COMBAT

AND THE

POSSIBILITY OF POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH

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and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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DEDICATION

Humbly dedicated to my grandfather,

Colonel William C. Lafield (Ret.).

As Chief of Supply and Distribution Center at the Pentagon during World War II, my grandfather's dedication to his country and the United States Army earned him the Distinguished Service Medal. He imbued in our family the meaning of honor, courage, and commitment. It is his legacy that I follow in the footsteps of.

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and professionally; thereby challenging those around him to do the same. AFSOC is markedly more efficient and dangerous with him on board.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

In order of appearance.

Operation Iraq Freedom (OIF) – Military operations in Iraq

Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) – Military operations in Afghanistan

Improvised Explosive Device (IED)

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)

Veterans Affairs (VA)

Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT)

Prolonged Exposure (PE)

Posttraumatic Growth (PTG)

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Global War on Terror (GWOT)

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manuel of Mental Disorders, fifth edition (DSM-V)

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manuel of Mental Disorders, fourth edition (DSM-IV)

Potentially Traumatic Event (PTE)

Department of Defense (DoD)

Mental Health Advisory Teams (MHAT)

Post-Deployment Health Assessment (PDHA)

The Post-Deployment Health Re-Assessment (PDHRA)

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal Axis (HPA axis)

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

Eye-Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)

Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF)

Penn Resiliency Program (PRP)

Military Occupational Specialty (MOS)

Permanent Change of Station (PCS)

End of Active Service (EAS)

Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT)

Prolonged Exposure (PE)

Acceptance-Commitment Therapy (ACT)

ABSTRACT

The psychological impact of war has been observed across time and culture. In the aftermath of wars throughout history, societies have experienced devastating post-war mental health and readjustment problems (Wells et al., 2011). The consequences of modern-day warfare have become amplified; specifically, with military operations in Iraq, Operation Iraqi Freedom and Afghanistan, Operation Enduring Freedom. The increase in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and other co-morbid mental health disorders among our nation's veterans has sparked the development of research in both treatment and prevention. As the demands of treatment have increased, there has been a shift towards a preventative mindset, focused on discovering what makes an individual resilient in the face of trauma and capable of growth post-trauma: posttraumatic growth (PTG). Understanding post-combat functioning in OIF and OEF veterans is vital, as it guides the development of interventions to enhance resilience and support, as well as promote successful re-integration into civilian life (Pietrzak et al., 2010). Concepts of mental health training which endeavor towards resilience and PTG do not transfer to these high-risk occupational contexts without being tailored to military culture. This qualitative, multiple case study, aims to unearth a rich description of the lived experiences of three combat arms veterans. Focusing on the phenomenon of PTG, this study clarifies resilience factors in combat, PTG from combat, and insight into time-course development. Ultimately, the goal of this work is to illustrate that combat trauma does not necessarily lead to a damaged life; there is hope for personal change and growth.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The psychological impact of war has been observed across time and culture. In the aftermath of wars throughout history, societies and entire countries have experienced devastating post-war mental health and readjustment problems (Wells et al., 2011). While this phenomenon is by no means novel, one may argue that the consequences of modern-day warfare have become amplified; thus, requiring new research. Specifically, the current military operations in Iraq, Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Afghanistan, Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) represent the first and largest sustained ground combat operations undertaken by the United States since the Vietnam War (Hoge, 2011; Hoge et al., 2004; & Keane, Niles, Otis, & Quinn, 2011). It has been subsumed by many researchers that aspects of this modern war are leading to an increase in mental health problems; specifically, trauma related disorders in both active duty and veteran service members (Hoge et al., 2004).

Contributing factors are that the United States Armed Forces consists entirely of volunteers, who are being asked to complete multiple tours of duty, and to extend the time of their deployments (maximum 18 months) (Keane et al., 2011). Moreover, conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan is somewhat unique with regards to topography, and that hostiles are using more improvised explosive devices (IEDs) than previously seen (Wells et al., 2011). Improved armored protection and battlefield medicine means that a greater proportion of service members are surviving significant injuries; such as, traumatic brain injury (TBI) and amputation, yet both increase the risk of subsequent mental health

conditions (Wells et al., 2011). The ultimate concern is that increasing the amount of time a soldier is deployed will place considerably more stress on the individual and his or her family, thus extending mental health problems into the future (Bartone, 2006; Keane et al., 2011). Already, Veterans Affairs (VA) Hospitals are seeing a rise in the rates of VA use since the Vietnam War; with 41% of eligible veterans enrolling for services (since 2002), compared to only 10% of Vietnam veterans who enrolled up to 15 years after the conflict (Wells et al., 2011). It is further estimated that the number of veterans presenting to the VA with mental health issues will continue to escalate due to the continuation of OIF and OEF (Wells et al., 2011). Therefore, it is clear that continuing operations in Iraq and Afghanistan demand increased awareness and knowledge about the psychological impact this modern war entails.

As the demands of treatment have increased, there has been a shift towards a more preventative mindset. This has focused on discovering what makes an individual resilient in the face of trauma and capable of growth post-trauma (posttraumatic growth or PTG). Resilience has been defined as "the process of negotiating, managing and adapting to significant sources of stress or trauma" (Windle, Bennett, & Noyes, 2011, p. 2). Further, the construct is one that involves assets and resources within the individual, their life and environment. Posttraumatic growth (PTG) has been defined as "positive personal changes that result from the struggle to deal with trauma and its psychological consequences" (Tedeschi & McNally, 2011, p. 19). Importantly, it has been hypothesized that a preventative approach may yield greater returns for an institution as large as the armed services (Cornum et al., 2011).

The genesis of this shift was the widely cited epidemiological study of the mental health impact of OIF and OEF, Walter Reed Army Institute of Research's Land Combat Study established in 2003. Hoge et al., (2004) published the findings of the first returning units which garnered wide-spread attention and made the mental health care of US troops a national priority (Hoge, 2011). Among the most striking findings were that overall 16% to 29% of service members met criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, or generalized anxiety three to four months post-deployment. Furthermore, Hoge et al., (2004) was the first to document a strong positive association between exposure to combat and PTSD, with 12% to 20% of soldiers from combat units meeting criteria for PTSD three to four months after returning; this compared with 5% to 9% prior to deployment. Increased understanding of the relationship between deployment and PTSD has consistently shown that the frequency and intensity of combat experiences are the most important correlates of PTSD and other mental health problems (Britt et al., 2013; Hoge, 2011, p. 21; Hoge et al., 2004; King et al., 1998; Smith et al., 2008). Hoge et al., (2004) also found that after combat duty, rates of PTSD were significantly associated with having been wounded or injured; and that there were significant associations for major depression and alcohol misuse.

Of the OIF and OEF veterans who seek mental health services, around a quarter receive a diagnosis and half of these individuals are dually or multiply diagnosed (Seal, Bertenthal, Miner, Sen, & Marmar, 2007). Additionally, PTSD appears to be the single most common diagnosis at 13%, which is significantly higher than estimates of a representative sample in the civilian population (Seal et al., 2007). That being said, it is alarming that in most cases active duty military and veterans who are struggling with

mental health disorders and related psychosocial problems do not seek out formal treatment. Hoge et al. (2004) found that of the individuals who met criteria for a mental disorder, 38% to 45% indicated an interest in receiving help and only 23% to 40% reported having received professional help in the past year. While there may be clear difficulties with access to care and stigma surrounding mental health, unique to the active duty population is the implication of mental health treatment on a service member's military career. Efforts to address this problem are critical and should be multi-faceted in that they take into consideration outreach, education, and changes in the models of health care delivery (Hoge et al., 2004). Thus, understanding post-combat functioning in OIF and OEF veterans is vital, as it could guide the development of interventions for active duty; to enhance resilience and support, as well as promote successful re-integration into civilian life for those leaving the service (Pietrzak et al., 2010).

The increase in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other trauma related mental health disorders among our nation's veterans has sparked the development of research in both treatment and prevention. It is clearly understood that the military cannot rely on treatment alone to manage mental health problems following combat. Additionally, selection procedures and screening are not effective as the only preventative means (Adler, Bliese, & Castro, 2011). Stringent selection and screening make it difficult to recruit sufficient numbers of personnel (Bliese, Adler, & Castro, 2011); and with an all-volunteer force where deployments are increasing in frequency and duration, this issue is even more pronounced. Additionally, decreasing the multiple stressors of modern-day warfare is not possible given political and strategic realities, as well as limited resources (Bartone, 2006).

Cornum et al. (2011) espoused the military's perspective by stating that "Waiting for illness or injury to occur is not the way commanders in the U.S. Army approach high-risk actions; and it is not the way we should approach high psychological risk activities" (p. 5). As such, the focus in the armed services has moved towards designing large-scale programs that increase resiliency (Adler et al., 2011). The goals of research in this area are to build resilience in people so as to lessen the psychological impact of trauma, improve functioning and performance, as well as promote growth. This represents an alternative approach to the norm; one that is preventative and based in positive psychology (Cornum et al., 2011). This paradigm shift has been supported by many researchers and practitioners in the military community and in various fields of mental health treatment. Simply stated, "dysfunction cannot be fully understood without a deeper understanding of health and resilience" (Bonanno, 2004, p. 26). Moreover, there is widespread recognition that service members who are deployed to combat zones are considered to be in a high-risk occupational category; where it is important to assess the impact of moderators (Britt et al., 2013). The ultimate challenge that has been identified by the Army and researchers working to implement resilience programs has been balancing the need to deliver these mental health programs quickly, with the need to establish their efficacy (Adler et al., 2011). It is a commonly occurring challenge that public health policies in military and veteran populations are often implemented before adequate scientific evidence is possible (Hoge, 2011). Continued research in these areas is important due to a significant population-based need with current and increasing impact.

The positive psychology framework and focus on resilience and posttraumatic growth surrounding warfare does not portray war in itself as positive. The Global War on Terror (GWOT) has no end date in sight; as active war zones continue to exist with American service members in combat. It is probable that American troops will continue to serve for the indefinite future (Keane et al., 2011). Additionally, with the current shift towards the use of special operations communities, the number of individuals serving multiple tours of duty is increasing; ultimately meaning greater exposure to traumatic stressors. We may anticipate increased likelihood of PTSD and other related mental health conditions (Keane et al., 2011). While the research discussed generates strong rationale for a focus on prevention, supporting the men and women who have, and continue to risk their lives in service to their country is of the utmost importance. War is a horrific reality. The field of psychology can offer hope for many with a better understanding of psychological resilience in the face of trauma and what makes some capable of growth post-trauma.

Trauma is defined in different ways. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manuel of Mental Disorders, fifth edition (DSM-V) defines trauma as "exposure to death, threatened death, actual or threatened serious injury, or actual or threatened sexual violence" (p. 271). The DSM-V criteria represent the minimum requirements for symptoms as well as what experiences are conceptualized to be traumatic. However, fundamentally, it does not epitomize a holistic view of PTSD and other trauma related diagnoses, or the experience of OEF and OIF veterans. It has been estimated that around 70% of service members in OEF and OIF are exposed to traumatic incidents (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). Ozer and Weiss (2004) discuss that because PTSD requires the presence

of an external event and symptoms linked to this event, it is different from virtually all other psychiatric disorders. Furthermore, this acknowledgement raises intriguing questions surrounding how trauma is defined; specifically, what the role is of the individual's appraisal and response (Ozer & Weiss, 2004). Relevant to combat exposure are additional questions about repeated or ongoing exposure to traumatic events. Ozer and Weiss (2004) identified the two most influential cognitive models of trauma response, which highlight either the importance of beliefs and linked emotions about the self and the world, or the network of associations linking thinking about or reminders of a traumatic event to cognitive, emotional, physiological, and behavioral responses. Thus, it seems that the nature of the stressor or traumatic event is critical for research, but how the event is experienced is what is important for whether or not a disorder will manifest. In fact, the trauma literature consistently recognizes that most human beings will experience trauma in their life and that the vast majority of them will endure remarkably well; with no presence of disorder (Bartone, 2006; Bonanno, 2004; King et al., 1998; Smith et al., 2008; Stanley et al., 2011; Taylor, 1983; & Westphal & Bonanno, 2007).

A critical component of this research is the recognition that combat-specific military personnel, both active and veteran, were actively trained in their occupation for encounters with DSM-V defined traumatic events. In other words, these service members are expecting to experience war-related events that are clinically defined as traumatic, and often anticipate the opportunity to perform well at their job. In so doing, they are able to establish the efficacy of their training. The literature working with this specific population recognizes this quality; thus, other words are often used synonymously with trauma; such as, *crisis* and *highly stressful events* (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Most

applicable to the population in this study is the term "potentially traumatic event" (PTE) (Adler, Wright, Bliese, Eckford, & Hoge, 2008) in the context of combat stress. Ultimately, the researchers working specifically with the armed services on resilience and posttraumatic growth conceptualize these terms as, "sets of circumstances that represent significant challenges to the adaptive resources of the individual, and that represent significant challenges to individuals' ways of understanding the world and their place in it" (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p. 1). Thus, many military mental health professionals have called for the re-conceptualization of combat related PTSD from an occupational model, which includes deployment psychology (Castro & Adler, 2011).

In the present qualitative study, I hope to illuminate the experiences of several combat arms veterans who chose to leave the military to pursue higher education. The purpose of the study is to gather thick description of the transformation that occurs from combat experience to posttraumatic growth (PTG). This study will be designed and informed theoretically by Calhoun, Cann, and Tedeschi's (2010) PTG model, which is detailed at the end of the literature review. The following research questions guided the study: How do participants conceptualize combat? What do participants think contributes to their resilience in the face of a potentially traumatic experience in combat? How does participant growth result from combat? Data will be gathered through interview, observation, and artifacts, and each individual's experience will be compared and contrasted via multiple-case study methodology and cross-case analysis.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review will explore what characterizes trauma for combat veterans, specifically related to the modern 'norm' of war as an occupational setting where potentially traumatic events occur. Next, the focus will turn to the influences of combat veterans' interactions with trauma, both internal and external variables. The review will then look at research on the concepts of resilience and posttraumatic growth (PTG) through the lens of deployment psychology. Finally, the literature review aims to narrow in on the conceptualization of PTG and specific characteristics of the phenomenon.

The Psychological Impact of Combat

Mental health and psycho-social factors.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have motivated the generation of important insights about the psychological impact of combat. While this topic has been observed and researched throughout history, it has been done retrospectively. OIF and OEF represent the first wars where research has been promoted early by the Department of Defense (DoD) and the VA in order to influence health policies (Hoge et al., 2004). Focus on the psychological consequences of the GWOT; specifically, OIF and OEF, has revolved around mental health disorders (PTSD and depression) as well as significant psycho-social adjustment issues. Moreover, as previously discussed, aspects of these modern wars have been identified as having a significant impact on mental health outcomes. Specifically related to OIF and OEF has been the nature of an all-volunteer force resulting in increases in frequency and duration of deployments (Bartone, 2006; &

Keane et al., 2011). This increase in deployments entails a parallel increase in the number and intensity of associated stressors.

During deployments, service members face both physical and psychological stressors associated with combat in difficult environments. Wells et al. (2011) identified that topography and the increase in enemy use of IEDs in OIF and OEF are unique factors impacting combat soldiers. Furthermore, it is well known that common stressors include difficult environments, sleep deprivation, dealing with organizational dynamics, performing duties outside one's normal area of concentration, and being separated from friends and family (King et al., 2006; & Warner, Appenzeller, Breitbach, Mobbs, & Lange, 2011). Bartone (2006) discusses the six primary psychological stress dimensions of modern military operations which include isolation, ambiguity, powerlessness, boredom, danger, and workload. Isolation relates to deployment in remote locations which are often characterized by a foreign culture and language, along with unreliable communication tools. Coupled with distance from family and friends, often time service members are placed in newly configured units, and thus surrounded by new coworkers. Ambiguity relates to the fact that modern military operations are characterized by change and lack of clarity with regards to the mission, rules of engagement, command or leadership structure, standards of behavior or what is acceptable, and individual role. Powerlessness is comprised of multiple facets beginning with movement restrictions as a result of security and operational concerns. Moreover, soldiers often experience rules of engagement constraints with regards to response options, intervening, or providing help to both service members and the local populace. Additionally, differing standards between units are often evident in terms of pay, movement, and behavior. Lastly, a major

factor of powerlessness is the nature of indeterminate deployment length. For some time, soldiers do not know when they are going home; which further impacts feelings of powerlessness in not being able to influence family issues. Boredom is often experienced by many with regards to long periods of repetitive work or lack of work; although, conceptualization of boredom often relates to lack of meaning or purpose from work. The danger dimension represents the real physical threats that can result in injury or death; specifically, in OIF and OEF are an increase in "hidden danger" such as suicide bombers, snipers, IEDs and vehicle-born improvised explosive devices (VBIED) (Bartone, 2006, p. S136). Moreover, this source of stress can be a direct threat to one's self or an indirect threat to one's comrades. Exposure to the severely injured or dead is also included in this dimension. Lastly, workload was included in order to highlight the increasing frequency and duration of deployments in OIF and OEF. Most deployments consist of a 24-hour, 7-day work week with no time off, which also relates to stress surrounding sleep deprivation (Bartone, 2006).

While many, if not all, deployed service members experience varying levels of these modern stressors, those soldiers who are in direct combat are at an increased risk. Again, Hoge et al (2004) was the first to show a significant relationship between combat and mental health issues; specifically, PTSD, in a longitudinal study across three comparable U.S. Army units. The following information focuses on this study alone. The study found that for all groups there was a strong relationship between combat experiences and the prevalence of PTSD. In this study, combat experiences were conceptualized as being shot at, handling dead bodies, knowing someone who was killed, or killing enemy combatants. More telling is that for the soldiers who were deployed in

Iraq and Afghanistan, the prevalence of PTSD (according to the strict definition) increased in a linear manner with the number of firefights during deployment. Additionally, PTSD rates were also significantly associated with being wounded or injured. Ultimately, the study found that the number of soldiers who met screening criteria for major depression, PTSD, or alcohol misuse was significantly higher post-deployment than pre-deployment. Thus, "Studies have consistently shown that the frequency and intensity of combat experiences were the most important correlates of PTSD and other mental health problems" (Hoge, 2011, p. 21).

The implications of this study are serious, as Hoge et al. (2004) reported that the findings could be generalized to ground-combat units, which are estimated to comprise about one quarter of all Army and Marine personnel in OIF and OEF and nearly 40% of all active duty personnel. The authors further discussed as part of the limitations of the study that estimates of the prevalence of mental health disorders were "conservative," due to screening procedures (p. 20). While the survey instruments that were used were validated with primary care and clinical populations rather than military, the authors required evidence of functional impairment and a high number of symptoms in order to increase the specificity and predictive value of the measures. This approach yielded an estimation that 9% of soldiers are at risk prior to combat deployment, and 11 to 17% are at risk for mental health disorders post-combat deployment. Moreover, the administration of surveys 3 to 4 months post deployment and again at 6 months allowed the authors to assert that there are long term risks for mental health problems associated with combat.

These critical findings have been replicated by many studies; however, the most thorough of those has been the work of the Mental Health Advisory Teams (MHAT)

sponsored by the army surgeon general to do annual assessments of mental health and well-being with deployed troops (Hoge, 2011). The MHATs have exhibited similar rates for PTSD and depression (15 to 20%) in brigade combat teams; as well as further identifying marital problems at a rate of 20%. Ultimately, MHATs reported that multiple deployments, longer deployments, greater time performing missions outside the wire (i.e. away from base camp), and combat intensity and frequency all contributed to higher rates of PTSD, depression, and marital problems (Hoge, 2011). A unique finding from this work has been that those soldiers with mental health problems were also more likely to report committing an ethical violation while on a mission (Hoge, 2011).

PTSD has certainly been the focus of most research looking in to the impact of combat on mental health. Most soldiers do not meet criteria for a full diagnosis of PTSD; and many experience mental health difficulties un-related to deployment. While the broad spectrum of mental health concerns experienced by this population is out of the scope of this review, there are many mental health concerns which have been hypothesized as indirectly or directly related to PTSD symptomology. Relevant to the relationship between combat experiences and PTSD has been suicide, alcoholism, risk taking behaviors, and family discord. Research has begun to focus on elevated rates of death by suicide in OIF and OEF veterans (Kaplan, Huguet, McFarland, & Newson, 2007). Rates of suicide are twice as high for male veterans than male non-veterans in the general population, and it is estimated that veterans are 58% more likely to use a fire arm in their attempt (Kaplan et al., 2007). Moreover, younger age has been identified as a factor for increased risk; which has major significance for the younger cohort of returning veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan (Zivin et al., 2007). In looking at suicidality among active

duty and veteran populations research has focused on the experience and symptomology of PTSD. For instance, the re-experiencing symptoms of PTSD are the highest predictive symptom associated with the disorder for suicidal ideation (Nye & Bell, 2007). Furthermore, the frequency of re-experiencing symptoms of PTSD appears to be related to combat exposure; specifically, war zone violence and atrocities (Beckham, Feldman, & Kirby, 1998). Ultimately, an empirically supported theory of suicidal behavior in active duty and veteran populations is needed to identify individuals at risk; as well as appropriate prevention and treatment efforts (Anestis, Bryan, Cornette, & Joiner, 2009).

In addition to increased risk of suicidal ideation, there are a myriad of social and behavioral issues that have been linked to PTSD and thus contribute to the difficulties that service members face after combat. Little attention has been given to the behavioral outcomes of combat exposure that are less clinically pertinent (Killgore et al., 2008). Some of the major concerns for both active duty and veteran members have been that of risk taking behaviors, alcohol use, and aggression. Theoretically, the association between combat exposure and these psycho-social issues could be directly causal, an indirect link related to high comorbidity, or due to spurious third variables (Wright et al., 2012). PTSD has been strongly associated with alcohol misuse though, which further lends to the complexity of these social and behavioral issues which impair functioning (Hoge et al., 2004; & Milliken, Auchterlonie, & Hoge, 2007). PTSD symptomology associated with increased rates of mood disorders, is considered to be one of the mechanisms from which these behaviors emerge (Milliken et al., 2007). Accounts of increased risk-taking behavior associated with adrenaline seeking and feelings of invincibility are commonly reported; yet little research has focused on this (Killgore et al., 2008). As a result,

Killgore et al (2008) hypothesized that greater exposure to violent combat experiences would be associated with increased habituation to dangerous situations and therefore greater risk taking. This study evaluated combat experiences of OIF and OEF soldiers within three days of returning from deployment, and administered the second survey on mental health issues, use of alcohol and drugs, aggressive behaviors, and other risks at three months post-deployment. Killgore et al. (2008) found that combat exposure was associated with greater alcohol use, and with concerns about using more than was intended. Combat exposure was also positively correlated with aggressive behaviors; such as, increased expressions of anger and physical assault. Ultimately, Killgore et al. (2008) found that combat experience; most notably violent combat experience, was associated with greater willingness to engage in risky behaviors (driving fast, taking dangerous shortcuts, thrill seeking) upon returning home. Combat experience was also predictive of frequency and quantity of alcohol use as well as physical aggression and anger (Killgore et al., 2008) even when controlling for internalizing symptoms of PTSD and social environment factors (Wright et al., 2012). Interestingly, Killgore et al. (2008) found that having a friend killed or injured was the one combat factor that was somewhat protective against risk taking behaviors; which the authors postulated was related to research on how grieving can slow motor behavior.

While the authors suggested that these findings still need to be assessed for duration, similar findings have pointed to the long-term nature of mental health and behavioral consequences of combat. Based on findings that soldiers are more likely to experience and report mental health difficulties 3 to 4 months after returning (Hoge et al., 2004), a longitudinal study was done comparing scores from the Post-Deployment Health

Assessment (PDHA) and the Post-Deployment Health Re-Assessment (PDHRA) which is given on average six months later. Milliken et al. (2007) found that concerns about interpersonal conflict increased the most (3.5 to 14.0%), PTSD increased substantially (11.8 to 16.7%), and overall mental health risk increased as well (17.0 to 27.1%). The study found that a major experience of these soldiers with regards to all three findings was underlying difficulties with alcohol. While alcohol problems were reported at the same rate as mental health concerns, soldiers were very rarely referred for treatment, and those who were rarely followed up (Milliken et al., 2007). The authors discuss that this phenomenon is likely associated with the fact that accessing alcohol treatment automatically triggers the involvement of a soldier's commander; thus, treatment is not confidential and can impact a soldier's career (Milliken et al., 2007). Moreover, contingent to information gathered from these studies is the common limitation that authors discuss surrounding the fact that most often data is not collected under conditions of anonymity (Hoge et al., 2004; & Killgore et al., 2008). Furthermore, an all-volunteer force means that there is some homogeneity among individuals who have chosen to join an inherently high-risk occupation; thus, risk taking behaviors and propensity for alcohol misuse and aggression, may be somewhat related to personality factors (Killgore et al., 2008).

Much literature has focused on the impact of deployment on military families and the unique stressors these families face; however, a review of this literature is beyond the scope of the current study. With regards to the negative psychological impact that combat has on service members, the role of PTSD has been implicated in resulting family issues; specifically, intimate partner violence (Riviere & Merrill, 2011) and "spillover" (Riviere

& Merrill, 2011, p. 140). Combat deployments have been aligned with an increase in intimate partner violence (IPV); and it has been noted that rates of IPV may be indirectly associated with PTSD symptomology in the abuser (Riviere & Merrill, 2011). Overall, mental health concerns in soldiers are commonly linked to family issues; such as, lower marital quality, increased likelihood of infidelity, decreased trust, and plans to separate or divorce (Riviere & Merrill, 2011). The four-fold increase in concerns about interpersonal conflict from Milliken et al. (2007) further highlight the impact that this war is having on family relationships. While all military families are not the same, those who are dealing with physically and mentally ill family members are qualitatively different than the majority who do not face those problems (Riviere & Merrill, 2011). One of the difficult facets faced by these families is the decline of their own mental health. The concept of "spillover" has emerged, where the negative outcomes the service member is experiencing become negative outcomes for the family members themselves (Riviere & Merrill, 2011, p. 140). This has primarily been seen with PTSD symptomology impacting emotional involvement, family integration, and likelihood of aggressive behavior (Riviere & Merrill, 2011). However, studies have also found that family members of service men and women deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan are at significantly higher risk for mental disorders in general (Wells et al., 2011). Overall, negative psycho-social transition factors post-deployment; along with PTSD, are correlated with the overall number of combat experiences (Adler, Britt, Castro, McGurk, & Bliese, 2011). Thus, it is critical to understand factors contributing to these phenomenon, as well as what can be done to support the successful reintegration of military members.

Risk factors and complications.

In addition to the development of large scale resilience training programs, researchers have worked to identify risk factors for the development of mental health issues, specifically focusing on PTSD. Being a member of the armed services is a high-risk occupation that requires soldiers to carry out dangerous tasks in hazardous locations, meaning that there is high likelihood for traumatic exposure (Greenberg & Jones, 2011). As previously discussed, there is general awareness and acceptance that the military cannot rely on mental health screening and selection procedures as the end all be all of preventative measures (Cornum et al., 2011). However, individual screening has and will continue to be a fundamental aspect of military service. "Secondary prevention" involves the early identification of those military individuals who are at increased risk for developing mental health concerns as a result of deployment related experiences (Warner et al., 2011, p. 47). In 2006 the DoD developed criteria for a minimum mental health standard for deployment. Broadly speaking, other than psychosis or bipolar disorder, there are no specific mental health conditions that would prevent deployment (Warner et al., 2011). Rather, consideration has to do with symptom severity and the level of care required (Warner et al., 2011). As such, efforts to identify specific risk factors or vulnerabilities that would lend towards higher likelihood of developing PTSD have looked in to multiple psycho-social variables.

While cognitive models of PTSD highlight thinking and attribution styles as contributing to whether or not a full diagnosis manifests, biologically focused models look to areas of the brain that deal with fear responses (the amygdala and hippocampus) and reactions to stress (hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis or HPA axis) (Ozer & Weiss,

2004). While these two models offer varying conceptualizations regarding the primacy of biology or environment, exploring them is beyond the scope of this paper. There are three types of risk factors for consideration in the development of PTSD: pretraumatic, peritraumatic, and posttraumatic (Keane et al., 2011). In the literature, predictors of PTSD have largely focused on four different categories: historical characteristics such as family psychiatric history, intelligence, childhood trauma, and other trauma; trauma severity; psychological processes during and immediately after the trauma; and social support and life stress after the trauma (Ozer & Weiss, 2004). Of these four categories, the strongest predictor was peritraumatic dissociation; which refers to "unusual experiences during and immediately after the traumatic event; such as a sense that things are not real, the experience of time stretching out, and an altered sense of self" (Ozer & Weiss, 2004, p. 170). With regard to historical characteristics, many studies have noted the relationship between prior assault, trauma history, and mental illness history with higher risk for PTSD after stressful experiences (Smith et al., 2008; Wells et al., 2011). More specifically, women and men who reported experience with prior sexual or violent assault seem to be at more than double the risk for new-onset PTSD after combat deployment (Smith et al., 2008). Another risk factor identified by Seal et al. (2007) seems to be age; as active duty service members who were in the youngest age group (18 to 24) were at higher risk for receiving one or more mental health diagnoses, including PTSD. Contingent with the connection between combat exposure and PTSD, is the hypothesis that younger soldiers are more likely to be of lower rank and have more combat experiences (Keane et al. 2011). While Seal et al. (2007) found minimal absolute differences between men and women and ethnic subgroups, other studies have noted

gender as a risk factor with women being twice as likely to develop PTSD (Keane et al., 2011) and 1.6 to 3.0 times more likely to be diagnosed with a mental disorder (Wojcik, Akhater, & Hassell, 2009). Lastly, social support following the trauma is also a strong predictor, with more social support decreasing the likelihood of later PTSD symptoms (Ozer & Weiss, 2004).

In addition to the identification of certain risk factors for the development of PTSD, physical injury represents a risk domain that has garnered increasing attention as a result of the influx of survivors of traumatic brain injuries (TBIs) and limb amputations. While a review of TBIs is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to understand the potential impact of physical injury on the development of PTSD. Roy and Francis (2011) state that, "The physical wounds of soldiers from OIF and OEF are tightly interwoven with their trauma symptoms and cannot be ignored" (p. 211). In fact, the word trauma originates from the Greek for 'bodily wound.' Psychological conditions, specifically PTSD and other anxiety disorders, are fairly common after an injury in a combat setting, and recovery from these injuries is dramatically influenced by its presence (Roy & Francis, 2011). Studies have identified associations between TBI and mental health problems among returning service members; with the largest association between TBI and PTSD being with those that report loss of consciousness as a result of the injury (Wells et al., 2011). Moreover, the delineation of mild TBI increases the complexity of the relationship as persistent symptoms that are reported with mild TBI; such as, headaches, dizziness, memory problems, irritability, and sleep problems, are also commonly reported by those with PTSD (Roy & Francis, 2011). These same authors note that at present, there is no way to discern between the two with confidence.

While some have argued that physical injury may decrease the risk of PTSD (Koren, Hemel, & Klein, 2006), most studies identify significant physical injury as a risk factor in that it highlights the reality of life-threatening circumstances that service members face (Roy & Francis, 2011) and is a direct threat military identity and self-worth. Koren et al., (2006) hypothesizes three possible mechanisms for how physical injury may increase the likelihood of PTSD. The authors propose that physical injury may have a direct effect on the development of PTSD as a result of activating the HPA axis, may activate mediators responsible for the link between the injury and PTSD, and may inhibit the body's recovery from the initial pathways created by the trauma (Koren et al., 2006). In addition to these explanations, there is much support for the impact of coping style on the physical injury – PTSD relationship (Roy & Francis, 2011) as many service members identify exercise and other physically strenuous activities as their primary mechanisms for coping with stress. Ultimately it seems that physical injury increases the level of complexity with regards to risk for mental health disorders; specifically, PTSD.

Identifying risk factors for the development of PTSD and other mental health diagnoses may play an important role in screening for and thus preventing the manifestation of disorders in service members. However, there are innumerable aspects of an individual that may play a role in how or whether symptoms manifest. The relationships are complex, and with regards to the U.S. military, there is little support for mental health screening (Bliese et al., 2011). Selection based screening for a broad range of psychological problems; other than severe mental illness and low general aptitude, has

been labeled ineffective, as operationally defining "psychological vulnerability" proves difficult (Bliese et al., 2011, p. 177).

Reconceptualizing posttraumatic stress disorder in the context of combat.

Hoge et al (2004) proposed that there are "many gaps in the understanding of the full psychosocial effect of combat" (p. 14). What has been established in the broadest sense is that there is a strong relationship between exposure to combat and posttraumatic stress symptomology. OIF and OEF have shown that those soldiers who spend significant time outside of base camps on combat missions are at the highest risk for developing PTSD. In fact, approximately 40% of soldiers who spend more than 40 hours a week, seven days a week, outside of base camp report significant symptoms of PTSD (Castro & Adler, 2011). Furthermore, service members from the same units who do not spend time outside of base camps report similar rates of PTSD as those who have never been deployed (Castro & Adler, 2011). This implies that deployment itself is not a risk factor for the development of PTSD, rather the critical factor is the frequency and intensity of combat experiences (Castro & Adler, 2011; Hoge et al., 2004). Moreover, the self-perceptions of individuals who experience ongoing trauma are radically worse than those of individuals who have experienced a singular traumatic event in the context of normal development (Ozer & Weiss, 2004). This has led many to debate the relevancy of a separate term for ongoing exposure to traumatic events; such as, "complex PTSD" or "disorders of extreme stress – not otherwise specified" (Ozer & Weiss, 2004, p. 171). Nevertheless, the crux of this argument is that in the context of war, PTSD symptoms are a normal reaction (Castro & Adler, 2011) to inherently abnormal situations. It is critical to look beyond the individual when considering the impact of trauma (Ozer & Weiss,

2004). Other researchers have noted that combat-related PTSD is more obstinate than PTSD from other traumas, and that this may be related to the confluence of comorbid problems after returning home (Milliken et al., 2007). As such, Castro and Adler (2011) propose a re-conceptualization of combat-related PTSD within a model that takes into consideration the military context; most notably, that trauma is an occupational hazard.

In the edited book, Deployment Psychology: Evidence-Based Strategies to Promote Mental Health in the Military (2011), Castro and Adler discuss several reasons why the current "victim-based medical model" of PTSD does not apply to combat-related PTSD (pp. 218-222). This approach rests on the delineation between people who develop PTSD as a result of some traumatic event, and those who develop the disorder as a result of an occupation which they are trained for. First, the authors highlight that the current model views the individual as a passive victim, compared to the occupational model which views the individual as an active participant in their job. Most notably, the distinction between the two rests on the fact that service members are trained for and expect exposure to traumatic stimuli. Specific to the occupation of a combat soldier is to kill the enemy, and there is institutional awareness that this job may require one's life. Thus, the argument is made that service members approach potentially traumatic events (PTEs) with a "different mindset and different level of preparedness that fundamentally changes their perception of potentially traumatic events and the nature of symptoms that can occur" (p. 219). An unfortunate side-effect is the added complexity in treatment of a service member's self-conceptualization of disorder in spite of their training and performance. Second, while the DSM-V does not presume exposure to one event like the DSM-IV did, there are still time course problems with the exposure to a PTE and the

development of symptoms. In line with the recommendations of Ozer and Weiss (2004), the occupational model accounts for numerous and varied events over time, as well as the possibility of the presence of symptoms prior to exposure. The experience of combat has been described as an "unremitting onslaught" of potentially traumatic events which fundamentally impact the individual's ability to remain resilient (p. 220). Once again, the increase in frequency and duration of combat deployments in modern war makes this aspect highly relevant. Third, the DSM-IV and V ignore the social context of the traumatic event, where the occupational model considers this aspect to be critical; as traumatic events are experienced in teams of service members. Thus, the processing of a traumatic event needs to be conceptualized not only at the individual level, but also at the group level. Numerous studies have focused on the organizational structure of the military and the impact on trauma and resilience and this factor will be explored later in the review. Lastly, current conception of PTSD symptomology revolves around the manifestation of symptoms following the traumatic event. As previously mentioned, within the military deployment context, symptoms of PTSD exist prior to exposure to traumatic stimuli largely related to the nature of war. For instance, hypervigilance is a normal result of training and necessary skill set in a dangerous environment. In conjunction, difficulty sleeping is both a normal response to difficult environmental conditions, but also a result of an over-active arousal system. Even more so, restricted range of affect is a cultural norm in the military; specifically, with regards to combat operations. It is also well-acknowledged within military culture that experiencing the full-spectrum of normal emotions in combat environments puts one's self, team, and the mission at risk. Often the operational tempo of combat deployments does not allow for

effective emotion-focused processing. Based on this reasoning, the authors call for a re-conceptualization of combat-related PTSD.

Specific to this re-conceptualization via an occupational model would be the reconstruction of both the concept of exposure to trauma, as well as symptoms post-combat. To begin, the criteria for what constitutes a traumatic event must take in to consideration multiple events with an accumulation of symptoms that do not necessarily have a one-to-one correspondence between exposure and set of symptoms. Studies have documented that according to DSM-IV criteria, soldiers do experience traumatic events (Hoge et al., 2004; & Fontana & Rosenheck, 1998); however, the vast majority of combat soldiers will display symptoms of PTSD and remain highly functioning. It seems that a fundamental aspect of potentially traumatic events (PTEs) for this population is related to the subjective experience, or 'A2 criterion' in the DSM-IV (Adler et al., 2008). These criteria of fear, helplessness, and/or horror, do not adequately describe the experience of military personnel in combat who develop PTSD (Adler et al., 2008; & Castro & Adler, 2011). As a result of this and other research (for a review see Brewin & Holmes, 2003), the criterion for PTSD has since been revised in the DSM-V and does not include specific emotional reactions to the event. However, this literature review includes the rationale for re-conceptualizing combat-related PTSD as it compared to DSM-IV criteria because it provides insight into the experience of combat. Moreover, while the DSM-V adjusted PTSD criteria to account for varying emotional reactions, several aspects of the current criteria remain problematic from the standpoint of combat.

Military personnel are professionals trained to encounter potentially traumatic occupational events, which means that the subjective experience could be very different

from that of a victim. Adler et al. (2008) examined the subjective response of military

personnel to combat-related PTEs and noted that other studies of individuals who are

trained to handle PTEs (police, fire fighters, etc.) have yielded mixed results. The Adler

et al. (2008) study hoped to clarify the role of the DSM-IV A2 diagnostic criteria for

PTSD specifically with regards to combat experience. The study found that a significant

amount did not report an A2 experience along with a traumatic event; rather the

experience was related to occupation and training, or the subjective experience of anger

(Adler et al., 2008). Additionally, the lack of fear, helplessness, or horror did not prevent

individuals from developing significant PTSD symptomology (Adler et al., 2008). Those

who did report an A2 experience had more PTSD symptoms; however, they were not

more likely to meet diagnostic criteria than those who did not report A2 experiences

(Adler et al., 2008). Lastly, the authors propose that the initial non-emotional reaction of

combat soldiers may reflect their level of training, or the profession's cultural bias against

emotional responses other than anger; however, this immediate response may not be

protective with regards to the development of PTSD (Adler et al., 2008). On the other

hand, if PTSD criteria does not account for the unique experiences of combat soldiers, it

may undermine needed services for many in the future (Adler et al., 2008). As such, each

of the PTSD symptom clusters need to be re-considered within an occupational

framework so as to better understand the experience of combat veterans with PTSD

(Castro & Adler, 2011).

Castro and Adler (2011) propose a reconstruction of each of the PTSD symptom

clusters from the lens of an occupational framework. Understanding these symptoms in

the context of combat is imperative for the development of meaningful prevention,

intervention, and treatment; primarily because many PTSD symptoms are rather "normal and adaptive responses to combat" (p. 225). The crux of the issue is that while these responses are normal and adaptive in the combat environment, they can become destructive and pathological in the civilian environment. The authors do note that not all PTSD symptoms are normal and adaptive. As a means for further understanding the combat experience, this literature review will focus on identifying for the reader which symptoms in the DSM-IV needed to be re-constructed. It is also important to be aware of the fact that several of the symptoms being reviewed remain in the DSM-V and are therefore currently relevant from a diagnostic standpoint.

Within the re-experiencing cluster, psychological and physiological reactivity are normal, trained responses that are essential for surviving combat. Soldiers are psychologically and physiologically sensitive to cues that could indicate danger, prior to having experienced the actual event. Furthermore, once an individual actually experiences the danger associated with a particular set of cues, this reactivity will likely become stronger (Castro & Adler, 2011). Several symptoms in the avoidance cluster are also likely to be present before the PTE, and are again, "adaptive elements of the occupational setting" (Castro & Adler, 2011, p. 227). Specifically, soldiers are trained and expected to narrow their focus and exclude outside distractions. Furthermore, feeling detached from others is a normal experience of deployment because of geographical isolation and distance from family and friends; and restricted emotional range is something that soldiers are trained for and military culture explicitly encourages. Lastly, a sense of foreshortened future in the military context is quite rational as the occupation entails the risk of life. With regard to the hyper-arousal cluster; difficulty sleeping,

hypervigilance, and an exaggerated startle response are all normal and adaptive

experiences in the combat deployment setting, and are also likely to be present prior to a

PTE (Castro & Adler, 2011; & Castro et al., 2012). While the DSM-V has accounted for

some of the variance in PTSD symptomology; including the removal of subjective

emotional experience, and the addition of considering multiple events, it is critical to

understand these symptoms within the occupational context of combat.

Treatment considerations and challenges.

Reports have suggested that the psychological impact of OIF and OEF are

resulting in high rates of mental health disorder and psycho-social concerns (Hoge et al.,

2004; & Milliken et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2008). Seal et al. (2009) determined

longitudinal trends and risk factors for mental health diagnoses among first-time users of

VA services and estimated that 21.8% received a provider diagnosis of PTSD. Couple

this with the estimate that by early 2008 half of the 1.7 million personnel who have

served in the GWOT have fulfilled their contracts and have access to veterans' benefits

(Keane et al., 2011). Additionally, the problem becomes amplified upon learning that as

many as half of the veterans who have PTSD do not seek mental health services (Hoge et

al., 2004). Simply put, when the symptoms of PTSD remain un-treated, the negative

impact on psycho-social functioning can be devastating; impacting relationships,

employment, physical health, and overall quality of life (Keane et al., 2011). Thus,

attention to the treatment of PTSD is important, as the burden is not only imposed on the

military, but society as a whole. While the current review focuses on the psychological

impact of combat, it is also important to note that no studies to date have estimated the

fiscal cost of combat-related PTSD on society, but economists have asserted that it will be profound (McCrone, Knapp, & Cawkill, 2003).

Several clinical challenges exist with regards to reducing the mental health impact of combat via treatment. The complexity of diagnosing and therefore treating PTSD has been presented in the literature as a compounding issue (Smith et al., 2008). Moreover, as previously discussed, combat-related PTSD presents some new challenges for clinicians. In addition to this, screening and diagnostic tools have low predictive value, PTSD comorbidity likely limits the overall effectiveness of treatments, and there is low to moderate effectiveness of treatment modalities (Hoge, 2011). While an analysis of the efficacy of treatment modalities is beyond the scope of this review; research has suggested that combat-related PTSD may require a more intense version of treatment than that in the civilian community (McCrone et al., 2003). While some studies have revealed that cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and eye-movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) are effective in reducing some symptoms of PTSD (McCrone et al., 2003), others conclude that exposure therapy is the only treatment factor where there is sufficient quality of evidence and confidence in effectiveness (Hoge, 2011). Since the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies published their practice guidelines (2000), studies have shown that short-term, goal-directed CBT is more efficacious than non-descript treatment or no treatment (Keane et al., 2011). Furthermore, the specific mechanisms of this treatment modality that effect successful change are cognitive restructuring and exposure (Keane et al., 2011).

In 2008 the VA published its guidelines on mental health services, and mandated that all VA systems provide empirically supported, manualized CBT that includes an

exposure element of either cognitive processing therapy or prolonged exposure therapy (Keane et al., 2011). However, given the high comorbidity of PTSD with other mental health problems following combat, it has been recommended that clinicians utilize a range of evidence-based therapies beyond those endorsed for PTSD (Hoge, 2011). Specific to combat veterans, researchers have highlighted the importance of addressing depression and substance use disorders (Hoge, 2011); and Adler et al. (2011) makes a specific case for clinical focus addressing feelings of anger and alienation. However, there are additional factors that need to be considered when treating PTSD in combat-veterans.

In line with Castro and Adler's (2011) re-conceptualization of combat-related PTSD, is the factor of time course of symptom development. While the DSM-IV and DSM-V "assume a relatively linear symptomatic response, in the occupational context of combat, the response begins prior to exposure to events, is affected by the deployment cycle, and is shaped by the need to reset for future deployments" (Castro & Adler, 2011, p. 230). As previously discussed, many of these symptoms are adaptive and normal; however, when service members return from deployment there is often an "initial euphoria" or "post-deployment optimism" that results in either the minimization of symptoms or feelings of numbness that make it difficult to ascertain the presence of maladaptive reactions (Castro & Adler, 2011, p. 230). This report goes hand in hand with research suggesting that a delayed onset of PTSD as a result of combat exposure is the norm, and that it typically manifests three to four months after arriving home (Hoge et al., 2004; & Milliken et al., 2007).

Other factors that need to be considered within treatment parameters are rapid maturation, risk taking, and feelings of rage, grief, and guilt. A subjective sense of aging or maturing is one of the first changes that service members report as a result of their deployment (Castro & Adler, 2011). While the literature on PTG discusses this change in the context of positive growth, it can lead to feelings of disconnect between the individual and his or her peers (Castro & Adler, 2011). Important to assess for are risk taking behaviors, as research has indicated that exposure to combat may result in physiological changes that alter the way one may process emotional experiences (Adler et al., 2011; Castro & Adler, 2011; Milliken et al., 2007). Finally, emotions of rage, guilt, and grief may interfere with successful therapeutic outcomes if they are not also addressed in therapy (Hoge, 2011). Significant pain is associated with the loss of a friend or respected leader, and in the theater of combat minimal time is given for grieving. Furthermore, emotions of mourning such as sadness and grief are often translated in to anger or rage as these emotions are more culturally accepted (Castro & Adler, 2011). Regardless of the reasoning for anger, the literature has identified these emotions as "essential symptoms" in combat-related PTSD, and a key challenge for recovery (Castro & Adler, 2011, p. 232).

Lastly, further support for the delayed onset of PTSD in this population has to do with the transition out of the military. It has been suggested that the structure of military culture can be so pervasive that it sustains individuals who may have combat-related PTSD; and in some cases, allows them to be highly functioning (Castro & Adler, 2011). When service members leave however, the loss of this structured environment may propel a decline in functioning and reveal PTSD symptoms (Castro & Adler, 2011).

Thus, the complex and unique issues that present with combat-related PTSD bring new meaning to the psychological impact of combat. Fundamentally, treatment of PTSD with combat veterans needs to separate itself from the rigid sequencing of symptoms in the DSM (Castro & Adler, 2011) and move towards interventions specific to the experiences of combat veterans from these modern wars.

As previously mentioned, OIF and OEF are distinctive in that research has been ongoing during the conflict rather than retrospective. This provides a unique opportunity to inform policy decisions and protect the health of the armed service members in the here and now (Wells et al., 2011). While research on screening and treatment modalities is critical to the mental health of both active duty and veteran populations, it has been repeatedly demonstrated that, "because so many individuals are at risk, mental health training needs to be provided before exposure to occupational hazards as well as after" (Castro & Adler, 2011, p. 235). In other words, "The suffering of veterans of recent deployments, compromised effectiveness of the fighting force, and high costs of caring for combat veterans with stress-related ailments have motivated the military to investigate training programs to bolster psychological resilience" (Stanley et al., 2011, p. 566). The culmination of this research has been a paramount shift in the mindset of the United States Armed Services on mental health. Wells et al. (2011) calls the introduction of resilience training one of the "hallmark changes" of OIF and OEF (p. 147).

The United States Army; along with many experts in varying fields, are endeavoring at the forefront of this task. The Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF) program represented the genesis of these ideas and is a proactive measure towards long-term psychological well-being. Included in this program is an assessment of

psychological fitness, universal resilience training, individualized training, and the development of master resilience trainers (Cornum et al., 2011). Much of this work was adapted to army culture from The Penn Resiliency Program (PRP); developed at the University of Pennsylvania and focusing on the factors of optimism, problem solving, self-efficacy, self-regulation, emotional awareness, flexibility, empathy, and strong relationships (Reivich et al., 2011). Launched in 2009, the hypothesis of the researchers and Army personnel was that the skills learned by soldiers would enhance their ability to handle trauma, prevent depression and anxiety, prevent PTSD, and enhance overall well-being and performance (Reivich et al., 2011). While the program and its research are ongoing, it represents one of the largest-scale psychological interventions undertaken; as the aim is a cultural transformation towards equal standing of psychological and physical fitness (Reivich et al, 2011). In other words, an intended outcome is for psychological health to become ingrained in the warrior ethos (Cornum et al., 2011).

A Preventative Approach Toward Psychological Well-Being

Introduction.

In reaction to General George W. Casey, Jr.'s question of what positive psychology had to say about soldier's problems, Martin Seligman stated,

> … the human response to high adversity; such as combat, is normally distributed: On the left of the distribution are the minority who collapse – exhibiting what is called variously PTSD, depression, or anxiety. In the middle are the great majority who are resilient; they return to their normal level of functioning after a brief period of disruption. On the right-hand side of the

distribution are those who grow: people who after adversity attain a higher level of functioning than they began with or, in other words, exhibit posttraumatic growth (Seligman & Fowler, 2011, p. 84).

At this point in time, one of the key questions emerging from research has to do with whether resilience training before, during, or after deployment fosters posttraumatic growth. The issue becomes further complicated as measures of posttraumatic growth may depend on baseline levels of resilience; and there is a hypothesis that those highest in resilience may show little change (Tedeschi & McNally, 2011). The relationship between resilience and posttraumatic growth is an important one as we consider the impact that both constructs may have on how the men and women in our armed services deal with trauma. Many researchers in the field have identified the paucity of research on the psychological impact of war and narrowed in on the specific lack of focus on PTG (Cornum et al., 2011). Ultimately, an important message can be sent by the research on resilience and PTG: that PTSD is not the inevitable outcome of combat, and even if it is present, there are other aspects of post-trauma life that are of great value (Tedeschi & McNally, 2011).

Resilience as a moderator of the relationship between combat exposure and PTSD is an imperative area of research (Britt et al., 2013). Similarly, PTG is an intriguing construct, and it provides a new lens to examine psychological trauma (Westphal & Bonanno, 2007). Both constructs, from a preventative mindset, convey that there is hope in the face of exposure to trauma. Thus, an understanding of resilience and PTG could offer invaluable information related to the experience of combat personnel, where PTEs are anticipated as a part of the occupation. That being said, the research on resilience and

PTG does not purport to deny the psychopathological effects of trauma; it aims to reveal the pathways through it (Prati & Pietratoni, 2009). From the standpoint of positive psychology, the concepts are defined as the presence of certain factors rather than the absence of symptoms or diagnoses. Nonetheless, experiencing trauma and recovering from it is a complex process. A promising approach is focusing on resilience, and illuminating the role of PTG in the process of recovering from trauma (Westphal & Bonanno, 2007).

Resilience.

Psychological resilience has been found to protect against the development of combat-related PTSD (King et al., 1998). As such, research has focused on delineating the factors that contribute to resilience so that it may be built in and around individuals who are at increased risk for the development of trauma related disorders. Throughout the literature the construct of resilience has been defined in a multitude of ways (Wells et al., 2011). Fletcher and Sarkar (2013), in their review of resilience, discuss that the wide discrepancies in the definition and conceptualization of resilience ultimately have made the construct difficult to study. For instance, they note that resilience has been defined in the literature as a trait, process, and outcome. What has remained consistent is that two core concepts operationalize resilience: adversity and positive adaptation (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). Furthermore, resilience is distinct from recovery in that it reflects an individual's ability to maintain healthy levels of psychological and physiological functioning (Bonnano, 2004). While resilient individuals will experience symptoms related to trauma disorders, it seems that these are transient and do not interfere with daily functioning (Bonanno, 2004).

Specific to the military context has been a call from researchers to expand from the Western focus on individual and relational aspects of positive adaptation; to incorporate an understanding from the cultural framework (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). In other words, the interaction between a person and their environment is a critical factor to be considered when conceptualizing resilience (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Windle et al., 2011). Based on current conceptualization of the construct and positive psychology framework, resilience as a preventative resource in the face of trauma is both a personality trait and a learned skill that changes over time; which research has supported (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). Most notable with regards to the experience of combat is that resilience influences how a PTE is appraised (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). Here in lies the importance of the term "potentially" traumatic event, as resilience has been identified as the difference maker for whether trauma occurs as a result (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). As Fletcher and Sarkar (2013) highlight, resilient individuals such as military personnel who are operating in a demanding performance environment on a daily basis, would evaluate occupational stressors as an opportunity for development, and a chance to demonstrate training (Castro & Adler, 2011). While there is a traditional assumption that trauma impedes positive adaptation, the construct of resilience offers much more in the form of adaptation and increased well-being (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). Resilience as an individual characteristic or skill set can be cultivated and enhanced in order to protect (Stanley et al., 2011). The remainder of this literature review will focus on the factors that make up resilience with specific attention to the relevancy of military culture; as well as explore the relationship resilience has with posttraumatic growth.

While the level of vulnerability and conversely, resilience to PTSD symptoms is not fully understood (Smith et al., 2008), developing a specific understanding of what comprises resilience is imperative. Military culture is a critical component of this understanding as an established "tenet of military psychology" is that group characteristics impact individual well-being (Bliese et al., 2011, p. 107). Thus, military psychology conceptualizes resilience as shared group level and individual factors (Bliese et al., 2011). The social structure of the military impacts mental health in two ways: characteristics of the primary groups service members belong to are at the root of the link between stressors and mental health outcomes, and group membership and the cumulative experiences (combat) also directly relate to mental health outcomes (Bliese et al., 2011). Thus, resilience as it relates to a military population needs to focus on both individual and social factors.

Research has begun to recognize that there are multiple pathways to resilience which largely have to do with the dynamic interplay between personality traits, cognitive skills, and social support (Bonanno, 2004). While there is recognition that resilience is a complex construct, there is also wide acceptance that it is a common phenomenon which results from "basic human adaptational systems" (Masten, 2001, p. 227). Masten (2001) identifies the small set of global factors that contribute to resilience as social connectedness, cognitive and self-regulation skills, positive views of the self, and motivation to excel in one's environment. The idea that these areas are basic adaptational systems means that resilience can be promoted in individuals (Masten, 2001). In fact, numerous studies have shown that resilience develops in the context of person-environment interactions and that it can be promoted (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). In order

to do so, researchers have focused on breaking these larger categories down in order to identify specific factors of resilience. A number of evidence-based factors that contribute to resilience have been identified; including, positive emotions, problem solving, sense of meaning, self-efficacy, self-regulation, emotional awareness, flexibility, empathy, and strong relationships (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013; Reivich et al., 2011; & Stanley et al., 2011). While there are additional factors recognized in the literature, this review will focus on the aforementioned as these are the factors that currently make up resilience training in the armed services (Reivich et al. 2011).

In a meta-analysis of the psychobiological mechanisms of resilience; Haglund, Nestadt, Cooper Southwick, and Charney (2007) identify what psychological resilience factors are most relevant in the literature. They review literature on positive emotions, active coping, cognitive flexibility, morality, physical exercise, and social support. Resilient individuals are characterized by positive emotions; specifically, optimism and a sense of humor have been shown to increase one's capacity to handle PTEs (Haglund et al., 2007). Both of these positive emotions are thought to increase resilience by influencing cognitive reappraisal and reframing; ultimately promoting a more positive perspective of PTEs (Haglund et al., 2007). Optimism and humor have also been found to relieve tension and reduce levels of distress (Frederickson & Levenson, 1998); which may relate to attracting social support (Haglund et al., 2007). Another aspect of positive emotions has to do with self-enhancement beliefs of resilient individuals. It seems that in the face of trauma, overly positive biases in favor of one's self; often related to high self-esteem, are adaptive and promote resilience (Bonanno, 2004). Active coping styles have been consistently shown as behaviors that psychologically resilient and hardy individuals

engage in (Moos & Schaefer, 1993). The concept of active coping styles revolves around utilizing productive strategies for problem solving, stress management, and regulation of negative emotions (Haglund et al., 2007). Examples of these types of coping include: acknowledgement and acceptance, facing fears, seeking social support, adopting an optimistic outlook, reframing in a positive light, and physical exercise (Haglund et al. 2007).

Specifically associated with PTEs and the outcome of PTSD has been a focus on facing fears, as fear conditioning plays a major role in the development and maintenance of posttraumatic psycho-pathology (Haglund et al., 2007); notably, with regard to avoidance. Resilient individuals are more adept at managing their fear and are able to critically appraise a PTE (Haglund et al., 2007). Building on these factors is the notion of cognitive flexibility which includes the ability to produce alternative explanations, reframe positively, and accept PTEs. Moreover, resilient individuals tend to see PTEs as temporary and limited in scope, rather than permanent and pervasive (Haglund et al., 2007). Positive cognitive reappraisal is a facet of resilience (Southwick et al., 2005) which appears to pervade the literature as a major component. This process for resilient individuals is the purposeful and conscious transformation of the emotional experience from a PTE into an experience of meaning (Haglund et al., 2007). Furthermore, appraisal-based flexibility promotes resilience by fostering positive self-perceptions that maintain self-esteem after PTEs (Westphal & Bonanno, 2007). Acceptance with regards to the uncontrollable aspects of a PTE is an important piece of reappraisal as it further informs the individual about realistic outcomes and what to focus on (Haglund et al., 2007). Another characteristic of resilient individuals is the presence of a framework of

beliefs, or moral compass, that often presents as religiosity, spirituality, or altruism (Southwick et al., 2005). Complicit with positive psychology research on gratitude promoting psychological well-being (Reivich et al., 2011), altruistic behavior has been linked to less trauma related mood symptoms (Rachman, 1979). It seems that individuals directed cognitively and behaviorally by a moral compass are more resilient in the face of PTEs (Haglund et al., 2007). Literature across disciplines has proven the positive impact of physical exercise on mental health and well-being; specifically, hardiness and self-esteem (Haglund et al., 2007). Furthermore, as research on the neurobiological factors of resilience develops, it seems that physical exercise attenuates the HPA axis response to stress and increases the release of endorphins (Haglund et al., 2007). Lastly, social support is a widely accepted and critical component of resilience. While resilient individuals appear to seek out social support in the face of stress and trauma, it is clear that the relationship is iterative, as social support increases resilience (Bonanno, 2004; Haglund et al., 2007; King et al., 1998; & Maddi, 2007). Moreover, role models, mentors, and leaders appear to play a significant role in building resilience through the demonstration of adaptive skills and attitudes (Haglund et al. 2007 & Southwick et al. 2005).

In addition to the previous review of resilience factors, the personality trait that is emerging in the literature as the basis of resilience is known as hardiness (Maddi, 2007). This trait has been shown to consist of three dimensions: commitment to meaningful purpose in life, internal locus of control or the belief that one can influence processes and outcomes in life, and the belief that learning and growth comes from both positive and negative experiences (Bonanno, 2004). This set of beliefs has been shown to influence

the manner in which individuals appraise PTEs, with the outcome being that they are less distressing (Bonanno, 2004). Individuals high in hardiness also demonstrate more successful coping styles; specifically, active and transformational coping or facing the PTE and endeavoring to turn it in to an opportunity via problem solving (Maddi, 2007). King et al. (1998) found in their study with Vietnam Veterans that hardiness had a direct negative association with PTSD. Furthermore, the study also found that hardiness had an indirect effect on PTSD through social support, in that the behaviors of hardy veterans involve social support seeking (King et al., 1998). These behaviors also seem to indicate that hardy individuals are better able to build a larger and more complex support network (King et al., 1998). Other research has also identified this, where hardiness has a significant relationship with social support in that individuals with hardiness engage more often in building relationships through emphasizing mutual assistance and encouragement (Maddi, 2007). Thus, the trait of hardiness provides courage and motivation (Maddi, 2007) to engage in these behaviors and thus manage the stress related to PTEs. Bartone (2006) discusses hardiness as a framework for understanding positive leadership and the influence this may have on resilience in military units. It seems that the significance of hardiness lies within the meaning making process. Thus, Bartone (2006) proposes that hardy leaders have the ability to influence the way in which subordinates interpret and make sense of their experiences. As such, the leader who by example and discussion communicates a positive construction or reconstruction of shared PTEs may be able to exert influence on the entire unit thereby increasing resilience (Bartone, 2006).

It seems that there is a dynamic relationship between personal resilience and social support factors; one that has been specifically identified as critical within the military context. Research in the area of social support and resilience has looked in to specific military factors such as unit cohesion and morale. Social resilience in the military context seems to be especially applicable as units are often made up by individuals with ideological similarity; which has a "uniquely powerful impact" on behavior (Cacioppo, Reis, & Zautra, 2011, p. 44). Cacioppo et al. (2011) defines social resilience as, "the capacity to foster, engage in, and sustain positive relationships and to endure and recover from life stressors. Its unique signature is the transformation of adversity into personal, relational, and collective growth…" (p. 44). Social resilience is inherently multilevel in that it is composed of characteristic ways an individual relates, interpersonal resources and capacities, and collective resources and capacities (Cacioppo et al., 2011). In social groups like those that exist within the military, social resilience can promote the development of individual resilience (Cacioppo et al. 2011).

Highly specific to the military context is research examining the facets of social support and the resulting impact on resilience. Military organizations are discreet and unique social constructs where psychological welfare is a command and leadership responsibility (Greenberg & Jones, 2011). The literature has identified that within the specific population of OIF and OEF veterans; resilience, unit support, and post-deployment social support serve as psychosocial buffers of PTSD (Pietrzak et al., 2010). More specifically, it appears that perceived unit support enriches personal resilience by promoting feelings of personal control and self-efficacy; which has been fundamentally linked to active coping styles and positive reappraisal (Bartone, 2006; & Southwick et al.

2005). Unit support has been defined in the literature as cohesion based on clear

boundaries and stable social structure and has been identified as a crucial factor in both

individual and unit performance, and post-combat well-being (Ben-Shalom, Lehrer, &

Ben-Ari, 2005). Another aspect akin to social support and unit cohesions appears to be

morale; which has been defined in the military context as "a positive psychological

variable reflecting a service member's level of motivation and enthusiasm for achieving

mission success" (Britt et al., 2013, p. 95). Morale as a type of positive affect appears to

foster resilience in a similar manner as positive emotions do (Britt et al. 2013).

Interestingly, higher levels of morale during deployment appear to be related to

perceiving benefits from the deployment; which could be tied to PTG (Greenberg &

Jones, 2011). It also appears that unit support and morale are catalysts for accessing

social support specifically for combat experiences (Britt et al., 2013). Within the military,

the most important social ties are with other unit members, as many personnel consider

the military their family (Greenberg & Jones, 2011). Both of these factors are critical to

the specific experience of combat exposure as they have been proven to buffer against

symptoms of PTSD by supporting adaptive coping behaviors and unit performance (Britt

et al., 2013; & Warner et al. 2011). Furthermore, it seems that building social support as

early as possible post-deployment can be protective against PTSD and other mental

health concerns (Milliken et al., 2007). Research has shown that hardiness and social

support seem to be the most critical resilience factors when it comes to the PTEs of

combat exposure (King et al., 1998).

Transitioning home from combat deployment.

Combat personnel face considerable risk of exposure to PTEs as a part of their occupation. With regards to combat deployment, there is a mismatch between increased need for support and increased difficulty in accessing that support (Greenberg & Jones, 2011). There is evidence that up to 10% of deployed military members have PTSD symptoms as a result of their current combat exposure (Smith et al., 2008), and 20 to 30% of military personnel returning from deployment report significant mental health problems (Hoge et al., 2004). In light of the literature presented on the psychological impact of combat and resilience in the face of PTEs, it is understandable that returning home from combat deployment is both a relief and a challenge (Adler, Zamorski, & Britt, 2011). This period of time encompasses a significant period of psychological adjustment which requires an understanding of the deployment cycle as well as the psychology of transition in the military (Adler et al., 2011). As such, the constructs of resilience and PTG are highly relevant aspects of this experience.

The psychology of transition is critical in the larger military context; however, it is briefly reviewed in this literature review because the experience of the transition home can have an impact on quality of life after (Adler et al., 2011). Moreover, understanding the ways that military personnel directly benefit from their combat deployment can facilitate interventions related to resilience and PTG (Adler et al., 2011). More specifically, research on narrative psychology has informed this transition in that a common experience among returning service members is the challenge of "creating a coherent narrative to their lives and understanding the role that the deployment may have in shaping their identity" (Adler et al., 2011, p. 155). The model of deployment to home

transition proposes that deployment variables, moderators, post-deployment transition

domains, and quality of life are all areas that need to be explored (Adler et al. 2011).

Specific to deployment variables are combat experiences, cognitions related to the

anticipation of homecoming, and meaningfulness of the work. Of particular relevance to

resilience research is that meaningfulness of the work done on deployment has been

shown to improve motivation and well-being (Britt, Dickinson, Moore, Castro, & Adler,

2007) as well as managing the transition process (Adler et al., 2011). The moderators that

have been identified as playing a major role on these deployment variables are

decompression, the development of a personal narrative, unit variables, and the

anticipation of deploying again. Decompression, or "the process of bringing someone

gradually back to a normal atmosphere" (Adler et al., 2011, p. 165), is considered a

critical influence on adaptation following deployment (Adler et al., 2011). Importantly,

decompression programs may promote and develop resilience as informal time spent

bonding with colleagues has been identified as the most helpful aspect (Adler et al.,

2011). The concept that resilience is enhanced by social support; thereby promoting

successful readjustment to civilian life after deployment (Pietrak et al., 2010) is further

supported by research that indicates that adjustment is facilitated by being with unit

members or other returning service members (Adler et al., 2011). A common theme that

emerges is that these positive aspects of the transition process may play a critical role in

how military personnel experience post-combat life.

What has begun to rise out of research on resilience is the possibility that military

personnel may experience positive benefits from exposure to PTEs. Work in this area is

exemplified by Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) posttraumatic growth measure; whereby

they identified three broad categories of perceived benefits from PTEs: changes in self-perception, changes in interpersonal relationships, and a changed philosophy of life. It is starkly apparent that combat exposure has devastating consequences; but also, that for most, resilience in the face of PTEs is the norm. Regardless, the challenge of reintegrating after combat deployment has remained consistent over time (Adler et al., 2011). Even without serious diagnostic levels of mental health, all combat veterans face this psychological transition (Adler et al., 2011). Thus, it is critical to focus on increasing the positive aspects of the experience, while simultaneously reducing the negative (Adler et al., 2011). "Combat can serve as a powerful life-changing experience capable of altering one's character and personality both in a positive and negative way. To date, this area has received little scientific attention in service members following combat." (Castro & Adler, 2011, p. 238). Thus, the experience of combat, resilience in the face of relevant PTEs, and the outcome of PTG is a meaningful spectrum of experience that needs to be further understood.

The possibility of posttraumatic growth.

The relationship between resilience and PTG remains unclear (Levine, Laufer, Stein, Hamama-Raz, & Solomon, 2009). The two constructs are often misinterpreted in the literature (Tedeshi, Calhoun, & Cann, 2007), with debates about whether or not PTG is a form of resilience, whether or not PTG is superior to resilience, and whether or not those with resilience will experience PTG (Tedeschi et al. 2007; & Westphal & Bonanno, 2007). Research has proven however that the two are separate constructs and that those high in resilience are less likely to experience PTG (Levine et al., 2009; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; & Westphal & Bonanno, 2007). This seems appropriate, as resilience

allows individuals to emerge from trauma with less dysfunction (Levine et al., 2009); whereas PTG represents change via trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Thus, PTG would only occur if the trauma is upsetting enough to subsume resilience factors and thereby incur positive meaning making of the traumatic event (Levine et al., 2009). In fact, empirical studies have shown that the strength of PTG is directly proportional to the strength of traumatic exposure (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). As the relationship between these two constructs remains complex, it has been proposed that future research in the area of PTG can be examined through the various avenues to resilience (Westphal & Bonanno, 2007).

While researchers have used a number of terms to describe the positive outcomes of trauma, Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) PTG is at the forefront of this field (Westphal & Bonanno, 2007). Moreover, the concept of PTG aligns with combat experience as it focuses on the conditions of major crisis, assumes measurable life changes, focuses on growth as ongoing change or outcome, and recognizes that growth may co-exist with significant distress (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Noteworthy with respect to PTEs that combat personnel experience, is the fact that the theory surrounding PTG recognizes the nature of simultaneous traumatic experiences (Almedom, 2005). Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2004) updated functional-descriptive model of growth was deemed the most comprehensive to date (Joseph & Linley, 2006) and has since been updated further with Calhoun, Cann, and Tedeschi's (2010) model. The model proposes that traumatic events compromise or fragment pre-trauma schema and coping methods for managing emotional distress; this inherently causes automatic rumination as individuals endeavor to make sense of what has happened and deal with the distress (Joseph & Linley, 2006). During

this time symptomology and possibly diagnosis (PTSD) manifest; however, rumination is indicative of cognitive activity that is directed towards re-building these schema (Joseph & Linley, 2006). Thus, it is the disruption of beliefs rather than the characteristics of the traumatic event that initiates the process of PTG (Calhoun et al., 2010). As such, the rumination develops from an automatic response to the traumatic events towards effortful rumination characterized by narrative development and meaning making (Joseph & Linley, 2006). Of significance is that this theory includes the possibility that an individual will continue to experience distress from the trauma throughout the process; yet, at lower levels than experienced in the immediate aftermath (Joseph & Linley, 2006). Indeed, Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) assert that PTG should not be viewed as the "inevitable result" of trauma; rather continued distress and growth often co-exist (p. 2).

Growth in three major domains was organized by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996): self-perception, relationships with others, and philosophy of life. The authors discuss how changes in self-perception arise as the process of living through traumas provides information about self-reliance (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). They further assert that this information informs "self-evaluations of competence" as well as the likelihood that one will address future life challenges in an assertive manner (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996, p. 456). Interestingly, a common occurrence is awareness of increased strength along with a sense of vulnerability; which seems to be indicative of the recognition that traumatic events will occur and can be survived (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). In terms of changes in relationships with others, the authors discuss how a common phenomenon of the process of growth is increased self-disclosure. This further lends to more emotional expressiveness, willingness to accept help, and general utilization of social supports

(Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Also akin to the experience that many combat veterans report is that deeper and more meaningful relationships occur in parallel with the loss of other relationships (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The third domain revolves around a changed philosophy of life, which points to a strengthening of spiritual or religious beliefs as a result of an increased sense of control, intimacy, and meaning (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Another perspective in this domain is that there is greater engagement with existential thinking and questioning (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The authors further assert that to fully understand the construct of PTG both the cognitive and emotional domains must be explored as PTG involves internal changes (Tedeschi et al., 2007) that comprise "deeply profound improvement" (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2007, p. 4).

One of the major challenges of PTG in the literature is the question of whether or not PTG is related to increased physical and psychological health (Helgelson, Reynolds, & Tomich, 2006). While there is recognition that growth takes time to emerge (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), one proposed mechanism of determining the relationship between PTG and health has been to study the time course development (Helgeson et al., 2006). Indeed, in their critique of PTG literature; Hobfall, Hall, Canetti-Nisim, Galea, Johnson, and Palmieri (2007) note that the relationship of PTG and psychological well-being is unclear and that the process could possibly lead to "deleterious outcomes" (p. 347). The authors assert that if PTG does not have adaptive significance it becomes un-ethical to promote (Hobfall et al., 2007). The basis for their argument rests on the relationship between PTG and symptomology that has been previously discussed (greater trauma is related to greater growth). Ultimately, the authors discuss their opinion that PTG must include an action component; whereby cognitive and emotional growth is translated into

behavioral changes (Hobfall et al., 2007). Tedeschi et al. (2007) responds to this analysis by discussing how PTG is viewed as positive by those who experience it, is not correlated with social desirability, is often under-reported, and is corroborated by others. Furthermore, the authors discuss that while reports of PTG highlight both positive and negative aspects of the experience, those individuals identify the growth experiences as more significant for themselves at a deeply personal level (Tedeschi et al., 2007). Moreover, a meta-analytic review on PTG found that the process of benefit finding was associated with better mental health outcomes (Helgeson et al., 2006). It seems that the literature may be inconsistent on this however, because PTG is related to less depression but more intrusive thoughts (Helgeson et al., 2006). However, one must attend to the theoretical foundations of PTG; whereby the process of rumination (which often includes intrusive thoughts) is a necessary experience on the path to PTG (Helgeson et al. 2006) and appears to be different from depressogenic rumination (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Research has begun to focus on the factors that promote PTG; namely optimism, social support, positive re-appraisal, and spirituality (Prati & Pietratoni, 2009). Each of these factors seems to promote the process of PTG by fostering meaning making and reinforcing adaptive resilience factors (hardiness, self-efficacy, etc.) (Prati & Pietratoni, 2009). Thus, understanding the type of cognitive processing and when it occurs is reinforced throughout the literature as key to identifying the cognitive routes to PTG (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The construct is complex and researchers have called for a focus on "individual attempts to navigate the aftermath of trauma to develop an overall appreciation of these transformative processes" (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p. 15; Helgeson et al., 2006; & Westphal & Bonanno, 2007). Implicit in this work is a focus on

the causal relations as well as the timing of these factors (Prati & Pietratoni, 2009).

Moreover, an understanding of the positive consequences of traumatic events may be

further illuminated by determining their relation to the negative consequences (Fontana &

Rosenheck 1998).

The Posttraumatic Growth (PTG) Model

Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) coined the term PTG, and since then have been

recognized as leaders in the field (Weiss & Berger, 2010). Moreover, the authors have

developed and revised their PTG model, as well as created a measurement instrument, the

Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). While I have reviewed the

core of the model within the literature review, it is critical to recognize that the most

recent revisions take in to account the impact of culture on the meaning and manifestation

of resilience and coping (Weiss & Berger, 2010). While the effects of culture on stress

and coping have been explored, the literature on PTG has not followed suit (Weiss &

Berger, 2010). Leaders in the field, Wong, Peker, and Peacock (2006) stated, "Given the

importance of the sociocultural context in shaping every aspect of the stress and coping

process, the next major step in the psychology of coping needs to seriously consider

culturally related variables" (p. 225). The information about the PTG model presented

here attends to the impact of culture, thus making it critical to this study as military

culture is a major facet.

Most recently, Calhoun, Cann, and Tedeschi (2010) have updated their model to

consider sociocultural influences. The authors suggest that there are specific factors and

processes whereby culture influences the behavior of individuals in the aftermath of

trauma. Calhoun et al. (2010) conceptualizes sociocultural context and PTG through proximate and distal influences. Proximate influences are the real people, or primary reference groups, in which the individual interacts (e.g., close friends, families, teams, religious groups) (Calhoun et al., 2010). In this sociocultural context, the way that proximate influences exert their power is through the idioms of trauma, distress, coping, and growth (Calhoun et al., 2010). In other words, how these groups speak about and conceptualize the crisis event and its aftermath may have consequences that impact an individual's coping and thus the degree to which PTG is experienced (Calhoun et al., 2010). Additionally, the social norms and rules of proximate groups in the context of recovering from trauma; such as, expected coping behavior, views about what helps, and the desirability of emotional disclosure, would be expected to impact the individual's response (Calhoun et al., 2010). This has specific implications for the military context; as previously discussed, mental health stigma and cultural norms surrounding emotional narrowing abound (Castro & Adler, 2012). On the other end, distal influences are broad cultural views and narratives stemming from geography and transmitted through media (Calhoun et al., 2010). For instance, there is some preliminary research suggesting that the U.S. narrative implicitly expects or encourages PTG (Calhoun et al., 2010). The authors use the example that the U.S. narrative is rooted in "belief in progress" and "the assumption that individuals have the ability to bring about change" (p. 4).

At the time of this most updated model, the authors suggest that sociocultural influences, both proximate and distal, may play a major role in two components of the PTG model: rumination and self-disclosure (Calhoun et al., 2010). The PTG model asserts that growth is not the inevitable outcome of cognitive work, but that it is common

with the conditions of examining one's life in the aftermath of trauma, in the context of basic assumptions about how events were expected to unfold, how one is connected to others, and how one is able to affect outcomes and experiences (Calhoun et al., 2010). Overall, the authors note that research about rumination across cultures is limited, but that there is evidence for the occurrence of rumination post-trauma in multiple cultures (Calhoun et al., 2010). Moreover, it is the style of rumination (deliberate or intrusive) and time course that appears to be culturally informed (Calhoun et al., 2010). Taku, Cann Tedeschi, and Calhoun (2009) looked at the relationship between PTG and intrusive versus deliberate rumination in samples from the U.S. and Japan. They found that deliberate rumination soon after the trauma was more predictive of growth in Japanese samples. Moreover, the authors further propose that one's distal culture influences three belief areas influencing cognitive strategies: personal control, sources of causation, and stability over time (Calhoun et al., 2010). Lastly, broad cultural factors; such as, those aligned with individualist or collectivist societies, and the general roles within them (e.g., gender, power, etc.) may influence the content of ruminations as well as self-disclosure (Calhoun et al., 2010). Ultimately, these cultural idioms, norms and rules about trauma and its aftermath are likely to play a role in the type and degree of growth that an individual experiences and acknowledges (Calhoun et al., 2010).

For the purposes of this study, focus will be placed on the participant's cognitive experience, their behavioral coping, emotional distress, self-analysis, and sociocultural influences. As such, the following model is proposed, and employed in study design. The edits to the model stem from the specific literature on combat and trauma that was previously reviewed. First, Calhoun et al.'s (2010) singular potentially disruptive event

was exchanged for multiple PTE's. This considers the common experience of combat

veterans to be processing multiple PTEs over the course of their deployment. Second,

emotional distress is depicted pre-trauma and as a consistent factor for the combat

individual, as the literature on reconceptualizing PTSD points to the presence of typical

symptoms prior to any PTE (Castro & Adler, 2012) as well as the level of general distress

normally associated with and inherent to a combat deployment. Lastly, the model is

simplified by excluding explanations and examples, focusing instead on the heading. The

proposed model follows, whereas Calhoun et al.'s (2010) PTG model may be found in

the Appendix (B).

1. Proposed Model of Posttraumatic Growth
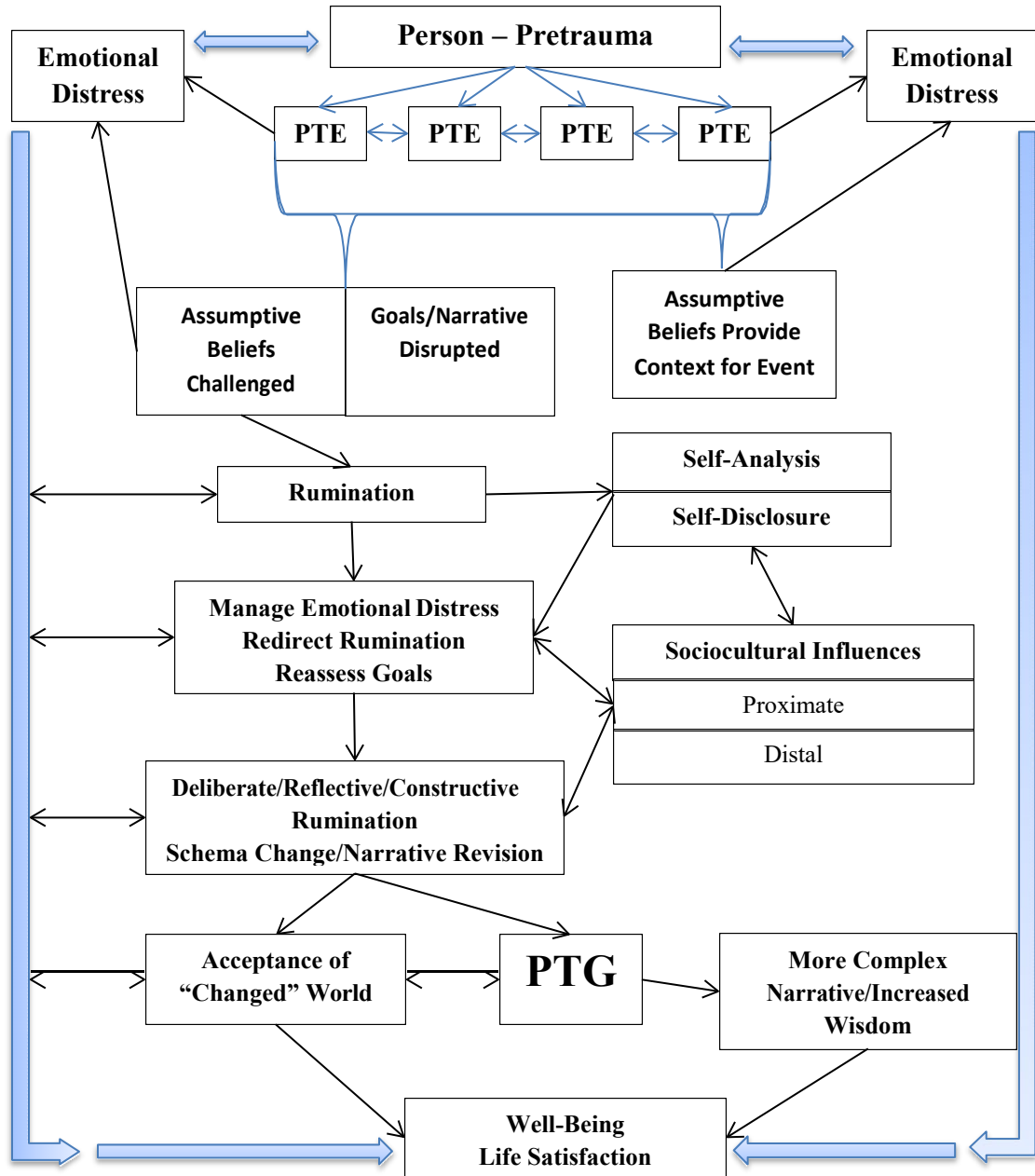
Summary

There is an ever-growing presence of PTSD and other co-morbid psychological disorders in the armed forces. Overwhelmingly, the increase of mental health disorders is linked to direct combat exposure. While treatment is critical, the burgeoning interest in growth factors falls in line with a wider movement in preventative positive psychology (Joseph & Linley, 2006). The promotion of PTG in the military is by no means a denial of the harsh realities and suffering that are endured by many military members and their families. Instead, understanding the transformation that is resilience, recovery, and PTG may help illuminate the path towards well-being and thriving post-trauma (Almedom, 2005). There is also the possibility that PTG following trauma is a critical factor keeping individuals from surrendering to the pain, and that it may be related to recovery and building of a more resilient self (Hobfall et al., 2007). Nevertheless, the literature has proven that the military is a unique culture, full of diverse individuals. Moreover, the experience of combat appears to be a unique trauma with a complex relationship to PTSD. Concepts of mental health training which endeavor towards resilience and PTG may not transfer to these high-risk occupational contexts without being tailored to the specific needs of a military population (Castro et al., 2012). Ultimately, the goal of this work is to illustrate that trauma does not necessarily lead to a damaged life; instead, these experiences can lead to positive change and growth (Joseph & Linley, 2006).

The purpose of this study aligns with research recommendations discussed throughout the literature review. This qualitative methodology aims to unearth a rich description of the lived experiences of three combat arms veterans; each of whom has experienced combat and the processes inherent to personal change both during and after.

Combat arms veterans from OIF and OEF make up a population where there is a void of

research on the phenomenon of PTG. More specifically, this study intends to clarify

resilience factors in combat, the relationship between resilience and PTG from combat,

and insight into time-course development of these experiences. The following research

questions were informed by the literature review and aim to elicit data that may help

guide future research directions and implications for practice: How do participants

conceptualize combat? What do participants think contributes to their resilience in the

face of a potentially traumatic experience in combat? How does participant growth result

from combat?

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

Introduction and Overview

The research method for this study will subsequently be presented throughout the chapter. The methodology has been both guided and informed by the literature, and endeavors to elicit greater understanding of the meaning that is ascribed to combat experience, resilience and recovery; and from this, PTG. With this purpose in mind, I will introduce the reader to the qualitative nature of this study and the value that this approach will offer to the topic. Following this introduction, I will re-visit and establish the research questions, discuss the theoretical and conceptual framework, introduce the specific methodology, identify contextual information, discuss data collection and analysis procedures, as well as specific measures of trustworthiness.

Qualitative research has been identified as necessary and complementary to quantitative research in that the research is about "what a subject matter is in all its real-world complexity" (Wertz et al., 2011, p. 2). The history of qualitative research and the spectrum of disciplines with which it spans, means that it is a "field of inquiry within its own right" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 2). As such, many authors have commented on the complexity of definitional issues, noting that definitions must be rooted in the history of the field (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), and that there is general concern over proposing a fixed definition of something that is so dynamic (Creswell, 2013). Nevertheless, the latest of an evolving definition by Denzin and Lincoln (2011) is provided in order to supplant the reader an idea of the nature of qualitative inquiry:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p. 3)

Thus, the nature of qualitative research does not lie within the realms of cause and effect or prediction; rather, it lies within an attempt to understand how people interpret their experiences, construct their world, and develop meaning (Merriam, 2009). Interpretive research assumes that reality is socially constructed (Merriam, 2009). In other words, individuals interpret events in their lives in a unique and complex manner, stemming from their personal and social identities. Accordingly, qualitative researchers deploy a range of interconnected techniques to gather and analyze data (Crotty, 2013), as each technique renders a distinct perspective on the subject matter (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

While each methodology embodies a specified framework for a plan of action (Crotty, 2013), there are several common characteristics of qualitative research. Creswell (2013) identifies these universal characteristics, in no particular order, from an examination of "major books in the field" (p. 44). First, qualitative research is done in a natural setting, or via face-to-face interaction with individuals in the context of their lives; and often where those individuals experience the issue under study. Second, the qualitative researcher acts as the primary instrument in the study; gathering the research,

observing it, and interacting with the participants. Third, qualitative researchers employ multiple methods in gathering data in order to identify significant themes that may cut across each source. Fourth, qualitative researchers utilize an "inductive-deductive logic process" throughout the research process, allowing the researcher to build themes while checking data (p. 45). Fifth, qualitative research focuses on the participants' meanings, perspectives, or multiple subjective views. Sixth, the research process for qualitative researchers is an ever evolving, "emergent design," meaning that the initial plan cannot be succinctly defined. Seventh, qualitative researchers are positioned within the research which means that through "reflexivity," they must convey how their own identity informs the research. Eighth, and last, qualitative researchers aim to develop a "holistic account" of the problem under study. As one may determine from these criteria, qualitative research is "many things to many people" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 10) and thus difficult to define distinctly.

A significant aspect of qualitative research is the importance placed on the process being an iterative one. While research streams from philosophical assumptions to theoretical perspectives, and then on to a specific framework involving multiple techniques (Creswell, 2013); it is important to recognize how each of these processes integrates with one another. Denzin and Lincoln (2011), stated "Behind these terms stands the personal biograph of the researcher, who speaks from a particular class, gender, racial, cultural, and ethnic community perspective" (p. 21). As such, in the section on conceptual and theoretical frameworks, I will thoroughly review my standing on these terms as well as how they are integrated.

Researchers conduct qualitative research for a myriad of reasons; specifically, when a problem needs to be explored (Creswell, 2013) or when we have questions about understanding the experiences of people (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative research offers the discovery of a deeper level of complexity with regards to the combat experiences of veterans, resilience, and how these inform PTG. As discussed in the introduction and literature review, there is significant need to study this group as combat experience, resilience, and PTG are difficult to measure independently, much less in concordance with one another. Many researchers have proposed that we need a complex, detailed understanding of this issue; which is an inherent strength of qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). Furthermore, qualitative research allows for empowerment of individuals, conveyance of their stories, understanding of the contexts, and explanations of the mechanisms in theories (Creswell, 2013). This population is encumbered by stigma associated with mental health, and therefore may be seen or experienced as silenced. Moreover, it is clear that military culture can reinforce this stigma, thereby threatening a long-term misunderstanding or lack of understanding. This research, with this population, is critical and highly sensitive. Qualitative research allows the researcher to de-emphasize the power relationship and collaborate with the participant in order to elicit a more intimate understanding of the topic (Creswell, 2013). The value of qualitative research is two-fold for this topic: methods are a catalyst for building trust in a population that is wary of sharing insider information, and it offers the flexibility needed to "adequately capture the complexity" of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013, p. 48).

Research Questions

The following research questions will be addressed in this study:

1. How do participants conceptualize combat?

A. What personal and contextual factors contribute to participants' definition of combat?

B. What made or did not make combat traumatic for participants?

C. What do participants identify about combat that makes it unique with regards to a PTE?

2. What do participants think contributes to their resilience in the face of a potentially traumatic experience in combat?

A. How does participants' resilience inform their conceptualization of combat?

B. What is the role of participants' resilience on recovery? Personal vs. Social?

C. What resilience factors influence personal growth after trauma?

3. How does participant growth result from combat?

A. How have participants changed as a direct result of combat? For the better or for the worse? Are the two mutually exclusive?

B. What is the participants' time-course development of PTG?

C. How have participants transitioned from combat to PTG?

D. How does participants' PTG influence their resilient self?

E. How does participants' PTG influence life after recovery?

Qualitative research allows the most sensitive and comprehensive way to address these research questions. These questions seek to explain a very real and present psycho-social phenomenon. Based on the complexity of these factors alone; in addition to how they relate to one another, these questions require extensive and in-depth descriptions. Moreover, the literature review and recommendations of researchers in the field both point to the importance of military culture to this population and to the meanings that individuals ascribe to combat, resilience, and PTG. The key concern is to describe, understand, and interpret the phenomenon from the emic perspective (Merriam, 2009).

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

As Creswell (2013) asserts, it is important to both understand and actively write about the beliefs and theories that inform one's research. My epistemological perspective is rooted in constructivism; which assumes that reality is socially constructed and that there are multiple realities, or interpretations of a single event (Merriam, 2009). Creswell (2013) explained social constructivism as follows:

> individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences – meanings directed toward certain objects or things. These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrow the meanings into a few categories or ideas. The goal of the research, then, is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation. Often these subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically. *In other words, they are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives* (pp. 24-25, emphasis added).

Therefore, the purposes of this research are to describe, understand, and interpret the multiple, context-bound realities that are portrayed by each participant.

Social constructivism; which emphasizes subjective meanings, cultural norms, and interactions with others, flows concordantly with the theory informing this research; the posttraumatic growth model (Calhoun et al., 2010). To reiterate from the literature review, the term posttraumatic growth (PTG) is generally defined as the experience of positive change resulting from the struggle with major life crises (Tedeschi & Calhoun,

1996). Most recently, Calhoun, Cann, and Tedeschi (2010) have expanded their model of

PTG to include the factors and processes whereby culture influences the behavior of

individuals in the aftermath of trauma. The way these authors have conceptualized the

sociocultural context and PTG is through proximate and distal influences. Proximate

influences are the real people, or primary reference groups, that the individual interacts

with (close friends, families, teams, religious groups) (Calhoun et al., 2010). In this

sociocultural context, the way that proximate influences speak about and conceptualize

the crisis event and its aftermath may have consequences that impact coping and thus the

degree to which PTG is experienced (Calhoun et al., 2010). Additionally, the social

norms and rules of proximate groups in the context of recovering from trauma; such as,

expected coping behavior, views about what helps, and the desirability of emotional

disclosure, would be expected to impact the individual's response (Calhoun et al., 2010).

On the other hand, distal influences are broad cultural views and narratives stemming

from geography and transmitted through media (Calhoun et al., 2010). For instance, there

is some preliminary research suggesting that the U.S. narrative implicitly expects or

encourages PTG (Calhoun et al., 2010). The authors use the example that the U.S.

narrative is rooted in "belief in progress" and "the assumption that individuals have the

ability to bring about change" (p. 4). While cross-cultural and cross-national research is

needed to further this supposition, it is clear that distal influences are important to

consider with regards to PTG.

To reiterate the theoretical foundations of PTG from the literature review, a brief

overview of the components of the model is provided. Calhoun, Cann, and Tedeschi's

(2010) Comprehensive Model of PTG may be viewed in the Appendix (B). Calhoun,

Cann, and Tedeschi's (2010) model begins with the person pre-trauma and ends with positive changes that can occur from the struggle with life crises. The theory posits that it is "the disruption of one's assumptive beliefs, rather than the characteristics of the event itself, that initiates the processes that can ultimately result in PTG" (Calhoun et al., 2010, p. 5). This focus on the individual's assumptive beliefs is what allows the model to accommodate the potential for the same event to be traumatic for one individual, but not another. Moreover, the model allows for emotional distress as a result of a PTE, yet without the disruption of assumptive beliefs. In other words, normal cognitive and behavioral reactions to a PTE may be experienced without the individual engaging in the cognitive process indicative of traumatic response and leading to PTG. Importantly, the posttraumatic growth model assumes that people may experience growth and distress concurrently; in fact, the majority of research suggests that the two may be correlated (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Each of these components is in line with the social constructivist epistemology of the research, and relates specifically to the experience of combat veterans suggested by the literature review. To reiterate, while combat experiences may be defined as traumatic through DSM-V criteria, many service members do not subjectively report them this way. Moreover, armed service members in combat are trained for and experience multiple PTEs in short periods of time, have PTSD symptomology prior to PTEs, and experience a unique transition after deployment that influences the time-course development of symptomology and recovery. The Comprehensive Model of PTG (Calhoun et al., 2010) accommodates all of these unique features, as well as, highlights the importance of socio-cultural influences which are critical to military context and culture.

These aspects of social constructionism and the PTG model informed both the development and analysis of the study. Specifically, open-ended questions were developed broad and general so that participants had the opportunity to construct their own meaning (Creswell, 2013). In addition to this, the process of interaction with each participant, the specific context of the research location, and the cultural and historical settings (Creswell, 2013) are all addressed in this chapter. Considerable time was given to reflexivity, as I was positioned as the primary tool in the research, and the interpretation of the data stemmed from my own personal, cultural, and historical experiences (Creswell, 2013). The PTG model informed not only the development of interview questions, but more importantly, the analysis of the study. Specific attention to the individual; their world-beliefs and socio-cultural influences was critical. Moreover, focus on the individual's construction of military culture and expectations proved significant.

Introduction to Specific Methodology

In its simplest form, a qualitative case study design may be defined as an "in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (Merriam, 2009, p. 40). Seemingly, the most concrete aspect of a case study is that the 'what' being studied is a unit around which there are distinguishable boundaries. Thus, it is this unit of analysis which characterizes the study, not the topic of investigation. A suggested technique for assessing the *boundedness* of a topic is to determine how finite the data collection would be, with regards to limits in the number of people involved or time for observations (Merriam, 2009). For this research project, the case or unit of analysis is a combat arms veteran who has pursued higher education at a large, mid-western University. This research project compared and contrasted three of these cases; thus, making it a multiple-

case study. While inclusion criteria and rationale will be discussed in the Participants Section following this, it is important to introduce the reader to the boundedness of this study. There is a limit to the number of potential participants, as combat arms units are specialized groups in the armed services. More so, there is a limit to the number of individuals who would be willing to participate in a research study and who could speak to their experiences in combat openly. Merriam (2009) also suggests that if the case is an instance of larger concern, or intrinsically interesting, then it may be identified as a case study. In concordance with the literature reviewed, this case is both: modern combat is causing an increase in psycho-social difficulties within our armed service members to no end; and there is a real and limited presence of those who are resilient to a level that they may function well enough post-combat to pursue a degree in higher education. Thus, this bounded system, the combat arms veteran in higher education, is what makes case study and this particular research study, unique.

In addition to this unique feature of the case study method, Merriam (2009) identifies three *special features* for further definition. The case study is *particularistic*, meaning that the case is important for what it will reveal about a specific (particular) phenomenon. It is also *descriptive*, meaning that the culmination of data results in a complete and literal description of the phenomenon. In fact, this feature is often considered a unique strength of case study method, as it allows for and deals with multiple sources of evidence in order to achieve thick description (Yin, 2014). Finally, a case study is also *heuristic*, meaning that it may both illuminate and extend the reader's understanding of the phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). The value which lies within all of

these special features is the case study's "ability to capture complex action, perception, and interpretation" (Merriam, 2009, p. 44).

Although case studies are often defined by what makes them unique from other qualitative research methods, some confusion remains as the process involved in case study is inextricably fused with both the unit of analysis and the product (Merriam, 2009). Differences in definition exist among some of the primary scholars; most notably, Stake (1995) focuses on efforts to isolate the unit of study or case, whereas Harry Wolcott (1992), the end-product of field work (Merriam, 2009). For the purposes of this study, I followed case study methodology as Yin (2014) defines it, via the research process.

Yin (2014) employs a two-fold definition of the research method, beginning with the scope of a case study and ending with the features of a case study. First, that a case study is, "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident" (Yin, 2014, p. 16). This first piece of the definition distinguishes what makes a case study unique from other methods, and points to the importance of considering the phenomenon and its context without limitations. Second,

> inquiry copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and as another result benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis (Yin, 2014, p. 17).

This second piece of the definition accommodates the fact that phenomenon and context are not readily distinguishable in real-world situations; thus, there are methodological characteristics that become important for purposes of rigor. Yin's (2014) case study definition and methodology parallel this study well. As previously discussed in this chapter and the literature review, military culture and context is a critical factor for these individuals and their experience transitioning home from combat. In addition to this, Calhoun, Cann, and Tedeschi's (2010) comprehensive model of PTG has gone through multiple revisions. Yin (2014) suggests that theory development as a part of the design phase and prior to any data collection is necessary so as to maintain focus and achieve rigor. This theory will inform the current research; however, as the authors suggest, it needs to be applied within varying cultural contexts. Combat arms veterans who maintain their identity with the Armed Services and are working towards higher education represent a unique group. Case studies are generalizable to theoretical propositions, and the goal of this study is to expand upon and generalize the PTG model.

Yin (2014) emphasizes that in case study, the first step is to develop a research design (Appendix A) or blueprint, in order to maintain focus and gather evidence that addresses the initial research questions. There are five components of a case study research design, beginning with the research questions. Yin (2014) suggests that "how" and "why" questions are more explanatory and deal with operational links that need to be followed over time; thus, making a case study method most appropriate. I used the literature review and several key studies to narrow down my interests to PTG as it relates to combat experience and resilience. The second component is to identify study propositions, which direct attention to what should be examined within the scope of the

study. These propositions are derived from the research questions and aim to illuminate where to look for the relevant information. The third component is to identify the units of analysis, which involves defining the case and bounding the case. Again, the research questions help to define the case as they should lead to the most appropriate unit of analysis. Bounding the case involves distinguishing the units of analysis, and establishing specific time boundaries for the purpose of the study. Yin (2014) suggests that the case study and units of analysis should be similar to those previously studied and cited in the literature review in order to compare findings with previous research. The fourth component foreshadows the data analysis and is about the logic linking the data to the propositions. This involves identifying a data analysis technique that is a direct reflection of the initial study propositions. Lastly, the fifth component is to identify the criteria for interpreting the study's findings. Yin (2014) suggests that a critical strategy is to identify and address rival explanations for the findings, which then becomes a criterion for interpreting them. At the design stage, this step is about locating and anticipating the important rivals so you may gather the critical data. Lastly, it is important to note that although Yin (2014) proposes a concrete design, he does recognize and allow for edits to be etched in to the design stone. Often this occurs when new data emerges; however, Yin (2014) states that in general, "these designs will need to be continually modified and improved in the future, in their present form they will nevertheless help you to design more rigorous and methodologically sound case studies" (p. 28).

Of major importance with regards to the research design and method with which the study is conducted is the role of theory development. Yin (2014) concludes that theory development in the design phase allows the researcher to represent key issues

from the literature and thus guides the study by determining the data to collect and the

strategy for analyzing it. He notes that the benefit is a stronger design and improved

ability to interpret the data; but that ultimately it is critical for generalization (Yin, 2014).

Yin (2014) uses the term, *analytic generalization*, to mean the use of theory to generalize

from case studies. The case is an opportunity to develop empirical information about

theoretical concepts or principles (Yin, 2014). Lessons learned from a case study may

even apply to a variety of situations that extend beyond the definition of like ones (Yin,

2014). Ultimately, the analytic generalization may emerge from corroborating,

modifying, rejecting, or advancing theoretical concepts; or new concepts that arose upon

the completion of the study (Yin, 2014). By developing theory in the design phase, and

throughout the method of the study, generalization will be conceptually higher than that

of the specific case (Yin, 2014).

According to Yin (2014), the multiple case study design strengthens the overall

rigor of a study, as there is the possibility of direct replication. Analytic conclusions

which independently arise from multiple cases are more powerful than those coming

from a single case. As such, we consider multiple cases as we would multiple

experiments in that there is a replication design. Using this logic, Yin (2014) asserts that

"Each case must be carefully selected so that it either (a) predicts similar results (a literal

replication) or (b) predicts contrasting results but for anticipatable reasons (a theoretical

replication)" (p. 57). Based on the literature reviewed about military culture and the

context of combat, I propose that each of the participant's experience with PTG will

result in similar data. Yin's (2014, p. 60) illustration of the replication approach to

multiple-case studies follows.

2. Yin's (2014) Replication Approach to Multiple Case Studies.
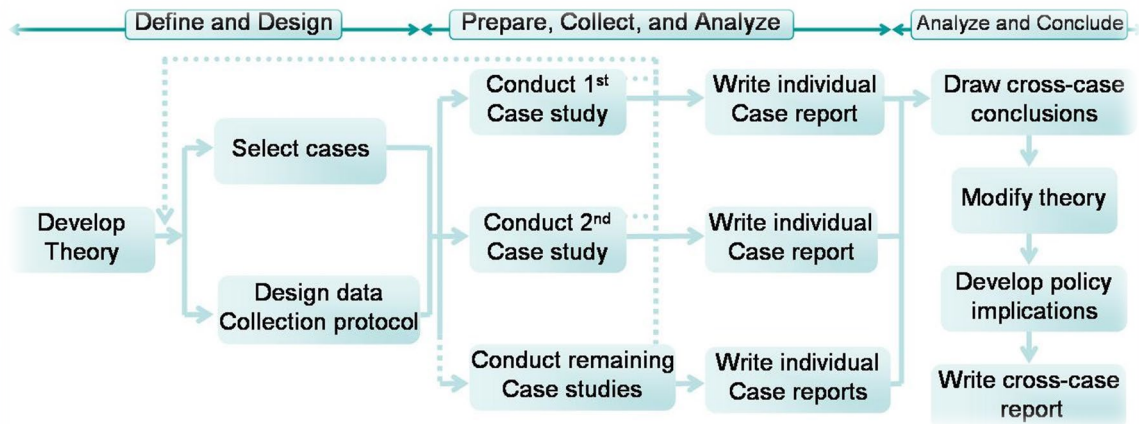
As previously discussed, the multiple-case study begins with theory development and the

process of defining and designing the study. Case selection and the definition of specific

measures used are the next steps. Each case is considered a separate study by which

converging evidence is pursued regarding the conclusions. The summary report will

include both the individual cases and the multiple-case results. Of note is the dashed-line

feedback loop in the illustration; which represents the occurrence of new or un-expected

data. This may require re-considering and editing the theoretical propositions and result

in a re-design prior to continuing with the study. Yin (2014) suggests that this procedure

is representative of rigor, as "you risk being accused of distorting or ignoring the

discovery, just to accommodate the original design" (p. 61). Examples of re-design

include: selection of alternative cases or changes in the protocol.

There are specific advantages of this methodology for investigating the

phenomenon PTG. From a broader perspective, the strength of case study design is that it

is a means of investigating complex social units, anchored in real life situations

(Merriam, 2009). The complexity of the transition from combat deployment to higher

education is profound. Moreover, with the number of individuals being deployed into combat increasing, this phenomenon is pertinent to American society. Case study is often chosen when there is limited access to knowledge (Merriam, 2009). Again, combat veterans are often wary of speaking about their experiences, and in many cases, are fearful of military career consequences if still active. Furthermore, insight garnered from a case study can be construed as a tentative hypothesis; thereby advancing the field of knowledge and providing valuable information for applied fields (Merriam, 2009). The positive psychology movement on prevention is fundamentally about applied work. Increased knowledge about resilience and PTG in the context of combat is for the significant purpose of helping those who serve this country live whole lives.

With specific regard to the research questions of this study, Yin (2014) suggests that "how" and "why" questions being explanatory, are preferential to case study methodology. While the research questions are about contemporary events, the relevant behaviors cannot be manipulated, furthermore making case study the ideal method. Lastly, because case study methodology allows for a full variety of evidence, it is preferred due to the sensitive and personal nature of the research questions. Any and all evidence that the participants are comfortable providing may be accommodated and analyzed.

Contexts of the Study

Participants.

This multiple-case study focuses on three OIF or OEF combat veterans who, at the time, were students at a large mid-western University seeking their degree in higher

education. In order to learn more about this population in general, and specifically those veterans, consultation was performed with several individuals who have expertise in this area: Founder and Director of the Veteran's Affairs Center at the University, a professor at the University and retired Marine, and an active duty Navy SEAL. In addition to research findings on the presence of stigma related to mental health impacting treatment seeking (Hoge et al., 2004), these conversations informed me that access and acceptance by the population could only be achieved from within. Additionally, it would be critical to develop sensitivity and awareness of military culture. Through the Director of the University's Veterans Center, I was able to introduce myself to the President of the Students Veteran's Association (SVA). Access to the population and identification of appropriate and willing participants was accomplished through collaboration with this individual, who also agreed to the conditions of the study and formally introduced me to the participants. His original estimation at the time was that there were 10 to 15 individuals who met the criteria of the study, but only 3 to 5 who would be able and willing to participate. Of the four identified and introduced to the study, three agreed to participation.

Qualitative research requires that the participant have experienced the phenomenon under study and that they are willing and capable of speaking to it. Both of these inclusion criteria are critical with regards to the population of combat veterans. As the experience of combat is the nexus of the study, inclusion criteria were established based off of this. Each participant is a former member of a combat arms unit, and has had one or more combat deployments, to include missions outside of base camp ("outside the wire") while on deployment. The term 'combat arms', used from a collective military

standpoint, refers to those troops who engage in direct tactical and land combat operations. According to U.S. Military Policy FM3-90 Appendix A, the Army branch is broken down in to Combat Arms (CA), Combat Support (CS), and Combat Service Support (CSS) units; with various differences between enlisted and officer systems that are not relevant to this study. Combat branches consist of Air Defense Artillery, Armor, Aviation, Engineers, Infantry, Field Artillery, and Special Operations Forces. The U.S. Navy and Air Force are not broken down in this form; however, the Marines, Navy SEALs, and Air Force Combat Controller and Pararescue are often considered combat arms. Several things are assumed by this criterion; primarily, that these participants joined the military with the intention and expectation of experiencing combat as a part of their occupation; which is in concordance with Castro and Adler's (2012) reasoning for the re-conceptualization of PTSD. Moreover, the training required by combat arms units implies that it is longer-term, more specific, and markedly more intense. Lastly, that each of the participants was at the time, actively pursuing a higher educational degree, does suggest good functioning and some level of resilience (Director of University VA, personal communication, March 20, 2015). This was purposeful, in that it allowed me to work with participants both willing and able to communicate their experiences on combat, resilience, and PTG. No previous or current mental health diagnosis, or PTSD, was required, nor was it considered a limiting factor. As previously discussed in the literature review, the conceptualization of potentially traumatic events in the context of combat and the aftermath, is not to be limited by DSM-V diagnosis.

Demographic information regarding age at time of enlistment, current age, branch of service, rank, number of deployments and location, amount of time since most recent

deployment, current military status, and familial information was gathered. In addition to this, it was important to ascertain if any of the participants experienced a formal resilience training during their active duty service; which two of the three did. While resilience training was burgeoning in the U.S. Army at the time of these participants' active duty careers; even if mandatory, the scope in both numbers and location of military personnel make it reasonable that not all would have received the training. Finally, while it is recognized that there are women in the military that have combat experiences, this study consisted of only male participants, as the topic of women in combat arms units is an evolving political one, outside the breadth of this study.

Site of the Location.

Several locations were offered; however, each participant chose to utilize the researcher's work office, located in the University Counseling Center. First and foremost, the comfort of the participants in doing the research was considered with regard to identification of a safe and private location for the semi-structured interviews. All three participants expressed that the office was convenient and private.

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, the researcher attended two Student Veterans Association events; where two of the participants were also in attendance. Detailed observations of the participants and their peers were made during this time. Additionally, observations were documented for every face to face interaction with each participant. Due to ethical obligations and the sensitive nature of the study, I met face to face with each participant prior to the formal interviews. The first meeting was utilized to discuss the purpose and parameters of the study, as well as provide informed consent

when the participant agreed (Appendix I). No formal observations were documented during this time. The second meeting was utilized to build interpersonal comfort and rapport, discuss the nature of the study, answer participant questions, and provide introductory information about the first interview and questions to be asked.

Positionality Statement.

The role of positionality is paramount not only in case study research, but throughout the qualitative tradition. The methods, analysis, and conclusions are significantly tied to the role of the researcher as the ultimate instrument in the study. It is well said by Merriam (2009) that, "Researchers do not 'find' knowledge, they construct it" (p. 9). As such, who I am as the instrument of the study, what my passion and purpose are regarding the study, and what my relationship to the participants was, are critical factors for consideration.

My clinical interests burgeoned at my first experience with providing formal counseling. The relationship with the client and the possibility of progress and growth unique to that individual was unlike any previous work experience. As a counseling psychology doctoral candidate, I theoretically identify and practice from a cognitive-behavioral orientation. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) has a strong evidence-based history for a variety of psychological concerns; specifically, anxiety and trauma disorders (Beck, 2011). Most recently, working with trauma clients has been undeniably the most fulfilling experience of my professional career. The possibility that an individual's life can change for the positive as a result of their hard work in and out of therapy is

inspiring. However, it is both my professional and personal upbringing that informs my research interests as well as the specific methodology of this study.

There are few things more tragic than war. At this time, the United States of America is engaged in what may be an indefinite GWOT. It is my personal values that call me to action. My grandfather, Colonel William C. Lafield (Ret.), dedicated his life and career to the United States Army. As a result, my Father experienced the meaning of service growing up in a military family. Subsequently, I was raised with values regarding pride in and dedication towards serving my country. Over the course of my parallel personal and professional development, the two met when I commissioned as a United States Naval Officer on July 7, 2016, and the opportunity to serve my country became lived. It was and remains the most fulfilling and humbling thing I believe I can do with my training and degree. I believe that psychology can positively impact the lives of armed service men, women, and their families. It is with great respect and humility that I have the opportunity to be a part of that journey. The relationship I have with this study is remarkable and continuously developing, as my own lived experience in military culture, both Navy and Marine Corps, becomes more imbued in my identity. This study is fundamentally representative of the intertwinement between personal and professional values and beliefs.

My relationship to the participants is complex. As previously discussed, the stigma of psychology is very real in the military. Moreover, combat veterans are hesitant, if not entirely un-willing, to speak with any mental health professional. An example of this is the nick-name that many service members fondly attribute to mental health professionals: "The Wizard," because we make people "disappear" from the military.

Whether for personal or professional reasons, their experiences of stigma are their own. My relationship to the participants began with them learning about me: my background, my purpose, my future career plans, and my intent with this study. It was a goal to ease each participant about my role as researcher, by proving to each a genuine interest in their life. This is fundamentally about rapport and empathy; however, in the context it becomes also about confidentiality. Each participant's trust in me and the proposed method of confidentiality was critical. By the end of their participation in the study, each asked me to utilize their real name (the names used are pseudonyms) and each provided personal photographs as artifacts for analysis. I was hopeful that my relationship with each participant would be one of equal partnership, and while very good rapport was developed, I truly feel that they offered myself and the study more than what I ever could have offered them. Cultural differences between military and civilian did offer a challenge during the data gathering phase as language specific to military culture often needed to be described. Whether or not each participant provided data in a way related to gender differences or educational status will remain unknown, as none of them noted this. While each participant was a willing mentor of sorts regarding their experience of military culture and combat; all three participants stated reasons for participation related to continuing to serve their fellow brothers and sisters in the military.

Data Collection

As previously discussed, one of the major benefits to case study methodology is the utilization of multiple types of data. Yin (2014) notes that no single source of data is superior, rather the sources are complementary and a strong case study will rely on as many as possible. In this multiple case study, two major sources of data were utilized and

the opportunity to incorporate the use of another was attained out of participant trust and willingness. The primary sources of data were prolonged interviews and direct participant observations; which were then supplemented with photographs of artifacts provided by each participant. Lastly, in concordance with Yin (2014): on reflexivity and the role of the researcher as the primary instrument in the study, the provider was also able to utilize reflective journaling as a source of supplemental data.

Yin (2014) suggests that the case study interview resembles a "guided conversation rather than structured queries" (p. 110). He maintains that throughout the interview process, the interviewer needs to follow a line of inquiry reflected by the protocol, as well as ask un-biased, conversational questions in an empathic manner. Answers in the form of propositions can then be used to inform further inquiry, as well as other sources of evidence. As in my discussion on positionality, where the participant is the expert, often they cross in to the role of informant. Following a prolonged interview method, three semi-structured interviews were completed with each participant; each respectively taking approximately two hours. Each interview protocol may be found in the Appendix (C); where the initial interview protocol was generated from the research questions, the two subsequent interviews were also informed by the former. While it was appropriate to focus the line of inquiry on case protocol, the role of the participants as the unit of analysis meant that their interpretations, opinions, insights, explanations, and meanings were followed up with additional questioning that may not be listed on the documented interview protocols. Interview data makes up the bulk, as this case study endeavored to construct each participants' subjective experience.

The initial interview protocol was semi-structured, with specific demographic information gathered first, followed by 12 open-ended questions, the majority of which included sub-questions. Each interview was audio recorded on two separate devices for transcription and based on participant permission. Each interview protocol was informed by the literature review and research questions, and focused on four major constructs: combat experience, resilience factors, culture, and PTG. The content of each interview was organized into chronological experiences, with the first interview focused on upbringing and pre-military life; the second, military culture, deployment and combat experiences; and the third, transition out of the military and adjustment to civilian and academic environment and cultures. It was anticipated that some questions may elicit difficult or distressing answers. Thus, it was not imperative to the study to ascertain specific combat experiences considered traumatic. However, the combat experience scale used by Hoge et al's (2004) seminal article was utilized in the second interview on combat experiences as a form of questioning that offered more autonomy to the participants as to whether or not they chose to relate this data. It is provided in the Appendix (E), in its original form for the readers' education. Each participant discussed in detail, examples of their own experiences indicated by the scale, and each endorsed experiencing almost all of them.

After demographic information was gathered, the interview protocol began with the participants' reasons for joining and their expectations, as this component provided important information about the mindset or psychological baseline of the participant (U.S. Navy SEAL, personal communication, April 1, 2015). Subsequent questions fell into each of the four categories listed above, with the first interview focused on

upbringing and pre-military experiences. As previously stated, the second (military culture and combat) and third (transition and adjustment) interviews were informed respectively by the direction of the previous interview, as well as the data. In order to complete this in a more standardized fashion across each case study; the researcher completed the first interview with each participant before the second interview protocol was developed; thus, the semi-structured questions were standard across cases. First order member checks were performed at the beginning of interview two and three, regarding questions that the researcher had from reflection on the prior.

The second major data source of observations occurred directly during formal interviews, and participant-based during two casual social interactions organized by the Student Veteran's Association. It was proposed that social and environmental conditions both formal and informal may provide relevant information. These direct and participant observations allowed me to assess for nuances in behavior and interpersonal interactions indicative of trauma, resilience, or growth. Additionally, the contrast between the one-on-one interview environment and a larger social scene also elicited important information surrounding military culture. While direct observation represents a more trustworthy data source, Yin (2014) proposes that participant observations denote "distinctive opportunity related to your ability to gain access to events or groups that are otherwise inaccessible to a study" (p. 116). Advantages to this are the ability to perceive reality from inside, and the opportunity to manipulate minor events (Yin, 2014). Observation protocol in these situations further includes a specific focus on social interactions and engagement, as the literature recognizes this as an important factor to resilience. Gathering this data, the difficulty of inability to take notes was outweighed by the experience to observe, as

access to the participant population is limited and guarded. Field notes were completed

for each observation, following the interaction, and subsequently transcribed as a means

to include them in the data analysis. Direct observations from interview data were written

at the conclusion of each interview in combination with analytic memo writing. The

analytic memos were also transcribed and included in the data analysis as a fourth source

of data. The observation protocol (Appendix D) was informed by the literature review on

the topics previously mentioned, and guided in protocol by Merriam (2009).

Lastly, there is limited ability to prepare for data sources such as documents and

physical artifacts, when these are at the discretion of the participant. While written

documents may be useful to corroborate evidence (verification of spelling or names) and

make inferences that could inform new questions for the participant, only one participant

offered a single document source of data. This document source was not deemed

significant enough to add value to the case or multiple cases; thus, it was not utilized. It

was also proposed that physical artifacts may be used as a data source beyond direct

observation, when the item holds specific meaning or cultural relevance. Several forms of

artifacts became significant enough during data collection with each participant, that they

represent their own data source. These include the meaning and cultural relevance of

tattoos, objects ascertained and kept from deployment, and military gear, as well as

photographs.

To conclude the data collection section, discussion of compensating participants

is warranted. Consultation with the Director of the university Veteran's Association, a

university Professor and former Marine, and the university President of the Student

Veterans Association, informed consideration of this practice. Ultimately any pre-

emptive offer for compensation was deemed potentially in-appropriate based on cultural considerations and researcher positionality as an Officer. It was recommended that upon completion of the participants' role in the study, I express my gratitude and thanks in the form of a written letter with the option of including a culturally appropriate gift (President of Student Veterans Association, personal communication, April 15, 2015). To clarify, no formal or monetary incentive was provided for participation in this study due to cultural consideration. Gratitude and appreciation were expressed to each of the participants through written thank you, and each were gifted a U.S. Navy Psychology military coin; which is a traditional collectable in the armed services and a token given in such circumstances.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data was primarily informed by Yin's (2014) cross-case synthesis technique, and through the evaluation of Dr. Tony Castro, committee methodologist member. As previously discussed, each individual case is considered its own study from which the goal is to accrue aggregate findings which then inform theory. Generally speaking, this technique begins with the creation of tables displaying the data from each individual case. Yin (2014) recommends, beginning this process within each individual case by exploring possible themes in the data. The analytic strategy followed the theoretical propositions that informed the study. As these propositions shaped the data collection plan, they also yielded certain analytic priorities. These priorities acted as a guide for the creation of categories and further analysis, or coding, whereupon each research question was addressed. Data from each case were compiled and analyzed

according to Yin's (2014) replication approach to multiple-case studies or cross-case analysis (2. Yin's (2014) Replication Approach to Multiple-Case Studies).

While the theoretical propositions shaped the data collection and analysis of all three cases, each case study was analyzed independently. Cross-case conclusions were then made via analysis of the generated themes from each case, which resulted in the recommended modifications of the PTG theory. As this qualitative study focused on a highly specific population, recommendations for future studies are garnered rather than policy implications. The following paragraphs will further detail the data analysis process.

Data transcription was completed independently by the researcher and author, for each interview, observation record, analytic/reflective writing, and artifact description. A computer-assisted tool, NVivo11 and NVivo12, was then utilized to code the data under the identified categories. Categories identified in the define and design phase of the study, and based on the theoretical propositions and research questions, consisted of: Combat, Military Culture, Resilience, and Posttraumatic Growth. The step-by-step process used to code the data was guided by White and Marsh (2006), as well as through consultation with Dr. Tony Castro. The following data analyses were influenced by White and Marsh's (2006) recommendations for qualitative research analysis; Yin's (2014) replication approach to multiple-case studies; and specific teachings from Dr. Tony Castro's Qualitative Analysis III: Case Study, graduate level course:

1. Category Identification – Based on the theoretical propositions of the PTG model (Calhoun et al., 2011), and subsequently, the research questions, categories were identified: Combat, Military Culture, Resilience, and Posttraumatic Growth.

2. *Foreshadowing Question (FQ)* – Develop a broad question that the data should answer and is representative of each category. This question thereby followed the theoretical analysis strategy (Yin, 2014) and stemmed from the research questions: *What are the major personal and environmental factors contributing to PTG after potentially traumatic combat experiences?*

3. First, Big Picture Read – Each transcribed data source was read in entirety without highlighting or making notes, as a means to become familiar with the data.

4. Category Edits – After the initial read through, category tables were re-evaluated as a means to ensure that the initial codes stem from the research questions, but also to accommodate for emergent or unexpected categories. While the opportunity to add or edit a category was afforded at this stage, each category identified remained highly relevant and reflective of the data and no additional category was identified.

5. Second Read – The second read through of the data consisted of the first level of analysis, or coding, whereupon tag phrases and segments that correspond to the categories were identified.

6. Note Important and Unexpected – During the coding process, tags that seemed important, but were unexpected, were also identified; allowing for emergent codes stemming from the data to influence the analysis.

7. Tables – Similarities between tags were identified and those phrases and segments were lumped into similar tables with an identifying code name, underneath their respective category.

8. Tag Descriptions – A second level of analyses was then completed whereupon descriptions of the tag phrases and segments were generated by the researcher and included analytic commentary. These tag descriptions were then analyzed across tables and categories for theme generation.

9. Theme Generation – Major themes were identified as having data stemming from every category and sub-table, and followed Dr. Tony Castro's rules for theme development: Themes should not sound like an initial code; themes should have a direction to them; themes should be in the form of a phrase or short sentence; and themes should be thick, meaning they should have sub-themes (Dr. Tony Castro, personal communication, August 26, 2018). Themes were identified with a descriptor of the theme and to include the supporting tags. These supporting tags were then grouped by similarities into sub-themes that support the major theme.

10. Findings – The third level of analysis is completed with the individual case write-up organized as follows: list the major theme followed by an introductory paragraph describing what the theme entails and means; identify the first sub-theme with a description and followed in order by a data claim, the data, and

embedded analysis; continue this organizational process for each sub-theme. The data was presented in the format of a series, or lists of quotes, to highlight the richness of the data itself. Embedded analysis is the researcher's interpretation of the data, as the researcher is the instrument of qualitative research.

11. Triangulation – The data was then re-read for confirming and disconfirming evidence with minor edits made to the findings section, and information to propose for further research.

12. Cross-Case Analysis – The major themes and sub-themes from each individual case were then compared, as it was anticipated that they would be replications of one another. However, contrasting analyses was also completed to adhere to Yin's (2014) recommended principles of good scientific research. Four cross-case themes emerged from the data. Findings from the cross-case analysis were written using the same theme structure as the individual cases; yet with greater emphasis on embedded, theoretical analysis.

13. Recommendation for Theory Modification – Conclusions were then drawn from the cross-case analysis findings, and the researcher embedded analysis of these findings, and applied to recommended modifications of the PTG model (Calhoun et al., 2011) as it relates to the unit of analysis, or the bounded system.

Yin (2014) recommends that four principles of good scientific research must be attended to during the data analysis process. First, the analysis must show that attention was given to all of the evidence and that each research question is covered. Second, the analysis should address plausible rival interpretations with evidence; otherwise it may be

stated as a topic for future research. Third, the analysis should address the most significant aspect or important issue of the case study. Fourth, the researcher should utilize expert knowledge about the case study to demonstrate awareness of current dialogue in the area. Strategies that were employed to satisfy these four principles, and increase the rigor of the study, are discussed in the following section on trustworthiness.

Trustworthiness

Best practices in qualitative research are referred to under the general title of trustworthiness. The criteria for qualitative rigor has been discussed and debated. Tracy (2010) contends that it is "ever changing and situated within local context and current conversation" (p. 837). Nonetheless, for many qualitative researchers the challenge lies with the complexity of qualitative methodology. As such, Yin's (2014) criteria for judging the quality of research designs, as well as his four principles of data collection were utilized to demonstrate trustworthiness. In addition to Yin (2014), concepts were applied from Tracy's (2010) eight-point conceptualization of qualitative quality; and Anfara, Brown, and Mangione's (2002) ideas on making the research process more public. Provided in this section are Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen's (1993) detailed definitions and descriptions of each measure of trustworthiness.

Qualitative research has often been assessed by the positivist criteria of validity and reliability (Anfara et al., 2002). Throughout its history, researchers have argued against this evaluation strategy. Denzin (1978) proposes that rigor is about making the data and interpretations as public and replicable as possible. Moreover, Denzin (2011) discusses how standards of quality research are influenced by "pedagogies of practice,

moral, ethical, and political institutional apparatuses that regulate and produce a particular form of science" (p. 645). Thus, it is inappropriate for interpretive research to conform to the definitions and criteria of its positivist kin (Atkinson & Delamont, 2006). Therefore, due to the complexity and art of qualitative research, along with how such standards are developed, many of the previously mentioned researchers not only deny the use of positivist criteria, but also the development of permanent standards for qualitative research (Tracy, 2010). On the other hand, many suggest that in order to establish qualitative research as scientifically valid, there must be a "model of disciplined, rigorous, thoughtful, reflective inquiry" (Denzin, 2011, p. 653).

Tracy (2010) takes the issue of trustworthiness further, by suggesting eight criteria for quality in qualitative research. She suggests that her conceptualization may be unique and provocative due to the proposal that these eight are universal hallmarks that span paradigms. Briefly reviewed are the eight criteria, followed by a more specific discussion on the criteria and means used in this study to establish trustworthiness. While it is recognized that there is overlap and redundancy in the criteria, all three resources; Tracy's (2010) criteria, in addition to Yin (2014), and Erlandson et al (1993), are discussed in order to provide a deeper understanding of the meaning of trustworthiness in qualitative research and this study.

1. Worthy Topic – "Good qualitative research is relevant, timely, significant, interesting, or evocative" (Tracy, 2010, p. 840). As discussed throughout the literature review, and primarily in the seminal edited book in the field of military psychology, *Deployment psychology: Evidence-based strategies to promote mental health in the military* (Adler et al., 2011), the topic is a disciplinary priority. Current

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political and social climate also makes this study of moral interest. Lastly, the entire phenomenon of PTG, in addition to the concept's relationship to combat and resilience, is only beginning to establish itself.

2. Rich Rigor – "High-quality qualitative research is marked by a rich complexity of abundance" (Tracy, 2010, p. 841). Acquired through a variety of data sources and samples, the multiples sources of data used, in addition to the cross-case analysis offer rich rigor. Moreover, Yin's (2014) principles of data collection; which will be discussed later in this section, provided the means for achieving rich rigor. Tracy (2010) proposes these four considerations: enough data to support claims, enough time gathering data, congruent context and sample for the goals of the study, and the use of appropriate procedures; all of which were arguably met.

3. Sincerity – "as an end goal can be achieved through self-reflexivity, vulnerability, honesty, transparency, and data auditing" (Tracy, 2010, p. 841). Self-reflexivity, in regards to honesty and transparency about biases, was practiced throughout the research process. In particular, the statement on positionality and the data collection process represent reflexivity, as the design of the study included negotiating access and trust. Self-reflexivity was maintained via the reflexive/analytic writing completed after each interview; as well as consistent consultation with committee members. Tracy's (2010) comment on transparency refers to honesty about the research process; including access to the context, level of participation and immersion, field note practices, and level of detail in transcription. These aspects were met via Anfara et al., (2002) recommendations for making research more public, and are discussed in this section.

4. Credibility – "refers to the trustworthiness, verisimilitude, and plausibility of the research findings" (Tracy, 2010, p. 842). A major criterion for trustworthiness; credibility needs to be established with the unit of analysis that has supplied the data and it is assessed by determining whether the analysis represents the data (Erlandson et al., 1993). As the means of establishing credibility were complex, this is further explored in the following section detailing criteria from Yin (2014) and Erlandson et al. (1993).

5. Resonance – "research's ability to meaningfully reverberate and affect an audience" (Tracy, 2010, p. 844). This topic is especially unique to the study, as it provides direct insight into the lived experiences of each case. Most readers will have no direct experience with the topic discussed, thereby promoting regard and understanding. This was accomplished through the means of transferability and will be discussed in the following sections.

6. Significant Contribution – "Theoretically significant research is… extending, building, and critiquing disciplinary knowledge" (Tracy, 2010, p. 846). Particular to the study is that of methodological significance, in that the units of analysis and topic of study were engaged in a new and insightful way. As discussed in the literature review, the majority of research on these topics is quantitative, and many researchers call for more in-depth studies on unique populations.

7. Ethical – "ethics are not just a means, but rather constitute a universal end goal of qualitative quality itself…" (Tracy, 2010, p. 846). Procedural ethics were dictated by the University of Missouri Institutional Review Board in order to do no harm, avoid

deception, negotiate informed consent, and ensure the privacy and confidentiality of each participant. A copy of the informed consent release is provided in the Appendix (I). Situational ethics were considered via the methodological approach and preliminary consultations with those aforementioned as personal communications. From these consultations it was determined that no formal diagnosis be required as inclusion criteria, that no discussion of specific combat experiences be required in data collection, and that no compensation be offered as incentive. Nevertheless, situations requiring ethical decision making did pervade the study. Prior to the study, the researcher engaged in learning about military culture and how this may impact connectedness with participants. Literature, consultation, and the use of documentaries all contributed to this knowledge. Additionally considered, was the importance of exiting ethics. This is a population often harboring mistrust of civilian stigma and opinion. Based on the researchers own integration into military culture over the course of this study's analysis and write-up, it was concluded that a legend of cautions to the reader on ways the analyses may be misread, misappropriated, or misused was not necessary.

8. Meaningful Coherence – "studies (a) achieve their purpose; (b) accomplish what they espouse to be about; (c) use methods and representation practices that partner well with espoused theories and paradigms; and (d) attentively interconnect literature reviewed with research foci, methods, and findings" (Tracy, 2010, p. 849). By utilizing Yin's (2014) approach to multiple-case study methodology, the interconnectedness between theoretical framework, research design, data collection, and analysis was achieved.

Following Tracy's (2010) quality criteria, is a review of each category of trustworthiness according to Erlandson et al (1993); credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, and the means with which they were addressed in this study. Yin's (2014) recommendations on the specific means and at what phase of the research they should be attended to will also be discussed in an integrated fashion.

Credibility in qualitative inquiry refers to the compatibility of the constructed realities that exist as defined by the respondents, with those that are attributed to them by the researcher (Erlandson et al., 1993). This relationship assesses the truth of the analysis as it relates to the data for each participant and context. As per social constructivism, credibility is established by ascertaining both the convergence and divergence of realities. The means of establishing this in a credible manner attends to the major concern for researcher bias via interpretation. First, prolonged engagement was utilized to overcome any impact on the context which researcher presence causes; as well as researcher personal biases. The amount of time deemed appropriate depended on the research questions and saturation of data. As the research questions pertained to combat veterans in the context of the academic environment, it was a time limited study. It is a snapshot of their functioning in the post-military environment and endeavor; thereby analyzing the constructs post-combat. Thus, data was gathered over the course of an academic year. Second, persistent observation was employed as much as possible in order to pursue interpretations on a consistent basis within the context. This was further supported by the third means of credibility: triangulation via multiple data sources. As previously discussed, data was gathered via interviews, observations, artifacts, and researcher reflections. Moreover, the multiple-case methodology also provides for triangulation with

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regards to the development of convergent themes across cases. Fourth, referential adequacy was accomplished by recording and transcribing the data so that it could be referenced throughout the study timeline. Fifth, first and second order member reflections were performed. First-order member reflection occurred with the participant in the context of follow-up from each interview to verify the data accuracy and researcher reflections; whereas second-order member reflection occurred after theme generation where the participants were able to review larger findings and provide comment. Tracy (2010) recommends "member reflections" rather than member checking for social constructivism research as it allows for additional data, reflection, and complexity. Lastly, Yin (2014) further recommends that during composition, key informants review the draft; which was completed by review of two committee members, one with expertise in the methodology and the other with expertise in the military population.

Transferability represents generalizability in qualitative research. However, this is not to be confused with external validity in the positivist sense. The naturalistic researcher maintains that observations are defined by the specific context with which they occur; thus, there is no true generalization (Erlandson et al., 1993). This does not mean that knowledge gained from one context cannot be applied to another context or for the same context in another time frame. Erlandson et al. (1993) explains that, "Rather than attempting to select isolated variables that are equivalent across contexts, the naturalistic researcher attempts to describe in great detail the interrelationships and intricacies of the context being studied" (p. 32). Thick description thus enables tentative judgments for applicability in other contexts. Detailed collection and detailed report of the data are key aspects of this process; both of which are exemplified through the data presented in the

individual case findings. A second means is through purposive sampling, which has been

discussed in the participant section, and refers to the participants' ability to provide rich

data about the phenomenon. Each participant remarkably demonstrated this ability. Yin

(2014) recommends that analytic generalization in case study research stems from

diligent theoretical development and the use of appropriate "how" and "why" research

questions, which was a significant factor in the design of this study.

Dependability, not unlike reliability, refers to the need to meet criterion for

consistency (Erlandson et al., 1993). The naturalistic researcher believes that instability

may be attributed to both error and reality shifts. Thus, dependability is about stability

with regards to replication as well as *trackability* with regards to the sources of error. A

dependability audit was completed as an external check on the processes of the study.

The audit trail begins with the provision of the research design (Yin, 2014) and is a

running account of the processes of the study. Anfara et al. (2002) recommends three

methods of making the method and research processes more rigorous, each exhibited for

the reader in a table format, located in the Appendix (F, G, H). Anfara et al. (2002)

recommends three table themes; first, displaying the relationship between research

questions and interview questions; second, depicting the relationship between tags,

categories, and themes; and third, the link between major findings and sources of data.

Included in this study for the purposes of dependability are Dependability Table 1

(Appendix F): Relationship of RQ's to IQ's; which documents research questions in

relation to interview questions. Since the same semi-structured interviews were utilized

for each participant, one table is representative for dependability across participants.

Dependability Tables 2 (Appendix G): Depiction of Codes by Data Sources and Number

of References; which portrays the codes for each participant and the number of data sources that elicit this code, as well as the number of total references of each code. Three of these tables are provided, one for each participant. Of note, is that the analytic computer tool, NVivo, utilizes different language. Thus, under "names" are the codes used in the data analysis, "files" are the data sources, and "references" are the data quotes. Organizationally, categories were used in the graphs for participant 1 and participant 2, but not for participant 3 as over time and use of the analytic tool, this became more efficient. Categories of data for all participants included: combat, military culture, PTG, and resilience. With participants 1 and 2 you will not zeros in the files and references sections as these categories were simply input for organizational purposes. Finally, Dependability Tables 3 (Appendix H): Depiction of Data Sources by Codes and Number of References; shows the codes and number of references per data source. Of note, participant 1 has pdfs of artifacts; whereas for participant 2 and 3, the researcher transitioned to word document descriptions and direct quotes describing the artifacts, so as to better analyze the data using the analytical tool.

Confirmability is indicative of the naturalistic researcher believing that the methodology may not be completely separate from the researcher who is the instrument (Erlandson et al., 1993). Data must be tracked to its source, and interpretations tracked through explicit and implicit logic. The audit trail also attends to much of the confirmability audit. A final means that supports not only confirmability but also credibility, transferability, and dependability, is the use of reflective memo writing. These reflective memos recorded and reported information about scheduling, logistics, insights and reasons, in addition to self-reflection on researcher role within the study (Erlandson

et al., 1993). These memos, three per case, were typed, transcribed, and included in the audit trail and data analysis. Additionally, as previously mentioned, they aided the direction of first-order member reflections.

These means were re-evaluated and ultimately accomplished over the course of a three-year time period. This breadth of time became important as it spanned researcher shift in identity as an active duty military member. As the researcher is the ultimate tool in design, implementation, and analysis of qualitative study, this time and identity development also contributes to confidence that the study is a rigorous qualitative dissertation. Represented in the figure below, Yin (2014) states that case study research is "A linear but iterative process" (p. 1); one which the researcher may attest to experientially through this study.

3. Yin's (2014) Linear but Iterative Process
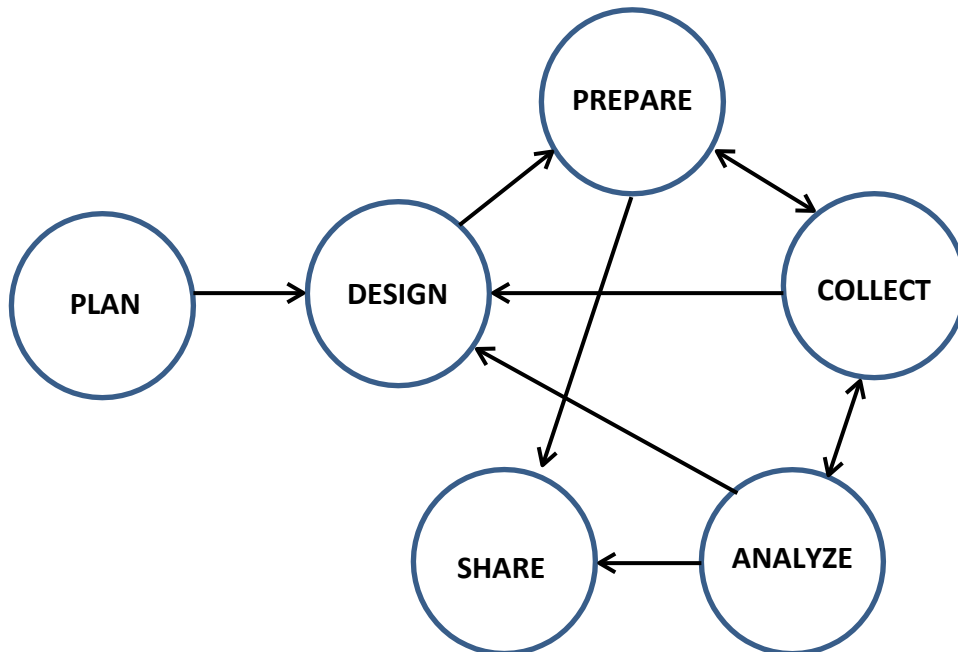
CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

This multiple-case study involves findings from three independent cases, followed by a conclusion and cross-case analysis comparing and contrasting all three. Cases are based on the individual participant; each of which are combat-arms veterans, who deployed at least once to Iraq or Afghanistan, and left active duty service to pursue higher education. Each case involves data gathered from three separate interviews, observations, and artifacts. The interviews focused on upbringing and pre-military experiences, military service and combat deployment experiences, and post-military transition and functioning, respectively. While each veteran identifies personal growth factors following their combat deployment experiences, one of the three exhibits higher levels of resilience prior to and during his combat tours, thus resulting in fewer personal and environmental factors tied to personal growth. While this was anticipated based on military occupational specialty, the study may serve as an important baseline for future research with the special forces community as its own culture and bounded system. The two veterans that exhibit more significant personal growth, also reported psychiatric concerns of clinical disposition, and formal treatment histories. All identify socio-cultural influences as having marked influence on their growth process. Themes from the data that explain this revolve around cognitive styles, perceptions of combat, identity establishment, and military culture and training.

Case # 1: The MARSOC Marine

Demographic information, and reason for joining.

Case number one explores the personal and environmental factors of Nate, who joined the United States Marine Corps at age 17. Growing up in a small, rural town in Missouri to an intact family and the middle of two brothers, Nate shared that his mother was the parent who signed the required waiver so that he could join the Marine Corps straight out of high school, but prior to turning 18 years old. He estimated that it was around 13 years of age where he determined for himself that he would join the armed services; specifically, the Marine Corps, as a prominent and influential figure in his life, his grandfather, was also a Marine Infantryman. When asked otherwise why he decided to join, Nate expressed that he wanted to challenge himself through the means of being around the strongest men in our country, but also that college did not seem relevant or accomplishable for him at that time. Nate shared, "you get to work with some of the most qualified, strongest, toughest people you have ever been around, and that's what they're going to turn you into." He further noted, "I figured they were going to give me a lot of structure and a lot of discipline." Nate sought an environment that aligned with his core values, and joined for self-betterment, which may be viewed as intrinsic motivation.

Serving north of eight years continuous active duty, Nate promoted to the rank of Sergeant (E-5), and was a Staff Sergeant Select (pending promotion to E-6) when he chose to leave the military. During his service, Nate deployed a total of three times including both Iraq (OIF) and Afghanistan (OEF). While he enlisted in the Marine Corps as an Infantryman, where he went on two deployments, he eventually was selected for

Marine Special Operations Company, known as MARSOC or Raider Battalion. Nate shared that he returned from his final deployment in February of 2012, making it a little over four years at the time of these interviews. Nate shared that he has no history of psychiatric care or any other mental health diagnoses. Nate did participate in mandatory pre and post deployment mental health screeners and interviews by licensed and credentialed professionals, as was standard at the time of the Iraq invasion and surge. Notably, he participated in formal psychological testing when he was screened and going through the selection process for MARSOC; to include, a series of personality and intelligence tests, as well as evidence-based peer and superior reviews (personal communication; LCDR Ashley Clark; August 10, 2018).

At the time of these interviews, Nate was un-married without any children, and in a committed relationship. He reported living with his younger brother, and that the rest of his immediate family lives in the same state. Nate completed his undergraduate degree in French Studies, and is currently a graduate student in an online MBA program. He works full-time in a local gym as a personal trainer.

Developing Cognitive Flexibility Supported Later Life Transition

The concept of cognitive flexibility addresses the process or style that an individual uses to analyze or appraise an experience, which further lends to cognitive coping. The term "cognitive flexibility" is used rather than "psychological flexibility" in order to clearly delineate a focus on thought processes; purposefully excluding a more holistic focus inclusive of emotional processes; where psychological flexibility may be defined as "positive emotions and thoughts, strengths, and satisfaction of basic needs for

belonging, competence, and autonomy" (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010, p. 467). Nate demonstrates cognitive flexibility through realistic and rational thought styles both during combat experiences and in the aftermath or re-appraisal stages. This is particularly important because of the chaotic nature of combat drastically limiting time for analytic thinking, but requiring people to also make complex strategic and moral decisions. Lastly, cognitive coping is an important skill in combat environments, as they are unequivocally rife with potentially traumatic, even horrific, events. Cognitive style becomes important as it influences perceptions of the potentially traumatic events, thus determining whether or not assumptive beliefs and narrative are challenged and disrupted, or assumptive beliefs provide context for the event.

First, Nate developed and exhibited *clarity of thought* in intensely chaotic and complex combat situations as well as during the re-appraisal and meaning making phase. This means the ability to make decisions based on circumstances, mission requirements, leadership responsibilities, and moral and ethical codes (Geneva Convention or Rules of War); but also, realistic evaluation of those decisions in the aftermath. For example, Nate described the first time he and his team were shot at when he was in a leadership position: "after that, I noticed I'd react a little clearer, start to think about stuff like where I want my guys to go. You can start to function again. I think some guys don't really get past that." He furthers the importance in the context of psycho-emotional and physiological barriers to thinking clearly; namely the hyper-arousal and adrenaline-dump response to fear. "You get an adrenaline dump, that's with most of this stuff… like I've taken IED's down without support and pretty much in order to think clearly, just assume, even if you're not sure, that it is an IED and it is going to go off." Nate also highlighted

the relationship between clarity of thought and timeliness, but in the combat scenario time is graded differently. "That's the way I would try and handle it: if I'm not dead right now, I've probably got a few minutes to figure something out. There is no point in rushing, because that's where most of my friends got killed… it was IEDs." For Nate, in the combat scenario, this represents a cognitive style of acceptance as a means to have clarity of thought, and in order to commit to his occupational role and mission. This is promotive in the context of combat; whereas, this style of thought is often described as catastrophizing (thinking the worst will happen), and seen as dysfunctional in the clinical civilian setting.

Eventually, Nate recognized that this ability separates him from the majority and has an impact on how he experienced potentially traumatic events: "As far as trauma, I think I had a couple of events that I, not at the time, but I realize now that I can react differently than ninety percent of the flock in a traumatic situation." He expanded on this recognized differentiation, stating, "The biggest thing I think differentiated me from the guys who just automatically get aggressive, and the guys that try and figure it out, is that I could still stay calm while trying to figure out what the hell was going on." This was further validated and developed during MARSOC selection and training. "MARSOC was really fine tuned. It was mostly type A personalities that are usually very critical thinkers, and to a degree, most of the guys there are really charismatic." Nate spoke to the fact that he emerged in a highly specialized group, successfully, because of his ability to think clearly and autonomously: "the ability to think, to erase the grey area… a lot of these guys just lost it." Nate's cognitive style is grounded in clarity of thought, which is further developed in the context of combat. The ability to find clarity during and after potentially

traumatic events likely facilitated a more realistic analysis and perception of those events; thereby reinforcing resilience and possibly protecting from trauma or the development of clinical symptoms and diagnoses. While this appears critical to functioning in combat and maintaining mission effectiveness, it is unclear what it may mean about symptom manifestation over longer periods of time and in the context of transition out of the military.

Second, Nate consistently practiced *quick, autonomous decision making* in environments and contexts that require this skill set for effective, and often life-saving action. To make the types of decisions he is making (tactical, moral, strategic) it is necessary to erase the "grey area" of decision making, effectively identifying either-or, or black and white options, as well as catastrophizing, or assuming the worst will occur. While this is highly effective and conducive in combat situations, as it is not only taught by the military but reinforced in training, it is often deemed "dysfunctional" in clinical settings as it is rooted in maladaptive cognitions underlying trauma, depression, and anxiety symptoms. Generally, cognitive therapies propose that in the context of trauma, certain beliefs that emerge are incomplete or based in fallacy because they do not include a holistic perspective of the event; rather they are grounded in self-blame, shame, and guilt. In contrast, Nate's ability to erase the grey area on his own, and that his decisions fall in line with his assumptive beliefs, represents an adaptive quick-thinking style using these methods. This cognitive style is grounded in his personal values and his training, as it is promotive to his occupation. For example, regarding his conceptualization of combat, "The biggest thing I would say is that within the entire military, combat units where you have to make really quick decisions, you have to erase the grey area on your

own. It's black and white because you have to make a decision and stick with it." This is inherently functional in combat; yet, analyzing the grey areas in hindsight, is often a major focus in trauma treatment. It seems that what is conducive and lifesaving in the theatre of combat, is problematic in the long-term aftermath of transition.

While this cognitive frame is acknowledged throughout military training, Nate's cognitive style is indicative of autonomy and competence in the process as a leader, versus being told how to erase the grey area or what is black and white. He shared how this was further developed in MARSOC, "doing the special operations process, where they pull you away from the organization and they say 'okay, now function by yourself, now function as a team, now function by yourself.' They kind of prep you to go back into the civilian world." He separates himself further from his peers based on this ability to engage in quick and autonomous thinking, also in a sense of psychological stability: "There were a lot of guys that were just studs, they were awesome Marines; but they couldn't think, they couldn't function by themselves without someone saying… they just, they just lost it." This ability to erase the grey area on his own, and in a very quick way, made him an effective operator, but also contributed to a thought style indicative of commander level ability. Those at this level within the military system find fulfillment in leadership roles, or end up leaving the military as it is founded in hierarchy and a culture of following the orders of those appointed over you.

Third, Nate demonstrated *independent thinking*, which seemed to be a major factor with regards to his identity development. Nate was able to filter both proximate and distal cultural influences based on his own assumptive beliefs, rather than what the military or USMC culture would assign. For instance, even from an early age, Nate

shared, "I'd pretty much decided by the time I was 13 that I wanted to do it, and then I think I was about 16 when the towers went down, and I mean I'd like to say that was the reason, but I'd already decided before that." The importance of this is magnified as Nate discussed how independent thought is stripped in USMC bootcamp: "The biggest thing is that they take your individualism away from you mentally; you speak in third-person the entire time. There is no 'I' or 'me,' it's 'this recruit.'" The psychological processes of bootcamp are meant to strip individualism for the purposes of re-building the individual with a more salient group identity, and within the culture of hierarchy and order. Nate appears to have a certain level of resilience to this through his cognitive styles. He related down the line finding success in MARSOC because of his ability to engage independent thought: "they want to see who can pull themselves back out of that mindset and actually function as a human being and operator, on their own." While he identifies MARSOC training as what reinforced this skill, he also noted that it is what eventually got him to leave the USMC and go back to school: "They really succeeded in producing great operators, then they fucked themselves by waking us back up and saying, 'what are you doing here?' That's what really helped me to mentally come back and be somewhat of a healthy citizen." This ability to think for himself in terms of each source of identity, seems to have contributed to his progression from military to academics and beyond. Nate recognizes within himself that his cognitive abilities represent a skill set that is not only conducive in military special operations, but also is transferable to other life domains.

Fourth, Nate acknowledged the reality of his circumstances and employed a *rational* thought style allowing him to cope with combat. This is most significantly seen

through his cognitive analysis of the threat of gruesome injury or death and the parallel construct of trauma. He initially spoke to his early mindset that, "you are somebody special and there is something out there that you are going to accomplish that is bigger than you," and that this mindset is motivating when it comes to choosing to join the military for express purposes of combat. However, through cognitive appraisal of his experiences in combat he shared, "I carried that for a while until I realized it might not actually apply. It came around after my first deployment, I could actually get my fucking legs blown off out here, get shot just like everybody else. You either realize that, or you don't." While he shared that this realization, "might just have been maturing," his behavioral response to this thought was, "I started working towards: I have something and I have to actively do something to get there, or try, even if I might not get there." Thus, Nate's rational thought style manifests in behaviors stemming from an internal locus of control; he identifies responsibility and accountability for his experiences in life.

When asked specifically about the most impactful combat experience, Nate related a story specific to the aforementioned concept of the appraisal of the reality of death:

> "The experience that sticks out to me the most… my fire-team was conducting a daytime 'knock and talk' in Anah, Iraq on March 7th, 2007. As soon as we left the house, we were ambushed by small arms fire from insurgents positioned about 40 meters up the street. They had set up a truck with a medium Russian belt-fed and were just lighting us up. We were on a paved road and there was nothing to get behind. Myself and my point-man were pinned down in the open. There was concrete flying up all around us, and I thought we were pretty much done. That was when my SAW-gunner; which is usually belt-fed on the ground, just put it on his shoulder, all 150 pounds of it and just ran towards the fire. Shot like 150 rounds into the truck. Killed the guy on the gun, wounded another, and they just drove off, and our whole team got up. He pretty much saved everybody on the whole team. He ran straight at the truck (laughing). I don't know if it was him being a lunatic or… I don't know. I think the reason that it

sticks out to me so much, is that it was on my 21st birthday, and it was the first time I thought I was going to die."

Truly believing that you are going to die, nonetheless, on the anniversary of your own birth, can undeniably be identified as a traumatic event. However, Nate's realistic and rationale thought style contributed to his ability to appraise the event and make meaning out of it. Events such as these, serve to reinforce occupational expectations, as well as occupational training and the thought styles that support mission capableness. Realistic thinking is both a coping mechanism and a reinforced appraisal style. Eventually, Nate made the personal choice to leave the military to pursue higher education and self-betterment. He shared applying this realistic thought style to his educational experiences, "I wouldn't say its worldliness; obviously that's part of it... it's just acknowledging reality every once in a while, instead of being force-fed bullshit." This is representative of Nate taking responsibility for his psychological development.

Fifth, Nate employed a *principal-based* decision-making process; in other words, choosing to act based on an established set of values, principles, and morals. Critical to this is self-awareness of these mores, how they came to be, and how they may be contradicted. Nate openly acknowledged the realistic nature of war as violent when he shares psychological strategy: "Violence of action. You pretty much just want to be so scary in what you do, that it just defeats the will of the enemy." At first, Nate described the development of his principal-based system, adapted through combat experiences and a deeper understanding of context and culture: "It was frustrating when you knew somebody was lying. Back then it just pissed us off, further on in the war, I learned I needed to pay attention to the other side of the house. The insurgency, they were horrible,

it would be the local people they would force to go put in IEDs." Nate's principal-based decision-making process evolves over time and combat experience. He maintained his values and morals, but learns that he must incorporate greater understanding of his context in order to do so.

On the contrary, Nate recognized that for many of his peers, the impact of combat experiences like this, did not result for them in principal-based decision making. For instance, "I mean I saw some cases of guys that were just… their personal rules of engagement had just completely just gone out the window." This is reflective of how the chaos of combat and the will to simply survive no matter the cost, can lead to a decline in moral functioning. It also appears to be a difference in value-saliency, as Nate harbored a strong sense of commitment to action based in values. For some, this can lead to the development of trauma disorders in the long run, as these individuals return to safety and begin to re-appraise their actions in hindsight, but external to the context that required their value shift. Nate appeared to have been able to make this shift and appraisal more in the present, thus possibly being protective: "For me, I mean, I tried to go by my morals. That's one of the things that goes with it." While his values and morals may have shifted in the context of combat, he relates that they were important influences on his cognitive style. In speaking about what might be his advice to others following in his footsteps who will likely encounter these experiences, Nate stated, "A lot of them think they want to kill somebody. Train for that, but train to do it in a professional way. Imagine you are going to get hit, you are going to get shot at. Try and just wrap your mind around how that's really going to feel." Here Nate addressed both the cognitive and emotional components of the experience, which likely contributed to his analyses of the situations he himself

faced. Overall, his cognitive appraisal is a major source of promotive coping and reinforcement of resilience in combat.

It is clear that Nate actively thought about the decisions he was making, and in so doing, utilized principles stemming from his belief system. This not only provides context for events, but also for his actions in those events. When Nate was challenged by certain combat experiences, he adapted by incorporating new learning into his pre-established belief systems. All of these facets of Nate's cognitive style were developed and adapted in combat, thus lending to their being termed flexible. This flexibility seems to have been protective in the sense that it contributes to resiliency in the face of potentially traumatic events, and further supports later life transition. It appears that this degree of flexibility; rooted in clear, rapid, autonomous, rational, principal-based thinking, is critical for combat arms service members and veterans due to the paradox that the combat environment presents.

The Ability to Bear Dissonance Helped Successful Navigation of Potentially Traumatic Events.

Both the environment and the context of combat has been researched and written about as inherently paradoxical; to which Nate echoed in his own language. Combat encompassed such extremes that it forced personal change, whether willingly or not. The conceptualization and perception of combat was an important marker across Nate's lived experience, as it influenced his cognitive style and identity over time. Concurrently, Nate's ability to both acknowledge and bear the extremes; the constant dissonance in his external locus, was a marked catalyst in processing the chaos of war. Nevertheless, Nate

touched on the negative outcomes of adjusting to an extreme environment; specifically, how coping mechanisms do not translate back to civilian life.

First, he experienced significant extremes in *environment* both as an individual and as part of a group. The environment of extremism begins within military culture at bootcamp, where Nate related how bootcamp, "gets you terrified, takes away your individualism, and then builds you back up as somebody who is really aggressive and pissed off all the time." He detailed how the military trains a response to fear by strengthening the central nervous system's fight response (versus flight or freeze) with anger and aggression: "I mean we were just trained to just be aggressive all the time." This training then lends itself to both the physical environment and the actions within it. Nate describes the living circumstances of combat: "The whole compound was maybe a quarter acre, in the middle of town, the floor where everyone is living is gravel, and it was 130 degrees. You get used to it, to not showering…" He echoed the extreme heat conditions again as one of his more prominent memories, "After a week of patrolling, our cammies were soaked; after one week they would literally stand up on their own because they were full of salt. It's gross, but you get used to it." These shared experiences in an extreme environment, both training and deployment, are often what is referred to as the process of adjusting to military life and culture; where many are separated from the military due to their inability to adjust to circumstances and demands such as these.

At an individual level, Nate detailed the personal response to the environment: "You get to the point where, the first month you don't sleep because you don't have time and you're just on edge," and "The loud continual stress, over and over and over, I would say that's the worst." This mental response to the extreme environment cannot and does

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not maintain however, and Nate noted this in relation to one of the major paradoxes of combat being marked only by chaos and boredom: "I mean you would go from different time frames of 'we're bored, let's goof off,' and then the next day someone gets hit by an IED and you're like 'oh fuck' and immediately thinking about it again." He further denoted the difficulty as it relates to time: "The biggest factor in a long-term deployment situation is that complacency kills; like as soon as you get comfortable, you are probably wrong. You shouldn't be comfortable." The extremes of the environment, whether they be living circumstances, weather, or training had a major psychological impact; which in turn, influenced functioning.

Second, this impact on functioning translated directly to the *means of coping* that are established within the extreme context. These means are in themselves just as extreme. He depicted this while in the military as a means to cope with the reality of death: "We were just living it up because most of us thought that there was a pretty good chance we were going to get severely injured or killed. So, we were just training hard and partying hard. I think a lot of it is just to not think about that shit." He also depicted this while on deployment in the combat environment, "We were just a bunch of young dudes with lots of guns and built up aggression. Eventually it just gets to the point where we were just hoping to get into a fire fight; beyond that point, you see a drop off where everybody is like 'get us the fuck home.'" Upon returning home, Nate also shared how these mechanisms of coping do not translate home to civilian culture: "I'll have episodes, where I'll get together with the guys and we'll get some drinks, but by normal standards we will get fucked up and not even think a thing about it. So that's one of the negatives I've carried back with me," and more markedly, "It's mostly just being volatile. Being an

asshole just to do it because you are so stressed out and you don't know how to vent (laughing), because your usual path of venting was fucking shooting at somebody." This portrays how difficult the transition home can be as their learned mechanisms for coping with extreme combat stress do not translate, and are not acceptable to civilian society.

Third, is how Nate managed the extreme dynamics of *interactions between people* and interpersonal relationships. With regard to the relationships he experienced between himself and other Marines, Nate describes these as tribal in nature in terms of living all aspects of life together: "The platoons, like 30-40 guys got pretty tight, and then the squads got really tight. You live in the same room, you go on patrols together, I mean you fight, together." He further shared about the intense and unique bond they had in terms of leaving the combat environment behind, "Just realizing that the group you are in, that's not going to last forever. You're not going to be in that really tight knit group anymore, that shit doesn't exist anywhere else." Much of military culture and war depends upon this tribalism, or group cohesion and morale. It is fostered in an extreme environment where every facet of life is done with the group, but then further reinforced by the fact that the same extreme environment requires group cohesion for survival.

As the unity of the group was paramount, he described how the group unit would handle outliers or those that did not assimilate: "Everyone there has to be indoctrinated, the guys that really went the other direction; like the conscientious objectors, they were dealt with and we would get them out of the unit, we would be so offended by the concept that we would just try and push them over the edge;" and "so like the dudes that you would never send out on patrols together because you were afraid one of them is going to frag the other one." Thus, outliers are "dealt with" in very extreme ways, akin to

the extreme nature of the relationships and environment. This is indicative of supreme socio-cultural norms and values that demand adherence for group efficacy. This point is further depicted through their reaction to suicidal individuals, and how these individuals would be treated while on suicide watch: "they were pretty much provoking them the entire time. Saying, 'just do it, I'll leave your gun here.' So, it's kind of the alpha male mentality, that's how it goes." Any individual within the tribal unit that does not assimilate or needs some special circumstances is viewed as a threat to the entire group and the weak link. Any threat or weakness to the system detracts from mission capability; thereby detracting from the individual's identity in itself. The reason these reactions are so extreme is because the only thing that keeps you alive in combat is the tribe. These relationships are paramount and have meaning in that they signify one's ability to perform, and ultimately to protect one another.

Extreme relationship dynamics were also in response to the extreme and paradoxical interactions with the enemy. Nate described living in a combat environment in immediate proximity of the enemy, "We were still getting hit every day. That's when you know that it's the people who live within a 2-mile radius of you, that were doing it to us, we just couldn't find them." There is even a marked level of distrust interacting with the local civilian population, that breeds extreme responses: "Every one we went into, their windows were blown out, so that's how close to the blast they were. Nobody. People were just telling us they didn't hear anything and didn't know of anything going on." Even later during his deployment experiences as an operator he reflected this poignantly in terms of the mental and emotional exhaustion the dissonance creates: "Even as operators, being deployed too many times and sick of the same old scenarios, like

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working with people, and then they would be the same people trying to blow your fucking legs off the next day." Thus, he explained his personal strategy involving psychology in the combat environment: "If I attack you from an ambush and you just curl up, I'm going to feed off that and I'm probably going to getcha'. But if you lunge back at me twice as ferocious, I'm probably going to think about it next time." While Nate depicted psychological strategy in war that is not novel by any means, he began to unravel what makes OIF and OEF unique combat environments to this day, and why the ability to bear dissonance is important navigating potentially traumatic events. He completed his statement from above with, "But to do that, if you can't immediately find the target, you are probably going to hit civilians, and that's what they want you to do. So, there is no real good advice. The biggest thing is don't be a coward."

Fourth, Nate exhibited a mentality and ability to *adjust his moral code* to the extreme context as a means to stay alive, but also process the experience. Related to the evolution of his principal-based thinking, Nate's moral flexibility emerged as a response to the demand of combat. Nate described how he evaluated situations based on his moral code, but that this is never a black and white situation: "For me, I tried to go by my morals. Even beyond that though, openly shooting people, shooting into buildings and stuff, I guarantee you, that's one of the things that goes with it. You need to be aggressive." The situation requires a psychology and level of aggression that may not fit within a moral code of someone who has never been confronted with this reality. Thus, the context of the combat environment and experience must be considered. Nate described his lived experience of the nature of insurgency:

"I mean the big thing, it's a toss-up in counter-insurgency. A lot of their tactics are trying to get you to shoot civilians so they can turn the populace against you. So, they would pop shots at us or blow up an IED and get one of us down and then start taking shots at us, and then leave. But they would shoot from a direction where they know there is a crowd of people, or a family living in that house. I mean by doctrine we are trained to return fire aggressively, like we are supposed to do that. And… they know this shit."

There is a cultural norm and acceptance within the enemy moral code with this tactic; yet, this does not align with both the training doctrine and moral code of the American forces. It presents a paradox and an experience of moral dissonance for the individual and the group. Occupationally, they cannot withhold action based on the unknown when the threat of the known is great enough to compel action. The known consequences of not acting are greater than the unknown consequences of acting; thus, requiring a level of moral flexibility in combat. This reality is starkly depicted by Nate on multiple occasions when he speaks specifically about the role of children in war. The reflection touches on the innocence of children being used as a combat tactic:

"So that's where we developed what I would call the 'Iraqi Bomb Squad'. We didn't have EOD on hand. If you thought it was an IED you would have to set there for hours; meanwhile, they know you are setting up, so the insurgents are down the street putting in another one for your egress out, or setting up an ambush. So, we would just have the kids go check it out. We would be like, 'Hey what's down that street?' If they wouldn't go down there, we would know it was legit. And then that's how we pretty much knew it was a local cell of insurgents; they were from the area, because none of the civilians got hurt."

This experience is deemed a norm for Nate. In comparison with the norm of what civilian society would expect, this tactic is likely outside of the moral action that an American civilian might employ. Nate reflected on this experience in another memory from combat, where he made important meaning from this paradox:

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"I had a buddy that used to take… when he would ask for care packages, this was in Afghanistan, he would ask for bouncy balls because the kids loved those. He would just get handfuls and take them on patrol. We would get to a street or corridor, and he would get kids to come up, and take the balls and just throw them, and if they didn't chase them, we knew there was an IED. Which, Law of Armed Conflict, war crimes, whatever you say… you learn how to do stuff and you re-adjust your morals for different cultures… because that's the difference between you coming home, and getting disintegrated on a fucking side street, just for a patrol."

This ability to bear dissonance in moral situations and to re-adjust his code for the context, is directly related to both his and that of his brothers' survival in combat. Beyond this, moral flexibility appears for Nate to be protective in the face of trauma. He is able to adjust his cognitions, and a functional moral code to the environment, so as to inform his actions within the context of combat.

When asked if he thought combat would change him, Nate stated, "Yeah. I think so. But I was young enough to think that it was going to be only for the better and it would be for the stuff I would choose. But it does change you… for better or for worse." Thus, the extreme nature of the combat environment and the extreme decisions and actions that result as a reality, were the catalyst for change for Nate. Nate fundamentally recognized, that personal change can be both positive and negative; in addition to being both within and outside of ones' control. However, it was his navigation of this change that is important with regards to resilience and growth over time, and inherently his ability to bear and adjust to the dissonance.

Finding a Balanced Identity Aids in Later Life Transition and is a Resilience Factor.

The role that culture has on identity development is echoed throughout Nate's story. He discussed the distal military culture and its influence on his identity, as well as

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the proximate cultural norms of specific sub-cultures: Marines, Infantry, and Operator. Nate depicted an evolution of his identity with parallel changes in his value system and purpose. In particular, Nate identified that it is in striking a balanced identity that supports psychological well-being and life satisfaction. Notably, the most distressing timeline for Nate is after leaving the USMC and navigating the new shift that civilian culture will require of his identity.

First, Nate depicted the importance of *full acculturation* into the military; specifically, the warrior culture and ethos as both a theory and means of life. Nate first portrayed how this was not a difficult transition for him due to previously having values that aligned with military culture, but also related to his purpose for joining: "I came in with the idea that I wanted to learn how to be like those guys… the Marines. So, I didn't come in with a chip on my shoulder;" "Work ethic, definitely. I didn't know it at the time, but growing up I had pretty good work ethos;" "I got to pick my contract and picked Infantry… that's what I thought were the baddest of the badasses, so that's what I signed up for;" and finally, "I wasn't really a physical specimen, I was pretty small, but with that, I was determined not to quit or fail at anything. So, I just learned to deal with being miserable." This last quote is in reference to the indoctrination process of Marine bootcamp; which is well-known across the services to be the most intense and challenging bootcamp in American military. Nate expanded upon the early influence of USMC training on identity and value systems: "They know what everyone's trigger points are, so they can try and get you to the point of breaking. They get you super aggressive;" and "Everybody is in such an aggressive state, and then you have to have your rifle… you sleep with your rifle. They don't go in the armory, you keep your rifle

the entire bootcamp." The Marine Infantry culture then influences mindset, as Nate depicted when asked if assuming the worst is the constant mentality, "Oh yeah, the training on that is good, especially if you are infantry, that's your job."

Nate then related the role of cultural values on identity: "It's just a culture that gives you a sense of pride. You are proud to be a warfighter. You are supposed to be, but you are also supposed to be humble." All of this initial training and indoctrination into the USMC is towards the purpose of stripping individualism and creating a tribal community; one that only succeeds, and stays alive, by depending on one another. Thus, it is a collectivist culture where your identity becomes all encompassing: "You would go out (into civilian society) and that was your identity. I'm a Marine, that's what you know and what you are." He further noted this process of an encompassed identity in relation to civilian culture: "I never quite understood when these civilians would ask me where I was stationed and they would assume I was over-seas or here on civilian status. I was like 'No, I'm active duty. I live where I work. I'm either training or sleeping in the barracks. It's all we did." Nate strongly related how being an active duty service member is inherently a lifestyle and the most salient identity.

Lastly, the greatest purpose of this full indoctrination is towards trained response to fear in war; in other words, the culture and its norms and values created a unified, uniform identity akin to the Spartan Community. Specifically, on the topic of fear in combat: "I think it was more focused on, we would try and reverse it to an aggressive perspective. Like, 'If we find the guys that are doing this, we are going to fuck them up so bad.'" When asked if there were other means of coping with this fear, Nate did depict having one close friend with whom he would speak openly, but then stated, "Other than

that, it's like a Spartan community. You don't bring that shit up." This is the identity:

aggression in response to fear because anything otherwise is a sign of weakness and a

distraction from the mission. Thus, the group identity and tribe, are highly guarded from

outsiders: "Not super exclusive, but the exact opposite of being inclusive. We aren't

going to go out of our way to let you in. This isn't happy-go-fucking-lucky-land. It is

based on merit." This tribal affiliation and identity exist in even more detail across

branches as well as combat arms versus support units where strength of identity is

measured in combat acumen: "Automatically there is going to be shit-talking… in our

eyes they were a bunch of clowns. Not only that, but their aggression in combat… they

lost all credibility." Thus, while general cultural norms and identities within active duty

service apply, even more significant are those unique to service branches and units within

them; specifically, combat arms, where identity is based on occupational prowess.

The final example of Nate's full acculturation and the impact on his identity are

the artifacts he keeps from his time in combat, and the tattoos on his body.

> "I had a bag I carried with me. One of those that my mom gave me before
> I went on deployment… it was more of a charm. St. George, who killed the
> dragon. And then the 1st Marine Division patch, my grandpa had given it to me…
> he had carried it… then on my first deployment, I had a stray round go off and hit
> the wall right next to me… dug that out and carried it for another deployment
> before I brought it home and gave it to my little brother before he deployed."

Nate also has the Raider Battalion crest and Marine 1 Infantry crest tattooed on his arm,

in addition to a memorial tattoo in remembrance of a close friend who he lost in combat.

While every artifact, the items and tattoos, are symbols of identity, they each have

particular meaning related to people in Nate's life; which turns out to be an important

part of his identity development as he transitions out of the military.

Second, Nate exhibited an *evolution of identity* resulting from combat experiences and further reinforced through special operations training, as he begins to establish who he is outside the USMC. Combat experiences in their entirety are a significant catalyst for identity exploration and self-acknowledgement for Nate. While Nate's evaluation of potentially traumatic events is parallel to the theory espoused by the occupational model of PTSD (Castro & Adler, 2011): "It just depends… it's not traumatic stress if you have trained for trauma." Nate discussed that it was not a single loss, but rather the recurrent experience of loss over time, in the context of the prior theme related to bearing dissonance: "First deployment was the most significant because that's when that cell started moving in and actually hit a couple of us… but it was just starting to wear on everybody, where it was touching home." He then depicted what he personally found to be the most traumatic aspects of his combat experiences, again related to the nature of time, wear and tear, and recurrent experiences and what they mean about purpose:

> "Just continuously seeing people with such a low quality of life. Like Iraq, Afghanistan, it's shitty. People don't give a fuck because they know their estimated life span is like 30 or 40. The quality of life sucks in Afghanistan, especially in the tribal regions. So that kind of eats at you. You know you are supposed to be there to help them… they just have such a bad quality of life, they don't even want help for the future. They don't even see that far ahead. So it gets to the point where you're like 'I really feel for them,' and then it just turns to, 'Fuck 'em. If they don't care, I don't care, whatever.' That's really sad."

Thus, it became for Nate, these larger, more global and time-based experiences that pushed him to look within for respite. "The end of that deployment, the Afghanistan deployment, that's when I was like, 'who am I going to be after this because this, isn't it.' So, I decided I was going to be an educated person and go to college."

Nate further shared how this process was reinforced, as he began to identify the pitfalls to identity foreclosure in the military:

> "You will see a lot of guys that never move past that… they have nothing else. They don't know how to identify as anything else, and they want to make sure even though they can't wear the uniform anymore, they will keep their fucking eye fade… you can't just be a one trick pony. That's what I was really scared of when I left, and then I think the reason I succeeded in getting away from that."

Nate also gave credence to the role that his training in special operations played on his motivation to transition out of the USMC: "I got selected. That was on me. I worked really hard to do it. Then I went and got selected to do a language for a year, and that really woke me up enough, language school and the operator pipeline." He spoke about special operations training re-building an independent identity and self-esteem in areas outside of military specifics: "the whole concept of the special operator was to be able to function outside of, to be more effective than any of the conventional forces: stronger, smarter, faster blah blah blah. You are supposed to be more, you have a better ability to interact with regular humans." This reinforced self-concept stemming from combat experiences as a catalyst for identifying the ideal self, initiated this transition in Nate's life. However, Nate did recognize that this evolution in his identity is ongoing and relates to time and distance from combat culture: "It's my most recent awakening, because if last year you had asked me that, I would have been like, 'I'm ready to go chase terrorists'. Spending more time at home, back at the farm with my brother's kids, my girlfriend, they already existed (family values), but being around them helps." Yet, the transition is not without distress: "I'm almost 30 and starting college. I don't know, it's not demoralizing, it's just different. You question yourself for a while, or I did. You just have to find your

self-worth." Nate actively initiated and sought this change in his life as a means for purpose and fulfillment; notably intrinsic motivators.

Third, Nate's strong source of motivation, acted as a driver for navigating how he would *establish his ideal self in the cultural environment* he was existing within. Nate reflected clearly how he was confronted immediately with the challenges of incongruence between identity and culture, after moving out of the USMC and into the academic, civilian society: "I thought I was pretty well adjusted to come back and just deal with people. I was pretty chill and relaxed and I got back and sat through my first class with a bunch of 19-year old's and thought I was going to lose my mind." What Nate is navigating is that his forged identity within the military culture is both the source of his distress within civilian culture, and a means for coping with the transition.

This results in seeking a balance between adjusting to the newly dominant culture, and staying connected with the old internalized culture. Nate had explicit awareness of the pitfalls of this process: "I was actively thinking about it. Some of it is time… but I've seen people that are completely fine when they get out, for years, and then just turn into shit bags, or non-functional assholes. I really didn't want to do that. I was trying to be proactive, and not let it snowball." Nate related how the educational environment was a catalyst for this continued evolution in identity: I've gotten to the point where I think that education helped me quite a bit. Not that it indoctrinated me in the other way, but it further empowered my sense of society." He further utilized skill sets forged in the military and actively applied them to his current environment as a means to progress towards his goals: "I've been moved around and stationed in enough places where I had to make friends, and I pick up on the slight traits, like I can see from a mile away those

that disgust me and who to stay away from, then it's just about the people who can tolerate me the way I am;" and "My small unit leadership… I don't run a pack of minions anymore, but I know what I need to do, how to task organize. Putting these skills into practical application for the rest of the real world."

Additionally, Nate expressed how the Student Veteran's Association was a major bridge between the two cultures: "It's huge, they are really active and they try to bring you into their organization." He shared that he actively sought out other combat veterans as a means to adjust by staying connected: "You try and get that back. You try and meet guys that you can at least discuss shit with and not have to tip toe around subjects." Notably, he even reported how there was a natural draw to one another based on the combat identity: "You would see it… we would always group together during every meeting, every event." While the maintained connectedness to this culture was imperative, Nate also had to work on adjusting to a new culture that he felt at odds with.

Nate related several interpersonal experiences that represent trial and error in terms of learning new cultural norms: "You can't understand why these people (civilians) think that way, because the people you are used to being around are not super sensitive;" and "I can't fucking stand these people… that was part of that old culture that I had to at least suppress a little bit or get rid of." He indicated acceptance in his realization that norms of the military culture were not present nor respected in that of civilian society. In this quote, Nate explained the ultimate barrier in the cultural adjustment process having to do with maturity but also value differences:

> "Dealing socially. Dealing with kids. I'm pretty decent at being a people person. The first year was hard. You had to learn what subjects were okay, what

not to talk about… getting familiar with how this new society that I left 10 years ago functions now. Discussing stuff that makes their life hard… like pretty much complaints from people that have no problem…"

Ultimately, Nate identified more with the educators within the educational environment as having a critical role in his adjustment, "I just learned how to tune it out. I had really good teachers…" He also related how important family and intimate relationships became with this transition: "I got lucky and got around a lot of good people. I didn't get involved with a different group of people that were falling in to that abyss." In particular, Nate shared how his romantic relationship was protective and a major part of this identity transition: "She brought me back out of that: 'I don't want anything to do with anybody' level." Thus, it appears that the more intimate relationships in Nate's life were a significant protective mechanism and the means with which he is able to accommodate the friction between interpersonal norms and culture.

While Nate adopted and existed successfully within civilian culture due to transferability of military identity and skills, purpose within the educational environment, and meaningful relationships, he still maintained his military identity as the most salient. You see this in his language across these data points; referring to civilians as the others or "they." You further see this as he stated, "I could still do a job, be a trigger puller, it wouldn't bother me at all. I'm not turning into Mr. Rogers. But outside of that, I would be fine with not taking part of any of that anymore. I could go either way. I think that's probably the most recent awakening." Thus, while he identified primarily within his military cultural identity, he sought a balance and is able to flex within the dominant

civilian culture, adapting to the norms to enough of a degree to experience well-being and

life satisfaction.

This evolution in Nate's identity based on the influence of cultures, sees him from

full indoctrination as a protective means, through combat as a catalyst towards continued

life fulfillment and purpose, and finally to adjusting within the dominant culture while

maintaining the most internalized facets of this identity. It seems that the marked impact

of combat is a solidifying of certain identity facets, characteristics, and values. A

metaphor for this would be the nature of hypervigilance; which is taught in the military as

a necessary and conducive survival skill set, but is also a symptom of PTSD in civilian

society. Nate related,

> "I'm in the gray I don't ever want to be in the white zone. The white zone, this is people who are out in Somalia during Blackhawk Down, the black zone, this is the girl on campus who gets hit by a bus because she is on her cell phone crossing the road. This extreme of one or the other is not good for anybody. So, try to be alert, but don't be somebody that can't mesh with society to some degree. Or at least try and fake it."

Ultimately, it is through this adjustment to culture clash where we see personal growth

factors emerge.

Adjusting to Cultural Differences Fosters Personal Growth.

Nate's lived experience to this point, paints a picture of resilience in the context

of combat, whereupon he related psychological well-being and life satisfaction. At the

time of the interview, Nate had already achieved his bachelor's degree in French Studies

and was pursuing his graduate degree in business; which inherently indicates a significant

degree of resilience and adjustment. However, we see the adversity of his combat

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experiences manifest in the cultural chasm between military and civilian. The warrior culture is neither requisite nor understood in civilian society, thus the onus falls to the individual to adjust and assimilate. What Nate finds is that the norms of warrior culture do not translate into civilian society. Therefore, it does not appear that full assimilation is possible for Nate, and that it may not even be conducive. He cannot abandon the warrior ethos as it is intertwined with his identity; yet, society does not place value on the values and norms of this ethos, therefor resulting in an existence of dissonance. This is the context where he reports significant struggle, resulting in both positive and negative personal change; both of which are meaningful to him.

First, Nate is confronted with the fact that the norms of warrior culture do not translate into civilian society; and thus, *developed skill sets and coping* must adjust. This is clearly depicted as Nate related some of his normal military occupational experiences: "you get shot at, and the first time, you go 'oh shit, are my optics sighting in correctly';" and "They shot this guy open, and I mean, we had been de-sensitized, I'd seen pictures, there wasn't much of a difference;" and "they were specifically targeting foot patrols with what we called 'toe-poppers.' So, like, mini-IEDs, just something that would take a foot off, it was demoralizing, scares the shit out of people." These experiences represent the norm for Nate, and yet by all civilian standards they are extreme and constitute DSM-V defined trauma experiences.

It is through his military training, the role of culture, and these experiences, that we begin to understand certain character traits or skill sets. Acknowledging these experiences also provides context for how Nate perceived the civilian and academic environment. It was not the environment or the work that represented adversity for Nate:

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"I started college when I was 26, the bachelor's, the whole experience was not challenging. I was pretty stressed out with how hard I thought it would be. I finished my bachelor's in 3 years." He also shared the application of Infantry and MARSOC skill sets and values being applicable to his life, "you carry over those organizational skills, taking care of my body, learning how to function by myself and think outside the box." On the contrary, it is the void of these types of experiences listed above that render those character traits; significant aspects of his identity, as not applicable and requiring adjustment to assimilate. It is not the work, or academic achievement, that challenges him. Nate stated, "so I was reinstated to civilian culture, or society, as everyone else sees it," which indicates that from his perspective, civilian society does not recognize nor understand the norms of warrior culture; they are inherently separate.

It appears to be the transition of culture and environment that begets challenge. Nate discussed the transition as it specifically relates to emotional narrowing, hypervigilance, heightened hyper-arousal and sleep disturbance. He noted that the transition with regards to these factors was a difficult one, requiring a good deal of time: "My first two years were pretty rough, I was not able to deal with all of this." He shares, "I'm not nearly where I used to be, when I first got out, I used to drink every night just to go to bed;" as it related to, "I'd get tired and I'd go to bed and it was just: go to sleep, night sweats, horrible… everything that was going on." He further depicted the role of anxiety and hyper-arousal in civilian society: "I would notice when I still had it, what a trigger was, what would kick it on. I would be going out in public: start sweating." Most notably Nate portrayed the conflict with regards to the change in the role of hypervigilance:

"It's not to the point of paranoia… you would have that period of like you haven't switched back from black zone to white zone; and you are driving around looking for IEDs and shit on your way to town. That's definitely still there, a fragment of it is, but it's not to that extent. I've been lucky enough to be where it has tuned out, but I'm still aware."

He further discussed the role of anger as the primary emotion, "I'll still catch it every once in a while. I used to get mad at… the medicine cabinet when something would tumble out and pop me in the head, I would get fucking pissed and sling shit across the room." All of these characteristics and skill sets, that had become an ingrained part of Nate's identity through the context of combat, military culture, and in response to the experiences he had, were no longer applicable in his civilian life. This was Nate's individual and internal struggle with regards to adjusting. While Nate reported significant cognitive and physical distress related to this transition, he often related it in a humorous fashion and with ease. He is at peace with this transition and acknowledges it as neither positive nor negative: "I just think overall I'm less naïve in life. From going in to coming out, maybe a little more cynical." On the other hand, Nate does not portray the same sentiment regarding transition when it comes to the differences in interpersonal norms; instead, stating with certainty, "there is a clashing with society."

Second, Nate is confronted with the fact that *interpersonal norms* of warrior culture do not translate to civilian relationships; and it is this adversity that represents the most significant challenge. Nate's combat experiences marked by early exposure in leadership roles, appeared to be a catalyst for rapid maturation: "20 years old and I was leading combat missions. I learned a lot from being pushed into leadership positions early, and you just don't see that." Additionally, military sociocultural norms for

interpersonal interaction include hierarchical structure, enforced respect, direct feedback, and black and white thinking; of which many of these examples have been portrayed. Moreover, this culture attracts and reinforces certain personality types: "we'd get into a fire-fight and these guys, you know, they weren't concerned about their safety at all. Whether that's heroism or their just fucking nuts." Thus, the types of experiences, roles, and personalities that imbued Nate's military experience were all reflective of a vastly separate and highly specific warrior culture.

When Nate leaves the warrior culture, he re-enters civilian society with the most prominent stressor being interpersonal interactions. He relayed the result of some of his discussions with peers in the academic and general work environment: "And she got pissed. She never spoke to me again, in a class of nine. And I wasn't even like, I try not to yell, or raise my voice, there are just kids that get hurt really easily about stuff," and applying his understanding of terrorist propaganda to an event that occurred on campus "Apparently that was a threat, my statement (of how to handle it by not acknowledging it)." Nate also shared how he perceives the majority of civilians would view him if he were to be entirely honest and genuine in social interactions: "civilians… they don't want to know about this shit. If I said some of this stuff to them, they would be like 'whoa, what a fucking psycho;'" and then again, "That will get me fired up to where I don't watch things I say as much as I should, and then some stuff comes out where people are like 'this guy is a little weird.'" Overall, Nate reported that in general he views the younger civilian collegiate population to be "gentrified," whereupon himself and other veterans like him, might be the people that are replaced or pushed out as a class. Nate

notes that this represents an insurmountable barrier for himself in the way of developing meaningful relationships.

Consistently, Nate openly acknowledged that many combat veterans who are well-adjusted in every area of their life, also fall into this category: "he kind of sticks to himself, works diligently in school and everything, but he doesn't want to talk to anybody. You see a lot of that;" and "some do and some don't. I know guys that I've bumped into that want nothing to do with anybody else." Yet, not all of his relationships are rife with conflict and distress; instead, Nate coped with this by seeking out relationships from the combat culture: "You look for it, and I had no clue when I got out, I thought I would pretty much just be a complete outsider when I left. But you actively search for that same type of group bond." Yet to be clear, this is not simply a veteran culture; this is specifically, the bond that is forged through combat: "I talk back and forth with Vets, and that being said, like not Vet Vets. Like my oldest brother, he is in the Army and I don't talk to him about this shit. He can't relate. Somebody who is a combat vet, and wants to talk about it." Nate also shared a deepening of familial relationships where he finds the greatest meaning: "Family definitely ended up better, like closer relationships. I'm back, actively, taking part of my family." Thus, Nate's lived experience is one where he leads a life based on warrior ethos, culture, and values, and as a result experiences significant conflict in interpersonal relations, thereby limiting himself to close family and those who are from this culture.

While this is a choice Nate made, it did not come without internal struggle, as you may see depicted in this quote which touches on confrontation of a major paradox for combat veterans:

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"I had a really hard time grasping why people here thought they have such a self-entitlement. And it's really hypocritical, when as a Veteran, you are supposed to protect all their rights, and that's what you are doing it for. Then you get back… and you see how they are actually employing their rights, and oh my God. I can't fucking stand these people! That was part of the old culture that I had to at least suppress a little bit, or get rid of."

Nate brought forth the inherent conflict when purpose and meaning for service through combat is challenged and fractured by experience of civilian values in action; thus, resulting in a moral injury of type. Acknowledging and understanding the root for its existence, Nate utilizes this cultural chasm as a lens for analyzing past events.

Third, despite the broad and deep cultural chasm between civilian and warrior, Nate experienced adversity related to how *society informs the military*; which resulted in significant cognitive dissonance, thereby undermining resiliency. Nate displayed adaptive changes in belief systems in order to accommodate experiences in combat based on context and culture. This becomes potentially problematic when removed from that context and culture upon reintegration to civilian society, when others or the individual place judgments on those actions or experiences that are rooted in civilian values or morals. There is no more marked exhibit of this than the trained de-sensitization, capability, and willingness to kill:

"I know there are guys that continue to be violent when they are out… you know, I'd say I have the ability to be violent, but I can control it… to an extent. If somebody was threatening anyone in my family or my girlfriend, that would probably be a situation that would turn bad. I would probably kill people and not think anything of it… but that would be frowned upon."

This is a reality for Nate, which he vehemently understands. However, Nate chose not to return to the warrior culture based on his shift in value for family, and his acceptance that

one cannot exist within the two cultures at the same time: "There's not a lot of jobs where you can go whack tangoes and then come back and hang out. The majority of the time you have to separate for a long time, and then come back and try and decompress… while in the midst of family." To be clear, the qualifier of these two separate cultures, according to Nate, is about the role of combat experience: "Within the military, the actual population of war-fighters or combat-specific MOS's is really only 5%. The rest is support, and then they come in and try to do this resilience thing with everybody." With the catalyst for change being combat, Nate reflected on how this focus on resiliency training represents a paradox to the warrior, and is ultimately the result of the majority civilian culture lacking awareness and understanding of the warrior culture. He shared his perspective on the topic: "the resilience campaign is just for people. Everybody wants to know everybody's business; how warfare is conducted; how our warfighters are being treated, and it's just to give them a false, warm and fuzzy. It's all a crock of shit." Nate essentially sees the resiliency campaign as the military's answer to appease the concerns of the civilian society about how warfighters are being prepared for combat traumas; yet, it is not the combat traumas but the reintegration to civilian society that is problematic. He shared the contradiction with this picture from when he was an operator:

> "They are like, 'we hold you to the highest standard… you are the best we have to offer in the Marine Corps…' but then it's 'but your also fucking children and we don't trust you any farther than we can throw you.' It's hard to be resilient when they are like, 'You're doing great, we support you, you have been through a lot…' and then they are openly doing things that don't support you because it comes from a higher command."

The concept that you place a level of trust on a 20-year-old individual to lead five other lives into combat on a mission that has significance at a world level, and then confine

them to concepts and trainings that are irrelevant and built for the weakest link, creates

cognitive dissonance and a sense of distrust or stripping of autonomy. Nate shared about

the influence of civilian values on the warrior population: "That's because they don't

know. They take steps backwards and they do stuff that is actually a slap in the face to

the actual warfighter population in the military." He further expressed with observably

elevated emotion: "for people who want to be involved and have their nose in everything,

they really don't know shit about how the military works. There are a lot of things that

drive me nuts, but this is the biggest… they claim to have our best interests at heart, and

they really just don't know anything about us." Thus, the role that culture plays on Nate's

navigation of combat experiences and personal growth is substantial because of the

cultural chasm and resulting adversity.

These four major themes emerged from the data of Nate's lived experience

joining the military, navigating combat, and transitioning into higher education and

civilian society. While each major theme contains overlap with one another; the

overarching phenomenon elicited from Nate's story is the role and influence of

contextual intelligence within civilian society. Nate related multiple growth factors that

result from the way he experienced potentially traumatic combat events: maturation,

leadership, cognitive flexibility, determination, self-reliance, to name a few. However,

these were developed and present themselves in the context of an all-encompassing

culture; which solidifies an identity, and his value and belief system. For Nate, it was the

challenge to these solidified cultural facets that forces him to re-appraise and re-navigate

himself. In other words, the combat experiences, whether traumatic or not, are not the

focal point for Nate. Rather it is the cultural stripping and challenge to his belief system

and identity during the transition into civilian society that caused distress levels significant enough to supersede his resilience and initiate the post-traumatic growth process.

Case #2: The Airborne Soldier

Demographic information, and reason for joining.

Case number two explores the personal and environmental factors of Sam, who joined the Unites States Army at age 17. Sam shared that the primary impetus for his decision to join was the impact of the events of 9/11. He detailed his memory of that day; in particular his perspective of the disruption of American society from all the airplanes being grounded. He shared living by a major international airport, and noted not only experiencing a change in the physical environment, but the psychological impact. Sam related, "I had to serve my country. I thought it was going to be a Pearl Harbor type of event, so I just immediately decided I was going to join." Sam further acknowledged that military service was valued in his family, and that in hindsight, this contributed to him feeling like he would "be kind of a natural for it." Overall, his memory is marked by both his own personal motivation from this moment on to join, and his parents' support and verbalization of pride in him.

Sam joined the U.S. Army in 2004 through the delayed entry program and for the military occupational specialty (MOS) of Infantryman. Eventually he volunteered for Airborne Training, which involved a highly specialized and very rigorous physical and mental screening and regimen. Upon completing and thriving in Airborne School, Sam

was assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division, 2nd Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry

Regiment, Alpha Company. He deployed with the 82nd Airborne from 2006 to 2007, for a

15-month deployment to Iraq for OIF. This deployment was Sam's only active duty

combat deployment, from which he returned in October 2007. This would make around

nine and a half years between his return from deployment and this interview. Ultimately,

Sam completed his contractual service in 2008 at the rank of Sergeant (E-5), but then

transitioned to the Army Reserves where he has continued to serve in a transportation

company. While Reserve status is complex, Sam shared that generally his obligation

requires him to muster one or two times per year to complete physical and occupational

training over the course of several weeks to one month. While he could be activated to

active duty status, Sam has not been active duty, nor has he deployed since joining the

reserves.

When asked about psychological history of treatment and diagnosis, Sam

willingly reported that he sought and participated in cognitive therapy through the VA

Hospital from 2009 to 2010, and that he was formally diagnosed with PTSD. He shared

presenting for treatment on a monthly basis, transitioning to every two-to three-month

sessions, and finally terminating having made progress and reached therapy goals. Given

that the VA published its guidelines on mental health services in 2008; mandating that all

VA systems provide empirically supported, manualized CBT that includes an exposure

element (CPT or PE) (Keane et al., 2011), it is likely that this is the modality of treatment

that Sam received. It is interesting to note that he did not participate in weekly sessions,

which would be the empirically supported frequency of therapy. Sam does discuss his

perception of the role that therapy has on his story, as well as the influence on PTG. At

the time of the interview, Sam was a full-time graduate student in Public Policy. He was

at the time, single and never married, with no children. Sam noted that he initially came

to the University to complete his undergraduate degree, and lived with his younger

brother, who was also a student at the same University at the time. Sam was born and

raised in a major city within the State, to an intact family with a younger brother and

younger sister. His parents divorced when he was around age nine. He shared that all of

his immediate family still reside in this same city and that he frequently spends time with

them. However, Sam spends a good majority of his time outside of academics, in the

State capitol working on legislation. At the time of this study, Sam was also interviewing

for jobs in State politics.

Personal Pursuit of Ideological Beliefs Supported Later Life Transition

The concept of establishing a personal ideological belief system is in reference to

the internalized assertions, theories, and aims that constitute an individual's sociopolitical

mindset, which is often parallel to identity development away from home. From an early

age, Sam depicted exposure to values surrounding political and philosophical thinking, as

well as spirituality through nature. While these constructs were imbued largely by his

father, his personal and familial values aligned with the military purpose from this

perspective. His romanticized view of the world, and his potential role in a worldly war,

made the military a proving ground for Sam to establish himself and his identity outside

of the bounds of his home environment. This is significant because Sam entered the

military with a deliberately reflective cognitive style, which is conducive to meaning

making; an integral facet of PTG. Ultimately, Sam sought out the opportunity of warfare

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as a romanticized means to establish himself in the world; thus, consciously seeking a more complex narrative and worldview.

First, Sam depicted *marked alignment between personal values and those of the military* which contributed to meaning making across his timeline. Subsequently, his assumptive beliefs, goals, and personal narrative were protective and provided an acceptable context to most of his military experiences throughout his service as well as in the aftermath. Early on, this is powerfully depicted via his value and endeavor towards gaining a broader worldview. He shared, "I always kind of realized there was a bigger world out there rather than just my environment. I didn't get to see a lot of it, but I knew it was there." Sam actively chose the military as a means to pursue this developed world view, but also in line with his values for service to his country. He shared, "I remember September 12th, 2001, just the amount of flags… I just kind of figured this was going to be my generation's great war and I needed to be a part of it and do my civic duty." He extrapolated further when he stated, "kind of had that romantic view of everyone coming together, putting in the good fight, and then eventually winning. I wanted to be a part of that, something bigger, and know my actions would be left in a history book." Sam viewed the military as a service to his country and society as a whole, and this broader perspective and purpose towards larger worldview constitutes a significant core schema for Sam. He shared even today thinking, "I definitely feel like what we do in our actions make up the aggregate, and I realized that at that age too. Positive action produces positive results in the aggregate for all of society, and the view that we are all part of a whole." In this sense, the military offered Sam an opportunity to serve society on a greater level, and he perceived it this way; which was fundamentally a strong value he

held. In fact, this value and ideology contributed to his decision to transition out of the military and pursue higher education: "We had some really intelligent guys who had college degrees. I would have conversations with them, and it kind of dawned on me that I was short-changing myself, I was short-changing to a degree our society as a whole, by not pushing myself."

Sam also discussed the role of his familial values on joining: "I was like the kid cutting grass to take donations to give to Survivor's Fund. Very patriotic." He further shared how his own sense of belongingness within his family contributed to his reason for joining: "Probably a little bit of a chip on the shoulder, looking for a little bit of glory, wanting to serve my country, but really there was a strong sense of belonging. I knew my family had my back." This strong value for military service also influenced his decision into Airborne School in terms of being part of an elite unit and surrounding himself with people who he aligned with. In fact Sam shared that his own sense of familial belongingness contributed to this being a strong value and something he sought in life outside his family: "I mean after 9/11, I just wanted to take the fight to them, so that's why I signed up for the Infantry, and then figured go 82nd with airborne because that would be another way of getting some of the people out who might not be there for the right reasons." Sam actively sought out an environment and social group; a culture, that aligned with his value system. This is in direct alignment with military culture as it espouses both figurative and literal uniformity, group cohesion, morale, and tribalism; as Sam stated, "I think we all looked about the world in a relatively similar stance."

He further described his family unit and the role this had on his personal value system: "The Johnson clan... I would say that's the major thing my family instilled in

me, that if you are going to do something, you follow through with it." Sam described

this in his young self as being competitive, a risk taker, and having an external appraisal

of strength: "I was also the kid that would take any dare, just to prove I'm not chicken.

Granted, I would do absolutely stupid stuff, like jump 20 feet from a tree. I was probably

more focused on the military than anything else, and it just kind of narrowed my focus."

Sam shared how this value and drive impacted his early educational experience, sharing,

"basically a trouble maker. I mean, I graduated high school with a 1.6 GPA. I wasn't

dumb, I just wasn't engaged, and also I was dead set on joining the military, all I needed

was a diploma." These family-imbued values certainly aligned with military service, and

were further reinforced through his military experiences. Ultimately this contributed to

later life transition in academics, as Sam shared his mindset, "failure is never an option in

the military; whereas in school, failure is most definitely an option! If you don't let it be

in your head it's not an option at that point. I think a lot of people come to college with

failure being an option." Family values for drive, determination, and hard work aligned

with those of the military, and through reinforcement contributed to later life transition

and success.

Additionally, Sam espoused value alignment in the context of his personal

strengths and interests. He shared, "I could focus incredibly on what I desired. I would be

up at the crack of dawn running and doing calisthenics, and then I would go running

again or play hockey." His value for physical fitness and sport directly align with military

values for physical prowess and bearing, but also contribute to resilience. Same related

how his high school experience playing hockey was protective in the context of combat:

"I would get so pumped up for these tryouts that I would get physically sick, but then that would translate to lack of performance on the rink. So, freshman year I was on the freshman team, and sophomore year on the sophomore team… but once I got beyond that I wasn't so pumped up that I was going through stuff in my head. Just played naturally. I think that prepared me psychologically to act under pressure."

Further, he discussed his upbringing and the role of hunting and fishing: "I always enjoyed hunting and fishing, so I just kind of figured I'd be a natural for it (military service) … and it was nice knowing how to shoot before showing up to basic training." This value and skill set again contributed to his experiences in combat: "Realizing what's happening to my body, muscle memory in that regard… I mean, shooting a deer you get what's called 'buck fever,' a little bit of adrenaline shooting through your blood." Even more than a skill set, Sam's experience and value for hunting is grounded in a spiritual connection with nature. He shared, "I absolutely love getting out there, seeing how the woods interact," and how his father passed this to him, "He instilled in me that whatever higher power was out there was all the way around us, and he got more of a spiritual feeling being on the mountain in Wyoming elk hunting, or a deer stand in the Ozarks, turkey hunting during the dogwood bloom." Thus, these early personal values developed through family had a significant role on Sam's decision to join and his perspective that he would adjust well to the military due to value alignment.

In fact, recruitment into the military actively asks about lifestyle and value alignment as it is known that this contributes to career success and advancement. However, in Sam's case, it also appears to have contributed to resilience during service as well as a maintained cultural connection, as Sam chose to remain in the Reserves and pursued politics in the name of veteran's rights. Thus, this value alignment is part of the

foundation contributing to his ideological development, and also provides context for meaning making, thereby contributing to later life transition.

Second, Sam's socially minded values were parallel to his *political mindset;* which represented a great source of fulfillment and therefore contributed to later life transition with regards to purpose. While Sam depicted early political ideals stemming from his father; "my Dad was a neo-conservative, and I think that got into my psyche a little bit," the military offers an environment where his own personal pursuit of these ideals occurred. Sam related a specific time indicative of this personal mindset that did not align with military culture when his unit had a poor leader: "This goes back to why I'm doing public policy now. For some reason it was a rational thought in my head to vote him out using Democracy, and it was like, 'no, that's not how it works here Sam...' and I was like 'oh shit.'" Regardless of this misalignment, Sam's political mindset is a major facet of his conceptualization of purpose. While this is a message first related by his father, Sam personally expounded on this through his deployment experiences: "I wanted to be the arm, the vehicle. My dad ended up saying that to me while I was over there. He said, 'look, you are the right-hand man of all the American people right now, so realize that.'" Sam actively sought development of this belief system by looking through a political lens at his experiences; which ultimately contributed to his transition: "I think actually being on the forefront of carrying out policy, probably ended up gearing me towards it. Rather than being a recipient, being on the other side, that was eye opening for me."

This mindset colored his development of meaning and purpose in theater, as he talked about educating himself on the politics of the war and the region he deployed to.

This self-education and political mindset ultimately led to his transition out of active duty service as his political ideology did not align with the greater purpose of the war. Sam noted a specific moment where he began to challenge himself with this thinking, "I remember watching the news while I was over there. John Kerry was coming up in politics and he was significantly anti-war. That impacted me in realizing that not everyone was behind it. But you have to drive on." This didn't represent a threat to his ideology, but rather initiated analytic thinking related to this belief system. Ultimately, Sam spoke about his political ideals being the major impetus for him to get out and pursue politics: "I would say that being in Iraq really tested me on whether I wanted to stay in or get out. I think I had a moral break-down to a point. Just in the fact of why are we here? When you start to think about the overall thing, I can't help but think that way." He also shared a fundamental change to his belief system due to his deployment experiences: "I used to believe in free will before I joined the military. Joining made me believe in fate. Fate defined by the environment." While this contributed to his transition out, there was enough of a strong sense of belongingness and identity salience within the military culture that was protective. In other words, while it may seem that the military had become contradictory to his belief system to the point that there is strong potential for moral injury (trauma), there were stronger protective mechanisms that allowed Sam to incorporate this new narrative into a new direction, in line with military culture; but by changing his environment.

Largely related to his acquired belongingness in the military, which will be depicted in the final theme, Sam's pursuit of a political belief system was incorporated into his purpose for education and politics. He portrayed this alignment when he shared,

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"I don't want to be a lobbyist for the highest bidder. I want to go do something I believe in and commit to that belief. I think that is residual from my military experience - honor and loyalty." Sam left active duty because the politics of the war weren't in line with his purpose, and he chose to seek out purpose. He found it in politics as an advocate for veterans: "I realized for me I needed more purpose. I think that's what ended up making me want to become an advocate. I want to benefit veterans. I think that's my role within the present sea." This shift in environment in order to align his belief system with his purpose is significant, and reflective of an established identity. Sam shared his perspective on being a veteran in politics:

> "I end up using it to let people know I'm of value. I'm also very cautious. If you want a message to come across as truthful, veterans are the number one most trustworthy group in the U.S. according to surveys. I'm very hesitant to throw veteran behind anything, unless I know it's really good."

Considering Sam's reasons for joining, he seems to harbor a strong desire to be of value to the community that he exists within. He sought out a role in politics where he could establish himself as valuable. Sam's pursuit of his personal ideological belief system through the political lens is an important driver in establishing meaning and purpose and directly transitions him to his next phase outside the military. Yet, identity development within the military culture plays just as strong of a role.

Third, Sam identified the military context and culture as having an imperative role on his *identity development*; and thereby his ideological belief system. When speaking about himself prior to the military, Sam often alluded to extrinsic motivators as he related, "I would say that I definitely had a chip on my shoulder. I don't know why. I felt like I had to prove something… I don't know to who, just, whoever." He even shared

how this extended into his early military experiences in terms of succeeding: "I didn't

want to come back, tail between my legs, and explain to teachers that were talking trash."

In hindsight, Sam explained how he related this extrinsic motivation to identity crisis:

> "I think when I was younger, I had an identity crisis. Being in the military taught me who I am. When you haven't been tested, there is a big persona; whereas, if you go through a crucible in your life like military service… going overseas, that gets stripped away and it's just bare bones your identity, and you figure out exactly who you are, and what you are willing to do, fast."

Thus, the military provided the environment and culture conducive to identity

development and rapid maturation, along with a shift towards intrinsic motivation. He

depicted this motivational shift by returning to the concept of the chip on his shoulder; "I

don't have to prove anything or much to anyone. I made that switch after joining the

military. I like being good at what I do, but it isn't about having a chip on my shoulder.

Trying to be humble. I think that goes a long way." He also reflected more of a growth

mindset (Dweck, 2008) in his current state, sharing about one of the more important

aspects of successful transition out of the military, "Just realizing that you have self-

worth. I've always been really competitive in nature, but now I don't gauge my life as -

so many people are behind me… it's, what's in front of me." Prior to his military service,

Sam measured his value externally and through a need to prove something to others,

whereas, he experienced a shift towards internal value as a result of his deployment

experiences. Being of value to his community remains important, but his internal

measurement of this is based on his own evaluation of self-worth more so than an

external one.

Sam also revisited this concept of identity development in a different interview, in relation to the topic of his relationship with his parents, primarily his father. He shared, "I think it was being away from the parents. Having your own experiences, and that ends up causing you to find who you are. For me, that was in Iraq, the most intense experience of my life. It was very rewarding." In fact, Sam's identity development outside of his relationship with his father is also interrelated to his political ideological development, focused on previously. He expressed, "On deployment I think my identity started making a gradual shift over time to where I went from basically being like my father, to being a liberal. I mean that basically took, about three years." This establishment of individual identity is still strongly linked to political lens, further supporting the previous assertions. Sam powerfully sums this shift up when he discussed his time on guard duty when deployed, which inherently involved long stretches of boredom: "You start to think, maybe a bit too much. I realized while I was there, that I was not the same as my father. I looked very highly upon my father, but I realized while I was there that I was not my father." Sam depicted a significant shift in identity, as he established himself outside of his family, within the context of military service. Ultimately, he related that deployment events were a challenge to his belief system, and the catalyst for change and self-acknowledgment.

The events of deployment, combat, and more broadly, military service and culture, thereby became salient markers of his self. His identity became grounded in these experiences. Although he exited active duty service, he demonstrated significant maintenance of military salience during his transition. When asked to share meaningful artifacts from his time in active duty service, Sam shared images of two items that are

part of his daily life. First, "Pack that I carried ammo in for the M-240B machine gun;" is representative of his MOS and role within his team, as there was often only one soldier responsible for this weapon system. Secondly, "Beret from my old unit with the 82nd Airborne Division. We did not wear these on deployment, but it's meaningful nonetheless," representative of his greater identity as a soldier (Army) and identification with the Airborne, a specified and elite group. These expressions of maintained identity over time and transition portray the strength of impact that deployment events had on his identity development.

Thus, the role of value alignment, the political lens, and identity development within the military context all coalesce into Sam's personal pursuit of an ideological belief system. This is inextricably tied to his later life transition as it is foundational to general resilience, catalytic to the transition out of the military, and directional in career purpose. However, Sam's narrative and process towards self-acknowledgement does not come without challenge after the military. When asked about how he feels when civilians thank him for his service, Sam related, "A part of me just says, this is the entirety of me… but I ended up feeling like… this is something I volunteered for. This is something I wanted to do, something I wanted to do for you. You don't have to thank me." This appears indicative of both the salience of identity, but also the autonomy in choice and purpose. Sam's establishment of himself and his worldview, through his pursuit of ideological beliefs, fundamentally supported his later life transition into higher education.

The Post-Military Acculturation Process is the Catalyst for Growth.

Full assimilation into military culture is often viewed as the greater emic purpose of bootcamp and other indoctrination courses that teach military history, customs, norms, and bearing. Assimilation is significantly valued and reinforced in combat arms units, as the impact of combat, its extreme context and environment, is a constant and direct threat to survival. Sam detailed how combat culture and the deployment environment became his reality and a highly protective means for survival. He recognized within himself, and from a broader perspective, what the military needs in a soldier to be successful in combat. This is unequivocally conducive and protective in the military and on deployment; however, when the development of his ideological belief system resulted in dissonance with this life, he faced the acculturation process into civilian society. The social, psychological and cultural change that stems from the balancing of these two cultures, while adapting to the predominant culture of civilian society, is the challenge that subsumed his resilience and ultimately is the catalyst for the growth process. Sam espoused high identification with both cultures, resulting in integration or seeking of a bicultural lifestyle. The growth process for Sam is marked by significant adversity and decline in functioning, and there is also the emergent role that insight garnered from therapy plays.

First, Sam acknowledged the *importance of military cultural assimilation; specifically, surrounding emotions,* based on the requirements and impact of combat. As previously discussed, Sam sought out a highly specified combat unit as part of his pursuit of an ideological belief system and in alignment with his self at that time. He related how this specialized training impacted him; in particular, the purpose of a live fire training where he had a simulated injury: "I would say that it numbed me. I mean the purpose is

to prepare you for when that stuff happens in real life, so you would be able to operate." He further related his ability to recognize the purpose of training, as well as his adaptation to it: "It registered for me in training. 'Squad leader is dead, team leader is dead, now you are in charge Private,' you get this overwhelming feeling. I could recognize that is what was happening to me, and just calm myself down, right into, 'okay this is a maneuver element…'" While Sam goes on to detail how he overcame this anxiety through multiple repetitions in training, he more so acknowledged a critical cultural norm in the military and its functional purpose in combat; namely emotional narrowing or compartmentalization. Sam shared, "Emotion is not good when you are trying to react logically in a situation where there is adrenaline pumping through your blood." He goes on to detail a specific potentially traumatic combat event where this was reinforced for him, "He ended up breaking down. He froze up and he was in charge. I ended up filling the void, I ended up assuming leadership as a senior specialist, E-4, kept security up, and started relaying stuff up to command." Here Sam shared how emotion can impact functioning within the combat environment and ultimately risk the mission and the lives of those around you. Regarding the expectation of experiencing events that are potentially traumatic, Sam shared, "The underlying assumption was there. From basic training on up to everything, you are there to be desensitized to taking lives as an infantry-man." Thus, with the expectation of these events, is the purpose of emotional numbing through desensitization as both individually protective, but also protective for the group.

Sam espoused the culmination of his thinking on the purpose of assimilation and why it was reinforced for him, by sharing one of the most devastating and meaningful experiences of combat:

> "By the way that Humvee was hit, I knew they were dead. It turned out that Smith was in tiny tiny little pieces… (silence) outside of his torso, which was in body armor. John was ripped in half. He was in the turret. The turret got popped off and flew almost 50 meters into a canal. By the time we found him he was dead. You know, I saw people get emotionally weak while we were still out there. Stepping into that role I think my brain must have flipped and I realized that being in tune with your emotions was a weakness. Then, carrying their corpses… we brought the bodies back, and then a helicopter flew down and you have what's called Flight of Heroes, and we take their body bags on a stretcher in front of the whole battalion to these Blackhawks. You know, they had us go talk to combat stress for a debrief, but it was like, 'mother-fucker I got to do my buddies honor.' I think at that point I hit a level where I was just emotionally numb and just realizing that I needed to accomplish missions. That was what the point was."

While being emotionally numb is protective in the context of extreme anxiety and adrenaline in combat events, it further lends to the reality that there is no time in combat or even immediately after an event to be vulnerable to emotion because it risks mission performance. On the other hand, the military values and reinforces the emotion of anger and the behavioral expressions of aggression, because as Sam stated, "Coping with that, was by having a successful engagement after. I was elated to get the bad guys, it was an emotional high for me, I just felt anger and numbness. You have to realize, you are there for this purpose, it's just what you are there to do." Assimilation then lends to coping through a military cultural worldview and these events are reinforcing because they are validation of training and purpose. For Sam, his assimilation process is marked primarily but this emotional numbing. The benefit to this is made starkly clear when Sam recounted his experience returning home for mid-tour leave, shortly in the aftermath of this event:

"It was a weird thing coming back after just having your two good buddies die. Being in Lambert International Airport, just like 'well.' It was in my head, but it wasn't tangible. Then two weeks later and 'well, time to go back to war!'" Many combat arms veterans will remain in or return to the environment of potentially traumatic events. Previously the Army thought that mid-deployment leave would be conducive for processing and longevity, but what Sam related was that it made the situation worse because he was incapable of acknowledging the reality of his loss in an environment that was so distant from the one he existed within when the loss happened. Further, he was removed from everything that helped him cope: his occupation and his brothers.

Thus, Sam reflected that with assimilation being protective, and the extreme context of the combat environment, it became his reality. He depicted it as this, "I think it was Tim O'Brian in *The Things They Carried* (1990)*,* who said that 'war is long periods of boredom, interrupted by sheer moments of terror.' I'd agree with that. You end up living for that." He further shared about the impact of the environment and combat, "It's a switch, it just goes, it's natural, and when it goes, it's the most fundamental of human behavior. I believe this: 'I need to eat, I need to sleep, I need to protect my shelter, and my tribe.' You realize you are in a very rudimentary environment." The way of survival is group assimilation, a shared culture of values, norms, and goals; which even more so, causes Sam to leave behind the civilian world. He related, "I remember sitting there in one of our last air assaults and someone saying to me, 'Hey we only got three weeks left, and then we are back to the real world.' Back to civilian world. It dawned on me, I couldn't even contemplate it." He further stated, "Your life becomes there. That's your environment, that's your world."

Second, Sam *acknowledged the clash between two cultures* that he identified with. Ultimately Sam is in alignment with the purpose of the military culture, while also recognizing the long-term impact on the individual's ability to transition. He stated,

> "Being completely honest, for me, no. For what the military would want, yes. It is very beneficial to the military to have someone who can be numb, make logical decisions, and doesn't require time to rationalize what just happened, but can move on to the next thing. It's beneficial towards accomplishing the mission, and towards survival purposes. At the same time, I don't think it's good for the individual."

He reiterated this thought process with an example: "It really is a paradox, because the Army operates from having that cold person who is willing to go over to the neighbor's house and take it over, at the same time, they can't say that;" and even more, "I feel like to actually be okay and be really good at that, you have to be cold. Whereas, when you come back it's not like you are going to go over to the neighbor's house and take it over. It doesn't apply." Sam used this metaphor of taking over a neighbor's home, not only to depict what skill sets and people are successful and needed by the military, but also to depict how the emotional mindset useful in combat, is not valued in the civilian world. Moreover, on a deeper level he begins to elicit the paradox of this with regards to the friction between the two cultures, when he added, "…they can't say that" in the above quote.

Sam brought up an inherent conflict between the two cultures and the deleterious outcome that results for the individual leaving the military and re-joining civilian culture. He reflected,

> "The best person to operate overseas can turn it off and go with it. But if you want to come back to America… I mean if you end up in Mali or Nigeria,

you will be alright because everyone is basically at the same level. But If you want to come back here to the States, you cannot operate like that, just because you need meaningful relationships. No one likes a cold person who is just seeing stuff, calling it for what it is, and just being blunt. They like nuances."

He subsequently identified aspects within both cultures that are at the root of this inherent conflict. For instance, Sam shared that if the military were to be honest with the general civilian public about what type of person is conducive in combat and why: "Oh well they can say that, but the general public would throw them onto a cross." He shared his perspective with regards to the military culture and their responsibility: "I think the best thing would be if the military were like, 'alright these are the people we need. You're messed up with regard to what everyone else thinks is normal. We like the messed-up portion, and then we will help you get back.' Just recognize that that is the paradox." Even more so, Sam noted thinking that the military needs to address the role of killing as part of its culture: "It is your job to make the other person die for what they believe in. I mean, that's something. I think that's one thing that the Army does not talk about enough." Then concurrently, he related about civilian society that there is an inherent lack of understanding and even willingness to understand. To follow up from the topic of being thanked for his service, Sam's initial response was that he thought, "Get the hell away from me." He further explained,

> "I wish civilian society would get more engaged. That's what would be the most respectful thing you could do. Get off your ass, quit watching so much American Idol, watch C-SPAN and read some articles. There is a lot of people that gave their lives and loved ones to keep this thing going, and then we only have 60% turn out for a Presidential Election!? I'm thankful. I'm thankful that people can be more concerned about Honey Boo Boo, but I view it as a big tragedy that people don't realize the gifts they are given… maybe that's harsh."

He further clarified this line of thinking when he shared about his values: "I know plenty of people that didn't come home, and their family should be thanked for their sacrifice, but I'm not somebody that should be thanked. This was of my own accord." The onus is left to the military veteran to adjust to the dominant civilian culture in order to make this transition, however, what Sam speaks of in terms of learned emotional numbing and then inherent cultural friction impacts the most important transitional factor for him: relationships.

Third, the major transitional adversity he faced in the acculturation process was *difficulty relating to others*. Sam first experienced this within the academic environment as he pursued higher education after leaving the Army. He shared, "Man, sitting in a classroom with 18-year old's. I would look out the window, notice it was rainy and muddy outside, and just want to throw them out the window and say, 'go sleep in that for 24 hours and tell me how bad five pages is.'" While seemingly light-hearted and related to maturity level, Sam eventually explained on a deeper level his true inability to relate. One of the major growth factors he identified is a clear recognition of what he values in life, being his relationships. He shared about what was difficult transitioning into the civilian academic world as, "People not realizing what's actually important in life. I see people cry and break down from stress. I look at them and I feel in my heart, no one is fucking shooting at you. No one died. You are alright." On the one hand, Sam's threshold for stress is much higher due to the types of stressful experiences he has in his repertoire, yet, this represents an inherent friction between cultures; which reinforces to him just how removed civilian society is from his own experiences in combat. He reported on this, "Sometimes I don't understand civilians. Maybe it's just me being too logical, but I think

the weights people place on different priorities don't make sense;" and speaking specifically about his academic peers, "I don't really feel there was enough substance there, where I could connect with them." He further identified differences in experiences: "I mean, shooting someone, picking up parts of your buddy. I would say that's traumatic for a 20-year-old, especially an American. I think that less than 1% of Americans have probably experienced that by that age." Sam then identified a difference in worldview, "You know, the 'everyone love everyone,' that's great in theory, but it just pisses you off. Sometimes you want to slug them, but you just sit there and realize they are idiots, and you just let them go." The worst of humanity is a reality for Sam; something that he has directly experienced, and has inextricably changed his perspective to the point that he is unable to connect with those who haven't. This becomes problematic as part of Sam's assimilation into the military is fundamentally about brotherhood and the group above the individual. For example, "I lived within the group. Didn't have autonomy. No real autonomy in the military. I lived for that group. Then coming back and being able to have autonomy, was just weird. I don't like being alone, even for a little bit."

Ultimately, this transition and his difficulty relating to others even in important relationships became the impetus to pursue formal therapy as a means to adjust. He shared in particular about several relationships he had prior to the military declining in the aftermath: "I ended up going over there, and I had a girlfriend that was here. I realized I was numb and I let her know that. I was like, 'this might take a while, you should go do your own thing;'" and "I lost a lot of relationships with people I went to high school with because I realized they weren't on the same trajectory… hard to connect." In the end, Sam reported that it wasn't until his relationships with family

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members began to be impacted, that he realized he was "going down a dark path." He

shared that it was "getting to the point where relationships were falling apart, and being

able to recognize that I had an issue and needed to go talk about it." Ultimately it was his

brother who convinced him to seek treatment at the VA Hospital. Sam shared that his

brother related a story to him:

> "When I was there, I didn't think about anything with my family, being
> honest. But I got back, and I wasn't doing well, and my brother told me the story
> of a recruiter coming to talk to him… government plates, a guy in uniform…
> while I was overseas. He showed up to my mom's house and walking up, she fell
> over. 'Oh I'm just a recruiter coming to talk to Ken,' you know. You don't know
> what you just did. Then my brother came home from UPS (silence and tearing up)
> and he saw the government plates, and while the recruiter who found out what he
> was doing to my mom, was consoling her, my brother sat there for about 15
> minutes and broke down in his car. Just knowing that you have people like that in
> your life, and you discover that when you get back, because they don't want to
> bug you when you are there. Really coming to that meaningful realization that
> you have people like that, it just makes those relationships, and knowing what's
> important in life, that much more."

Sam shared that after learning this, he did pursue formal therapy as a means to rebuild the

relationships in his life. This was a difficult realization, as the previously discussed role

of emotional numbing is often accomplished by compartmentalization and avoidance;

and is therefore reinforced in military culture, along with concepts of being an alpha male

and not showing signs of weakness. Sam reported at that point he chose to seek

treatment,

> "I was willing to swallow my pride for my family. I think that's the
> number one issue, a lot of people (veterans) end up saying, 'I don't need that shit,
> I can carry this.' Being humble enough to realize that sometimes you can't, and
> being willing to recognize that you have to confront the issues."

When asked specifically what he thought was the easiest aspect of his reintegration process, Sam shared, "Re-building relationships with family members, because, I come from a very strong family and they didn't push, but they were willing to receive whatever they got;" and he expressed being thankful for, "Go away for some time and come back a completely different person, but they still love you for who you are and they are accepting." It is important to note that while it was the decline in familial relationships, Sam's success in the re-building process also appears to be related to previously strong family dynamics. It is this attribute, Sam's strong family belongingness and support, that represents the foundation for his growth process. It is also this value for belongingness that acts as the cognitive construct most notably aiding in his resilience in combat.

Sam shared developed insight as to the broader concept of resilience from his own experiences:

"I think resilience is a real thing. I think some people might not be able to achieve it. I think a lot of it is how you end up looking at a situation and if you re-visit it. If you put yourself, quite honestly, into a victim mentality you can't achieve resiliency, because you end up just hitting a wall and then it's the wall's fault. Whereas, if you end up hitting a wall and then you climb over it, you now know how to climb over a wall, and at that point, you end up stronger on the other side. I don't view resiliency as the ability to bounce back from the event. I view it as the ability to incorporate an event into our life and reflecting on it in a positive way and then moving forth afterwards."

This statement is inherently reflective of the occupational model of trauma (Castro & Adler, 2011), discussed in the literature review and incorporated into the recommendations for changing the PTG model for this population. Sam inherently does not identify as a victim, and this is critical to his identity as a soldier. What's more, is the element of perspective regarding the PTE. Research indicates that an optimistic

explanatory style; reasoning that negative events are due to unstable, contextual, and external causes, is linked to resilience (Sarker & Fletcher, 2014). Just as the PTG model proposes, the focus is on the individual's appraisal of the event rather than the event itself, making the appraisal the most critical factor in anticipating the response. Whether or not an event is traumatic is based in perspective; or explanatory style or appraisal. Sam appears to utilize an adaptive perspective, as he factors in the context of combat, does not blame himself, and evaluates that these are singular events rather than all one experience to be generalized. While this appears to be a major source of resilience for Sam, he also related in this statement: "the ability to incorporate an event into our life and reflect on it in a positive way and then move forth afterwards." Sam is able to achieve this in combat, as well as the personal change that defines PTG when one is moving forward in the aftermath. However, it is not until the acculturation process where resilience is subsumed and Sam was forced to engage in re-processing his perceptions, re-appraising past experiences, and ultimately making meaning from them that lends to personal change in a new context. The unique and most predominant aspect of Sam's journey from resilience in combat to PTG in transition is the cognitive construct of belongingness.

Belongingness Supports Resilience and PTG

The most prominent theme in Sam's narrative is his value for, and investment in belongingness. This is evident as a familial value that was conducive to him joining the military, but also a primary mechanism towards him seeking help in the aftermath. His process of belongingness in the military, and ultimately his value for the tribe, is critical because it gives context to both the proximate and distal sociocultural influences on his lived experience. It is a dual-natured resilience factor in combat, as it resulted in the

formation of a tribal unit, but also makes up the most significant schema for processing

PTE's. When Sam's belongingness becomes subsumed in the context of post-traumatic

stress, removal from the tribe, and acculturation distress, it then becomes a major source

of meaning making and purpose in later life transition.

First, Sam detailed the *purpose and process of how the military develops*

belongingness, specifically with regard to combat/infantry culture. He described the

social environment as hierarchical, "I'd never been in such a regimented, rigid in

structure, environment… a little different going into that where it's so hierarchical and

your life is controlled." Sam detailed how it wasn't until later in his deployment

experiences where he began to understand the purpose of this structure having to do with

responsibility over lives. He shared, "I understand this now. I was always a little defiant,

until I became a Sgt and I had people I was in charge of. Yeah, I definitely bought in

then." He expressed on a deeper level his leadership style; how and why it developed in

the context of combat: "You end up realizing you can't control these bigger aspects. The

one thing I can control is how we go about accomplishing missions, as safe as you can

personally make it. That's a huge motivator." This represents a developed perspective

that is adaptive to the context and environment. As Sam's most important motivational

factor is the safety of his team, he related the importance of his leadership style with

regard to the individual, and an understanding as to why this is a part of combat culture:

> "Having a good leader who is willing to give the shirt of their back for
> you. Seeing someone road march to the point that blood is just pouring through
> their boots, substantially; and you being in charge of this person. They don't fall
> behind in the march with their pack. I was like, 'alright, this guy is willing to do a
> lot for me, I need to give him to the end of the world… he is basically my son
> now.'"

This mentality of dedication and loyalty in the context of physical pain is a training mechanism and imbued in the infantry and combat culture. Sam completed his line of thinking when he shared, "You end up riding them and that ends up bringing everyone else up and makes the team more proficient; because you are only as strong as your weakest link. In that type of environment, you have to work on everyone's weaknesses." In combat an individual's weakness can compromise the mission and ultimately the lives of everyone around. Thus, the belongingness between the unit becomes the most significant motivational factor for personal betterment and perseverance, because the ultimate outcome of failure at the individual or group level, is death. Sam shared, "Right, if you end up having that bond break down, you have serious repercussions."

Thus, this bond is developed between kill team, unit, company, platoon, battalion and on; with increase in responsibility over one another's life there necessitates increase in belongingness. The military has and continues to actively employ some of the most extreme ways of developing this bond. Sam stated without hesitation, "Being completely honest. The hazing helped. It helped bring everyone together and bond." Thus, the process of taking the alpha male character that is successful in combat, as previously discussed, and breaking the individual down to the point where he has to rely on the unit for survival. Sam related, "I mean everyone is super competitive, strong, dependable. Everyone wants to be John Wayne. I mean that is the culture and, in all seriousness, who carries out this stuff," and further, "You want a hard charger, who is pushing others and is pushed by others through competitiveness." With this personality type, the type of bond needed is forged in extreme ways. "I mean, it's everyone rallying

together. It's kind of informal team building in a weird only infantry sense, specific to

that culture." Specifically, Sam spoke to extreme, violent, and risk-taking behaviors as

the context for building the tribal-like bond. He shared specific to his platoon,

> "I think once stop movement, stop loss goes into effect, you have to know who you are with. There was quite a bit of bonding that would happen through shenanigans. One of the funniest things; my best friend and I got into a physical fight while we were drinking. In my defense, he hit me first. I ended up having a swollen temple and he had a chipped tooth. Stuff like that ended up bringing us together. Just like, pink bellies. That was our platoon's thing for birthdays… like ten guys hold you down and take turns for however many years you are just smacking you in the belly. Just stuff like that, and no one ratting on you. You would take a group punishment, but no one would give up anyone's names."

While to the outsider this may be perceived as juvenile and potentially psychologically

harmful, internal to the culture it represents a small glimpse into a much more significant

process. Survival is akin to reliance on one another, thus the process of forging a unit

involves extreme measures; whether it be violence, blood, or degradation, all of these are

nothing compared to what combat will threaten. Sam spoke to how this level of bond is

forged and why: "They would be willing to… they would rather have that happen to them

than someone that they love dearly. You need that within the military. It's not by kin or

blood, it's an adopted family. Its forged over time. It's forged through the suck." Sam is

speaking to the willingness of one soldier to sacrifice his life for another without

hesitation. This is what they all seek within each other.

Second, the strength of the bond or the unity of the tribal group was the

foundation for resilience in combat. Sam noted that there is an expectation surrounding

these relationships: "There is an unspoken pact: I will give you everything I have if you

give me everything, and I will check to see if you are constantly doing that, and I hope

you check to see I'm constantly doing that," and furthermore, "If you get to a point where you can't give me your all, then something needs to change real quick." This is the nature of the tribe; willing to give one another everything, but also reliant on one another from within and not externally. This bond and the sense of belongingness, was a major resilience factor for Sam. He shared, "We were all there for one another. Once you got into it, you realized, we were all there for one another." This quote is in response to the evolution that Sam related from joining the Army, seeking belongingness, and then realizing his role and purpose is for his brothers.

Given this sense of belongingness, throughout every interview, Sam depicted that he coped with PTE's and other combat experiences primarily through the tribe. In coping with the boredom and monotony, "The guard shifts were eight hours. By the end of that, you would know their entire life story." Coping with specific missions such as taking a home, "Just knowing that you can rely on the people around you. Going through your first door, or any door, you get hopped up. Just know you have a team backing you up." Coping with being responsible for the death of a non-combatant, "I would also say that they are along with the enemy to a point… but, better them than someone you have such a strong connection with… someone you consider a sibling." Coping with having a buddy shot or hit when near you, "Going back to the overall team and sense of belonging; moving into self-preservation as a group. Knowing that they did that for you, because you would be very willing to do that for them." Coping with a buddy being seriously injured or killed, "Just knowing that they gave you a pretty precious gift, and that you would have done the same for them. Don't let that gift go to waste." Ultimately, Sam depicted the relationships when he stated, "If I were to break my leg on the top of a mountain, they

would carry me down rather than go down and try to get help to come back up. I put a premium on people I can depend on." It is with these types of bonds that Sam copes with the experiences he has in combat. Furthermore, it is the reason why he ultimately stays, even when he began to recognize that his socio-political beliefs are not in line with the war. He shared, "What always pulled me back was the people I was serving with. Just my genuine love for them. I realized I was just there for them." This bond makes up a marked resilience factor for Sam; which is absolutely in line with literature linking unit morale and the like with resilience. However, this is more personal for Sam, as it is also imbued in the cognitive schema that is the catalyst for meaning making and purpose in later life transition.

Third, a deeply held sense of *belongingness supported meaning making* in the context of PTE's and in recovery from identified trauma. Sam detailed how his relationships, the depth of the bond, provides structure both cognitively and emotionally for how he perceives certain combat events, and in the end, how he makes sense of them. For instance, he shared with tears in his eyes,

> "One of the things that it etched into my mind is when we called for hell fires and J Dams into a house, and ended up having collateral damage. In the rubble… ended up pulling out kids. (Pauses) You have to realize that that's a reality. Going back to it, it's unfortunate. I wish it wouldn't have happened. Working with perfect information, you might have been able to handle it differently… but at the same time, seeing Hunter come out of the rubble with a four-year-old, just limp. It's better to see that than to be carrying Hunter's big ass limp. That's how I put it in perspective."

Sam depicted how he perceives and processes these PTE's in the context of belongingness and the tribe being the most important thing; which is again, adaptive within the context and environment. This is not a denial of the event or that it was not

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horrific; yet, it represents a very real cognitive evaluation that seems to have been protective to a degree from manufactured emotions of guilt, shame, and self-blame; all often at the root of trauma disorders. Sam then goes on to detail his process of meaning making from the traumatic loss of his two close friends, previously discussed. In this case he does share trauma-based symptomatology such as, intrusive memories, flashbacks, negative cognitive appraisal, and survivor's remorse. He shared, "I used to re-live it a lot. I used to think, 'why wasn't it me?' He was 19, kid on the way, and married. Good egg. But, instead of looking back and saying 'why me?' Saying 'why not me,' if it was them that gave their lives for me, what am I going to do about it." Sam then shared how these experiences, traumatic or not, contribute to his overall sense of meaning and thereby growth: "They (relationships) become more meaningful. That's one of the things that pulled me from that downward spiral. Realizing that there are so many people that absolutely love you." Here Sam further recognized the importance of belongingness and his realization of the meaning of these relationships; specifically, how this prompted him to re-evaluate past events in order to incorporate and carry them forward positively.

While the timeline is unclear with regard to the role of therapy on Sam's meaning making process and development of insight of this, he does clearly recognize formal therapy as an important catalyst for growth. He shared regarding treatment,

> "Having the strength to say, 'okay, I need a little bit of help' and going through cognitive therapy. I think that's one of the best decisions I've made in my life. If I can share that, and it actually comes across, maybe one person does it. Maybe… a good buddy of mine committed suicide not too long ago, and maybe it prevents one of those."

Even in the aftermath of trauma treatment, Sam's purpose in sharing his story and the role of therapy is imbued in belongingness. Of note, his loss of a friend to suicide is another reminder of the all too common and tragic of phenomenon for combat veterans: maintained traumatic loss relate to suicide after leaving the military. When asked specifically what major insights he garnered from therapy he shared, "The event doesn't have to be positive, but coming to the realization that it had a positive impact on your life in one way or another;" and furthering this line of thinking, "Without the negatives, I would have never realized the positives. I mean, you have to have them… the negatives, to get to the positive. You have to have something to test you." In totality, Sam summed up his growth experiences at the end of the final interview:

> "See if we can sum it up… I think the positive changes are really realizing what's important in life, along with the realization of what you will do to protect those things. Also, being able to develop who you are as a human being and knowing what you are capable of. Knowing what ethos you ascribe to. Negatives, I would say, sometimes a lack of empathy and sympathy really. But at the same time, that could be a plus, because you are not wasting your time as much."

He spoke dynamically and realistically about the role of belongingness and relationships here. While belongingness was the construct for meaning making in combat, it is also what guides Sam's purpose in later life transition.

Fourth, Sam conceptualized his sense of belongingness beyond meaning making about the past and into the *driver for his future purpose*. Just like the above quote on sharing his story of treatment, and application in the here and now for the betterment of his brothers, Sam continued to find purpose in this belongingness. He spoke not only to general purpose in the aftermath of trauma, but also his political advocacy:

"I think about it, and I think specifically about Smith and Johnson. Something over-arching… maybe they gave their lives for a greater good, maybe that was the way it had to be. Me thinking about them every single day, creates the electrons in my brain to get stuff going, and makes me so fiery that I'm not afraid to go toe-to-toe with a legislator that wants to amend something in my bill to kill it. Maybe that's how it had to be. I guess that's how my view of the world has changed. It's so chaotic, but then again, it's so beautiful. I do feel like there is an order to the chaos, but is it our place to comprehend? We have to rectify it in our own minds."

The meaning Sam finds from the traumatic loss of his two close friends, extended into his purpose specifically in politics as an advocate for Veteran's rights. Moreover, he related how this is a shared purpose amongst most Veterans: "If I know someone is a Veteran as well, it's a point where you can come together and rally around that." This is indicative of an ongoing connectedness and deeply rooted sense of belonging. In discussing this maintained connection and how he was preparing to attend a 10-year deployment reunion he shared,

"The strongest sense of belonging with those guys, outside my family. I would do anything for them. I have a lot of pride… you know, a lot of people; especially with ISIS as they started coming through Iraq, their pride was in what they accomplished. My pride was in the relationships I ended up developing. I didn't think it was going to end up being sustainable over there… so a lot of pride in what we accomplished as a group, rather than what is traditionally reported on the media as milestones. It was our personal milestones."

This quote beautifully depicts the entirety of Sam's combat experience and his later life transition in that it speaks to his ideological pursuit, the influence of culture, and the role of belongingness throughout his lived experience.

These three major themes represent the lived experience of Sam, as he navigated joining the military, transitioning back into civilian society, and seeking meaning and

purpose in his later life transition into politics. While these themes overlap and intertwine with one another, it is remarkable the salience of culture and relationships to this narrative. While the timeline is not entirely clear as to the role of formal therapy, it does appear that given his resilience factors in combat, it is the acculturation process that initiates distress. Thus, it is not the specific combat events that lead to trauma-based distress and clinical disorder. Removal from his tribe, initiation into a culture where he has difficulty finding relatedness, and subsequent decline in relationships and functioning leads to a level of distress that succumbs resilience and growth from combat. Even when Sam defines an event as traumatic and discusses how it impacted him over time, the event is about traumatic loss of brothers, loss of that belongingness. Re-establishing this belongingness bi-culturally is the context for his personal development and later successful life transition.

Case #3: The Recon Soldier

Demographic information, and reason for joining.

Case number three explores the personal and environmental factors of Liam, who joined the Unites States Army at age 20; two and a half years after graduating high school and while working hard labor jobs. Liam spoke frequently of taking "the traditional route," in that he chose to join as a means to follow in his father's footsteps as a legacy. Liam's father served Army Infantry in the Vietnam War, and Liam echoed, "I wanted to be just like Dad, so I went Army and I went Infantry. I don't know why, but I guess I felt

like I had to fill his shoes; to do what he did." Exploring this further, Liam shared childhood and family values for service and patriotism: "combined with the fact that we were at war, I felt it was the right thing to do." He also expressed a drive for seeking purpose in greater society and an innate feeling that, "I was made for more than I was accomplishing." Ultimately, it appears that Liam's call to duty while internal and intrinsic; "doing something bigger than myself," was also a means to seek greater connectedness with his father during a developmental period where he was establishing his own masculinity: "My Dad was Infantry in Vietnam. I felt like it was my duty to do that, and that if I didn't, I would regret it later. Not only in my Dad's eyes… which, he did tell me he didn't want me to join." Overall, Liam's decision to join Army Infantry was marked by seeking a greater purpose as well as an approval and connection from his father. However, Liam also joined over two years after high school, which he shared was about his own cognitive process of reflecting on what he was going to literally sign his life over to.

Liam joined the U.S. Army specifically for the MOS of Infantryman, 11 Bravo. He was designated into a Stryker platoon, which is an eight-man (small-unit) covered and armored vehicle made specifically for urban warfare and OIF. The concept surrounding the Stryker platoons, were armored vehicles that could navigate urban environments while protecting the unit inside, with a drop-down hatch in the back for rapid deployment of force. For his first deployment, he joined his platoon in Iraq, a month in to their 15-month deployment, as a replacement for a service member killed in action. Following his return from his first OIF deployment, Liam applied for and completed Army Reconnaissance training. His second OIF deployment was for 12 months as a non-

commissioned Officer (NCO) at the rank of E-5 (Sergeant) in the context of his battalion's reconnaissance scout platoon. Throughout the course of the interviews, Liam's deployment references are about his first OIF deployment. He only spoke once about his second deployment as a Recon NCO, noting that he was doing "mostly Black, airborne missions, so I didn't see a whole lot of direct action." Reconnaissance platoons are made up of small units whose primary mission is to conduct reconnaissance and surveillance, target acquisition, and combat assessment; which ultimately means covert missions behind enemy lines. This career designator is a highly intellectual specialty area, indicative of individuals with high resilience; both physical and psychological.

Liam returned from his second deployment in September of 2010; yet, he did not leave the Army to pursue his degree until 2012. The timeline of his return from deployment and this interview is roughly six years. Liam left the Army to pursue his undergraduate degree as a means towards advancement in the military and in greater society. At the time of the interview, he was 29 years old, and had completed his Bachelor's degree, double majoring in Psychology and Philosophy. He was working a full-time job with a local business after having taken the LSAT, but ultimately trying to decide his direction in graduate school; also considering psychological sciences. At the time, Liam was un-married, with no children, and with family in state: his parents and his twin sister. Liam later noted that the same day he chose to participate in this study, he had also presented to a Recruiter's office to "test the waters" and determine routes for Officer Candidacy in Army Special Forces.

Empathy as a Catalyst for Effective Navigation of PTEs.

Throughout Liam's depiction of his lived experience prior to, in the military, during combat, and in the academic environment; he demonstrated an astute sense of empathy for both individuals and the culture that surrounded him. In the context of the de-humanizing process that is combat infantry training, Liam seemed to find a balance between trained emotional narrowing that made him mission capable, and a personal stronghold on his own humanity. Generally, we see this in his over-arching purpose towards expanded world-view; specifically, we are exposed to this through his self-analysis of traumatic experiences and how he responded internally. His memories elicited his personal process of understanding, awareness, sensitivity, and vicarious experiencing of the feelings and thoughts of others; whether it be his own brotherhood, enemy combatants, Iraqi or American civilians. This endeavor and experience in empathy contributed to his personal growth as he reconciled his transition and the adjustment to life after combat.

First, Liam's marked *self-awareness,* helped him to manage his own sense of humanity during the de-humanizing process that is combat training. Liam initially related this through his process of joining the Army, and in his reasoning. Discussing why he waited several years after high school to join, Liam shared, "I hadn't fully committed to the idea. The idea of doing this for four, five, six years. It's a big commitment. Not only time-wise; basically, you are signing your life away not knowing what to expect, and there is no way to know." This statement indicates that Liam knew the gravity of the decision he was making and that his purpose in making it needed to be clear. He further shared about his purpose, possibly being different from most, but also being grounded in growth. He shared about the majority seeking combat versus himself: "I think a lot of

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guys just want that (violence). They want to be Chuck Norris, you know what I mean!? In the action, for the adrenaline rush. That's not why I joined. I joined to serve my country." Further discussion on why he chose to join the infantry, expands on his reasoning to follow in his father's footsteps, by depicting a deeper level of self-analysis and how he hoped to personally grow. Liam shared, "The fact that I went infantry, in my own mind, I felt that if I wasn't on the ground, in the population, the culture, the action, then I wouldn't be serving to my full potential. I wanted to get the full Army experience." He then expounded on what that full experience meant to him: "I think it was just enhanced. I have always had that mentality and that was one of the major reasons I was drawn to the military. I wanted to get out and experience other cultures, and the Army was a means to do so." Liam had significant insight as to his purpose and what he was seeking; his value for a broader world perspective and understanding of culture. This self-awareness and value for growth aided his experience in basic training.

The purpose and process of boot-camp, "basic" training, and infantry school is generalized as one of de-humanization. Concepts such as emotional narrowing, reinforcement of anger and aggression, breaking down the self, using violence and physical exhaustion to harden, and more, are all a part of the process of making an individual capable of performing and surviving in combat. Liam acknowledged the purpose: "That's what they want. In the infantry, for sure, that's what they want. They want a killer." Liam seemed to strike a balance between his acknowledgment of this and maintained humanity, through his self-awareness in the process, as well as his role and purpose. He shared, "I went through a real transition in Basic. I think a lot of guys do. It really messed with me a lot emotionally. You are trained… you are trained so much, just

to be a killer." Liam depicted this transition as primarily an emotional one. He then provided a glimpse into his cognitive process of re-framing:

> "Growing up I never saw myself as having to do that. In Christianity you are taught that its wrong, as a society we are taught that its wrong: to kill people. You go through a transition where it really hits you. The realization of, I'm going to have to do this when the time comes… and it hardens you. It's been a long process in the military of growing apart from that whole aspect of life."

Liam depicted self-awareness of his own process of becoming capable of killing, and how this is a psychological transition marked by shift in thinking and emotion. Yet, he expressed that it was also a time of growth. Liam stated, "If I was to compare physical and mental strength, I would say that mental was the weak side of what I had to endure, or what I had to do, especially in Basic. I think that's where I grew the most." Through his own self-analysis and awareness, he is able to elicit growth factors based in mental strength. The hardening process of Basic came with positives: self-reliance, maturity, confidence, grit, identity, and shared culture, all to the benefit of being capable of performing a mission and staying alive; however, often at the long-term cost of emotional foreclosure. Emotional foreclosure, not unlike identity foreclosure, is used to depict the stripping of emotion at every level; experiencing, processing, and expressing, that the military culture promotes, trains, and is reinforced in combat. Liam navigated this hardening of human-ness with a strong self-awareness of his foundational morals, values, and purpose. He shared, "One of my biggest blessings was that I've had good parents with strong morals, instilled in me at a young age," and "I knew that I would change, I hoped that I would change. That was one of the reasons I joined, was to better myself, and to change in some way."

As an extension of this astute self-awareness, Liam was also aware of the experience his peers were going through. He shared about the very first interpersonal interaction he had upon arriving at basic training:

> "This is going to sound bad, I actually got into a fight the first day I was there, with some guy from New York. I have no idea why to this day. You saw this to an extent because everyone is so stressed out, everyone is going through the whole shock of joining. Dealing with the certain type that joins, Alpha types… you butt heads. But you quickly learn that you can't be that way in the military. They push teamwork and working together so hard in the military because no one person functions at that capacity on a day to day basis. Physically, mentally, all of it combined; they give you un-accomplishable tasks… you can't do it. But that's not the point, the point is figuring out how to work together, surviving together."

Not only is this an acknowledgment of the purpose and impact of military basic training, but Liam showed marked awareness of the experience of others. He shared about two norms of the culture and process: "The whole culture is very fowl. I don't mean it in a bad way, but it's rough and tough. You know, the Drill Sergeants are always cussing you out and yelling," and "People aren't used to that. I had to deal with it on an individual level. Having people yell at me constantly. I don't think that's something anyone is used to. It just changes you." While Liam stated that he coped with this individually and internally, he also recognized the broader impact on a person, any person, in terms of humanity. He noted as a result of this process, "I saw a lot of guys that couldn't go through with it. They got weeded out in the process." Constant beratement and the use of yelling, is used as a catalyst for hardening, or emotional numbing. The other norm that challenges one's humanity Liam related, is that of learning close quarter combatives: "Having to learn to toughen up. I saw a lot of guys who really struggled when we had to learn how to do combatives. I got into my fair share of scuffles in high school. A lot of

these guys, I don't think ever had gotten into a confrontation in their life." Close quarter

combatives, or hand-to-hand, are the foundation of creating an aggressor, and it is close

in the interpersonal sense. It brings the individual face to face with another human whom

the aim is to physically harm. Liam is a keen observer of human behavior, in terms of his

assessment of his peers' emotional experience during this process.

Thus, Liam appeared to have a deeper sense of self prior to joining, but also

manifesting during the early phases of military indoctrination. He depicted an awareness

of the challenge to his own humanity and how this impacted him cognitively and

emotionally. Furthermore, he seemed to observe and aim to understand the experiences of

his peers. Liam, while acknowledging a change in his humanity, seemed to have such a

foundation in self-awareness that his empathy for those around him, the human

experience in general, was not compromised.

Second, empathy was an important factor in Liam's *analysis of potentially*

traumatic events. In other words, as Liam reasoned with PTE's, he used empathy as one

of his criterions for understanding the experience. The first major experience where Liam

applied this, is in the context of his pre-deployment training and thus, prior to any PTE on

deployment. Liam had the unique experience of completing pre-deployment training

while his unit was already actively deployed in Iraq. He shared about his experience:

> "It really set in. Every week there was a funeral of someone who had been killed over there from my unit. That was when a lot of guys looked at one another and said, this shit is for real. This isn't a game. This is real life. That's when reality set in. It was pretty intense stuff because you are going through training and they are setting it in hard, because they know that if you are not ready, you are going to cause something to happen and get yourself killed. So, you're doing that, and then going to funerals… I probably went to four or five funerals the

entire three to four weeks I was there. Of guys that were coming back from my unit in Iraq. That was the changing point, when I realized what I was in for."

This represented a significant exposure to the reality of combat; an expectation that death is a normal outcome of the profession, prior to being deployed or even being with his unit. Liam shared that he coped with this by making sure that he was proficient in his training, and thus, an effective team member. He shared, "I wanted to be as tactically ready as possible. I had to take, completely seriously, the training." He goes on to share the purpose of this being related to the team: "You don't want to be that guy whose gun malfunctions in the middle of a fire-fight, then you cause somebody to get injured or worse. You don't want that on your shoulders." His coping was adaptive, by focusing on what was controllable; his proficiency at training, but also in the context of integrating into the team. This came full circle when Liam joins his unit. He reflected on his experiences and his integration process to the unit, with empathy for his team members:

> "Most of these guys had trained up together for two years before deploying. I was a replacement. Also, these guys had been in the heat for a minute whenever I came in. I replaced one of the guys they lost that was sniper shot. That was tough. My team leaders and two other guys had lost this guy, and here I was, coming in I had some pretty big shoes to fill. That was hard. Hard to see them, because it was rough for them. So, I kept my mouth shut and did my job. I had to make sure I didn't do anything to screw up."

Liam entered into an established tribe, in the context of a traumatic loss of one of the members, and as the replacement for this member. He further noted being treated roughly, and that he "didn't talk to anybody" for months because he was the new guy. Yet, he did not relate resentment, rather he was able to observe the emotional toll and evaluate his own experience out of empathy for the team. In relating this story, when

Liam shared, "I was following in someone's shoes who had been killed… and it was tough," he became tearful in the interview. He later shared that his tearfulness was for the individual lost and the experience of his unit.

When asked about the combat experience that stands out or remains with him in memory, Liam offered the most "traumatic" experiences per his own perception. While the depiction certainly meets DSM-V criteria for a traumatic event, Liam's perception of it as traumatic is marked by something entirely different. Liam shared,

> "This guy grabbed my buddy. It's interesting because I'm sitting out in the yard, and it's a real small area, and I can see up on the roof, so I'm watching this entire thing go down. This guy comes around the back and he climbs on the roof, and right as I shout, 'Hey, this guy is coming,' B team comes through and this guy grabs Sgt. Griffs' rifle and sends a fucking… well, he sends a couple of rounds. My other buddy then comes right behind him with an automatic machine gun, and just lights this guy up. I'm sitting there. Like a movie. Just watching this entire thing go down. The guy has a suicide vest on, but it didn't explode. It actually catches on fire, I guess from all the rounds, and this guy just goes up in flames. Afterwards, we had to pull him out, and he was burnt to a crisp. It was the most graphic thing I had ever seen in my life. But… after the fact, all I could think was… the only thing that shocked me was how not shocking it was. If that makes sense. I was surprised by how not surprising it was."

This depiction could be interpreted, alone, as an example of emotional numbing. However, Liam's evaluation of what makes the event traumatic for him, is the void of an emotional connection. He has been trained to be emotionally numb, to expect scenarios such as this, and thus be capable of reacting effectively and swiftly. He is capable of this because of his training, but he is also significantly aware of his own lack of emotionality. This is in the moment awareness of emotional numbing in the context of an event that would engender strong emotions as a human, or through the shared experience of complex loss of human life. To a degree, it represents a deeper level of emotional

processing; self-empathy, with which he analyzes his experience. He questioned both himself and the interviewer, "The first time you see someone get killed, what do you think is going to happen?" and then after some silence, related:

> "I always thought that it was going to be like fireworks going off. I know this might be crossing a line, but I didn't experience anything. I didn't feel anything for this guy, and it ticked me off. I was like, 'why am I not feeling anything right now, why am I not feeling anything more?' It was a very existential moment."

The critical factor here is not what emotion he was anticipating he would feel, but that he anticipated he would feel an emotion at all; more so, a powerful and validating emotion. His awareness of this in the moment is also important, because he is fully aware of the loss of his humanity in the moment, and is thus able to evaluate the traumatic event as it relates to implications on his self-schema.

Lastly, Liam shared about a variety of PTE's in the context of normal or re-current combat deployment experiences. His evaluation of these events is relevant for the empathy he displayed for others; both potential combatants and Iraqi civilians. For example, in the context of identifying informants and gathering intel, he shared,

> "The women. They would cry very loudly, they would scream very loudly. It's all in Arabic, so you can't understand… but it was tormenting to listen to. You know, we are taking their son or their husband, whether they are guilty or not, no person wants them to go."

This is a stark, sensory-related memory, indicative of the reality of a combat zone in the midst of families and their home. Liam evaluated this from a perspective of humanity and empathy. In the context of clearing houses, Liam shared: "It's different every time, but

one thing I always noticed was the babies. The babies would always be on the floor. Along with everything else you are watching for, you have to look down. I didn't want to step on a baby." This being one of the more impactful memories that Liam shared from sweeping homes, which is a highly dangerous scenario. The purpose is to flush out and kill combatants, and what he remembers the most is something so foundational to humanity. This paints a picture of the paradox that is asked of our soldiers, what they confront on a normal basis; being mission effective while also considering humanity. Liam's value for looking down for the presence of babies, very well could have gotten him killed. Lastly, he related experiences of cultural awareness and empathy for the community: "IED's were the biggest problem, so we spent a lot of time trying to track down who was setting them. The families in the town, were hesitant. Very hesitant to talk to us. The rate of murder they were seeing in their own families, just for opening up their mouths." In the context of the most dangerous issue, the one that took the most life, Liam managed to find empathy for the experience of the proposed enemy. He further shared, "These guys wanted to resist, but didn't for very long. Most people didn't because we are big green giants walking around over there. They couldn't compete with us, you know? What are they going to do?" His application of what may be the visual imagery of the local population, seems to be indicative of his own endeavor to understand their perspective.

Outside of the context of PTE's, Liam continued to relate the importance of empathy in his experiences and how it imbued his moral code. He depicted respect for human life and the conscious effort that is required of the American soldier when he shared about the advice he would give to future soldiers. He related,

"Making absolutely certain that the person is hostile before pulling the trigger. That's one of the biggest things' units have trouble with, is guys not being aware. If he's an insurgent, how do you know? How do you deal with them? That is one of the major things I would make sure you are up to par on and trained. Something you must be competent in."

Liam answered in this way when asked about the advice he would give for coping with the situation of clearing a home. The answer he related is inherently moral and marked by empathy for others and respect for human life. It may seem obvious, but in the chaos of combat, this is often not a priority, and often not a priority for reasons of self-preservation and learned negative results. Liam depicted significant respect for human life, and even related that his own sense of morale was most fulfilled when he saw improvement in the local populace. He shared,

"When we first went in, nobody was coming out of their houses. Might have been a combination of both our presence and there was a huge Al Qaeda stronghold in the city. After the operation, we saw a real change. People started coming out, they started coming up to us… actively approaching us. Especially the kids. They would run up to us and ask for all sorts of things; they loved candy and pencils. That was something that really stuck out to me. In my mind, and to a lot of other soldiers' minds, it was a morale boost. To not only think we were there to do something good, but to see it happen."

This meaningful interaction with the civilian population directly related to his maintained purpose and morale. It is a glimpse of his humanity as it relates to the people and culture of the environment around him.

Liam consistently demonstrated the use of empathy in his analysis of traumatic and potentially traumatic events. This inherently colored the development of his self-schema, as well as that of his schema for others. Additionally, it appears to be what drove him motivationally as a soldier, in terms of his tactical training and combatant

identification. Thus, it developed as the connection, or the string, that tied his humanity to his occupation. Significantly, it became a major factor in the development of his world-view, and ultimately, his post-combat experience.

Third, empathy and cultural awareness from combat *imbued his world-view* and influenced his ability to cope with transition and the aftermath from combat. Liam depicted a reflection from his interactions with Officers or more generally, his peers who had college degrees, and that his observation of them was their "open-mindedness." Liam credited the military for this exposure:

> "I think that is something that grew on me in the military, the love of learning. It wasn't something I grew up thinking I could do, but most of the guys I knew that had college degrees, they were intelligent and fun to talk to, and pretty open-minded. I guess I was curious as to why that was. Something that I wanted to be like, and learn to have an open mind like that."

He shared that this became an important part of his pursuit of higher education, was to learn awareness and appreciation of others and their belief systems. More so, Liam expressed that while he had always valued pursuit of greater life experiences, he had never been exposed to different cultures. He shared, "A weakness is that I was pretty sheltered growing up. Getting thrown in there with new people, from every part of the U.S., and other places in the World. Breaking those cultural barriers and really learning the way other people think. It's a strength now." Thus, Liam further credited the military environment for being a cultural melting pot where he was exposed to diversity of people and thought.

These foundational experiences in the military, reinforced with those he is exposed to on deployment played an important role in the development of his worldview

through the lens of empathy. In fact, Liam directly addressed a stereotype of the greater

military mob-mentality or group think:

> "I don't have an issue with people being, or believing in whatever you believe in. But when you start degrading people and shutting them out just because they have another way of thinking; even when they are not harming you in the least, that's where I really take issue. It's a weird sort of paradoxical thing that happened in the military, because a lot of people see the military as this close-minded, imperial… whatever, like we are trying to take over the world. I didn't experience it like that at all."

This is an interesting depiction of the paradox within military culture: that it is a rigid

hierarchy founded on duty to follow orders, but that it also engenders an expansion of

worldview and open-mindedness to other people and cultures. He further shared thinking

that this impacts most who have deployed and seen combat; "They would say the same

thing. It really broadens your perspective… deep down, you understand." This growth

and changed world-view is something that Liam then translated into his academic

environment. In fact, he actively sought out these cultural experiences. He shared, "It

might just be my personality, I love different cultures. I've had Nigerian roommate, a

roommate from China. I just like to experience it." The following anecdote offered by

Liam displayed this on a much deeper level:

> "There is an international food festival every year. I don't know what came over me, but I decided to go and went by myself. I'm not saying I don't know what came over me in terms of why I went. I know why I went; to have a bunch of really good food. At the end, I was drawn towards this dance that they have. A bunch of Middle Easterners, Iraqis, and I think there were a lot of Kuwaitis. They have this dance at the end, or they all just get out there and start dancing. So, I just went, and I started hanging out with them, and I don't know why, but I just wanted to be around it. I think that I missed it maybe. I missed the experience of seeing something other than our own culture. Is that weird? It's extremely weird to me, because I thought about it later and was like 'what the hell was I thinking?' In fact, I don't know if I was trying to take a risk, or if I was just

wanting to relate to them on a different level. I ended up hanging out with them, about five of these Iraqi guys."

Given the role of empathy for others, and Liam's personal pursuit of a greater world-view through cultural experiences and awareness, this seeking of relatedness appears genuine. It may be that "if I was just wanting to relate to them on a different level," is his mechanism for a corrective experience. An experience that allows him to cognitively re-frame past trauma experiences within the culture. His empathy and passion for cultural awareness thus directly contributed to his healing and growth process.

Fourth, Liam approached life with this expanded worldview and empathy for others, as both a coping mechanism and a *means to evaluate* sources of emotional distress. When asked about difficulties with transition out of the military and associated distress, Liam shared, "This existential perspective on life. I may have been in the Army and may have done this or that, or been over there, but everybody else, they have to deal with issues in their life too. Everybody has to deal with issues, that's just a part of life;" and furthermore, "If you approach life with that mentality, then it helps you to not be so high and mighty. It really humbles you and you realize that everyone has to live life together. We are all in this thing together." This was a direct response to dealing with interpersonal differences between himself and civilians, especially his peers in school. He takes an empathic approach considering the experiences of others, without comparing them to his. A final example on the topic of his experience when being thanked by civilians for his service, Liam shared, "At one point I think I went through a phase where it bothered me, but then I began to step back and think, they are just doing what they are

supposed to be doing in their mind." He responded to interpersonal friction, often of the nature of civilian's not understanding Veterans, through empathy.

This empathic lens and change in world-view, specifically, his appreciation for other people and cultures; however, was also a source of distress. While he experienced empathy for others, this did not fully translate to experiences of relatedness or more so, connectedness; particularly in his own family. In other words, while he may accept others for their experiences, he does not seek deeper relationships with them. While Liam did not share specifics, he discussed the separation he feels between himself and people from his past, as a result of this change in worldview and personal growth. He noted specifically about his age peer group, "You just get disconnected and it's hard to get connected with those people again. You can't relate to them fully because they haven't served, they haven't been out to see the world like you have. They are still talking about stuff that you just can't relate to." Liam expressed that this shift in worldview is in parallel with a different level of maturity, and that as a result, he was unable to relate to friends from the past. With regard to his family, Liam shared that even with his fraternal twin, he was at the time actively trying to manage their relationship. He shared that overall,

> "I went off to the Army. I think she probably has always wanted to be closer, but within the last few years I've been stand-offish with my family. I think that one, values, two, my own personal issues, and three that life has just made us grow apart. I think she is proud of me, maybe a tad envious of me getting to experience some of the stuff I have. I think I've maybe rubbed that in her face a time or two when I shouldn't have."

Here Liam recognized that his values had shifted as a result of his military and combat experiences, and ultimately his change in worldview. He indicated that this has been cause for conflict in his familial relationships. He further shared,

> "Theological and philosophical differences that in a way have to do with the military. My experiences altered my perception of life. They don't get that because they haven't experienced it. How you feel about something is your opinion. This isn't my opinion, I've literally experienced it, and you haven't. You've been stuck here in this mindset. You haven't had the chance to think about it in a different way."

Liam's combat and deployment experiences significantly altered his perceptions and worldview. He alluded to an experience that does not exist in the American context, and that this friction emerged upon reintegration to that context; especially with familial relationships. While Liam used empathy as a protective mechanism to these frictions; when those frictions threaten his moral code, as they seem to have done with his family, he distanced himself from the relationship. He further alluded to this in the context of the distance between himself and his family as a first-generation college student. He shared,

> "It's hard, because neither one of my parents are college educated. I think me going to college… it's gotten a lot better in the last couple of years, but initially, me going to school, they struggled with it. Things that I wanted to talk about, they couldn't, they really didn't know how or what I was even talking about. I feel like I have to walk on eggshells when I'm around."

Thus, Liam's change in worldview, the empathic lens with which he approaches others, significantly changed his values and beliefs and ultimately, moral code. While this process is the same that he uses to cope with transitional interpersonal adversity, it is also a significant source of distress within his family, due to difference in moral tenants.

The military environment and culture; specifically, Liam's combat and deployment experiences, are the catalyst for his development of schema surrounding self, others, and the world. His natural empathy for others, and his passion for broadening his worldview and understanding of culture, allowed him to maintain his humanity in a context that often strips it. The result is that Liam was better able to cope with interpersonal adversity as he reconciled his life after combat. Yet, as the PTG model proposes, positive changes are usually in the context of negative results as well. Liam experienced a threat to his changed moral code by his own family, resulting in a decrease in connectedness with these relationships. Interestingly, he credited a marked amount of his success in navigating this to his military and combat experience, which is further echoed in the second theme.

Self-Reliance Supports Later Life Transition.

Throughout Liam's depiction of his lived experience, he credited the military and his combat experiences for fostering personal growth. Specifically, he portrayed the military as the catalyst for his own autonomy, competence, and relatedness; ultimately self-determination and the presence of strong intrinsic motivation per Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory (2000). This manifests as a major resilience and growth factor for Liam, as he consistently demonstrated self-reliance and internal locus of control, as well as an acceptance-based style of thinking rooted in his own "existential" worldview. These attributes contributed not only to his growth in the military, but also to his ability to navigate later life transition. While these important characteristics didn't absolve the distress and adversity he faced transitioning out of the Army, they did act as the groundwork for coping and the structure for meaning making.

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First, the military environment and hardship of combat *fostered self-determination*, leading to personal growth in the form of self-reliance. Liam reflected on his reasons for joining the military with regard to seeking his place, and receiving autonomy, competence, and relatedness. He spoke to seeking a direction and establishing himself in a more significant way to society: "To find that direction. I didn't feel like I was reaching my full potential. I started thinking: what have I always wanted, what is going on within our country, our society. At that time, it was 2006 and the war in Iraq was really popping off." He shared viewing the military as a structured environment that would orient him to a place where he belonged: "I think I felt lost back then. I wasn't goal-oriented or had a direction I was going;" and "I retracted back to my roots. I was living like trash, and I wanted to do something with a purpose with people who wanted that purpose too." He further spoke to his own perceived weakness interpersonally: "That was one of my biggest struggles, being able to communicate sufficiently with people. I was always quiet and reserved." Importantly, Liam shared that simply in signing up for Army Infantry deepened his relatedness with his father: "Once my Dad accepted that I was doing it, he started connecting with me on a level he never had. He opened up to me like never before. I don't think we had ever had that connection." Liam actively sought an environment and culture where he could establish himself in this way. He attested to the result with this powerful statement:

> "It instills a passion within you. There is something on deployments that… you are dealing with life and death. I don't think you will have ever lived as much as you will within a combat situation. I don't think you will have ever experienced that connection with your brothers next to you."

Liam found his purpose in the military; fulfilling the areas of choice in life direction, expertise in an area important to you, and deeper more meaningful relationships. His motivation in the military was marked by intrinsic factors which engender self-determination; ultimately trust in himself.

Liam shared that the military process of building warriors, followed by the extreme and reinforcing trials of combat, are what developed his sense of self, in the way of reliance and locus of control. He related that this begins in Basic Training: "Nobody has the right mentality when they join. That's the point of going through Basic; but I knew what I wanted to do and that I could do it." He shared this to reinforce that starting with Basic Training, the military is unlike any challenge one will face; the mentality is inherently different from anything in the civilian world. He shared to this point, "The military has really done that. Through training, physical pain, suffering… physical and mental suffering; you realize what you can take." This is the mechanism for expansion of self in terms of confidence and expectations, and it often is parallel with rapid maturation. He furthers this by sharing reflections on his growth:

> "Realizing I was capable of more than I thought. It's instilled in you in the military; realizing you can do a lot more than you think you can. Mentally, physically, emotionally; you can and you will handle a lot more. If you can push yourself to those limits, you realize we are pretty amazing as human beings."

Here he discussed the gauntlet that the military is in terms of pushing an individual to their physical and psychological limits. This is then reinforced by combat experiences: "It all comes together after combat, or at the same time… You realize your limits and then you see what you can do with those limits. I think a lot of people don't ever make that observation to begin with." For Liam, combat is the ultimate reinforcement of his

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capabilities learned in military training. He alluded to the perception that combat is the pinnacle of human experience with self-acknowledgment; both positive and negative.

While Liam's growth process surrounding self-reliance is ongoing, it became a major mechanism of coping with circumstances of combat; threats and environment, as he learned to accept what he could not control. He shared, "You have to do it within yourself. It's a realization that everything you need to be happy you have already on you. I think that the military, especially on deployments, does a good job of instilling that." This internal locus of control then provided a lens for Liam to view his circumstances and the events of deployment. Liam recognized that much of the distress in combat is related to uncontrollable circumstances; such as, the environment. He shared about the impact of the environment in Iraq: "All your days run together. I think I went a month out there at the JFOB, no shower. Not an exaggeration, I counted. 28 days of no shower and no air conditioning, in the middle of the summer;" "It's funny, you really don't think about how important electricity is until you don't have it;" "You can't even describe how hot it gets in Iraq. They kept knocking our power out, they would drop mortars to kill our generators. No air conditioning, no cold water;" "We would sleep on cots, and a lot of times you wouldn't even change out of your clothes;" and finally, "Three platoons working out of this fortified building in the middle of the city. A city of 70 to 80,000 people and dense, like New York. It was a stronghold of Al Qaeda at the time, and that's where we lived." When asked about how he coped with the environmental stressors, and even the reality of living and working out of a small building in the middle of enemy territory, Liam shared,

"My first deployment gave me this stoic mindset, in regard to how I approached my second, and life in general. In other words, I chose to join the Army. I knew there was a good possibility that I would be deployed to a combat zone. Therefore, I had to accept any situation I found myself in as a result of that decision."

Liam's growth in Basic and early training lends to his self-reliance; which then allows him to better cope with the realities of combat through reliance on self and things within his control, and acceptance of those things not in his control.

This mindset is not only applied to the stark environmental stressors of combat, but also to several key experiences that make up potentially traumatic events for Liam. Liam was confronted with the broader, significant reality of death prior to even leaving for deployment. He shared, "I kind of knew what to expect because of the amount of casualties we were getting, and because of how serious my leadership was. It was the summer of 2007, probably the hottest time of the entire war, during the surge." As Liam's empathy was previously discussed as a major protective and resilience factor to this, his internal locus of control and acceptance-based thinking also played a strong role. In general, he shared,

> "I think they wouldn't be able to get people over there if they knew how bad it was going to be… but you get to a point where that stops mattering. You don't worry because if it's going to happen, it's going to happen. You are there anyways, so the more you worry, the harder it's going to be for you and everyone else around you. It's something you learn to put away or bury down."

This is the epitome of the acceptance-commitment model, in that he accepts a reality and commits to a value-based or norm-based action. Acceptance of the fear and reality of death is a major theme with regard to preparing people for action in combat. He shared

how his mindset allowed him to cope with this as he discussed a specific, but also common threat to life: "You don't have time to worry about a sniper. Yeah, you are looking for the sniper, but if you get shot, that's not something you can predict. It's something you can't worry about because you are so worried about everything else with your job." Self-reliance, internal locus of control, and acceptance liberate cognitive functioning to be directed towards more task-specific foci; namely, mission orientation. Focus is always on the mission, and you can always find a gun to clean. For example, when asked about how he coped with constant barrage of artillery, rocket or mortar fire, Liam shared, "Count your lucky stars. I'm serious! That's just something that has your name on it or not. Just make sure you are doing everything you are supposed to be doing. Grab your mitch, make sure you have your helmet on, get in a place away from walls… fall back on your training." To some degree, mission focus may be the ability to naturally fall back on training in a time of high combat stress. Ultimately, this ability could be life-saving, and is certainly conducive to the military mission.

In particular, Liam recounted the first combat event from deployment where he experienced a close call with his life. He shared that this event, set the tempo for his mindset with regard to other potentially traumatic events; meaning, it was the first encounter where he realized he would need to focus on what he could control, and accept his circumstances. Liam shared:

> "We are a stryker platoon: 8-wheeled vehicles with drop down in the back. Squad carrying, meant for urban warfare, they were made for Iraq. To pull up to a house, drop the ass down, drop the back down, and drop a squad of infantrymen out very quickly. The first night we went out to our JFOB, it takes us all night long to get there because of the amount of IED's on the road. We ran into three different set ups of IEDs, no exaggeration. It's a matter of having to call EOD to come out and blow 'em, then moving forward. We didn't hit any of them… I

can't even describe how ridiculous I thought it was, like this was insane. Wondering if this was how it was going to be the whole time. So, we finally get there and pull into the motor pool area and go to park, and as soon as the ramp drops down and we jump out the back, an RPG comes flying in and hits the barrier right next to my stryker. (pause). That was my welcome to Iraq. It set me off with an idea of what was going to happen."

Experiencing several intense threats to life in the first day of his arrival on deployment and before he even connected with his unit at the JFOB, set the tone for Liam and his mindset. The early experience seems to have reinforced those previously discussed, while still state-side. Finally, when asked about the other major trauma event that many experience in combat: the loss of a brother - Liam again shared a perspective based in accepting what cannot be controlled. His mindset and ability to reason in this way, is significant, as we know that trauma disorders are developed in part due to maladaptive or faulty cognitive evaluations of an event; often personalizing or internalizing control. Liam stated, "We did lose guys… we did have to engage the enemy and we were shot at. I didn't take them personally. During the actual event, you don't have time to think about all that stuff." He acknowledged the void of time for processing an event like this, but then also managed to hold the outcome of the event as external to his control. Even in the immediate aftermath and confusion, Liam maintained his mindset:

"The hardest is losing a guy… you see the emotional reactions of the guys around you; it just makes you angry. Angry maybe at the guy who did it, but I think more so it's the fact that you think, 'what the hell is going on?' Then you realize… this is what I signed up for, this is what we are doing. This is war."

This process of pushing ones' self to the limit in the context of combat, resulted for Liam in an increased self-reliance with regard to his mindset and how he managed to

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perform and cope. Ultimately, Liam shared that the outcome of this is an "existential"

world-view marked by realistic thinking. Liam described this experience and the result:

> "The ways through which I have found meaning out of all of this is this existential mindset that it gives you. I guess they are one in the same; this realistic outlook on everything. I think that in a sense, existentialism comes from that realistic mindset… that you realize you can do a lot. You can be whoever you want to be; but, at the same time, you realize that things are the way they are and you have to accept those things."

The military and combat were a proving ground for Liam, laden with adversity and

challenge. Liam depicted his personal growth from these experiences; specifically

acknowledging the role that self-reliance and acceptance played on his development and

the way he navigated combat and potential trauma. The context of combat is an

environment laden with challenges, and we see from Liam that he manifested a primary

source of support for these challenges from his own self-acknowledgment. This has a

significant influence not only on Liam's schema about self, but also regarding others, and

the world, as it forms the basis for his post-combat journey. He shared,

> "The existentialism you gain from the military. You realize you create your own happiness. There is no way I would have thought I would ever go to college. I started to realize, I could do whatever I wanted to do. What's the saying? The world is your oyster? I think there is a lot of truth to that; you just have to be willing to put in the effort."

This mindset marks Liam's growth and his pursuit of personal change. It manifested in

the form of self-determination, and played a significant role in his success with later life

transition.

Second, Liam's self-determination developed in the military context *supported later life transition*. Just as this self-determination was forged by adversity and challenge in the Army and in combat, his later life transition is marked by significant distress that both challenged and reinforced his ability to cope. Liam is forced to re-navigate adversity, experience significant distress, and learn to apply his mindset; both self-reliance and acceptance, to a new context. Transitional adversity manifested in broad-based cultural differences between civilian and military; social and demographic differences; and ultimately different ways of thinking.

Liam first acknowledged the more broad-based friction between civilian and military culture even prior to his transition in the academic environment. He recalled vividly his experience coming home on mid-deployment leave; early OIF intervention for long deployments, essentially amounting to a two-week hiatus from combat. Liam shared,

> "From late September to early October I went on mid-tour leave. I came back to the U.S. It was intense! They get you in a Blackhawk, fly you to Kuwait, and then back home. It was like a dream. Even though I had been deployed for like four months, it felt like a lifetime. So much of me had changed. Coming back, I remember standing in the airport looking at people, imagining what I had just come from, and people are just… unaware. Unaware of what I had just done. It was intense."

Notably, Liam depicted that the intensity of combat means that time is a non-factor. He has changed as a person, but when confronted with the majority way of life in the U.S., he realized his experiences and his change are non-factors to society. The great chasm between civilian society and his reality in combat become apparent. This often contributes to a distancing from civilian society and even important individuals. For

Liam, he shared about how he chose to sever a connection with his family while on deployment:

> "I got to where I didn't even care, to be honest. I didn't care if I talked to anybody from home. I think a lot of guys got that way. You want to get through it and not worry about home, but really I didn't have much to say to them. I can't tell them what I've been doing and they wouldn't want to hear about it anyways."

While this is a specific example portraying Liam's decision not to call home while on deployment, it appears to stem from three domains of separation: the psycho-emotional that arises as a result of exposure to combat, the geographical distance of deployment, as well as the cultural separation which engenders lack of understanding. While it may be that Liam spoke specifically about his family in regards to the previous discussion on moral friction, he conceptualized the greater problem with cultural distance between veterans and society. Liam shared his perspective on this with regard to the problem that many combat veterans face:

> "We still managed to survive, if not be happy to some extent. We still managed to find meaning, and we managed to relate to each other and be there for each other. In those types of environments that are so… But then, you come back to a society where if you don't have a 100,000-dollar car or you aren't living in a million-dollar mansion, then you aren't happy. You know, that doesn't make sense. It's a problem with society. Not veterans, because veterans realize it."

This serves as a glimpse into Liam's perspective on the value-based differences between civilian society and the combat community. It is a stark realization, that he experienced purpose, meaning, and brotherhood (relatedness and connection) all in an environment marked by chaos and starkness; where death and trauma are not just reality, but expectations. It is the integration into a society that is void of this reality; thus,

prioritizing different values and means, whereupon he experienced a significant enough level of adversity to challenge and subsume his being.

This cultural chasm and the friction that occurred as Liam aimed to reintegrate successfully was both the aspect that overwhelmed his ability to cope, and what caused him to seek personal growth. Liam shared his summation; his personal journey, imbued with his own theory of what PTSD is in the combat community:

> "If you have experienced this sort of passion in your life, and then you come back to a society where you don't see that, it isn't the norm, then it really bugs you. I think that's the reason guys go through so many issues. PTSD is the realization that you will never be that great again. I think if you accept that, then you are already defeated. What is PTSD really? A traumatic experience, that's one thing. A deployment, that's a completely different animal all together. Military life, that's something else. So, we have all these different things we are trying to deal with and we label it this one thing: PTSD. I think that's a huge issue. Ten percent of military sees combat. Less than one percent of American society even goes into the military. So now you are talking about fractions and fractions of people who will ever experience that. Now you have all these great things, these different perspectives, but nobody cares, because they don't know where you have been. They are like, 'who is this guy, some crazy vet?' That's what is so frustrating to guys. They get out and all they can do, or what they have left, is this sort of retaliation. The 'oh fuck you civilians' because they don't get it. Now vets are painted in this horrible picture."

Thus, PTSD becomes a moniker for trauma but also deployment and the military culture and lifestyle; but, only upon reintegration to civilian society. This became Liam's reality, but also his motivation to pursue purpose outside of the military. The struggle is not in recovery from combat-trauma, it is much more complex, and having to do with reintegration to civilian society. Liam recognized this as he shared, "I didn't really see a lot of change until I got out of the military;" and furthermore, "A lot of this stuff doesn't occur to you until after you get out. There is a huge transition between the military and civilian world. Things you can't even think about. The world just sort of opens up to you.

You can go 100 different directions." It is this recognition that Liam portrayed the difficulties that he personally, and that many veterans, face. For instance, "It's a negative as well. I think it's one of the reasons why a lot of guys get out and end up homeless. They don't ever figure out a direction or purpose. They don't have someone to set up missions for them, and give a brief on what's going on tomorrow." Thus, while the loss of structure and hierarchy can be problematic for many, Liam pointed more so to the loss of purpose after the military. This combined with the lack of connectedness to others, and world-view differences, is the ultimate equation for inability to adjust, or even more significant impact of clinical mental health and suicide. On the other hand, Liam's lived experience is marked by prominence of acceptance; specifically, that the civilian society and individuals within, will never be able to relate. This acceptance in the context of cultural transition, appears to be a major threshold towards PTG.

Liam related the transitional adversity that he faced as a result of this separation. He shared with regard to the norm of combat culture for emotional narrowing that, "The entire process hardens you and makes you a little cold-hearted, and that's one of the biggest struggles, coming back from that." Meaning, that while this characteristic was important in combat scenarios; even life-saving, it becomes a source of distress when integrating with civilian society where interpersonal relationships do not value this. In fact, the opposite is valued for relationships and interpersonal norms and interactions. Further difficulty with relationships is depicted, "One of the biggest struggles is trying to connect with people. I've made efforts, but it's hard. I can go for one day and put on a face, and deal with these people; but if I have to do that day in and day out!? They are going to see through that." This is not about interpersonal skills for Liam, rather it's a

lack of connectedness. While he shared that some of this is demographic in nature, "It's hard to be their peer when you are so much older;" he ultimately related that it is about more than this: "They are your peers, so you talk to them like fellows, but then you are like 'why don't they get this?' You have to realize that they are not there yet, or never will be." He even shared inability to relate to those he had been close with, "I found I couldn't relate on that level to friends from home, or my parents. I found that I was taking my anger about this out on them, on those closest to me. My mom, the more she tried to get in to my life, the more I pushed her away." Thus, the response to this inability to connect is anger, and isolation. Anger resulted as this is the only emotion that has been normed in the military, and isolation occurred as Liam sought to distance himself from the people that elicited this friction and distress.

Liam shared that in the height of his difficulty with reintegration, his coping mechanisms were compromised. He shared "I had a lot of anger issues, just a build up inside. I was drinking a lot." He further noted, "I started to go down the wrong road. I was smoking marijuana to cope with my issues." He also related difficulty with mental health, "From when I got out just felt like a roller-coaster. Anxiety and depression back and forth." Ultimately in this context, Liam shared, "I remember being paranoid all the time. I don't know why or what I was paranoid about. I had my guns stored throughout my house. I was just expecting any moment that somebody was going to come through." He further reflected on his own experience navigating the aftermath of having gone through PTEs in combat: "It's why a lot of guys go through so many issues when they come back. You haven't had the time or luxury to deal with some of the stuff that you went through over there. Even the physical stuff. You haven't had time to reconcile it in

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your mind." Reintegration to civilian society, thus marks a time period and environment where there is direct confrontation with military norms and characteristics that don't apply in civilian society, and are even maladaptive. The quotes above are representative of four core factors to creating a warrior, all of which are fundamental in combat and detrimental in civilian society: anger and violence as a norm and professional mechanism, emotional foreclosure as a means to de-humanize and function in the face of trauma, paranoia as an adaptive mechanism for eternal vigilance, and work compulsion where all else is secondary to the mission. Liam's shift occurred with this self-acknowledgement: "That's not who I am. That's not the person I became in the military. There is a lot of good that comes in the military, but you have to learn to abstract it from all the negativity that goes along with it." This realization; ultimately a return to personal growth factors from combat and acceptance of a change in context, is what propelled Liam towards successfully navigating new adversity, and the PTG processes in full.

Third, in the context of overwhelming distress, Liam managed by translating his skill-sets in *self-reliance and acceptance-based thinking* towards his new context. Ultimately, he was driven to find an application of his world-view within his personal life and the academic environment; which is ultimately a new purpose for Liam. This he applied to his self and his home, interpersonal interactions, his past experiences and their current role in his life, and even his purpose moving forward.

Liam discussed how he first came to realize that the problem was within himself, and that he was the one that needed to work towards change. This represents a fundamental return to self-reliance, but marked by acknowledging the need for changing one's self. It further represents an intersection between self-reliance and self-

determination; which appear to majorly impact his experience. He shared, "I hit a point where I had to make changes. I was that low. I felt like I didn't have a purpose at all. I had to really do some soul searching and think about who I am as a person. Do I want to be this angry veteran that is living in the past?" Moreover, he also reflected on the interpersonal domain: "I found that I wasn't the person I wanted to be in my relationships." Thus, Liam began to seek personal change for the betterment of himself in civilian society; which ultimately contributed to his motivation for higher education and new-found purpose. He shared a significant question that he faced himself: "Death is something you deal with on a constant basis in the military. Something that you have to accept at an early stage. So, once you have accepted it, what's next? Well, life, now you get to live. So how are we going to do that, and find purpose?" This became critical to him on a personal level, in terms of growth. Liam shared his decision-making process to pursue his degree after leaving the military, "I realized from a mental maturity perspective, going to school would benefit me. I realized, I would never reach my full potential if I never had a formal education. I've gotten from college, not learning what to think, but how to think." This pursuit of personal change then put Liam on a path to finding his purpose. He shared, "One of the reasons I went to school and specifically pursued a degree in psychology is that not only was I dealing with some issues myself, but I'd seen a lot of other guys dealing with them too. I wanted to reconcile that. I wanted to figure out what was going on." Thus, Liam's purpose became about more than just himself, and extended into reconciling the major phenomenon of combat veterans struggles with mental health; his purpose became about his brotherhood.

This new-found purpose and path towards self-improvement in light of his struggles with reintegration created an opportunity for Liam to expand upon resilience factors learned in the military, and apply them in his new context. He fell back on his fundamental characteristics of self-reliance and acceptance. He both literally and figuratively began to open himself up to this new environment and culture. He shared,

> "One of the ways I've dealt with it is that I've made an effort to be more open. I left my doors unlocked, put my guns away, sort of opened up my blinds, things like that. I've really tried to open up to my environment and I think that's helped a lot. Because I think the more you close yourself off, the more paranoid you are going to be. Part of this is a trust thing. I'm putting trust in a society, that it is not as bad as those I've experienced."

Combat veterans have literally experienced the worst in humanity and society; which reinforces paranoia as a form of vigilance. They return to American society and are then expected to simply trust in people and society. Much of the distress reintegrating is related to the vulnerability that it takes to re-build this trust; opening one's self up to an environment, people, and society. Liam further rationalized this process through an acceptance-based lens. In other words, he recognized that he made the choice to leave the military and to put himself back in society. He discussed, "I realized it was something that I would just have to deal with. I put myself in this environment. I didn't have to go to school, I chose to go to school. You have to make that acceptance at an early stage;" which is parallel to his acceptance of combat experiences, and "What I did in the military is allowing me to pursue an education. But it's not mandatory, I'm not made to be here. I've made the decision to be here and now I have to deal with it. You have to accept the environment you are in." Liam's cognitive evaluation of the distress he experienced

within his new environment was more effectively managed and coped with when he began to fall back on autonomy, or his choice to be there, and acceptance.

This lens is also utilized with regard to interpersonal dynamics and managing distress related to differences between himself and those he was surrounded by. When asked about coping with different beliefs between himself and his school-aged peers, he noted, "It's tough. But it goes back to having to accept that you have put yourself within this environment. What good is it to not only make yourself more miserable, but their life too, because you want to be a jack-ass since you aren't' happy!?" More so, he spoke to his own acknowledgement and acceptance of the barrier between himself and those around him when he shared:

> "You know, 10% of the military and then a fraction of that in society that have ever experienced it [combat]. I think that has really helped me, because I've realized that if I am that fraction of a fraction, then you have an entire society out there that hasn't experienced it, so I can't expect them to relate. That's one of the ways that has really helped me cope, is that they can't get it, they never will. It's not possible."

He fundamentally recognized and accepted that his combat experiences would distance him from society, but that he could not expect society to also acknowledge or relate to this. He took the onus upon himself to adjust and even found different ways to connect: "But at the same time, you can inspire those people. You can engage them in a way their peers can't." Liam utilizes this mentality as a means to participate in his environment and interpersonally. He shared, "I think that veterans in school can be a really positive thing. I would like to think that I contributed a lot in my classes. Gave perspective that they couldn't think about. It's definitely a positive thing, but you just can't let it get to you, or it will eat you alive." Thus, Liam took ownership of managing the cultural and

interpersonal distress, and even managed to find fulfillment in interacting with his

environment; while all the while acknowledging the negative dynamics at play.

A significant factor that Liam recognized in his discussion on reintegration

distress and his own decline in functioning, was having the time to process combat

experiences. The tempo of combat, deployment, and even military life is one that

inherently limits processing of potentially traumatic events. Liam recognized that it is not

until one exits the military lifestyle and culture that you are confronted with the need to

process these past events. Without an effective and conducive structure to do so, this can

be devastating and overwhelming. Liam also applied military resilience factors to this

process, as he accepted both the positive and negative of his past experiences. He noted,

"Some of the events are traumatic, but not all of them are, because they are all different.

Fact is, it's hard to get over that kind of stuff. But you have to. I think it can be kind of

addicting to let that stuff take over and consume you." He shared also coming to this

realization in seeing much of the Vietnam-era veterans and their self-management. Liam

inherently did not identify with this experience:

> "This woe is me attitude. You feel a lot of that from guys especially from
> the Vietnam era. If you go over to the VA you will see it; where guys are over
> there, just stuck in the past, living in the past. These guys are just telling stories
> and it's like what are you doing? Is this what you have been doing with your
> life?"

This is not lack of respect for Veterans and their individual experience; rather, this was an

extension of Liam's self-reliance and acceptance-based thinking. OIF and OEF mark the

first major war of an entirely volunteer-based force. A common phenomenon among

these warriors is that they do not identify with a victim-based model of trauma. Liam did

not identify as a victim, he actively recognized his choice to go to combat and that he expected to experience the events he did. He shared, "You can't let that stuff define you. You can't let the stuff you have done define you. I know I'm bringing in a lot of different aspects of the military, but you can't let those events define your life." He made the impact of his past experiences on his current life within his control. Moreover, he endeavored in a process of self-acceptance for both the positive and the negative aspects of those experiences, choosing to internalize what is meaningful to his identity.

Liam's mindset with regard to his self-determination and ability to transition in life after combat, is notably exhibited in his personal definition of resilience. He shared thinking,

> "Resilience is not necessarily letting things not affect you. It's being able to function when things have affected you, or when you are dealing with things. Not that it hasn't affected you emotionally or even changed you in some way, but to the point that you are able to make progress forward. I think you have to really take the good and leave the bad. To learn how to learn lessons. Take the lesson and leave the bad. The bad will always be there but you can't let it overtake your life. As far as being in the military, that's what it is truly about."

This is inherent acceptance of both the good and bad; in moving forward, it is deciding what will be internalized as a part of your identity. Liam shared one of the major ideologies that he aimed to pass down to the soldiers he was in charge of, before their very first deployment:

> "There are a lot of valuable lessons and perspectives that will be forged, and taken away from the experiences you will go through. In order to fully benefit from that and reach your full potential, you will need to decipher and abstract those good, positive lessons from the abundance of negativity that comes with it. The ugliness of combat, the cynical slump that a deployment or military life can put you in. You will have so much to offer society."

Combat will leave an indelible mark on any individual, the way one sees and relates to others, as well as the way one views the world. Liam's developed sense of these personal changes are indicative of growth in the form of self-reliance. He managed later life transition by focusing on what he could control and accepting that with which is out of his control. Liam reflected on this from a greater "existential" world-view. While this is a significant contributor to Liam's navigation of life after combat and his transition; it is fundamentally rooted in his military and combat experience. Remarkably, Liam's perspective and approach appear to have stemmed from a maintained investment in his military identity.

Military Identity Provides Context for Meaning and Implications on Current Life.

Throughout Liam's lived experience there is a clear theme of identity development with a primary catalyst of the military and combat. At a deeper level, Liam's intrinsic needs related to self-acknowledgement, connectedness to others, and expanded worldview, are all fulfilled by his role within the military. This identity is all encompassing for Liam: he associated his identity as being part of a tribe; established a leadership role with a strategic military based mindset; and sought continued purpose in the context of the military. While this promoted resilience in the military, as well as during transition post-combat; it also appears that it was protective during the process of establishing new purpose. From a cognitive perspective the military forged character traits that maintained beyond his role as a soldier. As he pursued education as a means of self-betterment and challenge, these characteristics were invaluable. Furthermore, Liam's

military identity gave him context for establishing meaning and purpose, as well as the implications of past experiences on his current life.

First, the Army Infantry offered both the culture and the tribe that Liam sought in the form of a *shared identity and relatedness*. Previously discussed was how the military fulfilled his needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. To a deeper level, it also provided a culture and bond that was most influential on his identity development. It has been noted that Liam was actively considering and taking steps towards commissioning back into the Army. He stated at the end of the final interview, "You know, it's probably where I need to be. I probably need to be back in the military." Liam demonstrated a significant amount of insight with regard to transition and purpose, and yet he stated a "need" to be back in the military, more than just wanting-ness. Much of this seems to be related to his identity fulfillment.

While Liam previously shared important intrinsic reasons for joining based in value and seeking of a relationship with his father, or expression of masculinity; he shared at a deeper level his search of self and tribe. He frequently discussed this theory of and perspective on the type of individual that seeks out infantry or combat roles in the military, noting that, "Like I said, it's not for everybody. You see all types, all different walks of life, experiences, reasons for joining… but, I think there is a certain trend. Guys that just don't care. Living life on the edge, so to speak." While he spoke about this generally, he then shared more in depth related to his own evaluation of self: "I don't know why, but I really just didn't care at the time what happened to me personally. Maybe that's part of what comes with joining the military, it's something you have to accept, it's something that goes with it." This appears to be a characteristic of those that

join the combat MOS's in the military. Early on, with youth and naïveté, it is evaluated by others as recklessness or risk taking; which it may very well be. However, the military culture and training takes this characteristic and gives it meaning. Specifically, it becomes funneled into a willingness to sacrifice your life for your tribe, and ultimately for the mission. Liam shared, "That's the norm for guys. There is a sort of person that is attracted to an Infantry type of MOS. Guys that don't really care what happens to them. Maybe they have reached a point where this is the only direction to turn, it's the military." There are two different factors here: self-sacrifice, and no other option. Liam identified with the former, but also acknowledged the latter in combination to have a role in the experience of PTSD. Nevertheless, the bond and sacrifice for one another is forged through combat and shared identity: "You have relationships in the military that you will never be able to have with anyone else. The connection is beyond what you could find anywhere. Even if you don't like the guy, you still connect. It's like you know exactly what he is thinking." This is a functional bond formed within a tribal-like unit, for the purposes of survival. The trials of combat reinforce this, and a shared identity that is all encompassing.

The shared identity is reinforced in the context of military culture and training: value for the hierarchical system, and the reliance on leadership for survival. He first noted that training and preparing for combat, "for the first year and a half that I was in, that was all my life consisted of... I was going to Iraq." In this context, he shared the function and purpose of leadership roles, and how he viewed these individuals in his life:

> "There is a real transition within the military of joining and then getting to my unit, and just looking up to these guys. I mean looking at them like they are basically Gods. That's how it is. In combat, in a combat zone, with that mentality,

you just have to look to them. You don't know what you are doing, so you just look to them all the time to learn by watching, by listening. I wanted to be just like my Staff Sergeant who had been on three tours to Iraq and Afghanistan. Those guys that really know what they are doing. They have experienced a lot. That's something I really took pride in when I became an NCO, and I got guys under me and got to teach them… I got to lead them. I got to change their life."

Reverence and respect are imbued in military culture, but functionally it is fundamental to survival and one's development of competence and ability to perform. There is not an ulterior motive to what many may see as blind faith in hierarchy and leadership; it is purely functional because the nature of combat is experiential only. To prove this point, Liam shared his experience with the pressure of combat operations; in particular, the stress of dealing with the fact that every person may be a real threat. In speaking about clearing homes searching for terrorist affiliates he shared,

> "You train on it a little before, but you don't have the training you need until you get over there and start making operations. Fortunately, when I was starting out, I didn't have to make those kinds of calls because my leadership was there to make them for me, and it was just them telling me what to do. I go if they say go, kind of deal. Impulse security. Its good until you can get that experience, and then you don't have to think."

In a context where you are faced with life or death decisions and no time to think them through, experience is the only thing that begets expertise. Liam termed the concept, "impulse security," because an impulse in someone who is not combat-experienced can very well be faulty and lead to severe consequences. Thus, the ability to take and follow orders is paramount.

The tribal affiliation and leadership structure within, is supreme. This ultimately is a catalyst for the establishment of identity. Liam noted, "It defined me. I took a lot of

pride in the fact that we would come rolling in on base at 0500, disgusting, and everyone would be looking at us. All of us took pride in what we did; it was another thing that got us through it." He related here that not only is it a shared identity for the occupation, but pride in performance is also a coping mechanism; part of motivation and drive. Furthermore, this is a value and norm significantly held within the combat communities. When asked to share meaningful artifacts from his military experience, Liam shared multiple items and pictures, all specific expressions of unit and combat affiliation. He shared a link to an article written about his company that detailed the situation and living conditions on his first deployment. He also provided a picture of his Combat Infantry Badge, noting that this is the decoration he is "most honored" to wear on his uniform. He shared a hat given to him by his team leader and close friend that was from a Special Forces unit they worked with. Liam stated this is the most "sentimental" item he still has due to who gave it to him. Lastly, his description of the photographs he provided is as follows: "of me and one of my soldiers during my second deployment to Iraq, and the last picture is of me in my dress uniform at a battalion ball, right after returning from deployment." All of these are reflective of the tribal bond, display of identity, and ultimately self. Military culture does consist of external displays of rank, accomplishment, unit, time in service, and deployment experience. Liam shared an example of this:

> "It's just how you feel. You are the top dog walking around, you know that, because you're the guy that just came in from 2 months out there. Everyone knows it. All the way down to how you wear your boots and the weapon you carry. You can look at a guy's weapon and tell if this guy is for real. We had M-4's, PAC-2's, and we had MCOG's on. You are decked out, and it's not for no reason. You are decked out because you use it, you need to use it to perform in the best way possible."

The outward expression of identity is not simply about affiliation, it is also about performance. Liam stated the impact to his identity: "Soldier mode, the soldier mentality. This warfighter mentality… you are that, it becomes you, it becomes who you are. It's not just our job, it's who you are." The identity is all encompassing and significantly psychological, as it informs a way of thinking and perception.

Second, this all-encompassing identity resulted in the development of a *strategic based mindset* that contributed to his positive and protective evaluation of combat and PTE's. More specifically, Liam appears to acknowledge and understand the value of the greater strategy or purpose of the mission, even when the risk is detrimental at the individual level. Liam shared about the shift in the war moving towards 'winning hearts and minds' and that a significant part of this was the role of presence patrols; literally, small groups patrolling the city as a means to show open presence. He shared,

> "We had a really bad sniper problem in the town. Some guy that we think was sent over from Iran, and he was taking out… he took out at least three of our guys. One guy out of a Mosque. They were smart about it. They knew what they were doing, and we were sitting ducks. Especially during the day, when they would send us out on presence patrols, just to let them know we are in the area and we are not going to back down. We were easy targets during that time."

While the greater overall strategy was to win hearts and minds, there was a serious impact to the individual soldier risking his life. Another example he gave was the strategic move to pay local militants who aren't affiliated with terrorists, but who were identified as combatants. He depicted how his platoon made a major push through a city and cleared every home and building, essentially clearing out the city:

"It pushed the bad guys out. The guys that we didn't push out, I think from a strategic standpoint that's a pretty solid move. You can think what you want, but we had the Iraqi Army who we worked with hand in hand, the Iraqi police who were a little less competent, and the CLC or Sons of Iraq, who were basically the guys we were fighting, now we are paying, so they are working for us. I mean, they aren't shooting at us anymore! Granted they are shady as hell. Shady and just careless with their weapons and just, dis-loyal. Not dis-loyal, but not loyal to any side."

This is an interesting depiction of the interpersonal landscape of the war in terms of who is fighting side by side. The overall strategy of paying local combatants is also akin to the hearts and minds theory, but creates marked hypervigilance in the American soldiers. Not only to fight alongside those that were previously the enemy; but in recognizing their complete lack of any loyalty, which is an inherent value to American forces. These experiences where the individual is valued less than the mission, can result in a-motivation, but for Liam it's rationalized because of his acceptance-based approach and recognition of greater strategy.

In a context separate from combat situations, Liam applied this strategic mindset to himself and his own direction with school. Acknowledging the broader strategy behind the military's standard of commissioning involving a college degree:

"It would just tick me off. All these Officers have college degrees and they got so much respect. I was the same age as some of the Lieutenants, and I had experienced so much in the Army, and they didn't know a thing about it. It was so irritating to have these E-7's and E-8's that had been in for 15 years and they're subordinates of these young Captains. I was just like, well why is that!? Well, they have a college education. You have to have a college education. It's just the way of life, that's the way it is."

Liam acknowledged his own frustration with the hierarchy in the military. Experience means everything in combat, but when it comes to Officer-ship it is more about education

and a degree. This again meets the overall strategic mission, but puts the individuals at risk as a result. Nevertheless, Liam accepted this and internalized the strategy: "If you don't have a college degree you can't do some things, that's just the way I feel. You can't move up in life in a lot of ways." Finally, Liam maintained this mindset even in the context of emotional distress. During his mid-tour leave he described a moment where he was faced with the reality of returning to war. He shared,

> "I came home and I did not want to go back, I just wanted to stay home. All I could think was why in the hell would I want to go back right now. Looking back, obviously, I'm glad I did it. I did the right thing. But part of me was like, what the hell am I doing over there? I just remember telling my Dad, 'I don't want to go back,' and him saying, 'Well, if I could go for you I would.' That's just part of it. That's war."

This strategic mindset allowed Liam to reframe potentially traumatic combat experiences, but also to buy in to the greater mission and military system; even when there is direct threat or cost to the individual. Liam thus experienced a role and identity that was both meaningful and fulfilling.

Third, *maintained military identity* was protective in later life transition as it provided the context for new purpose. Liam is only faced with the need to transition out of the military when he begins to lose the sense of fulfillment in his current military role. He shared this occurring with his removal from the combat environment, but also his role changing to accommodate society. Several things occured that motivated Liam to seek out transition. He shared, "As a grunt, if you don't have that mission that you enlisted to do, if you are not actually doing that, then you get bored. You just start losing heart in what you are actually doing in the military. I felt I'd just reached a peak." This loss of purpose coincides with lack of an outlet for the expression infantry identity. Parallel to

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this experience, he shared, "The cohesion sort of dissipates. I'm not saying you don't have the brotherhood; you always have that. But… you don't have the cohesion." These factors tend to result in individuals leaving the unit, further resulting in a fracturing of group cohesion, which is imperative for performance. He further noted, "There just wasn't much going on and because of the complacency, you have discipline issues, and just a break down in the structure." Following this, Liam described how this impacted him as a leader when he had to shift focus to performance issues and deficits:

> "Now as a squad leader you are spending all your time disciplining soldiers, but you can't even do it in a way that is effective. Now you are writing counseling statements. Day in and day out, that's all I was doing. That's not why I was there. I wasn't there to write a counseling statement for some guy who pissed hot, or for every other little thing. I was there to forge soldiers. That's what I wanted to do and we weren't allowed to do that."

When identity is encompassed in the ability to perform in combat, and the unit is removed from combat and expected to exist within the reality of society, the identity is not fulfilled. Liam lost fulfillment in his identity within the military context, at which point he was confronted with the need to make a transition.

In describing his overall role and experience in the Army, Liam stated, "It's a very rewarding job. I think that if it wasn't for me getting out to go to school, I think that was the next step for me [special forces]. I needed a college education regardless of what I did next. If it wasn't for that, I would still be there today." Liam didn't actively leave the military for a different identity or phase of life after the military, he chose to leave to develop himself; possibly to return in a different capacity. He reflected on the time he began to consider higher education:

"I felt like I had just sort of hit a peak, and there were a lot of changes going on in the military at the time that were tough for a lot of guys. I felt like I wanted to do SFAS (special forces assessment selection). I felt like intellectually it would have been a lot more stimulating for me. All around, it would have given me a challenge. It's something I'm still considering."

When the timing doesn't match up for him to pursue this, Liam instead chose higher education as a means to challenge himself at a different level, and towards personal growth. He initially had purpose to fulfill a different role, representative of the changes the military was enacting. Liam even shared about his endeavor towards commissioning as an Officer and going special forces, and that "enlisted guys, for some reason it's hard to get back in. I think that's because the Army has been transitioning even more since I got out. I think they are trying to get rid of that old mentality." Thus, if his identity and purpose is still within the military, then he must endeavor to challenge and change himself to adjust with the military.

Overall, Liam recognized that there are facets of his identity forged in the military and combat context that are permanent. He depicted this himself in speaking to his mindset, but also reflecting on his ability to participate in the research. Significantly, Liam shared,

"That sort of warfighter, door-kicker mentality. That stays with you. That stays with you through whatever you do. I don't think it will ever go away. The monotonous bull-hassle that you have to deal with, that was dis-heartening. It's the reason a lot of guys get out. That happens when you have garrison life. The less time you are deployed, the more time you have in garrison, is when stuff starts to get ridiculous."

Liam essentially views life outside of the context of the combat identity as "dis-heartening" and "ridiculous." He further shared regarding his identity, "I've really

struggled with that in the recent past; especially after getting out. While I was there, I was a soldier. That's who I was. I wasn't just a soldier, I was a grunt, a door-kicker, that's just how we define ourselves." He noted in particular that this is something he has continued to struggle with recently. However, this is less about a loss of identity, and more about a loss of a means to fulfill the identity; loss of the mechanism and outlet to perform within the identity. Liam's lived experience does portray a struggle and distress with transition and the establishment of meaning in the aftermath of trauma.

Liam summed up his experience with transition out of the Army and the process of self-acknowledgment:

> "If you look at what and how we define ourselves, there are different levels. In my mind there are two levels: what you do; like occupation-wise or job, and then you have the deeper more intimate level of who you are as a person. With the military, those are one in the same. When you come out, they are both lost simultaneously. That is what I've really been dealing with over the past several years, is figuring out who I am as a person."

Liam acknowledged that his identity was encompassed by the military, and that upon leaving that culture he experienced a marked loss. However, Liam failed to recognize that at that time in his transition it was less about who he was as a person and more about how purpose fulfills identity. He lost the outlet for his identity, but not the characteristics that made it up. His empathy for humanity and culture, and his existential world view that reinforced his self-reliance and acceptance of the greater world and varying societies remained intact. In fact, it is these aspects of his identity that reinforce and support his transition process; his success in another environment. Liam's identity remained stable; rather, it was the void of a mechanism, mission, or purpose with which to attach his identity that formed the crucible of transcendence in PTG. Additionally, he has not found

fulfillment of this identity because the standard he holds is combat, and there is nothing

that can compare.

Liam shared on multiple occasions in the interview process as well as in his

written reflections, that he recognizably had a difficult time verbalizing his experiences.

Specifically, he related,

> "I don't talk about this stuff very much. You might be able to sense that
> because I have a hard time getting it out. I'm not a story teller, so I don't really
> like to talk about this stuff. To me it's better left in the past. Obviously now is
> different because I'm doing it for a purpose, but I've never been the type of guy
> that goes in to a bar and sits down and tells a story. I feel that is the lowest form
> of conversation."

This reference was specifically about deployment and combat experiences. To hear him

speak about his personal development and growth, as well as his pride in his identity, you

may not expect for him to feel that his combat experiences are the "lowest form of

conversation." Based on previous data, this is likely based on two concepts: the mentality

of being an active participant in the war (opposite of the victim-based model of PTSD),

and the need to maintain the identity. He further shared, "You are probably the first

female I've ever said this stuff to;" and more so, "I haven't thought about a lot of the

things we talked about. The fact that I'm talking it out and you are drawing my attention

to specific questions, is not only beneficial as a veteran, but as a student of psychology.

It's interesting seeing things from both, or a combined, perspective." These quotes are

indicative of where Liam is in the growth process. He does not appear to have processed

these experiences in depth, verbally, or in a structured way, until now. He is actively

making new insight and meaning versus reflecting on the meaning. It may be that his

growth process is limited in a sense, until there is establishment of purpose fulfilling of his identity; possibly the final threshold of PTG.

These three major themes emerged from the data of Liam's lived experience joining the military, navigating combat, and transitioning to higher education and civilian society. While each major theme overlaps with one another, the over-arching phenomenon significant to Liam's story is the role and influence of military on purpose and fulfillment. Liam recognized his personal growth with the military and combat as the primary catalyst for empathy, cultural awareness, self-reliance, realistic thinking, and acceptance of a changed life. As these characteristics were developed in the context of an all-encompassing military culture, they faced challenge when confronted with the adversity of transitioning out of this culture. This does not represent a re-appraisal or identity transformation though; instead, for Liam it caused him to fall back on his growth from the military and work to apply these characteristics in a new context. Liam's personal growth took place in the military, and was furthered in the context of transition. While the role of his maintained purpose and potential to return to the military is unknown, it appears that this may be an important stage of PTG for Liam.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The following chapter will offer discussion of the study; including an introduction re-visiting the research questions, overview of post-traumatic growth theory, and brief review of the themes from each individual case. The cross-case analysis will then be presented, concentrating on comparing and contrasting data, including embedded analysis guided by theory and evidence. Conclusions will then be discussed regarding the Post-Traumatic Growth Model (Calhoun et al., 2010) and conceptualization of how it may be adapted to represent later life transition following combat for military populations. Finally, implications for practice will be discussed, as well as directions for future research, and limitations of the study.

This study on the experiences of combat and the possibility of post-traumatic growth, is a research endeavor on a critical topic that American society faces today. The use of qualitative research is maximized when a problem needs to be explored (Creswell, 2013) and when we have questions about understanding the complex experiences of people (Merriam, 2009). The following research questions guided the study and produced provoking data: How do participants conceptualize combat? What do participants think contributes to their resilience in the face of a potentially traumatic experience in combat? How does participant growth result from combat? Regarding the conceptualization of combat, the researcher sought to explore the participants' experience of what defines combat, the nature of trauma within combat, and what makes combat experiences unique as they relate to PTEs. The focus on resilience in combat, looked at the participants'

cognitive evaluation of combat experiences, their adjustment process, and their growth during, and post-combat. Finally, personal growth as a result of combat, concentrated on participants' perspectives on both positive and negative personal changes, transition factors, self-schema, and the amalgamation of impact and meaning on each participant's life.

The research questions guiding the study were directly informed by the posttraumatic growth model (Calhoun et al., 2010). The theory and model of posttraumatic growth (PTG) is generally defined as the experience of positive change resulting from the struggle with major life crises (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Calhoun, Cann, and Tedeschi's (2010) model begins with the person pre-trauma and ends with positive changes that can occur from adversity. The theory posits that it is "the disruption of one's assumptive beliefs, rather than the characteristics of the event itself, that initiates the processes that can ultimately result in PTG" (Calhoun et al., 2010, p. 5). This emphasis on the individual's assumptive beliefs is what allows the model to accommodate the potential for the same event to be traumatic for one individual, but not another. Moreover, the model allows for emotional distress as a result of a PTE, yet without the disruption of assumptive beliefs. Thus, normal cognitive and behavioral reactions to a PTE may be experienced without the individual engaging in the cognitive processes' indicative of traumatic response and resulting in PTG. When assumptive beliefs are challenged to a degree that cognitive schema or narrative are disrupted, the processes initiated may include, in a non-linear, iterative fashion: distressing rumination; self-analysis and disclosure; management, redirection and reassessment of ruminative content; incorporation or denial of sociocultural influences; schema change and narrative

revision; acceptance of a changed worldview; accompanied post-traumatic growth; and followed by more complex narrative and increased wisdom lending to well-being and life satisfaction. The posttraumatic growth model further assumes that people may experience growth and distress concurrently during these processes, and that the two may be correlated (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

Each of these components is in line with the social constructivist epistemology of the research, and relates specifically to the experience of combat veterans suggested by the literature review. To reiterate, while combat experiences may be defined as traumatic based on DSM-V criteria, many service members do not subjectively report them this way, nor do they identify with a victim-based model. The combat arms population includes service members who not only chose a combat-related MOS, but also anticipate and expect to enter combat zones. Moreover, these individuals are specially trained as part of their occupation for multiple types of PTEs, and for them to occur concurrently in short periods of time. Again, these service members also exhibit and report general distress and criteria of PTSD symptomology prior to PTEs, due to occupational training and culture. The outcome is that many experience a unique transition after deployment that influences the time-course development of symptomology and recovery. The Comprehensive Model of PTG (Calhoun et al., 2010) accommodates all of these unique features, and highlights the importance of socio-cultural influences which are critical to military context and culture.

Culmination of the literature review and theoretical influences resulted in several proposed revisions of the model, to formally reflect the unique features of the combat arms population listed above. These revisions are founded in research and were discussed

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in the literature review, as well as the review on the Posttraumatic Growth Model

(Calhoun et al., 2010). The previously reviewed revisions are re-presented as a follow-up

to the theoretical overview. First, the potential for multiple PTE's was accommodated in

the model in exchange for Calhoun et al.'s (2010) singular potentially traumatic event.

This is in consideration of the common experience in combat of multiple PTEs over short

and long periods of time during the entirety of a deployment. Second, emotional distress

is acknowledged as both a pre and post PTE factor, as well as one that may remain

consistent throughout the processes of PTG. This is a reflection of the literature on

reconceptualizing PTSD from an occupational lens, pointing to the normal presence of

trauma symptoms prior to any PTE (Castro & Adler, 2012); as well as the level of

general distress understandably associated with and inherent to a combat deployment. For

comparative visual reference, please see the Comprehensive Model of PTG (Calhoun et

al., 2011, p. 6) in the Appendix (B), and the proposed research model for this study on

page 55 (also noted in the List of Illustrations).

As a final introduction to the cross-case analysis and discussion of data, the

individual case themes are reviewed. A table is provided below for visual reference, with

descriptive data to follow.

4. Comparison of Individual Case Themes

NATE The MARSOC Marine	SAM The Airborne Soldier	LIAM The Recon Soldier
Developing *cognitive flexibility* supported evaluation of PTEs and later life transition.	Personal pursuit of *ideological beliefs* supported later life transition.	*Empathy* was a catalyst for effective navigation of PTEs.

The *ability to bear dissonance* helped successful navigation of PTEs.	The post-military *acculturation process* was a catalyst for growth.	*Self-reliance* supported later life transition.
Finding a *balanced identity* aided later life transition and was a resilience factor.	*Belongingness* supported resilience and PTG.	Military *identity* provided context for meaning and implications on current life.
Adjusting to *cultural differences* fostered PTG.		

In the first case of The MARSOC Marine, Nate, four themes emerged from the data.

First, developing cognitive flexibility supported later life transition; focuses on the role of

his cognitive appraisal process both in combat and in later life transition. Second, the

ability to bear dissonance helped successful navigation of PTEs; addresses another

cognitive appraisal mechanism and a resilience factor with specific relation to combat.

Third, finding a balanced identity aided in later life transition and is a resilience factor;

looks at the important role of culture on identity development and transition. Fourth,

adjusting to cultural differences fostered personal growth; acknowledges that the cultural

transition from combat was a catalyst for the growth process. In the second case of The

Airborne Soldier, Sam, three themes emerged from the data. First, personal pursuit of

ideological beliefs supported later life transition; addresses a cognitive appraisal and

reasoning process and how it emerged. Second, the post-military acculturation process

was a catalyst for growth; emphasizes the environment and cultural implications inciting

change in later life transition. Third, belongingness supported resilience and PTG; elicits

the role of connectedness and interpersonal relationships during the process of

experiencing a PTE and PTG. In the third case of The Recon Soldier, Liam, three themes

emerged from the data. First, empathy was a catalyst for effective navigation of PTEs;

recognizes the cognitive appraisal process linked to humanity and the influence on PTEs and later life transition. Second, self-reliance supported later life transition; distinguishes the role of self-reliance as a resilience factor and related to changed worldview. Third, military identity provided context for meaning and implications on current life; portrays the marked impact of military identity and need for pursuit of purpose in later life transition. Across these three participants, four cross-case themes emerged.

Cross Case Analysis: The Combat Veterans

Combat Experiences Forged Solidified Core Schema.

Each of the participants related direct exposure to multiple combat-related PTEs; some in rapid succession, but generally over the course of twelve-month, or greater, deployments. Uniformly, the participants shared autonomy in their decision-making process to seek out a combat MOS, and that through military indoctrination and training, their expectations were established. All of them related a level of significance to the experience of a combat environment and events as holding marked power. They depicted the nature of combat as other-worldly and an all-encompassing human experience. As a result, participants depicted permanent changes to their cognitive processes; thereby forging core schema of self, others, and the world. These schemas inherently influenced appraisal of PTEs and adversity in later life transition. Furthermore, these core schemas represent the groundwork for maintained resilience in combat and the military over time. They are also at the root of a secondary growth process involving re-evaluation of self in the context of culture shock and later life transition.

First, each participant *ascribed significance to the nature of combat*. Evaluations of the environment, experiences, and interpersonal relationships of combat were depicted using language such as chaos, extreme, kinetic, and paradoxical. Nate shared his perspective of combat: "Everybody was so God damn scared, all the time. You are thinking so much about not dying;" "You're just on edge;" "the shock and awe factor;" "you get an adrenaline dump;" "the loud and continuous stress, over and over, I would say is the worst;" "complacency kills. As soon as you start to get comfortable, you are probably wrong. You shouldn't be comfortable. You are in a war zone." These depictions are further indication of limited time and opportunity to cognitively remove one's self from the circumstances, which may impact the processes linked to growth. He reflected on all of his deployments, noting that "My first was the most kinetic out of three deployments. During the surge into Iraq. The whole time period was the most kinetic in that province, so that's where we went as Marines." Nate used the work "kinetic" to relate purposeful and intended action through combat; in other words, that their purpose was fulfilled due to the overwhelming experience of combat events. This combined with Nate's evaluation of the nature of combat seems dissonant, but is the accepted reality of the occupation. Combat is marked by constant psychological distress related to horror, threat to life, loss, and moral injury; however, this constant is not always appraised as entirely traumatic. In fact, Nate acknowledged and accepted that it is what he was trained for, and what he intended to do.

Sam also depicted the nature of combat as having a marked impact in terms of constant distress and threat to life; but also, as an expected occupational experience. He shared the nature of combat being, "sheer moments of terror;" "constant state of

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restlessness both physically and mentally;" "it really is a paradox;" "an evolutionarily speaking, rudimentary environment." Then, like Nate, also recognized the expectation and purpose of this: "you are there, and people are going to try and kill you;" "it's your job to make the other person die for what they believe;" "you just have to realize, you are there for this purpose." Thus, Sam also depicted acceptance of occupational normalcy to the nature of combat. He further shared, "I think long deployments are good if you want to accomplish stuff and get those milestones, but you are going to have a lot of people who are a little bit off when they come back;" thus acknowledging the occupational paradox of what is required to accomplish a mission and the resulting consequence of the nature of combat over time. Sam thereby acknowledged the dissonance between the normalcy experienced in combat, and how this normalcy manifests as abnormal for the individual upon leaving combat.

Finally, Liam, depicted the nature of combat from his perspective: "confusion;" "the entire process hardens you;" "all the gore;" "tormenting to listen to;" "all your days run together;" "pretty messy;" "insane. I can't even describe to you how ridiculous I thought it was." Liam also evaluated the psychological experience of his deployment based on combat intensity and action, "I was there 13 or 14 months. It was a long time, a long deployment. My second deployment was a year, but it wasn't a long one." Liam evaluated time based on combat intensity. The one deployment he evaluated as "long" is a matter of one to two months longer than the other. It is the nature and intensity of combat that is the differing factor. Liam, like Nate and Sam, also recognized occupational expectations and rationale for purpose: "you have to realize, this is what you signed up

for, this is war." Thus, Liam echoed the same acceptance of occupational normalcy while also depicting the nature of combat as being critically impactful to his way of thinking.

The PTG Model (Calhoun et al., 2010) is theoretically focused on the individual's appraisal of the PTE, rather than the PTE itself. Yet, empirical studies have shown that the strength of PTG is directly proportional to the strength of traumatic exposure (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). While it may not be the event that is important, the nature of combat is depicted universally among the participants as profoundly significant in strength. This appears to be related to several recognized aspects of combat. For instance, marked levels of psychological distress are present pre-combat, during, and post-combat events. In fact, psychological distress, whether that be emotional or cognitive, is a norm within the combat environment, thereby inciting constant hypervigilance. It seems a normal response to abnormal circumstances. The nature of combat is inherently abnormal, and cannot be compared to any other human experience. It is at the extreme end of the spectrum of life. Couple this with the mentality that you expected, trained for, and hope to validate your identity through this experience, and the nature of combat becomes even more psychologically complex. Additionally, this all-encompassing state is then marked by actual traumatic events that occur repeatedly, both in close proximity and across the deployment timeframe, but without a context that offers space to process them. The personal change, or growth, that occurs in this environment is rapid and functional. The functional purpose is interpreted differently by the participants, but related to what it means to stay alive; thus, directly stemming from the nature of combat. Nate stated succinctly: "It's not traumatic stress if you have trained for trauma. To some extent, it's going to shock you, but you can prepare for stuff like that." Liam also shared this belief,

"Some of the events are traumatic, but not all of them are. Not all events are the same." While the participants may not evaluate all combat events as traumatic, the nature of combat and deployment is an exposure experience that results in solidified personal change.

Second, combat in its entirety led to *changes in cognitive styles*. The nature of combat resulted in personal change of cognitive styles and belief systems for all of the participants. Nate's process of personal change is realized through his development of cognitive flexibility in combat. In response to the combat environment, Nate learned that clear, quick, independent, rational, and principle-based thought styles were not only what would keep him alive, but what made him more resilient. For example, he related, "You are still going to have adrenaline dumps every time. The biggest thing that differentiated myself is staying calm while trying to figure out what the hell is going on;" "you have to make really quick decisions, erase the grey all on your own;" "you learn, and you re-adjust your morals;" and finally, related about the individuals who make special forces, "really fine-tuned… type-A personalities, critical thinkers." Nate's shift was primarily a strategic response with regard to surviving in combat. This is a strong theme possibly related to being put in leadership roles early in combat; as this is a hallmark of Marine operations that Nate shared. Of specific relevancy to trauma models may be the emergence of data here related to moral flexibility. Moreover, Nate's cognitive style and application to his occupation is reinforced as resilient and adaptive simply by his acceptance to MARSOC. The special forces training further solidified these processes. Importantly, with three total deployments, Nate has more combat time than the other two participants.

Sam also depicted changes to his own cognitive processes that were in direct reaction to the nature of the combat environment and events. His personal changes in this domain were via a defined ideological belief system; primarily a shift in sociopolitical thinking. He shared, "He was significantly anti-war, and I think that impacted me in realizing that not everyone was behind it;" "positive action produces positive results in the aggregate for all society, and the view that we are all part of a whole;" "being in Iraq really tested me. I had a moral breakdown, just in the fact of why are we here? I can't help but think that way;" and finally, "I went from being like my father, basically the idea of neo-conservative philosophy, over to basically liberal." While Sam's major shift in thinking was sociopolitical, he also related similar to Nate, a shift in style: "I'm pretty linear in the way I think. I think the military did that… you have to meet the mission;" flexible thinking, "don't have a plan, have a few good ideas, plans are so rigid;" decision-based thinking, "I'm very comfortable leading, telling people, this is how we are going to gear up;" and finally clarity under pressure, "tapping into that focus and calming yourself down physically." Thus, while Sam's changes in thinking were reflective of adjustment to combat, the major theme of a changed ideological belief system lends to him leaving the military earlier than the other two participants, as he had the least amount of combat time. While a shift in thought styles may be indicative of resilience in combat, changes to belief systems are indicative of one of the final stages of PTG.

Liam's depiction of his shift in cognition in response to combat was with a focus on maintaining his humanity. Cognitions aimed at empathy and cultural awareness were his primary appraisal tools when it came to seeking a balance in his humanity. He displayed a drive to understand the people around him as a cognitive style and major lens

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of appraisal. He related thinking about the local civilian population's experience: "families were hesitant to talk to us because of the rate of murder they were seeing;" "whether they are guilty or not, no mom wants to see them go;" "it's just a part of their culture;" and "most didn't resist because what were they going to do?" How Liam thought about his experience within the nature of combat is reflective of an endeavor towards empathy and understanding, which allowed him to maintain his humanity in the context of emotional foreclosure. Liam summed his mentality within the nature of combat when he shared, "It was enhanced. I just wanted to get out and experience other cultures." While noting this "enhancement" he also related the significance of it and personally identifies with having changed: "My experiences in combat, you know, it just altered my perception of life." We may assume that Liam developed many of the cognitive skills and processes that both Nate and Sam depicted as a means to perform more effectively in combat, based on his leadership roles, advancement, and Recon training. Liam chose to speak primarily and focused on these processes of thinking, which left an indelible mark on his view of others and the world. This may represent a deeper level of appraisal; where combat-specific cognitive styles are a first level of growth, and then a deeper more meaningful level emerges. Both Liam and Sam display this level of thinking as it relates to others.

Third, combat in its entirety led to *changes in emotional experiences*. All of the participants described their own process of emotional foreclosure or narrowing: both in military training as well as resulting from combat. They all used similar words to describe the experience, such as, numb or cold; but then again, they all recognized the importance with regard to surviving combat and performing within their occupation.

Unanimously, this experience is the most uniform across participants. When speaking about his training, Nate shared, "Its good training. I mean, it's cold and creepy. You have to be a different type of person;" and specifically noting that emotional experiences are dominated by aggression and anger, "I mean we were just trained to be aggressive all the time." Sam shared several examples of his own experience in emotional narrowing or foreclosure; specifically, in the context of relationships: "the negative was being cold. Being very cold, especially with relationships;" "I realized I was numb;" "I think my brain must have flipped, realizing that being in tune with your emotions was a weakness;" "I just felt anger… numbness;" and finally "to be really good at that, you have to be cold." Liam echoed this major theme: "the entire process hardens you and makes you cold-hearted;" "I didn't feel anything;" and "I went through a real transition. It really messed with me, emotionally." Across participants this experience of emotional numbing is validated as real and functional to the occupation. The only emotional experience that they each described was anger and aggression in response to combat situations and identified trauma events, as this was conditioned. Thus, it would appear that none of the participants experienced a stage of managing or processing emotional distress from PTEs; other than through anger. The emotional experience; to include the expected emotions a human may have in the context of combat trauma, is therefore inherently lacking. Their cognitive efforts are entirely spent on managing the constant threat to life and grappling with death. With the emotional experience being narrowed, this means that the participants did not go through one of the stages of the PTG Model (Calhoun et al., 2010). In fact, PTG research points to the fact that both cognitive and emotional domains must be explored as PTG involves internal changes (Tedeschi et al.,

2007) that comprise "deeply profound improvement" (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2007, p. 4). This is further tied to the research on PTSD that disorder often manifests over time when, among other things, the individual has not had a full emotionally valid experience in response to the event. The void of emotion-focused processing may very well be linked to the manifestation of disorder later, and the subsequent secondary growth process to be explored in the fourth theme. Nevertheless, some level of rumination was present, and is indicative of cognitive activity that was directed towards rebuilding major schema (Joseph & Linley, 2006); a primary mechanism in the growth process.

Fourth, these *cognitive changes resulted in solidified core schema* surrounding self, others, and the world. As Liam portrayed, "I don't think you will ever have lived as much as you will within a combat situation;" the experience results in a marked and permanent change to each participant. Notable change to the core schema of self, appear to be rooted at the deepest level in recognition of one's capabilities; specifically grounded in the ability to take life. Nate acknowledged this when he shared, "I have the ability to be violent, but I can control it to an extent. If somebody was threatening anybody in my family, that would probably be a situation that would turn bad, I would probably kill people and not think anything of it." When Sam was evaluating the positive personal changes that are a direct result from his combat experiences, he stated, "If someone is in that circle, you are willing to kill for them. You are willing to lay down your own life, to do whatever to protect those people. You actually realize that you are willing to kill someone for it." Liam expressed, "We are taught it's wrong to kill people, but then you go through a real transition. The realization… and it hardens you. You are trained so much, to be a killer." This represents a change of core schema of self at the deepest level

of humanity. The experience of, and the ability to take another human life fundamentally changes the way they think about their self and extends into their beliefs about what they are capable of; such as the self-determination depicted in the second theme to follow. None of the participants are in any way pariahs of society, or psychologically deemed sociopathic or murderous. Far from it; this is about acceptance of a changed self; the final process in PTG.

Core schema surrounding beliefs about the role of others in one's life and generally, were also established. For Nate, this related to the previous discussion on beliefs about self, as he shared, "I could still do a job, be a trigger puller. I still hold the firm belief that there are bad people. I don't think that they are born that way, but sadly, the World produces them. I'm not someone that wants to waste time or energy, or lives, trying to coerce bad people into doing good stuff." This reinforces a more consistent theme seen across all participants with regard to beliefs about others, that there is a highly realistic view of people in the world and what those people are capable of - war. It is akin to the common shift between all participants that relationships are closer and more meaningful, but highly limited and specified. There is high value placed on the role of others in life, but with the caveat that these are few. Nate stated, "I can see from a mile away the traits that disgust me, so I know who to stay away from. Then it's really about people who can tolerate me, the way I am. That kind of molds your group." This results directly from the experience of unity, tribe, relatedness that exists in combat. Nate recognized this: "You are not going to be in that really tight knit group anymore, that shit doesn't exist anywhere else." Yet, when it comes to family and those within his circle, "it's definitely ended up better, like, closer relationships now." Sam also depicted this

theme of intensely close relationships being forged in combat, and resulting in high value for others in life after, but fewer of these relationships that meet the criteria for the individual. Sam noted, "the strongest sense of belongingness is with those guys (combat group). I would do anything for those guys;" and "I put a premium on people I can depend on;" finally, "really coming to that meaningful realization that you have people like that in your life, it just makes knowing what's important in life that much more." Liam shared the same result in terms of the impact of combat on beliefs about the role of others: that there is a disconnect with most others resulting in a focus on fewer, more meaningful relationships, because the most meaningful of connection was in combat. He shared, "You get disconnected, you can't relate to those people because they haven't served, they haven't been out and seen the world like you have;" and "I don't think that I will ever have that closeness with anyone else, that I do with my guys." He noted that despite this, the impact is that he seeks out relationships that are deeper and more meaningful: "Even more so than just guys who have been in the military, because you are a veteran first of all, but these guys have a similar purpose in life." This schema applied to the role that others play in their lives, represents an acceptance of changed relationships. It is inherently connected to the change they recognize in themselves, but also that of their experience of people in combat and what humans are capable of. Thus, there is a link between schema changes of self, others, and then their greater worldview.

For the participants, core schema surrounding worldview revolved around an existentialism marked by self-determination and realism. Nate often spoke about "acknowledging reality," and shared that significant personal change for him was "overall I'm less naïve about life. Maybe a little more cynical." In terms of a greater

world-view mentality, Sam shared, "I'm deterministic in my belief. I think, a lot of things have been determined, spiritually. I tend to think, 'that's how it ends up!'" Finally, he summed up the changes on his core schema when he stated,

> "I think the positive change is really realizing what's important in life, along with what you will do to protect those things. Also, being able to develop who you are as a human being and knowing what you are capable of. Knowing what ethos you ascribe to. A negative I would say is sometimes lack of empathy and sympathy. At the same time, that is a plus because you are not wasting your time."

Liam expressed, "I knew that I would change, that was one of the reasons I joined was to better myself and change in some way;" followed by, "Existentialism that you gain in the military. The fact that you realize you create your own happiness, on your own, whatever you want to create in life, you create it;" and "The way I have found meaning in all of this is the existential mindset it gives you; the realistic outlook on everything. You realize you can be whoever you want to be, but at the same time, things are the way they are, and you have to accept that." This shift of worldview represents acceptance of a changed world, as well as a more complex narrative that directly lends to well-being and life satisfaction for each of the participants. However, these core schemas are rooted in combat, which is a life experience that far less than one percent of the population will have. In fact, these core schemas are not in line with those of the general civilian society. They are paradoxical in that they represent growth at the personal, individual level; but then are the major source of cultural dissonance upon re-entering civilian society, and the cause of subsequent distress explored in the final theme.

The overall strength of the exposure to combat manifests in momentous personal change. Cognitive changes were established with regard to surviving, but also how each

participant perceived surviving in combat. In other words, their cognitive shifts were how they appraised combat events and representative of the self as context. For Nate this was literally to survive and strategically accomplish missions; Sam to live in line with his sociopolitical beliefs and seek belongingness; and Liam to maintain humanity through empathy for others. Each participant committed to action, based on their values and how they appraised their circumstances. Interestingly, while each participant has similar emotional experiences; or lack thereof, they all agreed with the occupational functionality. It's a necessary evil of the occupation, and may possibly be at the root of anticipated distress, or even disorder, in the aftermath of combat. Nevertheless, all go through the processes of growth in the context of the constant stress, in order to come to a place of accepted personal, other, and world change.

Self-Reliance, Belongingness, and Acceptance are Major Growth Domains from Combat.

The three major domains of growth established by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) are those of self-perception, relationships with others, and philosophy of life. In parallel with solidified core schema of self, others, and the world; each of the participants depicted an application of their growth factors in the domains of self-reliance, brotherhood, and acceptance. These growth factors are reflections of the research on PTG, in that changes in self-perception arise as the process of living through traumas provides information about self-reliance (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). It also appears to result in the phenomenon of deeper and more meaningful relationships occurring in parallel with the loss of other relationships (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Lastly, the third domain revolves around a changed philosophy of life, which points to a strengthening of

beliefs as a result of an increased sense of control, intimacy, and meaning (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996); as well as greater engagement with existential thinking and questioning (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). While each of these growth factors are depicted by all participants, their utilization of them as resilience in combat and later life transition differs slightly.

First, self-reliance, brotherhood, and acceptance emerged as prominent growth factors; they were *utilized for resilience and later life application*. Nate related his growth in these three areas; first with regard to self-reliance through early leadership roles and then later through specified training; but mainly through experiential learning in combat: "I learned a lot of that by being pushed into leadership early. A lot of times in Iraq in 2006 and 2007 I would be the on-scene ground commander. I would be the highest rank in that situation. 20 years old and leading combat missions;" "you actually have to push and do what you want. You have to make it happen. It's not just some destiny that will fall in your lap. It came around as a result of my first deployment; I could actually get my fucking legs blown off out here, get shot just like everybody else. You either realize that, or you don't;" "Whenever I moved up in leadership, even working by myself, you know how to better function by yourself. What I need to do, how to task organize;" and "learning how to function by myself and think outside the box, that's from MARSOC." Also, in the context of combat you see the importance of brotherhood: "you live together and you fight together. I don't know how else to put it… we would always group together. You try and get that back. You try and meet guys that you can at least discuss shit with and not have to tip toe around subjects."

Sam also reported significant changes related to recognized self-reliance, relatedness, and acceptance. He shared a sense of self-reliance related to both his ability and his worth: "I think anything I want, I can achieve;" "I'm very comfortable with being me, not making excuses for who I am. I learned that from the military;" and "Just realizing that you have self-worth. I've never gauged my life as having so many people behind or in front of me." He shared about the role of relationships in combat: "If everything was controlled, they would rather it happen to them. You need that in the military. It's not by blood or kin, it's forged over time, its forged through the suck." He related his change in worldview based in acceptance: "I guess that's how my view of the world has changed. It's so chaotic, then again beautiful. I do feel like there is an order to the chaos, but is it our place to comprehend. We have to rectify it in our own minds;" and "made me believe in fate defined by the environment."

Liam also reported significant sense of self-reliance, belongingness, and acceptance when he spoke about the overall meaning he takes from his combat experience. He shared, "I knew that I had the ability. I could do whatever I put my mind to, just because I'd been through so much. I'd put myself through so much in training and the deployments; mentally and physically;" and "through physical and mental suffering, you realize what you can take." He related how combat influences the role of relationships: "It instills a passion within you… you are dealing with life and death. I don't think that you will ever experience a greater connection with your friends who are next to you… brothers, I should say." Finally, he shared a sense of acceptance in his worldview, "having to accept that you put yourself in this environment;" and "you have to do it within yourself. Deployment instills that in you."

The participants align with regard to their experience of growth in the form of increased self-reliance, experience of deeply meaningful belongingness, and acceptance of the changed world around them. Self-reliance is a critical growth factor as it acts as information that informs "self-evaluations of competence" as well as the likelihood that one will address future life challenges in an assertive manner (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996, p. 456). Thus, it is a building block for future resilience as it first acts as a lens for appraising combat experiences, and then a coping mechanism for later life transition. A common occurrence is awareness of increased strength along with a sense of vulnerability, which seems to be indicative of the recognition that traumatic events will occur and can be survived (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). This comes across in the participants' changed worldviews based in acceptance and realistic thought. However, there is not a reported sense of vulnerability, as formally defined. This is likely related to sociocultural influences in the military regarding value for strength and stoicism, in which vulnerability is interpreted as weakness. Instead of vulnerability, there is acceptance of fate and reality of death. Combat events can be survived through effective operational performance, but inherently they may not be.

Lastly, in terms of changes in relationships with others, there is undeniably a sense of deeper and more meaningful bonds in relationships among all participants. Posttraumatic growth literature notes a common phenomenon of the process of growth is increased self-disclosure, which further lends to more emotional expressiveness, willingness to accept help, and general utilization of social supports (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Here again, the sociocultural influences of the military are antagonistic to this process. There is less emotional expressiveness due to emotional foreclosure in the

occupation (Castro & Adler, 2012), but also due to the fact that the culture devalues it, as emotional suppression, or psychic numbing, is integral to military masculinity. It has been proposed that "heroic masculinity" is the culturally accepted norm in the military; which refers to the ideals of overcoming adversity by utilizing aggressive action, relentless perseverance, and ignoring feelings of sadness or pain (Meyers et al., 2016). The social norms and rules of proximate groups in the context of recovering from trauma; such as, expected coping behavior, views about what helps, and the desirability of emotional disclosure, would be expected to impact the individual's response (Calhoun et al., 2010). Nate even referred to the culture and these topics: "It's Spartan. You don't talk about that shit;" and that emotional self-disclosure was not accepted. This is then magnified by un-willingness to accept help as it goes against these socio-cultural norms of strength, self-reliance, and heroic masculinity. Furthermore, help typically comes from outsiders, for which there is mistrust and even paranoia about, as historically these individuals posed a threat to combat-MOS careers. Thus, utilization of social supports is limited to other combat-arms individuals, which results in limited relationships overall, but even more markedly in later life transition outside of the military. Given the strength of these sociocultural influences is directly tied to occupational purpose, and reinforced in combat, it may take significantly overwhelming distress to surmount these norms and seek emotional disclosure and help outside of the tribe. In fact, these help-seeking behaviors may only occur in a context where the tribe has dissolved, including later life transition outside of the military.

Second, these growth factors provided the context for *meaning making of PTEs*. Here we see the first major difference between participants; where Nate and Liam

primarily utilized their self-reliance and acceptance-based worldview to process PTEs, and Sam relied almost entirely on belongingness. Nate discussed several PTEs where his appraisal of the event was marked by self-reliance, realism and acceptance. For instance, "For me, I tried to go by my morals. Even beyond that though, openly shooting people, shooting into buildings and stuff, I guarantee you… that's one of the things that goes with it. You need to be aggressive." In speaking further about being put in a situation where you shoot another human being, Nate stated, "I think probably 90 to 95 percent do (want to shoot an enemy). Until it happens, and then there is the 90 percent of those guys who just prepare for the next time it does happen, and the 10 percent left that actually want it to happen again. It's just reality." Nate spoke about the reality of combat environments and the events that became a norm. He related acceptance-based thinking, as he has described the nature of fighting an insurgency; that the enemy's tactic was to exploit the emotion of the local population. He further related acceptance of his role in combat, and that he turned to preparation, or a form of self-reliance, to cope. Liam also primarily used these lenses to evaluate the PTEs he was confronted with in combat. He shared a story of one of the events he does evaluate as traumatic:

> "The one that sticks out in my head more than anything, was when my buddy, he was a driver… I watched the vehicle explode from about 200 meters out. I'll never forget it. The IED came up through the driver's seat and killed him. The rest of the squad was fine, all the guys in the back. I watched the vehicle explode… the visual aspect is ingrained in my head. It's hard to get over that kind of stuff, but you have to. You can't let it define you. It can be kind of addicting to let it consume you."

Liam later went on to say that he "didn't take it personally," with regard to experiences of losing friends in combat and that "death is something that you have to accept at an early

stage." He followed this acceptance-based perspective of a trauma event with a coping tool based in self-reliance: "you need to be able to decipher those good, positive lessons from the abundance of negativity that comes with it: the ugliness of combat." Thus, Nate and Liam relied heavily on their growth factors of self-reliance and acceptance of a changed world when it came to appraising combat events.

Interestingly, Nate and Liam both have double the amount of time in service as Sam. This also means that they advanced higher in rank, and had a second; in Nate's case, a third, deployment compared to Sam's one. Not only do they both have more aggregate time in combat and were therefore exposed to more combat stress and events; they both pursued specialized training after their first deployments within special forces communities. Special forces communities, like MARSOC and Reconnaissance, involve in depth screening and testing for psychological factors conducive to the work, namely higher individual or independent resilience. This would mean that early growth in the military and on the first deployment increased their resilience in following combat situations, as these same growth factors are then utilized as cognitive coping mechanisms. While the relationship between resilience and PTG has yet to be defined clearly in the literature (Levine, Laufer, Stein, Hamama-Raz, & Solomon, 2009), research has proven that the two are separate constructs and that those high in resilience are less likely to experience PTG (Levine et al., 2009; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Westphal & Bonanno, 2007). According to the theory, we would assume that this is the context for less PTG with Nate and Liam, compared to Sam. However, if we factor in the unique dynamics of combat and growth already discussed it would appear that there is not less PTG for Nate and Liam, rather a longer time-course development.

Throughout the research, the strongest overall theme in Sam's lived experience is the role of belongingness. Sam coped through his tribal connection with others, and also used the important experience of belongingness to establish meaning from PTEs. Sam shared that his combat unit makes up "the strongest sense of belonging outside my family. I would do anything for those guys. My pride was in the relationships I developed. Pride in what we accomplished as a group;" and "my friends that I really feel close to, I feel like I can talk to them. I put a premium on people I can depend on." Sam considered his friends from combat to be on equal level to his family and actively sought them out for support. Moreover, he shared that he did engage in emotional expression and help-seeking later in life because of this:

> "I think especially with PTSD being diagnosed and having the strength to say I need help, and going through therapy. That's one of the best decisions I've made in my life, and if I can share that, maybe one person does it too. A good buddy committed suicide not too long ago, and maybe it prevents one of those."

Furthermore, Sam actively took this value and growth domain and directly applied it to his appraisal of PTEs throughout combat. There are numerous examples in Sam's case study where he found meaning or reason for the trauma through belongingness. For instance, dealing with the loss of a brother, "The overall thing of a team and sense of belonging, and moving into self-preservation as a group. Knowing they did that for you, because you would be willing to do that for them;" and dealing with horrific experiences of collateral damage, "at the same time, seeing Hunter come out of the rubble with a 4-year old, just limp. It's better to see that, then have to carry Hunter's big ass, limp. That's how I put it in perspective." This significant reliance on his brotherhood is not to say that Sam did not experience growth in self-reliance or worldview; as it is depicted above that

he personally did recognize these positive changes within himself. Rather, it is apparent that his relationships with others was the primary growth domain and mechanism for resilience. It may be that in the context of combat, this resilience factor is not as significant as those that are inherently intrinsic and internal, such as the level of self-reliance and acceptance-based thinking that Nate and Liam portrayed.

Third, these growth factors provided the context for *resilience in later life transition.* As each of these growth factors resulted in increased resilience and coping for the participants, they also provided the context for their pursuit of later life transition. As previously noted from the literature, changes in self-perception (self-schema) that occur in the context of the growth process, provide information about competence; which then expands to self-evaluation of how you may address future life challenges (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). All of the participants come from rural, working-class families and environments. They all identified as being "uninterested" and thus, unsuccessful in the academic environment; which all of them supplemented by noting low expectations for higher education. Additionally, every single participant is a first-generation college graduate in their family. Nate shared, "Then the end of the Afghanistan deployment was when I was like, what and who am I going to be after this because this isn't it for me. So, I decided I was going to be an educated person and go to college." Nate later related that this confidence came specifically from his experience in special forces training, and the opportunities he succeeded at. He shared in general, "I started college when I was 26, and the whole bachelor's experience was not challenging. I finished in three years. If I hadn't been in the Marine Corps the full nine years, I don't think I would have done as well. It gave me structure, and discipline." Thus, Nate garnered confidence from his growth and

resilience in the military and through combat that promoted him actively seeking out later life transition. Specifically, a transition that in his pre-military life was not even regarded as an option.

Sam's personal growth also contributed to his pursuit of higher education after the military. Interestingly, both Sam and Liam had significant experiences with leadership, which in part motivated them to pursue academia. Sam shared,

> "I had a great Staff Sergeant, but he was very un-educated, and I would dare say looking back, not all that intelligent. But he was very good at being a soldier. I saw a sworn statement he wrote once, and it looked like a third grader wrote it. I realized it bugged me that I felt more intelligent than someone, and I could be a better decision maker. It bugged me that someone like that was in charge of 12 people. To realize that person has a direct influence on your life."

While this quote appears representative of the changes in self-schema having to do with increased competence and self-reliance, Sam also related the importance of growth in relationships with others. He stated, "My military experience opened me up to talking and communicating and attempting to understand more people," and he sought this out in the academic environment. He shared, "it developed into… well I want to be more, and do all this great stuff… well I need to go to college;" and "I remember sitting there when I got back from Iraq thinking, okay I'm no dummy, I need to go to college;" translated into: "It comes back to my military experience. Failure is never an option in the military, whereas in school, failure is most definitely an option! But, if you don't let it get in your head, it's not an option at that point. You end up doing alright." Like Nate, Sam shared that his college experience was not as stressful or challenging as he initially had anticipated: "being completely honest, the expectations did not level out with what was going on. It was kind of disappointing."

Finally, Liam also related that the strong sense of self-reliance from his growth in the military was the driver in him seeking out later life transition in higher education, and as a personal challenge. Like Sam, he noted that interactions with leadership sparked his consideration for higher education. However, unlike Sam, his experiences were inspiring: "I don't think I would have ever gone to college if I hadn't joined the Army. I don't think I would have been turned on to college education as a good thing;" and "most of the guys that I knew in the military that had college degrees, they were intelligent, and fun to talk to, and open-minded. I was curious as to why that was. Something I wanted to be like, and to learn, and have an open mind like that." Sam actively sought out an intellectual challenge based in self-reliance, but also pursuit of self-betterment. He shared, "I realized I would never reach my full potential if I never had a formal education. Ultimately, he makes the connection between his growth and resilience: "I knew I had the ability to go to school. I knew I could do whatever I put my mind to. Just because I had been through so much. I'd put myself through so much in training, the deployments, mentally and physically." Liam was motivated to pursue later life transition in the context of his growth and in pursuit of further growth.

It may be that each of the participants sought out higher education as their personal challenge based on their earlier life experiences where this seemed out of reach. Unanimously, they all recognized it as critical to their development and purpose in life after the military. Their growth from combat translated to resilience in the military, and then motivation to pursue different life challenges; ultimately related to purpose in later life transition. Nate depicted seeking out his undergraduate degree in French as, "So French… This is just when we started acknowledging Boko Haram as a huge terrorist

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organization just tearing up Africa. That's what I wanted to do it for. It gave me another window to go toward." Sam shared, "Maybe they gave their lives for a greater good. Me thinking about them every single day, makes me so fiery that I'm not afraid to go toe to toe with a legislator that wants to amend something in my bill and kill it. Maybe that's how it had to be." Liam expressed, "It's a very rewarding job, but I needed a college education regardless of what I did next" when he discusses how seeking out a degree was related to self-betterment in the context of re-inventing himself for the military as an Officer or for Special Forces. Thus, it appears that for these participants, combat creates growth through meaning making, which then translates to life outside of combat and results in greater resilience and pursuit of future challenges. It is this greater challenge where combat also plays a role. The growth process for these participants includes a second phase of seeking purpose and fulfillment in later life transition, outside of their military identity and culture.

Establishment of Purpose through Identity.

Throughout the lived experience of each participant, emerged a theme related to identity. All participants depicted establishment of their identity within their military cultural system; further relating that this was all encompassing. Beginning with their reasoning for joining, each participant portrayed an intrinsic drive to establish themselves within the military. This was then reinforced by their adoption of a strong group identity akin to a tribal affiliation, where there was acceptance of cultural norms and values that were staunchly adhered to. As previously depicted, the participants found purpose in their identities in combat, through validation of themselves and their abilities; occupational, personal, and relational. It appears that for each participant, their transition out of the

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military is sparked by experiences whereupon this identity no longer fulfills a sense of purpose. Thus, they each sought later life transition, into higher education, as a means to re-purpose themselves. This process was marked by significant distress in the context of navigating a new balanced identity outside of the military, but also represented a stage of self-acknowledgment whereby the growth process was re-initiated. Significantly, it elicits information about functioning and well-being related to ongoing purpose.

First, the participants experienced an *all-encompassing military identity* that was both functional for combat and reinforced by PTEs. Importantly, each individual case study details the participants' reasons for joining the military and specifically seeking out a combat-MOS. Nate, Sam, and Liam, all clearly related intrinsic motivation for joining: challenge, self-betterment, structure, drive, identity, values, purpose, worldliness, and personal change. Moreover, previously reviewed was that for each participant, the criteria for self-determination (i.e. autonomy, competence, and relatedness) were all fulfilled by their military experience. This is significant to their story as self-determination is "an investigation of people's inherent growth tendencies;" to include the psychological needs that are the basis for self-motivation and personality integration (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68). The military fostered both intrinsic motivation and integration of self, or identity, for each of the participants.

Nate clearly portrayed his purpose for joining the Marines and seeking out the Infantry: "being around the Marines, working with the most qualified, strongest, toughest people. That's what they're going to turn you into;" "I always figured they would give me structure and discipline;" and "the baddest of the badasses, so that's what I signed up for." Nate's intrinsic drive to join the military was then developed through training and

culture, whereupon he internalized an identity based on his role in the Marines. He shared a sense of fulfillment from the culture and identity: "It's a culture that gives you a sense of pride. You are proud to be a warfighter. You are supposed to be, but also humble." He further shared how the identity became all-encompassing through bootcamp, but then further as a way of life: "the break down process is they get you terrified, take away your individualism, and then build you back up;" "everyone there has been indoctrinated. The guys that really went the other direction, they were dealt with and they would get them out of the unit;" and finally, "I never quite understood when civilians would ask me… they always thought I was stationed overseas and if you are here, you are in some kind of civilian status. No. I'm active duty. I'm a Marine. I live where I work. I'm either training or sleeping in the barracks. It's all we did." While Nate's case study details his identity transition with regard to the role that special forces training played in pulling him away from the all-encompassing nature; he still acknowledged that the identity is both who and what he did. His purpose was in being a Marine, an identity and occupation of primary salience that did not allow for any aspect to be part time.

Sam also shared his experience with identity development; primarily occurring in the context of socio-cultural factors, or identification with a tribe. He first shared about his reasons for joining and seeking out the infantry in the Army: "I just knew I had to serve my country;" "I wanted to take the fight to them;" and "A little bit of a chip on my shoulder, wanting to prove myself… probably looking for some glory." Sam's motivation was mostly intrinsic in the sense that his decision to join was firmly based in his values for service and patriotism. He also noted a sense of wanting to prove himself; which was explored in his case study as transitioning from proving self to others, to proving himself

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in the context of his own goals (extrinsic to intrinsic). Sam's motivation did not appear to match the intrinsic strength that Nate's or Liam's did; which may have also been at the root of why he left active duty service. He noted about his drive to maintain: "What always pulls you back in is the people that you are serving with, just your genuine love for them. You realize you are just there for them." While this quote is strongly indicative of relatedness, self-determination does not require proximal relational supports, rather a strong and secure relational base (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Moreover, competence alone does not generate intrinsic motivation, unless there is a sense of autonomy related to internal locus of control (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Sam placed primary importance on relationships, which does engender resilience and coping, as a universally recognized tenet in military psychology is that group characteristics impact individual well-being; thus, resilience is also conceptualized at a shared group level (Bliese et al., 2011). Yet, Sam's identity development did not appear to supply the strength of intrinsic motivation needed to sustain in the long-run because it was externally oriented. He even noted, "No! No real autonomy in the military." Nevertheless, he did relate significance to his identity development in the Army where the all-encompassing facet had to do with his relationships or group identity: "I realized I was very much a part of it going up and down. I definitely bought in" and "I lived within that group. Didn't have autonomy, I lived in that group." While Sam fully identified with military culture at the group identity level, his individual identity development was not all-encompassing: "Maybe this goes back to why I'm doing public policy now. For some reason it was a rational thought in my head to vote him out using democracy. It was like, 'no… that's not how it works here Sam.'" Sam related a cognitive example where he does not buy into the norms of the

military culture, as he shared trying to vote out an individual in leadership. Sam further recognized this, as he shared how a mentor tried to integrate him in fully: "He would always tell me that I was a good soldier's soldier, but that I need to start playing the dog and pony show when we weren't in the field. It would stick at times and then I would slowly go back… and then get reeled back in quick!" Thus, in this way, Sam's lived experience differed from Nate's and Liam's as his identity within the military was primarily about the group dynamic. Nonetheless, he experienced fulfillment from this identity and eventually parlayed this into later life transition and purpose.

Among all the participants, Liam most clearly depicted a marked experience with an all-encompassing military identity. Like Nate, he shared significant intrinsic reasoning for joining the military: "I felt like it was my duty;" "I wanted to be just like Dad, and it was the right thing to do at the time;" "just to find that direction. To reach my potential;" "I wanted to go out and experience other cultures;" and finally, "just doing something bigger than myself;" and "I hoped that I would change, that was one of the reasons I joined, was to better myself." Thus, Liam's baseline of intrinsic motivation was extremely strong, and may have contributed to his maintained purpose in the military through adversities. Liam, more strongly than the other two participants, depicted the nature of his identity development and the role that military culture plays:

> "The entire time I was in I was stuck in this soldier mode. The soldier mentality. This warfighter mentality that is hard to explain unless you are there. You are that. It becomes you, who you are. It's not just our job, but it's who we are. I think that's the military in general. Once you join, you take that on."

He also shared, "While I was there, I was a soldier. That's who I was. Not just a soldier, I was a grunt, a door-kicker… that's just how these guys define themselves." This is a

glimpse of defining one's self in the context of what you do. Thus, the identity is not only wrapped in the culture of the military, but in the purpose of the occupational role. For combat-arms service members, this is inherently doing combat. Furthermore, Like Nate, Liam related an immense amount of pride in his identity: "You have a lot of pride that swells up in you when you are doing that stuff. It's just how you feel. You're the top dog walking around, you know that, because you just came in from a month out there. Everyone knows it;" and "All of us took pride in what we did. We felt like we could be prideful because we were the only ones doing it." Even more so, this indicates that not only did Liam value his identity, but more specifically, the combat-arms identity is the most revered and valued within greater military culture; thus, reinforced within both proximate and distal systems.

Second, the participants *sought transition out of the military when they began to lose a sense of purpos*e in their identity. This resulted in the process of transitioning that involves a core theme of navigating a balance between twin identities: military and civilian. While each of the participants acknowledged distress related to this process, some managed this more adroitly than others. The PTG Model asserts that in the sociocultural context, the way that proximate influences exert their power is through the idioms of trauma, distress, coping, and growth (Calhoun et al., 2010). In other words, how these groups speak about and conceptualize the nature of combat and its aftermath may have consequences that impact an individual's coping and thus the degree to which PTG is experienced (Calhoun et al., 2010). Thus, it may be that the degree of identity foreclosure; related to salience of personal and group affiliation, is an indicator for sociocultural impact. While Sam left the military fluidly, and actually maintained some

service standing by remaining in the Reserves, both Nate and Liam experienced

significant events that engender loss of purpose in their roles and identities and a more

difficult transition.

While Nate shared a timeline in identity development that eventually allowed for

less significant foreclosure leaving the military, he did experience a direct affront to his

identity. Nate perceived his MARSOC training as a mechanism for increased levels of

individual resilience; self-reliance, and performance. He shared several experiences

related to military changes in culture that were contradictory to these facets, ultimately

resulting in him leaving. For instance,

> "They were like, 'we hold you to the highest standard,' and 'you are the
> best we have to offer in the Marine Corps…' but then, you are also fucking
> children and we don't trust any of you farther than we can throw you. It's hard to
> be resilient when your command is like: 'you are doing great, you have been
> through a lot, we support you…' and then they openly do things that contradict
> this because it comes from a higher command."

This is indicative of the cultural and social influence on resilience, specifically related to

the impact of leadership. Nate specifically spoke about the number of changes that he

deemed, "steps backwards" and "a slap in the face of the actual warfighter community,"

when he spoke about the overall campaign in the military regarding resilience training.

He stated, "The resilience campaign is just for civilians. Since society has everybody's

nose in everybody's business. Everybody wants to know how warfare is conducted, how

our warfighters are being treated. It's just to give them a false warm and fuzzy, it's all a

crock of shit." Nate's sentiment was in relation to the fact that the actual population of

warfighters, or service members who see combat, is on average 10%; whereas the

resilience campaign was directed at the entire population. Additionally, the combat-arms

populations don't identify with needing resilience training as this is forged in combat; more specifically, those in special forces like Nate, only make it there if they are highly resilient. Lastly, in addition to these affronts to his identity, Nate related that he left the Marine Corps when his opportunities to continue within his purpose (combat) became limited. He shared that with promotion, "You just get cranked up and move into worse and worse spots. Less and less tactically involved spots, and you do more and more paperwork. Fuck that." It appears that an affront to his identity and decreased opportunity to perform within that identity, both contributed to Nate leaving the military.

With this confrontation of his identity and simultaneous loss in purpose, Nate chose to transition out of the military and this lived experience is documented in the individual case. He detailed his experience seeking a balanced identity as a veteran and now civilian, noting in particular an awareness that identity foreclosure is a significant problem for veterans:

> "They have nothing else. They don't know how to identify as anything else. Even though they can't wear the uniform anymore they will keep their fucking eye fade, and it's like come on dude. You can't just be a one trick pony. That's what I was really scared of when I left, and then, I think the reason I succeeded in getting away from that."

Interestingly, Nate succeeded in leaving the military and transitioning, by maintaining some connection with his identity; thus, finding a balance. He shared how important it was for him to have an outlet with others for this identity: "You look for it... I had no clue when I got out, I thought I would pretty much be a complete outsider. You actively search for the same type of group and bonds when you get out;" and "The actual combat veterans, we would all group together during every meeting or event. You try and get that

back." One of the important facets of Nate's maintained identity was a maintained connection with other combat veterans, as within this culture there is a familiarity with the norms and values of the military identity. This allowed Nate to express himself genuinely whether it be topics of conversation or behavior. He summarized his identity transition on an individual level: "I'm almost 30 and I'm starting college. It's not demoralizing, it's just different. You question yourself for a while, or I did. You just have to find your self-worth. You have to prove what it is, what your function is now, what makes you great, because it's no longer… you can't pull that card anymore." Associating function and performance with self-worth is an important value that appears to stem from military culture. Again, his identity in the military was wrapped in what he did and how well he did it. While Nate considered related occupational work after leaving the military, through this identity transition he came to recognize his conundrum, and why the identity is all encompassing: "there is not a lot… there's a few, but not a lot of jobs where you can go whack tangoes and then come back and hang out. The majority of the time you have to go separate for a long time, and then come back and try to decompress in the midst of also trying to make family time." As his identity shifted, his values did as well, and he realized that he was unwilling to sacrifice the time with his family in order to pursue this. Nate was at a critical juncture in that his desired path of purpose is in conflict with his value for family; indicative of a significant resiliency challenge. Unfortunately, he was entering this stage at the time of interview, resulting in little data as to how he managed it, other than the second order member check, where he did indicate decline in functioning and seeking formal therapy through the VA for PTSD.

Sam's transition in identity was a much more fluid process; whereupon he left the Army not because of a challenge to identity, but rather because he never fully adopted it as the most salient aspect of himself. While in his case study he is portrayed to have experienced significant acculturation difficulties, these were largely focused on dialing down hypervigilance symptoms and reconnecting with emotional material as a means to develop relationships. He noted recognition of this, "If you want to come back to America, you cannot operate like that, because you need meaningful relationships. No one here likes a cold person, who is just blunt and tells it like it is. They like nuances." Sam left at the end of his tour as a means to pursue college education and career outside of the military. He related his process simply, "Your identity shifts from soldier to I guess, academic or student…" Ultimately, Sam's journey navigating the identity transition is wrapped around his group identity, as this was the strong affiliation for him. He shared how difficult this became for him after leaving the military: "I think it's beneficial towards accomplishing the mission, beneficial towards survival purposes; at the same time, I don't think it's good for the individual. I lived in that group. Then coming back and being able to have autonomy, was just weird. I don't like being alone for even a little bit." In other words, Sam's lived experience in the Army being one primarily marked by belongingness and group identity, was something that he recognized as conducive for military life, especially combat deployment. However, in the transition when he is removed from this type of close-knit group society, the loss of this is distressing. Sam, alike Nate and Liam, managed this by seeking out relatedness: "Especially if you know someone else is a veteran. It's a point where you can come together and end up rallying around that." Sam's distress in the transition was loss of

group identity, which was not marked by threat to purpose as it was for Nate and Liam, who experienced transition of identity on a more personal level.

To a significant degree, Liam discussed in depth the experience of affront to identity and lack of outlet for purpose, being the catalyst for later life transition. He related two dynamics in particular that were at the root of this; first, loss of purpose due to the void of combat: "As a grunt, if you don't have that mission that you enlisted to do, then you get bored. You just start losing heart in what you are actually doing in the military." Not being able to perform in combat represented a lack of purpose in the identity, as it is all encompassing. Second, like Nate, he noted experiencing certain cultural changes in the military that did not align with his values, experiences, and ultimately identity: "Now as a squad leader you're spending all your time disciplining soldiers, but you can't even do it the way that you think is effective. That's not why I was there. I wasn't there to write counseling statements for every little thing. I was there to forge soldiers, that's what I wanted to do;" and "I saw a lot of changes that I didn't care for, did not support. That was disheartening to me. I just felt my heart wasn't in it anymore. That's one of the reasons I got out to go to school. It wasn't there for me like it was." Liam's portrayal was that he lost the intrinsic motivation for what he was doing and the resulting extrinsic factors were not enough for him to maintain. In other words, there was a lack of value-based and committed actions. This does not mean that he does not struggle with leaving; on the contrary, the salience of Liam's developed identity in the military made for a difficult transition. He shared, "That's something that I've really struggled with in the recent past, especially after getting out. While I was there, I was a soldier. That's who I was."

Ultimately, Liam sought and found a balance between identities by maintaining

parts of his military self while also being open to personal change and new purpose. He

relied on resilience factors as a means for establishing this balance and displayed self-

reliance and internal locus of control: "That's not who I am. That's not the person I

became in the military. There is a lot of good that comes from the military, but you have

to learn to abstract that from all the negative that goes along with it." He shared in

particular an example of a growth mindset that would be associated with self-

determination and perception of challenge:

> "Another thing that really helped me while I was in the military and once I
> got out, was that I was always trying to better myself as a soldier, and I'm
> continuously trying to better myself as a person. I've just made that a habit in life.
> There are days that I fail, tremendously. Some days I don't even want to get out of
> bed in the morning. I think that's just life in general. You have to just do it."

Ultimately, Liam was able to apply aspects of his military identity to the process of

seeking a balance. He took the same approach of self-reliance and betterment in his

efforts to establish this new identity outside of the military.

Third, *intrinsic value and purpose* appear to be critical factors for well-being. Just

as the participants sought intrinsic value in joining the military, they each sought this as

part of their transition out. In the process of finding a balance between identities,

elements from military self are incorporated into a new identity in the civilian world. This

constituted a process by which each participant was re-purposing their self in a new

context. At the time of the interviews, each participant was in a different stage of this

process. With the addition of data from the second order member check, there is a lens

for analyzing the role of found purpose on well-being. Undoubtedly, this is also a topic for future study and implications for practice.

During the course of the interviews, Nate was in a state of transition where he acknowledged an equal ability to return to the military identity or leave it behind. He stated,

> "I could still do the job. Be a trigger puller. I could do that job if it comes down to it. Outside of that, I would be fine with not taking part of any of that anymore. I could go either way. I think that's probably the most recent awakening because last year if you had asked me that I would have been like, 'oh no, I'm ready to go chase terrorists.'"

Thus, he openly acknowledged the time frame involved in his cognitive shift of identity, and having to do with purpose through occupation. It seems that his shift was accompanied by changes in values: "It's definitely shifted. Now it's trying to be healthy, definitely spending time around my family, and doing something that is going to benefit somebody else in the world besides just me." While there is an expected deepening of relationships that is in line with the growth he exhibited, there is also recognition that he seeks purpose through work that would impact a system greater than himself. Upon the final interview, Nate shared that he was in a state of limbo partially related to his partner finishing her degree program: "There is a small town I'm close to that I was going to start a gym there and just run it myself. I thought the MBA would help with that. If that doesn't end up happening, I don't know, I can get hired somewhere else." Nate reviewed the themes from his individual case and concurred with the findings entirely. He did relate that over the past 18 months he had "succumbed to anxiety and panic attacks," and that he was receiving treatment from the VA for PTSD. While this is limited information,

it is unclear whether or not Nate found intrinsic value or purpose in his identity and if this played a role on his general well-being or ability to process the past. Nate's time-course development for both trauma symptoms and the growth process may be longer than Sam or Liam's due to his greater time in service and combat experience, higher levels of resilience, and more recent transition away from the military. At this point, Nate's experience is unique to both Sam and Liam's, both of whom found significant purpose in their new identity with a direct connection to military self.

Throughout Sam's depiction of his lived experience both in the military and during his transition and time in higher education, there was a consistent theme focused on socio-political endeavors. Sam maintained a connection to his military self throughout the process, noting, "When I'm talking to people and tell them I'm a veteran. I think first, it is something of pride." Thus, it is still an important part of his identity structure. More so, it directly related to his motivation and current occupational role and purpose: "I was in the military, and actually being on the forefront of carrying out policy, it probably ended up gearing me more towards it. Being on the other side, where you are actually carrying out policy, that was eye opening to me and I realized that government was the function that made that in place." He further noted willingness to give up extrinsic motivators for a more intrinsic experience, and that this guided his transition: "I realized for me that I needed more purpose. That I would be willing to take pay cuts, as long as what I was doing had purpose. I think that's what ended up making me want to turn into an advocate for veterans;" and "I don't want to go be a lobbyist for the highest bidder I want to go do something that I believe in and commit to that belief. I think that is residual from my military experience. Honor and loyalty." More specifically, he shared about his

pursuit of politics as it related directly to his relationships and purpose in life, tied to belongingness: "A lot of people who have gone through this stuff (combat), just want to do their own thing. What I want to do is benefit veterans. I want to be an advocate for them. That's my role within the present sea." Sam found intrinsic value and purpose in his identity that was directly related to the value he found in his military self. Data gathered from his second order member check indicated that Sam concurred entirely with the major themes of his case study. Specifically, he related to the use of the term "tribe" in speaking about the forging of his value for belongingness. He noted gained insight from his work on the study, and that the themes were "driving forces behind what I do." Sam related that he is working as an analyst in the House of Representatives, filing legislation and providing research; in particular on veteran's issues. He noted high well-being and that it was great "being part of a team" and "caring for the institution."

While Liam and Nate's identity transitions are more parallel in every way, the outcome of Liam's transition appears to be more similar to Sam's. Liam did go through a period of self-reflection and distress related to re-establishing himself and his purpose: "I think I hit a point where I had to make changes. I've been that low, where I felt like I didn't have a purpose at all. I've had to do some soul searching and think about who I am as a person because of that. Do I want to just be this angry veteran that is 40 years old down the road, living in the past?" This reflection on internal dialogue is reminiscent of deliberate rumination, whereupon he challenged himself to think about his identity and what it means for the future. At the time of the interviews, Liam was able to make a connection with regard to purpose directly stemming from his military self: "One of the reasons I started going to school and specifically pursued a degree in psychology, is that

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not only was I dealing with some issues myself, but I'd seen a lot of guys dealing with issues. I wanted to reconcile that. I wanted to figure out what was going on." Not only is this purpose related to self-acknowledgement and personal change; but it is also reflective of maintained identity by aiding his brotherhood. It fulfilled the need for intrinsic value and purpose tied to military self. The second order member check confirmed that Liam concurred with the major theme findings from his individual case review. He noted the information was "intriguing" and that "most of the information still holds true to this day." He presented two caveats: that his study of psychology likely contributed to his ability processing cognitions and emotions in the aftermath of combat and made him more capable of developing insight that translated to behavioral change; and that he felt his upbringing played a major role on his ability to transition in the sense that he learned hard work and self-determination early, from his father. Liam shared that he has been working for the past two years overseas, as a private contractor for the government, and that he started a Master's degree in Intelligence Management, but is considering a Human Dimensions program also. Thus, it also appears that Liam's established identity directly relates to his military self, and that his occupational purpose is parallel as well. He shared "doing very well."

The process of identity transition is a significant theme across the participants, as it relates to their intrinsic motivation and purpose in life. The following reflection from Liam, elicits critical components surrounding military identity and later life transition:

> "That warfighter mentality stays with you, whatever you do. I don't think it will ever go away. The monotonous bull-hassle that you have to deal with, that was dis-heartening. I think that's a lot of the reason why guys get out. That happens when you have garrison life, when you are not deployed, you are back in the States. The less time you are deployed and the more you are back in garrison

is when stuff starts to get ridiculous. People start EAS'ing, you know, PCS'ing, getting out, moving to another base. Guys don't go on deployment because they have to get surgery or something. Just whatever… or guys start screwing around."

This reflection first attends to the permanence of a mentality forged in the context of combat, and that the mentality is an expression of an identity and purpose. When this purpose is confronted or lost, it impacts the most intrinsic of motivating factors. The participants experienced this upon removal from the combat environment and culture. In parallel, the above quote notes an important facet of the disintegration of the tribe. Outside the context of combat, when the mission is complete, the tribal unit is literally and figuratively not necessary for the mission. While the time-course development is different for each participant, as to when they decide to leave the military, one aspect is starkly consistent across all three: distress from the growth process is not recognized or acknowledged until leaving the military. Sociocultural influences, both proximate and distal, are thought to play a major role in two components of the PTG model: rumination and self-disclosure (Calhoun et al., 2010). The PTG model asserts that growth is not the inevitable outcome of cognitive work, but that it is common with the conditions of examining one's life in the aftermath of trauma, in the context of basic assumptions about how events were expected to unfold, how one is connected to others, and how one is able to affect outcomes and experiences (Calhoun et al., 2010). Furthermore, it is the style of rumination; deliberate or intrusive, and time course that appears to be culturally informed (Calhoun et al., 2010). While the participants have detailed significant growth in combat resulting in resilience and contributing to an identity that establishes purpose in life; this does not represent the whole cycle of growth for them, as they are only able to engage in purposeful rumination about self and change after having left the military.

Culture Shock of Transition Sparked Completion of Growth.

Markedly apparent is the immense amount of growth that each participant depicted as a critical factor in their lived experience of combat deployment. Growth was forged in the context of combat and military culture, as it was to a fundamental level, functional for the mission and potentially life-saving. However, it appears that neither the combat environment, nor military culture is conducive to the holistic PTG model. Uniformly, the participants detailed dysfunctional distress only occurring during their stage of transition out of the military. This time period appears to represent a critical re-evaluation of self, as each participant is faced with a veritable culture shock; whereupon their forged cognitive schema of self, others, and the world is mal-aligned with society's. It is this process of navigating the vast cultural chasm between military life and civilian life, that the participants re-enter the growth process to a deeper level.

First, participants *did not recognize their own personal growth until they were met with the hardship of transition* away from military culture. Important to understand is that neither the combat environment, nor military culture, allows for certain critical processes that contribute to a full experience of PTG; namely, emotional processing and management. Previously depicted with each participant has been their lack of emotional processing, or to the degree of recognizing only anger and feeling "cold." We may also question the experience and role of the rumination process while in combat, as all of the participants depicted constant levels of distress channeled into focus on mission-oriented tasks while in combat. Discussions on renewed focus on training; such as, making sure their guns are clean and functioning properly; or focus on basic life needs revolving around shelter, food, and survival, were abundantly referenced in each participants' lived

experience. Looking at emotional and cognitive processes while in the combat environment is critical as this population remains in the environment of their multiple traumas; often experiencing re-exposure, rather than being removed from an experience with a singular trauma event. Research has begun to focus on the factors that promote PTG: namely optimism, social support, positive re-appraisal, and spirituality (Prati & Pietratoni, 2009). Each of these factors seems to promote the process of PTG by fostering meaning making; thereby reinforcing adaptive resilience factors such as hardiness and self-efficacy (Prati & Pietratoni, 2009). Thus, understanding the type of cognitive processing and when it occurs is reinforced throughout the literature as key to identifying the cognitive routes to PTG (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). While the participants did experience significant growth in combat, research needs to be done on the specific combat-environmental limitations to the PTG process.

Each of the participants referenced their own time-course, notably, starting with when they left the military, rather than how long it's been since returning from combat. Moreover, they each referred to these time periods as being markedly distressing. Nate shared, "This fall will be my fourth year out. I've actually gotten a lot better. My first two years were pretty rough. I was not able to deal with all of this." Nate further shared,

> "I'd get tired and go to sleep and it was just night sweats, horrible. I had really bad anxiety first deployment and for years… I started to notice when it stopped being all the time. What a trigger was, what would kick it on. It would be going in public, start sweating… if I had done this interview with you two years ago, I would have been pouring sweat."

When speaking about what changed for him, Sam shared his experience after leaving the military as, "that's one of the things that pulled me from that downward spiral, was

relationships." Sam related some of his distress during that time when he shared ending a romantic relationship, noting, "I told her this was going to take a while." He further shared lingering impact from combat traumas, "I carried that around with me for a long time. Thinking why wasn't it me…" Notably, Sam left the Army shortly after his first and only deployment. Additionally, he often related time spent processing combat events with peers at least to a degree that Nate and Liam did not. Sam shared, "Some of the most revealing stuff was said on eight-hour guard tours. We would talk about that stuff, we were always there for that. At the same time, you have guys that are just hard-charging, who are having a rough time and just don't want to mention it." Sam's lived experience depicted throughout this study, with primary themes related to belongingness, may be at the root of his willingness to seek external help via formal therapy, earlier. Finally, Liam shared about his time-course, but also beginning at the point of exiting the Army:

> "I'd say I lost purpose for sure. I think I went through a real bad time and I don't think I realized it till after the fact. I went through an extremely bad time after I got out of the military. But I think I went through a bad time after my deployments, but maybe wasn't acknowledging it or I just didn't care at the time."

While all the participants recognized that it was the distress related to transition out of the military that managed to subsume their resiliency and cause distress, Liam's quote also brings to light the notion that he was likely experiencing distress from his deployments, but was managing it within the military system. Nate also alluded to the development of severe anxiety starting from his first deployment. In other words, in addition to being capable of coping while in the structured military environment, this type of distress from deployment is normalized and expected. Moreover, you are surrounded by others within the culture who experience it and normalize it as well. Nate referred to this when he

shared, "You just don't see how normal people function. You just see how other people like you function, so you just think it's normal and keep going with it. Even if it's completely toxic." Thus, part of the cultural transition involved exposure to people and society that do not recognize symptomatic coping as the norm. Questioning of self only occurred in the context of being around people who were not living with these symptoms. Liam followed up by sharing, "You know, I didn't really see a lot of change until I actually got out of the military… it really didn't even occur to me. A lot of this stuff doesn't even occur to you until you get out." The occupational-model of PTSD fundamentally recognizes the delayed time-course development of disorder in the context of combat events. For these three participants, it was the transition out of the military that is the life adversity subsuming resilience and triggering dysfunction and re-initiation of the growth model.

The PTG theory includes the possibility that an individual will continue to experience distress from the trauma throughout the process of growth; yet, at lower levels than experienced in the immediate aftermath (Joseph & Linley, 2006). Indeed, Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) assert that PTG should not be viewed as the inevitable result of trauma; rather continued distress and growth often co-exist. All three participants echoed an experience of maintained distress during the growth process, as well as in combat; however, it appears that the intensity of their distress was lower in the immediate aftermath, while they were still within the military system, and then rose to higher levels during the critical time period of transition out of the military. As discussed above, this appears to be related to the socio-cultural norms in the military for emotional suppression and stoic coping. Additionally, the structure of both environment and occupation is so

significant that most are capable of maintained functioning within the system. Lastly, the culture is one of tribe mentality and support; where there is a built-in social support system. It is possible for service members to live, work, sleep and generally exist within the military system entirely, without ever needing to participate in civilian society.

The psychology of transition in the greater military context has critically focused on the transition that service members face when returning from deployment and reintegrating with their home lifestyle. This period of time encompasses significant adjustment adversities, which require an understanding of the deployment cycle as well as specific socio-cultural factors (Adler et al., 2011). Two of the most preeminent deployment psychology researchers, Castro and Adler (2011), assert that "Combat can serve as a powerful life-changing experience capable of altering one's character and personality both in a positive and negative way" (p. 238). Little attention has been given to this transition; however, research endeavors from OIF and OEF have produced major milestones on the topic. Largely, the research indicates that it is the challenge of "creating a coherent narrative to their lives and understanding the role that the deployment may have in shaping their identity" (Adler et al., 2011, p. 155). Resulting from this research is an initiative towards decompression, or "the process of bringing someone gradually back to a normal atmosphere" (Adler et al., 2011, p. 165). Interestingly, informal time spent bonding with colleagues has been identified as the most helpful aspect of decompression (Adler et al., 2011). The concept that resilience is enhanced by social support, thereby promoting successful readjustment to life after deployment (Pietrak et al., 2010) is further supported by research that indicates that adjustment is facilitated by being with unit members or other returning service members (Adler et al., 2011). Unfortunately, the

focus on the psychology of transition has yet to shift to the transition out of the military, where this prominent resilience factor of group identity and cohesion is non-existent.

Second, military culture, deployment, and combat fundamentally represented a *separate world* to the participants, where civilian society was psycho-socially distant. Each of the participants noted the disconnect between the two. Nate stated upon leaving the military, "So I was reinstated to civilian culture, or society, as everyone else sees it (laughs);" Sam shared a moment while still deployed, "I'm sitting there on one of our last air assaults and someone says to me, 'Hey we've only got three weeks left, then we are back to the real world.' Back to the civilian world. It dawned on me that I couldn't even contemplate what that was;" and finally Liam shared, "there is a huge transition between the military and civilian world. Things you don't even think about. Now that you are out of the military, that world just sort of opens up to you. You can go 100 different directions." This acknowledgment of the vast differences between cultures and societies is depicted in each of the individual case studies. Fundamentally, each of the participants' cognitive schema are that the two are critically different worlds.

The civilian world was also perceived and experienced to lack an understanding of the military world, thus making it harder to relate. Liam shared his opinion that, "society doesn't have the same perspective." He got more specific when he shared about the impact of a society that lacks understanding, and then forges a perspective without real knowledge. Liam stated,

> "They just don't think about what veterans go through. All they know is that this guy was in the Army and they saw Jarhead, so maybe that's what this was like. Or, 'I saw Rainbow one time, so maybe he is just some disoriented veteran that's one PTSD-flash away from snapping and breaking my neck.' I

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don't know for sure what people think, but a lot of the time, that's what it seems to be."

Here Liam referenced two popular movies that depict military culture and warfare, and his thinking that many civilians only take their knowledge from movies. Nate also related this sentiment on how civilian society generally does not understand the military. He further shared frustration that in the context of this misunderstanding and even ignorance, civilian society still wants to exert control over something it does not understand or know. Nate shared, "Like, civilians, they don't want to know about this shit. If I said some of this to them, they would be like, 'whoa, what a psycho.' It just got me pissed off, people talking about this stuff, and they have no clue. For them it's just going with popular opinion." He further shared, "For people that want to be involved and have their nose in everything as much as they do, they really don't know shit about how the military works. People here claim to have our best interests at heart and they really just don't know anything about it." Nate echoed Liam's experience that in general, the civilian society that they were re-entering into, lacks understanding and thus, acceptance of combat-veterans. Nate experienced frustration from this to another level, from his experiences of how civilians aimed to influence the lives of service members or veterans. Sam also recognized the disparity of knowledge and how this impacts the veteran population. Sam referenced legitimate research on the topic of PTSD across the world, when he shared his take-away from a conference:

> "It's about the American public at war. PTSD is more significant the further away our home is from the combat area. A good example of this is Israel, where people are fighting where they grew up. People transition very easily back to civilian life. Also, whether it is a shared burden or an individual burden. WWII

was a shared burden, whereas right now, with a volunteer force it's not a shared burden."

Sam expressed his hope that the civilian population would become more engaged with world politics, and veterans' experiences, noting, "I think the most respectful thing you could do is get more engaged." This phenomenon of the lack of knowledge and awareness that civilian society has about military life in general, not to mention the roles and experiences of service members at war, resonates strongly across the participants. It is in this context, of bearing the burden of re-integrating into a society that recognizes nothing of you or your experiences, that the participants encountered distress subsuming their resilience.

Third, the *cultural chasm between military and civilian society is paramount in that it is mal-aligned with core schema of self, others, and the world; which ultimately manifested as a context for growth.* While there are many factors that contributed to the time-course development of all three participants; in terms of when they experienced, acknowledged, and reflected on their growth, a major theme was regarding their experience integrating to society. This theme was expressed in its own way for each participant in their individual case study. Uniformly, it was about the threat to changed cognitive schema that were developed in combat. Nate shared, "I thought I was pretty well adjusted to come back and just deal with people. I was pretty chill and relaxed, and I got back and sat through my first class with a bunch of 19-year-olds and thought I was going to lose my mind." He further explained:

> "I had a really hard time grasping why people here thought they have such self-entitlement. When you enlist, you are supposed to protect rights, and then you get back and see how they are actually employing their rights, and oh my god

I can't fucking stand these people! That was part of the old culture that I had to at least suppress a little bit or get rid of."

Over the time that he spends in civilian society, Nate further shared, "You can't understand why these people think that way." He further expressed, "Getting familiar with how this new society functions. Discussing stuff that makes their life hard… pretty much complaints from people that have no problem." Nate's hardship of combat and resulting growth is foreign to civilian society, which makes the way he thinks about the world inherently different. For Nate, this resulted in feelings of disgust and resentment, whereupon he limited his interactions and focused primarily on family. Again, this may be indicative of where Nate is in his own time-course development of trauma and growth.

Sam, on the other hand, experienced the same exposure to different schema, but appears to engage people on it. He related an early experience with reintegration: "Transitioning in, sitting in a classroom with 18-year-olds. They would complain. I would look out the window, notice it was rainy and muddy outside, and just want to throw them out the window and say 'go sleep in that and tell me how bad it is in here.'" He related several other experiences that generally exposed a difference in his threshold for stress and related life circumstances. He shared, "I see people cry and break-down because of stress. I look at them and I feel in my heart, 'no one is fucking shooting at you. No one died. You are all right.'" This further relates to his own recognition of the difference between values:

> "People place different values on things. Degrees, prestige, stuff like that. I don't think they get it. Sometimes I don't understand people. The weight they place on different priorities… people not realizing what's important. The really important things in your life are your family, your friends, and to make sure you are doing alright."

In parallel with Sam's individual case study and his value for belongingness, is this expression of his cognitive schema surrounding relationships and life. Instead of removing himself from these contexts though, Sam actually incorporated an explanation into his worldview: "We are at the point now where war and armed conflict has become so common place that an 18-year-old here doesn't remember a time before that. The population adjusts, and at that point, it's just common-place." He then followed this with, "I'm guilty of it too. I'm sitting here thinking about this interview and Veteran's policy, when there are people in Iraq and Afghanistan. It's just become so normal. It's tragic." Sam incorporated a belief into his worldview that acknowledges and makes sense of society. While the role of therapy on this process is unknown, it is important to recognize as part of his growth related to combat events and in the context of transitioning away from the military.

Liam's experience with the cultural chasm between military and civilian society, was primarily marked by acceptance. As depicted in his individual case study, he fell back entirely on internal locus of control and that he must accept that he put himself in to the civilian environment. However, he also experienced a stark confrontation with differences in values and priorities. Liam shared comparing his general deployment experience to society's norm,

> "We still managed to survive. If not be happy to some extent. If you are not happy to some extent you are just going to go crazy. We still managed to find some meaning, and to relate to one another and be there for each other. But then you come back to a society where if you don't have a $100,000 car, or aren't living in a million-dollar mansion, then you aren't happy. You know, that doesn't make sense! I think it's a problem with society, not veterans. Veterans realize it."

While he experienced a sense of disappointment and ultimately incongruence with value systems, Liam managed this through acceptance. For example, he shared, "If I'm that fraction of a fraction, then you have an entire society out here that hasn't experienced it, so I can't expect them to relate. That's one of the ways that has really helped me to cope. That they can't get it, they never will. It's not possible." While there is acceptance here, there is with Liam, like all three participants, an acknowledgement of a permanent separation between themselves and individuals in society. The individual combat-veteran must burden the transition into a society that does not recognize him.

Conclusion.

Posttraumatic growth represents change via trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996); thus, would only occur if the trauma is upsetting enough to subsume resilience factors and thereby incur positive meaning making of the traumatic event (Levine et al., 2009). For Nate, Sam, and Liam, dysfunction doesn't occur until they are faced with the adversities of transitioning away from the military. Given that we recognize military culture and context does not allow for complete rumination or emotional experience and expression, it appears that this meaning making process does not manifest until the individual has transitioned out of the military. Growth occurs in combat and resilience is increased, but the full PTG process is not complete until the individual can process the meaning of their experiences and the impact on their identity and purpose in life. For these participants, the cultural shift and challenge to their schema represents the context where resilience is subsumed and the meaning making process may be completed. This aligns with research, in that the meaningfulness of the work done on deployment has

been shown to improve motivation and well-being (Britt, Dickinson, Moore, Castro, & Adler, 2007) as well as managing the transition process (Adler et al., 2011).

Inherently, it appears that the full meaning making process proposed by the PTG model is critical for growth potential. In certain circumstances, growth may still occur without the full process; like in combat, but it may be that it is not completely personalized until these processes have the opportunity to manifest in their entirety. Circumstances such as consistent combat stress elicit personal changes for both better and worse. The meaning made from the catalytic events and the implications on life; schema regarding self, others, and the world, are directly related to growth. Historically, the military environment and culture has not been conducive to meaning making in its full capacity. Veterans are faced with re-exposure to their PTEs and traumas in the context of resilience being overwhelmed by cultural transition and parallel loss of identity and tribe. Altering the culture to allow for this process in an appropriate manner, to not deter from combat effectiveness, may be a priority. Alternatively, we may ask how society and the military can build a more mutual understanding of one another; and close the chasm. For these participants, the first threshold for PTG appears to be within the context of unremitting combat stress and trauma; whereas the second threshold is during the acceptance phase of transition into an unrelatable culture. Finally, the ultimate PTG threshold directly informed by combat is the individual's acceptance of a changed world in the sense that life fulfillment is contextual. The participants acknowledge that their purpose will never be comparable to what it was in the role of a combat-arms service member, and that it is not meant to be. Instead, recognition of personal growth promotes seeking a newfound purpose separate from the context of combat.

Theoretical Discussion: Adapting the PTG Model for Combat Veterans

Proposed in this study is the value of a rigorous, in-depth vision of the lived experiences of several within a finite population. This vision extends to influence theory development and application of the PTG model with regard to combat veterans. A review of the data from the individual cases and the cross-case analysis provides strong evidence for transferability; the adjustment of the model and theory, as a means to accommodate the combat-arms community.

Significantly, the proposed changes to the PTG model based on the literature review of deployment psychology and specifically, the occupational-model of PTSD (Castro & Adler, 2011) appear validated by the study. First, the model needs to recognize the presence of emotional distress; more appropriately stated as combat or occupational stress, prior to the experience of any particular PTE, as well as throughout the processes and ultimately until the individual leaves the combat theater. Moreover, the experienced levels of distress for combat veterans does not align with the research on PTG, in that levels of distress are not at their highest in the immediate aftermath of the PTE. Combat stress will remain high and fluctuate throughout the course of deployment, with a decrease in distress upon returning home related to survival and homecoming, only to be followed by increases in distress related to late-onset symptom manifestation (Adler et al., 2011). While the full psychosocial impact of combat is a construct so dynamic and complex, research has delineated a strong relationship between exposure to combat and posttraumatic stress symptomatology, with the most critical factors being frequency and

intensity (Castro & Adler, 2011; Hoge et al., 2004). The participants speak volumes about their conceptualization of combat and the constant onslaught of the environment and tempo. Certainly, this study indicates significant growth in the context of combat stress and events; which also supports a more direct route of rapid growth without full processing in some of the PTG stages. The PTG model recognizes this by including a pathway for growth via combat stress and bi-directional off-shoots for processing at certain stages. Combat stress in itself appears to be a catalyst for growth in the realm of changes to core schemas; cognitive styles of thought that influence appraisal mechanisms, but that also manifest from the individual's confrontation with survival in combat.

Second, the proposed change that the model includes multiple correlated or successive PTE's appears valid. Whether the participants depicted several highly impactful anecdotes, or multiple memories of events; part of their conceptualization of combat is the nature of multiple, successive experiences. While incidents may vary as to whether the individual deems them traumatic or not, there is evidence of the additive nature of combat stress that makes the accumulation traumatic. Couple this with the lack of any decompression time or removal from the environment, the constant focus on mission, and continued operational tempo, and the number and type of events may become critical. While the PTG Model (Calhoun et al., 2010) is theoretically focused on the individual's appraisal of the PTE, rather than the PTE itself, it is apparent that combat presents a unique context where occupation and trauma are intertwined. The type of combat event being appraised may influence the individual's processing. As empirical studies have shown that the strength of PTG is directly proportional to the strength of

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traumatic exposure (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), it is relevant to consider the number and type of events in the growth process.

Third, the number and type of combat events considered, the use of the term "potentially traumatic event" is an important aspect of the model for the combat-arms population based on the occupational model of trauma. This model implies that service members approach PTEs with a "different mindset and different level of preparedness that fundamentally changes their perception of potentially traumatic events and the nature of symptoms that can occur" (Castro & Adler, 2011, p. 219). These participants do not align with the victim-based medical model of PTSD, as they all speak to their combat experiences as active engagement in their occupation. Thus, as the model is founded, the focus must be on the individual's appraisal of the event, rather than the event itself. However, given that PTSD symptomatology and PTG have both been linked to the strength of traumatic exposure (intensity and frequency), it may be important to delineate the number and type of events, as this could direct processing and time-course development. In particular, and to be discussed in implications for practice and directions for future research, three major areas of psychic injuries in war have been identified specifically related to combat experiences: life-threatening fear-based trauma, complex loss, and moral injury (Nash, 2007). Depending on the research, the growth process may differ for perceived traumas related to moral injury, versus loss or threat to life.

Converging evidence from the individual case studies and the cross-case analysis points to the significance of conceptualizing the nature of combat when evaluating PTG. The role of combat stress, the strength of combat events, and the individual's appraisal of trauma, all play a role in the processes of PTG. Most prominently, this role appears to

influence the time-course development of the PTG process. For these participants, while personal growth occurred in the context of combat, the processes that include rumination, self-analysis, self-disclosure, emotional distress and expression, did not occur in depth until their resilience factors were subsumed by the transition out of the military and cultural re-adjustment. The void of emotion-focused processing in combat, may in fact engender the delayed presence of trauma symptomatology or disorder later. Thus, significant growth may only occur in parallel when the environment and culture supports these emotional processes. While schema change and narrative revision occurred in combat, recognition of self and new possibilities did not occur until post-deployment. Thus, it appears that the PTG model for combat arms veterans should be depicted as iterative, based on both deployment cycle and transition out of the military, both of which appear to significantly influence the time-course development of PTG.

The final recommendation for PTG theory and model adjustment to combat veterans is focused on the role of socio-cultural influences. Individual cases and the cross-case analysis focus on major themes of identity and military culture. Socio-cultural influences, both distal and proximate, play a greater role for the combat-arms population as they influence assumptive beliefs, goals, narratives, rumination styles, emotionality, self-analysis, and self-disclosure. In fact, research indicates that the social context of the traumatic event is critical; as traumatic events are experienced in teams of service members (Castro & Adler, 2011). Thus, the processing of a traumatic event needs to be conceptualized not only at the individual level, but also at the group level. Within the combat culture, where identity salience is based on the occupational-model as well as

group affiliation, socio-cultural influences need to be considered earlier in the PTG model.

Directions for Future Research

Research in military psychology with active duty combat-MOS populations is burgeoning. Directions for future research in the areas of combat, resilience, and PTG are endless. This study, and the methodology chosen, fundamentally recognizes the significance of a uniquely bound population. Future research in this area needs to delineate between service members that are within combat-arms populations and have actively engaged in combat, and those who are not and have not. It appears that combat MOS's attract specific individuals, and subsequently develop their identities within the military system. Directions for future research with this population, and related to the data produced in this study, should focus on the nature of combat, time-course development of disorder and PTG, the impact of proximate sociocultural influences, and transition out of the military.

Related to research directions specifically focusing on the combat-arms population, is a focus on combat itself. OIF and OEF represent modern warfare, to include insurgency, but also in an urban environment. As seen in the individual case depictions, perceptions on the nature of combat inherently include the urban environment of a culture different from that of the individuals. Research on how combat arms service member's perceive combat; to include the environment, cultural implications, combatants, tactics, and greater strategies, may directly produce specific protective

factors and core schema changes. Just as Sarker and Fletcher (2014) argued, current measures of resilience assess protective factors within the context that they arise, thus, are not easily generalized to other populations. Given the specified population and unique nature of combat as the context, it is relevant that the constructs of resilience and PTG need to be studied further in the context of combat. Moreover, this research direction could focus on the types of combat events deemed traumatic by the population; which may impact the growth process. For instance, more research needs to be done on the impact of moral injury on PTG. Moral injury is a classification of combat trauma that is becoming more markedly representative of service members' experiences in OIF and OEF; representing a syndrome of shame, self-handicapping, anger, and demoralization that manifests when deeply held moral and ethical beliefs are transgressed (Nash, 2007). If research indicates that these traumas are the hallmark of the GWOT or specifically with the combat arms population, this not only impacts treatment modality, but likely also PTG.

The time-course development of both disorder and PTG appear to be a paramount research endeavor. Throughout the literature, military populations and specifically those who experience combat, depict a distinct time-course development to civilian comparisons. While we may acknowledge that disorder may be delayed and functioning maintained by military structure, we need to take a closer look at the cognitive and emotional processes that do occur in the time-course. In other words, what type of processing occurs and when during the deployment cycle and in the context of combat? Furthermore, what are the combat-specific limitations on cognitive processing and does this influence rumination styles? Fundamentally this could influence research on what

types of treatment or interventions may be effective in a combat theatre. Currently it is recognized that the most viable time for early treatment is post-deployment, while in garrison (Gray et al., 2012); yet, if there are interventions that could be incorporated into the combat environment without decreasing occupational efficacy, this would be groundbreaking. A major focus of PTG research needs to be on time-course intervention, or ways to promote PTG early; possibly, while still in the combat environment.

Given the significance of sociocultural influences and identity, a major research initiative needs to be on the proximate social norms of combat arms communities and how they influence PTG. A major question stemming from this research would be how to increase self-disclosure and help-seeking while in service, but without changing the tenets of the culture? This is a delicate process as cultural norms in these communities are inherently functional for the purposes of surviving combat. It may be that mental health follows in the footsteps of the military medical model; whereupon medical care is given by an insider. To clarify, combat-arms units have members who are specialized in medical care, but function primarily as a warrior. Post-trauma interventions that are a catalyst for growth could be delivered from within; however, this would require a level of cultural acceptance. Moreover, unit-based research would be a more specific goal in terms of replicating this study. The participants in the study came from different service branches, different operational units, and had different training. A deeper look at sociocultural impact would involve an in-depth study with multiple participants from the same unit who experienced combat together; as well as PTE's together. This may further elicit the importance of the individual appraisal process, while also depict the impact of proximate norms.

Finally, transition out of the military and the adversity of navigating the cultural chasm needs to be further researched. Currently, there does not appear to be any model depicting the transition out cycle, nor are there specific interventions to aid this process. Research could focus on time-course and cycle identification, illuminating the major transitional issues, and eliciting resilience factors that support this process. Specifically recommended would be a focus on the relationship between military identity salience and transition success; the construct of intrinsic motivation and purpose in work-life satisfaction after transition; and finally, the role of acculturation on combat veterans. A unique research effort could look at the role of psychotherapy on PTG; specifically, in the context of transition, but also at various stages of the deployment and transition cycle. It is a greater societal endeavor to research the friction between core schemas or narratives developed in the military and those of general society. However, given the longevity of the GWOT and the impact to society that veterans have both socially and fiscally, this appears to be a critical area.

Implications for Practice

The field of applied psychology is fundamentally rooted in research-guided practice. The directions for future research discussed could have a profound impact on therapeutic intervention, and ultimately PTG. As discussed in the literature review, there are significant treatment considerations and challenges within the active duty and veteran populations. Combat-related PTSD presents new challenges for clinicians. Screening and diagnostic tools have low predictive value, PTSD comorbidity likely limits the overall

effectiveness of treatments, and there is low to moderate effectiveness of treatment

modalities (Hoge, 2011). It appears that combat-related PTSD may require a more intense

version of treatment than that in the civilian community (McCrone et al., 2003). While

evidence-based models of trauma treatment; Prolonged Exposure and Cognitive

Processing Therapy, both include specific interventions with proven efficacy in trauma

treatment (Keane et al., 2011), these modalities have not been validated specifically with

combat-arms populations, focused on combat trauma. While they all include components

of cognitive restructuring, emotional processing and exposure, they are not grounded in

military culture or, the warrior ethos.

In parallel with the occupational-model of PTSD (Castro & Adler, 2011) which

propagates a unique diagnostic lens for combat-related trauma in the military;

implications for practice should follow. To date, there is only one treatment modality that

is founded in warrior ethos, normed with active duty populations, and developed as a

specific intervention for combat-trauma within the deployment cycle. Adaptive

Disclosure is a manualized therapy that was developed specifically for active-duty

service members that is a hybrid approach of existing cognitive behavioral strategies

specifically packaged to focus on the three most injurious combat and operational

experiences: life-threat, loss, and moral injury (Gray et al., 2012). Moreover, the

approach was developed in parallel with the warrior culture and ideal; in that, "one of the

bedrock assumptions as an approach to treatment is that the cultures of those we treat,

most especially their values and guiding ideals, must always be appreciated and

incorporated into treatments to the extent they deserve" (Litz, et. al., 2016, p. 30). It is a

treatment modality that has modified evidence-based trauma interventions to incorporate

the socio-cultural constructs of the warrior ethos. Early studies have shown that the intervention promotes significant reductions in PTSD, depression, negative posttraumatic appraisals, and is associated with increases in PTG (Gray et al., 2012).

Overwhelmingly, evidence emerged from this study that combat-related resilience and PTG is parallel to an acceptance-commitment frame of thinking. It appears that the tenets of Acceptance-Commitment Therapy (ACT) may directly support resilience in combat, as well as PTG through treatment of PTSD. While this is a major assertion that needs to be further researched, fundamentally, the foundation of ACT in contextualism (Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda, & Lillis, 2006) would accommodate the specific focus on combat. Moreover, ACT specifically targets acceptance as an alternative to experiential avoidance, cognitive defusion to decrease believability, present-focus for non-judgmental understanding of events as they occur, self as context, value-consistent life, and committed action, all for the purpose of increased psychological flexibility; which is associated with lower probabilities of psychiatric disorder (Hayes et al., 2006). Specifically applying ACT towards development of moral flexibility may also be a treatment initiative for combat-arms personnel given the increase in moral injury from OIF and OEF (Nash, 2007). Nevertheless, ACT also appears to emulate the occupational-model of PTSD proposed by Castro and Adler (2011) in that service members accept traumatic realities of their occupation, and are inherently committed to action within their occupation, as it is fundamentally based in their values for service.

Implications for practice are significantly founded on recognizing the reality for these service members that in the context of combat, PTSD symptoms are a normal reaction (Castro & Adler, 2011) to inherently abnormal situations. Moreover, military

culture and occupational training for combat not only condition, but normalize certain characteristics that are deemed trauma symptoms by an external observer. The term "symptom" is inherently defined by subjective means. A primary implication for practice needs to be generally, a consideration of the role of culture and ethos; in particular, that certain symptoms may not be considered as such by the combat-arms service member. Providers need to delineate on an individual basis what symptoms are considered by the individual and whether or not they represent significant distress or negative impact to that individual's way of life. In line with this approach, would be an allowance for the individual's perception of trauma, and processing of the meaning of trauma in the occupational context.

Specific focus on practice needs to be given to identifying the time-course development of the individual. Through the cultural and occupational lens, treatment is subject to the deployment cycle, as well as the transition cycle. Specific factors to consider are combat exposure and intensity, time in service, identity salience, and external resilience factors. In particular, external resilience factors having to do with both social supports within and outside of the military community are important. Finally, the individual's transition timeline needs to be a consideration, as it is likely that they will face considerable distress related to cultural re-adjustment and loss of identity. The time-course of return from combat, deployment, and transition out, are all important as they set the stage for cognitive and emotional processes. Focus of treatment may begin with trauma therapy and then shift to meaning making and a growth orientation; but it needs to fit within the service member's mindset as defined by their occupational timeline. Researchers have noted that combat-related PTSD is more obstinate than PTSD from

other traumas, and that this may be related to the confluence of comorbid problems after returning home (Milliken et al., 2007). It is clear that the transition period needs to be considered in any treatment, and that more focus needs to be given to transition out of the military. This study promotes the detailed focus on re-establishment of purpose outside of the military, to include intrinsic motivation and a maintained connection to military identity. These factors may well contribute to well-being and life satisfaction after transition.

Lastly, the impetus for this study is grounded in positive psychology and preventative means, while also recognizing the reality of combat and the ultimate goal of PTG. The most significant practice implications are those that may be applied in the context of combat. If treatment or individual interventions can be pursued without limited combat effectiveness, this may be the gold-standard of care within the combat-arms community. With research, there may be significant practice implications on how to promote cognitive and emotional processing of PTEs while in the context of combat. It may be that the principles of ACT are more readily accommodated and applied in quicker time, literally making them more flexible to the context of combat. Research has already shown that acceptance interventions increase persistence and willingness to engage in distressing tasks compared to inactive and emotion control/distraction conditions (Hayes, Levin, Plumb-Vilardaga, Villatte, & Pistorello, 2013). This may not only contribute to combat and occupational effectiveness, but also limit manifestation of disorder and result in earlier growth processes. Given that this is a lofty goal, it is only prudent to recognize that most combat-arms service members will be susceptible to manifestation of significant distress related to combat stress; most notably when they return from

deployment and transition out of the military. The void of certain cognitive and emotional processes in the theater of war, need to be addressed and allowed to manifest. The military and its practitioners need to focus on supportive means and contexts for this manifestation without occupational and cultural stigma. It is in the best interest of the service member that they process through these stages within the socio-cultural context of the military, prior to transitioning out. A maintained cohesion between individual and combat-unit or tribe, needs to be a goal of practice.

Prevention and treatment at a later stage of time-course development could focus on modification of current transition programs and support systems that exist. Service members exit the military in a variety of ways, each comprising variability in pension and medical support. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for service members to have to wait anywhere from three to twelve months for VA medical care and coverage after leaving the military. The Psychological Health Center for Excellence does offer inTransition, which is a free and confidential program providing coaching and assistance with mental health needs during relocation between assignments, returning from deployment, and transitioning from active duty. Incorporating the PTG model into a treatment program in this context may be helpful, as well as recognizing the unique acculturation issues faced. The major critique of programs such as inTransition, and support services like Military One Source, is that the providers and support personnel are often not versed in military culture. It is apparent that in practice, military culture needs to be a more prominent factor.

Understanding the ways that military personnel directly benefit from their combat deployment can facilitate interventions related to resilience and PTG (Adler et al., 2011).

This study recommends theory modification and adjustment to the PTG model; specifically, for the combat arms population. Associated interventions depicted must focus on the unique nature of combat and combat trauma, the occupational role, identity salience, and socio-cultural norms. All of these factors play an undeniable role in the cognitive and emotional processes of Nate, Sam, and Liam. For many combat veterans, it must be that combat does not represent the end of a life's purpose, but rather the foundation of a purposeful life.

> "The Warrior Archetype is not the be-all and end-all of life. It is only one identity, one stage on the path to maturity. But it is the greatest stage – and the most powerful. It is the foundation upon which all succeeding stages are laid.
>
> Let us be, then, warriors of the heart, and enlist in our inner cause the virtues we have acquired through blood and sweat in the sphere of conflict – courage, patience, selflessness, loyalty, fidelity, self-command, respect for elders, love of our comrades (and of the enemy), perseverance, cheerfulness in adversity and a sense of humor, however terse or dark" (Pressfield, 2011, p. 90).

Limitations of the Study

Qualitative research is a holistic attempt at understanding how people interpret their experiences, construct their world, and develop meaning (Merriam, 2009). Yet, this study is not without limitations. Notably, limitations exist within the role of the bound system and the researcher. With regard to the sample population, three participants represent the minimal sample size proposed for the study. Furthermore, each individual participated in the study at a different time in their own time-course development; which likely influences their ability to interpret and communicate their lived experience. Theme development and replication across cases may have been influenced by overall time in service and proximity to service or deployment. Moreover, because the participants were

selected based on their willingness to participate, this may skew the data towards a more positive portrayal of growth, as compared to those individuals who did not want to participate in a study. Another major consideration with the study sample is the role of formal therapy and diagnosis. One participant reported diagnosis and therapy, another just diagnosis, and the other no diagnosis nor therapy. Psychotherapy is considered by many to be a guided process of holistic self-acknowledgment and growth; thus, it could be an important phenomenon impacting the PTG process. While it may be that factors related to the participants that represent limitations are plenty, these are identified as the most notable within the present study.

With regard to limitations based on the researcher, two major domains are considered: positionality and engagement. The researcher's positionality transformed significantly over the course of the study; from civilian to active duty service member. While prolonged exposure endeavors to oppose researcher bias and presence, the researcher is the primary tool of qualitative study. It is undeniable that researcher identity and affiliated biases impacted the study. Future studies could include peer evaluations, and a multi-disciplinary approach to data analysis. This would be most impactful at the level of coding the data, if triangulation were pursued through multiple independent coders, versus the single in this study. A follow-up study could be completed with a multi-disciplinary team of researchers, eliciting the lived experience of active combat-arms participants from the same unit, at various stages of their military life.

APPENDIX

A. Research Design

    I. Research Questions:

        1. How do participants conceptualize combat?

        2. What do participants think contributes to their resilience in the face of a potentially traumatic experience in combat?

        3. How does participant growth result from combat?

    II. Propositions:

        1. While separate constructs, resilience and post-combat PTG are mutually exclusive for combat arms veterans.

        2. Reasons for joining and military culture play a significant role in the psychological experience of combat, resilience, and PTG.

        3. PTG is context and timing dependent; the structure and meaning of the education environment is conducive for PTG.

    III. Units of Analysis: 3 combat arms veterans currently seeking a degree in higher education or the academic environment.

    IV. Logic Linking Data to Propositions: Cross-Case Synthesis.

    V. Criteria for Interpreting Findings: Convergent and divergent theme generation and cross-case patterns.

B. Comprehensive Model of PTG (Calhoun et al., 2011, p. 6)
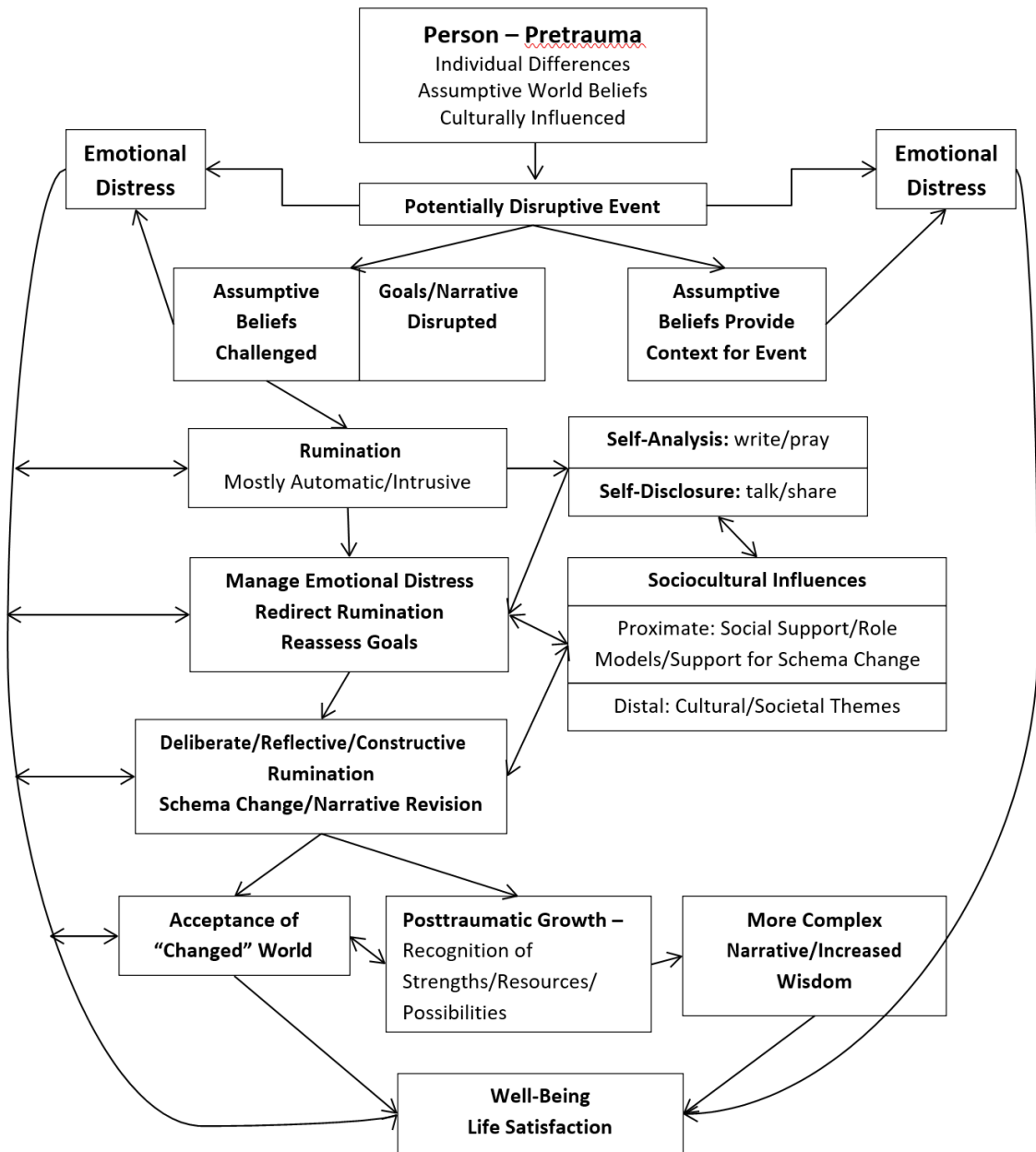
C. Initial Interview Protocol

INITIAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: CASE 1

Date: Location: Time:

Demographics:

Military Branch: _____   Combat Arms: _____

Military Rank: _____   Age:_____   Age Upon Joining: ___

Current Military Status: _____

OEF: □ OIF: □ Other: □ _____   # of Deployments: ____

Return Date from Most Recent Deployment: _____

Marriage Status: _____   Children: Yes: □ No:

Other Local Family: _____

I want to allow for time prior to and during the demographic section for small-talk and/or questions that result from the demographic answers.

1) What made you want, and eventually decide, to join the Armed Services?
   a) What made you want to be in a combat unit rather than other options?
   b) What were your expectations for what this would be like?
2) How was your experience learning military and (specific branch) culture?
   a) How does this culture impact you today?
3) Talk to me about your preparation for deployment?
   a) How did the military prepare you?
   b) How did you personally prepare?
4) Looking back, do you feel that you were prepared both mentally and physically for your deployment(s)?
   a) Did you go through any formal mental training to prepare you for deployment?
5) What did you do while deployed to manage stress?
6) Talk to me about your transition home from deployment. What was that like for you?
   a) What was positive or easy?
   b) What was negative or hard?
7) How did you deal with the negative or hard aspects?
8) In what ways are you a different person as a result of your combat

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experiences?

9) What aspects of your life changed when you returned?

10) What led you to the University and wanting to get your degree?

      a) What aspects of your life changed when you started your college education?

      b) What has been easy about school? Hard?

11) What do you miss about being in the (specific branch) or active duty?

12) Today, what aspects of you are the same? What are different?

      a) What are your thoughts on how you changed?

      b) Were you aware of your change in the moment? Or looking back?

      c) Any light bulb moments or specific events which caused you to change or be aware of your change?

D. Observation Protocol

1. SETTING

2. PARTICIPANTS

3. SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

4. CONVERSATION

5. SUBTLE FACTORS

6. MY BEHAVIOR

Topics:

- Military Culture
- Social Skills/Engagement/Groups
- Comfort/Belongingness/Openness
- Indications of Maturity Level
- Trauma Behaviors

E. Combat experiences as utilized by Hoge et al., (2004)

COMBAT EXPERIENCES
Being attacked or ambushed
Receiving incoming artillery, rocket, or mortar fire
Being shot at or receiving small-arms fire
Shooting or directing fire at the enemy
Being responsible for the death of an enemy combatant
Being responsible for the death of a noncombatant
Seeing dead bodies or human remains
Handling or uncovering human remains
Seeing dead or seriously injured Americans
Knowing someone seriously injured or killed
Participating in demining operations
Seeing ill or injured women or children whom you were unable to help
Being wounded or injured
Had a close call, was shot or hit, but protective gear saved you
Had a buddy shot or hit who was near you
Clearing or searching homes or buildings
Engaging in hand-to-hand combat
Saved the life of a soldier or civilian

F. Dependability Table 1: Relationship of RQs to IQs

Research Questions in Relation to Interview Questions	
Research Questions	Interview Questions

1. How do participants conceptualize combat?
          A. What personal and contextual factors contribute to the participant's definition of combat?
          B. What made or did not make combat traumatic for participants?
          C. What do participants identify about combat that makes it unique with regards to a PTE?
	P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P8, P10, P13, P14, P15, P17
	
	M1, M2, M3, M4, M5, M(IR*), M6, M9, M10, M12
	
	E7, E8, E9, E11

2. What do participants think contributes to their resilience in the face of a potentially traumatic experience in combat?
          A. How does participants' resilience inform their conceptualization of combat?
          B. What is the role of participants' resilience on recovery? Personal vs. Social?
          C. What resilience factors influence personal growth after trauma?
	P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16, P17
	
	M2, M3, M4, M6, M(IR), M7, M8, M9, M10, M11, M12
	
	E2, E3, E4, E7, E8, E9, E10

3. How does participant growth result from combat?
          A. How have participants changed as a direct result of combat? For the better or for the worse? Are the two mutually exclusive?
          B. What is the participants' time-course development of PTG?
          C. How have participants transitioned from combat to PTG?
          D. How does participants' PTG influence their resilient self?
          E. How does participants' PTG influence life after recovery?
	P4, P5, P6, P11, P12, P13, P15, P17
	
	M2, M4, M6, M(IR), M7, M8, M10, M12
	
	E2, E3, E4, E5, E6, E7, E8, E9, E10, E11, E12, E13, E14

G. Dependability Tables 2: Depiction of Codes by Data Sources and Number of References

Participant 1: The MARSOC Marine; Nate

Name	Files	References
COMBAT	0	0
Combat Moments	3	17
Conceptualization of C	3	14
Impact of Combat	4	27
Military Culture	5	36
PTG	0	0
Meaning Making	4	24
Personal Growth	3	14
Purpose	3	6
Self-Reflections	4	26
RESILIENCE	0	0
Core Values	1	6
Personal Strengths	5	18
Reintegration Factors	5	18
Transitional Adversity	3	23
Tribe Role	5	21

Participant 2: The Airborne Soldier; Sam

Name	Files	References
COMBAT	0	0
Combat Moments	3	9
Conceptualization o	3	15
Impact of Combat	3	12
Military Culture	5	19
PTG	0	0
Meaning Making	6	35
Personal Change	4	29
Purpose	5	21
Self-Reflection	3	22
RESILIENCE	0	0
Core Values	4	11
Personal Strengths	3	12
Reintegration Facto	5	15
Transitional Adversit	3	26
Tribe Role	4	24

Participant 3: The Recon Soldier; Liam

Name	Files	References
COMBAT MOMENTS	3	14
CONCEPTUALIZATION of	3	4
CORE VALUES	3	5
IMPACT of COMBAT	4	23
MEANING MAKING	6	13
MILITARY CULTURE	3	22
PERSONAL CHANGE	4	25
PERSONAL STRENGTH	2	6
PURPOSE	3	14
REINTEGRATION FACILIT	4	17
SELF-REFLECTION	4	19
TRANSITIONAL ADVERSI	6	38
TRIBE	4	14

H. Dependability Tables 3: Depiction of Data Sources by Codes and Number of References

Participant 1: The MARSOC Marine; Nate

Name	Codes	References
Artifact 1	0	0
Artifact 2	0	0
Artifact 3	0	0
Artifact 4	0	0
Artifact(s) Description	5	10
Interview 1	13	92
Interview 2	10	64
Interview 3	10	69
Reflexive Journal 1_P1	2	3
Reflexive Journal 2_P1	5	7
Reflexive Journal 3_P1	3	5

Participant 2: The Airborne Soldier; Sam

Name	Codes	References
Artifact Descriptions	4	4
Interview 1	12	69
Interview 2	12	89
Interview 3	12	77
Reflexive Journal 1_P2	4	4
Reflexive Journal 2_P2	4	4
Reflexive Journal 3_P2	3	3

Participant 3: The Recon Soldier; Liam

Name	Codes	References
Artifact Descriptions	1	1
Email Reflections	5	5
Interview 1	13	80
Interview 2	10	41
Interview 3	12	78
Reflexive Journal 1_P3	2	3
Reflexive Journal 2_P3	3	3
Reflexive Journal 3_P3	3	3

I. Informed Consent Release Form

Consent Form

(For Participants in Dissertation Research)

Researcher Name and Contact Information:

Lea M. Lafield, M.Ed.
Doctoral Candidate, Counseling Psychology
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Columbia, MO 65211
(214) 668-8647
Lea.lafield@gmail.com

Project Title: The Psychological Experience of Combat and Possibility of Posttraumatic Growth

YOU ARE BEING ASKED TO VOLUNTEER TO PARTICIPATE IN A DISSERTATION RESEARCH STUDY

This form provides you with the information about the study. The researcher will describe this study and answer all of your questions. Furthermore, you will receive a copy of this consent form before participating in this study.

When you are invited to participate in research, you have the right to be informed about the study procedures so that you can decide whether you want to consent to participate. Please ask the researcher to explain any information that you do not understand.

You have the right to know what you will be asked to do so that you can decide whether or not to be in the study. Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to be in the study if you do not want to. You may refuse to be in the study and nothing will happen. If you do not want to continue to be in the study, you may stop at any time without penalty. If you choose to stop participation in this study, simply inform the researcher of your desire to stop the study.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the phenomenon of posttraumatic growth as it relates to resilience and combat experience for combat arms veterans from OIF and OEF who are currently pursuing their undergraduate degree.

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

- Participate in three in-person interviews lasting no longer than 120 minutes.
- Participant in follow-up procedures either in-person or over the phone.

Total estimated time to participate in this study is 7 hours over the course of 2 semesters.

Risks and Benefits of being in the study:

- Your participation in this study is not expected to cause you any risks greater than those encountered in everyday life.

- Upon the event of emotional distress occurring as a direct or indirect result of participating in this research, the researcher will provide appropriate contact information for University and community mental health referrals.
- Participants have an opportunity to reflect upon their personal growth and to inform a developing field.

Compensation:

- There will be no compensation associated with this study.

Confidentiality and Privacy Protections:

- The data resulting from your participation may be made available to other researchers in the future for research purposes not detailed within this consent form. In these cases, the data will contain no identifying information that could associate you with it, or with your participation in this study.
- Furthermore, no identifiable information will be collected from the survey, however you will be asked to provide
- Only the researcher associated with this project will review the recorded data.

The records of this study will be stored securely and kept confidential. Authorized persons from The University of Missouri-Columbia and member of its Institutional Review Board have the legal right to review research records and will protect the confidentiality of those records to the extent permitted by law. All publications and presentations will use pseudonyms to protect your identity. Throughout the study, the researchers will notify you of new information that may become available and that might affect your decision to remain in this study.

The Campus Institutional Review Board approved this study. You may contact the Campus Institutional Review Board if you have questions about your rights, concerns, complaints, or comments as a research participant.

You can contact the Campus Institutional Review Board directly by telephone or email to voice or solicit any concerns, questions, input or complaints about the research study.

Campus Institutional Review Board
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Signatures:

I have read this consent form and my questions have been answered. My signature below means that I do want to be in the study. I know that I can remove myself from the study at any time without any problems.

Signature: _____Date: _____

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Researcher's Signature
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

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