

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF COMBAT VETERANS'  
EXPERIENCES AS THEY TRANSITION TO CIVILIAN EMPLOYMENT USING  
HIGHER EDUCATION AS CAREER DEVELOPMENT

A Dissertation

by

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## ABSTRACT

When enlisted combat arms military service members return from deployment and enter or reenter the American workforce, they often find it challenging to explain their Military Occupation Specialty (MOS) positions and associated responsibilities and accomplishments to employers. Particularly in an economy that has gone from being prosperous to becoming stagnant and recessed in recent years, veterans have returned from military service to find increased competition for fewer jobs that are mostly at the lower end of the skill requirements and pay scale. Many service members have utilized higher education as career development to mitigate the transition from being a military service member to being a civilian employee.

The purpose of this study was to explore, using hermeneutic phenomenology, the lived experiences and feelings of combat arms veterans about the transition process from higher education to the civilian work environment while allowing veterans to share their feelings about their experiences in their own words. The aim of this research was to better understand the veterans' perceptions of their career development transition to civilian employment in order to identify strategies to assist them through the transition and into civilian employment. Seven veterans of military service in the infantry were identified with purposeful sampling from the population of OEF/OIF veterans with combat arms MOSs pursuing higher education at a large southwestern university. Because there is no direct civilian employment correlate for the combat arms MOS, it necessitates that the participants identify new career directions. Participants were at

least junior level in their education at the time of interview. Each participant was interviewed twice face-to-face with hermeneutic interviews conducted three weeks apart.

Themes that emerged from my review of the research data are reflective of the phenomena occurring within the veteran participants' career development experiences as they move through and move out of higher education into civilian employment. The themes that emerged from the participants' stories of their experiences share common roots of power and have intertwining branches: new structures, new systems, and new relationships that impact the veterans' career development. Feelings of fear and hope about their career development and future civilian employment are part of the veterans' career transition process and experiences as illustrated in the data. This process and the constructs brought into relief from analysis provide the answers to the research questions posited about infantry veterans' experiences using higher education as career development for civilian employment. While they expressed a clear understanding of their skills and capabilities gained through military service that they believed should be of value in civilian employment, the participants also acknowledged their concerns and worries that their experiences and abilities to contribute in civilian employment would not be recognized.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the thousands of veterans who have engaged in higher education and used the benefits they honorably earned to change their lives with a new career. It is especially dedicated to my favorite veteran, World War II (WWII) Marine George M. Sierk, my grandfather who inspired my passion for supporting veterans. To the many veterans who have been wonderful friends and demonstrated exceptional generosity in helping me to learn about what it means in our world today to volunteer to serve our country: You inspire me. Your service and sacrifice has demonstrated the best of American character, and your perseverance to move your career forward with education has proven the power of the American dream you fought for. Thank you can never be enough.

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I want to extend my deep gratitude to the veterans who were willing to participate in this study. Your service and sacrifice to secure our liberty is humbling and inspiring. It has been my honor to hear your stories and share your experiences to help others. This work would not exist without you.

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## NOMENCLATURE

Veteran	A prior military service member; may still be on active duty
OIF	Operation Iraqi Freedom (Iraq), March 20, 2003–August 31, 2010
OEF	Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan), October 7, 2001– present
OND	Operation New Dawn (Iraq), September 1, 2010–December 15, 2011
MOS	Military Occupation Specialty code; one’s military job; term primarily used by the U.S. Army
NEC	Navy Enlisted Classification
AFSC	Air Force Specialty Code
Combat Arms	Military generalist responsible for close combat, reconnaissance, security, and other aspects of combat situations; may include artillery specialists, infantry, special operations, and tank crew
Enlisted	Career path in the military; usually non-college graduates
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder; a mental health diagnosis
TBI	Traumatic Brain Injury; physical injury to the brain tissue incurred from external force
Post 9/11 GI Bill	Enacted by Congress in 2008 and expanded in 2010 to authorize funding for military and veteran postsecondary education benefits to those who served after September 10, 2001

Outside the Wire	The unsecured space outside the perimeter around a base or military encampment
MEU	Military Expeditionary Unit; a self-sustaining military unit that can enter an area and hold the position secure for 30 days without additional force support
Deployment	Military service members moved to a specified area for a specified purpose over a specified time
11B	Eleven Bravo; Army military occupation specialty of infantryman
0341	Marine Corps military occupation specialty of infantry mortorman
RSP	Recruit Sustainment Program; prior to training, ensure that service members are mentally and physically prepared and their personnel and medical records are correct
ETS	End of Term of Service date
Stop-loss	Military policy allowing a service member's active duty to be involuntarily extended past their initial end of term of service date through their actual contract end date
PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Team; responsible for helping support reconstruction efforts in unstable international areas; infantry provides security for engineering and construction forces

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Veterans are a growing population on many college and university campuses at present as they return from deployments or leave military service to take advantage of their education benefits in order to move into new career fields. Numbers of veterans in higher education have increased over the 13 years the United States has been engaged in the global wars on terrorism: Afghanistan - Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF); Iraq - Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) known as Operation New Dawn (OND) since September 1, 2010; and periodic contingent military operations. The end of combat operations in Iraq and overall troop drawdown in Afghanistan has led to service members returning from combat in numbers not seen in 40 years (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Garza-Mitchell, 2009). Additionally, the Post-9/11 GI Bill, in effect since August 2009, has ensured that veterans who want to pursue higher education can obtain an almost fully funded college degree.

The lagging economy has not offered significant employment opportunities for veterans leaving the service, especially for those with little to no training outside their military experience. While the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013) reports the post-9/11 veteran unemployment rate dropped from 12% in October 2011 to 10% in October 2012, it still sits higher than the civilian rate of 7.4% for that same period. The numbers are not differentiated for those who are attending higher education versus those who are not, but it is, nevertheless, worth noting that the

difference between veteran and civilian rates exists. Some employers have offered employment to any veteran who wants civilian employment, but the low-wage entry positions available, such as cashiers, are more suited to those without any work experience than veterans who have been battle tested and proven their capabilities in service.

Perhaps some of the most challenged by employment options are service members entering the civilian workforce from infantry Military Occupation Specialties (MOS). Having held positions as scouts, gunners, and general infantry, these service members' previous work has little comparison in the civilian world. For those individuals whose job it has been to identify and kill the enemy in foreign lands, the need to acquire new employment skills and knowledge is most likely a must.

The current educational benefit available to military veterans, the Post-9/11 GI Bill, is the most comprehensive education benefit ever offered and allows those using it to take advantage of traditional two- and four-year college education, certificate programs, on-the-job training, apprenticeship, or flight school. The benefit can even be used at some foreign schools for those who want to take part in international study programs as part of their education (Ryan, Carlstrom, Hughey, & Harris, 2011; Van Dusen, 2011). In drafting and updating the legislation authorizing the Post-9/11 GI Bill, Congress paved the way for more veterans to obtain educational opportunities since the initial GI Bill following World War II (WWII). With more opportunity for education, veterans now have the potential to attain a degree that, combined with their military

service, could make them the most well-qualified and desirable candidates for employment since WWII as well (Elliott, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011; Ryan et al., 2011).

Given the economic challenges that continue to plague our workforce, the competitive nature of the employment search for fewer open jobs, and the availability and flexibility of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, it seems logical that a preferred pathway following military service may be higher education. Obtaining a college degree, certification, or other educational enhancement for infantry veterans could lead to increased options of employment and greater marketability of skills and experiences. Questions remain, then, regarding why the rate of veteran employment continues to lag behind that of non-veterans and how veterans can be most successful in future careers following military service by making use of higher education as part of their career development.

I undertook this research to explore the lived experiences of career development of infantry veterans as they transition into higher education leading to graduation and on to civilian employment. The findings of the research study will be important to the field of human resource development as well as to those developing and implementing programs in higher education that are designed to support career development. It may also aid in further consideration of how current student development theories apply to veterans in higher education. The findings will be particularly important for those individuals in organizations who are responsible for creating effective candidate screening and hiring processes as well as employee development opportunities; this research may highlight the ways in which veterans make use of career development.



Additionally, it may offer insight into how veterans pursuing new careers after military service make sense of the skills and experiences they gained in service in relation to their new career directions.

### **Engaging in Military Service**

Service members join the military for many reasons. Some feel it is their duty to serve out of patriotism or a desire to defend their nation, others come from military families and follow their family members' footsteps into service, a few are looking for adventure or a challenge beyond what they believe the traditional workforce can provide them, and a number want or need the educational benefits provided for military service so they can reach career opportunities otherwise unavailable to them (Ackerman et al., 2009). Whatever their reasons for entering, service members make a commitment to an organization and a job for a specified length of time and agree to follow that commitment wherever it leads. Since September 11, 2001, that commitment has led most to at least one deployment overseas where they have engaged in work that is unknown or unrelated to most civilians' experiences.

As an all-volunteer military, it is critical that the branches select the individuals for their specialty functions carefully. They use "a set of selection criteria for choosing recruits. Physical, educational, and mental criteria are applied in screening applicants for entry into the military—criteria that are positively related to success in the civilian sector" (Teachman & Call, 1996, p. 4). Of great importance to the military and service members is whether service members are a good fit with and capable of succeeding in their assigned work. A great deal of time is put into the training process for each MOS.

The military wants to get the best return on its investment as do service members who want to get the most out of their experience (Dillon, 2007). Research has demonstrated that “the military serves as a bridging environment whereby appropriate values and social skills necessary for success in mainstream American society are learned” (Teachman & Call, 1996, p. 5). Particularly for those entering military service directly from high school, the interpersonal and technical skill development is critical for both military and later civilian success. How well these skills are learned and implemented is largely dependent on the individual service member. Gaining experience working with diverse groups in challenging and dynamic situations in addition to the MOS skills should position them well for success after service (Dillon, 2007).

The work service members do in the military depends on the branch in which they serve, the skills and specialties needed at the time, and their abilities as reflected on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB). This test “is designed to help recruits identify their career-related aptitudes” (Dillon, 2007, p. 12) prior to entering to military service. Many, but not all, of the occupations to which service members are assigned have a similar corresponding position in the civilian employment sector, which provides service members an opportunity to learn skills and technical knowledge in military training that may be useful outside the military. Additionally, Teachman and Call (1996) note that “greater transferability of skills from military to civilian jobs due to the increased technical requirements of waging war” (p. 5) is evident in the technical nature of many MOSs.

Service members receive additional training after their basic boot camp learning and go to job training schools before, between, or after deployments. At these specialized schools they learn new information and strategies to become more effective at their MOSs. Service members have a specialty to which they are assigned or have chosen based on testing and aptitudes brought to light during training. As Dillon (2007) states, “the military trains you to be technically proficient in whatever occupation you are assigned to. But you’ll also learn teamwork, perseverance, leadership, and other skills widely applicable in the civilian workforce” (p. 8). This is one of the military’s strongest selling points to potential recruits. The training military service members undergo is of significant interest, particularly among individuals with little direction in life or for those individuals who want to gain skills and experience but do not want to go to college. Also for those individuals who want to learn particular skills or gain certain experience, the military training is seen as desirable and rewarding. Some of the MOSs that service members undertake are more related to civilian careers than others, such as vehicle repair, which makes the transition to, or back to, civilian careers somewhat easier.

In other cases, like infantry, there is no comparable position within civilian organizations. This disconnect between military MOS and civilian career opportunities causes difficulty for those attempting to transition without a specific direction. In all, these service members are one of the least understood and most in-need populations that have the capability to create economic change and fiscal prosperity through their unique contributions (Ackerman et al., 2009). Although some military specialties might

potentially transition more effectively to civilian careers, it is important to remember that the overall leadership, teamwork, ability to complete objectives, and decision making that military service members learn should be vital to most civilian positions.

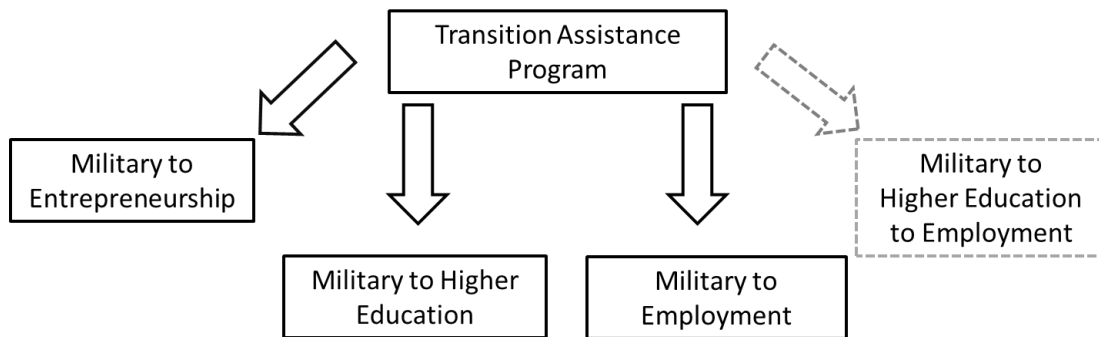
Though the selection processes for entering military service, the testing to determine MOS assignment, and overall skill development that all service members experience should correspond to effective transition to the civilian workforce, the disconnect between what should be happening and what is happening based on Department of Labor statistics is apparent. Based on what the data are telling us, military veterans should be well-prepared to compete for employment in the civilian marketplace with their skills, training, and experience (Steele, Salcedo, & Coley, 2010). That veterans' unemployment rate remains higher than that of their counterparts who have not served indicates that something may be happening to create a deficit in veteran hiring. Understanding what may be creating the hiring gap is important to finding solutions to any existing problems and increasing veterans' hiring rate.

### **Transitioning Out of Military Service**

To assist with service members' transition to civilian life and career-related concerns, Congress determined that before leaving the military service members would need the opportunity to learn how to seek employment. They must have the opportunity to attend transitional services workshops 90 days before separating from service, because not all skills and experiences from the military would easily or realistically transition to civilian employment (Clemens & Milsom, 2008). Prior to separating from the military service, members go through a program known as the Transition Assistance

Program (TAP), which is a cooperative partnership between the Department of Defense, Department of Labor, and Department of Veteran Affairs (U.S. Department of Labor, 2002).

TAP sessions are delivered over the course of several days, and service members select a track from the following three TAP options: transition from military to civilian employment, transition from military to entrepreneurship, or transition from military to higher education and the accompanying benefit programs and resources available to attendees. However, no sessions are offered that address the transition from military to higher education and then to employment as shown in Figure 1. This is a significant gap in information that service members separating from the military increasingly need as they are ill prepared to think beyond higher education. Additionally, because service members are often not focused on the information being presented during the TAP classes, due to the presentation style and timing of the program, they miss information they need to help them transition after active duty (Ackerman et al., 2009). Also, because each branch presents its own version of the program, and presentation skills vary widely, not all information needed is conveyed to every service member. Among service members separating from the military, the TAP program is not regarded as valuable or relevant to their future in academics or employment.



**Figure 1.** Military transition assistance program tracks.

Following the TAP program, it is essential that veterans receive career development assistance in order to effectively navigate the career transition from military service MOS to civilian employment opportunity. Because many veterans entered military service without prior employment experience, they will need significant assistance in initiating and following through on an effective employment search. Chris Kyle, a combat veteran, shared the following words from his transition experience.

It is so hard becoming a civilian. When you are in the military, everything you do is for the greater good. And as a civilian, everything you do is for your own good. ... And this is your problem. ... They train us how to become warriors, but then they don't teach us and train us how to become businessmen. (Repko, 2012, p. 1)

The transition that separating military service members make to civilian life and employment is a developmental challenge. While the process is often difficult, once completed, the skills of transitioning may become an additional aptitude the service member brings to civilian employment. The career development transitions that

veterans experience as they go through higher education may force them to expand their networks to accommodate new people and experiences that change their perceptions of themselves.

For individuals who had never anticipated a college education, this change may trigger enormous dissonance between who they believed they were and who they have become. After adjusting to the military way of life, including putting the military's and the team's needs ahead of their own (Dillon, 2007), service members may grow into a new "life space" of "everything we know or think we know. It includes our interpretation of the past and our expectations of the future, our plans and our prejudices" (Parkes, 1971, p. 103). It is this transition and the career development that occurs during this time that is of interest for this research.

### **Veteran Experiences in Transition**

Limited research on the current veteran population in higher education exists to inform us about veterans' diverse needs and how to best address those needs through the services offered in the higher education environment. The bulk of the literature available on the subject of veterans in higher education addresses their entry to higher education following military service (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; Ackerman et al., 2009). These articles have been published in student affairs journals and compilations that are aimed primarily at those who assist college students and develop policy for student service departments in higher education. DiRamio et al. (2008) present one of the most prominent voices to address veterans in higher education. Their article not only prompted increased study of veterans returning to institutions of higher

learning but also initiated the use of Schlossberg's (1981a) theory of adult transition with research on the veteran population attending higher education.

Following this work, other scholars began examining veterans' general transition experiences as they enter the higher education environment, including the study of personal issues like Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and military sexual trauma in addition to veterans' academic struggle (Elliott et al., 2011). While DiRamio et al. (2008) pointed out many of the challenges veterans face when attending institutions of higher education, the article also addressed the significant concern that the institutions of higher education were ill prepared with the necessary resources to assist veterans through the transition challenges. The gap in the current body of literature exists in the exploration of the veterans' career development and civilian employment search experiences as they transition throughout their higher education experiences and prepare to leave the institution for civilian employment. The extant gap and potential remedies will be addressed by this research.

Veterans comprise a unique culture group in our society based on their clothing, lifestyle, language, and practices in which they engage that set them apart from others (Dunlop, 1999). Even after leaving military service to undertake academic study, the experience they have had prior to entering an institution of higher learning sets them apart in their actions and reactions on campus, the ways in which they socialize and study, and their expectations for how they will be treated by faculty and staff (Ackerman et al., 2009). Veterans experience higher education differently than their traditionally aged counterparts and often struggle to fit into the fabric of campus life.



The culture of a college student is largely incongruent with that of a military service veteran. Among other changes, veterans are no longer being provided with clothing, meals, and work by the military. Brown and Gross (2011) define veteran and military students as “a subpopulation of adult learners” (p. 45) with more in common with other nontraditional populations in higher education than traditional 18–22 year olds. They note that addressing veterans in higher education the same way that traditional students are supported “does not develop a context for understanding the military student, the driving forces supporting military education, or the benefits associated with these students’ academic success” (Brown & Gross, 2011, p. 45). As such, I am intentionally not using the term *student veteran*, which is the label previous authors have used to describe them. In this research I will refer to this population as *veterans in higher education* to reflect the position that veterans attending institutions of higher education are nontraditional adult learners and do so purposefully to further their career options.

As a group, veterans in higher education exist in a space where challenges to their awareness of resources must be overcome before learning from the resources can begin. Veterans engaged in career development through higher education particularly need to make use of career development resources in order to learn how to seek out available careers based on their education, identify civilian positions of interest, and conduct a career search effectively. Resources are available for all students, but veterans in higher education may struggle with how to access services on campus. Coming from a military culture in which all necessary resources are provided to service members and

seeking additional or special resources is frowned upon, or flatly punished, veterans may be reluctant to ask for help and access to resources not readily visible. Additionally, veterans are a notoriously stubborn and self-confident group who will resist asking for help unless absolutely necessary. That perspective, coupled with a lack of knowledge about resources available and fear of being ridiculed for asking for assistance, may lead to veterans not accessing services available for support and guidance.

Current career development literature on veterans either entering or already in civilian employment following higher education is scant. Literature addressing a particular career counseling strategy for working with veterans, cognitive information processing, is available, however, this thread of research does not discuss the career development and transition process from higher education to the civilian career for veterans. As such, this research stream will not fulfill the need for broader information on the way in which veterans engaged in higher education navigate the career development process as they transition into civilian employment, though it may help to identify challenges veterans face once employed in the civilian sector.

When military service members return from deployment and enter or reenter higher education preparing for the American civilian workforce, many find it challenging to explain their MOSs and associated responsibilities and accomplishments to prospective employers. Some of the MOSs, such as computer technicians, photographers, and medical laboratory technician, are similar skill-wise to civilian positions and, therefore, are easier to transition to civilian careers. However, this is not the case for all military jobs.

For those individuals whose military job has no civilian equivalent or who desire a career necessitating education, the experience to be gained and assistance available on the college campus can have a significant impact on their post-military employment success (Bullock, Braud, Andrews, & Phillips, 2009). What is surprising is the number of veterans who have struggled with the transition process from military service member and back to civilian in higher education searching for post-graduation employment. Anecdotal evidence in magazines, newspapers, online news stories, and student reports suggests that the responsibility for the lack of veteran hiring lies in part with the employers and part with the veterans themselves.

On the side of the employers, a great deal of attention has been focused on the divisive narratives portraying veterans as heroes with broad skills and technical capabilities or as passive victims of the wars and mental illness brought on by their experiences overseas. Public displays of both profiles have further polarized the representations through large employer announcements of plans to hire significant numbers of veterans and violent actions by perpetrators identified as disturbed and traumatized veterans. Eisler (2013) noted the “incongruity here between society’s respect for the military and its fear of the ways that military life can reshape people” (para. 8). He also pointed to a 2011 study (Morin) that found almost half of Americans without a family member serving would not recommend military service as a career path, indicating that negative perceptions of the military are pervasive even as we, as a society, say we support our troops (Eisler, 2013).

As noted previously, much of the more recent research about veterans' transition has made use of Schlossberg's (1981a) theory of transition in adult learning. Schlossberg's (1981a) work on transition is based on the ways in which adults go through change. Research on working adults, older adults, and retired adults has informed the models and frameworks developed to describe the transition process for these groups. While this model was not developed with military veterans in mind, it has been made to fit when considering the ways in which they transition through their military experiences and into higher education (Ackerman et al., 2009). For this research discussing military transition, the framework used by Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) will be most helpful because it defines the stages of transition.

Understanding the environment and situation surrounding experiences in higher education, one can easily appreciate how Schlossberg's model of adult transition fits with the experience new veterans in higher education face. Parkes (1971) talked about psychosocial transition, which compels "the abandonment of one set of assumptions and the development of a fresh set to enable the individual to cope with the new altered life space" (p. 103). This idea of a change in assumptions is much more in line with Schlossberg's concept of transition and applies more directly when looking at changes military service members encounter in their transitions.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Veterans whose MOS has no civilian employment equivalent, such as infantry veterans, have limited technical options for post-military work. The job they have done has no civilian equivalent, though they do possess knowledge and skills that can be

assets to them in civilian work. Because of this they may choose to attend institutions of higher education as a way to develop additional skills and gain knowledge to make them more competitive for the civilian workforce.

Additionally, many veterans want to take advantage of the generous education benefits they earned to find a new career path. For these veterans, the career development transition they experience in higher education may have a significant impact on their civilian employment potential and viability as candidates in their employment searches. This research sought to understand what it is like to be a veteran transitioning through higher education as a career development path to civilian employment upon graduation.

### **Assumptions**

Several assumptions regarding infantry veterans' career development experiences in higher education and transitions to civilian employment following higher education guided the development of this research study. These assumptions included (a) veterans in higher education go through a career development process as part of their transition, (b) veterans in higher education experience challenges to be navigated as part of their career development transition to civilian employment, (c) the interviewees would respond truthfully and disclose as much as they were comfortable with, and (d) the phenomena identified through the research would likely be applicable to the larger population of veterans in higher education engaged in career development.

## **Purpose of Study and Research Questions**

**Purpose of the study.** The purpose of this research was to explore the lived experiences of career development of infantry veterans as they transition into higher education leading to graduation and on to civilian employment. Career development experiences were, for this research, generally defined as the process individuals go through as they develop knowledge about what they like to do, what they are good at doing, what they have done to build skills and competencies, and what they want to do for work following higher education.

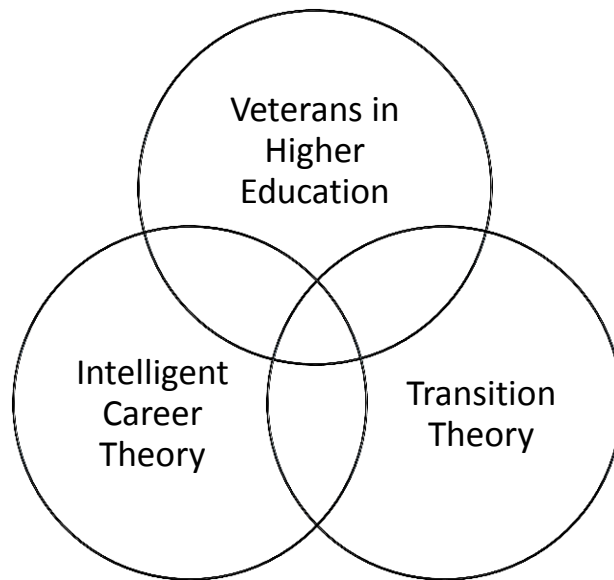
**Research questions.** The following questions guided the research:

1. What are the lived experiences of veterans in higher education from combat arms Military Occupation Specialties (MOS) related to career development as they prepare to leave higher education and transition to civilian employment?
2. How do veterans in higher education from combat arms MOSs relate their prior military experiences to their future career work?
3. How do veterans in higher education from combat arms MOSs feel about the transition process?

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter provides a review of the literature framing this research. The chapter is comprised of the three main categories of literature reviewed that informed my perspective on the population, the issue, and the context of interest for the study. This chapter is organized into three sections (see Figure 2). The first section describes the population for this study: veterans in higher education. The second section provides an overview of the literature concerning intelligent career theory. The third section reviews literature concerning transition theory.



**Figure 2.** Literature review main categories.

## **Veterans in Higher Education**

The bulk of the literature available on the subject of veterans in higher education addresses their entry to higher education following military service and general needs for support in higher education without addressing career development directly. These articles have been published in student affairs journals and higher education compilations and are aimed primarily at those who assist students and develop policy for student service departments in higher education. With the first wave of veterans entering higher education following military service, DiRamio et al.'s (2008) article marked the beginning of new scholarly research on the current veteran population. They posited an approach to serving veterans in higher education with a holistic approach incorporating academic and student service resources coordinated by a "Transition Coach" (p. 93) but did not include career development services as one of the services (DiRamio et al., 2008). Following their work, other scholars, such as Ackerman et al. (2009) and Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, and Fleming (2011), began examining veterans' transition into higher educational experiences.

What has not been examined in the literature addressing the current veteran population in higher education is the perceived impact of career development in higher education upon veterans' success in attaining civilian employment. Indeed, career development and career services for veterans in higher education are not identified in any of the literature reviewed for this research. The gap in this body of literature exists in the area of veterans transitioning to civilian employment mitigating the transition with pursuit of a degree in higher education.



Veterans are faced with two important aspects of career development to focus on during higher education enrollment: improving skills developed in the military and learning new skills and knowledge. When service members leave the military and enter higher education with the intent of moving into civilian employment, they bring with them a significant breadth and depth of technical and interpersonal skills. Their varied experiences gained through military training and service are the greatest assets that veterans bring to the educational arena and future work, and it is these skills that will serve them best as they move into civilian employment following higher education. Enhancing military-developed skills in higher education, while adding academic knowledge, can be an effective way for veterans in higher education to transition from military service to civilian employment.

Veterans of the most recent wars and military actions, have been entering higher education following military service in increasing numbers since 2001 (DiRamio et al., 2008). Particularly with the advent of the Post-9/11 GI Bill enacted in 2008, unarguably the most comprehensive GI Bill ever enacted, enrollment numbers have risen since the benefit first began paying out in 2009. With further changes made to the benefits program in 2010, even more veterans began entering higher education. United States government records of GI Bill use show 773,000 users of the GI Bill since August 2009 (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2013).

Veterans are taking full advantage of the opportunity to gain higher education through traditional colleges and universities, technical training programs, and career schools. However they choose to pursue education and training, many veterans are

making use of their hard-earned educational benefits to add to what they have to offer the civilian world in terms of working and earning potential. Given this, we would expect to see veterans representing increasing numbers in business organizations that say they are eager to gain the experience, maturity, interpersonal skills, and competencies veterans embody.

It is surprising, then, to continue seeing veteran unemployment rates in excess of 10% and, at times, up to 20% (U.S. Department of Labor, 2013). The gap between the high numbers of veterans pursuing further education and the high unemployment rates of veterans remains unexplained and, given that the gap exists, it is relevant to research what is most important for veterans in higher education to focus on during their university enrollment. Enhancing military-developed skills, in addition to gaining new skills developed in the higher education environment, is the priority for veterans' success in civilian employment after graduation. By building on the skills service members in transition bring to institutions of higher education and capitalizing on the positive qualities they bring to the educational environment, colleges and universities can create an institutional culture where veterans are valued. This starts by ensuring that the faculty and staff understand how and what veterans in higher education have learned and gained through military service (Rumann & Hamrick, 2009).

### **Military Training and Education**

All military service members go through a form of basic training as developed and implemented by their service branch. Basic training gives them the necessary skills each person must have as a member of that branch and the military in general. In

addition, basic training is an inculcation to the cultural nuances of each service branch and basic expectations and rules to which members must adhere. Service members then have a specialty to which they are assigned or chosen for, based on testing and aptitudes brought to light during training and evaluation. Service members are asked for input on their preferences for MOS, but they are often assigned based on other capabilities or military need at the time. Over 140 MOSs exist between the military branches (Dillon, 2007), and some have direct counterparts in the civilian workforce. Some of those that more easily transition are computer technicians, photographers, and medical laboratory technicians, as illustrated in Table 1, but this is not the case for all military jobs.

Service members receive additional instruction after their basic boot camp training and go through MOS training schools before, between, or after deployments in order to learn new information, skills, and strategies to become more effective at their MOS. Much of the learning in which service members engage to become proficient at their MOSs is seen by civilians as physical training and learning by rote rather than true education. This difference in the understanding of these terms and of the learning experience between military and civilian can present a significant barrier to service members' success in post-service education and employment.

Like civilian jobs, MOSs require learning technical aspects of the work while other interpersonal skills are developed through ongoing experience. For example, an Army medic may attend a number of schools for training on field medicine to learn and gain experience in how to care for wounded soldiers and provide emergency medical care. In addition to the technical proficiencies developed through the educational

courses, the soldier will also learn and practice effective communication to be able to give directions and provide information on the condition of the wounded, strategic

Table 1

*Military Occupation Specialty in Comparison to Civilian Position*

MOS	Civilian Position
Aviation	Air traffic controllers, air crew, aircraft mechanics
Combat Operations	Infantry, armored vehicle operation, artillery and missile crew, Special Forces
Computers	Computer network and systems administrators, computer support technicians, computer programmers
Construction	Cabinetmakers, carpenters, plumbers, masons, surveyors
Food Service	Planning, ordering, inspecting, preparing, and serving meals, food service operations and safety
Health Care	Lab technicians, other medical technicians, dental technicians, physicians, nurses, physical therapists
Law Enforcement	Military police, security forces, investigators, law enforcement and security
Maintenance	Automotive, heavy equipment, tanks, other vehicles
Manufacture and Power Plant	Machinists, welders, electricians, operators, manufacture or power positions
Media and the Arts	Photographers, graphic artists, broadcasters, media technicians, technical arts specialties

*Note.* Adapted from “Military Training for Civilian Careers (or: How to Gain Practical Experience While Serving Your Country),” by C. Hall Dillon, 2007, *Occupational Outlook Quarterly Online*, 51(1) pp. 8–9.

thinking to create a plan of action when responding to a medical emergency situation, and strong leadership to help subordinates learn and develop skills.

The training and education that service members undergo in the military is important for those individuals who may have little or no clear direction in life and want to gain skills and experience before, or without, going through traditional higher education or technical training. Also, for those individuals who want to gain particular skills, such as problem solving and decision making, or gain organization and planning experience, the military training undertaken by service members is seen as desirable and rewarding. It may, however, create an unanticipated barrier for those who interact with or seek employment from others who do not see value in the kind of military training and education veterans have undertaken.

In that category are some faculty and administrators in higher education who fail to see the connection between military MOS and education. Further, they equate all military learning to *training*, which is perceived as physical in nature rather than requiring mental strength, intelligence, and acuity (Bauman, 2009). Holding this belief system can lead these individuals to discount the knowledge and skills service members bring to the institution and to the classroom in particular (Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008). Failure to have their competencies and capabilities recognized by faculty and administrators may have a strong impact on service members' confidence in pursuing some form of higher education and may cause them to subsume skills and examples of experience from their military experience in the classroom rather than using the opportunity to contribute to others' learning (Livingston et al., 2011).

## **Intelligent Career Theory**

As global markets have changed, the world of work has undergone significant transformation as well. No longer is the image of the company man the norm, but rather, it is not unusual for an employee to anticipate changing employment multiple times both within and outside a firm. Impacted by the movement to a knowledge society, shifts in perceptions of balance between work and personal life, and the increasing retirement rates of the large baby-boomer generation, the employment landscape is undergoing change. One of the ways in which employment change is taking place is in the way employees perceive their career options and career development opportunities. Rather than the focus on one's career unfolding within a single firm based only on promotion through performance, employees are beginning to realize that career opportunities can come from a variety of sources and are not bounded by performance or time spent at a particular employer. They are finding that careers can be boundaryless and based on much more than previously considered (Arthur, Claman & DeFillippi, 1995; DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994; Inkson & Arthur, 2001; Parker, Khapova, & Arthur, 2009).

**Competency-based career progression.** Many firms take a horizontal view of career competencies and connect them to specific career goals within the organization meaning that career progression within that firm is based on their assessment of employees' performance within a specific role and for a defined amount of time. This perspective limits employees' expansion of their knowledge outside the proscribed boundaries of their positions and creates an artificial time line they must follow in order to consider a career change (Inkson & Arthur, 2001). If employees do not experience

career progression within the proscribed time and based on meeting organizational performance goals, they may become demotivated and less inclined to continue to reach for career progression opportunities.

The competency-based model of career progression, intelligent career theory, is based on the belief that the management of one's career development is in the hands of the individual and that career progression should be boundaryless. DeFillippi and Arthur (1994) note that the intention of the intelligent career is "less to serve the present employer, than to protect against dependency upon it" (p. 310) so that employees' career development becomes emancipated from organizational control and employees gain agency in their career progression through the accumulation of career capital as they invest in themselves (Inkson & Arthur, 2001). This is accomplished through a "knowing" (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994) career competency framework.

The "know-why" (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994) competency reflects an individual's career motivations, values, work identities, and career interests. Within this competency, employees' desires to do particular work and expectations about their careers are also inherent as may be their enactment of the organizational culture within which they work (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994; Inkson & Arthur, 2001). Many employees also find their sense of purpose affiliated with their career, which is demonstrated in the "know-why" (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994) competency that may impact their sense of commitment to their work (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994; Inkson & Arthur, 2001).

The "know-how" (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994) competency refers to those attributes, skills, technical competencies, and knowledge bases that employees bring to

their work. These may be the result of formal education or training as well as on-the-job learning and self-study (Arthur et al., 1995). Taken from the traditional concept of setting a position's needs to match an individual's Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities (KSA), know-how is focused on the KSAs employees have within them that they can use broadly rather than determining how those fit a particular position (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994; Inkson & Arthur, 2001).

The “know-whom” (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994) competency focuses on employees' career networks within and outside the present organization and how those networks are used to maximize career movement and progression (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994). The intrapersonal relationships employees maintain within their work organizations, personal friendships, professional associates, and academic connections provide a valuable network within which to gather career opportunity information and build career capital through a positive professional reputation (Arthur et al., 1995). Most commonly referred to as networking, the “know-whom” (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994) competency engages employees in intentional relationship-building for mutually beneficial career development (Inkson & Arthur, 2001).

Effective use of the career competencies typically occurs when the three ways of knowing interact for increased career capital building and greater career development success. Investing in understanding and making conscious use of the competencies gives employees greater agency in their career capital development and probability of continued career growth (Inkson & Arthur, 2001).



*Knowing-why to knowing-how* occurs when employees understand their motivations and values within their work and use that knowledge to grow and develop in their work-related competencies. Likewise, maintaining strong technical skills or content knowledge can lead employees to have increased confidence and enthusiasm for their work in a knowing-why to knowing-how interaction. *Knowing-how to knowing-whom* interaction can be seen in employees' increased network contacts based on an excellent professional reputation. Employees who are known to be well-informed and knowledgeable in their fields will be highly sought on referral by contacts who need their expertise in a knowing-whom to knowing-how interaction. *Knowing-whom to knowing-why* provides the opportunity for employees to receive feedback from trusted others in their networks to help clarify and reinforce career goals and motivations. In turn, employees who have redefined their work-life values may turn to those within their networks to identify new career opportunities more in line with their values and motivations to work in the knowing-why to knowing-whom interaction (Puri, 2009).

**Objective versus subjective career development perspectives.** Careers are, for many employees, the things upon which they base their value, worth, and status in life and within which they find purpose, meaning, and motivation (Parker, 2002). As such, it seems counterintuitive to do so when employers, most often, do not place the same value on employees. Top-down management, fortress-building, and corporate allegiance have been the hallmarks of career development in traditional organizations (Arthur et al., 1995). With this, career development has also maintained an “objective career dimension, concerned with externally defined work roles and status attributions”

whereby “job histories, sequences of roles, status acquisition, and work transitions” (Parker, 2002, p. 85) are assessed to determine employee potential for career advancement. Cataloging objective measurements of employees’ potential for career growth may provide what is perceived as an effective yardstick for comparison to others, but does not take into account the myriad subjective factors upon which employees may gauge themselves.

Objective and subjective information about employees can be obtained through traditional career counseling methods used in combination with the knowing competency-based approach. Personality assessments, such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, can be used to provide information about employees’ know-why ways of processing information and relating to others. Such assessments can also help clarify employees’ values and motivations to work. Evaluation of employees’ tactical performance at work, educational record, and ongoing training can illuminate their know-how competencies and identify how they meet the qualifications for a position type. Gathering know-whom information can be most challenging because it requires obtaining feedback from employees’ colleagues, clients, and other contacts; however, it can provide some of the most valuable information for an employee who seeks career development. Such feedback can be gathered through 360 feedback systems or customer evaluations, but may require more direct requests for information (Parker, 2002).

This subjective-objective duality in career perspectives necessitates the need for understanding the interdependence between these disparate concepts (Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005). It also encourages organizations, employees, and career

development specialists to use both perspectives to assess career effectiveness and fit. Arthur et al. (2005) note that the interdependent perspective recognizes that individuals are “continually interpreting and reinterpreting the work experiences and career success they have had” (p. 180) in order to best understand their career experience. Assessing knowledge about oneself from both internal and external perspectives should provide the maximum amount of information upon which to make career decisions where the employee maintains agency and independence in the career orientation (Arthur et al., 2005). Likewise, shifting to a new career paradigm taking a dualistic perspective “can promote the accumulation of the critical competencies of knowing why, knowing how and knowing whom to the mutual advantage of both the person and the firm” (Arthur et al., 1995, pp. 11–12).

### **Transition Theory**

Schlossberg’s (1981a) transition theory is based on the ways in which adults experience and respond to change. Research on working adults, older adults, and retired adults has informed the models and frameworks developed to describe the transition process for these groups (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006). Schlossberg (1981a) defined transition as a time when “an event or non-event results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a corresponding change in one’s behavior and relationships” (p. 5). Schlossberg reviewed Moos and Tsu’s crisis theory (as cited in 1981a), which defines crisis as “a relatively short period of disequilibrium in which a person has to work out new ways of handling a problem” (p. 7); transition theory comes out of crisis theory. Additionally, earlier Parkes (1971)

discussed psychosocial transition, which compels “the abandonment of one set of assumptions and the development of a fresh set to enable the individual to cope with the new altered life space” (p. 103). This idea of a change in assumptions is in line with Schlossberg’s theory of transition and adaptation. The results of those changes may be new friendships, new likes and dislikes, and new ways of thinking and believing about oneself (Schlossberg, 1981a). Schlossberg’s transition theory has been used in previous research on veterans in higher education (Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008) and has been shown to present an effective way in which to understand their experience of change.

**Influences on transition.** Factors influencing the transition process may be internal or external to the person experiencing change and can have a significant impact on how the change is weathered. Schlossberg et al. (2006) articulated four categories of factors that could influence the transition process. These factors are referred to as the four Ss: situation identifies the circumstances surrounding the transition, self describes the characteristics of the person experiencing the transition, support includes the people and networks providing support through the transition, and strategies for navigating and adjusting to the transition. While characteristics of the four Ss may impact or create challenge within the transition process, they can also encapsulate characteristics or strategies that may positively influence the transition process and the person engaged in it (Schlossberg et al., 2006). Of importance in the transition process is also the adaptation one must go through as a part of the process.

Adaptation to transition is a process of incorporating the change into one's life and is largely dependent on how one feels about the change and "on one's perceived and/or actual balance of resources to deficits in terms of the transition itself" (Schlossberg, 1981a, p. 7). Adaptation factors include role change, affect, source of the change, timing of the change, speed of the change onset, duration of the change, degree of stress involved, and the environment within which the change takes place (Schlossberg, 1981a). Each of these factors influences how the transition is experienced and the ways in which the individual experiencing the transition reacts to it. The adaptation factors also influence how successfully, or unsuccessfully, the transition is navigated (Schlossberg, 1981a).

**Work life transition.** Most relevant to this research is Schlossberg et al.'s (2006) description of the process adults go through when transitioning through work-life events. Work transitions, such as undertaking a career search, are perhaps some of the most common transitions regularly experienced by adults in life, and the framework presented identifies stages one might expect to move through.

The initial work transition process can be framed as the *moving in* phase of transition. Although challenging, this transition is developmentally significant as employees are indoctrinated into a new way of life with different expectations determined by the situation rather than the individual (Schlossberg et al., 2006). It is at this stage that organizational rules, expectations, and structure are presented to new employees, and organizational culture, underlying social dynamics, and unwritten rules begin to show.

The *moving through* phase of transition (Schlossberg et al., 2006) involves people adjusting and coming to terms with their situation and environment. This often requires them to become more open to different world views and develop an awareness of the “other” as their attitudes, beliefs, and responses may change due to the experiences surrounding them as organizational culture takes hold. Regardless of their preconceptions, adult learners find that their response to their experiences “depends on one’s perceived and/or actual balance of resources to deficits in terms of the transition itself, the pre-post environment, and the individual’s sense of competency, well-being, and health” (Schlossberg, 1981a, pp. 7–8). All of employees’ experiences, positive and negative, serve to broaden their perspectives and add to the dynamic of internal change that marks this phase and is the shift in self-perception that Schlossberg et al. (2006) point to as a leading characteristic of transition.

Once the employment period ends, employees begin a new stage of transition, the *moving out* phase, which is often characterized by grief and hope, whether the transition is anticipated or not anticipated (Schlossberg et al., 2006). One of the critical issues employees must address in this phase is future employment and merging past experience with what they expect for the future.

The transition military service members make to civilian life and employment is a developmental challenge. While the process is likely difficult, once completed, it becomes an additional skill the service member brings to civilian employment. The transitions that veterans experience as they go through higher education force them to expand their networks to accommodate new kinds of people and experiences that change

their perceptions of themselves. For those who had never anticipated a college education this change can trigger enormous dissonance between who they believed they were and who they have become. After adjusting to the military way of life, including putting the military's and the team's needs ahead of their own (Dillon, 2007), service members grow into a new "life space" of "everything we know or think we know. It includes our interpretation of the past and our expectations of the future, our plans and our prejudices" (Parkes, 1971, p. 103).

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

Understanding veterans' career development perspectives as they move out of the academic experience is vital in order to learn how they access resources to assist them in meeting their post-graduation goals (Wilson, Leary, Mitchell, & Ritchie, 2009). After all, it is the veterans' lenses that judge the availability and fitness of the career development processes helping them to transition to the civilian career culture which may, after years of acculturation within the military, seem as foreign as another country.

#### **Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

Because this research was particularly interested in the lived career development experiences of veterans as they transition into civilian employment from higher education, it was important that I use a qualitative methodology to explore their perspectives. As Creswell (2013) notes, there are an array of qualitative methods a researcher might select to analyze research data and draw inferences from what is learned. As such, it was also important I use a method for analyzing the descriptions of veterans' career development experiences that allowed for as much rich description as possible.

To fully move into the veterans' life spaces and understand their thoughts and feelings in their journeys requires going beyond an analysis of the dialogue they present and, instead, necessitates becoming part of their experiences. I did this through the use of hermeneutic phenomenology (van Manen, 1990) to identify particular themes of



interest. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach to understanding the research data provided an opportunity to “explicate the meanings [of experiences] as we live them in our everyday world” (van Manen, 1990, p. 11).

Phenomenology was developed in Germany by Edmund Husserl as a philosophical perspective (Dowling, 2007). Described as a “theory of the unique” (van Manen, 1990, p. 7), phenomenology is the study of a phenomenon of interest in common to a specific group of people (Creswell, 2013). Van Manen (1990) notes:

The point of phenomenological research is to ‘borrow’ other people’s experiences and their reflections on their experiences in order to better be able to come to an understanding of the deeper meaning or significance of an aspect of human experience, in the context of the whole of human experience. (p. 62)

Van Manen (1982) notes that when we focus on theorizing and developing tacit frameworks to define an experience, “we are forgetting that it was living human beings who bring schemas and frameworks into being and not the reverse” (p. 297). It is that presentness and sense of being inextricably connected between mind and body in the space we occupy that makes phenomenology so effective for coming to understand what it feels like to be in an experience (van Manen, 1990). For this purpose, I used hermeneutic phenomenology to understand these lived experiences. Concepts of key importance to the use of phenomenology are those of lifeworld and intentionality (Dowling, 2007).

**Lifeworld.** The lifeworld is central to phenomenology as a core part of the philosophy of understanding the experience of others with respect to experience of a

particular phenomenon. Lifeworld, from Husserl's perspective, is described as "immediate, pre-reflexive consciousness of life" (Dowling, 2007, p. 132) and "the way that such a phenomenon appears in everyday life" (Giorgi and Giorgi, 2008, p. 29) and is essential to phenomenological research. Heidegger (as cited in van Manen, 1990) refers to the concept of "being" as part of the world around us and the search for the meaning of that being. Because each person's life is experienced independently from others', it is necessary to examine how experiences occur unaffected, unblemished, and without judgment of the person within whose life they are taking place. It is these experiences that contain the phenomena with which phenomenology is concerned (Creswell, 2013).

The way in which the lifeworld is viewed in phenomenology is a point of divergence between hermeneutic phenomenology, as described by van Manen (1990), and psychological phenomenology, as identified by Moustakas (1994). Setting aside one's own perspective and experience with a phenomenon in order to more purely receive and analyze participants' experiences, known as bracketing or *epoche*, is favored by Moustakas and more closely follows Husserl's preference for understanding experiences without the influence of context in which the experiences are taking place (Creswell, 2013; Dowling, 2007). By contrast, van Manen does not necessitate bracketing in order to effectively uncover the phenomena embedded in the experiences of one's daily life. In fact, the practice of not subverting one's own experiences when engaging hermeneutic phenomenology is seen by van Manen (1990) as giving the phenomenological researcher "clues for orienting oneself to the phenomenon and thus to all other stages of phenomenological research" (p. 57).

**Intentionality.** Similar to lifeworld, intentionality has a unique role in phenomenology. Husserl's understanding of intentionality references the concept of the mind being directed toward something, being conscious of that something, and the intentional relationship of the act along with the object of the act (as cited in Moustakas, 1994). Further, in Moustakas's (1994) view that the world and our own selves are connected, we understand that "the act of consciousness and the object of consciousness are intentionally related" (p. 28). By contrast, van Manen (1990) sees intentionality in hermeneutic phenomenology as an extension of ourselves into the research process as we "want to know the world in which we live as human beings...to *know* the world is to profoundly *be* in the world" (p. 5). It is in this being in the world that we experience phenomena.

These two different understandings of lifeworld and intentionality as defining elements of phenomenology have led to different ways of doing phenomenological research. Moustakas's understandings lend best to psychological, or transcendental, phenomenology where Husserl's initial concepts and beliefs are more strictly followed. Van Manen's eschewing of the *epoche* and understanding that the researcher's worldview plays a role in the research process presents the strongest difference from Moustakas and defines van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology.

Based on my positionality and familiarity with the participants, it would have been almost impossible to bracket my experiences with the veteran population and the participants in particular. Because of the key differences highlighted, as well as my experiences, I used van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology for this research to

explore infantry veterans' career development experiences as they move out of higher education into civilian employment.

### **Study Design**

**Research setting.** I selected a large (approximately 50,000 students), four-year public institution of higher education in the southwest United States for the research setting. The institution has a long military history and tradition and is well-known by those who are veterans or desire to serve following their education. I selected it because of my proximity and ability to access the veteran population in attendance as well as the military heritage that draws veterans to it. The institution boasts a military organization engaged in military training as well as strong Reserve Officer Training Corps and active duty commissioning programs for each military branch.

**Sampling and participant selection.** I selected participants for this study with purposeful sampling from the population of OEF/OIF veterans with combat arms MOSs pursuing higher education at a large southwestern university. Because there is no direct civilian employment correlate for the combat arms MOS, it necessitates that the participants identify new career directions. Participants were at least junior level in their education at the time of interview.

I identified ten candidates whom I knew met all of the study criteria and contacted them via email. I let each candidate know about the research project, how they met the criteria to participate, and what would be required to participate. I asked each candidate if he had questions I could address and if he would like to participate in the research project. From the ten candidates I contacted, seven candidates were willing

to participate, and I followed up by sending each of the seven candidates the Participant Consent Form to read prior to our first meeting. I explained that participation was voluntary and that the participants could end their participation at any time without penalty. I also invited further questions about their participation and provided responses to meet the participants' satisfaction prior to beginning the research.

### **Data Collection**

I collected data through two hermeneutic interviews that focused on the participants' storytelling to gain insight into the lived experiences through their descriptions of their lived experiences (van Manen, 1990). I also made use of a field notes journal to help me keep nonverbal data from the participant interviews, my own thoughts and emotions, and all other considerations I had about the research process and outcomes.

**Hermeneutic interviews.** I conducted two hermeneutic interviews with each participant. Interviews took place three weeks apart to allow both the participants and me to reflect on the first interview and review the first interview transcript before continuing to the second interview. The interview questions for the first and second interviews are shown in Appendices B and C. I conducted both interviews face-to-face in order to include details of nonverbal elements of the storytelling including facial movements, body language, and emotions. Participants chose the location to be interviewed so they would be most comfortable to talk about their experiences. I audio recorded the interviews, and I took notes to recall details and identify nonverbal cues in

conjunction with the storytelling. I also assigned each participant a pseudonym to which all interview recordings and written data were associated.

I asked participants to focus on telling the story of their experience in responding to the hermeneutic interview questions. Particularly with respect to career development, storytelling provides a way for individuals to subjectively explore their experiences in relation to the social and cultural environments within which they occurred (Cohen & Mallon, 2001). Storytelling is engaged in a more fluid and seamless manner lacking the hard edges of questions as in tacit narrative (Boje, 2008). While the style of storytelling might suggest a more casual perspective, subject to change as the storyteller decides, this manner of understanding benefits the research by not placing structural limitations on what is or can be. The storytellers bring the listeners into the experience and may, at times, engage them as participants in the story as it unfolds (Boje & Tyler, 2009). In doing so, the story may change in unanticipated ways but will, ultimately, be a reflection of truth as experienced.

My goal in using the hermeneutic interview storytelling process was to elicit a truer and more vivid picture of the lived experience of the veterans in higher education who, due to culture or lack of knowledge of the academic system, lack the resources needed to successfully complete their academic mission. Using storytelling also allowed me access to belief structures of the participants as they shifted and changed over time through learning in a way that strict narrative would not have done (Boje & Tyler, 2009). In essence, I hoped to see the reflections of the participants' experiences in a more

present and malleable state where changes in their understanding of their experiences showed changes in story (Boje, 2008).

I conducted the first hermeneutic interview using five common questions designed to elicit participants' stories of their career development experiences (see Appendix B). Ad hoc probes and follow-up questions helped to keep the participants on track in their responses, probe concepts for additional information, and help to link the elicited concepts. Following the first interview, I sent the recordings to a transcription service for transcribing and then used the returned copies to match nonverbal cues from my field notes to the transcribed interviews with the goal of aiding recall of key points of interest in the data. During the intervening time between the first and second interviews, the participants had time to review their own interview transcripts for accuracy and clarity.

I conducted a second hermeneutic interview with each participant using three common questions designed to elicit additional information, probe emerging themes, and identify participants' recommendations for support based on their experiences (see Appendix C). Because the research focused on the participants' lived experiences, I determined that their experiences should also inform the implications I would later address. Utilizing their stories of experience with support resources provided an opportunity for me to better inform and articulate the implications.

**Field notes journal.** I also maintained a journal of notes on my research process, literature selections, and chapter outlines to inform and constrain my work. I kept notes on points of interest in the transcribed interview data as well as thoughts on

emerging themes and significant ideas in the journal as well as reviewer comments and questions to be addressed. I also detailed challenges encountered and my time line of progress in the journal in order to maintain deadlines and ensure follow-up on tasks and meetings. The journal was essential for tracking details about participants that were not included in their recorded comments. It was also an effective way in which to document my emotions through the research process as well as my personal reflections on the meaning of military service and career development.

### **Delimitations**

As with other research studies, this study is bounded by delimitations that must be recognized as part of the research process. While acknowledging these delimitations to the study, I also set forth that every attempt has been made to identify and make use of them in order to conduct the most productive research possible in this study.

Delimitations of this research study include: (a) the potential population was necessarily limited to two military branches and one gender due to the research criteria of participants having served in infantry, (b) the population was drawn from one institution of higher education with a strong military history, (c) participants all served at least one combat deployment in the infantry, and (d) the research questions were written to only address career development.

### **Data Management and Analysis**

**Data preparation.** Once an interview was finished and the data were collected, the audio recording was transcribed professionally by a transcription service and I correlated it with the field notes taken during the interview. I then listened to the audio



recording while reading the transcript and accompanying field notes to ensure alignment of the content. I also assigned line numbers to note where particular field note comments fit and highlighted the participant's comments to differentiate them from interview questions. I repeated this process for each participant's interview for the first and then the second round of interviews. Although the analysis of the data began with the very first interview, all data were prepared with this process for consistency and accurate reflection of the interview.

For the data analysis process I employed Ruona's (2005) steps of data analysis as I searched for themes. Each step played an important role in helping me effectively mine the data. The steps included (1) sensing themes, (2) constant comparison, (3) recursiveness, (4) inductive and deductive thinking, and (5) interpretation to generate meaning (p. 236).

**Familiarization.** In sensing themes (Ruona, 2005) and familiarizing myself with the data, I looked for key patterns in the data. This process required me to be fully immersed in the data and maintain openness to what I was reading and sensing in order to identify points in the data that might seem particularly important. As I began the analysis at this step, I used the review with comments function on my computer program to highlight and add notes regarding emerging points of interest in the interview text. During this time I utilized recursiveness (Ruona, 2005), which means I began analysis after the first interview and continued through the remainder of all interviews. Doing so allowed me to make slight adjustments to the interview questions and use prompts to key in on emerging themes I had identified previously.

Originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), constant comparison (Ruona, 2005) required me to make an ongoing comparison of the data throughout my review. As I evaluated the data, I considered how current points compared to those previously noted as potentially important in my review. After several reviews of the data, I began to see very clear points of interest emerge though I had not identified even informal labels for them. During this review I identified 19 concepts that I had noted for further exploration and recorded the concepts of interest in my own words in my field journal. These concepts, of which some were retained, some eliminated, and some merged, would later form the basis for emerging informal and formal themes.

**Coding.** Once the initial reviews of familiarization were complete, I began the more intensive process of coding, while continuing to apply constant comparison and emerging points of interest to data through notes. Starting with applying informal codes to the points of interest already identified and then continuing to read and assign informal codes, I began to see how many were connected conceptually. Using inductive thinking (Ruona, 2005) in coding meant I was constructing the themes and meanings from the data while in the review process. I then used deductive thinking (Ruona, 2005) to examine whether the data accurately reflected the themes and meanings I had identified. I continued to read, apply constant comparison, and consider how the informal themes made sense both in groups and collectively. Throughout this process I made notes on the interviews and in my field journal to track my thoughts and ideas.

**Making meaning.** The process of interpreting to make meaning (Ruona, 2005) took place throughout the review of data. I weeded through the data to identify

important and nonimportant ideas, based on codes, which allowed me flexibility in mapping, unmapping, and remapping the data to themes. It also helped guide me in maintaining focus on points I found important without feeling they were permanently tied to a theme.

Extracting the sections noted with comments, I was better able to see how many of the informal themes fit together as formal themes, or “clusters of meaning” (Creswell, 2013, p. 82), and connected to the overarching theme for the research. Through constant comparison, I was also able to eliminate and merge some of those informal themes that, upon further review, did not fit as strongly into the emerging themes on their own. It was during this step that I engaged constant comparison most rigorously to narrow 11 informal themes to five themes representing the phenomena taking place among the participants.

### **Positionality**

It is important for me to note that I have significant knowledge of veterans’ career development experiences in higher education through my work in the field of career development and veterans in higher education. This knowledge is most likely greater than what most researchers would have and may have created bias in my role as researcher. Because of this knowledge and experience advising veterans in higher education on numerous aspects of their academic, military, and personal lives, I was likely better situated than other researchers might have been to understand the culture and context that impacts veterans’ career development.

Because of my familiarity with their higher education experiences, participants were also much more forthcoming in answering the interview questions and sharing more personal details of their experiences than they might have been otherwise. As such, it would not have been possible for me to set aside my knowledge and experience with the subject matter of this research as Moustakas suggests (Creswell, 2013). Rather, I believe that my personal experience with and connection to the participants provided them greater comfort and trust in relating their stories to me. Their comfort allowed for much more depth and detail in the experiences the participants shared as well as greater expression of emotion and feeling.

Additionally, I am a liberal, Caucasian woman who is married, the mother of two boys, granddaughter of a WWII Marine Corps veteran, niece of a Vietnam veteran, and friend to numerous veterans of all service branches. My personal experiences and interactions have given me a different perspective on the military and post-military service career development that may be sharply different from others with an interest in this same research area.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness, as related to qualitative research, is important to ensure that those individuals making use of the research can trust the soundness of the data and the way in which they were collected, managed, and interpreted. The concepts essential to sound and trustworthy research are ethics, validity, reliability, and transferability (Merriam, 2009). Each is reviewed below as it applies to this research.

**Ethics.** I took a number of steps to ensure this research was conducted in an ethical and responsible manner. The research study was reviewed and approved by the Texas A&M University Institutional Research Board. The supervising faculty member and I both completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) program requirements for the *Course in the Protection of Human Subjects: Social and Behavioral Research for Investigators and Key Study Personnel*.

Only those potential participants who I knew met the basic criteria were approached about participating in the research study. I corresponded by email with them directly to the email address they provide me. I ensured that participants understood their rights as participants, that their participation was voluntary, and that they could withdraw at any time. In addition, I ensured participants knew they had the right to answer, or not answer, any question and that the interview could be ended at any time. Each participant read and signed a copy of the informed consent form and was allowed to keep a copy of the form for their future reference. The informed consent form stated that by signing the form, participants allowed me permission to publish the results in a thesis or other publications with the provision that the quotations remain anonymous.

I did not use personal identifying information in the study. I removed participant names and used pseudonyms instead to protect anonymity. I am the only person to know the participants' names. Data collected were audio recorded, downloaded to my personal computer under the assigned pseudonyms, and transcribed by a transcription service. I destroyed the audio recordings upon completion of the project. During the

project, the audio recordings and transcripts were secured on a unique flash drive for this research in a locked cabinet in my home office.

**Validity.** I employed a number of strategies in data collection, management, and interpretation in order to ensure that this research was conducted and presented in a manner reflecting the validity and reliability necessary to instill confidence. Strategies I used to support the validity of the research were *triangulation* and *member checks*.

I employed triangulation throughout the research to ensure that more than one source of information was used to verify the emerging themes and inform the constructs. I referred back to the research identified in the literature review and sought out additional literature to verify the ideas coming to light in the data were reflective of the ways in which similar ideas and themes were defined in the literature. Additionally, I used my field notes journal identifying the participants' nonverbal actions during the face-to-face interviews and my thoughts and feelings throughout the research process to bring subsequent information to light regarding the themes and how they tied to the literature. Peer review and member checking further informed the ways in which I perceived the themes and constructs.

Member checking helped me ensure that the interview data accurately reflected the participants' words. Additionally, I conducted two interviews with each participant that allowed me to verify that each participant had shared all the information he wanted to for each question and gave each one an opportunity to fill in gaps he identified after reviewing his responses. Throughout the research I asked participants to read portions of the interpretations I made from the data. I also asked participants if the interpretations

held true for them and if what I was reporting was an accurate reflection of their lived experiences. Feedback from the participants and validating, through the literature, the themes I uncovered helped me feel confident that I was able to deeply understand the participants' point of view and experiences.

*Adequate engagement with the data* or *saturation* occurred when no new information was heard or gleaned from the data after a number of interviews (Merriam, 2009). I used Ruona's (2005) recursive and constant comparison processes beginning with the first interview and continued throughout data collection until saturation of the themes occurred. To determine when saturation was reached, I compiled data from participants' interviews into a table representing each theme at the meaning-making stage. I reviewed this table regularly to get a sense of when new data stopped coming to light.

**Reliability.** I achieved reliability of the research through *triangulation*, as previously noted, as well as with use of an *audit trail* in the form of the current chapter describing the study design, data collection, data management, and data analysis processes as well as the field notes journal I kept throughout the research study. My field notes, correlated with the interview transcripts, gave me greater assurance that the themes I elicited from the interview data meant what the participants intended and were reflective of their experiences. I also used *peer review* for reliability. Peers both within and outside of my academic program that are familiar with the research process as well as with the subject I researched conducted a review of the research both in process and in its final state. I also sought feedback from my writing group and my dissertation

committee to ensure I progressed correctly through the research process (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009).

**Transferability.** Transferability of qualitative research occurs when the results of one study can be transferred to another setting. The researcher's role is to provide the readers of the research with enough information about population and context to make an informed decision about whether the research is transferable (Merriam, 2009). In order to make transferability of this research most possible, I used *rich, thick description* to elucidate details about participants, the research process, and findings of the research.



## CHAPTER IV

### ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Chapter IV begins with a profile of each of the seven participants I formed from interview data that I collected from the participants through the two hermeneutic interviews conducted with each. The profiles begin to illuminate the participants' experiences in career development.

I then reviewed the data to identify themes common among participants. A significant part of the review process involved constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which I used to determine how emerging themes fit together. I used van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic phenomenology to understand the data and explore the career development experiences as identified by the themes. I included the themes and characterizations of each as reflected by participants' comments.

The participant profiles that follow include elements to create understanding of the participants' experiences as they relate to career development and the purpose for this research. First, I used the interview data to construct a brief biography of each participant's experiences in military service and higher education: his story. Next, I used the participant's interview data to answer the three research questions for each participant individually based on the interview data.

As illustrated in Table 2, all participants served at least one combat deployment as members of the infantry in the National Guard, Army, or Marine Corps. In fact, five participants served more than one combat deployment. Three participants served in the

National Guard while the other four enlisted directly to full active duty. Of the participants, five began their experience in higher education prior to joining the military as active duty or National Guard.

Table 2

*Participant Characteristics*

Participant <sup>1</sup>	Age <sup>2</sup>	Branch <sup>3</sup>	Number of Deployments	Location of Deployments	College Major	Career Interest
Adam	35	Army	2	Iraq Afghanistan	Agricultural Leadership	Veterinary
Jeff	27	Nat. Guard	2	Iraq Afghanistan	Psychology	Law Enforcement
John	29	Marine Corps	2	Afghanistan Afghanistan	Industrial Distribution	Sales Supply Chain
Matt	23	Nat. Guard	1	Afghanistan	University Studies - Architecture	Construction
Roger	33	Army	1	Iraq	Industrial Distribution	Sales
Sean	23	Nat. Guard	2	Iraq Afghanistan	Industrial Distribution	Sales
Tom	28	Army	2	Iraq	Political Science	Undecided

<sup>1</sup>Pseudonym assigned to participant for confidentiality purposes.

<sup>2</sup>Age at the time of interview.

<sup>3</sup>Nat. Guard indicates State National Guard serving on federal status with the U.S. Army.

**Adam's Story**

Adam, a 35-year-old, married, Army veteran, began college as a traditional freshman in 1996. He played in the school band and was a member of his school's

military organization. He began with a desire to achieve his bachelor's degree and continue on to veterinary school and had never considered the military as a career. Through his participation in the military organization he found strengths and skills he had not realized he had. As his classes became increasingly more difficult, Adam says he "wasn't disciplined to put the full effort into it". With his roommate preparing to take an Army commission to become an officer upon graduation, Adam decided that he would put his veterinary school plans on hold and follow in his roommate's footsteps. He signed the commissioning paperwork in 1998 and began planning for his future career in the Army.

Before commissioning with the Army, Adam experienced some significant family challenges that would ultimately change the course of his future. His mother had an aneurysm that caused her a great deal of impairment, and his father lost his job several months later. In spite of feeling lost and confused, Adam now admits he "didn't have the self-respect to go get help, saying 'hey help me, I'm way too good, I don't need help from somebody else.' I just felt sorry for myself". His grades fell and, with his family's need for help growing, Adam soon found that staying in school was not possible. The Army released him from his contract and he returned home to work and support his family. Adam attempted to return to school the next year while continuing to work full-time but found that he was unable to maintain focus on his studies. He again left school to work and made the decision to enlist in the Army. In 2002 Adam began his career in the Army, enlisting in the infantry and using his previous education to secure a promotion upon entry.

Adam went through basic training, Airborne school, and Javelin missile launcher school and was soon sent to Korea for his first duty station. After spending over a year in Korea, he was then quickly deployed for the next year to Afghanistan on his first combat deployment. While he had not anticipated so much time away from home and family, Adam found that he enjoyed the pace of life and work in the military. And although he was not pursuing the career he had intended as he began college, Adam realized that the value of serving others through the military met his purpose of helping and caring for others. After a little over a year in Afghanistan and the same back in the United States, Adam received his next orders for deployment to Iraq. He reflects that he is glad he was able to serve on both fronts and would have felt at odds with himself had he not been able to do so. Upon completion of over a year in Iraq, Adam returned home and chose to end his time in the service. Adam was not sure what his next step would be, but he decided to settle with his wife near the college he first attended almost 10 years prior.

Like many veterans leaving military service, Adam applied for unemployment benefits to get him through until he found his footing in the civilian world. He obtained temporary employment for a short time while completing his application to return to college but did not find the satisfaction he was seeking in employment. Adam was readmitted to higher education and was happy to return to complete his degree. Adam renewed his drive for education and his plans to attend veterinary school but learned he would have to take a large number of additional classes. Adam took on studying for the additional class load, adapting to life as a regular married civilian, and planning for a

new career with the same drive and single-mindedness as he did his military learning. He learned that his previous lack of academic success significantly impacted his academic progress when he returned, which has made his pursuit of veterinary school much more challenging.

Rather than being able to consider an easy transition to professional school, Adam is now pursuing additional classes and certifications to raise his grades and be considered for veterinary school. He also hopes the additional coursework will give him knowledge and credentials upon which to build an alternate career. While he continues school, Adam is now working full-time designing websites and marketing his company's business in the community. Although his current work is not aligned with his primary career interests, he hopes the experience will help him build his overall career profile. Adam's frustration at not meeting the requirements to begin veterinary school does not outweigh his desire to fulfill his career goals.

**Transition experience.** Adam has navigated the transition back to school from the military based on his long-term career interest in becoming a veterinarian. He has continued to pursue his goal in spite of academic challenges and a break in school for military service. Although he returned to the same major he left before service and has had to mitigate previous poor grades, Adam believes that the character he has gained as a result of his service should bear a stronger weight on his application to veterinary school when compared to other applicants. However, he has realized that he should not "think that just because I was a veteran people are going to actually care. Some people

do, some people don't. I put all my eggs in the veterinary journey and of course that journey is not over yet....”.

Because he approaches his academics from a more focused and rigorous position with his sights on veterinary school, Adam also takes a realistic view about potentially needing to adjust his plans to pursue another career. The change of plan would mean relinquishing one career dream to pursue another option. While Adam knows from his military experience that he can accomplish challenging goals, he struggles with how to relate his academic degree along with the skills he brings from the military:

And the realization is coming that it could happen and I need to figure out when is that enough, when am I actually just going to move on? You have things that you want to do and I can sit there and try to get in every single year for 10 years and then look back and go what did I do with myself? But that's why I'm kind of steering towards doing something with Homeland Security whether it be TSA [Transportation Security Administration] or some other government agency just because number one, I already have some of the government experience. But you know government jobs tend to be a little bit more friendly with people that already have the federal experience and the education, which in this sense definitely helps.

Adam's recognition that he may have to forgo his long-held desire to be a veterinarian comes as a bittersweet acceptance that his family responsibilities as an older, nontraditional student may mean pursuing a career path he had not expected.

**Relating military experience.** When describing the nuances of his service on his résumé, Adam notes:

...anybody in the military, that's their end goal is to shoot a weapon. That's the basic point of being in the military. But you have your job and what that entails and that's the important thing, getting that and putting that in there.

Adam has struggled with the perception of his service in the military in general and his work as an infantryman in particular. He knows he has many valuable skills to offer employers, but he has found that explaining those skills takes translation of both the military technicalities of his work and of the skills utilized in the work. The end result is not always understood by employers with whom Adam has communicated:

I took a list of everything that I'd done, just literally everything that I could remember I'd possibly done and how can I make that sound like something that somebody on the civilian side would look at and think okay, they trained these people or they managed this, supervised this, planned this, coordinated this, you know, things that can be used in a civilian business type of environment.

In spite of seeing some of his experience lost in the translation, Adam believes that employers do see value in his military experience and how he can add to an organization's effectiveness:

So I've learned really quickly that I talk about the important parts and the things I know can be beneficial from what I did in the military....you have to find that common ground and I think there's people out there that do that. It's not only

going to be beneficial to veterans but it's also going to be beneficial to those that have to deal or work with veterans.

Helping employers learn about what military service means and what veterans can bring to the organization is something Adam is confident sharing.

**Feelings about the transition.** Adam is, understandably, nervous about his transition because he does not yet know if he will be able to achieve his career goal of becoming a veterinarian. In spite of his future plans being yet unknown, he feels like the transition back to academic study has been worthwhile and beneficial to his overall transition back to the civilian life. Adam believes that the planning he did prior to leaving the Army and returning to school made the difference for his experience:

I knew what I wanted to go back to school and do, which I would suggest that for any person that was still in the military thinking about going to school, go ahead and do your best to figure that out, plan that out before you go because it's just going to help you in the long run.

Adam also feels that although employers generally appreciate veterans for their service and commitment to something in which they believe strongly, they need to better understand the work veterans have undertaken. He also feels the pressure of representing veterans and all that label entails. He is proud of his service and wants to see it recognized in the civilian employment sector but believes that the lack of knowledge employers have about veterans may inhibit his success:

I think one of the biggest things that an employer could benefit from a veteran is just understanding it's not necessarily the job experience per se, not the industry



experience. It's the being able to make a decision in a stressful situation, being asked to do something and then carrying out that mission and completing it. It is the fact that they've volunteered for something and followed through with it. It's the management and team building that goes along with – you know, you're in a survival situation. Your life depends on it. Well, you know, okay, in the civilian world, in a literal sense your life might not depend on it but the company depends on it – it depends on the teamwork. You want people that are going to be around that you can trust that's going to get the job done. One that you know are going to be loyal to the company they're working for. Most important of all, they are trainable. You can't necessarily teach that necessary skill of working together with another person or being able to communicate efficiently and effectively or being able to manage or supervise any situation. And most of all, being able to think on your feet and solve a problem and do something that's put right in front of you because that's what you've had to do to survive.

### **Jeff's Story**

Jeff is a 27-year-old National Guardsman who is nearing the end of his six-year commitment, which has included two deployments as an 11B infantryman. Jeff knew he wanted to join the military when he was eight years old. He would run around shooting his bb-gun acting like a sniper in the woods and believed that his future was in military service. Jeff lost sight of that dream for a time, but found it again when he joined the Civil Air Patrol (CAP), the auxiliary of the Air Force open to those in high school. There he found the opportunity for leadership and military study he had been seeking.

Jeff became a lieutenant in the CAP, which gave him the kind of military training and education he wanted to pursue and spurred his interest in a military-oriented program for college.

While he planned for a career in the military, Jeff set a goal of obtaining a college degree to commission as an officer. He applied to two such colleges and made the decision, out of impatience, to begin his studies at one and then transfer to finish his degree. Into the first semester, Jeff significantly injured his ankle and had to leave school to heal and reconsider his options. While a military career was not eliminated as a possibility, his academic progress was on hold.

Once healed, Jeff spent the next two years working a number of jobs that he realized were not taking him toward his goals. He decided to enlist in the National Guard and received orders to deploy to Iraq soon after he completed basic training and infantry school. While on deployment, Jeff decided to return to school using benefits to ensure he would incur no cost. He notes that returning from deployment and beginning school two days later was not a good decision for him, and he spent the better part of the first semester transitioning back to civilian life and campus culture.

For the next year Jeff focused on school and integrating with other veterans and fellow students. He began a relationship that helped him adjust further, but all the while Jeff felt as though something was missing from his experience. He had been set to go directly to Afghanistan from Iraq to continue his first deployment but returned to school when those orders fell through. Jeff still wanted to serve in Afghanistan and, knowing he would be ordered to deploy with an unknown unit at some point, he asked to deploy a

second time to “finish the mission” with others he knew and trusted from his previous deployment.

Jeff notes that the second deployment was much more strenuous than the first due to his increased rank and responsibility and the change in combat location. Rather than only being responsible for himself and his gear, Jeff took on the challenge of being a leader of others and helping those on their first deployment to adjust to the experience. Upon returning from deployment, Jeff had several months to acclimate to civilian life before re-enrolling in school; he found this time period helped make a much easier transition back to academics.

As Jeff moves toward the end of his educational journey he recounts the time it has taken him to accomplish what others do much more quickly in education. And although it has taken time to achieve, Jeff is proud of nearly reaching his goal of obtaining his bachelor’s degree. He plans to pursue a career in local law enforcement so that he can continue to serve others and provide effectively for his family, which is the most important thing to him:

It makes no sense, you know, sitting behind a desk working...you know, what am I doing? I’m not doing anything for the betterment of myself or anyone else.

I would much rather do something that could actually have an impact.

Jeff knows there are risks in law enforcement similar to those he experienced in combat, but he believes that his potential to do good for others outweighs the risk to himself. He balances that with a desire to continue work in a field that offers an amount of risk and

allows him to fulfill his need for the same kind of excitement and mission focus he found on deployment:

...for right now I can't sit behind a desk. I can't – I can't do that. I need, I guess, lack of better words, I need the adrenaline rush of it and I feel like I haven't – I haven't finished the job and I think going into law enforcement is in a way me finishing the job.

**Transition experience.** Jeff's transition to higher education has been much smoother following his most recent second deployment and he has been working through the post-deployment challenges more effectively this time as well. He has had more time to adjust to being back in the civilian environment and has more recognition and understanding of how PTSD may impact his career viability in law enforcement. This knowledge has given him greater focus in his education and better perspective on the employment search on which he is now working.

The drive to achieve his degree is one of the key factors that led Jeff to military service and to return to higher education following each deployment. Having benefits to pay for the degree was an obvious positive from his perspective, but it was the value of holding a bachelor's degree that pushed Jeff to obtain the education that not all veterans afford themselves:

I mean I'm the only person from my family, immediate family, my mom, dad, brother, sister, and I, I'll be the only one to have a four-year degree. And my brother and sister both started their degrees, but never finished. So, it's always been a goal for me, I mean not to prove anything but to kind of prove something

that I wanted to get a four-year degree, even though in the career field that I want to go into, which is law enforcement, I don't necessarily need a degree. It's just always been a goal for me.

Having a degree in the field of law enforcement may also mean additional pay and opportunities, particularly with his record of military service. As much as Jeff values his service as something he did for others, he hopes that experience will benefit him when it comes to moving into a civilian career. He balances his hopes with realistic expectations based on his conversations in which he has engaged with others from military service now in law enforcement:

...but that's not how employers look at it. They don't look at a deployment as studying abroad that you have experience in whatever, you know what I mean. As far as law enforcement just tying it in to what I know, I can tell them I've been deployed, and I can tell them I was infantry, and I can tell them I know how to detain people and everything else, but they don't necessarily see that as a growing your future career, I guess. It's just something that you did. And, I think people are more likely to say, "Oh, thank you for your service," than, "Okay. That service really helped you in your career."

Jeff has concerns, however, that residual impacts from his service could thwart, or at least restrict, his potential opportunities in law enforcement. Perceptions about veterans' combat stress and their abilities to perform in stressful and dangerous situations are realities they must face even in law enforcement and with which Jeff knows he must contend in his employment search. And while the law prevents

prospective employers from asking about candidates' medical conditions or basing hiring decisions on medical history, Jeff realizes that the actuality of that happening is a possibility:

I did have to call people about [disabilities], that was a big thing for me, was I didn't know how police department or any department, state, federal, whatever, I didn't know how they would treat VA [Department of Veterans Affairs] disabilities. And, so I actually had to call police departments and make sure that they did not, for lack of better words, discriminate on disabilities, and what were the limitations. Because, I didn't want to go into the VA and claim PTSD and then get into the job force and be like, "Hey, no, we're not going to hire you if you have this kind of disability," so that was a huge thing for me. And, that was actually one of the main reasons I did not claim anxiety or PTSD after my first deployment. Well, because I didn't know what they would do.

**Relating military experience.** In relating his military experience, Jeff is very positive about all he has to offer an employer. He was promoted between his two deployments and so was able to experience both followership and leadership exercised during combat operations. Additionally, his leadership responsibilities on his most recent deployment allowed Jeff to develop other skills he believes hold value to employers that he will be able to highlight:

You know, I had to be where I needed to be and I needed to have the equipment I needed to have. So, that really taught me how to be a follower and the repercussions if you don't follow correctly....right before my second deployment

I got promoted to Sergeant, which means that I had a team of, depending on the time of the deployment, three to four guys, and I had much more responsibility not just for myself and my equipment, but for my guys, their equipment, and everything else. And, if they did something wrong it fell onto me.

Jeff is ready to talk with prospective employers about the capabilities he will bring to a law enforcement position. He hopes that hiring managers in law enforcement will be receptive to his military experience and his desire to have a positive impact on the community he will serve:

So, you know, as far as law enforcement I think they do understand better, but with other jobs, I don't think that they will see me being a team leader, or a stand-in squad leader for nine months of the most stressful life I've ever lived, I don't think that they will see that as leadership ability.

**Feelings about the transition.** Graduating four years after he anticipated finishing college and completing his military service obligation, Jeff is more than ready to move on to the next phase of his life in civilian employment. He is both excited for what the future holds and nervous at the prospect of the search and all he needs to do to prepare for it. Like many students, he was not aware of when he should begin his employment search efforts and feels like he may be behind for meeting his goals:

I've kind of not started my job search. I think that's one way of dealing with the stress of having to start a job search is just not starting it. And, then, two, is just realizing that I do know what I want to do. I do know the general area of where I want to work. And I feel behind the curve, but I also feel like if I start putting my

name out there now, that people are going to forget my name nine months from now....

Having a set idea of what he wants his immediate career path to be has given Jeff some security in not having to evaluate different industries, but it's also limited the variety of his options:

I mean the job search is more me looking into different law enforcement agencies, seeing what they offer as far as salaries, seeing what they offer as far as if you have a four-year degree will they pay you extra per month, per week, whatever. If you're a veteran will they pay you extra, will they, you know, what are the benefits of being a veteran to their department.

Overall, Jeff feels hopeful about his future career. From his positive experience in the military he knows that law enforcement will be a fulfilling career path, and it will allow him the flexibility to decide where to establish his own family and build the future they want together.

### **John's Story**

John is a 29-year-old 0341 infantry mortarman who served with the Marine Corps. He is an industrial distribution major completing his junior year. John began higher education in 2002 at the same college he now attends. As a traditional college student working on a degree in history he spent a year and a half attending school without having the inertia or direction he felt he needed to accomplish the degree and find a career field. In 2004 John left campus to attend the Disney College Program in Florida to gain work experience as a lifeguard and, hopefully, career direction. What he



found was that he enjoyed the relaxation and fun more than school and decided to stay there for the next three years.

John eventually found that, although he was having fun, his life was not going in the direction he had anticipated. In 2007 he made the decision to join the Marine Corps. He very intentionally signed up for infantry and was given a mortorman position, an additional defined position within the Marine Corps infantry, that he did not want; however, he was determined to do the best at the job he was given. John's experience in the Marines taught him a great deal, and he developed personally and professionally while in service. He did two combat deployments to Afghanistan, with one happening soon after he left infantry school.

The first deployment found him participating in the initial push into Helmand Province to secure the region and roads for other coalition forces. This undertaking was well-known and well-respected among others in the Corps. John's second deployment was with the 26<sup>th</sup> Marine Expeditionary Unit, the military's 911 force. While they were initially only supposed to go out for six months, the deployment began early and spanned nine months taking them to Pakistan for disaster relief, into Libya to enforce the no-fly zone implemented during the start of their civil war, and then into Afghanistan for the push of Route 611 to Sangin off of Route One to relieve other Marines there.

John returned to the United States and decided that the time he had spent in the Marines had been enough for him. He was more focused and more driven to achieve academically than to continue deploying. John was re-admitted to the college he had left almost eight years prior with a desire to complete his degree and begin a civilian career.

He joined his school's military organization to contribute the maturity and skills he gained in military service to the group and began his studies in history again. What he found, after time away, was that a degree in history was no longer of interest and would not provide him the solid career path he now desired. While attending a meeting at the industrial distribution program with a friend, John learned that the degree program was a good fit for his career interests and strengths. He soon transferred into the program and quickly began getting involved with the student organization and taking advantage of the many career search activities offered. Interacting regularly with employers through the programs offered in the department is what John credits with giving him hope for his career search.

**Transition experience.** John believes his transition to a civilian career will be relatively easy based on the networking and interviewing he has done thus far. He also knows that his experience as a veteran sets him apart from others and has given him a different perspective on the transition to career from education:

For me it just seems like another step. There's just something I've got to get through in order to be where I want to be. I look forward to graduation, I recognize it for the big event in somebody's life that is, with being 29 instead of 19 and doing what I have done....

Knowing the value of his military service gives John additional confidence as he engages in employment search activities, and he wants to make the most of his service as he is compared to other traditional students in his program. "I think the fact that I am military and I have an honorable discharge and all that other stuff leads more credence,

more credits to my application”. Being sought as a candidate by several companies has helped with John’s confidence in the career development process as well:

Everybody told me that it’s going to be hard to get the initial interview, but it’s easier for me because I think they read through it and they see the Marine Corps and then it’s just like we’ll give him the interview.

More challenging to John has been the transition adjustment in college, particularly because he previously attended as a traditional student. His mindset and drive to succeed have been impacted by his experience in military service, and he is much better prepared for the rigor of managing academics, career development, and employment search in addition to integrating socially than he finds other students to be:

I had already gone to college before I went to the military, I really didn’t see – I already knew what I was getting into when I came back to college. I think it’s more the culture shock to realize that people in school aren’t going to have the same work ethic that you do.

While getting acclimated to working with others who have a very different motivation than him, John has also learned that he cannot do everything on his own. Much like in the Marine Corps, he has to develop the trust to rely on others to complete group projects in class, fulfill club commitments, and attend team events. John has found this trust and reliance is especially important when it comes to working on his employment search:

Yeah, we’ll try to get the stuff done by ourselves without much help. This is one of those things, especially in this job market, that you just can’t do. You’ve got

to have help, at least to get your foot in the door. Once you've got your foot in the door it's all you, but you need help to get that first push.

**Relating military experience.** Sharing his military experience with others is something John is reluctant to do at times, but he believes that his experience will be a key factor in attracting employers. He has experienced some reticence from employers who are not familiar with military veterans and feels the need to explain his experience so that they better understand it. "Prejudgment. I always hate prejudging. That's one of the reasons why I don't like to tell people I was in the military unless it's pertinent to the situation or pertinent to they need to know". The reactions he has received have not necessarily been negative, but he finds that many of the assumptions made by others may impede his success.

John has found that much of what he gained through military service has benefitted him in college and should continue to do so in civilian employment:

Well, predominantly we're fairly self-sufficient. Like, point us in a direction and tell us what the end goal is and then just let us go. And check in on us once in a while if we're really messing up steer us back towards the right way....Remember we're not straight out of college. We don't need somebody making sure we're doing our project every day.

This self-sufficiency makes John feel like he can be more accountable for success than others and, accompanied with a strong ability when working with teams, is a significant strength John can bring to the employers he is considering. "Being able to do the most with the minimal amount of material. Basically being able to adapt to whatever is

coming along. Being prepared all the time. Adaptation and preparedness". These are also skills that were gained in his military service that John believes will help him succeed as a civilian employee.

**Feelings about the transition.** John feels positively about his transition to civilian employment and believes that his biggest challenge will be choosing from a number of very good positions. Given his qualifications and capabilities, he feels that finding the best fit for long-term employment will take time and effective decision making but that in the end he will be successful in the employment search. What worries him most is starting over, yet again, in a new organization where he is not able to be as self-sufficient as he would like from the start:

Apprehension is starting back at the bottom of the barrel again. That I'm not looking forward to....At the beginning I know I'm going to have to follow somebody else's plan, but I'm looking forward to be able to come up with my own.

John's confidence in learning is strong, however, and he feels that the previous transitions he has experienced have taught him important lessons about beginning new challenges.

Concerns about how old mindsets and behaviors from the military might impact him on the job are also on John's mind as he transitions to civilian employment. Attending college has given him time to readjust to civilian life and integrate with nonmilitary peers, but he has found that some ways of reacting, based on military experience, are harder to leave behind. When he thinks about interacting with others in

the work environment, John feels that his response to some situations may elicit more of a military response from him than he would like:

Not so much worried that it's going to happen, it's just transitioning stuff from the military. I have that worst case scenario, I'd sit there and if somebody's late, my mind immediately goes to okay, they've got in an accident, who do I need to call?

John recognizes that this thought process, as well as other reactions, are ingrained in him based on real necessity from combat situations and may take longer to transition to a more relaxed civilian response than others. In spite of such lingering transition issues, John feels confident and prepared that his education and military service make him an effective candidate.

### **Matt's Story**

Matt always wanted to join the military as he grew up, and his original plan was to join the Marine Corps upon graduating from high school. Although he does not come from a military family, Matt felt a desire to serve others and do something selfless that others were not prepared to do. He also has an adventurous side that wants to see new places and have an impact on the world around him. When he was accepted to attend college Matt followed through on a deal he made with his parents to attend school if he was accepted. He became a member of his school's military organization to find out if he would be able to succeed in the military if he chose to follow that path. Matt serves with the National Guard as an 11B infantryman and is a 23-year-old university studies major in the College of Architecture with minors in business and urban planning.

With school costs increasing in his sophomore year and concerns about his family's contribution to the expenses weighing on his mind, Matt talked with a recruiter about the option of enlisting in the National Guard. He learned that some of his school expenses could be paid with educational benefits earned in service giving him and his family a reprieve from the burden, and he made the decision to enlist. The decision was not easy for Matt as he considered his long-time girlfriend with whom he planned to spend his future. Matt notes, "...when I decided to join the military she was not too happy about that. It put kind of a strain on the relationship – still does a little bit". He has found that balancing the military and relationships is one of the biggest challenges of being a soldier.

Following basic training and infantry school, Matt returned to his unit to find that they would be deploying soon and he withdrew from school and prepared for the experience. Training prepared him as much as possible, and he spent the next seven months in Afghanistan. He was part of a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) group that focused on reconstruction in Kapisa Province as well as providing security for the civil affairs staff in the area. "They would go in and advise the government on how to do things and we'd also do engineering products like roads and bridges and buildings and we'd go by and help them out with that". One of the most significant impacts on Matt from his deployment was the "bunch of really good guys" with whom he served. Matt found that it was the buddies he served alongside that made the time pass quickly and helped him maintain focus and direction in his work on deployment.

Upon returning from deployment Matt was challenged by the transition from military to civilian life because:

...it's really kind of strange at that point, at least for the Guard, because you just all disperse. You don't really – as soon as you get back you all go on your separate ways, you don't get to talk to them or anything so that's kind of different.

Without the daily contact of working together and reintegrating together, Matt had to find his own way in the transition. Returning home mid-semester allowed him some time to readjust to civilian life before returning to school. He also needed to take time to readjust to family life and his relationship, which survived the deployment and became an engagement. At the start of the next semester Matt returned to college having missed his junior year and part of his senior year. In that time, his friends had graduated and moved away, and he was faced with making new friends in a new context, which was unlike the college experience he had previously.

**Transition experience.** Matt's biggest challenge in transitioning to the civilian employment sector is not having support around him from the other military service members with whom he served. The very individual process of reintegrating to civilian life and considering how he will fit into a civilian employment has left Matt feeling more isolated than he may have been otherwise. He has also found that he misses the deployment experience and sometimes wishes he could return to deployment again:

I can't tell many people that, but there's just something about being on a deployment that...I kind of want to go back. I just texted one of my buddies



yesterday and said, 'I wish we were back.' And I get those texts from him all the time, you know back and forth.

For Matt, trying to focus on his civilian employment search, those feelings do sometimes distract him from the career future he knows is ahead of him. He also knows, since he is still in the National Guard, that another deployment may be just a phone call away, a fact which further complicates his search. He also worries that, in spite of legal protections, he will lose his employment if he deploys again:

I'll be in the Guard for probably awhile, I may re-up, I don't know yet, but I need somebody that will be okay with me being in the Guard and having to do drills and maybe possibly getting deployed again. I know there's laws against that but if you say you're in the Guard or whatever or you're in the military, they don't necessarily have to hire you and you'll never know it's because you're in the military. They can just say you weren't the right fit for the job or something. I just need to find somebody that's okay with me being in the military.

**Relating military experience.** Matt, like many other veterans, also worries about the reaction he will receive from employers about his previous, and potential future, military service. As he illustrates:

...being an infantryman your job is to close with and destroy the enemy I guess is a good way to put it. You can't really tell them that was your job to do. It might freak them out. You kind of have to come up with a nicer way to put it, you can't really say that's what you're supposed to do.

Although he believes strongly that his experience will benefit him and the employer who hires him, Matt has found that he is largely alone in learning how to articulate his military experience to employers and building a résumé that reflects the skills he has to offer based on his experience without overpromising:

You kind of have to be careful because I wasn't you know, in construction or anything like that. That's not what I was in the military and it's kind of hard to say what my job was really to do. There's a little bit of help online, I was looking, I can't remember the name of the site, but it tells you with your MOS how you can relate it to civilian experience and one of the things was instead of saying what you're really supposed to do, you say I was in charge or responsible for multi-million dollar equipment, we had a lot of leadership and that sort of thing.

Matt has been working with some of his construction industry contacts and others to help him prepare for the rigors of the employment search ahead of him:

For sure figuring out ways that my military service can go on a résumé or that I can sell myself to an employer because of my military service to make it a positive thing rather than maybe a negative thing.

He has made good contacts within the construction industry he plans to enter upon graduation. Included are some valuable connections made through his family who have helped him in his career pursuit thus far. Matt relates:

I have some experience in construction just working a civilian job and then being overseas. A lot of people seems like, like leadership, especially in construction

I've noticed. Because a lot of guys I've talked to in construction are old veterans, some of the guys who are head honchos in the business now and they're all vets....

Given the number of veterans he has encountered in construction, Matt feels confident that he will be able to find a position prior to his graduation.

**Feelings about the transition.** Overall, Matt feels very confident about his career transition and the ways in which he will market his military experience to employers. Having made solid contacts in his industry of choice and built a résumé reflecting his best skills from military service, Matt believes he is well-positioned to find an employer who will be a good fit for him and describes some of his skills:

Definitely leadership because you're broken down from the beginning. You learn how to follow and then you get to where at some point you have to lead. You're also great at dealing with a lot of stress which helps in school because a lot of times it's very stressful. You have to keep to deadlines which then, in turn, transfers to the work environment when you have strict deadlines you have to follow or you're going to get sued, you're going to be fired, your project's going to fail, whatever it might be. So I definitely think that's some very big aspects. Very responsible. You're responsible for your life, your buddy's life, a lot of very expensive equipment. If that equipment falls in the wrong hands a lot of bad things can happen.

Matt also feels that there are a number of ways in which he can contribute to changing the perceptions of veterans in the workplace, particularly perceptions of

combat veterans. He would like to see civilians become better educated about veterans and the benefits of working alongside them as colleagues. He would also like to see organizations take greater steps to create programs to support veterans who work for them.

Let them know that they're valued. Maybe have some good training once you get to the company. A lot of companies have good training programs and stuff so just something like that. Maybe even a veterans group within the bigger companies or something like that? I don't know, just a way for veterans to connect....Maybe make a position that's just a little added responsibility – maybe for a veteran or someone who likes veterans or knows a lot about it – that can maybe talk to people, be there if people have questions or there's some kind of clash between them because somebody doesn't understand or someone thinks a veteran's strange because he's doing different things because he's kind of a little different or something.

Matt looks forward to being one of the people who take the responsibility for answering questions and providing a positive example of a combat veteran in the workplace. He would like to see veterans have increased opportunities to connect overall and feels like such connections would help his transition and that of others.

### **Roger's Story**

Roger is an Army veteran and current reservist, who served 12 years active duty before entering higher education. Growing up he came from a military family with a tradition of service in the infantry. With military tradition in his family, he always knew

he was going to be in the Army and recalls pictures of himself as a child standing in his father's boots and maroon beret. In high school he decided to follow his sister to West Point, which required him to make a great deal of commitment with the year-long application process. After beginning West Point, Roger discovered it was not the military experience he had thought it would be and left after the first year and a half. Roger transferred to another college, but "after screwing that up, I just went back to working and floating around at life to be honest". But he missed the structure of the military and the sense of being a part of something bigger than himself and he went back to the Army. Joining the active duty Army in 1998, Roger served as an infantryman, deploying once to Iraq with the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne as a paratrooper. Enlisting prior to 9/11, Roger never imagined he would be serving in war-time but saw military service as an opportunity to do something for others and expand his own capabilities and knowledge.

Though humble about the opportunities he has had, Roger has been honored to serve in some unique positions that have given him a platform to talk to others about the value of military service. During his time in service, Roger served for more than a year as a guard at the Tomb of the Unknowns in Washington, DC. After being selected from a highly competitive pool of candidates, he underwent extensive initial and ongoing training to learn and uphold the rigid standards of both the Army and the tomb guards. He was also selected to stand guard at the head of late President Reagan's casket as he lay in state in the Capitol. This position also required extensive training and attention to detail while in the public eye. These positions of honor are examples of Roger's drive to do the best work as a service member and take advantage of the many opportunities

available for those who work to excel. One of Roger's most memorable and most challenging days of service was September 11, 2001, when he assisted in the rescue and recovery efforts at the Pentagon. The tragedy and resiliency he saw and participated in that day left a lasting impression upon Roger. He used his experiences there to propel him forward in the Army and shaped his mindset of caring for and serving others even further.

Throughout his time in service Roger also took advantage of many additional training and school opportunities to further his capabilities in the Army and broaden his applicable skills. He attended the prestigious Pathfinder School, a three-week course that teaches navigation and precision cargo loads and drops, where he finished at the top of his group. While this school was not required for his position, and is very difficult to get into, Roger used his time there to perfect the skills taught. He spent countless hours studying and training and emerged as the class leader and gaining experience he believes will be useful for the rest of his life.

Roger places a great deal of importance on having a college degree and understands the importance of it in the civilian sector. He always knew "I'm going to get back to college". He approached applying to college with the same diligence he displayed in the military and decided that he would attend his first choice school or none at all. He felt that "if I hadn't gotten in I would have retired from the Army and just kept trying to get in". Roger believes that his accomplishment of being accepted into college is his proudest moment yet.

Roger is a 33-year-old junior in college majoring in industrial distribution. He believes the major and career field options are a good fit for veterans because the employment options available are similar to many that veterans have held. The school's strong relationships with regional employers also gives him an opportunity to use the networking and social skills he has developed through military service. Like many veterans in higher education, Roger is married and has a child. Having additional responsibilities for a family makes academic life all the more challenging for him. Relying on the strict time management necessary in the military helps him accomplish his academic requirements as well as the extra-curricular activities in which Roger has chosen to participate. To meet other students with similar backgrounds and interests, Roger continues to stay involved in the military lifestyle as a member of his school's military organization. His participation in a group of all combat veterans in higher education keeps him connected to other veterans as he becomes more involved in the student lifestyle. Meeting regularly for formal and informal events, the group shares the same kind of bonds that Roger experienced in the military. The activities of this organization have given him the opportunity to introduce others to what it means to be a veteran transitioning to a new career.

**Transition experience.** The value of education is something that was instilled in Roger since he was young along with the value of military service. Although he experienced challenges finding the right fit initially, he, nevertheless, knew that education would be a part of his future. Additionally, he has encouraged veterans with whom he served and those who served under him to pursue education:

And college isn't an "I'm going to go try it out." Remember that when you go to college you are specifically going to graduate. You're going to college to graduate with a degree. You're not going to try out college. Don't waste your time, don't waste your benefits. Go to college with a full head of steam, fully prepared to graduate from college. You may not know what degree plan you're going to want to approach initially, but that's okay. Everybody changes their majors, including guys that have been to Afghanistan and have been shot at. )

Roger's transition into higher education the first semester was especially difficult. His first semester grades were well below what he would have liked, but he recognized that he was going through a transition that was not just academic; it was also not just social and academic. Roger also realized that, unlike the military, no one would be accountable for his challenges except him. He found that to get help he had to ask for it. That included academic support, career assistance, and making new social connections:

If you ask for help – "What can I do between now and before my senior year to land that internship? What can I do to bolster my résumé to be more attractive, not just necessarily just to you but just in general?" And they're quick to the trigger to help. You know, they always have, "Hey, you should think about this."

It's career advice from people that are out in the industry right now.

**Relating military experience.** Roger has a good sense about what he will need to do to have an effective career search in the civilian sector and has taken steps to begin



his transition to civilian employment. He has made connecting with other veterans, academic peers, faculty, and employers a priority:

Obviously, employments while you're in college – that really has no bearing on whether you're a veteran or not. But, at the same time, your entire time while you're in school you should be looking forward to your employment in the sense of you should already be talking to people and getting your name out there and discussing with people what it's like.

Roger's networking strategy has been effective in helping him meet industry leaders as well as managers in sectors of the industrial distribution marketplace that he had not explored previously. He also finds value in engaging with others outside of his chosen profession. From Roger's military experience, he knows that he needs to be attuned to accomplishing the mission, and every person he meets could bring value to him in accomplishing his employment mission so he expressly takes the time to make those connections:

I'm always looking – when I meet people, I'm already thinking ahead to my employment – is this something I could see myself doing? And, if so, I need to stay in contact with this person. And is this someone that I feel is important because of the people they know? And are these professional relationships, and even personal relationships, that I need to develop over time – for my own benefit, more than anything? And that comes across probably as a touch selfish, but that's certainly one thing you learn in the military: is if you don't look out for number one, nobody else will.

Engaging interested others in the interview process is a new process for Roger. While he knows he is capable of generating conversation about his military experiences overall, he has found it challenging to steer employers' questions to his transferable strengths and skills. Their interest in the unique opportunities he has had in service sometimes outweighs the hard questions he wants to address about how he can benefit an organization:

I mean the series of questions from the employer always kind of comes – regardless of the employer, and really just the people I meet in general, it's always kind of the same series of questions: how long did you serve, and then it goes to what ranks were you in, and then it goes to ... the “did you deploy” question. But so it just starts with a very simple fact-finding questions, and then they'll – every employer's a little bit different. Employers are just curious. They don't really ask just in the initial conversations. They don't do a whole lot of digging as far as what position did you hold; well, why do you have that position; how many people are you in charge of. Like it's just real kind of broad questions; they're just curious.

**Feelings about the transition.** Roger feels hopeful and enthusiastic about his transition to a civilian career. He knows his military experience has given him ample skills that are reflected on his résumé. His maturity versus the traditional-aged college students with whom he is competing will set him apart when networking and interviewing. In discussing the differences between his experience and a traditional student's, Roger noted:

Like they're not willing to step up and be like, "Well, I want to be in charge. I want to be a leader." They're happy with just doing their job and getting the results and going about their social lives. I don't understand not wanting to be a leader. I don't understand not wanting the responsibility, 'cause it sets you apart.

Roger also realizes that building a solid civilian career after a successful military career is his key to a happy future for himself and his family. He thrives on the sense of responsibility he carries in identifying a new career and going through the employment search process:

You know, you can sit around and wait on luck but at the end of the day you have to go out and you have to seek the opportunities that you want in your life, and once you find them, you have to seize them and develop 'em in the most rapid but also in-depth manner in which you can do it. I'm looking forward to graduating and...really just employment and life in general.

### **Sean's Story**

Sean is a 23-year-old National Guardsman who served two deployments as an infantryman. He comes from a family where members from each generation have served so he knew about the different branches and the expectations of serving his country. Sean always knew he would join the military, but did not know what branch until his best friend from high school joined the National Guard. He learned that he would get all the Army training and have the opportunity to serve his country and state as well as earn college funding. Sean wanted to attend college to be an engineer and

determined that he could accomplish serving his country and achieve the education he desired with the National Guard shortly after his 17th birthday.

After attending basic training and infantry school, Sean returned to begin his freshman year in college. He began as a petroleum engineering major because he had heard about the high employment rate and starting salary upon graduation. At the time, he had little else upon which to base his career decisions. During his second year of college, Sean was completing his first state Guard deployment cleaning up hurricane damage when he received orders for his first federal military deployment overseas and spent the next year in Iraq. Upon returning from Iraq, Sean reentered college less than two weeks later and believes this was a significant mistake because he had not adjusted to civilian life and the expectations and rigors of academics. Without the time to decompress and acclimate that semester, Sean found himself making poor choices with his self-care and studying.

Once adjusted to the civilian pattern of life, Sean spent the next year focusing on his grades and long-time relationship with his girlfriend. After transferring into the industrial distribution major, he found that he was much more engaged in his studies and thinking about career potential. Knowing he still had time committed to the military and the potential to be deployed, Sean chose to go on a deployment to Afghanistan at a time he knew he could prepare for and made plans to return to school afterward. Sean also felt that with two wars being fought, he needed to fight in both in order to complete the mission he had embarked upon when joining the military. He also felt that he was much better prepared for his second deployment having learned how to manage himself, his

equipment, and his relationships through his previous experience. Sean spent the next year deployed to Afghanistan. Returning from deployment once again, Sean resumed his education and married his girlfriend. He also ended his military service.

**Transition experience.** Sean's career development has been sporadic throughout his time in college and the deployments that have interrupted his education. His interest in engineering led him to an academic major that will allow him flexibility in pursuing his career interests even as they continue to change and evolve.

He has learned, from his employment search and military experience, that connecting with others and building a network of contacts will give him the greatest benefit for finding a new career:

The sooner you start, the more people you'll meet. And it's always that one person you never thought who could, you know, do something for you and then they'll come through and you could have a job working for that person and you never knew. You never thought you'd end up working for them. I hear those stories all the time. So you can never meet too many people.

His ease in talking with others is one of the many skills Sean contributes to his success in the military as well as in his career transition:

You know, it's very people oriented and I'm really good at that. I'm really good at dealing with people and building relationships and, you know, I don't get nervous talking to anyone. It doesn't matter if it's, you know, the CEO of a company or Joe Schmoe in the street. It doesn't matter. You're going to get the

same person when it comes to me and I'm very comfortable with that and I like that, the idea of talking to people and getting to know people....

Sean credits his ability to talk easily with others as something that has helped him most with his transition. Building a conversation on shared interests helps him relate to those with whom he is speaking and helps him share his experiences with them.

**Relating military experience.** Sean also credits his experience in the infantry with helping him gain the flexibility and breadth of skills that has helped him become a more well-rounded candidate for employment in his field:

Some of them get it immediately and they really don't need any explanation and just the fact that they know that you're military...Iraq, Afghanistan veteran. That enough is they get the picture. They understand kind of who you are and stuff like that....I mean, you know, you think it'd be easy, but trying to define exactly what an infantryman does, oh, my gosh...it just depends on your particular mission that you get when you're down range. You could be doing route clearance. You can be doing – looking for bad guys. You could have missions where that's all you do. You could be doing QRF [Quick Reaction Force]. You could be doing, you know, security.

The variety of missions Sean participated in and led means he has ample examples from which to draw when relating his skills to an employer for his future career. He knows this sets him apart from other students who have no work experience and those who are unable to draw connections between previous experience and future potential:

You've just got to figure out how to...relate what they're looking for to skills that you don't know that you have. And it's just, you know, because you call them different names. You performed those in different environments and you don't think they relate, but they do....They like the maturity. They like the, you know, dedication, the loyalty, and the Army values, as you'd say.

Like many veterans, Sean also wants employers to know that military veterans are not all the same and do not all experience the same challenges after service. Having received some less than positive reactions regarding his military experience when talking with employers, he hopes they will take notice of a key message: "... we're not crazy. We don't all have PTSD". He hopes that employers will focus on evaluating veterans' skills compared to the positions to which they are applying rather than evaluating them as a group based on stereotypes.

**Feelings about the transition.** Sean has seen previously that some people do not value military service in the same way that others do. This dissonance in reactions led to some frustration early on as he looked for a non-career job in the community:

I get the impression when some people speak to you I think they really – maybe for some people it is, but I think there's really this kind of false impression that you did the military because you couldn't do anything else or the military is not a real job or that's not practical or that's not, you know, it doesn't apply to real people....I don't know how people got the impression that doing the military is easy. Oh, my gosh! There is – I've never been more challenged physically, mentally, you know, emotionally, psych – everything from the military. I mean

the amount of technical knowledge you have to know is far more than anything I'd ever have to learn, you know, in school in my opinion.

Having had positive experiences in his identification of prospective employers and employment opportunities through his current academic department, Sean now feels hopeful about relating his military experience transition to civilian employment in the future:

You hear about the benefits and stuff like that, but I think being able to talk to employers and see that a lot of them really do look for that – or maybe they're not looking for it at first, when they get to talk to you they quickly see why they'd rather have you than some of the other people, who were, you know, in the program with you. So yeah – I mean I'm excited.

From the networking he has done, Sean has a good sense of what employers are looking for and feels confident that he can meet their expectations. He feels that the hard work veterans are used to doing makes them the best candidates to be considered:

I did military service and school simultaneously along with having a relationship with my wife and stuff like that. I mean, there's a lot of things that go into that, and it's much more difficult, you know? It's much more difficult. So if you're able to put that much effort into getting something you want, how do you think that person is going to perform in their job for you?

### **Tom's Story**

Tom is a 28-year-old political science major who served active duty in the Army as an infantryman. After growing up in a small Michigan town in the rust belt, he



enlisted right after graduating high school in 2003. College was something Tom did not see as an option for himself. He recounts that most kids like him were expected to graduate high school and get a job. He did not want to stay in the same area and follow others' plan for him, so Tom enlisted in the Army. During his time in service, Tom deployed twice to Iraq including for the surge of 2007 after being stop-lossed.

Upon ending his time in service, Tom followed his girlfriend to a new state and city. He had a friend from the Army there who worked for the city police department and he put in a good word for him to get started with the hiring process. But Tom found that as he went further into the hiring process he felt that being a police officer would be enjoyable for a few years but not the long term for a career.

Tom decided to use his educational benefits to attend community college and started just going a few semesters to see how he liked it and how successful he might be. Without a degree plan or career path, Tom began taking classes and found that he was stronger academically than he had anticipated he might be. He found it was not like high school where he was a marginal student. College was different because he was older with greater focus and a broader perspective. Even without a solid career direction, at 26 Tom understood the importance of obtaining an education in contrast to the younger students who he found were only interested a good time. He did well at community college and earned his associate's degree in one year.

Associate's degree in hand, Tom applied and was accepted to his first choice four-year school and began studying for his bachelor's degree. He was initially accepted as an economics major but found that the classes were not interesting to him so he made

the change to political science. Tom's perspective was that earning a degree would benefit him, regardless of the field of study. He already believed that the value of his military experience would outweigh his academic degree, so he focused on earning his degree within the amount of time he had remaining on his benefits rather than selecting a degree leading to a career.

Even without identifying a career interest and pursuing a degree in line with that interest, Tom has received numerous employment opportunities based on his military experience and skills in addition to his degree. His greatest challenge in evaluating the employers and the positions they are seeking to hire him for is in determining whether the organizational culture will be a good fit for him. After serving in the military, Tom is invested in being part of an organization that will value all that he brings and utilize his talents effectively. He hopes that the organization that welcomes his service will welcome many others' as well.

**Transition experience.** Tom's transition has been easy as he has adjusted to a more difficult academic environment and begun thinking about work after graduation. Any concerns he had about how his classroom experiences were put aside with the positive interactions he has had:

...most of the professors were very accommodating and valued our input...I didn't have a negative time. Most of it was just differences of maturity and world view, you know, veterans tend to – we tend to latch onto something, and we're all about getting stuff done.

Being, often, the only veteran in a class made Tom stand out as different, a point he used as an advantage. The opportunity to demonstrate his professionalism and maturity helped him set a good example for other students while garnering the attention and respect of the faculty looking for those who were engaged in the class material.

Tom has been less focused on engaging intentionally in career development activities. He reflects on not pursuing a particular course of education to lead to a career field and not networking as effectively as he might have:

...going into college I wasn't as prepared for that reality as I could have been. If I would have tried to do more networking in college...gone to more events and things that could have helped that a lot.

He does note that veterans do not often know about the kinds of career development activities they need to engage in, like networking, and are not naturally drawn to participate in them. Reflecting on his own experience, he believes that breaking out of the military mindset will be of vital importance for veterans to be successful and create better understanding of their capabilities by employers:

In the military it's dictated by what rank's on you or what metal is on your chest or whatever, but in the civilian world you really do have to go out and network. People aren't just going to respect you because you were in that position or because you were a captain. They can try, they can appreciate service, but they don't know what that means.

Tom also thinks he and other veterans need to help each other be better prepared to compete with others in the employment search process. He compares the readiness processes to what veterans engaged in when they were in service:

...veterans need to do a good job at taking care of ourselves and look out for one another also in our physical appearance and everything. It used to be – my grandpa always told me – they always did the events where they had a good haircut and had a clean shave and all that, but now days I’ve seen guys show up to job interviews with a full beard, no haircut.

Tom has seen how his own efforts in career development, while admittedly minimal, have made him more effective as an employment seeker and supportive of his fellow veterans.

**Relating military experience.** Tom is realistic about knowing that employers are not necessarily well-versed on, or even aware of, what veterans have done and all they can contribute to an organization. “Yeah, I would say that’s being generous to even assume they know you’ve carried a gun and shoot bad guys”. He also knows that part of the lack of knowledge is due to veterans themselves:

I think military-friendly companies are great, and I’m even looking at a job with one of them right now, but on the whole companies don’t really know what to do with the veterans, and I don’t think veterans do a good job of explaining or showing companies how they can be utilized either. I think a lot of us are very timid in our approach with them like “well, you guys tell me what to do, and I’ll do it” but we’re not very good at “this is my skill set. This is how you can utilize

me as a vet.” And so I think it’s rare when you come across a veteran that can really sell themselves...

While confident in his own abilities to do so, Tom sees veterans’ inability to showcase their skills and capabilities as a large obstruction to their career potential when competing with traditional students and other prospective employees:

...it’s harder to sell that to your regular employer and explain, you know – so if you didn’t know, I attended weekly BUB meetings...battle update briefs, and gave the commander this kind of information – it’s hard to translate participating in BUBs to I’m really skilled at briefing high-level leadership and good at presentations. That doesn’t always come across the right way.

**Feelings about the transition.** Tom is excited about the transition and feels confident in his ability to be successful in the civilian work world. He attributes part of his confidence to those who have educated and supported him in the career transition. He also attributes it to making the most of his military experience. “I feel really blessed because I’ve had good mentors, I’ve had people I could ask advice from to help me figure things out, and so far it’s worked for me”. He is also adamant that other veterans must engage in such mentoring and networking relationships if they are to be successful moving into a new career:

...you can’t just stand there at the back of the room with your hands in your pockets with a sullen look on your face and be like “well, I’m a veteran.” You can’t carry that around. If you’re a veteran, you need to do everything that kid is

doing right and then in addition to that you're a veteran. People aren't just going to float your way just because you were a veteran.

Tom's excitement about the potential of veterans, like himself, in civilian employment is tempered with realistic reflection, and perhaps melancholy, about moving more deeply into the civilian workforce. The loss of deep connections in teamwork and sense of life-changing mission are noticeable in the civilian employment environments he is considering:

And that's probably the hardest part of civilian employment is it doesn't feel like it matters as much as the military does. You don't get that job satisfaction like "Hey, we did a good thing today. The team really came together. It was the best squad." You just don't get that same accomplishment.

What Tom does continue to feel enthusiastic about is the limitless potential in his civilian career depending on how hard he is willing to work. With fewer boundaries by rank and structure and more opportunity for growth, he sees the ability to grow his career in the direction and at the speed he wants based on his own individual effort:

And if you think about it in the civilian world you can get bonus money and all sorts of financial incentives, and in the military you do all sorts of crazy stuff for cheap pieces of aluminum to pin on our chest. You'd be amazed what you can get out of guys if you push some real money at them or give them some real incentives to do stuff.

Tom's excitement to get into the civilian workforce and prove his value is palpable to those around him, and he hopes that drive is contagious. He feels that he is ready to

compete with nonveterans and is prepared to set the example for what veterans can accomplish.

**Emerging Themes**

Themes that emerged from my review of the research data, as shown in Table 3, are reflective of the phenomena occurring within the veteran participants’ career development experiences as they move through and move out of higher education into civilian employment.

Table 3

*Summary of Themes*

Theme	Essence
Lost in Translation	Veterans of combat arms must regain personal and professional power to be able to have impact on career development.
Back to Basic	Moving from expert in military service to novice in education and employment challenges infantrymen’s confidence.
Battle Buddies	Relationships developed in military are stronger and more meaningful than those built in higher education and civilian employment.
Drop Your Tools	Service members are identified by unique cultural markers that contribute to their comfort level and identity.
Virtue and Valor	Infantrymen are instructed and learn to closely manage their emotions as they go about their work on deployment to protect themselves and others.

Data show that the veterans are not only aware of the challenges they face but are also deeply thoughtful about their experiences and their needs for support and assistance. Comments taken from the veterans' stories illustrate the elements of their changing environments that impact their transitions.

In the theme *lost in translation*, I highlighted the veterans' challenges in relating their military experiences to the civilian academic and employment worlds. *Back to basic* refers to the veterans' return to being novices in their environment and to the work to which they are attending. The theme *battle buddies* references the veterans' experiences with changing types and depth of relationships in the civilian environment of education and employment. *Drop your tools* alludes to the veterans' cultural adjustment to higher education and civilian employment and comes from the Karl Weick (1993) work on organizational sensemaking based on the cultural markers or "tools" we carry and what happens to us when we leave them behind. *Virtue and valor* reflects the warrior ethos of service and care for others that the veterans continue to carry as they leave active service and transition to civilian life.

**Lost in translation.** Veterans in higher education struggle with self-advocacy and self-efficacy as they transition to civilian employment within systems and structures with which they are unfamiliar and of which they do not feel a part. They recognize that their experiences and capabilities as infantrymen do not translate directly to civilian work and are challenged with how to help others make sense of their previous work. That struggle is part of their experience as they undertake career development within higher education. Their sense of being able to take ownership of their career



development and employment search is challenged by the very structures intended to support and develop students as prospective employees.

Combat arms veterans know they have capabilities and experience that will benefit the industries they want to work within, but they need help forming and learning to share their message. Sean's reflections on this challenge illustrate the struggle he has gone through:

I mean, you're talking to someone who's probably worked harder in the military than he probably will work ever again in his life and you're saying he can't accomplish something? And there's probably very few things that you can throw at him that he's not going to be able to accomplish in the course of his time working for you, or her time. So I would say employers need to understand that, you know, not all vets are like that, but I'd say, you know, probably the ones who are in school probably are. So you're not just hiring someone who has the skills and knowledge, but you're also hiring someone who knows that not accomplishing something is unacceptable. And they'll find a way to accomplish whatever it is they need to. And obviously the skill sets, the maturity, the responsibility. A lot of things that they have to teach new college grads are a lot of those are second nature to veterans.

Likewise, Adam has confidence in his abilities but knows that he needs education on employment search strategies to be able to effectively share all the experience he has to offer employers. He also sees the knowledge gap between what veterans have to offer and what employers understand about veterans as a significant divide to be bridged:

And there's quite a few people that have never actually worked or done anything or had to do a résumé before they were in the military....If you don't know any better, it kind of goes back to the whole if you don't know any better, hopefully there's people out there or some kind of organization or something out there that you can reach out to that's going to help with that. There's plenty of résumé builder people...but do they know how to take a veteran's résumé and know how to do something? No they don't. So that's something that needs to be taken care of. We're too one dimensional when it comes to that and some of it has to do with just how the civilian world thinks of veterans and veterans think of the civilian world. We have to both work together in kind of molding that, people on the civilian side are not going to know any better unless people in the middle facilitate that to join it to where there's a common understanding....

Matt, too, feels the difficulty of demonstrating his capabilities to civilian employers, though several he has talked with are veterans. He sees the value of education to help combat arms veterans, like him, make the transition to civilian employment in a new career field:

...unfortunately in the infantry you can't necessarily translate those skills completely into some jobs. Some guys who are mechanics, they can go straight into a civilian job if they want because that's what they've done. Unfortunately for some people in infantry, unless they had some experience before, you don't necessarily get those skills. You still have a lot of great things you can offer, but

you can't necessarily go straight into a civilian job. You need a little bit more technical training....

Veterans of combat arms feel the changes in themselves from their experiences in combat service that they believe should make them more effective employment seekers. They hope that potential employers will also sense the maturity and confidence gained in service that the veterans believe they embody. Roger shares this perspective:

You don't get the option of not growing up and changing when you deploy.

Because if you refuse to change, you normally come back in a box....And I make sure I hit the parts about the level of leadership that I – leadership positions that I held and what I did. Not so much what I did specifically as a job, because my job, like I said, it doesn't transfer over to – yeah, jumping out of a plane and shooting people's not a civilian skill that, really, a whole lot of employers are looking for, but being a squad leader and being a platoon sergeant, and being in charge of – starting off and just being in charge of myself, and then having 1 or 2 soldiers, and then 5 and then 8, and then 40, and being able to do that – and while jumping out of planes and waking up way too early in the morning to go running.

Tom also wants to make sure his maturity from military service comes through to employers but struggles with the systems in place that do not allow him to directly interact with them. He has found that the online recruiting programs many employers use inhibit his ability to set his experience apart from others:

I think the hard part too is, there's no good way – particularly as companies move more and more to an online hiring process – there's no good way to

distinguish, I'm a veteran. Of course, every workplace does the EEO self-identifying questions, but they claim that those are anonymous and everything so if that's the only place on the application besides my job experience and you're not scanning for military experience in these programs then how should that help me make my military experience stand out? I think that's probably the biggest obstacle we face is we're in the same stack as the 10,000 people that just graduated and responded to an application...the only way we can really delineate ourselves is with those EEO questions, but even then those are confidential, and unless employers are specifically looking for military experience in these automated scans...unless the employer knows that's what they're looking for.

Combat arms veterans have been through some of the most difficult situations in the military, many they do not want to recount to explain their skills and experiences. They do not believe that employers are able to understand their work or context of it and want to be able to articulate their experience more fully. Jeff puts words to this challenge:

To realize what their job was. To realize that, depending on who the person is, they've been in some of the most stressful situations the world can put them in, and depending on who they are, if they want to continue in a stressful job then – I guess that would be for the professionals – to identify who the person is and to identify what they need...if I was pushed into a job field right after getting out of the military and someone said “here's a job for you, go take it” and it was

something stressful right off the bat or something that I couldn't handle at that time I think that would be a huge problem for me.

More than anything, combat arms veterans want to be understood. They know they have a great deal to offer the civilian employment world and are ready to take on the challenges inherent in the transition. They are most stymied by their inability to make use of the structures in place for their career development and enact changes that would give them parity within the employment search systems used to compare them with those they are competing against for employments.

**Back to basic.** Starting over in higher education and anticipating another new beginning in employment is described as just as daunting to the veterans as entering basic training in the military. While they had vague ideas about what the new environment would be like, they had little preparation for how to plan for a future career and undertake the work necessary to do so. Like new recruits, they have had to watch and learn from others around them. They have also had to learn that it is acceptable and generally encouraged for them to ask questions and learn on their own to attain successful post education employment. Engaging in higher education is seen by the veterans as a way to bridge their military experience to the civilian workforce: to gain additional knowledge in a content area that will help them pursue a new career path after their service. What they have found upon engaging in higher education is a greater sense of loss, fear, and hopelessness than they experienced since beginning their service. Through learning with other veterans they have found hope restored and motivation to

move through the transition to complete their new mission in life. John experienced these feelings as he created his civilian résumé:

Because it's harder for us to figure out what should go on there and what shouldn't. Some stuff shouldn't – obviously like kill count, body count, after action report stuff shouldn't go on there – but stuff like the dollar amount of the equipment that we were responsible for....

Roger sees the perspective of starting over as particularly difficult for those from combat arms, but certainly applicable to other veterans. He has watched the soldiers he led in battle go through the transition as he has gone through it himself and provides advice from a military perspective that has been helpful to many veterans:

Stop, take a step back, look at the situation, and see if there's a different way you can do it. It's like anything in the military. It's like a basic 101 assault. Go to the objective. Something blocks your way all of a sudden right in the middle of your assault, take a step back real quick and get around it, get back to the objective, complete the mission. Done. And veterans have that ability, but sometimes they don't – they can't apply it over to the civilian world.

The participants know that it will be up to them to determine how to transition most effectively. Through their new experiences in education they have come to realize that seeking out resources to help them is vital to their success. Jeff references what he has learned about the importance of combat arms veterans getting civilian employment exposure as part of their career development while still in higher education:

So it would definitely be, pursue something as soon as you get into college. Find out – do internships during the summer. There’s many different opportunities in whatever job field you want to do. You know, ride alongs with police officers, there’s internships during the summers. Almost any job force, especially if you go in saying “I was prior military. I’m trying to find a new interest. I’m going through college right now. Can I shadow you for a day?” I’m sure 90% of the businesses out there won’t turn you down. Find out what you actually enjoy doing....

In search of civilian employment exposure, Adam has experienced firsthand the feeling of needing to prove himself and his capabilities to employers in spite of his military experience. As he highlights, experience in combat required the adaptability and fortitude he knows will be needed in civilian employment:

...you execute whatever plan needs to be executed whether it be training or actually planning for anything, making sure of accountability of equipment and all that stuff. Of course the fun stuff is actually jumping and going to ranges and shooting. Other than that, that was basically the garrison environment. Of course when it comes to the deployment side of it, it’s basically missions come down from higher and you just do whatever you’re told, you plan for whatever and execute that....

Moving from a position of expertise in the military to one of relative novice in the career development process produces discomfort for combat arms veterans. In addition to the fear and regret they experience at leaving old systems behind, they carry

a sense of hope that brings them comfort and sustains them in the learning of new ways of doing and being. Feeling the fear and loss of starting over again is just part of what combat arms veterans experience in their transition. As they move through their education and acquire new skills and knowledge, they come to understand that merging the new with the old will lead to the path of their greatest success.

**Battle buddies.** Most who have served in the military count their friendships with battle buddies as the most honest, sincere, and meaningful they have ever experienced. Putting their lives in each other's hands and knowing their buddy will *watch their six*, those bonds do not change or decrease over time. When veterans are faced with entering the civilian workforce without battle buddies or those who understand that depth of friendship, it creates significant dissonance for them. Their transition time in higher education is a testing ground for how they will adjust to different kinds of friendships. Roger articulates his feelings and experience about these new relationships:

That support network. You had it in the Army and once you leave you wonder where it went. And it's okay to have friends that aren't your age who are your classmates. Because they're going through the same thing you're going through. Regardless of their age, that's why you build such strong bonds in the military because you have buddies who are going through the same hardships that you are, and it's the same academically.

Veterans do seek out other veterans to socialize with outside the military in higher education. Many find the bonds of military branch are outweighed by bonds of common



military experience. However, the veterans may remain a more insular group due to their unique experiences and cultural references. This may create a challenge to them in expanding their personal and professional networks as Tom illustrates:

...[school] has a good strong veteran community, especially coming into [a military group] and making friends with fellow combat vets; that worked out great. But at times it was kind of weird and lonely. We probably, as veterans, we probably didn't develop the college social network that we would have if we were traditional students. I mean, we made friends with veterans, but veterans is a pretty broad spectrum so we had [military group] and then veterans groups and you have people who are in their 30s and 40s and you have people who are still in service and going back in, you know Green to Gold program. So we probably didn't develop as big a social network as the traditional student would.

Deploying with the National Guard during his time in higher education made Matt's transition more complicated when he returned to a changed social environment. The kind of challenge he experienced with changes to his social structure impacts National Guard and Reservists uniquely and can impede the transition both in higher education and later in civilian employment. Finding other veterans to connect with made Matt feel better about the personal changes he experienced when returning to higher education after deployment:

I like the veterans association where you can meet all the old veterans and all the veterans who are coming back and everything and that you can meet each other because you have all been through kind of the same experiences, you might get

along better. So when you get back sometimes you don't necessarily feel like – because like I was saying all my friends were gone when I got home so I had to meet new people and that was a little bit difficult at first.

Jeff found that some of his military bonds may be helpful to his employment search as well as his transition. Connecting with others on deployment with similar career paths is a way for infantrymen to build trust and gain knowledge about their field of interest. Being able to talk about civilian career options as well as military experiences could make the transition much smoother for him due to his career interest:

But, at this current drill this past weekend, I met a police officer actually in the town right next to the town that I want to work at. And, so I was kind of getting my name out to him, like, “Hey, this is what I'm wanting to do, if there's any way you can refer me to the right people.” And, I think that's a large part of it is knowing someone, at least in the general area, that can help point you in the right direction. And, then, going into the second deployment my first sergeant was a police officer in [town], a team leader alongside me was a police officer in [town], and there was a bunch of – there's at least three other police officers that I knew from around the [state] area.

The connections that veterans, particularly combat arms veterans, develop with each other and their reliance on each other does not translate in the same way to the civilian world where friendships are less based on deep personal trust and teamwork is expected, but individual achievement is more often rewarded. Putting their lives in each other's hands creates a unique bond that veterans' counterparts in higher education and

civilian employment cannot often understand. The experience of losing that kind of trust and reliance on others can shake veterans' confidence and leave them feeling lost.

Finding other veterans in their new environments can help support their transition and integration of new skills and knowledge.

**Drop your tools.** Military service members are identified clearly by their tools, which set them apart as belonging to a unique culture (Weick, 1993). From their distinctive uniforms, pins and ribbons, and weapons, service members are easy to identify. When leaving service for higher education and then moving to civilian employment, veterans must leave these outward cultural markers of their service, their tools, behind. What that means to them, in terms of loss of identity and culture, impacts how they proceed through new environments and relate to others.

Their fear of dropping their military tools and moving on to a new civilian future and civilian culture is, perhaps, one of the most stressful feelings that combat arms veterans must address when moving through higher education. Inability to undertake this part of their transition could have significant repercussions for their academic and civilian career success. Jeff felt the need to retain his military identity and go on a second deployment to continue serving and addresses his feelings of reluctance about dropping his tools and moving on to civilian culture:

I think that's why I can't really just go into a 9-to-5-desk job that I need a little, I don't know, adrenaline, I guess. I don't know how to describe it...I need an outlet right now because I still feel like I need service, and I still feel like I need that adrenaline rush.

After deploying to Iraq and then returning to higher education, Sean, too, experienced a need to hold onto his military identity. He felt an intrinsic desire to continue service and volunteered for a second deployment:

I actually heard there was another deployment coming up to go to Afghanistan soon, and I don't know, I just felt like hey, there are two wars going on, and I need to fight in each of them. I felt like, if I'm in the military during that time I need to be involved in every conflict that's going on. And so I think in order to just scratch that itch, as they say, I was like, ok I'll go to Afghanistan.

Although he is looking forward to his future career, after just one deployment, Matt expressed a yearning to return to the battlefield and hold onto the military culture with which he more closely identified:

I'm just really glad that I did it and I had a chance to deploy, especially with things slowing down because now unless things kind of go crazy, we might not be going anywhere for a while. And part of me really wants to. Yeah. I just want to go back, but I feel like I have too many responsibilities here now or something. I figure if we get forced to go again or if something big happens in the world then I'll volunteer, but if not...if they tell us we have to go, then I'll go and I'll be excited about it. I don't know exactly what it is; it's just kind of a calling I guess.

Within his 12 years of active duty service and two years as a reservist career counselor, Roger has seen the kind of difficulties that can occur when veterans of combat arms do not drop their tools. After working through his own difficulties in transition, he fears

similar scenarios among his friends and the soldiers who served under him. Of great importance to him is the impact of veterans not dropping their tools and the potential damage to their future career potential along with lack of ability to transition if they do not:

And a lot of those veterans are the ones that, you know,...like maturity wasn't their strong suit. You know, the ones that get out of the military and they're the guys that saved their enlistment bonus and they put it in the bank, and as soon as they get out they buy a Camaro and a bag of weed. And then they get busted for possession, and they didn't realize that they also had to pay insurance and gas for the vehicle, so it gets repo'ed, and they hang their head, go with a tail between their legs and hope to God they can get back in. And then they get back in; they tell the stories of how the civilian world's bullshit and this and that. They always talk about the inability to adapt, it's so difficult for veterans to adapt, and these guys come home and they have road rage. Because they're driving like they used to when they were in country....

The veterans expressed sadness at leaving their military identity, their tools, behind. In some cases, they voiced a desire to return to deployment and service, not because they wish to be in the dangerous environments in which they served previously, but because they were more comfortable there than in their new environments of school and civilian work. The veterans also feel a loss of their sense of purpose and excitement that comes with deployment and the military culture with which they are most familiar.

**Virtue and valor.** The warrior ethos of care is not isolated to the battlefield or military service alone among veterans. Veterans' desire to continue serving and caring for others remains as they undertake education and consider new career opportunities post education. Getting to their new opportunities means moving through a career search process in which they must disclose their previous work. As veterans of combat arms service, this could mean relating information that would be shocking and disturbing to many civilians, particularly in an interview setting, and may create a false perception about who veterans are. Instead of sharing their valid work experiences gained through military service, these veterans hide the details they believe may harm others and make light of the load they carry in memories of service. In so doing, they add to the weight they carry while continuing to serve and care for others.

Sean has experienced prospective employers making little attempt to understand his military experience. While he would like them to know more about his capabilities, Sean is reluctant to share too much information when employers do not ask:

...they don't normally ask details or anything, but they'll ask general, how long did you ever go overseas, and that's sort of where it ends. I don't know if it's because they're like – I don't know if that's the cultural thing, they're scared that if they ask about it you're going to like freak out and have an episode. You know the kind of misconceptions people have about military people is – I don't even know what they are. I can't, because I'm in the military, so it's hard to see myself, but I'm sure it's like "I don't want to ask this guy. He might start talking about dead bodies and freak out"...That seems to be on the back of every vet's

mind. Because whenever they hear you're a vet at first it's like "oh cool" and they're like, "that's great you're a vet – all this experience" and the second thought that comes to their mind is "oh, is he like going to kill someone like on the nightshift or something?"... They also need to know that you put in a whole lot more work to get where you are than people who aren't vets.

After participating in several career fairs and interviews Adam has come to expect the reactions he receives and now attends prepared for the interactions with employers:

I was kind of expecting it, personally, just because of experiences that I've had in the past. So I've kind of gotten past that point. But the first time I was like I'm just a normal person. I'm no different than you; I've just seen a whole lot more. I might have had to do things that most people wouldn't have to do or think about doing, but me personally, I didn't take offense to it just because I understand the ignorance of civilians. It's not that they're doing it on purpose, they just don't know better....It's kind of interesting though that immediately when I told them I was in the infantry and I'd been in combat and all this stuff, they kind of stepped back from me a little bit thinking that I'm going to reach over and choke them out or something....I can only imagine how people that are really affected by something like PTSD or something like that or have seen some really, really, really bad things that it's like somebody coming up to you and say hey, have you killed somebody? That's just not a question you ask. Because most people don't want to remember those kind of things....

Roger relates his feelings with confidence in the work he did and contribution he made. While he knows that some employers he talks with will not be comfortable addressing his prior service, Roger hopes his time in higher education will help him make sense of his military job to others and his potential contributions to future employers:

Just because I was in the infantry, doesn't mean I like to kill people. I was in the infantry because I wanted a challenge. I wanted a mental and physical challenge....It's almost an unwritten rule that all employers are going to follow, the one they're saying deep down inside "if I hire this veteran I may have to put up with..." – then they insert whatever ridiculous made-up scenario in their mind. "He might plant a bomb in my office, slash my tires, break my arm, but it's okay as long as I keep him happy." Don't fear grunts, don't be afraid of us, we're not bad people. We just did a job that was really bad, but we did it because nobody else would....You can't say anything about what you did in the military and drive it down unless you're one of those veterans that doesn't get it and doesn't have social tact and will say things like, "Yeah, I blew a guy up." You know, it's that old social and professional tact. Which is another thing we learn while we're in college.

Tom expressed feelings of wanting his work in military service to be understood by prospective employers and future coworkers who do not have knowledge about military service:

Yeah, I would say that's being generous to even assume they know you've carried a gun and shoot bad guys. I think probably the hardest thing when it



came time to get out of the military, I had guys tell me that most people whether it's professional or personal settings, when you tell people you're a veteran, particularly that you're a combat veteran – like, you know that you're doing a really awesome thing and you think that when you get out that people are going to “ooh” and “aah” over you because you're a veteran especially a combat veteran, but for the most part, like the guys warned me, was when you get out and you go to get a job or go eat at a bar or a restaurant they'll ask if I'm a veteran and it's like “oh, that's nice.” So it's not really as big a deal as you think it is I guess. I think there's a lot of that....particularly guys that just got out – they get really caught up in the military jargon and it's hard for employers. Then there's always the whole “he's a crazy vet” thing too.

Matt feels that focusing on the positive aspects of his work as an infantryman is the best way for him to help relate his experience and deflect the negative perceptions he expects:

Being infantryman so you can't really tell them that's what you did. But it's really kind of hard I guess for what our MOS is. Just because you have to be very careful about with what you say or people might think you're a little off or something like that I guess. So you just have to sugarcoat things that you did. I can say I worked with engineers and things when we went out on the PRT and we helped [talk] to the population, help them with their government. I told an interviewer that I was more open to that but again, it's a little tough I guess saying exactly what your job was to relate to civilian experience. A little bit of

leadership and you can handle stress pretty well after you've gone through that, but what our job was doesn't really relate to most civilian jobs unless you're working security or something or police. I think they're pretty understanding, they seem not to want to dig too much into it. Pretty much anybody I talk to, whether it's an employer or somebody in general unless they've been there, they have experience with veterans, they really don't want to dig into it just because they don't know what they might dig up, I guess.

Veterans sense and have, in many cases, experienced employers' fears of them. Employers' reluctance to engage in a discussion about veterans' combat experiences that they can relate to civilian work creates an additional challenge to the veterans in their career development and employment search. Infantrymen know their MOSs and the work entailed evoke fear, and they are reticent to disclose examples of their success. They prefer instead to gloss over the truth and minimize their contributions in the military and capabilities they gained as a result of their work.

CHAPTER V  
DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, FUTURE RESEARCH, AND  
CONCLUSIONS

**Discussion**

The purpose of this research was to explore the lived experiences of career development of veterans as they transition into higher education leading to graduation and on to civilian employment. The research sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of veterans in higher education from combat arms MOSs related to career development as they prepare to leave higher education and transition to civilian employment?
2. How do veterans in higher education from combat arms MOSs relate their prior military experiences to their future career work?
3. How do veterans in higher education from combat arms MOSs feel about the transition process?

I used hermeneutic phenomenology for this research to gain insight into the participants' lifeworlds as veterans from infantry MOSs engaging in higher education as part of their career development to move into civilian employment. My goal in this analytical process was to understand, as much as possible, the being and lived experiences of the participants to make sense of their experiences individually and as a group. In other words, the aim was not to simply report what they have experienced but to attend to the deeper phenomenon occurring as reflected in the words they shared so as

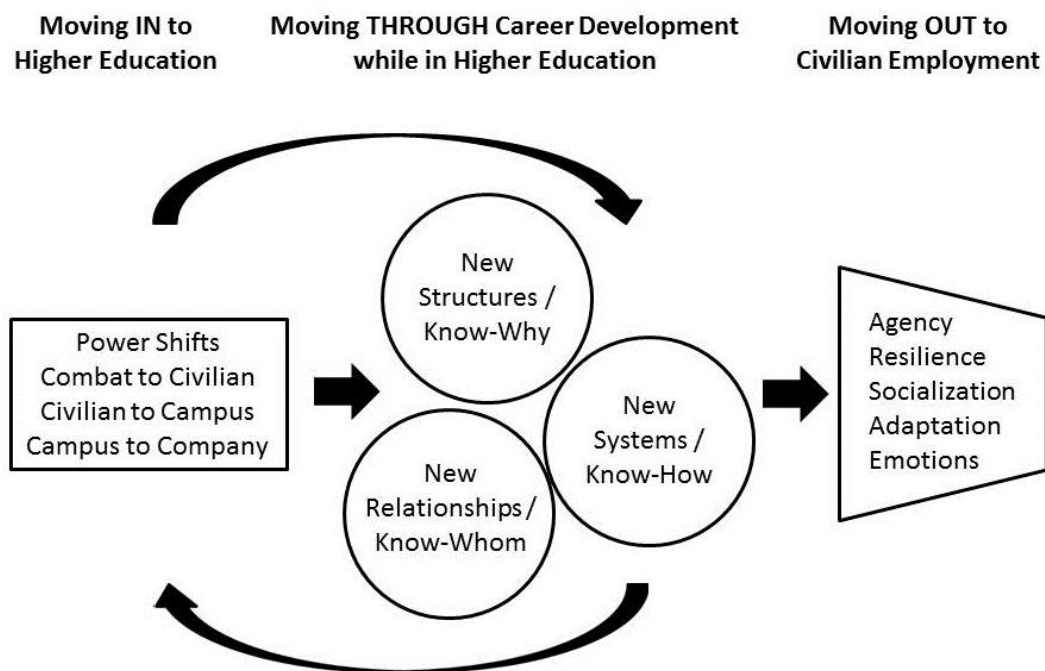
to, as closely as possible, inhabit their space and understanding of events impacting them (van Manen, 1990).

Veterans from combat arms MOSs transitioning in higher education as a career development path to civilian employment experience a myriad of changes impacting them personally and professionally. If we assume that the changes involve only a new location and new work, we vastly underestimate the complexity of the factors that impact this unique population. This assumption also undermines the emotional hurdles and negotiations veterans in higher education must overcome in order to be most successful in their career development.

What follows is insight into the phenomenon of the combat veterans' career development experiences in the transition as they undertake higher education to prepare for a new career. I have also included recommendations for theory building and practice development to better aid veterans engaged in career development through higher education as they move toward civilian employment.

Shifts of their personal and professional power and changes to the structures, systems, and relationships that impact their experiences wind throughout the phenomenon as illustrated by the veterans' comments. Figure 3 shows the circular nature of the process and phenomenon that develops from the interaction between power shifts and environmental and relationship changes impacting the veterans' experience. The themes that emerged from the participants' stories of their experiences share common roots of power and have intertwining branches: new structures, new systems, and new relationships that impact the veterans' career development. Feelings of fear and

hope about their career development and future civilian employment are part of the veterans' career transition process and experiences as illustrated in the data. This process and the constructs brought into relief from analysis provide the answers to the research questions posited about infantry veterans' experiences using higher education as career development for civilian employment.



**Figure 3.** Transition process of veterans of combat arms.

The participants articulated the lived experiences of career development in higher education as they highlighted their challenges in personal and professional adjustment to civilian and higher education cultures. While they expressed a clear understanding of

their skills and capabilities gained through military service that they believed should be of value in civilian employment, the participants also acknowledged their concerns and worries that their experiences and abilities to contribute in civilian employment would not be recognized.

The veterans participating in this research noted the impact of the relationships they have left behind and the challenge of forming new connections to others. They realized the importance of being able to relate to those educating them as well as employers who might hire them. The veterans identified purposefully working with others and forming strong bonds built on shared goals in the military as one of the most difficult parts of service to leave behind when engaging in higher education for career development. The participants also expressed the importance of their sense of the loss of purpose and need to find new purpose in a new career in their transition to civilian employment.

Participants in this research expressed feeling a great deal of difficulty making sense of their previous experience gained in the military to the civilian employers with whom they want to engage for potential employment. Feeling, in some cases, that the value they believe they can offer to employers may not be acknowledged leaves the veterans apprehensive about how they will secure civilian employment. In some cases they have seen that their experience in military services is valued in general, while the skills they bring are overlooked. They have also experienced interactions with employers who have been unconsciously, and sometimes consciously, taken aback when

addressing combat veterans. Learning to manage their emotions in such situations is a strategy they know they need to employ.

The participants' need to gain agency in the new environments encountered after leaving military service and form new relationships to others based on common experiences in higher education are the most important challenges the veterans believe they face. They know the most pressing issues they need to address in transition is their need to get their feet under them as well as their need to learn to relate to others outside of military culture. This adjustment to the culture change in civilian life was one of the themes that came through most strongly with each participant. Without similar training to readjust to their lives after military service, the participants all referenced the struggle to build competence and confidence in the civilian academic world of higher education.

### **Power Shifts**

Transitioning in life means change, and change most often means giving up one sense of power for another. Power may encompass influence, self-esteem, direction, self-efficacy, and privilege. Veterans engaged in higher education with the aim of new civilian careers experience multiple power shifts, from high to low, through which they must navigate as they pursue higher education to reach new civilian careers. In the case of veterans in higher education the changes to personal and professional power can put their world into chaos and leave them with more questions than answers about who they are, who they will become, and where they belong. As shown in Figure 3, the constructs uncovered in the veterans' words about their transition experiences are influenced by the power shifts they undergo when moving in and moving through higher education, going

from military life to that of a civilian, from infantry work to study in higher education, and from a veteran in higher education to a civilian employee.

**Combat to civilian.** Many veterans enter higher education within a year of leaving military service or return following deployment with the Reserves or National Guard during their higher education experience (Ackerman et al., 2009). This means that a great deal of their transition experiences, including power shifts, take place while they are engaged in career development through higher education.

After spending several years in the military, whether through active duty, Reserves, or National Guard, infantrymen are experts and hold high personal and professional power levels based on the strength of their military work and connections established to others in the service. They have amassed knowledge of numerous weapons systems and memorized their capabilities, requirements for effectiveness, and processes for cleaning and use. Their abilities to seek and destroy enemy targets with minimal intelligence information has been tested and proven repeatedly in spite of harsh climates and dangerous environments. Most are junior non-commissioned officers and have had leadership of at least a small squad of four to six others, requiring them to not only take care of their equipment and welfare but also that of their followers. They have risked their lives daily for a cause greater than themselves and been witness to some of the most horrific things humans can do to each other in war. Most of them have done all this before the age of 22. Leaving the military after amassing these levels of experience, or power, has been compared to returning to a “three-dimensional world after experiencing a fourth dimension” (Hoge, 2010, p. xiv).



Upon leaving the military and returning to civilian life, infantrymen feel their level of power drop far below that which they experienced in the military. They find that not only have they been significantly changed by their experiences but the world too has gone on without them. Veterans and those around them are often not prepared for the difficulties of the transition home, in spite of having read information and seen others' experiences (Hoge, 2010). Their power in relationships is lessened as friends and family have moved on in their lives, beginning and ending their own experiences. Friends from youth have gone on to higher education, employments, marriages, and children. Parents have a new lifestyle that does not include the service member in daily activities or considerations.

The veterans' power to interact in a productive manner with the structures and systems around them is absent, as are the early morning runs and days spent at target practice or climbing mountains and clearing compounds, giving way to the mundane tasks of paying bills and buying groceries that lack the life-and-death energy that infantrymen are used to living with daily. Their daily decisions now lack the life-and-death consequences that gave them the rush of feeling alive and capable of greatness; the sort of high that cannot be found among the trivial details of laundry and cooking dinner. The power they felt in their sense of higher calling and the bonds of war is replaced by chore lists, video games, and time spent alone. Veterans return to a civilian life as mundane and foreign to them as any of the international landscapes upon which they did battle. They are strangers in their own family homes and to those they left behind, and the distance between their military and civilian lives is as vast as the oceans they crossed

to serve. Home is now strange and unknown, and the infantrymen feel lost and irrelevant as civilians, in spite of the choruses of *thank you for your service* they hear at the mall.

**Civilian to campus.** If returning home feels like a foreign landscape to the infantryman, attending higher education feels akin to landing on Mars. At home there may be the comfort of one's old bed or a favorite meal to rebuild power in energy and capacity to face challenges, but on a college campus veterans are confronted with diversity of thought and presence on campus like they may never have known in the military. Students who express their individuality through unique dress, colorful hairstyles, and a bevy of body decoration are aliens to be studied rather than engaged with from the perspective of veterans. Their power built through fitting in with military service and culture gives way to an inability to relate to those around them. Gone is the anonymity and singularity of the service member's uniform, haircut, and code; in its place is diversity in every essence of the students and a seeming disrespect for regimen and rules. The veterans now feel incompetent, attempting to fit in.

Veterans in higher education also struggle with the lack of respect they experience from students in their classes and are unsure how to react to it. Whether addressed with inappropriate questions from naïve students or unshielded disgust from faculty or staff, veterans face negative biases in their academic experiences that undermine their capabilities and self-efficacy. Having worked to earn the GI Bill benefits that allow them to attend higher education, veterans feel their power deficits

within the classroom as well as on the broader campus as they believe they are unable to impact others' behavior they find offensive.

Veterans wonder why the faculty pays little attention to students who ignore directions and slumber through lectures and take strong exception to those who disrupt the veterans' hard-earned opportunity to learn. Many also wrestle with challenges to their memory and the ability to concentrate, just a couple of effects of combat stress injury, Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), and PTSD, whether diagnosed and accommodated on campus or not. They also worry that every distracting paper rustle or cell phone click could mean that vital class information is lost, leading to increased anxiety and academic challenge. Additionally, their ignorance of and reluctance to seek assistance from the very resources designed to help students to be most successful in higher education means their full academic potential may not be reached. Veterans who are used to being told to "suck it up" are, most often, unwilling to seek or accept assistance from campus resources until it is past time to make effective use of the services provided. While veterans may have rebuilt power in adjusting to grocery shopping and paying bills in the civilian world, the trappings of higher education often leave their power in and patience with the academic process ineffective.

**Campus to company.** Once engaged with the higher education environment to which they grow accustomed, veterans engaged in career development must build power to undertake new tasks and a new mindset. The self-marketing that comes as part of networking and interviewing with employers who are unfamiliar with military work can be as difficult for veterans to do as coordinating dress shirts and ties. Veterans find

themselves unsure of how to discuss their military service in terms that outsiders can understand and will find palatable. They know that subjects on which they consider themselves experts will not relate to work they desire for their future. They hope that their academic knowledge, drawn from study in their chosen field, will measure up to that of the student counterparts with whom they are competing. Their confidence is overshadowed by the knowledge that those without familiarity with the military often fear them and have few ways to relate to their military experiences.

Preparation for the civilian employment search is often put off by veterans who are not aware of, or do not seek out, additional resources. Learning to write a civilian résumé and training for business lunches is not included as part of the curriculum and so is not addressed until the time for campus career fairs and interviewing is upon them. The veterans are impotent in their job search efficacy due to failure to access available resources. Veterans, however, bring a very different mindset to the employment search because they entered higher education to pursue a specific career goal. Not pushed by parents to attend college straight out of high school, they found their way to higher education out of desire for a new career path. This focus on career sets veterans apart from their traditional counterparts and makes their need to use the available resources all the more important. Entering the employment search process unprepared and without knowledge of the processes in which they will be engaged decreases the veterans' abilities to be strong competitors and lessens their assurance that they will secure civilian employment and become empowered through their career transitions.

## **New Structures, New Systems, and New Relationships in Career Development**

The power shifts identified are known by combat arms veterans to be real and have impact on their career development experiences. Their power shifts and the ways in which they see themselves make a difference in how they engage the environments they encounter when moving through higher education in preparation to move out to civilian employment. Gone is the self-confidence with which they attacked the enemy, managed millions of dollars' worth of equipment, and led others in foreign lands. In its place is paralysis and discomfort quite foreign to these infantrymen who took on a job others could not or would not do. What changes and molds their reempowerment are the new structures, systems, and relationships with which they engage in career development as they move through their higher education experience and undertake their civilian employment search.

**New structures – know-why.** Engaging in career development activities while in higher education puts veterans in contact with new structures that shape their career development. These resources, such as career services, impact their abilities to successfully identify civilian employment. The resources veterans must make use of for career development constitute the structures that serve as the internal framework upon which they will overlay the skill and knowledge building they must undertake to identify and secure a civilian career. Gaining confidence with all they have learned about themselves helps veterans make progress in developing their *know-why* competency of intelligent career theory.

Knowing why relates to the exploration of and connection with their values and interests in work (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994; Inkson & Arthur, 2001). In order for the veterans to be productive in career development, it is necessary that they consider their previous experiences in addition to their education and develop an awareness of why they wish to pursue a particular field or career path. Uncovering their motivation to work and self-perception about doing the work of their field of interest will aid the veterans in building their new self-concepts as civilian employees (Parker et al., 2009).

Participants in this research articulated making use of developmental structures to aid their know-why exploration to help them learn more about careers of interest and determine best-fit career options. Some of those they referenced included academic department resources and other professional development opportunities for employment. Awareness of these other resources aids the veterans' development of realistic concepts about professions of interest as well as industries they may want to pursue, which also supports their empowerment. Utilizing available resources and developmental opportunities to reflect on their career motivations, values, work identities, and career interests, the know-why competency helps the veterans better understand their career directions. Gaining clarity about their reasons for pursuing particular career interests and generating a new perspective of themselves as civilian employment seekers will aid the veterans' career identity empowerment and ability to align their internal impetus and values regarding work with the civilian career search.

**New systems – know-how.** The systems, the *know-how*, that encompass the tactics and processes needed for veterans to articulate the knowledge and skills needed

for effective career development are largely unknown to them. Building knowledge through interactions with structures that help them know why they are choosing certain career paths, the veterans work within their career development to gain insight to the civilian employment landscape and to successfully pursue civilian careers. Limited engagement with career development in higher education is the participants' inability to consistently articulate the ways in which their military skills relate to civilian employment. The dearth of information available to veterans through traditional higher education resources concerning the systems they need for career development success impedes veterans' know-how competency of intelligent career theory (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994).

If they are to effectively promote themselves as civilian employment seekers, veterans must be able to articulate their capabilities and potential to be productive employees in the civilian employment sector. Knowing how reflects the veterans' demonstrated and tacit knowledge and skills as well as their abilities to explain how they will be assets to the organizations they seek to join (Parker et al., 2009). The knowledge, skills, and competencies may be technical as well as interpersonal and may be based on their military or academic development and appraisal. Capability in knowing how they work and building capacity to express all they have to offer as prospective employees is part of the skill set the veterans must achieve in career development (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994).

Still lacking is the veterans' understanding of how to effectively articulate their military experience. Their ability to express the knowledge and capabilities they gained

in military service is also missing, because they are unable to articulate their strengths and intelligence that meet employer needs. Without the help of experienced career development resources on their campus designed to help veterans develop these tactics, they will continue to be disempowered in their career development.

Learning to develop the documents, such as a cover letter and résumé, needed for an effective employment search necessitates the ability to articulate previous experience effectively. Additionally, the ability to express their competencies through online application systems, networking strategies, and interview preparation is of critical importance for the veterans to be successful in finding employment. Moreover, they need to build confidence with the systems over time necessitating early exposure and training by career services resources, when necessary, so they can be most effective with the processes.

**New relationships – know-whom.** Inherent in the career development and civilian employment search processes is the building of new relationships. Building their *know-whom* competency will help veterans establish career networks within and outside higher education to further their career development and employment search empowerment (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994). Doing so will aid the veterans' development of comfort engaging in networking conversations as they interact with potential employers. Understanding how their networks can be mined to maximize their employment search will build the veterans' confidence and capability in their career development.



Professional networking is not a skill that comes naturally to veterans. After years of training in relating to others based on rank and respecting strict power distances, veterans need training in how to appropriately relate to academic peers, faculty, and recruiting employers. In order to expand their know-whom list they will need to make use of diverse opportunities in higher education for career development and learn to engage with others in their fields of interest as well as with prospective employers with whom they would like to work (Parker, Khapova, & Arthur, 2001).

Veterans must find ways to establish friendships and acquaintanceships based on field of study and career interest rather than the deep trusting bonds borne in battle. These relationships with classmates and future colleagues are not built on life-and-death situations but rather on common interests, reciprocal acts of kindness and friendship, and professional respect. New relationships may support the veterans' academic success in addition to their adjustment to civilian culture, which could aid their career development progress. Being able to effectively establish comfortable interactions with prospective employers in the employment search process is vital to veterans' accomplishment of securing civilian employment following higher education. The veterans need to understand that, in civilian employment, people hire candidates they like and with whom they believe they will enjoy spending time at work.

### **Constructs**

In this research I identified shifts in personal and professional power experienced by veterans of combat arms as they move in and move through higher education interacting with the new structures, systems, and relationships as contributing factors to

the veterans' career development success, or lack thereof. The antecedents of the ways in which these factors impact the veterans' career development are seen in the constructs as shown in Figure 3. These constructs were derived from the themes that emerged from the interview data and were identified in the literature to provide deeper meaning for the phenomenon of infantry veterans' career development experiences. Table 4 provides a summary of the themes and constructs of veterans' career development.

**Agency.** Veterans from combat arms know that their interpersonal strengths will be assets to the civilian employment environment. They are quick to articulate their leadership abilities as well as their adaptability to new places, people, and work. The veterans highlight their follow-through and commitment as strengths they have to offer future employers. Veterans also struggle with knowing that employers may not see through their own prejudices against, fears of, and assumptions about military veterans to learn about the skills and capabilities these unique employment candidates have to offer.

...the headlines about combat veterans with post-traumatic stress, high suicide rates, and other mental health issues may have made businesses reluctant to hire qualified veterans. That perception may in turn have contributed to the high level of veteran unemployment of recent years.... (Eisler, 2013, para. 11)

The loss of familiar surroundings, work, and fellow veterans working alongside them creates power dissonance for veterans engaged in career development. The dissonance between confidence in their skills and capabilities and their inability to

Table 4

*Summary of Themes and Constructs*

Theme	Construct	Essence	Contribution
Lost in Translation	Agency	Veterans of combat arms must regain personal and professional power to be able to have an impact on career development.	Recognizing loss of agency and regaining it through education and recognition of skills acquired in military will aid personal and professional power.
Back to Basic	Resilience	Moving from expert in military service to novice in education and employment challenges infantrymen's confidence.	Building new competencies and new relationships that support personal growth will support confidence overall.
Battle Buddies	Socialization	Relationships developed in the military are stronger and more meaningful than those built in higher education and civilian employment.	Developing new relationships with supportive others based on common interests is important to develop a sense of place.
Drop Your Tools	Adaptation	Service members are identified by unique cultural markers that contribute to their comfort level and identity.	Letting go of the military identity is necessary for transition to a new identity in the civilian environment for career development.
Virtue and Valor	Emotion Management	Infantrymen are instructed and learn to closely manage their emotions as they go about their work on deployment to protect themselves and others.	Engaging career development requires veterans to manage emotions to protect from employers' negative reactions, their own responses to employers' reactions, and environmentally appropriate emotions for the job search.

effectively express these characteristics, along with the fearful or dismissive reactions they receive from employers, leaves the veterans adrift and lacking agency.

Giddens (1984) views agency as one's ability to use personal power to do something where they have the option to do, or to not do, as well as having the power to create or intercede in an event. Based on this perspective, the power shifts veterans undergo break down their confidence and create self-doubt about their ability to successfully engage in career development. In spite of their relationships with other veterans in higher education, agency "...places the emphasis strongly on individuals' capacity to use power to influence..." (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2013, p. 49).

The pressure, therein, for veterans to resolve their challenges in securing and using personal and professional power is at the utmost. In order for the veterans to be empowered with agency and pursue career development with the ability to act intentionally, they must have regained their power and be able to use it to create change in their career lives. Tom's comments illustrate his perspective on veterans' use of their power to accomplish new tasks in civilian employment with agency:

I think there's some of that because people think "oh I'm hiring a veteran. They should be able to just do this." Because they think we're like a trained monkey, but just because it's not a technical MOS – like you didn't hire me to be a welder so if you want me to weld you have to show me – not that I couldn't learn it. But it wouldn't be worth the investment and that's something an employer is going to look at if they have extensive training because you're probably going to get more

out of training a veteran doing a job than if you hired a civilian. With a veteran he's like "show me how to do it and I'll knock that thing out of the park. I'll make it work."

The agentic action of veterans from combat arms MOSs in higher education will only be impactful when their power is used and actions are intentional. Veterans must have a way to rebuild their power within the new academic contexts in which they are learning if they are to achieve agency in career development. Eisler (2013) observed, "Military service changes everyone in some way, and while some veterans face significant challenges as they move to civilian life, others emerge stronger" (para. 12). Sean illustrated the veterans' knowledge of what is at stake in regaining power in employment search environments where the veterans are not understood by prospective employers, saying:

It's so difficult, because you have so much to explain. You have so much money on the table, but getting it on the table, it's hard. I mean I feel like there ought to be like a video they should watch or something that would, like, list all these things out before they talk to veterans.

Eteläpelto et al. (2013) note that, although Giddens does not reference a conceptual basis for discussing agency in a work environment as separate from other contexts, they believe that professional agency, related to career development, should manifest power as does personal agency. As Hoge (2010) notes, "Having a positive view of yourself is an essential starting place toward navigating the reactions resulting from combat experiences" (p. 9). Veterans reestablishing their personal and professional power and

making use of power in higher education can then be seen as important to career development and building of personal and professional agency.

**Resilience.** Starting over as the new kid in school is rarely easy, but veterans entering higher education from combat arms MOSs report experiencing a sense of loss and discomfort greater than that which they felt beginning in the military. Their readjustment to civilian life is fraught with the struggle of lack of power and fear of failure. Regarding navigating the transition, Hoge (2010) says, “the journey of readjusting after combat is one of learning to live with your experiences and of integrating them into who you are” (p. 10). The veterans’ ability to be resilient in their career development and navigate from novice to expert in higher education and civilian seeking employment will depend on their ability to gain agency through rebuilding power and adapt to the changing environments they will encounter as they move through higher education and move out to civilian employment. Adam recounted his interview encounter when being perceived to have a relative absence of experience:

I went through the interview and it was great, I was feeling pretty good about it and that’s when he told me, well I’m looking for somebody that is ready to set up a sales team. Well that’s not something I’ve haven’t necessarily done in the military, and I gave examples of that but it wasn’t specific enough for somebody to realize or give out like “hey, this guy was in the military, he’s done things like that, but am I willing to give out the cash just because he was in the military or do I just want somebody who has a little bit more experience in that?”

Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker (2000) implement the definition of resilience as “...a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (p. 543). While the career development transition process itself may not be viewed as a significantly adverse experience by those outside the military experience, the change of culture from military to civilian employment seeker in higher education is enough to disrupt the veterans’ behavior patterns, emotional coping, and psychological functioning (Bonanno, 2004). These impacts, along with the shifts in power they experience and loss of trusted friendships, leave infantrymen dazed as they struggle to engage in education and career development work.

Veterans may experience, at inopportune times, feelings of anxiety, anger, and fear as a result of triggers, such as sights, sounds, or smells, which could bring them back to the combat experience in the moment and disrupt their learning and career development. Added to the sense of unbalance and loss they experience, the challenges veterans often encounter from effects of combat stress, PTSD, and TBI create the hardship experienced by infantrymen that should be seen as significant. The adversity experienced may impede veterans’ ability to learn and adjust as they move from novice to experienced in higher education and later in civilian employment. It is important to the discussion of resilience and veterans’ experience of adversity in this context, to note Bonanno’s (2004) assertion that although PTSD is of concern, most individuals exposed to “violent or life-threatening events” (p. 24) do not develop diagnosable PTSD though they may experience significant stress as a result of combat experiences.

Trauma in the war zone encompasses much more than taking direct or indirect fire, including experiencing a near miss on one's life; knowing someone who was seriously injured or killed; handling body parts; witnessing or being involved in accidents involving vehicles or aircraft; witnessing noncombatants suffering; or seeing poverty, pain, destruction, or ethnic violence. (Hoge, 2010, p. 20)

Combat veterans have experienced all this and more, but may not have been diagnosed with PTSD. Not developing diagnosed PTSD, however, does not negate the significance of the adversity combat veterans have encountered.

Because resilience occurs frequently with those who experience intermittent traumatic life events, veterans engaged in higher education are well-suited to expect that they will move past the challenges that surface. Luthar et al. (2000) assert that regular interaction with positive influences and a generally productive and hopeful outlook aids those experiencing challenge in building resilience. Veterans engaged in developing renewed power through their transition into higher education along with their discovery of new interests in academics and career may be seen as positive in their outlook and intentions. Veterans undertaking positive life steps to move into a new career and who are making positive life changes can be seen as setting their stage to experience resilience. Those veterans who have experienced resilience by navigating the power shifts and the structures and systems of the career development process will also be able to support other veterans through their challenges as they, too, build resilience.

Luthar (2006) notes that an important aspect of resilience for those experiencing adversity is their connections to other students and support services that can provide



assistance with social system negotiation to aid in the adaptation to life's challenges.

John offered words of support for other combat veterans in finding support, "Use all the help you've got. Use any organizations that might be able to assist in getting you a job. Don't try to do it all on your own is the biggest piece of advice I can say". Strong connections will provide support to the infantrymen as well as mitigate potentially harmful interactions or situations the veterans may encounter in higher education career development as they gain knowledge and experience. Roger made sense of his resilience experience, and that of veterans starting over in education, by relating it to beginning the military experience saying:

Academically, remember that when you start it doesn't matter what you want to do, you are starting at the bottom so you're going to have to go through all the stupid and mundane classes. You've got to take your basic math, you've got to take your basic science, you've got to take your history, you've got to take your political science. Remember what it's like to be a private and remember that you have to do all of it. Remember basic training. Whether you know how to shoot a rifle, you will go through the training to tell you how to hold the rifle properly.

Same thing with college.

Adjusting in a positive and healthy manner to the struggles of transition through career development in higher education is necessary to infantry veterans building resilience.

**Socialization.** There is a reason that the phrase "I've got your six" has migrated from the military to civilian nomenclature. With 12 being straight ahead, such as on a clock, the six refers to the service member's backside as a descriptor of the opposite

direction. To have another's six is to have his/her back; to be watching out for him/her; to protect him/her. This expression of the bond of friendship and care is used to tell others that you are there for them, and to infantrymen the phrase evokes a strength of relationship that is unknown to those who have not put their lives in the hands of others when bullets are flying. Battle buddies can be relied upon to provide cover in times of danger and a listening ear when being away from home becomes almost unbearable.

This suggests that, in addition to rebuilding power, reassembling a new network of friends and colleagues will be important to veterans for their transition. In spite of the tough exterior many expect of infantrymen, their friendships run deep as Roger recounts:

It's okay to be emotional from time to time. It's okay to be outwardly loving.

It's okay to say nice things to people. It's okay to encourage people. It's okay to pick people up off the ground when they screw up and help dust 'em off and set 'em in the right direction.

To infantrymen, the connections to their buddies last beyond a deployment, a service contract, and a life. The bonds they share are built on shared experience and are intense and lasting as Bahten (2012) notes, "Succeeding in combat defines a warrior, places him in a brotherhood where he is always welcome and understood" (point 1).

When moving into higher education, veterans have left previous relationships behind and need to learn how to form new relationships based on new experiences. Goffman (in Bourdieu, 1989) pointed to the "sense of one's place" (p. 17) as a way in which we identify where we belong. In part, this sense of place comes from the way in which we relate to those around us from that place. The relationships we have,

therefore, help to define our place. Building on this concept, Bourdieu (1985) asserted that one's position in one's place is also based on the level of power, or capital, one possesses. By taking into account one's power and relationships to identify one's place, one can then assess others' places based on their power and relationships. This "sense of the place of others" (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 19) was identified as *habitus* by Bourdieu and helps give us a sense of where we belong in the world. Matt described his sense of place in the National Guard:

I'm still glad I'm in because I'm in the National Guard, I get to go with some of my buddies even though a lot of them are getting out and things now. But I still get to go back and be with them and still get that experience, that camaraderie.

Having a sense of one's own power and relationships is key to both Goffman's and Bourdieu's perspectives. For veterans engaged in career development while in higher education, these concepts are in flux; this fluctuation leads to a lack of *habitus* for them. Losing their identity as infantrymen impacts veterans' ability to draw strength and power to belong in a new environment. Leaving relationships where they knew they would be supported and protected by those who had their six, veterans of combat arms are faced with establishing new relationships in an unfamiliar context and gaining a new sense of place in relation to others.

Building new relationships and *habitus* is challenging, however, when age and vast difference of experience create significant divides between combat veterans and the students around them. What veterans find is a new group of battle buddies among the other veterans attending higher education alongside them. Members of the different

military branches who may not have socialized together while in service find solidarity in their veteran experience in higher education and come together to form a new unit with common experiences and culture. Leaving higher education for civilian employment, veterans must again navigate new relationships and reestablish their sense of place. Aided by their earlier experience, the infantrymen may be better equipped to engage in developing the new relationships needed to successfully establish their sense of place at work, and once again, it may be with other veterans that they find their identity and habitus.

**Adaptation.** Anyone who has heard of the horrors of military combat would never imagine veterans wanting to return to that environment. Hearing an infantryman say, “I just want to go back to Afghanistan where everything is easy,” makes little sense to those in the civilian world. Bahten (2012) notes, “War is horrible, but there is nothing like a life-and-death fight to make you feel truly alive. The adrenaline rush is tremendous, and can never be replaced” (point 1). This is the sentiment that many veterans carry with them, whether voiced or not. This is not to say that they wish to return to the chaos, fear, gore, or exhaustion of war. What the veterans want is to return to that which is familiar and where they feel competent and confident in their work. They want to go back to the place where they know what their mission is and how to accomplish it; where their tools, their culture, and worldview make sense. Roger stated, “Trust me. It is a lot easier to stay in than to go to college and then try to find a job”.

Infantrymen are a unique group. Some suggest they are the ones whose skills could not be used elsewhere in the military or were not qualified to serve in more skilled

positions. Others say they are the military elite because of their willingness to do a difficult job under the harshest of conditions with the greatest breadth of skill.

Infantrymen consider themselves to be the military's jack-of-all-trades position. Even within the military, they are known to be unique. The tools of infantrymen define them and the military culture to which they belong: uniform and patches, weapons and language, places of service, and jobs done. All these tools define the infantrymen, even as they leave the military for a new career path. Arriving to higher education, infantrymen must undergo a number of transitions in order to be most successful as civilians and career changers. Perhaps one of the most important transitions is a change of identity from active infantryman to civilian employment seeker in higher education. Becoming a civilian means shedding the identity and tools of the infantryman. The adaptation from infantryman to civilian is not, however, without pain as they make sense of their new environment and how to succeed in it. Matt described his adaptation in career development:

That's all I'm really looking for right now, is I look for companies and build those relationships back and I get those connections. I'm just trying to find a company that has to do with at least a little sympathetic to that I was in the military maybe and just be okay with it and maybe looking for that kind of person.

Weick (1993) identifies sensemaking as "an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs" (p. 635). Part of sensemaking is the need to create order out of one's experience and

embrace a new identity tied to a new experience. The challenge of sensemaking is inherent in the experience veterans undergo as they make sense of the new structures surrounding them, utilize new systems to engage with the unfamiliar structures, and build new relationships in the process. Jeff described sensemaking in his skill adaptation from military service to higher education:

I was like, you know, there's ways to be proficient at what you do, and I think that proficiency of the military definitely helped me to realize that you don't settle. Whatever you're given you do it the best of your ability, you don't just stand around and hope that the best outcome, you have to work for the best outcome. And, so I think that was a large part of the experience.

Veterans make sense of the new structures surrounding them, utilize new systems to engage with the unfamiliar structures, and build new relationships in the process without the power they had engaged while serving as infantrymen, doing a job many others are unwilling to consider. As they adapt, they must drop their tools and leave behind the security and confidence that comes with a familiar identity and forge ahead. Of this struggle, Weick (1996) notes that, "Dropping one's tools is a proxy for unlearning, for adaptation, for flexibility...it is the very unwillingness of people to drop their tools that turns some of these dramas into tragedies" (p. 301–302).

Unlearning and adapting is not as easy as one might surmise, however. To leave one's culture behind and shed a comfortable identity in which one has earned respect through hard work can be seen as almost insurmountable by some veterans. Giving up the way in which one defines oneself brings pain and fear that the individual may never

be seen in the same way or have the same strength as before. Infantrymen must leave at least part of their military culture behind if they are to successfully move through higher education to new careers and take on new roles and new identities as veterans in higher education and seekers of civilian employment. Additionally, engaging in career development requires that they do so if they are to be perceived as able to fit into new work roles. Adaptation may be the most difficult aspect of the infantrymen's transition, but it also may be the most critical for them to engage in if they are to effectively move out of higher education to a new career.

**Emotion management.** Emotions are a part of everyday life whether one is managing a store or leading a team clearing compounds of dangers in a foreign country. How we deal with our emotions in different settings is something we learn over time and through experience. The feelings infantry veterans have while in the military and on dangerous deployments are very different from the ones experienced on a daily basis while they are in higher education undertaking career development work. Concerns for assignments to be completed, what to wear to a networking event, and how to discuss their military work in an interview are the new normal for the veterans of combat arms. Having been taught how to manage their emotions in combat, they are now faced with having to adjust to different levels, kinds, and frequencies of emotions as well as learning how to address the emotions they feel. The changing environment from military to higher education and career development can bring forth a watershed of emotions the veterans had not anticipated and must learn to manage.

Hochschild (1979) addressed the idea of emotion management by saying, “The individual often works on inducing or inhibiting feelings so as to render them ‘appropriate’ to a situation” (p. 551). The effort toward hiding or bringing forth emotions depending on the circumstance takes energy and is most often based on unwritten social rules whereby we measure how we feel compared to what is expected. These rules then help us determine what we should feel when and “reflect patterns of social membership” (Hochschild, 1979, p. 566). In a close-knit organization like the military, and the infantry in particular, a great deal of pressure is put on conforming and maintaining relationships. Following the rules to keep social relationships functional in a highly stressful environment where teamwork is necessary is seen as critical to organizational success. Managing emotions on the battlefield as instructed by leadership may mean the difference between loss of a team member and the service member’s full squad returning home from deployment.

Giddens (as cited in Callahan, 2004) proposed that people acting in social systems are guided by the rules and resources that comprise the structures within which they act. As they do so, their actions impact the structures that, in turn, change the social systems. The ongoing reciprocal nature of the interactions between systems and structures is referred to as structuration. Callahan & McCollum (2002) asserted that emotions play a role in these interactions and serve as part of the message content that is exchanged and created, amended, and recreated through the give and take of emotion structuration. This ongoing process is emotion management, which takes the forms of



emotion work, emotional labor, autonomous emotional labor, and indirect emotional labor (Callahan & McCollum, 2002).

In the case of infantrymen, the way in which service members manage their emotions in the military can have a great deal to do with their military experience. For infantrymen there are many impacts to emotions that must be addressed throughout military service. Being far away from home and loved ones for extended periods of time may bring significant sadness and heartbreak, particularly when deployments extend beyond the expected end date or the service member is away for holidays. Missing family and friends can take a toll on the service members' emotions. "During combat, warriors report 'locking down' their emotions, falling back on their training, or feeling anger. The important difference has to do with not feeling like a victim" (Hoge, 2010, p. 23). At the same time, infantrymen are engaged in combat situations where they must face daily stress performing their jobs and ensuring that those for whom they are responsible also do well in their work. Many days, doing well means seeking out and destroying enemy targets. It also means protecting one another from harm so that all can return home safely. To not do one's job well may mean innocents are killed or a team member is left unprotected. As Bahten (2012) explains, "Technically your warrior may well be a killer, as are his friends. He may have a hard time seeing that this does not make him a murderer" (point 5). In order to survive and maintain control over their work, infantrymen in this study were expected to manage their emotions while working and manage them appropriately when the time came to deal with them. "Controlling fear does not mean that a warrior doesn't feel fear; but that they learn how to operate in

the presence of it, and how to use fear as an alert signal...” (Hoge, 2010, p. 23). The external expectation of emotion management in exchange for recognition of a job well done is emotional labor. The benefit to the participants in setting emotions aside was for the infantrymen’s and the military’s overall work effectiveness.

Awareness that prospective employers are fearful of veterans makes them nervous about their interactions during networking events and interviews. Roger voiced this sentiment saying, “Yeah, maybe employers do need to hear that we’re not crazy though. We’re not”. In part, infantrymen need to manage the emotions they feel about being feared along with the desire they feel to prove that employers should not be apprehensive about the veterans. For some veterans the experience leads to anger and frustration; for others it brings about sadness and reluctance to engage wholeheartedly in the career development interaction. In all cases there is a strong need by the veterans to keep their feelings under control as they learn and adjust to the new kinds of encounters taking place in career development. Civilians with limited or no exposure to military veterans do not realize that the transition process is less about relinquishing the identity of warrior than it is finding a way to integrate that identity and accompanying behaviors and emotions with the new civilian self (Hoge, 2010). This process of veterans managing their emotions for their own self-care is emotion work. It is under the control of the veterans and done for the protection of their state of mind so that they can be at their best while engaged in career development activities. “Shutting down emotions is a necessary skill in combat, and it can sometimes be very difficult to turn them back on

after coming home” (Hoge, 2010, p. 32). Adam described how he approaches this emotion work:

Honestly the way I approach it and I can’t speak for everybody, it’s been a learning process for me because like I said before, I tell somebody I was in the military and they kind of scoot back not really knowing what to do about it or what to say or how to handle it. That uncomfortable silence for a second, so I tend not to tell people right away, I kind of try and build that relationship first. Once I build that rapport with them within 10 seconds, 20 seconds, 30 seconds, just getting to know the person just enough to where if they start asking those questions on those things I’ve done in the military...

Veterans know that they must put others at ease about their experiences and diffuse the fear they sense from prospective employers so they can engage successfully in the civilian employment search. Doing so often results in the infantrymen saying little about their combat work or minimizing the importance of it and the valuable skills they gained through the experiences. Instead they draw little attention to their military work and gloss over the skills that would likely make them desirable candidates as Sean illustrated:

So trying to portray that to employers can be kind of difficult, because you get it, but trying to explain it to someone who hasn’t been in the military....It is very difficult, because you’re trying to convey a message that’s effective and to someone who’s not in the military, you’re trying to relate that – well, how does that relate to having a normal job? Let me try to explain it in a sense of how it’d

be like if you were doing that in a normal job. It's hard – Because it's just things you don't do outside of the military. You know, there's a roughness about it that kind of, it's even hard for me to try to explain it right now...

It is their need to continue to protect others from the ugly realities of military service and harsh details about combat that most speaks to the infantrymen's emotion management. The management of the veterans' emotions done in hopes of securing the civilian employment they seek is autonomous emotional labor. As Bahten (2012) explains, "he doesn't want you to understand, because that would mean you had shared his most horrible experience, and he wants someone to remain innocent" (point 8). Autonomous emotional labor is conducted by the veterans in hopes that doing so will shield employers from the ugliness of what they have experienced. They also hope to prevent the negative outlook about military experience the veterans fear exists among employers and net them much desired employment as they move out of higher education to civilian employment.

Engaging in career development activities puts veterans in the position to undertake many new experiences that require them to manage their emotions to meet the expectations of others. Of all the environments in which infantrymen may be least comfortable are the networking events in which they must take part for their career development and civilian employment search in higher education. They might have attended dinners and receptions during their time in the military, but interacting with prospective employers in semisocial environments stretches their skills and their patience beyond what they have experienced previously. Jeff finds networking

experiences challenging to his emotions when his service is addressed by naïve but well-intentioned employers:

And a lot of times I just get annoyed with people saying, “Thank you for your service.” Like, “I don’t know your name. I didn’t do it for you. I did it for me and hopefully it will help me in the future.” If it didn’t then, maybe I should have rethought that, but it’s just the route that I took.

Attending such events is not required and may not net them the civilian employment they desire, but veterans learn that the expectation for them to attend outweighs their reluctance. The process of smiling past their discomfort with the professional event attendance necessary in order to engage prospective employers in conversation is indirect emotional labor. Some veterans gain comfort in these interactions more quickly and learn to build rapport with little effort. Others find this part of their career development the most challenging and must work much harder to manage the emotions therein. Managing their emotions is one of the most important tasks veterans will undertake as they navigate their education and career development transitions.

### **Summary of Major Findings**

Moving in, moving through, and moving out of higher education, veterans of combat arms undergo shifts to their personal and professional power that force them to question who they are and how they relate to the environment around them. As was evident in the constructs, expressed through the participants’ comments, power shifts from high power as experts in the infantry to low power as novices moving in and moving through higher education means the veterans of combat arms must adjust the

ways in which they relate to others and learn new strategies to engage the career development and civilian employment search processes. Environments veterans encounter on campus and in the civilian employment search comprise the new structures, new systems, and new relationships with which they must engage if they are to be successful in their career development and search for civilian employment in higher education.

The new structures, systems, and relationships with which veterans interact as they move through higher education in career development represent the career competencies identified in intelligent career theory. New structures, the know-why competency, embodies the motivations and desires of the veterans in their career development. As their power changes and increases, the veterans' interactions with career exploration resources and academic engagement helps them consider why they are interested in a particular field of study and work. The know-how competency is represented by the new systems veterans interact with in their career development. Systems are the tactical aspects the veterans must gain knowledge of as they increase power, such as résumé preparation and interviewing skills. The new relationships veterans must develop symbolize the know-whom competency of their career development. Learning to network with employers and establishing reciprocally beneficial friendships with classmates occurs as the veterans build their power and confidence in the higher education career development environment.

Figure 3 displays the antecedents of the power shifts interacting with the new structures, systems, and relationships that veterans encounter in career development

within higher education, which are the constructs illuminated in the interview data. The constructs uncovered demonstrate the painful challenges veterans of combat arms undertake to fulfill their goals of using higher education to accomplish civilian employment. As noted previously, participants felt that staying in the infantry would have been much easier than moving on to a new civilian life and career, and at times they long to return to that military life that was comfortable and easier for them. The infantrymen's success moving out to civilian employment is not predicated on accomplishing an end state to the transitions they undergo. Rather, they attest to expecting the nature of their adjustments as they move forward to be ongoing as they undertake new experiences.

The glimpse into their efforts to gain agency and form new bonds with others in civilian life while pursuing a new career path provides an understanding of the inherent challenges of the transition infantrymen undertake and constructs taking place in their lives. Insight into the rebuilding infantrymen do as they shed their military identities and start at the beginning as novices determined to become experts once again illuminates the motivation they bring to the task of adapting to a new sense of normal. Also knowing the emotional energy veterans put forth to manage their feelings to meet both their and others' expectations emphasizes the strength combat veterans rely on each day. The infantrymen must find a way to incorporate the inherent hope and fear that result from the constructs taking place into their lives and find a way to manage the emotions as they move into, move through, and move out of the educational experience they are using as part of career development to pursue new civilian careers.

## **Implications for Future Research and Practice**

My research sought to better understand the career development experiences of veterans of combat arms MOSs as they transitioned into higher education as a conduit to a new civilian career. What I discovered from the veterans' stories sheds light on the external and internal impacts they feel upon them and their experiences of those impacts to their transition. It also sets the stage for future directions for research and new strategies for practice.

## **Implications for Future Research**

The first article to raise serious discussion about veterans attending higher education was published in 2008. Since then the extant literature on veterans undertaking higher education has developed neither the breadth nor the depth that would allow researchers and practitioners to effectively implement the included suggestions. Much more research is needed on the current veteran population, particularly related to their career development. Although we are more than 10 years into two wars and multiple smaller military conflicts, the surface has been only minimally scratched with respect to what we need to learn about how to best serve veterans' career development needs within and as they leave institutions of higher education. Table 5 highlights some of the potential directions for new research.

Current literature on veterans in higher education, such as the DiRamio et al. (2008) article, views them much the same as traditional college students in higher education. The same theoretical bases of student development have been used to research the veteran population rather than revising traditional student development



Table 5

*Implications for Research*

Focus	Research Implication
Veteran Career Development in Higher Education	Additional research needed on current veteran population in higher education; particularly address career development aspect of transition
Veteran Development in Higher Education	New theories of the development of veterans in higher education needed to better understand the population as a unique subset in higher education
Unique Veteran Population Subsets	Focus research and theory development on subsets of the veteran population to increase likelihood that findings will align with population profile
Veteran Transition	Research needed on veterans transitioning into civilian employment with particular attention paid to how veterans navigate power shifts as part of their exit from military and entry to a new career field
Emotion Management	Phenomenon of emotion management offers a thread of literature useful to further examination of ways veterans manage their emotions in military work and in transition to civilian environment
Veteran Reacculturation	Veterans' adjustment to civilian culture should be studied using models based on American expatriates in business returning to the U.S. and cultural identity theories

theories or positing new theories about veterans' development in higher education as needed. This has led researchers who study veterans in higher education to recycle theories that may not be wholly appropriate to the veteran population and leading to arguable research findings.

Based on this research, veterans experience higher education differently than their traditional student counterparts. Their motivations to attend higher education are

focused on gaining a new career and building on the competencies they possess rather than seeking out new life experiences. Because of these differences, different theories of overall development, and specifically career development, are needed to better understand the veteran population and the veterans' experiences as a unique subset of the population in higher education. The constructs illuminated in this research seem, generally, to reflect some of those present in student development theories applied to traditional student populations. This research may provide an appropriate starting point for further research and theory building to address veterans in higher education.

### **Implications for Practice**

It is important to note that many of the implications for practice supported by the research were suggested by the research participants themselves based on their experiences. The veterans were asked to identify what they would tell those working in civilian employment and higher education about how to best support veterans in their organizations. Their thoughts on implications for practice, along with those that came from the data, are shown in Tables 6 and 7.

**Employers.** If veterans are to be hired within systems that account for their military experience and make use of the skills and talents they have to offer so they will be sustainably employed, employers must engage training on military cultural competency for the entire organization, particularly for those responsible for leadership in human resources and hiring activities. Those responsible for hiring need to learn how to effectively evaluate military work experience and ask respectful probing questions in interviews to gather adequate information needed to make a hiring decision about a

veteran. Additionally, they need to understand that the work done in the military is separate from the individuals doing it and be able to manage their responses so they do not display fear or other off-putting emotions to veterans conducting a civilian employment search. Military cultural competency training should also discuss the general value of employing veterans beyond the tax credits and public perception.

The veterans participating in this research recommended that employers consider implementing affinity groups for veterans within their organizations. Much like their experiences in higher education, the bonds of military service extend beyond service branch once veterans enter the civilian world. In addition to easing their transition into large organizations, providing mentorship for other veterans, and serving in advocacy roles, veterans believe that affinity groups could provide a valuable source of knowledge for other employees as well. This concept is supported by the research indicating that strong relationships with others, particularly similar others, could aid veterans' resilience, socialization, and adaptation.

Veterans want to be challenged in their work and given responsibility for tasks that will allow them to make strong contributions to the organization. As part of their development of new professional power, veterans should be allowed the opportunity to utilize the skills they developed through their military work. Effective leadership, decision making, and communication are all part of a veteran's past military work and should be utilized as assets to benefit the organization even at the entry level of technical skills. Employers who make use of these skills will support the veterans' adaptation and

acquiring new tools. Additionally, the confidence gained through using their strengths will likely help build the veterans' professional power and increase their agency.

Table 6

*Implications for Practice – Employers*

Focus	Practice Implication – Employers
Military Cultural Competency Training	Implement military cultural competency training organization-wide, particularly for those responsible for human resources and hiring activities to learn how to effectively evaluate and make use of military work experience
Organizational Support	Implement veteran affinity groups to ease veteran transition into large organizations, provide mentorship, and serve in advocacy role to provide knowledge for other employees
Utilize Skills and Experience	Give responsibility for tasks that will allow veterans to make strong contributions to the organization and allow the opportunity to utilize skills developed through military work

**Higher education.** Veterans participating in this research recommended that those responsible for career development at institutions of higher education reach out to veterans as they enter higher education to help them begin thinking about career transition. They suggested that, because veterans do not seek assistance unless absolutely necessary, school representatives contact them preemptively so that they are aware of the resources available and how to access them. The participants also suggested that the career development staff receive special training on how to assist veterans with résumé development and interview preparation because they are likely

unfamiliar with the nuances of military work. Special understanding is needed regarding how military work might be best displayed on the résumé and in interview situations.

Table 7

*Implications for Practice – Higher Education*

Focus	Practice Implication – Higher Education
Early Career Services Outreach	Because veterans do not seek assistance unless necessary, school representatives should contact them preemptively so they are aware of resources available and how to access them
Career Services Staff Training	Implement career development staff training on how to assist veterans with résumé development and interview preparation because staff are likely unfamiliar with the nuances of military work
Military Cultural Competency Training	Implement military cultural competency training campus-wide, particularly for those responsible for teaching and advising activities to learn how to effectively educate and make thoughtful referrals of veterans to supportive resources

Veterans say it is important for those educating, advising, and supporting them to do so in a sensitive and competent manner. Military cultural competency training for those teaching and supporting veterans in higher education would provide the foundation for an educated dialog about the financial and experience benefits that veterans bring to campus as well as informed discussion regarding addressing veterans’ needs in higher education. Participants in this study highlighted difficulties that could be resolved by a more knowledgeable faculty regarding veterans’ needs in the classroom. In addition to the technical training needed for career services staff to assist with veterans’ résumés and interview preparation, military cultural competency training for career services staff

would give them the sensitivity and language to engage effective discussion with veterans about their career development needs.

## **Conclusions**

Veterans of combat arms MOSs in the military using higher education as part of their career development to transition to new civilian careers undergo changes to their personal and professional power as they engage with new structures, new systems, and new relationships in education and civilian employment search. The resulting constructs and the ways in which they move through the changes give them both hope and fear for their futures. As a result of these findings, this research has contributed new information to the body of extant literature on the current veteran population and has initiated a new stream of research on veterans' experiences using higher education as a conduit of career development leading to civilian employment.

Veterans of military service in combat arms were the population of interest due to their lack of a direct civilian employment correlate to their military work as well as because of the perception of what it means to be an infantryman. The resulting constructs discovered in their stories brought to light their fears about and challenges to the infantrymen's experiences of career transition as well as reminders of the hope and excitement they have at the prospect of a new future in civilian employment.

The power shift that veterans of combat arms feel upon moving into and moving through higher education constitutes one of the most significant impacts to their growth and adjustment in post-military career development. Faced with decreased empowerment in the unfamiliar environment of higher education, the infantrymen

experience challenges interacting with new structures, like career service resources; new systems, such as online hiring programs; and new relationships, in the form of other veterans and traditional students. Constructs resulting from these interactions shed light on the veterans' lifeworld as they experience it moving through higher education and moving out to civilian employment. The fear they experience is evident through their comments on lack of knowledge of processes and challenges of interacting with others who do not understand them. The hope they feel is also palpable when they recount their reasons for pursuing higher education and how they hope to continue to contribute as civilian employees in the future.

This research contributes to the bodies of literature in human resource development and higher education by describing the transition experiences of infantry veterans undertaking higher education as career development to be better prepared for the civilian employment sector for which their military work has no equal. Gaining a better understanding of these veterans' experiences should inform both fields about how to support this unique population with career development resources and advise and help the veterans make the most of their military work experiences and skills in their civilian employment search. It should also provide a point of reference for policy and practice development for providing career development for military veterans and engaging in more effective hiring evaluations of military veterans.

Another contribution of this research is in providing a better picture of what it means to be a veteran of the United States military. Too often we are given portraits of veterans by the media buying into the archetypes of either the strong, heroic veteran or

the sad, damaged veteran. Rarely do we see a realistic picture, with the stereotypes stripped away, leaving an honest portrayal of who veterans are. While it was not the goal of this research to offer a new model to provide perspective of what it means to be a veteran, it is a positive result of honest conversations with veterans clearly articulating their strengths, challenges, hopes, and fears. If the realistic image of infantrymen based on this research is adopted as the new representation of a veteran then it will be a fair portrayal without prejudice toward hero or victim.

Finally, I hope that, with the new understanding of combat veterans' career development experiences provided herein, employers will see combat veterans as an asset to be valued for the contributions they can make to strengthen organizations rather than merely a tax benefit. As the baby boomer leaders continue to retire and pass their reins to new hands, they should be able to rely with confidence on military veterans to take on the hard work and leadership necessary to continue organizational success. Much as the WWII veterans brought skill and capability to American business, the current generation of infantrymen has demonstrated their adaptability and leadership in service as well as drive to make a new contribution by undertaking higher education. The lessons to be learned from this research have the potential to change the way in which veterans of combat arms are perceived by civilian employers and prepared for their new missions in civilian employment.



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APPENDIX A: TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY HUMAN SUBJECTS PROTECTION  
PROGRAM CONSENT FORM

TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY HUMAN SUBJECTS PROTECTION PROGRAM  
CONSENT FORM

Project Title: A Phenomenological Exploration of Combat Veterans' Career Development Experiences as They Transition from Higher Education to Civilian Employment

**You are invited to take part in a research study being conducted by Sarah E. Minnis, a researcher from Texas A&M University. The information in this form is provided to help you decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part in the study, you will be asked to sign this consent form. If you decide you do not want to participate, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits you normally would have.**

**Why Is This Study Being Done?**

The purpose of this study is to explore, from a phenomenological perspective, combat veterans' experiences with career development as they prepare to leave higher education and go into civilian employment.

**Why Am I Being Asked To Be In This Study?**

You are being asked to be in this study because you are an OEF/OIF combat veteran with MOS, such as infantry, scouts, and gunners, which necessitate the participants identify a new career direction. Participants will be junior or senior level in their education.

**How Many People Will Be Asked To Be In This Study?**

6-10 people (participants) will be invited to participate in this study.

**What Are the Alternatives to being in this study?**

The alternative to being in the study is not to participate.

**What Will I Be Asked To Do In This Study?**

You will be asked to respond to questions about your post-military higher education experience. Your participation in this study will last up to 3 weeks and includes 2 meetings of 1-2 hours each.

**Will Photos, Video or Audio Recordings Be Made Of Me during the Study?**

The researcher will make an audio recording during the study so that your responses can be reviewed as they are the data for the study. If you do not give permission for the audio recording to be obtained, you cannot participate in this study.

**Are There Any Risks To Me?**

The things that you will be doing are no more risks than you would come across in everyday life. I will ensure participants understand that participation is voluntary and that they may withdraw at any time. In addition, I will ensure participants know they have to right to answer, or not answer any question and that the interview can be ended at any time. You do not have to answer anything you do not want to. Information about individuals and/or organizations that may be able to help you with these problems will be given to you.

**Will There Be Any Costs To Me?**

Aside from your time, there are no costs for taking part in the study.

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IRB APPROVAL DATE: 03/18/2013  
IRB EXPIRATION DATE: 03/15/2014

**TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY HUMAN SUBJECTS PROTECTION PROGRAM  
CONSENT FORM**

**Will I Be Paid To Be In This Study?**

You will receive entry into a drawing to receive a \$30 restaurant gift card. The winner will be identified through a random drawing conducted at the end of the study.

**Will Information From This Study Be Kept Private?**

The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Research records will be stored securely and only I will have access to the records.

Information about you will be stored in locked file cabinet; computer files protected with a password. This consent form will be filed securely in an official area.

People who have access to your information include the Project Director and research study personnel. Representatives of regulatory agencies such as the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) and entities such as the Texas A&M University Human Subjects Protection Program may access your records to make sure the study is being run correctly and that information is collected properly.

Information about you and related to this study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted or required by law.

**Who may I Contact for More Information?**

You may contact the Project Director, Sarah E. Minnis, M.A.Ed., to tell her about a concern or complaint about this research at or [sminnis@tamu.edu](mailto:sminnis@tamu.edu). You may also contact the Jamie L. Callahan, Ed.D., [jcallahan@tamu.edu](mailto:jcallahan@tamu.edu).

For questions about your rights as a research participant; or if you have questions, complaints, or concerns about the research, you may call the Texas A&M University Human Subjects Protection Program office at (979) 458-4067 or [irb@tamu.edu](mailto:irb@tamu.edu).

**What if I Change My Mind About Participating?**

This research is voluntary and you have the choice whether or not to be in this research study. You may decide to not begin or to stop participating at any time. If you choose not to be in this study or stop being in the study, there will be no effect on your student status or relationship with Texas A&M University, etc. Any new information discovered about the research will be provided to you. This information could affect your willingness to continue your participation.

**STATEMENT OF CONSENT**

**I agree to be in this study and know that I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. The procedures, risks, and benefits have been explained to me, and my questions have been answered. I know that new information about this research study will be provided to me as it becomes available and that the researcher will tell me if I must be removed from the study. I can ask more questions if I want. A copy of this entire consent form will be given to me.**

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## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW 1 QUESTIONS

1. What is it like to be a student veteran looking toward graduation and civilian employment?
2. How do you feel about your civilian job search?
3. Share your story of your civilian job search.
4. Tell me about your experience relating your military experience to employers with whom you are interviewing.
5. How does your experience in your civilian job search compare to your expectations about the experience?

## APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW 2 QUESTIONS

1. Based on how you feel about your experience of career transition, what do you want other student veterans to know about how to navigate such a transition?
2. Based on how you feel about your experience of career transition, what do you want civilian employers and those working in higher education to know about student veterans' career transition?
3. How do you feel that you, as a veteran, will make a difference in your civilian workplace?