: http://www.militaryonesource.mil

4. Mental Health America – an advocacy group that provides access to behavioral health services for all Americans, addressing the full spectrum of mental and substance use conditions.

Phone (in crisis): 1-800-273-TALK
Phone: 1-800- 969-6642
Website: http://www.nmha.org/go/find_therapy

ELECTRONIC CONSENT

BY CHECKING "I AGREE" BELOW YOU ARE INDICATING THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE INFORMATION ABOVE, AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS; AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Please print a copy of this page for your records.

☐ I AGREE
☐ I DISAGREE

Appendix D: Survey Instrument

The following questions will ask you about your use of transitional objects during combat. You may skip any question you are uncomfortable answering. Please answer the questions to the best of your ability. It is possible that you carried more than one special possession during your deployment. If this is the case, please include that information in the comment boxes where appropriate. When responding to the questions, however, please answer with a single most important possession in mind.

The following terms are found in the questions:

A *transitional object* is an item that serves a soothing function during life transitions and periods of sudden change, loss, and separation. Transitional objects are used throughout our lives to reduce anxiety. Examples of tangible *transitional objects* can include photographs, written letters, a journal, jewelry, insignia, tattoos and articles of clothing. Examples of intangible *transitional objects* can include music, wishes, dreams, and smells. A *life transition* is a significant change in a person's social or personal environment that has the potential to cause stress in positive or negative ways. For the purposes of this study, life transitions, change, loss, and separation will refer to deployment to a combat zone.

SECTION A: THE ITEM

1. Did you carry an object with sentimental value or personal meaning with you during any of your deployments?
☐Yes
☐No (Skip to Questions 20 & 21)

2. Please describe the object. (Comment box)

3. How did you get this object?
☐ Spouse / partner
☐ Parent / sibling / other immediate relative
☐ Child
☐ Friend
☐ Other (please describe): **(Comment box)**

4. How long have you had the object?
☐ Less than one year
☐ 2 to 4 years
☐ 5 to 7 years
☐ 8 to 10 years
☐ 11+ years

5. Did you carry this object with you before deployment?
☐ Yes
☐ No

6. How likely were you to use the object for the following purposes during deployment?
☐ Good luck charm * Always * Often * Sometimes * Seldom * Never
☐ Memory or reminder of home * Always * Often * Sometimes * Seldom * Never
☐ Religious / spiritual * Always * Often * Sometimes * Seldom * Never
☐ Reason to stay alive * Always * Often * Sometimes * Seldom * Never
☐ Other (please describe): **(Comment box)**

7. How frequently did you take precautions to keep the object safe?
☐ Always
☐ Often
☐ Sometimes
☐ Seldom
☐ Never

8. What did you do to keep the object safe? (Please describe.)
(Comment box)

SECTION B: IMPACT

9. How helpful was the object in times of stress?
☐ Extremely helpful
☐ Very helpful
☐ Moderately helpful
☐ Not very helpful
☐ Not at all helpful

10. If you realized the object wasn't with you, how likely were you to go back and get it?
☐ Extremely likely
☐ Very likely
☐ Moderately likely
☐ Not very likely
☐ Not at all likely

11. You became anxious when the object wasn't with you.
☐ Strongly disagree
☐ Disagree
☐ Neutral
☐ Agree
☐ Strongly agree

12. How often did you turn to this object for comfort?

☐ Always
☐ Often
☐ Sometimes
☐ Seldom
☐ Never

13. You gained a sense of control when you turned to this object.
☐ Always
☐ Often
☐ Sometimes
☐ Seldom
☐ Never

14. Looking at or using this object helped you deal with feelings of (check all that apply):
☐ Sadness
☐ Homesickness
☐ Anxiety
☐ Fear
☐ Loneliness
☐ None of the above
☐ Other (please specify): **(Comment box)**

15. The object was helpful during your transition into combat.
☐ Strongly disagree
☐ Disagree
☐ Neutral
☐ Agree
☐ Strongly agree

16. You felt better when you looked at or used this object.
☐ Strongly disagree
☐ Disagree
☐ Neutral
☐ Agree
☐ Strongly agree

17. You found a familiarity that was comforting when you looked at or used this object.
☐ Strongly disagree
☐ Disagree
☐ Neutral
☐ Agree
☐ Strongly agree
18. When you look at or use the object today, you feel more:
☐ Positive emotions

☐ Negative emotions
☐ Neutral emotions
☐ I no longer have or use this object

19. The object was helpful in your transition once home.
☐ Strongly disagree
☐ Disagree
☐ Neutral
☐ Agree
☐ Strongly agree

SECTION C: COPING METHODS

20. When you experience a stressful event you typically (check all that apply)**:**

☐ Act as though the event hasn't happened.

☐Focus on work or other activities to take your mind off things.

☐ Use alcohol, drugs, food, shopping, etc. to make yourself feel better.

☐ Put your trust in God or a Higher Power.

☐ Look for something good in what is happening.

☐ Focus on trying to do something about the situation.

☐ Joke about the situation or laugh it off.

☐ Discuss the situation with someone.

☐ Talk about your feelings with someone.

☐ Get upset and let out your emotions.

☐ Get upset but keep your feelings to yourself.

☐ Head outdoors for a hike, run, swim, bike ride, etc., to settle anxiety and clear your thoughts.

☐ Listen to music, watch television or a movie.

☐ Have fantasies or wishes about how things might turn out.

☐ Draw on past experience if you have faced a similar situation before.

☐ Admit that you can't deal with things and give up.

21. OPTIONAL: Please share anything else you would like the researcher to know about your use of special possessions/ transitional objects, including:

(a) Why you did not use a transitional object during deployment; or

(b) Issues this survey did not cover, or a point you would like to elaborate on, relating to your special possession and its use. **(Comment box)**

Appendix E: Recruitment Email—Focus Group

Dear Potential Participant,

My name is Julia St. George. I am a second-year Master's student at Smith College School for Social Work in Northampton, MA, and the daughter of a retired military service member and Vietnam veteran. I also have been a volunteer with the Veterans Education Project. You are being contacted because through your involvement with the VEP, I hope you might be interested in participating in a focus group for my research thesis.

I am conducting a study to learn how service members use "transitional objects" (articles that provide you with psychological comfort, good luck, or reminders of home or loved ones) during deployment, and whether the use of objects helped in some way during and after their wartime experience. For this study, examples of these objects include photographs, written letters, tattoos, music, pieces of clothing, insignia, religious articles, and other possessions that have special meaning.

I am looking for individuals who:

- Are 18 years or older;
- Have served overseas on active duty as a member of the U.S. Armed Forces;
- Can read and write English;
- Believe they suffer, or have suffered, from a self-reported diagnosis of combat- or active duty-related acute or post-traumatic stress.

If you choose to participate in this study, I will ask that you commit to a 60- to 90-minute group interview with other combat veterans at the VEP office in Amherst, at a mutually agreeable time in late February or early March.

Participating in this study is voluntary, and all information will be kept confidential. Unfortunately, I cannot pay you for your participation in this study due to lack of funding. However, your participation will allow you to share the story of your transitional object, and your unique experience about having used it during deployment, and its impact on your time in combat and on your return home.

If you would like to talk with me about any questions you have about the study or with interest for participation, please email me at XXXX@smith.edu, or call me at XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,
Julia St. George

Appendix F: Informed Consent and Referrals—Focus Group

Dear Participant,

My name is Julia St. George. I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work (SSW) in Northampton, MA, and the daughter of a retired military service member. I am conducting research to learn how service members use "transitional objects" (articles that provide you with good luck, psychological comfort, or reminders of home or loved ones) during deployment, and whether the use of objects helped in some way during and after their wartime experience. This study has been approved by the Smith College SSW Human Subjects Review Committee and will be presented as a Master's thesis. It may be used in future presentations, publications or dissertations.

Your participation in my study is voluntary. You were invited to participate because you are a member of the Veterans Education Project or have received this request from a colleague affiliated with the VEP. If you choose to participate in this study, I will ask that you commit to a 60- to 90-minute interview with other combat veterans. Before the session, I will ask you to complete a form with general questions about you and your military service history. During the discussion, I will ask you to share memories of your use of transitional objects during and after deployment and the effect the object had on your mental health and wellbeing during combat and upon returning home.

There may be potential risks to participating in this study. This study may bring up difficult feelings in regards to recalling your experiences in the military and upon return home from deployment. If the interview becomes too stressful, you may choose to take a break, end the interview, or withdraw from the study at any time. I have included a list of mental health resources at the end of this letter that may be of help to you if you feel as though you would like to discuss your feelings with someone.

Participating in this study is voluntary, and you will receive no financial benefit for agreeing to take part. However, you may experience some personal benefit from participating by gaining a better understanding of or new perspective on your war zone experience.

Our interview will be audiotaped on a digital recorder and transcribed solely by me for analysis. The digital recording and the transcription will be coded to protect your privacy. The demographic questionnaire also will be assigned a number for identification. Identifying information that is revealed during the interviews will not be included in the transcribed narrative; my research advisor will have access to this data only after any identifying information is removed. Some illustrative quotes will be used in the thesis, but will be reported without identifying information pertaining to you, and disguised if necessary. In order to maintain confidentiality, all data will be reported as a whole in any publications or presentations.

Confidentiality within the focus group is very limited, both because members are aware of each other's participation and will hear what each other has to say during the group, but also because I cannot enforce a requirement that members do not tell outsiders who participated and what went

on in the group. For these reasons, I will ask that group members respect one another's privacy and confidentiality.

If you agree to participate, all research materials, including the data, self-report surveys, audio recordings, and analysis will be stored electronically and protected by password and encryption; the informed consent will be kept in a secure location separate from other collected materials. All research material will be stored securely for three years as required by Federal regulations. After that time, the data will be destroyed or will continue to be kept secured as long as the researcher needs them for research purposes. When the data are no longer needed, they will be destroyed.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose to participate, you have the right to refuse to answer any question. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time – before, during, or after the interview – with no penalty. Should you withdraw, no information about this will be shared in any way with VEP, and there will be no impact on your relationship with the group. If you decide to withdraw and choose to leave the group before the end of the session, I won't be able to remove the data you already provided before you left, as it can be next to impossible to discern who said what with full accuracy when listening to recordings later. Should you withdraw from the study, I will immediately destroy all materials related to you, including correspondence and signed consent forms.

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

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 PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Signature of Participant Date

Signature of Researcher Date

Please retain a copy of this document for your records.

Research Contact Information:

Julia St. George
XXXXXXX@smith.edu

Referral Sources

1. Veterans Crisis Line – a confidential 24/7 resource that connects service members and veterans in crisis and their families and friends with qualified Department of Veterans Affairs responders through a toll-free hotline, online chat, or text.

Website (with links to veterans and military chat): http://www.veteranscrisisline.net/
Toll-free hotline: 1-800-273-8255 and Press 1
Text message: 838255

2. Give An Hour – a non-profit organization that offers free mental health services to anyone who is or has been affected (indirectly or directly) by the conflicts in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Website (link is under "For Visitors"): http://www.giveanhour.org

3. Military OneSource – an organization that provides resources for military members and their families, including face-to-face counseling, telephone consultations, and online consultations.

Contact a consultant: 1-800-342-9647
International/overseas calling options: 1-800-3429-6477 or 1-703-253-7599
Website: http://www.militaryonesource.mil

4. Mental Health America – an advocacy group that provides access to behavioral health services for all Americans, addressing the full spectrum of mental and substance use conditions.

Phone (in crisis): 1-800-273-TALK
Phone: 1-800- 969-6642
Website: http://www.nmha.org/go/find_therapy

Appendix G: Human Subjects Review Committee Approval Letter

SMITH COLLEGE

School for Social Work
Smith College
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

February 1, 2013

Julia St. George

Dear Julia,

Thank you for making all the requested changes to your Human Subjects Review application. I appreciate your thoughtful responses to each. Your project is now approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

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 project.

Sincerely,

Marsha K. Pruett /fhw

Marsha Kline Pruett, M.S., Ph.D., M.S.L.
Vice Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Elaine Kersten, Research Advisor

Appendix H: Focus Group Interview Questions

(1) The transitional object

Tell me about the special item(s) you brought along to war.

- Which was the most important item?
- Why was it important to you?
- Could you describe it to me?
- How did you get this item?
- How long have you had it?
- Was it with you at all times?

How would you describe its purpose during deployment?

- Good luck charm
- A memory or reminder of home
- Religious / spiritual
- Reason to stay alive
- Something else?

Did you do anything special to keep the object safe?

(2) Assessing Impact

How did you feel when you had the item with you?

How did you feel when the object wasn't with you?

If you realized the item wasn't with you, would you go back to get it?

Did you carry this item with you before you were deployed?

Did it serve the same purpose?

Do you carry it with you now?

What meaning does it have for you now?

(3) Benefits or Costs

Do you think the object helped you in times of stress?

What role did the object play in your experience?

- During your transition into combat
- While in combat
- Readjusting or transitioning post-deployment

Are there any lingering benefits to having used this object in combat?
Do you think you suffer(ed) from PTSD related to combat?

(4) Is there anything we have missed or haven't covered in tonight's discussion that you think is important to bring up?

Appendix I: Tables

Table 1

Reasons for Carrying Transitional Objects During Deployment

N=44	Always	Often	Sometimes	Seldom	Never
Good luck charm	40.5% (15)	8.1% (3)	18.9% (7)	8.1% (3)	24.3% (9)
Memory or reminder of home	58.5% (24)	14.6% (6)	9.8% (4)	9.8% (4)	7.3% (3)
Religious spiritual	37.8% (14)	5.4% (2)	13.5% (5)	8.1% (3)	35.1% (13)
Reason to stay alive	44.4% (16)	8.3% (3)	11.1% (4)	8.3% (3)	27.8% (10)

Other responses (N=4): Reason to go home; reminder of friends; taking care of soldiers; when burying dead soldiers "to the deep" at sea off the ship.

Table 2

Service Members' Coping Methods Based on Whether or Not They Carried a Transitional Object

Item	Carry (N=48)	Not Carry (N=14)	Combined (N=62)
Act as though the event hasn't happened.	10.4 (5)	7.1 (1)	10.7 (6)
Focus on work or other activities to take your mind off things.	47.9 (23)	64.3 (9)	57.1 (32)
Use alcohol, drugs, food, shopping, etc. to make yourself feel better.	12.5 (6)	0	10.7 (6)
Put your trust in God or a Higher Power.	37.5 (18)	21.4 (3)	37.5 (21)
Look for something good in what is happening.	47.9 (23)	28.6 (4)	48.2 (27)
Focus on trying to do something about the situation.	52.1 (25)	57.1 (8)	58.9 (33)
Joke about the situation or laugh it off.	37.5 (18)	35.7 (5)	41.1 (23)
Discuss the situation with someone.	37.5 (18)	14.3 (3)	37.5 (21)
Talk about your feelings with someone.	18.8 (9)	21.4 (3)	21.4 (12)
Get upset and let out your emotions.	18.8 (9)	0	16.1 (9)
Get upset but keep your feelings to yourself.	33.3 (16)	7.1 (1)	30.4 (17)
Head outdoors for a hike, run, swim, bike ride, etc. to settle anxiety and clear your thoughts.	33.3 (16)	28.6 (4)	35.7 (20)
Listen to music, watch television or a movie.	27.1 (13)	21.4 (3)	28.6 (16)
Have fantasies or wishes about how things might turn out.	18.8 (9)	14.3 (2)	19.6 (11)
Draw on past experience if you have faced a similar situation before.	47.9 (23)	21.4 (3)	46.4 (26)
Admit that you can't deal with things and give up.	2.1 (1)	0	1.8 (1)

Adapted from: Carver, C. S., Scheier, M. F., & Weintraub, J. K. (1989). Assessing coping strategies: A theoretically based approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 56*, 267-283.

Appendix J: Figures

Figure 1.

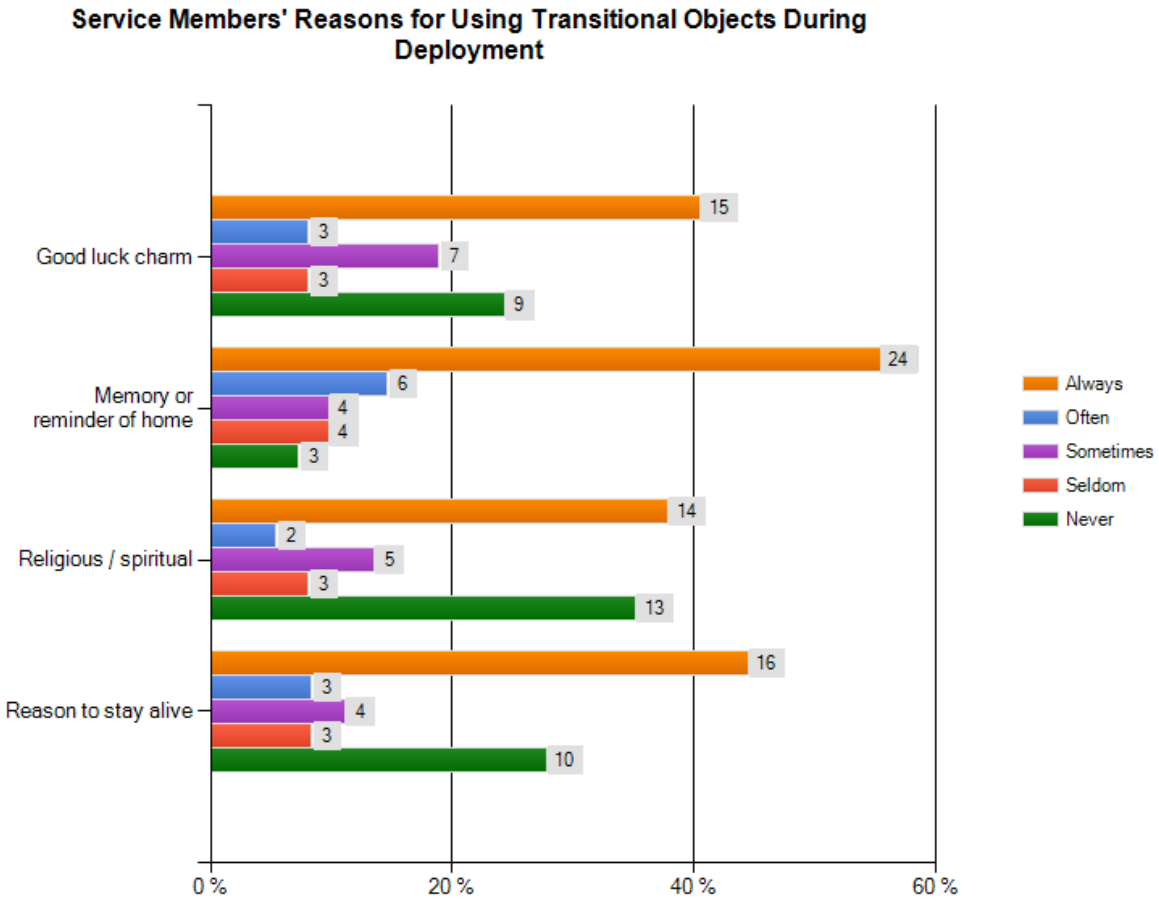

Figure 2.

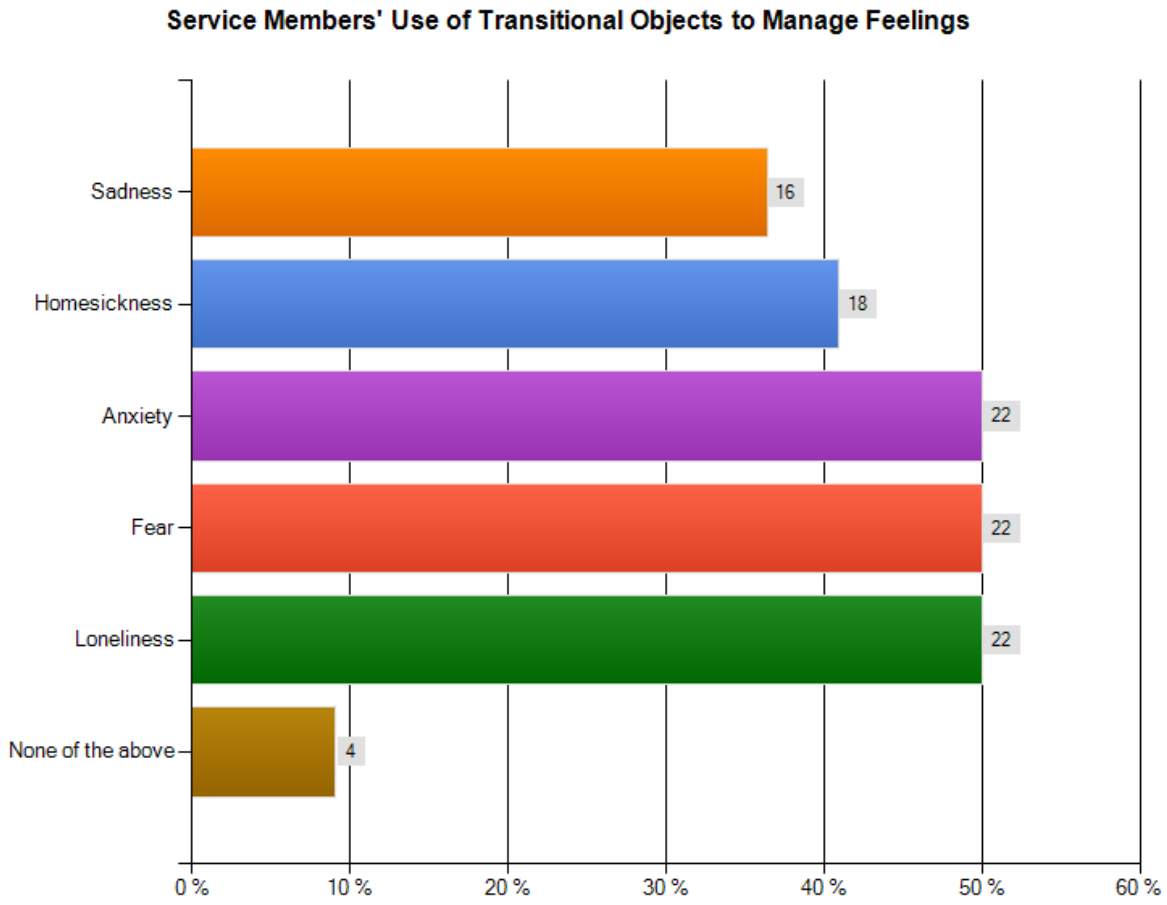

Figure 2. Service members' responses to a survey question that asked them to identify difficult or challenging feelings their transitional object helped them deal with while they were deployed.

Appendix J: Focus Group Members' Transitional Objects

Figure 3

Figure 3. Kopiko (*Koffiebonbon*), chocolate coffee-candy from the Netherlands, originally given to Veteran Two by an aunt before his deployment during World War II.

Figure 4

Figure 4. Army-issued dog tags, St. Christopher medal, and Airborne Parachutist Badge ("jump wings") carried and worn by Veteran One during the Vietnam War. The "jump wings" belonged to the veteran's best friend from high school, who gave them to him before leaving for combat; the friend was killed shortly before he was due to return home. Veteran 1 received the religious medal from another veteran he met on his way to Vietnam.

Figure 5

Figure 5. Army-issued waterproof wallet carried by Veteran Six during the Vietnam War, containing a lock of his wife's hair, a fabric patch she made for him, letters, and other personal items.

Figure 6

Figure 6. Interior view of Army-issued waterproof wallet carried by Veteran Six during the Vietnam War, containing a lock of his wife's hair, a fabric patch she made for him, letters, and other personal items.