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# Adult children of male military combatants : impacts into adulthood

Robert N. Smith

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## ABSTRACT

This study was undertaken to explore potential impacts occurring in adulthood stemming from individuals' childhood experiences of growing up in a household with a father who sustained combat-related trauma during the course of their military service. Numerous studies in recent years and decades have researched how military wartime or combat-related trauma can affect the lives of the soldiers who sustained the actual trauma, as well as exploring secondary traumatization and its effects on the family system upon their return home from combat. However, there has been little attention paid to the adult stage of life for individuals raised by a traumatized combatant father. Eight such individuals volunteered to take part in an interview exploring their perceptions of how they have been influenced and impacted by their unique childhoods.

Four major themes were identified. The first two themes support previous research: 1) their fathers were more prone to developing avoidant and withdrawn personalities post-combat and had difficulty engaging in meaningful parent-child interactions, and 2) their fathers demonstrated a reluctance to discuss their combat experiences. The second two themes may be considered new data: 1) upon finally learning about their fathers' trauma, participants expressed forgiveness and a significant change of perspective of their childhoods relating to their father's personalities, and 2) all participants demonstrate increased intersubjectivity, place high value on the importance of communication, and show greater insight into their own thoughts and behaviors in their adult lives.

ADULT CHILDREN OF MALE MILITARY COMBATANTS:  
IMPACTS INTO ADULTHOOD

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

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to explore and identify any lasting effects continuing to operate into adulthood for individuals raised by a military combatant father who had experienced trauma during the course of his military service. The word trauma is used in place of the more diagnosable term “Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome,” or PTSD for short. The purpose for this differentiation is that many military servicemen who have experienced trauma in the line of duty, and reflect the symptoms of PTSD, never actually receive an official diagnosis and never receive treatment for their trauma. This lack of recognition can occur for several reasons but often relates to the stigma attached to seeking professional mental health care while still active in the military, which often times leads to fear of ostracization among their commanders and military peers (Gould, Greenberg & Hetherton 2007). For this reason, during the course of this study, adults raised by a military combatant father who had experienced trauma during the course of their service, but did not necessarily receive a PTSD diagnosis, were sought out for in-depth interviews to explore what lasting effects they feel were directly related to their unique childhood.

In recent decades numerous studies have surfaced that explore the effects that wartime and combat-related trauma has on soldiers, their families and children. These studies tend to focus directly on the soldier who received the trauma or on the impact that it can exert on the family system, and how it can permanently alter the dynamics of the family and the parent-child relationship. The available research has not focused on what happens to these children upon reaching adulthood and what lasting effects, if any, may still be playing out in the lives of these

adult children of military combatants. This study attempts to address this disparity in the currently available research by hearing the personal stories of individuals whose fathers were exposed to significant trauma as a result of their combat experiences during the course of their military service.

The research that will be presented herein stems from the personal accounts of eight adults who volunteered to share the stories of their childhood. Throughout the course of these interviews, all participants applied a great deal of insight and critical thinking into their unique childhoods and how they see those experiences with their father as continuing to influence and shape them into the present. They were able to recount story after story depicting a father who had obviously suffered a great deal of inner turmoil, and in most instances still does, as a result of their military combat experiences; many of the stories were difficult to hear and to even imagine, but just as many stories were equally inspirational and positive.

As of December 31, 2011 the Department of Defense reported there to be approximately 1,414,149 active duty service men and women worldwide (<http://siadapp.dmdc.osd.mil/personnel/MILITARY/history/hst1112.pdf>), and this figure does not even include the thousands of reserve forces also stationed worldwide. Many of the people represented in these figures will go into combat and experience trauma that most people cannot even imagine. Many of the people represented in these figures already have or in the future will have children. This study attempts to address the profound impact that trauma can exert on an entire family system, but this study especially will explore and focus on the lives of the children raised by the fighting men of our country's military. It begs the question: What happens to these children when they cease to remain children, and become adults?

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### *Introduction*

In the professional community there is an ever-growing pool of research regarding war-related trauma in the military arena in relation to combat veterans' lives and the short and long term implications of experiencing this specific trauma. PTSD is the most common mental health diagnosis at Veterans Affairs facilities (Seal, Bertenthal, Miner, Sen, & Marmar, 2007). The effects of PTSD stemming from direct trauma exposure experienced by war veterans over the lifespan manifests in numerous ways including guilt, self-loathing, sabotaging, self-destructive behaviors, substance abuse, anhedonia and withdrawal (Litz, 2007); one half of all soldiers in high combat environments suffer from PTSD or are at higher risk of becoming susceptible to it (Castro, 2009). Additionally, there are an estimated two million children nationwide who have parents that have been deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan (Flake, Davis, Johnson, & Middleton, 2009; Chartrand, Frank, White, & Shope, 2008). Considering the children of military combatants, the question may then be raised: How does wartime trauma affect the children of these soldiers upon their return home from combat; more specifically, what are the long-term implications for children into adulthood who were raised by a trauma-suffering combatant parent?

One way this question has begun to be addressed is reflected in recent interest regarding the negative influence that wartime trauma has on family systems; for example, 80% of veterans deployed in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) reported expressing interest in increasing the levels of family involvement as an additional source of

social support while receiving treatment at V.A. hospitals (Khaylis, Polusny, Erbes, Gewirtz, & Rath, 2011). It would seem likely that upon a soldier's return home, mental states such as these could transfer onto and affect their spouses, partners and children post-deployment, possibly leading to intergenerational transference and vicarious trauma.

Although recognition of the positive benefit that family involvement has on soldier PTSD and trauma treatment, more research that looks into this transference, especially how it affects children into adulthood, is needed. Dias and Sales (2009) compellingly demonstrate the need for further research in this area by stating "It seems that deployment and the return home from battlefield really increases child maltreatment at home. We need to gain better understanding of the consequences on children of fathers' exposure to war . . . and to devote more attention to the adult stage" (p. 185). Chartrand et al. (2008) also states clearly: "Little research has focused on the effect of soldiers' wartime deployment on their children" (p.1009). Exploring how these children are affected as adults can offer significant insight to clinical social work practice and the broader field of trauma research. Also, it can further serve to widen the pool of clinical practice knowledge in offering additional context to some of the characteristics at play in the lives of these adults; researchers, clinical practitioners and therapists may all benefit from such research.

#### *Adult Survivors of Childhood Trauma*

Trauma can occur not only from experiencing or witnessing perceived or actual potentially life threatening events or situations, but can also "develop without an exposure that threatens life or physical integrity; it can also develop from a series of relatively minor emotional insults over time that can result from a stressful life or poor coping skills" (Seides, 2010, p. 725). There have been several studies that explore various aspects of how childhood trauma – any

trauma – continues to affect the sufferer throughout the lifespan. A study by Allen and Lauterbach (2007) that explores personality characteristics of adults who experienced trauma in childhood illustrates this. The authors state that prior to this research “no identifiable studies have sought to investigate the influence of childhood trauma on personality traits irrespective of a diagnosable personality disorder” (p. 588). The study analyzed adult personality characteristics on three levels: extroversion, neuroticism, and openness to experiences. Results of the study showed that adults who experienced either Type I trauma (single incidence) or Type II trauma (multiple instances over a prolonged period) as children reported higher levels of neuroticism and less openness to new experiences than adults with trauma-free childhoods, suggesting that “child trauma victims, regardless of the type and duration of the trauma, are likely to be higher in traits such as tension, nervousness, irritability, insecurity, and emotionality than persons not victimized as children” (Allen & Lauterbach, 2007, p. 592)” This study demonstrates how any form of childhood trauma can continue to shape and affect an individual well into adulthood.

It is important to keep this information in mind within the context of children raised by a military combatant father, as there is popular agreement in the professional community that a soldier’s wartime trauma does indeed have the potential to affect the emotional well-being of their children (Herzog, 2009). It has been observed that PTSD-diagnosed veterans report a decrease in parenting satisfaction and a diminished relationship quality with their children (Semper, Taft, King, & King, 2004; Khaylis et al., 2011). The stressful effects on the family system, especially stress brought home by military veterans, have largely remained out of mainstream and academic discussions for the last seventy years (Figley & Figley, 2009). The notable fact is that stress added to the family system, especially the stress that is put onto the parent-child relationship, by a combatant parent suffering from wartime trauma is becoming

more clearly established, and illustrates the importance for further and broader studies to be conducted to determine the long-term effects into the adult stage of life of these children. The majority of published studies seem to focus primarily on one perspective: that of the military person with the diagnosis. It has been observed and stated in several academic publications that the need for research to look at what the effects are from the perspective of the now-adult child raised by the war-wounded parent is needed (Dias & Sales, 2009). Having this additional perspective will allow for a more holistic approach to understanding the broader ways wartime trauma can affect not only individuals who experienced it, but also the ways that the family system and children are taken by its grip.

Clinical research has established that adverse psychological experiences in childhood greatly increases the risks of suffering from psychological disorders and related ailments later in life as adults (Philippe, Laventure, Beaulieu-Pellitier, Lecours, & Lokes, 2011). It has been demonstrated that adults who have experienced trauma as children have been shown to experience ongoing difficulties with regulating internal self-criticism and interpersonal aggression, among other struggles (Thomas, 2003). As P. M. Thomas (2003) states, suggesting a link between child trauma and adult functionality: “Many trauma researchers have recognized a connection between receiving protection in childhood and feeling protected in later life” (p. 364). Traumatic experiences, even decades earlier in life, can still exert a tremendous impact on the current well-being of the adults who experienced the trauma, and can manifest in a wide range of physical and mental health related issues (Edwards, Anda, Felitti, & Dube, 2004), issues that could very well have far-reaching implications. The incorporation of research on adult survivors of childhood trauma provides a valuable perspective into understanding how children may be affected by mentally and emotionally developing in an environment with a father suffering from

the effects of wartime trauma, as this trauma has been shown to affect the family system and the child-parent relationship (Khaylis et al., 2011). Chartrand et al. (2008) also notes the role that military culture itself can play, further compounding the situation: “Although children in military families are routinely exposed to stresses such as frequent moves and separation . . . children’s ability to adapt to such stresses is mediated by variables like their caregivers depression and stress” (p. 1009), further adding to the levels of potential negative effects on children into adulthood.

### *Trauma as a Subjective Experience*

The experience of trauma can produce a wide range of reactions among individuals. Indeed, the very nature of trauma is a subjective experience. Whether it takes the form of a perceived or actual threat to one’s life and well-being or witnessing a threat to the integrity of others’ lives (such as in combat situations), or whether it takes on a more subtle appearance in the form of mental abuse or neglect, micro-traumas or long-term abuse (as experienced in the interactions between children and their traumatized combatant parent), the effects can all be equally damaging and equally profound. Seides (2010) states “While [microtraumas] do not qualify as meeting the minimum threshold of stress, over time they can meet and exceed this minimum level and qualify as aetiologic factors of PTSD symptoms” (p. 726). Regarding these implications, Allen and Lauterbach (2007) note that “It is possible that childhood trauma affects personality in more subtle, (i.e. less pathological) ways that nonetheless can have a profound impact on later life” (p. 587). Research has been showing that experiencing adversity throughout childhood constitutes a major risk factor in developing depression and anxiety, among other symptoms, later in life; this has been demonstrated across numerous populations and age groups

(Levitan, Rector, Sheldon, & Goering, 2003). The emphasis on childhood trauma as potentially leading to an increase in the likelihood of developing emotional and psychological problems in later life has continued to be a focal point in much current academic literature.

Considering the information that has been put forth regarding children raised in military families by a combatant parent, the constant presence of regular stressors such as frequent moves, long parental deployments and the high likelihood of the parent displaying trauma symptoms upon the return home, these children are no doubt at risk for developing emotional problems and/or changes in their personality over the lifespan. Combatant parents have been demonstrated to display decreased interest in the lives of their children and report diminished pleasure in their relationship with them; not uncommon is also the increased chances of emotional numbing, detachment, and avoidance (Fales-Stewart & Kelley, 2005). A child growing up in these conditions may not necessarily become the victim of physical violence or other forms of more observable abuse, but may instead become the victim of a childhood characterized by emotional distance and neglect; they may instead become the victim of subtle and prolonged micro-traumas. As Seides (2010) compellingly articulates:

The effects of these serial and chronic emotional insults can be perilous. Over time these individuals may learn to feel helpless, suffer from insomnia, become hypervigilant, dysthymic, easily startled, easily distracted and/or irritable. The only variation is that traumatic events of this nature are not one-time events. They are multiple, milder, prolonged and uncontrollable events of which the outcome is typically fear, humiliation, intrusive thoughts, insomnia, hypervigilance and a decreased quality of life (p. 727).

Further problems that can arise relate to feelings of protection later in life. Adult survivors of childhood trauma often have difficulty setting limits in relationships, defending themselves in conflict situations and generally feeling a sense of personal safety (Thomas, 2003.) It would appear that a childhood comprised of these subtle forms of abuse and microtraumas are as potentially damaging and impactful as any singular traumatic event would be; these types of

micro-traumas are as significant and defining as any traumatic experience in life, whether prolonged or instantaneous. Within the lifestyles of military families these instances may be all too commonplace, begging the question of what the long-term effects are for the children who experience this unique upbringing.

### *Combats' Effects on Children and the Family System*

Studies that have begun to explore the effects of wartime-induced trauma on the family system and parental relationships have largely focused on using large-scale cross-sectional surveys. These studies tend to use an array of Likert-type scaling surveys and have shown effectiveness in gauging participant levels of satisfaction, or lack thereof, within certain areas of their life. The available studies have targeted a range of life issues among returning soldiers that include couples satisfaction, parental satisfaction and family involvement. Study participants have ranged from active-duty military personnel, National Guard soldiers and military reserve soldiers who have all been deployed to OEF or OIF combat operations. Participant ages and levels of education have varied greatly. Ages, gender and ethnic identity have also ranged significantly but with the largest number of respondents being of European descent; the majority have identified as White/Caucasian. The vast majority of participants in these studies were male, with up to 97% reflected in one study by Gewirtz, Polusny, DeGarmo, and Erbes (2010).

In an article entitled “Developmental Issues Impacting Military Families with Young Children During Single and Multiple Deployments” authors Barker and Berry (2009) explore issues for young children resulting from deployments of a military parent. The data is important as it provides further contextualization of the pertinent issues that can plague children developmentally and emotionally resulting from extended absences of a military parent who is

deployed. The study looked at families of deployed military personnel at two separate times, 3-4 months into the deployment and 4-6 weeks after the return home of the deployed parent. 57 families participated in the study with requirements for participation being that the family had at least one child and the parent was active duty (not National Guard or reservist). A four-point Likert survey was developed that asked the non-deployed parent to rate their child(ren) on observed behavioral responses (OBR's) and intense attachment behaviors (IAB's).

Results of the study concluded that in the time leading up to deployment and time during actual deployment children experienced increased levels of behavioral problems. Upon reunification with the returned parent children displayed increased attachment behaviors, confusion and distress by the parent's sudden reappearance. Persistent problems in coping with this return home manifested most commonly in young children not wanting to sleep in bed alone and not seeking comfort (emotional, physical, etc.) from the returning parent. Also of note is that the non-deployed parent left with the task of caring for the child(ren) experienced heightened levels of fatigue and loneliness, among other strains; research has demonstrated that increased parental strain in a family system does affect the children and is linked to the development of psychopathology later in life (Levitan et al., 2003).

In tandem with the wealth of data regarding the significant impact that wartime deployment has on the individual soldier, the data collected through this study is striking in that it demonstrates the impact the same deployment can have on the entire family system. Wartime trauma sustained by the combat soldier, as has already been discussed, can manifest in a variety of ways that affect the parent-child relationship. What this particular study demonstrates is that the children, (as well as the non-deployed parent) show increased attachment issues and behavioral problems, *even after reunification of the deployed parent*. This supports other

research showing that frequent absences (such as during military deployment) of a parent (most commonly the father) throughout a child's life has shown to have an effect on children's cognitive and behavioral functioning (Pougnet, Serbin, Stack, & Schwartzman, 2011), manifested in displays of internalizing problems such as sadness, anxiety and social withdrawal, and externalizing problems such as aggression, impulsivity and hyperactivity (Carlson, 2006). The long term effects that growing up in this environment has on children into adulthood is a topic that has been minimally explored and one that deserves more attention.

An article by Khaylis et al. (2011) entitled "Posttraumatic Stress, Family Adjustment, and Treatment Among National Guard Soldiers Deployed to OEF/OIF" presents a study that explores how wartime trauma suffered by military combatants affects the family system and influences parent-child satisfaction. The study's goal was to address a literature gap regarding preferred treatment modalities for combat veterans (family-based interventions vs. traditional individual treatment). In this study 100 post-deployment National Guard soldiers were anonymously surveyed using a traditional pen-and-paper method. Participation was voluntary and a cover letter explaining risks/benefits of participating in the study was included; of the 100 National Guard soldiers who expressed interest, 97 completed the survey. The survey collected demographic information: participants reflected an average age of 28-35 years old, with the majority of participants being male (92.8%), Caucasian (89.7) and possessing some college education (67%). Within the study, two assessment tools were utilized: the Primary Care PTSD Screen (PC-PTSD) to assess trauma symptoms, and the global item from the Dyadic Adjustment Scale to assess relationship satisfaction.

Findings from the study reflected that 48.5% of all participants screened positive for PTSD symptoms and 68% reported difficulty managing emotions and reactions. Of the parent

subsample (n = 36), 72.2% reported fears of managing emotions and reactions, and 69.4% had serious concerns regarding child-rearing and getting along with their children. 55.6% of parents said parenting has become more stressful since returning home from deployment. These findings demonstrate high levels of concern regarding family interaction. Concerning the parent subsample, the authors' data reflects consistency with previous research finding that combat veterans experience more family-related stressors upon returning home from deployment. Perhaps most strikingly, the data reflects combat veterans with war-related trauma experience greater difficulties with parental satisfaction and a decreased quality in parent-child relationships.

Limitations in the study are that only National Guard soldiers were surveyed; this specific participant pool may limit the generalizability of the research findings to soldiers in other branches of the military. The authors state that although the data reflects significant findings, they should be considered preliminary; further research is still needed. Additionally, the percentages reflecting PTSD symptoms experienced by the study participants were determined using a brief-screen. In order to further solidify the research findings a more comprehensive assessment tool should be used in future studies. Also of note is that among the 97 participants in this study only 7 were female; according to recent statistics gathered by The Women's Memorial (2011), 15.2% of National Guard soldiers are female, more than twice the number of female participants in this study.

In a study entitled "Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms among National Guard Soldiers Deployed to Iraq: Associations with Parenting Behaviors and Couple Adjustment" authors Gewirtz et al. (2010) discuss strikingly similar research into the relationship between combat trauma and couple/child-rearing satisfaction. The study drew its findings from participation of 468 male National Guard soldiers who were deployed to Iraq and reported being the father of at

least one child. Demographic data reflects a majority of participants identifying as European American (89%), African American (5%) and Hispanic American (6%). The mean age of study participants was 36.4 years old, and of this pool 74% were married. PTSD symptomatology was assessed using the PTSD Checklist-Military Version (PCL-M). Perceived parenting behaviors were assessed using the Alabama Parenting Questionnaire-Short Form (APQ-9) and positive parent-child involvement were measured using the Social Adjustment Scale-Self Report (SAS-SR). Problematic alcohol use was also screened for using the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT). Findings from this study demonstrate a direct link between reports of parenting difficulties/dissatisfaction and post-deployment PTSD symptoms among military combatants. Also present in the data was 31% of participants reported problematic drinking.

In the research findings section the authors state “PTSD symptoms of emotional numbing/avoidance may manifest in detachment from family activities and reduced monitoring of, and involvement with, children, and hyperarousal symptoms may spark volatile or emotionally dysregulated parent-child interactions, particularly in stressful situations (such as those around discipline or conflict)” (2010, p. 606). This study reflects a direct link to male military combatants experiencing war-related trauma and a decreased ability to maintain healthy relationships with their children. Additionally, as reflected by this study, the chances for maladaptive coping strategies in response to trauma, such as alcohol abuse, also becomes increased. The primary limitation inherent in the study is related to the specific recruitment pool; as demonstrated in other studies, using only National Guard soldiers limits the generalizability of the findings to other branches of the military. Also, as the study respondents were all male and the majority self-identified as either Caucasian, African American or Hispanic, the authors state

that other ethnic identities (i.e. Asian or Native American, etc.) reflected in the demographic data were excluded because numbers were too small for meaningful quantifiable data to be derived.

“Effect of Parents’ Wartime Deployment on the Behavior of Young Children in Military Families” by Chartrand et al. (2008) continues to demonstrate the need for additional research into how trauma sustained by military combatants can impact their children over the life-span. The study conducted a cross-sectional survey of the parents/childcare providers of children aged 1 ½ - 5 years old who were enrolled in military childcare centers on an undisclosed Marine Corps base while a parent was deployed. The study excluded children with pre-existing mental health issues or children whose parents were reservists or National Guard soldiers. Of the 169 families who returned the survey 92% of parents who were deployed were fathers; the majority of those who filled out the survey were Caucasian mothers with some college education. Parents/caregivers completed the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL), a test designed to report parental observations of perceived child behavioral concerns, as well as the Parenting Stress Index-Short Form (PSI-SF) and the Center for Epidemiologic Studies-Depression Screener (CES-D) to assess parents’ own levels of depression symptoms. The tests were given to the parent or caregiver who reported knowing the child the best.

Results of the study demonstrated higher levels of emotional impact in older children (aged 3-5 years) with a parent who was deployed in a war zone. The data shows that older children are at greater risk for experiencing clinically elevated emotional internalizing and externalizing rates than children under the age of 3; these children also, as demonstrated by the collected data, experience greater symptoms of behavioral problems. The authors state these findings are consistent with other research with children over the age of 5. Potential reasons for the higher levels of emotional impacts on children aged three or over may be attributed to the

time between 18 and 35 months as “critical for the development of attachment relationships” (2008, p. 1013); however, this is speculation and further study would be required to establish a definite cause for this observation. Additional limitations in the study come from the relatively small sample size; the authors also state that these findings are not generalizable to families living off-base, children who are not enrolled in childcare, or members of other military branches or reserve units. However, within the participant group, this study does establish parents’ wartime deployment as having a significant impact on the behavior of their children. Although this study specifically targets young children, it demonstrates the need for further attention to be paid to how these children continue to emotionally and psychologically develop into adulthood and across the life span.

### *Literature Gaps*

There are several interesting gaps to be found while reviewing various studies relating to wartime trauma among military combatants; these omissions are generally reflected across the board. Most strikingly apparent is that study participants are vastly male. According to The Women’s Memorial Foundation (2011), as of February of 2011 women comprise only 14.5% of the active duty population, while 15.2% comprise the National Guard and 19.6% making up the reserve population. Various studies in publication have pooled participants from different military contexts; some studies focus primarily on active-duty servicemembers, others from National Guard soldiers and other studies utilize a combination. Some of the participants served only in Afghanistan while others served only in Iraq; a percentage of participants served multiple tours of duty and in both countries. It would be interesting to explore if certain war contexts produced different levels of trauma in returning soldiers and to what extent the intensity of the

symptoms have been experienced depending on specific deployment location. Overall, the available studies reflect that the participants surveyed are predominately males of European descent. Although the racial and gender disparities are addressed within the studies themselves, this author has not come across studies that focus on the effects of wartime trauma solely in woman or solely on minority populations. Despite these gaps, the research demonstrates the need for further study by offering important and general insight into how a military father with combat-related trauma can affect the family system and the parent-child relationship upon returning home from war.

#### *A Call for Further Study*

A consistent theme that the literature seems to reflect is a commonality between trauma-exposed servicemembers and a deterioration of their relationship with their children after returning home from combat deployment. Furthermore, there appears to be growing agreement among professionals that more understanding and additional research is needed about children who grow up in this type of environment and how they are affected later in life as adults (Dias & Sales, 2009; Chartrand et al., 2008). The importance of looking at how the adult children of veterans who experienced trauma in a combat environment fare as adults - emotionally, mentally and psychologically - would be beneficial to and provide positive implications for the research and practical interventions conducted by mental health practitioners across a wide range of treatment modalities.

The collective data in these various studies points to military combat trauma exerting a negative impact on the soldier's ability to find satisfaction with, and take interest in, their relationship with their children. As demonstrated, combatants' trauma can significantly impact

ways of interacting with their children and manifest as emotional numbing and dysregulation, alcohol use, heightened stress and parental dissatisfaction, among others (Khaylis et. al., 2011; Gewirtz et. al., 2010; Chartrand et.al., 2008). What is also presented throughout the literature is information relating to the extremely divergent and subjective nature of trauma itself, as well as the innumerable effects it can have on the person who experienced it. What is consistently not addressed in the literature, however, is what the long-term, lingering effects are for the now-adult children of these combatants; several researchers and authors have illustrated the need for this research to be further explored.

The question is thus presented once again: What are the emotional and psychological effects of adults who, as children, were raised by a trauma-suffering military combatant parent? Following suit with broader research concerning childhood trauma, this study specifically seeks out the adult children of military combatants to engage in a qualitative study exploring how they feel their lives have been impacted by the experience of being raised by a traumatized combatant father; the study addresses themes of attachment behaviors and emotional issues potentially still operating in adulthood, as well as themes of resiliency and forgiveness. This study has participants reflect on their childhood experiences as well as their adult lives, allowing for exploration into possible correlations between their childhood experiences and themes in their adult life. This study should be seen as an attempt to bridge research concerning general childhood trauma and the reported deterioration in the relationship between combatant fathers and their children. It also gives a voice to the individuals who lived through this unique, shared experience, and allows them to discuss their personal stories of a childhood shadowed by combat and wartime trauma.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### *Theoretical Foundation*

The underlying method for this qualitative research is founded in phenomenology and grounded theory, the former which can be described as:

...a philosophical paradigm for conducting qualitative research that emphasizes a focus on people's subjective experiences and interpretations of the world...Guided by this principle, qualitative researchers attempt to understand the people they observe from those people's own perspectives – to understand their feelings, their views of reality, and the special meanings to them of what the researchers observe” (Rubin & Babbie, 2003, p. 218).

“Grounded theory is an inductive qualitative method that begins with observations and looks for patterns, themes, or common categories...the analysis is not set up to confirm or disconfirm specific hypotheses” (Rubin & Babbie, 2003, p. 218). In this manner, the researcher must approach collected data without any preconceived notions of what results the data may lead to, thereby allowing the greatest chance for the researcher not to be led or influenced by any anticipated or pre-supposed notions of certain data outcomes.

In essence, this approach to research is rooted entirely in the life experiences and perceptions of those individuals or groups being studied or interviewed, offering the chance for the researcher to be free of the barriers and parameters that accompany traditional quantitative hypothesis-testing research (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). Grounded Theory has its origin in the works of Glaser and Strauss (1967). They argued for a shift away from the traditional scientific approaches so frequently employed at that time and instead added emphasis on

interpreting the subjective meaning derived from transcribing interviews and coding the abstract material therein (Glaser, 1978). Using this approach for data collection the researcher is allowed the chance to ‘make meaning’ and identify themes instead of having to prove or disprove pre-conceived hypotheses. As articulately described by Ruth E. Fassinger (2005): “Grounded theorists interrogate the meanings created in these social relationships, attempting to discover how groups of people define their realities on the basis of their understandings of interpersonal interactions” (p156).

A joining of phenomenology and grounded theory, intimately related as they naturally are, is an appropriate foundation for interpreting the data collected from the personal interviews of adult children whose fathers are military combat veterans. Allowing these participants the room to narrate their personal subjective experiences of growing up in the shadow of a traumatized combatant father – and to explore how they feel this unique childhood experience may or may not continue to impact them into adulthood – will allow, from a research perspective, the opportunity to explore potential themes at play in the lives of this group, heretofore largely unexplored.

### *Research Design*

This study is qualitative in nature and seeks to explore how children raised by a military combatant father may or may not be affected as adults, and what some of the mental health or emotional impacts are, if any, that may continue to occur throughout their lifespan. The study seeks out some of these children, now adults, to engage in a personal interview focusing on childhood and adult experiences, and how the former may affect the latter. A total of eight

individuals were personally interviewed to explore how they felt their unique upbringing has impacted them as adults.

During the interview, study participants were asked a series of open-ended questions exploring various aspects of their lives as children in relation to their father being a military combatant and how they feel their adult life has been impacted by their experiences being raised in such an environment. The questions in the study were designed to reflect the results of several quantitative reports demonstrating that military combatant veterans report a decrease in parenting satisfaction and a diminished relationship quality with their children (Khaylis et al., 2011); Barker and Berry, 2009; Gewirtz et al., 2010; Chartrand et.al., 2008). As much of the current data focuses on the military personnel who experienced the trauma and their subsequent attitudes of parenting satisfaction, this study should be seen as a continuation of such research, research that attempts to ask the question: How do the children of these combatants fare as adults?

As with any retrospective study, the very nature of asking the participants to reflect on early life experiences can affect the internal validity of the experiment, as memories may have been inaccurately or only partially recalled. For this reason many of the questions presented in the study targeted emotional states and not specific incidences, for example: “Can you recall any observable changes in behavior for your father pre- and post-deployment?” or “Can you describe the climate in your household leading up to the deployment?” All questions and statements proposed within the study were structured as objectively as possible in an effort to reduce the likelihood of leading the participant’s answers (please refer to ‘Appendix A’ on page 55 for a full list of interview questions).

The design for this research was feasible to carry out for several reasons. There are multitudes of adults who as children were raised in military families; more specifically, many of

these adults were raised in a household with a father suffering from combat-related trauma. As military bases are located throughout the country, in small towns and large cities alike, this specific population was easily accessible and readily available. The most obvious challenge was to locate an appropriate number of study participants to agree to participate in the study; however, once the population was accessed there was no guarantee that they would meet the criteria for participation. Since this study addresses an area of research that has had little attention paid to it, as well as an area that has been identified as needing significant further study (Chartrand et. al., 2008; Dias and Sales, 2009), the information collected through this study may contribute to the pool of clinical social work knowledge and broadly apply to trauma research in general.

### *Sample*

The population studied during this research is the adult children of male military combatants. This general population demonstrates a range of diversity in the areas of ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, age and class. However, the desired study population for the proposed research focused on more consistent variables by looking specifically at non-military associated, English speaking adults between the ages of 18-35. In this manner the study utilized a non-probability sample selection, as a specific age range was sought. Additional factors such as gender, class, socioeconomic status and ethnicity were ideally hoped to be represented within the sample population but was ultimately dependent upon who responded to the study. In searching for participants no preference was given to or influenced by gender or ethnicity; a diverse, albeit homogenous, sample pool was indeed desired. A target sample of twelve participants was sought, but due to time constraints only eight were identified.

### *A Note on Stigma*

It is important at this time to note the role of stigma in the military culture regarding receiving help for actual or perceived psychological problems. Gould et al. (2007) note, regarding a recent study about military mental health stigma,

...results showed that admitting to a psychological problem was more stigmatizing than admitting to a medical problem and over half believed their career would be affected if they disclosed a psychological problem. . .personnel were much less likely to follow through with a psychological referral than with a medical referral” (p. 506)

Furthermore, the authors state how “soldiers felt stigmatized and abandoned after seeking help and many had not sought help for fear of being ostracized” (p. 506). This fear of stigmatization and ostracization by soldiers among their military peers and commanders leads many to feel the need to hide their trauma symptoms while actively in service. For this reason many soldiers who participated in combat situations never receive an official diagnosis during or after their military service, but nonetheless still silently suffer from PTSD and other trauma symptoms.

Regarding participants for this study, it was not a requirement that their fathers have a PTSD diagnosis but participants should have felt fairly certain that their father was indeed traumatized during the course of his military service. (For example, this researcher’s father never sought help nor received a PTSD diagnosis until after reaching full retirement status; although he certainly suffered from military combat trauma throughout his service, it was something that was never spoken about or discussed during his active-duty career.) Participants whose father has a known PTSD diagnosis were preferred to take part in the study over those whose father’s did not, but a lack of an official diagnosis did not automatically rule out participation; participants that observed with certainty that their father had been traumatized were still considered.

Inclusion Criteria: Participants had to be fluent in English and between the ages of 18-35, and must not have ever served in the military. They must have identified their father as being the military member who experienced the combat trauma, as the majority of soldiers are male. These criteria were to ensure homogeneity of the sample pool, as societal norms and public perceptions of military combat-sustained trauma have significantly changed (for example) since the WWII era. Limiting the age range to 18-35 years meant that participants' fathers could have served in any number of military combat deployments from Vietnam to the time of the Grenada Invasion of the early 1980's, the Gulf War of the early 1990's, or even into the present campaigns in The Middle East, placing the potential participants approximately between the ages of 18-35.

Exclusion Criteria: The study excluded those under the age of 18 and over the age of 35. Participants also must not have had any present or past connection to military service, as any potential trauma sustained from their own service may have obscured the data being sought. Non-fluent English speakers were also excluded from participation due to the oral nature of describing and elaborating on their life experiences.

### *Recruitment and Data Collection*

A number of recruitment methods were utilized to locate the study sample. As the sample specifically included non-military adults (age 18-35), no special permission was needed; participation was completely voluntary. As the desired age group was adults aged 18-35, posters, fliers and other print media were distributed and displayed in or near public places such as coffee shops, restaurants/bars, college campuses, and other commonly frequented and easily accessible

places where potential participants were likely to congregate. The possibility of taking out advertisement space in local and community newsletters and newspapers was explored, as well as online advertisement websites, but ultimately discounted due to limited financial resources. Social media sites such as facebook were also utilized to locate volunteers.

Participants were interviewed and asked to discuss their experiences growing up with a military father who was exposed to combat/wartime trauma. The interview questions were open-ended in design to encourage thoughtful and elaborative responses; the same interview questions were asked in each interview. The interviews averaged approximately 30-45 minutes each. Demographic data was collected at the beginning of the interview; information regarding age, gender, relationship status, level of education achieved, and the military branch their father served in was asked for the participants to identify. Demographic information served to describe who the participants in the study are. If geography permitted, all interviews were conducted in person. When a personal interview was not possible they were conducted over the phone. All interviews were scheduled in advance so as to cause the least inconvenience to the participant. All interviews, whether in person or via phone, were recorded using a digital voice recorder; the digital recorder automatically saves all recorded information as a digital music file that can be easily transferred and saved onto a computer. All information was stored in a password protected computer folder only accessible by the researcher. All transcriptions were carried out by the researcher.

Every effort to ensure participant confidentiality was strived for throughout the recruitment and data collection process. Additional information regarding the specific nature of the research, how the collected data would be utilized, potential risks/benefits of participation, approximate length of time the interview would take to complete, reasonable guarantee of

confidentiality, who the research would be presented to upon completion, and other important factors were explained in full detail. In addition to the consent form, a list of professional referrals was also provided to the participants. Once participation criteria was met, informed consent given and referral sources provided, the participants were then able to voluntarily consent to participate in the study, upon which time a date and location was established for the interview to take place.

Upon conducting an ample number of interviews (a total of 8) the process of collecting, analyzing and sorting the collected data began. It is important to note that precautions were taken to protect identifying information and secure the confidentiality of participants during all phases of the study. Code numbers were assigned to each participant once the data collection began, thus further ensuring confidentiality. Physical material was stored in a locked and protected filing cabinet, while all electronic data were stored in password-protected computer files. These precautionary measures provided maximum reasonable confidentiality, as well as protected any identifying information of individual participants. Although efforts were taken to achieve diversity (such as posting fliers and advertisements in different parts of the community), no guarantee could be made that diversity would be achieved as it is not possible to control who would respond.

### *Data Analysis*

A process of coding was used to organize and analyze the interview material. “The use of a structured interview and the detailed coding and categorizing procedures...attempt to bring specificity to data gathered in a more natural setting” (Fassinger, 2005, p. 157); the purpose of coding is to organize the material gathered from interviews into groups that contain and reflect

similar and related themes. Once coding of the interview transcriptions occurred, and themes were established and organized, the researcher was then in a position to better understanding how the subjects made subjective meaning of the world based on their personal experiences in relation to their father having been traumatized from military combat experiences. A sample size of eight participants was large enough to reflect noticeable trends and correlations within the data and provide opportunity to draw inferences, characteristics and meaning from the study results. In conclusion, the over-arching purpose of this study was to provide a preliminary understanding of potential effects or possible correlations associated between childhood experiences of being raised by a trauma-suffering combatant father and potential mental health impacts continuing into adulthood.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

#### *Introduction*

This qualitative study explores how the adult children of traumatized male military combatants felt their unique childhood experiences have continued to affect them in their current, adult lives. The adult children of traumatized fathers, specifically, were the focus of this study for two reasons: 1) the majority of combat service members are male; and 2) for the purposes of this study, focusing on one gender allowed for the greatest homogeneity. As the majority of presently available military-trauma research focuses either on trauma as experienced directly by the combatant and/or it's relation to child-rearing and family practices in the short-term, this study attempts to address how these children, raised by a traumatized military combatant father, may be affected well into adulthood and throughout the lifespan.

This chapter presents findings collected from in-depth interviews of eight such individuals who were willing to discuss their childhood experiences and how they feel that definitive childhood experience still impacts them presently. Basic demographic information was collected at the beginning of each interview, details of which can be found below. The interview questions were organized around two major themes: 1) memories/accounts relating specifically to their father, including their perceptions of his general demeanor and personality; and 2) issues and characteristics relating to participant's current adult lives in relation to their childhood memories of their father.

Using content analysis to analyze the interviews, four consistent themes were clearly identified, with  $N=8$  in all cases. The first theme illustrates that all participants' fathers were described as having withdrawn and avoidant personalities that severely impacted the dynamics of the entire family and especially the father-child relationship. The second major theme demonstrates that all participants' fathers rarely discussed or spoke about their military combat experiences and the nature of their trauma. The third consistent theme demonstrates that as adults all participants underwent a profound change in their perceptions of the traumatic experiences of their fathers; each interviewee expressed forgiveness, a change of perspective and more understanding for their childhood difficulties relating to their father's trauma. The fourth theme described how as adults, they describe more acute self-awareness, more control of their own thoughts and behaviors (intersubjectivity), and/or place higher value on communication in the various relationships in their lives.

#### *Demographic Information of Sample*

A total of eight individuals volunteered to take part in the study. Volunteers were recruited on-line or through snowball sampling, and responded from all over the United States including New England, the Northwest and the Deep South regions. Respondents ( $N=8$ ) all identified as Caucasian; although a more ethnically diverse sample pool was desired, the results did end up allowing for the greatest possible homogeneity of the sample pool to be achieved. The average participant was 27.75 years old. Gender was perfectly split; half identified as male and half as female. Highest level of education achieved unanimously demonstrated participants' pursuit of education beyond high school, as all eight had achieved an Associate's degree or higher, or were currently enrolled in a four-year college at the time of the interview. Of the eight volunteers five identified as being single (not in any current relationship); one participant was

married and the other two were engaged. Concerning the branch of service that the participants' fathers belonged to, results varied greatly; the highest number ( $N=3$ ) served in the Army, while the rest were scattered between the other three branches of service: Navy ( $N=2$ ), Marines ( $N=2$ ) and Air Force ( $N=1$ ). This is significant in that it does show the potential for trauma to be sustained in any of the four branches of the US military.

That all eight participants have achieved a higher educational degree, or are currently pursuing one, is significant, as it may demonstrate a possible correlation with participants' father's trauma. However, a greater  $N$  would need to be achieved in future studies in order to have a better understanding of possible significance; in the case of this study, it is very interesting but may be purely coincidental.

#### *Themes of Childhood Memories Relating to the Father*

The first two themes are retrospective in nature and jointly relate to the personality and general disposition of participants' traumatized fathers. The first theme reflects that participants' fathers had a withdrawn and generally avoidant personality ( $N=8$ ). This supports available data showing that combat veterans who experienced trauma are at a greater risk for guilt, self-loathing, sabotaging, self-destructive behaviors, substance abuse, anhedonia, and withdrawal upon their return home from battle (Litz 2007), and that combatant veterans report a decrease in parenting satisfaction and a diminished relationship quality with their children (Khaylis et al., 2011; Barker and Berry, 2009; Gewirtz et al., 2010; Chartrand et.al., 2008). Additional related data that surfaced during participant interviews also supports these established research findings; themes of father's substance abuse ( $N=6$ ), physical abuse/neglect ( $N=6$ ), household described as chaotic/tense ( $N=5$ ), and childhood fear of father ( $N=4$ ) also surfaced. The second unanimous theme demonstrates participants' fathers' difficulties ( $N=8$ ) with confronting and discussing their

combat experiences, and their reluctance to divulge information. All of these themes support and add to pre-established research, which already has been illustrated in the Literature Review chapter.

*Father's personality described as avoidant, withdrawn, on high-alert, and difficulty engaging in the family*

Participants were asked to openly reflect on their father's personality as children and adolescents. They either gave examples and accounts of actual childhood memories, or provided general descriptions of their overall view of how their father simply *was*; several participants provided both. One participant recounted an instance when the house alarm went off early one morning; the family later figured out that, unbeknownst to them at the time, a deer had simply run into the side of the house, tripping the alarm. His younger brother, also a combat veteran, reacted the same way as the father:

The house alarm went off. Before I could even open my door my dad was downstairs, and my brother. So I'll never forget, I mean they like – sshheeeeeww – completely swarmed the house to make sure nobody was in before I could literally open the door to my bedroom. I think it was just an instant reaction from being in combat, and stuff like that.... [His] reaction was to get up and go downstairs and see. Like I said, they're Marines – they shoot first and ask questions later.

Stories such as this were easily recounted by many of the participants. More commonly, however, participants just described their father's general personality, such as: "I think it was more, instead of just dealing with whatever the conflict was he would either try to ignore it or keep yelling 'Stop, shut up' or something. Instead of dealing with it, it would just escalate and then, SNAP, he would just flip." Similarly, another participant articulated: "He was very closed-mouth and he ran away from things. Any kind of conflict he would shrink back from or he would hide, basically, like go back to the computer room and close the door." A different participant described the same kind of personality. She said: "He's a quiet guy, so not like in-

your-face and ‘Hey, I’m here!’ you know. So I think anyone who was kind of like that...he was okay with, but he always needed to be in the background – not in the forefront of things.”

Another interviewee simply stated: “He would just withdraw,” while another simply offered that it was “...more of an overall inability or hard time just expressing emotion at all.” Several participants also recounted how substance abuse influenced and exacerbated their father’s mood, ultimately leading to the same avoidant, withdrawn personality. The following excerpt by a male participant articulately described this:

Well, he would, he wouldn’t know how to deal with the emotions he was going through so he would just drink. Instead of knowing that it would make it worse, he thought it would make it better. But in reality it would make things just that much worse. Maybe not worse for him but worse for everyone else around him, and in the end it would be worse for him.

On the same topic of themes relating to their father’s avoidant personality, many participants recalled specifically how their father’s avoidant nature directly affected the family as a whole – specifically the child-parent relationship: “I mean he just didn’t, in my opinion, he didn’t know how to respond to family and that kind of stuff.” A different participant added:

He was sort of...not really involved on a moment-to-moment, day-to-day basis; I think he would just do as much as he needed to do but wouldn’t really go any further as far as, like, hanging out with the kids, hugs, bonding-time, stuff like that. I think he would just sort of do as much as he had to do to get by with it.

The same participant, a 29 year old female, added “I don’t really remember hanging out with him in any type of father-daughter capacity, except when he was my softball coach...other than that I don’t really remember doing stuff [with him].” To the same effect a younger, male participant added: “We didn’t do a whole lot of family trips or anything when I was growing up...most of the time he’d probably just sit around and watch TV when he was home or if he didn’t have any work to do.”

These instances of participants' fathers' withdrawal from family involvement were so common and so similar throughout each interview, that it began to seem as though each person could have had the same father or have grown up in the same household. A female participant stated "I don't think my dad understands how to relate to his own family...he didn't really know what to say to my mom or to me, or my sister. So even today he's like that." Yet again, a different interviewee states: "...the entire family, the entire family. He wouldn't go to church with us ever which is a big deal to my mom. He just didn't really hang out with us very much...maybe he had stuff that he just didn't feel like he could talk to us about, which is still the case. There's just certain places he doesn't go." Across the board, interview after interview, participants described a father who had a difficult time engaging in the family, who was largely unable to respond to the needs of the children, and whose general way of coping with their trauma was to withdraw.

*Father rarely talked about combat experiences; when they did it was in a calm, non-emotional and detached way of speaking.*

Participants were asked the question: "Did your father ever talk about his traumatic experiences with you, either as a child or as an adult?" Much like how they described their fathers' personalities, this question produced very similar, articulate and elaborate responses. All eight volunteers described the same type of avoidant disposition. They described how when confronted with questions relating to their combat experiences their father would offer very little, if any, information.

One male participant, upon hearing his father describe an experience he had gone through, stated his father was "...calm, like he was telling just any story about anything, like saying 'I just brought in wood for the fireplace...'. That's how it was; like saying 'Can you go get the mail?'

Just calm, like talking about the Red Sox or something.” A female participant stated: “It’s just not stuff that he talked – we didn’t talk about stuff like that. Just like my dad doesn’t talk to me about Vietnam. If I ask him he will just kind of purse his lips tightly and say ‘You know, my best friend got shot sitting next to me,’ and nodded, ‘...in my arms.’ And that’s really all he’ll tell me.” In each interview the same types of responses were generated; some answers were short, such as “There’s never any emotion – never” or “He didn’t really go into too much detail about it.” Other responses were much more elaborate, as demonstrated here:

He never talked about stuff. As long as I can remember growing up I never knew too much about what he had gone through. I knew that he had gone to combat before, I knew that he had seen people die. I know that his whole career was medical and that he had seen some pretty bad stuff, but it probably wasn’t until I was in my early to mid-twenties that I actually started asking him and he actually started telling me that stuff. But if I hadn’t of asked I don’t think he would ever have told me, maybe even to this day he wouldn’t have told me. I really don’t know much about that – it’s kind of a mystery. What I do know is because I’ve usually directly asked him, but he’s really never given up that information on his own, unsolicited. When he did tell me about things he was cool and calm, very much like he could’ve been talking about just anything.

A different participant stated:

I don’t really know a whole lot of what he did. He doesn’t talk about it a whole lot, his experience in Vietnam. I mean, he does talk about how there was battles and there were fights and things that happened; he did see people die. He doesn’t get very explicit with stuff like that...in my thirty-four years of life he really doesn’t talk about it a lot; he’s really pretty quiet about it.

Interestingly, several of the participants described how their fathers occasionally would talk about some of their combat deployments but would only focus on trivial matters, still avoiding any discussions on the combat or any actual emotional effects. One participant stated how his father “would talk about a fun day...messaging around and stuff...throwing a Frisbee or whatever. Nothing really personal.” A different participant offered a more elaborate account of the same theme:

He’s told little stories but it’s more about his experience of travelling or taking pictures or going into Saigon. I remember he’s talked about his first experience with a woman who

was a prostitute – I think it was in Saigon or one of the cities – so he would talk about stuff like that, just the stuff they would do when they would go off-base. But he never actually talked about what happened...if he did it was very, like, very vague. It was like ‘Yep, I had friends and they didn’t make it out.’

One participant, whose father was an Army Green Berate, recounted a story his father told him of an instance in Vietnam when he uncovered an enemy spy in his company. He explained how his father “...found a North Vietnamese guy pretending to be South Vietnamese – he was in their base – so he had to take him out on a ‘mission’ or whatever, and all he said was the guy didn’t come back with him.” The following interview excerpt is from that story:

*Participant:* He would try to laugh during some of [the stories]. Especially the one where he was, like, ‘We took this guy out on a mission and he didn’t come back’ – I remember him laughing about it, trying to make it funny. It could have been his way of trying to hide any stress about it...he would always laugh during real serious stories like that. It could have been his way of trying to hide any stress about it.

*Interviewer:* Trying to hide any discomfort?

*Participant:* Yeah.

*Interviewer:* Doesn’t sound like a very funny story, does it?

*Participant:* No, not at all. He would always laugh during real serious stories like that.

### *Themes of Adult Issues Stemming from Child-Father Relationship*

The next two themes relate to how the participants feel their childhood experiences of being raised by a traumatized military father continue to impact them currently in their adult lives, and reflect possible new findings. The third theme shows how these adult children have gone out of their way to examine and reflect upon their lives, and have thought critically about their past childhood experiences *in specific relation to their father*. The interviews demonstrated that although they understand their childhoods were often defined by non-ideal situations (i.e. some instances of abuse, neglect, father’s substance abuse, etc.) related to child-rearing by an often detached, avoidant father, they have made a conscious effort to attempt an understanding of how going into combat and experiencing life-threatening military situations could have affected

their father's ability to be involved and attuned to the needs of the family and children. For this reason, forgiveness and understanding upon reaching adulthood is the third major theme ( $N=8$ ) running throughout the interviews among all study participants.

The fourth theme that was identified throughout all interviews ( $N=8$ ) shows that the participants all seem to place high value on the importance of communication and/or personal intersubjectivity in their adult lives; communication with their father, their friends, partners and loved ones alike is also seen by them as an essential and crucial component in maintaining healthy relationships. The participants all discussed and alluded to feeling that they have gained more self-awareness and self-control of their own thoughts and actions in relationships and in their navigation of the world in general. Self-driven critical thinking, increased intersubjectivity in the navigation of relationships and/or higher value on communication is the fourth consistent theme that unites all participants.

*As adults, participants express forgiveness, change of perspective and more understanding for childhood difficulties related to their fathers' trauma*

The second part of the interview consisted of asking questions relating to how participants felt their childhood experiences of being raised by a traumatized combatant father may continue to affect them into the present day, as adults. One question that generated particularly rich responses was "Do you feel that as an adult you have a different perspective of the experiences your father went through during his military service?" All interviewees either spoke directly or alluded to major shifts in their consciences relating to their understanding of how trauma can permanently alter the course of an individual's life, in this case their father's; all eight participants expressed understanding and/or forgiveness. The following example is a typical response: "When I was younger I just didn't know why he always was the way he was. I

knew he was in the Army but didn't know anything about it, so now that I know I can understand and see why he is like he is, or when we were growing up." Another participant offered a more elaborate response to the question:

When I was younger I had a lot of anger and I didn't know what to do with it. I think I was modeling it after my dad, but it was also in reaction to my dad because I didn't know what was going to happen day to day. When I was younger I know I had all these crazy feelings all the time; I hated my dad and I was scared of him – I wanted nothing to do with him for most of my childhood – I didn't understand why he was the way he was. All I saw was this mean guy who drank a lot and would hit me and yell at my mom and just cause general chaos in the house – I didn't know why. Years later, fast-forward, yeah, it's clear that he has some serious PTSD...when I try to imagine what it would have been like for me to be 19 or 20 and having people die in my arms who have been shot in some country I've never been to before – yeah, that's life-changing...he wasn't prepared for the military when he joined...so yeah, it really damaged him and I don't think he ever got over that, and I don't think he realized how much it damaged him.

A few of the participants explained that education and learning about the conflicts their fathers fought in offered a source of information, and possibly even comfort, for them. Since their fathers rarely offered information about their experiences, as previously illustrated, some participants went out of their way to seek out information, as described here by one participant: "Until I got probably to late high school, late high school/college, we started reading books about it and knowing what he did – it doesn't say specifically what he did but what the units did and all that stuff – you definitely get a different perspective." Another participant said "...honestly I think getting an education had a lot to do with it. Going back to school and having a degree in nursing, you do learn about a lot of this stuff, but...I think a combination of education, common sense, personal experiences, and also my personality." A third interviewee stated: "I definitely have a better understanding of what he went through was far more serious, far more dangerous, I think...I definitely have a better understanding but I still don't really know from his perspective what happened. I just know from what I studied in school."

Upon reaching adulthood, many of the participants reflected that they now see their father more as a victim; they felt that the military let them down by not offering adequate support upon their return home, as demonstrated by this short, yet poignant, statement: “I give him the benefit of the doubt. I know he wasn’t the way he was intentionally...I have a lot more sympathy now that I have an explanation. I see him more as a victim than him being consciously really aware or insightful of what he was doing at the time.” This attitude is further, and beautifully, articulated in another such elaboration:

I think victim is a good word. I mean think about it: he joined the military at 18, he had no idea what he was getting himself into, I’m sure nobody prepared him for what he was getting himself into or the type of things he would see. I’m sure he was just thrown into it – this young, sort of adolescent, young adult, who had never experienced anything like that before in his life – just thrown into a situation, don’t know how to handle it, then after the experiences and situations are over with I’m sure nobody tried to help him, I’m sure people just said “Buck up.” Then it just got worse from there. So yeah, I think victim is a good word to use...I don’t hold a grudge or any anger or resentment or anything like that towards him now, I think because I understand. I think the fault lies with him not getting the help that he needed. Even, maybe, before I was even born there were probably some red flags that should have been attended to, and then as the years went on it just got worse and worse. You know, it’s like a diabetic who’s not getting their insulin – is it their fault if somebody is with-holding their medicine from them if they’re sick? It’s the same thing. There should have been more help available, there should have been more awareness of it – I think there is now. But like I said before I’m not resentful or I’m not angry anymore because I do understand.

This type of response was typical for participants who recounted instances of abuse or neglect perpetrated by their father, and forgiveness was a major theme that came up during those interviews. One participant who attributed her father’s withdrawn, unstable personality as leading to her parent’s divorce had the following to say about him: “...he’s also a very withdrawn person and didn’t have a lot going on internally that he knew or let out, so that caused problems. It’s like festering, you know? So this is my adult perspective on it: my dad was, you know, crumbling on the inside, and my mom was very volatile and didn’t know what to think about it, and he was just a wall; so I can see why it didn’t work.” She later went on to say

“...looking back on it, or knowing what I know now it’s like ‘Ohhhhh...’ I can look back on the historiography of our lives – my dad’s life and my life – and I see why he might have been the way he was.” The following portion of an interview sums up fairly holistically the sentiments and attitudes of the whole sample pool:

I think when I was really young I didn’t even see him as angry. I just thought – you know you grow up thinking your parents are like everyone’s parents are, so you don’t really...it’s like “This sucks!” in the moment but you don’t really think that it’s wrong. But then you grow up and you start to realize that every dad is probably not like this, this probably isn’t normal. I think there’s just sort of a mutual understanding, understanding where it’s one thing to be mad at someone for stepping on your toes, but then when you understand why they’ve been stepping on your toes it’s easier to forgive them – if it’s a good reason. So it was like that; understanding why made it less painful and easier to understand.

*As adults, subjects describe more self-awareness, more control of own thoughts and behaviors (intersubjectivity), and/or place higher value in communication*

Participants were asked the questions “Do you feel that any parts of your childhood experiences continue to impact you currently as an adult?” and “Do you feel that growing up with a traumatized military combatant father has affected your ability to relate to people or the world around you?” They were encouraged to elaborate as extensively as possible, and the answers given back were striking in their depth of thought.

One participant, a female in her early thirties, stated: “I’m very communicative in my adult life...communication is extremely important. You can’t be a wall or shut down. You can’t bottle things, because it comes out in nasty ways, or it just causes things to disintegrate – or relationships to disintegrate – like my mom’s and my dad’s or even his relationship with his daughters.” She went on to state “...it’s like I try to keep calm and talk about things even if I’m really frustrated or angry.” Regarding the importance of communication, a different interviewee shared “I think I have better communication skills than he does. In some senses he’s a lot better

at it – he’s always done sales so he’s good with people on a non-emotional level, relating to them and stuff like that, but when it comes to talking about family and being close like that I think he kind of, he’s a little more ‘I want to be your friend’ kind of thing.”

Participants reflected that they strive to have more control in their thoughts and actions when navigating the various relational landscapes in their lives. They described feeling that anger is not a healthy solution to solve issues and expressed an ability to practice more control in their thoughts and behaviors. One participant simply stated: “I try to not be as easily tempered sometimes, or try to think things through before reacting.” Concerning child-rearing specifically, one female interviewee stated:

I think now having a daughter, I definitely make it a point to not get angry with her, to not overreact, to pick my battles, to realize what’s really worth getting upset about versus just reacting instantly...I have this theory that hitting and spanking your child is not disciplinary for the child. I don’t think it’s effective; I think it’s an outlet for the parent. It makes the parent feel better because they don’t know how to express their anger – *they* hit the child, *they* feel better – it’s like when somebody punches a wall, it’s the same thing. You’re punching the wall because you’re getting out *your* anger, *your* aggression, and the ‘wall’ gets hurt from it.

Other participants discussed specific positive character traits they felt were related to their childhood experiences with their father. Through retrospection, they described feeling that they were able to transform negative moments into positive experiences later in their lives, and now see those experiences as essential to their development. One such sentiment is expressed: “I definitely think that I’m a good listener...you know how if some people hear a piece of information and they react to it? I try to be like ‘Ok, well, maybe it is this way, but also maybe it’s this way, too.’ You don’t really know. We need to talk to the person before we know exactly what it means.” She goes on to explain “...he taught me a lot of positive stuff. Some of that I take with me...[he] raised me to be a thinker about people and about feelings.” A different participant, a younger male, simply stated that “I guess now, maybe I try to be more patient.”

Yet another participant stated, regarding self-control: “I don’t think I...I mean I speak my mind but not to the point where he does. He has that force, that demeanor...I’m only 30 but maybe it comes with age. I do a lot of stuff, stuff around the house that he did, like how I approach stuff, what the problem is...and people maybe. Learn to walk away, stuff like that.” Perhaps the most extensive elaboration of how being raised by a traumatized combatant father can shape and influence a person throughout life came from a male in his mid-twenties:

I think my dad made me who I am. As bad as some of the crap is I’m glad it happened. It shaped me into who I am. I don’t have any regrets....it made me fall in love with reading – that was my escape; it made me discover interests I never knew I had. All those moments of me trying to escape my household I was teaching myself about other things...I’ve always tried to figure out where people are coming from and why people do the things they do and think the way they think – and I think all of that comes from my dad. It comes from a negative place but I think I’ve somehow managed to turn it into a positive thing...everyone in my family, all my friends, everyone in my life, really, across the board, say I’m one of the most easy-going, relaxing people that they’ve known. Not much gets to me; I shrug things off very easily...when I do get angry it’s intense. It happens instantly. I can hold things in for years and years but the rare occasion where something does set me over the edge I can erupt; I see that in myself. But my dad would kick and scream and yell and hit and whip and go into a fury – I’ve never been like that; I can keep it under control. I’ve never been in a fight. I don’t hit people. I’m not violent.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

#### *Expectations of Findings*

It was anticipated that during the interviews instances of child maltreatment, chaotic/tense households, issues of parental substance abuse and other vivid recollections from childhood would be recalled frequently by the interviewees. This expectation comes from two sources. The first stems from personal experiences of the researcher having grown up in a household with a PTSD-diagnosed combat veteran father. The second source of this expectation is derived from and reflected in professional literature within the field of military trauma research of how wartime and military combat experiences can affect family life and child-rearing upon a soldier's return home. In this sense, the retrospective themes relating to the participants' childhood experiences of their fathers complimented and were supported by current research in this field of study. These findings are not new, but they do add a voice and a deeply personal narrative of the feelings, sights and sounds that defined these children's lives. The retrospective themes add depth and perspective to the available research, and offer a stark image of the transformative journey that these individuals have taken from a childhood that was by no means ideal into an adulthood marked by personal resilience, forgiveness and increased intersubjectivity in the many relationships in their lives.

What was not expected, on the same note, was the amount of resiliency and critical thinking that participants demonstrated during the interviews when it came to their understanding of the impact that such a childhood ultimately had, and continues to have, on their adult lives.

These findings were not anticipated, but in interview after interview these themes continued to show themselves at play in the lives of these incredible people; that they have been able to create a truly transformative experience from the ashes of a childhood never asked for is a remarkable feat indeed. As children, participants recounted story after story of not understanding why their father was so withdrawn, detached, volatile or angry. The not-knowing seems to have been a shared experience amongst them and certainly a defining part of their memories.

What was remarkable was the shift in consciousness that came to the participants later in life; hearing stories from their fathers about their combat experiences caused participants to re-examine their childhoods and specifically the nature and personalities of their fathers. In direct relation to this new understanding, participants all expressed forgiveness and greater insight into why their fathers simply were the way they were. Furthermore, they were able to describe many positive impacts in their current lives that they see as stemming directly from their experiences as children. To hear their personal stories in their own voices was a privilege.

#### *Statement of Researcher Bias*

It is important to note the role of potential researcher bias within the course of this study. As mentioned, this researcher's father is a combat veteran who has been diagnosed with PTSD. For this reason, it was important to delicately structure the interview questions to be as open-ended as possible and to present them in a way that would not 'lead' participants' answers, thereby avoiding the chances for their interviews to conform to the researcher's own notions of what their lives may or may not have been like. This also allowed the freedom for volunteers to recount their own stories in a way that would not conform to pre-conceived notions. I believe this was successful.

No two families, military or civilian, are quite the same, and for this simple reason it was vital for the researcher to hear different accounts as much as possible. Positive and negative stories alike were sought after, families from different geographical regions of the country stepped forward, fathers in different branches of the military and who fought in different military campaigns were identified, and age ranges were diverse. For these reasons it is the researcher's belief that a diverse, yet homogenous, sample pool was indeed attained. It is hoped that the acknowledgement and awareness of these potential bias factors have significantly contributed to reducing the chances of its occurrence throughout the course of this study.

### *Concerning Retrospective Themes*

The retrospective portion of the interview generated two distinct and unanimous themes: 1) that participants' fathers were all described as having very similar withdrawn, avoidant personalities and struggled with staying involved in the day-to-day interactions of family life, and 2) that participants' fathers rarely discussed their wartime or combat experiences. Through first-person accounts, these two themes aptly describe and illustrate the difficulties that enshrouded the lives of the participants as children. Demonstrating these themes at play in the lives of the participants not only serves to support the presently available data but also offers a natural backdrop allowing for better understanding and contextualization of how such a childhood can continue to impact individuals throughout the lifespan, and was essential to understanding the themes operating in the participants' current adult lives.

Additional supportive themes that also arose throughout the interviews further illuminated previously established research; participants repeatedly described their fathers' struggles with substance abuse, struggles with anger and emotional regulation, accounts of

perpetrating various forms of abuse (most commonly physical abuse and neglect) and various forms of self-destructive behaviors. Although these themes were not the focus of this research, they did offer further proof that trauma sustained from military combat affects not only the veteran but the entire family system. Ultimately, the retrospective portion of the findings of this study substantiates previous literature describing military combatants as having more difficulty staying engaged in the family, developing avoidant personalities, a proneness to developing problems with substance abuse, and a diminished relationship quality with their children.

### *Concerning Current Themes in Adulthood*

The portion of the interview concerned with how participants feel that being raised by a traumatized combat veteran has impacted their lives as adults was the primary focus of this study. Two distinct, and unexpected, themes arose. The first of these themes related to how participants were able to reach a place of forgiveness for their fathers' childhood maltreatment of them and/or for not being as involved in their lives as they would have liked. They described only reaching this place of understanding after growing older and critically thinking about the significant impact that going to war can have on a person's personality.

The second of these themes identified how, later in life, participants were able to transform and overcome their turbulent childhoods in a way that allowed them to attain a greater insight as to how their own thoughts and behaviors affect those around them. They described gaining a kind of awareness within themselves in relation to people that their fathers, due to their trauma, were never able to achieve. Subjects described this as a key element into their own personal development and spoke of the importance that communication and intersubjectivity plays in their adult lives. Although these positive personal attributes stem from a place of

negativity and often-times maltreatment, participants described having attained their current beliefs and attitudes through those very negative experiences.

One participant, for example, discussed how her father's trauma ultimately led to her parent's divorce. She discussed how as a child she did not understand why her father was so distant, why he drank so much, and why he generally avoided family interactions. She recounted several memories of a chaotic household where her father and mother regularly fought and argued, and she, a small child, simply not understanding why any of that was happening. Now in her early thirties she is able to reflect back on those instances of her childhood and understand that her father was suffering deeply but had no outlet, and her mother become more volatile and unpredictable in reaction to her father's distance and avoidance. She went on to describe how now in her current life she places high value on openness and communication in her relationships, especially within her own marriage. She spoke of a deep aversion to spousal fighting and how open displays of anger and physicalities ultimately solves nothing; she instead spoke of the importance of talking through issues in an open, honest way.

A different participant recounted stories of a father who began to heavily abuse marijuana during his deployment and after his return home from Vietnam. She described being severely harassed and victimized by her older half-siblings (from her father's previous marriage) on a fairly regular basis while he would self-seclude and use marijuana. Although her father never abused her she does believe that his drug use caused him to be neglectful, as she described often feeling unsafe and unprotected in her own household. This participant explained that through her father's avoidant and withdrawn personality and not knowing what his mood may have been like day-to-day, as well as with a lot of support and comfort from her mother, she developed a knack for 'reading' people, being a good listener and being able to think objectively in most

situations. It is no wonder, she explained, that she now works in the mental health field and attributes aspects of her personality to her childhood experiences growing up with a traumatized war veteran father. They have a great relationship today and she describes holding no ill-will or begrudging feelings towards him.

A male participant in his thirties described his father as a heavy drinker and prone to severe displays of anger. He described how his father's anger could easily get out of hand and lead to physical altercations; although this participant said physical confrontations were not necessarily regular or frequent, there was always the potential for a situation to get out of hand, which did occur on several occasions. His father never spoke of his military experiences with him until the participant was well into adulthood but upon hearing some of his stories he described being able to better understand why his father's behavior was the way it was within the family and towards him. He also no longer is angry and described feeling a sense of understanding. Discovering parts of his father's past allowed him to make sense of some of the worse instances of his childhood. As an adult he described that he is not nearly as quick to anger, has more patience, and tries to not jump to conclusions or have strong reactions to various life situations until he has better understand of any such situation.

The participant who spoke of her parenting ideals also reflects this same sense of understanding and being aware of her internal emotions. Her father was also described as an alcoholic who struggled with anger and emotional regulation. Additionally, he regularly self-secluded and was described as having a hard time remaining involved in the lives of his children. She articulated since becoming a parent she now understands just how stressful children can be and how easy she feels it is for some parents to go over the edge in response to that stress. Now armed with this knowledge, she better appreciates the pressures and stresses her father must have

been under, but also spoke at length of the importance of regulating her own feelings and emotions in response to her child's behavior. In a way that her father wasn't quite able to do, she now finds herself not as quick to anger, does not believe that spanking or any form of corporeal punishment is an effective parenting strategy, has more patience and "picks her battles" wisely, and is more acutely aware of her own internal emotions. She also expressed complete forgiveness and understanding towards her father upon learning later in life of his extensive military trauma history and how damaging such experiences can be on an individual.

In each interview stories as these unfolded time and time again. Each story was very different from one to the next but there seemed to be an ever-present unifying trajectory of personal growth and development among each interviewee. The differences described in childhood experiences were as different as the participants themselves, and whether physical abuse or neglect occurred or did not occur, whether they felt safe or did not feel safe, whether they were scared of their father or not, each person articulated a profound impact in their current lives that they see and understand as having directly resulted from their relationships with their fathers. All participants felt that they have grown into resilient, mature, inquisitive and strong individuals with many positive attributes that arose out of and in reaction to their childhoods.

### *Recommendations for Future Research*

The small sample size of eight participants limited the generalizability of this study. A larger  $N$  would allow for a greater range of responses and account more accurately for any shared experiences and later-life impacts of being raised by a military combatant father. Having a greater number of participants would also increase the chances of attaining a more ethnically diverse sample, as all eight in this study identified as White. A more longitudinal study of

lifespan impacts stemming from childhood experiences with traumatized combatant fathers would also be of importance to the general field of trauma research.

This study looked specifically at male military combatants, the reason for this being two-fold. The primary reasoning was for the purpose of creating homogeneity within the sample pool, and the other reason due to the limited time frame of this study. Although the majority of combat veterans are male it was still difficult at times to locate volunteers for this study, and may have been even more difficult to locate the children of female combatants within the same allotted timeframe. It would be interesting and important for researchers in this field to incorporate female combat veterans in future studies or even to look solely at the effects of children raised by these servicewomen. This added diversity would increase the generalizability of future studies and would also be addressing the notable fact that more women are engaging in military combat throughout the world.

Another interesting recommendation for future research could be to examine the adult children of military combatants of specific campaigns in which their fathers fought in. As this study cross examines a range of military campaigns from Vietnam to the present wars in The Middle East, a study that focuses on any one combat operation could account for and reflect differences within the ever-changing nature of military and civilian stigmas attached to receiving mental health care, and how these stigmas affect combatants and their children throughout different generations. Participants' fathers who fought in Vietnam would have experienced a very different reaction to their service and their trauma compared to, for example, combatants returning home from the wars in the Middle East, as civilian and military perceptions of trauma and treatment have changed so much over the last several decades. The role that stigma plays in

receiving mental health support among military combatants is an important factor that could be studied independently or in conjunction with future research of this type.

### *Implications for Social Work Practice*

There are several important implications of this study for both the field of social work and the more generalized field of trauma research. Beginning to explore some of the impacts from being raised by a combat-traumatized veteran father offers a window into the inner world of these adult children, as it does demonstrate long-lasting impacts operating well into adulthood, and arguably throughout the lifespan. This insight can be valuable for social workers, therapists and anyone in the mental health field who works with military families, or anyone who has an interest in the various ways that combat-related trauma can affect the entire family system in the short- or long-term. This study can be seen as a continuation and supplement to already-established research, but in many ways this study offers something new to the field: it demonstrates that these children grow into resilient and intelligent adults who place high value on the importance of communication in the various relationships in their lives, it shows an ability for self-exploration into their own intersubjectivity and perhaps most importantly, these individuals demonstrate that it is very possible indeed for people to turn adverse childhoods into something positive and perhaps even inspirational.

It is again important to note that the findings from this study are very preliminary, as heretofore little attention has been paid to the long-term effects of individuals who share this particular and unique childhood. It simply means that these results make some important points and hopefully raise even more important questions. This explorative study offers an attempt at a deeper understanding at play in the lives of the adult children of male military combatants, and it

is the researcher's belief that this has been accomplished. Interesting and important information has been uncovered as a result of this study, and if it demonstrated nothing else it is hoped that in the least it will illustrate the need for a continuity of this research to take place through future similar studies.

Military servicemembers and their families are in all respects a fairly private and highly unique *culture* within our own country, a culture of which the intricacies and demands are largely unknown to the general, civilian population. Few, if any, populations ask so much from the individuals as of those belonging to this special group of people. The military servicemen and women of this country are the first to volunteer their lives for the sake of protecting the good of the whole; they serve not for themselves or for personal recognition, they do not serve because they think their lives will be made easier as a result of their duties and they do not serve for selfishness or personal gain. They serve their neighbors, they serve their country and the history that is represented therein, and they serve their children and families. They serve for you and they serve for me. This study is for them, as so little is ever given back to them in return for their sacrifices. The implications of this study will hopefully contribute to the awareness of the personal costs that their service has on us all. It is hoped that this research, as preliminary as it is, will somehow contribute to the relief and well-being of all the children across the country whose father's sacrificed their own well-being for the sakes of their children, family and country. It is also hoped that mental health professionals will find this information useful and insightful when working with the children, adult-children, and families of our military men and women.

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Appendix A  
Interview Guide

Demographic Information:

Age:

Ethnicity:

Gender Identification:

Highest Level of Education Achieved:

Father's Branch of Military:

Relationship Status:

Interview Questions:

1. Can you describe, to the best of your knowledge, where your father was deployed and what the nature of his traumatic experiences were?
2. What was your father's role/job during his deployment (ground soldier, medic, search and rescue, etc.)?
3. How long did the deployment(s) last?
4. Can you describe the climate in your household leading up to the deployment? How about after his return? (This will depend on the age of the child pre- and post-deployment)
5. Relating to the previous question, can you recall any observable changes in behavior for your father pre- and post-deployment (such as depression, self-seclusion, disinterest in activities that he normally enjoyed, etc.)? Please describe.

6. Throughout your childhood and adolescence, can you recall any observable triggers for your father after his deployment (meaning situations/scenarios/events that would cause visibly heightened stress, anxiety, or other emotions)? Please describe.
7. Did you ever have the feeling, or did you know, that your father ever abused alcohol or other drugs throughout your childhood? If so, do you recall a difference in those patterns pre- and post-deployment? Please describe.
8. Do you feel that your father was ever abusive (any abuse: verbal, physical, mental, etc.) to you or any members of your family upon his return home from deployment? Please describe.
9. Were you ever scared of your father? Can you please describe what would make you scared?
10. Do you feel that any parts of your childhood experiences continue to impact you currently as an adult? Please describe anything that comes to mind. (For example, issues relating to trusting people or forming relationships, your own alcohol/drug use, or perhaps no impact at all, etc.)
11. Do you feel that as an adult you have a different perspective on the experiences your father went through during his military service? How do you feel this has affected your present relationship with him?
12. Did your father ever talk about his traumatic experiences with you, either as a child or as an adult? If so, do you remember how you felt or reacted?
13. Do you feel that growing up with a traumatized military combatant father has affected your ability to relate to people or the world around you? Please describe what comes to mind.
14. Is there anything else you would like to share or discuss, or anything important you feel I left out of this discussion?

## Appendix B

### Informed Consent Letter

07 February 2012

Dear Participant,

My name is Neil Smith. I am a graduate student from Smith College School for Social Work and am pursuing my Master's degree in clinical social work (MSW). I am currently conducting a research study for the purpose of fulfilling my graduation requirements; the study will be an essential component of my Master's thesis and integral to my research is the involvement of voluntary participants. My research seeks out adults like yourself who grew up in a military household with a father who suffered from combat-related trauma as a result of their military experiences. I am interested in how these individuals feel their unique childhood experiences have impacted them as adults, if at all. The results from the survey will be used for my MSW thesis and may additionally be used for presentations or be published.

You are being asked to take part in this study because you meet the four requirements for participation: 1) You are between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five; 2) You are not presently serving in, or have ever served in, the military in any capacity; 3) You are fluent in the English language, and; 4) Your father served in the military and during his service participated in wartime or combat situations. If you do not meet all four of these criteria then you will unfortunately not be able to participate. The interview will be conducted by myself at a place and time of your convenience; should we not be able to meet personally, the interview will be conducted via telephone. The entirety of the interview will be audibly recorded and should take approximately 30-45 minutes. The extent of your involvement will be to take part in an interview that will ask you to reflect on various aspects of your experiences being raised by a father who suffered from combat-related trauma sustained from his military experiences. While answering the various questions, you will be given complete freedom to tell your own story and create your own narrative of your personal experiences. At the beginning of the interview I will collect basic personal information such as your age, gender, ethnicity, highest level of education achieved and your current relationship status. Your personal identity will only be known to me.

There are no physical risks that may result from participating in this study. However, due to the potentially sensitive subject matter involved with reflecting on life experiences it may be possible that emotional discomfort or some stress may result. In anticipation of this possibility a

list of referral sources are provided should any emotional discomfort result from participating in this study. Your participation will help to provide a better understanding of how people like yourself, who were raised by a military combatant father, have been affected by their unique experience. Unfortunately, I will not be able to compensate you for your time in any monetary fashion, but considering that significant research in this field is currently lacking, your participation may potentially help to provide better services to many people throughout the country – people who have had similar life experiences as you have.

The only people who will have access to the data I collect will be myself and my direct research advisors, who will be supervising my research and helping me throughout the process. All electronic materials and data collected will be stored on my computer in a password-protected file and any material that is in print form will remain in a locked filing cabinet. This protocol is to ensure your maximum confidentiality and protect your personal identity; the data will be protected for a minimum period of three years as stipulated by Federal Government guidelines, after which time all material will be destroyed. Should I need the materials beyond the three year period they will continue to remain in a safe, secure location. When and if the time comes to present or publish the study results, all research findings will be presented in a manner that will continue to protect your identity. Your personal protection is my absolute priority.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may refuse to answer any question during the interview and may opt to withdraw from the study at any point before May 15, 2012. If you do choose to withdraw your participation all information about you will be immediately destroyed. If at any point during the course of the study you have any questions or concerns, you are encouraged to contact me at either of the e-mails listed below. You may also contact the 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 \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Contact Information:

R. Neil Smith Jr.  
Smith College School for Social Work  
Northampton, MA 01063



## Appendix C

### Human Subjects Review Committee Approval Letter



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

February 16, 2012

R. Neil Smith

Dear Neil,

I want to let you know that this revision is very well done, thought out and approved in its entirety. You are ready to go ahead.

*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 research.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'David L. Burton'.

David L. Burton, M.S.W., Ph.D.  
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Marian Kaufman, Research Advisor

Appendix D

Recruitment Poster  
*(Please see next page)*

**Q:** Were you raised in a military family?  
And did your father serve in  
combat operations?

**A:** Yes!

*please read on ...*

## Adult Children of Military Combatants: Impacts into Adulthood

### purpose

A study exploring the personal impacts of being raised by a traumatized military combatant father.

You are invited to take part in a confidential personal interview that will offer you the chance to *discuss these experiences in your own words*.

### eligibility requirements

1. You are between the ages of 18 and 30.
2. As a child, your father served in the military and during their service participated in wartime or combat situations.
3. You speak English fluently.
4. You are not presently serving, or have ever served, in the military in any capacity.

*Sorry, no monetary compensation.*

If you are interested in participating in this study, or if you have any questions or concerns about eligibility, please contact:

**Neil Smith**

**P:** [REDACTED]

**E:** [REDACTED]

Military Research Study

**Neil Smith**

Military Research Study

**Neil Smith**