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The Longitudinal Impact Of Moral Injury On Combat Soldiers: A Narrative Inquiry Study

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THE LONGITUDINAL IMPACT OF MORAL INJURY ON COMBAT SOLDIERS:

A NARRATIVE INQUIRY STUDY

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Education

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

David Richard Gosling

March 2020

**THE LONGITUDINAL IMPACT OF MORAL INJURY ON COMBAT SOLDIERS:
A NARRATIVE INQUIRY STUDY**

by

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Approved March 2020 by

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**THE LONGITUDINAL IMPACT OF MORAL INJURY ON COMBAT SOLDIERS:
A NARRATIVE INQUIRY STUDY**

ABSTRACT

This study explores the confluence of Narrative Inquiry's three commonplaces of temporality, sociality, and place on the experiences of five combat veterans with combat-designated Military Occupational Specialties (MOS) across the lifespan. In particular, the study examines the longitudinal components of Moral Injury (MI) before, during, and after combat operations. Chapter 4 explores the individual narratives of the participants, Chapter 5 examines common narrative threads between participants, and Chapter 6 is the author's subsequent extrapolations on the subject matter given his own experiences as a combat veteran of the Iraq War.

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**THE LONGITUDINAL IMPACT OF MORAL INJURY ON COMBAT SOLDIERS:
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

In the Book of Genesis, Cain infamously murders his brother Abel in a fit of jealous rage. As punishment, God casts Cain away from his family of origin, where he is destined to roam the unpopulated earth using the means at his disposal. This biblical story serves numerous purposes. First, it is an explicit teaching on the Ten Commandments to follow in Exodus; foreshadowing rules the Israelites must follow to maintain their sacred covenant with God. Second, it is a cautionary tale, which suggests that righteousness and effort are not always met with divine favor: Cain (originally) deserved the favor of God in equal measure to Abel but did not receive it; Abel received such favor but paid for it with his life. Third, the story tells readers that the worst punishment for the worst crime (i.e., the murder of a blood relation) is exile from one's community and home. Fourth, it suggests that such a life, disconnected from community, is filled with hardship and heartbreak. Fifth, the story of Cain and Abel is an attempt by the early Jewish community to make sense of perhaps the most alarming reality of life: that humans purposively and willfully kill members of their own species and have since the dawn of time.

Each of these allegorical lessons taken from one of the most ancient stories in Judeo-Christian culture is ironically applicable to the postmodern state of American combat veterans. The first lesson reminds soldiers that to kill another human being is to break covenant with the divine according to the Christian values upon which American society is established. The ways and means by which killing is justified in war are not applicable when soldiers return home and reenter civilian life (Grossman, 2009). This reality has major ramifications for the way soldiers process their combat experiences, and may contribute to the fact that among wartime

experiences, killing is uniquely correlated to the progression of posttraumatic stress (PTSD) symptomology (Maguen, et al., 2010, 2011).

The second lesson echoes the torment and guilt of those veterans who move through combat unharmed, while comrades who are sometimes considered closer than actual blood relatives are killed around them. One of the ugliest facets of industrialized warfare remains the arbitrary nature of mechanized (and now computerized) combat; a soldier's skill, courage, and tenacity are no longer variables that hold much sway over individual fate. The prowess of an Achilles, the cunning of an Odysseus, or the equanimity of a Marcus Aurelius mean next to nothing when the bullets and bombs find their targets with indiscriminate efficacy; the historical qualities that make for renowned soldiering are dwarfed by the immensity of technologized combat.

The third lesson establishes the sense of exile and disenfranchisement many combat veterans feel to some degree upon reentry to the civilian world. The fourth lesson reminds the reader that such exiles often lead to irrevocable loss. Taken collectively, Cain's banishment and subsequent suffering are a model representation of how combat veterans either *feel* they are exiled by society writ-large or how they *choose to exile themselves* as a form of self-inflicted punishment for perceived transgressions or failures on the battlefield. This sense of abandonment is supported by the current literature on warrior reentry to the civilian world (See, e.g., Ahern, et al., 2015; Orazem, et al., 2007).

The fifth lesson demonstrates how the act of murder, extrapolated and expanded upon as it has been over the millennia, remains an indelible image of horror and revulsion in the minds of human beings. Soldiers are just such human beings, before and after they wear the uniform, and

are no less impressionable than the rest of the species when it comes to the magnitude and implications of taking human life (Grossman, 2009).

An Emerging Construct

Research in the past decade has begun to hone in on the moral and existential struggles related to experiences of wartime service. Shay (1991, 1994), in his exploration of the experiences of Vietnam veterans, coined the term *moral injury* as a *betrayal of what's right by someone who holds legitimate authority (e.g., a military leader) in a high stakes situation*. More recently, Litz et al. (2009) defined moral injury as *perpetrating, failing to prevent, or bearing witness to acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations*. This definition served as placeholder for the emerging construct over the course of the past decade, while other research (e.g., Drescher, et al., 2011; Currier, Holland, Drescher, & Foy, 2015) has expanded on the import of moral injury and narrowed its boundaries and limitations as a social construct.

The result of such efforts implies combat-related moral injury is underestimated at the expense of those who served and fought. In an examination of the types of war-zone events that cause service members lasting distress, one study reported that 34% of service members believed their most difficult combat experience was an event of moral injury (Stein, et al., 2012).

According to the National Health and Resilience Veterans Study (NHRVS, 2013), a significant minority of combat veterans experienced moral injury during wartime service, while Wisco et al. (2017) determined that 41.8% of combat veterans claimed exposure to at least one type of morally injurious experience (MIE) during their time in the military.

Self-Directed Harm (SDH)

In conjunction with the statistical likelihood of moral injury in combat, soldiers who experienced such events were also found to be at risk for self-injurious thoughts and behaviors

(Bryan, Bryan, Morrow, Etienne, & Ray-Sannerud, 2014), while the interaction of moral injury and PTSD was associated with significantly increased risk for suicide ideation and attempts, even among the subgroup of participants with a history of suicidal ideation (Bryan, Bryan, Roberge, Leifker, & Rozek, 2018). Other research indicates that exposure to potentially morally injurious events accounts for PTSD symptoms above and beyond combat exposure (Jordan, Eisen, Bolton, Nash, & Litz, 2017); moral appraisals of combat experience predict additional distress beyond exposure to combat (Lancaster & Erbes, 2017); and taking human life (e.g., Maguen et al., 2010, 2011) and acts of abusive violence (Currier, Holland, Jones, & Sheu, 2014) increase the risk for depression, PTSD, and suicidality among combat veterans (Currier, Holland, & Malott, 2015).

These statistics connect more broadly to the suicide crisis among U.S. military personnel, the rate of which has more than doubled since 2002 (Bryan, et al., 2018; Schoenbaum et al., 2014). A decade ago, the historical trend for lower suicide rates among military personnel ended when the military suicide rate surpassed that of the demographically matched U.S. general population (20.2 per 100,000 vs. 19.2 per 100,000) for the first time in known history (Schoenbaum et al., 2014; Smolenski et al., 2014). Thus, it is self-evident that between the reported percentages of moral injury among combat veterans, the construct's correlation to PTSD and suicidality, and the overall suicide rate of military members, there are major ramifications due to the lack of understanding and expertise among mental health professionals in identifying, addressing, and treating moral injury among American warriors.

Theoretical Framework

Historically, narrative inquiry resists the reductionistic and formalistic boundaries of theory as prescribed by the “grand narrative” of positivist thought (Clandinin and Connelly,

2000). In contrast to what he deemed the *technical rationalism* of the scientific method, Schon (1983) coined the terms *reflection-in-action* and *knowledge-in-action* to denote an epistemology of practice, whereby thinking and doing are no longer separate and distinct. Reflection-in-action can proceed among uncertainties “because it is not bound by the dichotomies of Technical Rationality” (Schon, 1983, pp. 68–69). Narrative researchers have argued that the reductionism entailed by technical rationalism has taken the concept of professional memory and reduced it to a formulated set of rules regarding truth and untruth (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). In contrast, the narrative method attempts to put “the body back into the mind” (Johnson, 1987, p. xxxvi) and “wreak havoc with certainty” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 37). As Clandinin and Connelly note: “Emotion, value, felt experience with the world, memory, and narrative explanations of one’s past do not stand still in a way that allows for certainty” (p. 37).

Comparable to reductionism, narrative inquirers also experience tension at the boundaries of formalistic thought that is, they assume a “view that things are never what they are but are rather what our framework or point of view or perspective or outlook makes them” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 39). Where formalists begin inquiry in theory, narrative inquirers begin with lived and told experience. Rather than a formal literature review, for instance, many narrative researchers weave literature throughout a dissertation or book to create a seamless link between developing thought, theory, and practice as embodied in the inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly). This often results in a tension between literature reviewed as a framework versus literature reviewed as a conversation between theory and life. This tension, as well as the others created by reductionistic and formalistic boundaries, can bring vibrancy, authenticity, and depth to an adequately developed narrative project. After all, the anticipated result of a narrative

inquiry is not to prescribe general applications, but rather to create texts that allow readers to use their imaginative capacities to formulate their own uses and applications.

In response to criticism that narrative inquiry lacks structure, and that it is merely the telling of stories (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006), there are three “commonplaces” and eight elements that are given full consideration under the methods section below. Collectively, these components provide an adequate framework and structure to the professional narrative inquiry, while allowing for space to move forward without being confined by formalistic and reductionistic limitations.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of military veterans with combat military occupational specialties (MOS) who experienced moral injury during combat across generational and societal lines. Specifically, it aimed to explore three groups of research questions:

- How do experiences of moral injury differ according to the particularities of the war being fought, across generations, and between individuals?
- In what ways does a combat MOS impact the perceived experience of moral injury among combat soldiers? Does it make such experiences easier or harder to handle in the moment? More or less likely to have occurred in the first place? Does it make coping with the aftermath of moral injury easier or harder to handle down the line as civilians? Is a combat MOS a continuing source of pride for veterans who experienced moral injury? Does a combat MOS in any way bolster or limit their ability and/or desire to seek out support?

- What are the longitudinal effects of undergoing combat MOS training across the lifespan, and how do the tenets of the warrior ethos permeate the lives and day-to-day experiences of such veterans? How do older generations perceive their younger warrior counterparts and vice versa? What are the generational differences between combat-MOS war veterans and their experiences of moral injury?

Significance of the Study

The significance of the study, in alignment with the narrative inquiry process, was intended to lie primarily in its ability to weave a cohesive narrative from a number of disparate life perspectives and to offer this story up to the public for consumption, interpretation, and both meaning-making and paradigm-shifting purposes. A narrative inquiry study is not concerned with finding an objective truth, but rather with exploring and displaying one particular perspective (i.e., the researcher's), intertwined among the perspectives of study participants through a research process that is honest, open, and expressive. The manner one chooses to interpret this exploratory process remains valid for the individual, and no two persons will (or should) come away from the project with the exact same response or reaction.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this study, I have appropriated the most recent and salient definitions of moral injury-related phenomena as described by Farnsworth, Drescher, Evans, and Walser (2017). The authors approached said phenomena from a functional perspective, marking a clear divergence from prior syndromal definitions of moral injury. Important terms are defined as follows:

Morally Injurious Experience (MIE): a situation occurring in a high-stakes environment where an individual perceives that an important moral value has

been violated by the actions of self or others. From a functional perspective, such values are related to behaviors and choices that enhance social collaboration and discourage selfishness. An MIE is a necessary but not sufficient factor for the development of moral injury (p. 392).

Moral Pain: the experience of dysphoric moral emotions and cognitions (e.g., self-condemnation) in response to a morally injurious event. Once again, from an evolutionary and functional perspective, moral pain functions as a motivator for individuals within a community to protect and maintain group cohesion (p. 392).

Moral Injury: expanded social, psychological, and spiritual suffering stemming from costly or unworkable attempts to manage, control, or cope with the experience of moral pain.

Farnsworth, et al. (2017) point to three reasons why the functional approach to moral injury supersedes the aforementioned syndromal representation of the phenomenon. First, a functional approach makes it easier to distinguish between similar content based on the function such actions serve. For instance, running away from fear serves a different function (self-preservation) than running away from disgust (avoidance). Second, it allows for a non-pathologized approach to moral injury, in contrast with current treatments for PTSD. The authors note that moral injury is a painful but ultimately healthy attempt to correct one's moral trajectory. Last, the authors claim that the functional definitions accommodate a variety of moral responses and contexts, to include longitudinal factors—a key component of the proposed study. As such, I believe these are the most appropriate and well-defined terms currently available amidst the moral injury research for use in this study.

Chapter Summary

This chapter: (a) examined the emergence of moral injury as a new and exciting psychological construct; (b) outlined the purpose and significance of the proposed study; (c) explored the value of the narrative inquiry method as a viable methodology; (d) offered up initial research questions, and (e) proposed an ongoing definition of terms based on Farnsworth and colleagues' (2017) recent work. The subsequent chapter will, in much more detail, explore the salient points of research on moral injury and its many interrelated topics.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Research on morality in this century has been predominantly focused on differing aspects of individual morality and the point of moral origination (c.f., Greene et al., 2004; Greene, 2015; Haidt, et al., 2001; Moll & Schulkin, 2009; Ugazio, Lamb, & Singer, 2012). A closer look at the origins of morality research is warranted, however, for an appropriate discussion of moral injury to subsequently take place.

Moral Reasoning and Development

Although the study of moral reasoning can be traced back to Piaget's early work on the developmental conceptualization of moral judgment, it was Lawrence Kohlberg who generated substantial interest in the study of moral reasoning and development (Giammarco, 2016). Kohlberg's model of moral development attempted to explain how normal morality develops across the lifespan, with individuals progressing through a series of six stages of moral development, each with its own implications for individual and societal behavior. Progress through such cognitive stages was considered invariant and sequential—no person could skip a level, and each level could only be reached by a progression through all former stages (Rest, Narvaez, Thoma, & Bebeau, 2000). Kohlberg created and expanded upon the Moral Judgments Scale (MJS) over the course of his career as the instrument used to determine the given developmental stage (i.e. pre-conventional, conventional, & post-conventional) for an individual. However, due to the lack of basic psychometric properties (e.g., inter-rater reliability, construct validity, etc.), the MJS was limited in its ability to validate its creator's developmental model (Giammarco, 2016).

A group of researchers known as Neo-Kohlbergians have since attempted to rectify some of the inconsistencies and concerns of Kohlberg's model by: (a) switching from "hard" to "soft" stages of development (reformulated as *schemas*); (b) emphasizing automatic processes (vs. intentional reflectivity); (c) tending to the specific and concrete over the abstract; (d) arguing in favor of individuals retaining their ability to use reasoning in lower stages of moral development, and (e) a move away from the universality of moral reasoning toward a perspective of morality as a community enterprise, relative to situation and circumstance (Rest, et al., 2000).

Despite the important contributions of the Neo-Kohlbergians, Giammarco (2016) noted that major issues remain concerning the overall utility of the moral reasoning model. In particular, related studies of both the MSJ and the Defining Issues Test-2 (DIT-2) failed to control for covariance between groups attributable to education, socio-economic status, and IQ, confounding the conclusion that morality scores increase as a function of age (Giammarco, 2016). Researchers have found a significant association between moral development scores and IQ (See, e.g., Dawson, 2002), suggesting higher DIT scores may be achieved because of greater IQ and abstract reasoning abilities (Giammarco, 2016). In addition, there is the well-known critique of the model by Gilligan (1982), whose Moral Orientation Theory (MOT) distinguished the use of justice-oriented morality from care-oriented morality (largely) across gender lines between men and women, respectively. There is now partial evidence that pro-social dilemmas evoke more care responses, while antisocial dilemmas evoke more justice responses, supporting Gilligan's original claim (Giammarco, 2016); yet both models rely heavily on dilemma-based assessments rather than real-life scenarios.

Nonetheless, the DIT-2 has still been successfully implemented in a variety of research settings in the past decade. For instance, Caceda and colleagues (2015) found, in a stepwise

linear regression analysis, that functional connectivity between the salience and central executive networks of the brain, along with age and the DIT-2 personal interest schema score, significantly predicted reciprocity behaviors between two individuals performing a “trust” game with money ($R^2 = 0.498$, $p = 0.001$). In other recent studies, the DIT-2 has been used successfully to determine connections between moral reasoning and: (a) noncriminal psychopathy (Heinze, Allen, Magai, & Ritzier, 2010); (b) narcissism (Traiser & Eighmy, 2011), and (c) longitudinal success in academia (O’Flaherty & Gleeson, 2017). Last, Bailey (2011) debunked prior research (e.g., Emler, et al., 2007) that claimed the DIT-2 had an inherent political bias toward the left. Taken as a collective, these studies suggest the DIT-2, a derivative of distilled Kohlbergian concepts, remains a useful measure in the sphere of moral reasoning, and one that could be utilized in pursuit of a deeper understanding of moral injury among veterans, in particular.

An alternative in the dichotomous nature of the justice–care debate is the Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) of Haidt and Joseph (2004). The authors identified five areas of moral regulation that persist across cultures and which have evolutionary roots: (a) Harm/Care; (b) Fairness/Reciprocity; (c) Ingroup/Loyalty; (d) Authority/Respect, and (e) Purity/Sanctity (Haidt & Graham, 2007). The authors claim that these areas measure and describe differences in moral concerns across individuals, social groups, and cultures (Haidt & Graham, 2007). Yet the MFT suffers from the same problems as the MSJ, the DIT-2, and the MOT in that they each rely extensively on dilemma–based scenarios to measure morality and are all based on self-report measures (Giammarco, 2016). And yet, value remains in the use of MFT and its subsequent offshoots, such as the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ).

In an oft-cited study, Graham and colleagues (2011) created the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ) to further solidify and expound upon the claims of MFT. Reaching a vast

network of participants (N = 34,476) via their own website and public following, the authors were able—given the large size of the study—to compare a variety of confirmatory factor analysis outcomes via structural equation modeling to demonstrate the superiority of a 5-factor model based on the aforementioned areas of moral regulation (in contrast to a hierarchical model, 2- and 3-factor models, and a 6-factor model). Convergent and discriminant validity was provided by contrasting each of the MFQ subscales with external scale sets (e.g., the Adapted Good-Self Assessment, IRI, Psychopathy Scale, etc.), and the original test-retest Pearson correlations were .68 (Fairness) and higher for all subscales (all p 's < .001). Significantly, the authors were able to adjust for geographical location and gender, suggesting the sameness of ideological patterns across cultures (liberals skew more towards Harm and Fairness, conservatives to Ingroup, Authority, & Purity), and that there were substantial differences between men and women, with the latter scoring higher on Harm (MD = .47, $t(118238) = 99.16$, $p < .0001$, $d = 0.58$), Fairness (MD = .16, $t(118238) = 37.75$, $p < .0001$, $d = 0.22$) and Purity (MD = .16, $t(118238) = 25.10$, $p < .0001$, $d = 0.15$). The magnitude of this study suggests the MFQ is a valuable resource in determining the origins of an individual's moral foundation and regulation.

The moral reasoning avenue of research—indispensable for the current research on moral injury—is nonetheless a victim of its own application by confounding what people *should* do versus what they actually *would* do in a real-life scenario. As there are no simple solutions to these research dilemmas, alternative perspectives on the conceptualization of morality are warranted as part of the foundational literature for the proposed study.

Relationship Regulation

While neurocognitive and individualistic considerations are integral to the understanding of morality, the sociocultural and relational contexts from which morality is derived may be even more important to consider when working with a military population (Farnsworth, et al., 2014). In particular, Rai and Fiske (2011) proposed a theory of *Relationship Regulation* (RRT) that relies on four separate forms of social relationship, each with a singular moral motive, to predict moral actions and outcomes in a given sociocultural setting. This model is well equipped to accurately position the phenomenon of moral injury during and after combat service.

According to RRT, the four forms of social relationship and corresponding motivations are: communal sharing (CS) motivated by unity; authority-ranking (AR) motivated by hierarchy; equality matching (EM) motivated by equality; and market pricing (MP) motivated by proportionality (Rai & Fiske, 2011). At any given time, several—or all—of these relational constructs may be in operation, thereby influencing the moral beliefs, actions, and consequences of the persons involved; any individual in a group may reach a different moral conclusion than another, based on which relationship constructs are activated. Likewise, different groups may (and often do) reach opposing conclusions on what constitutes a moral or immoral action based on sociocultural values. An oft-cited example of this type of socially regulated morality is the phenomenon of honor killings in certain societies. By western standards, an event where a woman is publicly murdered for adultery, for instance, would be considered a criminal act of the worst kind. According to strict interpretations of Sharia (i.e., Islamic) law, however, male kin to such a woman may be obligated to commit murder in order to maintain the cohesion and moral standing of the familial tribe; they are operating from a perspective of communal sharing (CS) where unity of the whole supersedes any interests of the individual. The sociocultural and

historical prism through which morality is interpreted has everything to do with how actions and their consequences are perceived.

While Rai and Fiske (2011) emphasized the existence of distinctly immoral actions, they also asserted the value and importance of placing actions within an appropriate sociocultural context. Historically—in relation to moral injury—the military operates from an authority-ranking (AR) construct where the rank structure restricts individual choice in the service of operational efficiency. By thinking less and doing more, soldiers learn to remain active amidst crisis and rely on their superiors to make command decisions (Litz, et al, 2009). This is reflected in the training undergone by recruits in boot camp, where individual characteristics are methodically stripped away and replaced by institutional values espoused by the military (Atuel & Castro, 2018).

Concurrently, soldiers often operate from a sense of communal sharing (CS), where in-group loyalty remains a preeminent component of the soldiering experience and a fail-safe against external threats. In postmodern warfare, relatively small units may operate in wide swaths of hostile territory, where outsiders are considered untrustworthy. A desire to reinforce the cohesion of an in-group against external threats—most often by virtue of physical violence—is a form of morality-based action via the *communal sharing* (CS) model of social relationship and engagement. Tragically, many of the opponents U.S. service members face in the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) operate from exactly the same model, where threats to group identity take precedence over individual concerns and identities.

Further research has identified the utility of the Relationship Regulation model. Simpson and Laham (2015) were the first to systematically explore the associations between moral judgments (based on the RM foundational concepts) and other relational factors. In two studies,

using Australian undergraduates (N = 106) and American participants (N = 111), they used a variety of hypothetical moral violations (based on the tenets of both MFT and RR) to have participants judge the same violations according to different types of relationship construal, as well as according to the degree they were related to the four RM prototypes. Consistent with the Relationship Regulation model, individuals judged Care and Loyalty violations harshly when moving from the Communal Sharing (CS) modality, and Respect violations more severely when in the Authority Ranking (AR) modality. The study demonstrated “convergence between relationship-specific analyses and analyses assessing individual differences, with results cohering with hypotheses derived from RRT and MFT” (Simpson & Laham, 2015).

Likewise, Tepe and Aydinli-Karakulak (2019) recently added to the RRT literature by examining the functionality of “metarelational threats” that may serve as mediators between RM violation and perception of wrongness, such as severity and intentionality of a transgression, as well as the possibility for moral and emotional contagion (discussed briefly below). Across 6 separate studies, the authors confirmed the tenets of RRT, which suggest that morality is indeed a form of relationship regulation. Furthermore, they also found that metarelational threat partially mediates RM violation and perceived immorality; transgressions committed intentionally were more threatening, for instance, because intentional acts are more likely to reoccur.

RRT continues to be an important and relevant prism through which to view the meaning of morality, especially in relation to unique sociocultural factors, as may be seen in the military subculture, for instance. Two subsidiary considerations specifically related to RRT and the military population—emotional/moral contagion and situational morality—will be discussed in subsections below.

Emotional Contagion

The concept of *emotional or moral contagion* (Alvinus, et al., 2016; Johnson, 2008) is intimately connected to this latest notion of metarelational threat (as outlined above) within RRT. Defined as “the tendency to catch and feel emotions and/or behaviors which are similar to and associated with others” (Kemper, 2011, p. 163), examples of emotional contagion among military service members abound, from: (a) its culture that is complicit in the sexual harassment of female members (Antecol & Cobb-Clark, 2006), (b) based on the norms of hegemonic masculinity (Green, Emslie, O’Neill, Hunt, & Walker, 2010), to (c) occasions of civilian massacre (Shay, 1994), to (d) the fact that soldiers in units with 5 or more suicide attempts in the past year are more than *twice* as likely as their peers to themselves attempt suicide (Ursano, et al., 2015).

Comparable to the notion of “group think”, the theory of emotional contagion suggests that individuals are much more susceptible to influence among peers and institutions than previously believed. Likewise, one danger within the AR framework utilized by the military is in executing orders considered immoral under different social circumstances (e.g., killing another human being). This may lead to a violation of what Park (2010) deemed an individual's *global meaning system*, and ultimately to situations that are fertile grounds for moral injury (e.g., betrayal by a superior; see: Shay, 1994, 2002).

Contact does not have to be in physical proximity in order for an emotional contagion to be exploited, either, as indirect forms of contagion may result in similar outcomes (Eskine, Novreske, & Richards, 2013; Stavrova, Newman, Kulemann, & Fetchenhauer, 2016). As Tepe and Aydinli-Karakulak (2019) described in their study: the “perceived possibility of getting contaminated either through direct physical contact or indirectly via moral contagion leads to

perceived meta-relational threat, and thus, to severe condemnation”. Furthermore, becoming the *target* of a moral act is now linked to moral acts—whether good or bad—later on (Hoffman, Wisneski, Brandt, and Skitka, 2014). This may have significant ramifications for those service members who experience bullying or other forms institutionalized marginalization within the military: what happens to an individual can lead the same person to later do that very thing to others.

Situational Morality

Relatedly, while morality exists as a method for sustaining and strengthening interpersonal relationships (Rai & Fiske, 2011), research suggests that situational factors also influence the extent to which a person does or does not identify with the moral self in a given scenario (Aquino, et al., 2009). This identification with a moral center (or lack thereof) contributes to the decision-making process of an individual faced with a moral dilemma or experience. Ugazio, Lamb, and Singer (2012) detailed how the motivational component of emotion plays an integral role in moral judgment. Anger, as an example, is an "approach" emotion that increases the likelihood people will judge a forthcoming action morally permissible or necessary. Conversely, disgust is a "withdrawal" emotion that has the opposite effect. In consequence, one begins to understand how scenarios entailing a strong action demand (i.e., combat) elicit strong emotions, which in turn influence or dictate moral outcomes (Ugazio, Lamb, & Singer, 2012).

This finding is applicable after an event takes place, as well. One recent study (Jordan, Eisen, Bolton, Nash, & Litz, 2017) found that *perpetration*-based moral injury was mediated by guilt and shame in combat veterans, while *betrayal*-based moral injury was mediated by anger. There is evidence that morally injurious events committed by veterans themselves are associated

with the strongest forms of suffering, in contrast to the actions or omissions of others (Bryan et al., 2014). In short, the perspective taken by the veteran both during and after an event, including labels derived from context and content, may determine the manner in which that same veteran later responds emotionally and cognitively when recalling the past.

The significance of situational context as it relates to moral injury can be further understood through Park's (2010) work concerning *globalized* versus *situational* meaning making: humans run the risk of experiencing moral injury when their *global* value system is compromised through a combination of individual and societal-relational factors. This process may lead to further moral injury if the person in question uses maladaptive, negative coping mechanisms (such as shame) that reinforce the wrongness of their actions or even their personhood. One of many problems related to placing moral injury beneath the diagnosis of PTSD is that the current DSM-5 parameters fail to properly account for such differences between fear-based and shame-based reactions (Bryan, et al., 2018). What follows is a discussion on the relationship in the literature between moral injury and PTSD.

Moral Injury and PTSD

Until recently, there remained only a partial understanding of where and how moral injury correlates with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Jordan, et al., 2017). Early literature in the field of moral injury concurred that mental health problems emerge from a more diverse set of warzone experiences than fear-based stressors alone (Friedman, Resick, Bryant, & Brewin, 2011), and that moral injury contains a unique set of variables impacting the psychological, behavioral, social, and spiritual realms of veteran life (Drescher, et al., 2011). However, a lack of consensus on the definition or parameters of moral injury (Kopacz, et al., 2015) has remained an

obstacle to categorization and the development of instruments testing the components (and limits) of the construct.

In the past year, Bryan et al. (2018) were able to run an exploratory structural equation model (ESEM) that confirmed the distinct and separate categorization of PTSD and moral injury (N = 930). Using social cognitive theory as a theoretical base (Resick, Monson, & Chard, 2007), the authors differentiated the two constructs according to the syndromal presentation of either natural or manufactured emotion in National Guard personnel: PTSD was aligned with “natural” emotions such as fear and anxiety; moral injury was aligned with “manufactured” emotions such as guilt and shame. The distinction between natural and manufactured emotions is concerned with whether or not emotions emanate directly from the trauma itself (i.e., natural), or are a result of one’s thoughts and interpretations about the event after the fact (i.e., manufactured; Bryan, et al., 2018). Other components of manufactured emotion include: spiritual and/or existential issues, problems with forgiveness, anhedonia, anger/aggression, embitterment, betrayal, and social dissonance—none considered central features of PTSD despite empirical examination (Bryan, et al., 2018; Drescher et al., 2011; Litz et al., 2009; Shay, 2014).

In the same study (Bryan, et al., 2018), depressed mood loaded onto both PTSD and moral injury, while the interaction of PTSD and moral injury was associated with significantly increased risk for suicidal ideation ($B = -0.06$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .020$) and suicide attempts ($B = 0.11$, $SE = 0.05$, $p = .032$), remaining a statistically significant predictor of the latter even among soldiers with a history of the former (Bryan, et al., 2018). These findings may be compared favorably to aforementioned data regarding suicidality among service members: the interplay between moral injury and PTSD creates a particularly vicious cycle of self-recrimination, regret,

and fear-based stressors that may often lead service members toward the path of self-directed harm (SDH).

Indicator variables selected in the Bryan, et al. (2018) study to measure the hypothesized constructs and symptoms underlying PTSD and moral injury were from the following scales: PTSD Checklist for DSM-5; Differential Emotions Scale-IV; Patient Health Questionnaire-9; Alcohol Use Disorder Identification Test-Consumption; and the Insomnia Severity Index. Goodness of fit was assessed via a statistically nonsignificant chi-square test, root mean square error of approximately (RMSEA; < 0.05), comparative fit index (CFI; > 0.95), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI; > 0.95 , and standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR; < 0.05). A robust maximum likelihood estimation was used to specify all parameters. Results of the ESEM indicated the measurement model provided very good fit to the data when two factors were specified, as opposed to results in a 1-, 3-, and 4-factor model ($\chi^2 [37] = 44.92, p = .100$; RMSEA = 0.02, 95% CI [0.00–0.03]). In the aggregate, the ESEM model findings (Bryan, et al., 2018) support other recent research that indicates: (a) the effects of moral injury on PTSD symptomology are mediated by moral emotions (Lancaster, 2018); (b) acts of personal transgression have an impact on the course of PTSD development (Lancaster, 2018); (c) moral injury may challenge a soldier's basic sense of humanity (Currier, Holland, & Malott, 2014); (d) moral injury may evoke a spiritual/existential crisis (Wortmann, et al., 2017); and (e) moral injury may result in negative changes in ethical attitudes and behaviors (Drescher, et al., 2011).

One sees in the “manufactured” emotions of moral injury many of the components soldiers struggle with the most upon reentry to society. Orazem, et al. (2017), found the main struggles of post-service life to be: (a) the sense of being left behind; (b) the sense of not belonging; (c) the sense of missing the military culture; (d) the sense of lost purpose and

meaning; and (e) a negative perspective on civilians and the civilian way of life. As such, it may be said that emotions like enduring regret, guilt, shame, outrage, and anger, are more present and play a more significant role in the lives of combat veterans than the fear-based components traditionally conceptualized within a PTSD framework (Bryan et al., 2016; Farnsworth, Drescher, Nieuwsma, Walser, & Currier, 2014). While the fact remains that many changes following combat exposure do not necessarily indicate the presence of a mental health disorder (Castro, Kintzle, & Hassan, 2015; Hoge, et al., 2004), there are an increasing number of researchers claiming that moral injury, in point of fact, is not actually a mental health disorder, but rather “an experience of suffering that both transcends and overlaps with several mental health disorders, including PTSD, depression, and substance abuse” (Farnsworth, Drescher, Evans, & Walser, 2017, p. 392). Another recent study deemed moral injury “a descriptive term meant to reflect veterans’ own explanations of their postwar pain, confusion, and shame” (Purcell, Burkman, Keyser, Fucella, & Maguen, 2018, p. 646). Significantly, Farnsworth, et al. (2017) go on to state that contrary to the medical model of mental health—centered on the reduction of pathological symptomology—the functional approach to moral injury involves a *shift in perspective*, whereby morally injured soldiers change how they choose to relate and respond to their own moral pain.

Treatment

In the same vein, treatment for moral injury is less about specific modalities (although Farnsworth, et al., recommend Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, a.k.a., ACT) than an open invitation for combat soldiers to process their experiences in counseling, while also receiving a modicum of transition support (Castro, et al., 2015). Counseling has been proven effective and beneficial even in the absence of a mental health disorder (World Health Organization, 2002),

and especially when a problem exists that has not risen to the level of a diagnosis (Castro, et al., 2015; Napier, et al., 2014).

Moral Healing

Farnsworth, et al. (2017) use the term *moral healing* to explain this process, which contains five steps:

- 1) Acceptance of the reality of past moral wrongs.
- 2) Openness to moral pain as an element of the human experience.
- 3) Flexible consideration of moral rules in favor of underlying values.
- 4) Awareness of a sense of self that is distinct from moral pain.
- 5) Actively living values, including those previously violated, in the present moment.

One sees in this approach a holistic perspective that takes into account the fact that most veterans want and need to remain responsible for past mistakes (Purcell, et al., 2018); many clinicians without cultural competency as it relates to the military subculture make the mistake of telling veterans that none of the things that happened were their fault (Schorr, Stein, Maguen, Barnes, Bosch, & Litz, 2018). This type of blanket absolution is anathema to the accountability and responsibility instilled in service members through hard months and years of training. A better response includes Farnsworth, et al.'s (2017) suggestions above, in which combat veterans are empowered to live more truly by their moral codes in the present as a means of recompense for the mistakes of the past.

Impact of Killing (IOK) Treatment

A developing treatment that appears to take the nuances of combat experience into account is the *Impact of Killing* (IOK) treatment, a 6- to 8-week program focused on the specific experience and psychological consequences of killing in combat (Purcell, et al., 2018). An initial

IOK trial helped veterans improve their quality of life and significantly reduced posttraumatic stress symptoms and other psychiatric symptoms (Maguen et al., 2017; Purcell, et al., 2018). Following evidence-based and trauma-informed practices (e.g., Cognitive Processing Therapy [CPT] & Prolonged Exposure [PE] therapy), the researchers ensured continuity of care for veterans already working through PTSD concerns, allowing them to move fluidly from treatment for other traumas onto the specific ramifications of killing in combat after their PTSD treatment was complete. Weekly sessions addressed, in order, the following related concepts: (a) pre-treatment evaluation; (b) common responses to killing; (c) cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) elements; (d) becoming “unstuck”; (e) forgiveness; and (f) taking the next step (Purcell, et al., 2018).

Instead of offering platitudes in an attempt to assuage guilt and displace blame, the IOK treatment purposively asks veterans to honor their moral convictions in the present and into the future as a form of recompense for past misdeeds; it is designed to create the possibility of a life beyond the confines of prolonged suffering and shame from moral injury (Purcell, et al., 2018). Across 5 domains (Impact, Effectiveness, Critique, Novelty, & Other Considerations), participants reported positive results from the treatment, with a further intention to continue working on the pieces of their experiences that still needed resolution.

As the name implies, however, the IOK is only for those veterans who killed other human beings during the course of wartime service, and not for all service members suffering from morally injurious experiences. It is also meant to be follow-on after extensive PTSD treatment, and not something done concurrently with any other intensive mental health program. Despite these limitations, the IOK is a step in the right direction by taking actual combat veteran voices into account when designing and implementing mental health programming from a holistic

perspective. One of the major hurdles in the development of appropriate instrumentation remains the fact that veterans commonly report that moral injury is inadequately addressed in session by counselors (Schorr, et al., 2018), lending credence to the notion that if counselors do not ask, then combat veterans will not tell, and the entire mental health community will thus remain ignorant of the particularities of the morally injurious experience from those who know it best. A brief examination of current moral injury instrumentation is thus warranted.

Instrumentation

Before the past year, two psychometrically validated instruments were available to assess moral injury exposure. They are the Moral Injury Questionnaire—Military Version (MIQ-M; Currier, et al., 2015) and the Moral Injury Events Scale (MIES; Nash et al., 2013). The MIES was developed using generic questions surrounding moral injury experiences with combat Marines, while the MIQ-M was based on the earlier work of Drescher, et al. (2011), one of the seminal works on moral injury. With a focus on events and symptoms, neither former measure has proven accurate in tracking changes among veterans in response to treatment or in assessing spiritual/existential struggles and changes in religiosity (Koenig, et al. 2018). Two new measures, however, have changed the landscape of moral injury inventory.

Moral Injury Symptom Scale—Military Version (MISS-M)

In response to the aforementioned limitations, Koenig et al. (2018) developed a new multi-dimensional measure of MI symptoms entitled the Moral Injury Symptom Scale—Military Version (MISS-M). This instrument includes items based on the 10 theoretically grounded components of moral injury as found in the most relevant and well-regarded literature. The 10 components are: (a) shame; (b) guilt; (c) betrayal; (d) violation of moral values; (e) loss of

meaning; (f) difficulty forgiving; (g) loss of trust; (h) self-condemnation; (i) spiritual/religious struggles; and (j) loss of religious faith/hope (Koenig, et al., 2018).

An initial Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), done in random halves of the sample for the instrument, revealed a single factor for each dimension/subscale of the MISS-M except for those subscales (i.e., forgiving and self-condemnation), for which two factors were identified based on the positive or negative connotation of the question. Of an original 54 items, 9 failed to meet the cut-off criterion, resulting in 45-item MISS-M in its final version. A subsequent Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) confirmed Eigenvalues for all factors making up the subscales equal to or exceeding 1.0 (range 1.55 to 10.94), with the exception of the faith/hope subscale. In the larger, overall sample ($N = 427$), the internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) of the 45-item MISS-M was acceptable ($\alpha = 0.92$, 95% CI = 0.91–0.93), as was the reliability of most of the individual subscales (α range: 0.56–0.91). Construct validity was indicated by high correlations between the total MISS-M score and the 10 subscales (Pearson r 's ranging from 0.45 to 0.78). Discriminant validity was suggested by weak correlations between the total MISS-M score and other social, religious and physical health constructs, while convergent validity was demonstrated by correlations with other mental health symptoms that might accompany moral injury, to include: PTSD symptoms (assessed by the 20-item PCL-5; $r = 0.56$); depressive symptoms (assessed by the 14-item Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale; HADS; $r = 0.62$), and anxiety symptoms (HADS; $r = 0.59$). The MISS-M is particularly useful in flagging those veterans who may be struggling with both PTSD and components of moral injury, as veterans with greater expressions of moral injury have simultaneously endorsed higher levels of combat related stressors (Currier, et al., 2018).

Expressions of Moral Injury Scale–Military Version (EMIS-M).

At the same time, another group of researchers (Currier, et al., 2018) recently developed the Expressions of Moral Injury Scale—Military Version (EMIS-M) for assessing expressions of MI after the occurrence of the event. The EMIS-M items “capture possible cognitive and emotional consequences of MI events as well as maladaptive behaviors that often follow such moral reactions” (Currier, et al., 2018, p. 476). Following both an exploratory (Study 1, N = 286) and confirmatory factor analysis (Study 2, N = 624) with veterans of at least one military deployment, the instrument demonstrated excellent psychometric properties across a wide array of statistical analyses, with evidence supporting a two-dimensional solution on the basis of expressions directed at *self* and *others* (Currier, et al., 2018). For purposes of construct validity—aside from the EMIS-M survey items—veterans also completed a battery of psychometrically validated measures related to moral injury, to include: the PTSD Checklist for the DSM-5 (PCL-5); Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-8); Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT-C); The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS); Integration of Stressful Life Events Scale (ISLES-SF); forgiveness of self/other questionnaire; Adult Trait Hope Scale (ATHS), and the Gratitude Questionnaire 6 (GQ-6).

In the first study, an EFA with principal axis factoring using direct oblimin rotation resulted in two factors collectively explaining 57.63% of variance in candidate items; a two-factor solution was also supported by the scree plot analysis. The authors retained all items that: (a) loaded highly on their respective factors (i.e., .50 or above); (b) evidenced low cross-loadings (.30 or below); (c) had strong communalities ($h^2 < .50$), and (d) avoided redundancy. Among reliability indices, the internal consistency of the two subscales exceeded 0.9, while test–retest coefficients over a 6-month waiting period between administrations of the instrument were also favorable (0.74 – 0.80). With a corrected alpha level of .005, EMIS-M subscales yielded

statistically significant correlations for convergent and divergent validity analyses (.17–.73), with the exception of total alcohol use assessed on the AUDIT-C (.09). Specifically, there was a positive link between EMIS-M subscales and the inability to make meaning of a potential trauma over their lifetime, and an inverse association between the subscale scores with social support, hope, and gratitude.

In the second study, participants were asked to complete measures on combat exposure, guilt & shame, anger, and social desirability (in addition to all the measures asked of the first group of participants). The authors then tested differences in model fit between the hypothesized two-factor structure previously identified in the EFA with two alternative models: a bi-factor specification and unidimensional specification. CFA results confirmed that the EMIS-M is best conceptualized as two distinct but related factors, as evidenced by comparable loadings of each item on its respective factor and an acceptable fit of the common factors model, yet there was also support for a bi-factor model, suggesting an overall MI factor that encapsulates both subsidiary factors. In terms of reliability, internal consistencies of the subscales again exceeded the recommended level of .9, and in terms of validity, on a corrected alpha level of .004, the subscales again yielded statistically significant correlations in examining construct validity (.12 – .73).

The EMIS-M helpfully corrects an inherent error within the MIQ-M, which intentionally conflated self and other types of transgressions due to a fear that respondents would be unwilling to endorse items about their own wrongdoings (Schorr, et al., 2018). Findings from the EMIS-M study were mirrored by the recent Grounded Theory (GT) work of Schorr et al. (2018), who used focus groups in the Veterans Administration (VA) system to come to the same conclusion: moral injury was endorsed by veterans as either being an issue of personal responsibility or that of the

responsibility of others (Schorr, et al., 2018). Such a framework suggests a qualitative difference between events where one violates their own beliefs versus having someone else do so for them, either willingly or unwillingly. These findings may help researchers understand how justified acts of killing still cause moral injury (Farnsworth, et al., 2014), and how soldiers need not feel they've failed their own moral codes in order to experience moral distress (Schorr, et al., 2018). The influences of varied institutions, the specificities inherent within different forms of service, and other related factors may all contribute to the actions of individuals and units leading to moral injury. A closer look at the structure and nature of the military institution is warranted in light of a lack of substantive research on the ways in which such military factors may play a role in the creation and sustainment of moral injury.

Gaps in the Current Perspective

One gap in the current literature appears to be a lack of consideration in regards to the military subculture's unique impact on the individual combat soldier, and how that influence is then expressed in their experiences and perceptions of moral injury. The United States military is unlike any other institution in the nation; it places extensive demands on members in terms of risking their lives, irregular working hours, unpredictable work tasks, longer absences from home, and continuous moves, among other frequently cited challenges (Alvinus, 2013). Such institutions "seek exclusive and undivided loyalty, and they attempt to reduce the claims of competing roles and status positions on those they wish to encompass within their boundaries" (Alvinus, Johansson, and Larsson, 2016, p. 313). Those who have served know there are no half-measures in the military, and that military identity remains a component of life well after service is complete. Alvinus, Johansson, and Larsson (2016) went so far as to deem the military

an ideal *greedy institution* in that it demands unconditional sacrifice, compliance, and cooperation from its members.

While this term denotes a negative connotation, in fairness the military has a unique mission that requires organizationally specific training, maintains higher-than-average costs connected to turnover, suffers unique consequences associated with poor selection, classification, and training, and has to continually change operational focus, which often results in negative outcomes for its personnel (Dupre & Day, 2007; Tucker, Sinclair, & Thomas, 2005). This has a direct influence on military job satisfaction, deemed the most frequently studied attitude in organizational behavior research (Alvinus, et al., 2016).

What follows is an interwoven consideration of the ways in which military culture and identity intersect with underappreciated factors related to moral injury; specifically, the concept of hegemonic masculinity and the import of an individual's military occupational specialty (MOS) on their perception of self and other. Beyond the importance of doing the individual veteran experience justice via the narrative process, this study's intent is to examine moral injury as a holistic phenomenon. As such, it will take a closer look than all previous studies at such subsidiary factors that have gone unreported or unexamined by previous research.

Military Culture

As noted, many researchers studying combat-related moral injury have failed to account for the power and dynamism of the military institution in terms of the norms, belief systems, and everyday attitudes of its members. Strategic-level leaders are tasked with recreating a "sense of oneness" between themselves and the organization that reduces their ability or desire to view themselves outside the confines of the institutional hierarchy (Alvinus, et al., 2016). Service members at all ranks find themselves similarly affected by their military experience, so much so

that they are often unable to view themselves as “normal” people afterward, but always as ex-soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen (Green, et al., 2010). Atuel and Castro (2018) used Sue’s (2001) *multidimensional model of cultural competence* (MDCC) to explain military culture via: (a) command structure; (b) military norms; and (c) military identity. A closer look at each of these is needed in relation to the military institution’s impact on the trajectory of moral harm amongst its members.

Command structure. The military chain of command is both a hierarchy of power and a social network that determines authority, responsibility, decision-making, and communication flow (Atuel & Castro, 2018). Every service member is situated within this structure, and their identity as an individual will commonly be linked to job description, rank, unit, and branch of service. Due to the intense organizational demands placed on the military by the American government, military leaders at all levels are equally exacting in their expectations for adherence to this command structure; when the chain of command is usurped, or breached, then discipline fails and the consequences in real-world operations may be severe. Research indicates that soldiers in combat respond to orders that will risk their lives through a combination of factors, including a desire not to let fellow unit members down, and an adherence to orders that is expounded ad nauseam through the process of basic training (Grossman, 2009). This type of unquestioning adherence to rules (and the unquestionable power of leaders) plays a significant role in the occurrence of morally injurious experiences (MIE’s) by virtue of the simple fact that soldiers will follow orders in the military that they would not consider rational, prudent, or even morally just in the civilian sector. This may lead to moral injury after service time when individuals are able to give their experiences and actions more due consideration, thus feeling

intense guilt, shame, or other forms of self-condemnation for actions taken under duress of military obligation.

Military norms. Military norms encompass the spectrum of values, traditions, beliefs, behaviors, and events connected to military life, including the language used to communicate within and without the chain of command (Atuel & Castro, 2018). In order for new members to learn these particular facets of military life, they undergo an indoctrination process through their training that engages them in a set pattern of regimented behaviors, where their perspective is shifted from the self to the collective; the identity of the individual is subsumed by the greater mission and purpose of the group. Simultaneously, they are taught to prioritize values such as integrity, commitment, honor, loyalty, respect, and devotion to duty, which have applicability to group cohesion (Atuel & Castro, 2018), an assumed factor in the success of all military missions (Atuel & Castro, 2018; King, 2006). As these norms are followed, members develop a sense of “we-ness” that begins in the immediate unit and eventually includes the entire military structure (Atuel & Castro, 2018; Siebold, 2007). Interconnected with the aforementioned elements of command structure, military norms are another form of societal reinforcement by which service members may feel trapped by circumstance into performing (or allowing others to perform) actions that have conflicting moral consequences or considerations.

Military identity. Atuel and Castro (2018) argue that military command structure and military norms work in conjunction to form the military sense of identity, grounded in the traditional warrior ethos, but defined in its postmodern manifestation by an around-the-clock state of physical and psychological combat readiness (Castro & Adler, 1999). Despite the fact that individuals possess multiple identities (e.g., male, Latino, etc.), the military identity often becomes the distinct feature by which members see themselves, both during and after military

service (Castro, et al., 2015). This combination of identity influence and 24/7 preparedness, where service members are beholden to the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) even when off duty or on vacation, lends itself to a powerful and complex form of self-perception. When the command structure, norms, and identity components of military culture are considered in the aggregate, one is struck by the pervasive power of this distinct subculture in its ability to transform the hearts and minds of its members toward a collectivist mentality (and communal sharing [CS] modality) that puts the good of the whole above the good of the individual. Such a conversion has obvious implications for the development of moral injury amongst its members, who—after all—will eventually leave the military and return to the individualistic purview of the dominant culture in the United States. And, comparable to the intricate complexities of a national government, the military contains innumerable checks and balances to maintain this mindsight amongst its members. Amongst the most powerful of these tools is the continued adherence of the American military subculture to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity.

The Military and Hegemonic Masculinity

Forms of masculinity are as varied as the types of men in the world; as a social construct, both men and women (and non-gendered individuals) deploy masculinity in a range of settings (Gillon, 2008). Traditional gender role theory highlights the processes of male socialization within a given sociocultural context that lead to gendered beliefs and practices, as well as subsequent normative constructs demanding adherence (Gillon, 2007; Levant, 1996). The normative male gender role is both associated with traditionally masculine values such as objectivity, rationality, and control (Edley & Wetherell, 1995) as well as with numerous negative consequences for the mental and physical wellbeing of men (Gillon, 2008). This is unsurprising;

given that an overreliance on rational, objective thought may limit an individual's ability to perceive and process emotionality.

One area of concern regarding gender role theory is the extent to which it fails to address within-subject differences in the masculinity inhabited by the same men at different times, that is: (a) identity is variable and contextual (Gergen 1999); and (b) men can engage in different behaviors associated with different ideologies depending on context (Gillon, 2008). This failure has major ramifications in the field of moral injury, where a soldier's sense of masculinity may very well inform their actions, as well as their responses to emotional prompts following a morally injurious experience. The social constructionist perspective on masculinity proposes that men are able to construct their masculinity moment-by-moment, and in relation to one another and to the world (Edley & Wetherell, 1997; Gillon, 2008). This is accomplished through the process of discourse, in which individuals negotiate and renegotiate their identity according to a given cultural domain. As it relates to military service and moral injury, however, one form of socially constructed masculinity is of the utmost concern.

Connell (1995) coined the term *hegemonic masculinity* to describe “the continued dominance within many Western cultural settings of a traditional mode of masculinity over others (which are subordinated) on the basis of its patriarchal function” (Gillon, 2008, p. 124). In its dominance, this form of masculinity forces all other forms and varieties of masculinity to be defined in relation to the hegemonic ideal. According to Connell (1995), the 4 components of hegemonic masculinity are: (a) power; (b) an ambivalence to femininity; (c) domination and objectification; and (d) avoidance of emotion. *Power* is concerned with the idealization of strength and invulnerability; a “tough guy” approach that often manifests through oppressive and violent methods (Gillon, 2008). *Ambivalence to femininity* may be seen as “an ongoing reaction

to, and rejection of, the qualities and attributes associated with female and feminine ways of being (e.g. nurturing, caring, communalism)” (Gillon, 2008, p. 125). *Domination and objectification* gives primacy to logic and rationality, and places value on material gains as a means of control over others (Gillon, 2008). *Avoidance of emotion*, as the name implies, concerns the suppression of emotionality in favor of rationalism, including bodily experiences that must be controlled or avoided: “emotions serve little purpose in the acquisition of power and the manifestation of strength, and are to be denigrated or denied wherever possible” (Gillon, 2008, p. 125).

As it relates to military service, Green et al. (2010) found that hegemonic masculinity was embedded in the construction of soldier identity, resulting in stunted emotional language to express distress, and a propensity to delay or refuse mental health treatment. This finding raises immediate and obvious concerns as to the impact of the hegemonic ideal in the military on those members who experience MIE’s and MI’s (or who later develop MI’s as a result of MIE’s). A pervasive ambivalence to all things feminine, to include the expression of emotions beyond anger/rage (which can suggest power, another hegemonic ideal), here has been demonstrated to directly impact the ability of service members to seek mental health treatment, or—failing that—to even be able to articulate with emotional language what they are experiencing as a result of such injuries.

Furthermore, while military masculinity does promote an equally important caring ethos, based on the strong interdependent bonds of camaraderie, it is only available to soldiers accepted and included by their peers (Green, et al., 2010). In other words, recruits or soldiers who exhibit behaviors that will be a liability on the battlefield, and as such represent a risk to the entire team, are not eligible for this special form of masculine care. As Green, et al. (2010) explain: “this

seeming paradox between hyper masculinity and caring masculinities appears to be embedded within military culture” (p. 1483). Again, the consequences in relation to moral injury are potentially catastrophic—those service members at greatest risk for MIE’s and MI’s at the hands of their own comrades (as outcasts or misfits) are also the *least* likely to receive care, concern, and support from the same larger group. The corrosive effects of the hegemonic ideal within the military—notwithstanding many of its positive attributes for the same—suggest that military members are at a unique disadvantage for coping with morally injurious experiences (MIE), moral pain (MP), and, ultimately, moral injuries (MI). One more facet of the unique military experience must now be included to the larger discussion; that of military occupational specialty, or “MOS”.

Military Occupational Specialty (MOS), Combat Arms, and Moral Injury

Following World War I, during which the misuse of personnel was widespread, the United States military began a concerted effort to better categorize and define job positions (Mitchell & Driskill, 1996). By the end of World War II, the American military was at the forefront of occupational analysis, job classification, and testing methodologies related to task performance (Mitchell & Driskill, 1996). The end result of decades of work during the 20th century in the field of occupational analysis was the task-based approach taken via the creation of the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB). The ASVAB measures an individual’s ability to learn in relation to task-oriented measures (Mitchell & Driskill, 1996), and remains the gateway test to the wide array of jobs available in each branch of the Armed Forces. Given appropriate openings as older members of the military discharge from the service, a high score allows an individual to pick from hundreds of military occupational specialties (MOS), while a low score greatly reduces a recruit’s choices in the same regard.

Given the diversity of jobs in the technologized military of the 21st century, there is surprisingly little consideration among researchers given to those individuals (formerly all men, now predominantly men) that join the military with the express purpose of taking on a combat-arms designated MOS. These are specialties (e.g., tank, infantry, and artillery jobs in the Army and Marines) that simultaneously manage to combine a greatly enhanced risk of danger with a more physically demanding training process and a reduced ability to translate skillsets back to the civilian workforce. In other words, an argument can be made that combat soldiers *voluntarily* give more and risk more, while getting less back in return.

Research supports this assertion. An enlistment military occupational specialty (MOS) with a combat arms designation resulted in an almost 3-fold increased odds of TBI disability compared with other MOS categories *after* wartime service (Gubata, Piccirillo, Packnett, & Cowan, 2013), and a combat MOS was one of several risk factors associated with increased odds of accidental death among enlisted personnel *during* military service (Lewandowski-Romps, 2014). As self-evident by their job descriptions, combat soldiers are more at-risk for combat-related stressors, which results in greater expressions of moral injury (Currier, et al., 2018). Yet, moral injury literature is silent on such job distinctions despite the many ways that a combat MOS sets the individual soldier on a trajectory toward increased risk of PTSD and moral injury, as well as a reduced ability to use their skillset once back in the civilian workforce. An enlisted intelligence analyst with a Top-Secret security clearance can walk into 6-figure employment; a rifleman who usually risked more, gave more, and lost more, has no such recourse.

Lastly, the culture of the combat arms is an important consideration when addressing moral injury among combat veterans. Infantrymen, in particular, pride themselves on being the “tip of the spear”, the first in and the last out during wartime conflicts. They include less than 1%

of the military's fighting force, which in turn represents only 3% of the entire U.S. population (Atuel & Castro, 2018). This means that roughly 3 Americans out of every 10,000 people serve in the U.S. military as infantry soldiers, which does not even consider the number of infantrymen who actually fight in combat during wartime service. Justifiably, such soldiers and Marines take great pride in their job descriptor, and this esprit-de-corps is reflected in the increased level of physicality, discipline, and efficiency traditionally displayed by light infantry units (Grossman, 2009). In relation to hegemonic masculinity, however, it is also important to note that the same culture can be detrimental to the mental health and wellbeing of its members (Greene, et al., 2010). Whatever hold the hegemonic ideal has on the rest of the military, in the combat arms world it can be more accurately termed a stranglehold; there is little to no room to exhibit weakness, emotion, or other components of humanity considered superfluous to combat readiness. Take this in conjunction with the aforementioned power and pervasiveness of military culture, as well as the insidious nature of hegemonic masculinity within the military, and the resulting picture is stark.

Chapter Summary

The combat veterans of the U.S. military, with a designated combat MOS, have undergone the most intensive training available in the western world, which simultaneously: (a) eliminated emotional language from their vocabulary, and (b) trained them to perform acts of violence against other human beings with deadly accuracy and a minimal amount of internal dissonance. Add to this the up-tempo nature of the past 2 decades of fighting, the all-encompassing power of the military culture, and a relatively insular, continuously deployed fighting force, and the result is truly alarming. The result has been an unprecedented level of exposure to MIE's and MI's among this distinct population, whose members are also distinct in

their inability to express themselves with the emotive energy needed to heal and make sense of such invisible wounds.

The purpose of this study is to look closely at this intersectionality of factors that contribute so significantly to exposure to moral harm and the development of moral injury over time. To do the complexity of the issues justice, the narrative inquiry method was chosen to illustrate the depth and breadth of combat veteran experience over the lifespan. The next chapter will illustrate the power of this method, and the reasons for choosing an intergenerational group of participants. After all, much of what we can learn in the present has to do with the mistakes of the past. To the best of this author's knowledge, this is the first study of its kind to consider the multifaceted extent of the military culture's influence on its members in terms of their perceptions, experiences, and reactions to moral harm while in uniform.

CHAPTER III: METHOD

Narrative Inquiry

“She was just slightly disappointed when he admitted that he came to the nursery window not to see her but to listen to stories.

‘You see, I don’t know any stories. None of the lost boys knows any stories.’

‘How perfectly awful,’ Wendy said” (Barrie, 1929)

Humans think in metaphor and learn through stories (Bateson, 1994). In this sense, narrative inquiry is the form of research that attempts to most closely approximate the human condition. Each one of us struggles to make sense of our experiences, our purpose, and our impact on others. John Dewey (1938) believed that experience held both a personal and a social component, and pointed out that all experiences are the manifestation or result of innumerable prior experiences. Likewise, each future moment will be based in part on the experiences of both the present and the past. To make sense of this and other sundry human complexities, we have created stories full of analogies, metaphors, and other forms of powerful imagery to give voice to our lives, share them with others, teach and inspire future generations, and touch the transcendent.

Not all stories, however, lead to positive outcomes. Many stories we tell mislead ourselves and others, remain ambiguous and confusing, or contain multiple meanings that keep the truth muddled and hidden (Bateson, 1994). There are many such stories in society writ large. An example of the last would be the manner in which the entertainment industry weaves the fabricated narrative that a human being must look a certain way in order to be found attractive. A more positive example of a collective story would be the “golden rule”, which for millennia has dictated that we should treat others as we wish to be treated in turn. This simple rule, and the

numerous stories expressing its message, have been created, refined, deconstructed, and recreated by countless societies; it remains a central tenet of civilized life today despite its ancient roots.

Proponents of literary theory claim there is no true difference between fact and fiction (Czarniawska, 1997); narrative itself is life and learning, regardless of its factual accuracy (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). While a positivist perspective states there are objective truths in the world that can be known through the scientific method, and a social constructionist one claims relativism and the contextual nature of all phenomena, the narrative researcher is focused solely on the narrative itself, which is both phenomenon *and* method of the social sciences. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) put it: “if we understand the world narratively, as we do, then it makes sense to study the world narratively” (p. 17).

This does not mean narrative inquirers do not pay attention to their own experiences as researchers, but rather that they are able to weave such experiences, as well as innumerable other facets of their lives, into the very fabric of that narrative. No researcher remains untouched by her research, and no research remains uninfluenced by the particularities of the researcher. “Narrative can be used to highlight temporal fluidity and show change within time and can become a self-conscious text that continually flags whose perception is dominant, which environments made particular plots possible and whose interpretations are being offered” (Conle, p. 57, 2013). Narrative inquiry is a means to learn, to grow, to help, to teach, to reflect, to reconsider, to be challenged, to contribute, and to shift positions, all through the method of story, the oldest and most profound manner of human expression.

While some researchers see narrative inquiry as an “easy” kind of research, it is a form of inquiry that requires particular kinds of wakefulness distinct from other forms of qualitative

research, and is much more than the simple telling of stories (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007). Connelly and Clandinin describe story as a type of “portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful” (p. 477). As such, narrative inquiry may be seen as *the study of experience as story*, while simultaneously remaining a methodology that seeks to “adopt a particular narrative view of experience as phenomena under study” (Connelly & Clandinin, p. 477, 2006). While narrative inquiry shares features with other forms of qualitative research, there are three distinct attributes (a.k.a., commonplaces) needed for genuine narrative research, the combination of which allows for the manifestation of a distinct contribution to the greater research community.

The Three Commonplaces

Clandinin, et al. (2007) used the term “commonplace” to denote checkpoints or places to direct one’s attention while doing narrative inquiry. According to their analysis of prior narrative research, the three commonplaces that must be present to specify the dimensions of an inquiry space are: temporality, sociality, and place. *Temporality* reminds the inquirer (and the reader) that all events, people, and places are in constant flux, continuous motion. As sages took note through the ages, one of the few certainties in life is that it never stands still. Narrative inquiry must always strive to understand everything—including the research itself—as a transition point, always moving toward a different manifestation. *Sociality* refers to both the personal and social conditions of the participants, the subject matter, the location, and even the researchers. Personal conditions include “feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 480), while the social includes the existential, the environment, and other contextual factors that influence the personal from a broader socio-cultural perspective. Importantly, Clandinin et al. (2007) remind us that inquirers are always *in relationship* with

participants' lives, and cannot exclude themselves when considering the commonplace of sociality. Lastly, *place* refers to the physical and topological boundaries—either isolated or in sequence—through which the inquiry and its events unfold.

In specific regard to this study, *temporality* may equally indicate the time of an interview, the time of my written reflections following the interview, the time of my changed position months after the interview when scanning through fields texts, the time when events described during the interview took place, or an unknown time in the future when I am looking forward to a specific milestone in the research. Likewise, *sociality* may suggest my personal feelings about the subject matter, a participant's feelings or thoughts about me, the changing feelings and thoughts we both have about each other over the course of the inquiry, or even the shifting political climate of the country as the inquiry unfolds. *Place* might refer to the specific place where a combat-related moral injury occurred, or to the imagery following the event, or to the broader region of the Middle East, Southeast Asia, or elsewhere. It may mean a participant's home, living room, or favorite easy chair. It may mean the swing set where a former combat soldier pushes his daughter while attempting to forget the war. It could mean the small foldout table with the rickety legs and the plastic, blue-and-white checkered cover where I currently write these words. It may—and will—mean all of these things and more as the inquiry unfolds. Taken collectively, the commonplaces allow for a three-dimensional understanding of time, place, and person that are richly detailed, nuanced, and complex; these are the hallmarks of the narrative process.

The Eight Elements

Beyond the three commonplaces, Clandinin, Pushor, and Orr (2007) argued for a list of elements to consider when designing and implementing narrative inquiry that serve as a set of

questions for every phase of the inquiry's development. In the aggregate, these elements guide the study according to clearly articulated principles, lending credence to the narrative methodology, and thereby to the significance of the study's results. Each of the eight elements is outlined below.

Justification. According to Clandinin, et al. (2007), a narrative inquiry must be justified at three levels: the personal, practical, and social. Personal justification involves situating oneself (as researcher) within the context of the study. For my own part, it is self-evident that I'm a member of the particular group I'm studying, and that exploring the stories and life events of others will also be an avenue to explore my own life history. The practical justification of the study entails how it will provide insight into particularities of the human condition and how it will change the reader's thinking about the issue at hand. In this case, the hope is that the depth and nuance of narrative inquiry will offer a unique glimpse at living through moral injury from a variety of perspectives, experiences, age ranges, and developmental levels amongst combat veterans. Lastly, social justification is concerned with the broader significance of the study to the public and the ways in which it may touch or alter the culture surrounding combat veterans. While it seems hubristic to state that my own study can impact anything beyond the immediate participants' lives (and my own), there is also the hope that it may contribute in some fashion to the growing literature on moral injury from its unique vantage point, offering further thick and rich descriptions to the lived experiences of war.

Naming the Phenomenon. The second element outlined by Clandinin, et al. (2007) is the axiomatic need to name the phenomenon being studied. More than this, however, is the rejoinder from the authors that "a narrative inquirer always adopts a narrative view of the phenomenon" (Clandinin, et al., 2007, p. 25). This suggests that such naming must always take place while

accounting for person, place, and time—and that the narrator is also in a certain place, at a specific time, with a particular background and temperament, when the naming of the phenomenon takes place. The importance here is that the naming of things may change over time as the author considers and reconsiders the many meanings of field texts accumulated through research. The entire process of narrative inquiry is one of fluidity taking precedence over the concrete, and of context trumping the quest for certainty.

Choosing and Describing Method. Closely related to the naming of the phenomenon is the choice of narrative methodology invoked and implemented. Clandinin, et al., (2007) saw this as a process in their own work that “unfolded through imagining, and reimagining, a reflexive and reflective back and forth as lives changed and the context changed” (p. 27). The inquiry itself is a puzzle to solve in an ever-shifting space, and the methods picked must match the intent of the inquirer. The first task of the researcher, then, is to begin thinking narratively; they must see that the topic, participants, and place exist in a multidimensional, ever changing life space (Clandinin, et al., 2007). The second task is to decide the types of field texts to be compiled and composed, always with consideration given to the commonplaces of temporality, sociality, and place. This process is aided by the use of imaginative thinking, in which metaphor, analogy, mythology, and other forms of creative thought can be used to reach solutions.

Analysis and Interpretation Processes. The fourth design element discussed by Clandinin, et al. (2007) encourages the use of the commonplaces to scaffold the study from field texts to research texts and to find the appropriate balance between the three that will best serve the study and its participants. It is important for the researcher to recognize that the transition between field and research text is most often not smooth or linear, and that by moving to-and-fro

in time, or between people and places, the researcher finds the appropriate forms to translate their field work into more tightly organized and ordered data.

Positioning Research. It is incumbent upon researchers to “position their studies in relation to other research on a particular phenomenon, to related programs of research, and to research undertaken using different epistemological and ontological assumptions” (Clandinin, et al., 2007, p. 29). The three components of positioning research mentioned may be viewed in sequence from most specific to most broad. Positioning my study in relation to other narrative accounts of moral injury is simple—none have yet been done. Positioning my study within a program of research is more challenging. Conceptually, I will adhere to the Deweyan view of experience, which “acknowledges the embodiment of the person in the world and that focuses on not only the individual’s experience but also on the social, cultural, and institutional narratives in which the individual’s experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted” (Clandinin, et al., 2007, p. 29). In addition, the gathered data will be viewed and analyzed by an expert in the field of combat-related moral injury, for his feedback and commentary. This will be an important comparison point between my own work and that of someone who has extensive experience in the field.

Lastly, the literature review is generally viewed as the means to position a narrative inquiry against research of a phenomenon using other epistemological and ontological assumptions (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). While I have done my best in the preliminary steps of this study to examine all of the meaningful research done to date on moral injury and the experiences of combat veterans, it should also be noted that the essence of narrative inquiry resides in the rejection of clearly defined boundaries and foundational assumptions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). A narrative inquiry’s epistemological and ontological base is best described by

its very name: it is dedicated to a thorough, unadulterated exploration of story, without boxing the narrative into the confines of a prescribed theory or construct.

Uniqueness. The sixth element outlined by Clandinin et al. (2007) is the researcher's responsibility to "offer some sense of what it is that can be known about a phenomenon that could not be known, at least in the same way, by other theories, methods, or lines of work" (p. 30). As noted, the current study will be the first of its kind—a longitudinal study of the combat veteran experience of moral injury through time, place, and sociality. Due to the newness of the moral injury construct, there is limited knowledge related to how it manifests over time, what differences are experienced between generations of combat vets, and how the changing nature of military training and American society have in turn impacted combat veterans' perceptions of themselves and their experiences of moral harm. This study is the first of its kind to address these dimensions of the moral injury (MI) in relation to wartime service.

Ethical Considerations. As Connelly and Clandinin (2006) note: "ethical considerations permeate narrative inquiries from start to finish: at the outset of the study; as inquirer-participant relationships unfold, and as participants are represented in research texts" (p. 483). Due to the intense and in-depth nature of narrative work, researchers cultivate relationships with the participants that must be continuously navigated and monitored. Furthermore, the research that we do must be presented and "re-presented" to the participants as we move through the weeks, months, and even years of field text accumulation. The good and bad of such presenting must also be included in the narrative; a participant's poor reaction to a transcribed conversation, remembered differently, might provide context and depth to the study that would otherwise be omitted. In sum, the healer's motto of "Do No Harm" is applicable to all narrative studies at all times, and ethical actions related to the study itself may prove a valuable addition to the inquiry

as the study unfolds. Special consideration must also be given to the delicate nature of moral injury and traumatic experience...not all participants may be willing to fully disclose their experiences, and as the researcher I must remember my obligation to protect the participants if and when the dialogue becomes emotionally charged.

Representation. The final element consists of six separate considerations regarding representation, which “require evidence, interpretive plausibility, and disciplined thought” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 485). The first of these is to think *narratively*, meaning that temporality, sociality, and place must always be considered when constructing story. The second is to *consider the range of textual forms available*; narrative may take on a variety of shapes, sizes, or symbols, and the broader the measure given to this reality at the outset, the stronger the final product. The third consideration: *writing research texts is in and of itself an act of narrative; the experience of authoring a narrative does, in fact, become part of the story*. The fourth is to remember there are *several layers of audience* to consider in the creation of a narrative: the self, the participants, and the wider public. To omit any of these, or to unbalance the story in favor of one or the other will lead to a flat, incoherent storyline or even to unethical practice when it comes to the absence of the participants’ own voices. Fifth is the reminder to write with the awareness that there are *definitive criteria by which the work will be judged* by other researchers: authenticity, adequacy, and plausibility. Last, narrative inquiries must be *constructed with social significance in mind*; how will this study impact the field and contribute to the greater body of literature? These six subcomponents of representation must be considered prior to, during, and following the construction of a narrative inquiry.

Research Questions

- How do experiences of moral injury differ according to the particularities of the war being fought? How do they differ across generations, and as the veterans themselves age?
- In what ways does a combat MOS impact the perceived experience of moral injury among combat soldiers and Marines? Does a combat MOS make such experiences easier or harder to handle in the moment? Are MIE's more or less likely to develop into MI's among those combat veterans with a combat MOS? Does a combat MOS make coping with the aftermath of moral injury easier or harder to handle down the line as civilians? Is a combat MOS a continuing source of pride for veterans who experienced moral injury? Does a combat MOS in any way bolster or limit their ability and/or desire to seek out support?
- What are the longitudinal effects of combat MOS training on an individual across the lifespan, and how do the tenets of the warrior ethos permeate the lives and day-to-day experiences of such veterans? How do older generations perceive their younger warrior counterparts, and vice versa? What are the generational differences between combat MOS war veterans and their experiences of moral injury?

Study Design

The study design follows the tenets of narrative inquiry as described in the previous methodology section, particularly in relation to the use of the three commonplaces and eight elements identified by Connelly and Clandinin (2000). Creation and documentation of field texts began immediately upon IRB approval, while continuous editing and reshaping of the narrative with the intent to best tell the larger story of the participants has continued up to submission for final review and defense.

Study Context and Intervention

The study is grounded in the social constructionist paradigm, which asserts that meaning and value are created in relationship and are situated according to context and culture (Gergen, 1999). The form of narrative inquiry used is based on the work of Dewey, for whom “education, experience, and life are inextricably intertwined” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xxiii), and who believed experience was both personal and social (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Participants

Participants were selected via snowball sampling, from a number of my personal connections with military veterans and professional connections in counselor education. I had a passing acquaintance with one participant, who I met briefly on two occasions but did not know in any real capacity prior to the start of the study. All others were strangers to me, introduced by intermediaries who knew of my research interest and history in the military.

Data Sources

Data sources included my own thoughts, behaviors, and experiences—as related to the project—as well as those of the participants I was lucky enough to share time with and get to know. Historical documents, geographical locations, personal artifacts, photos or videos, and any number of other miscellaneous items were included as data with the permission of the participants and their families.

Data Collection

Data collection began immediately via the creation of a field journal upon approval by the university’s Internal Review Board (IRB) in the summer of 2019. This journal documented my own timeline through the process and allowed for me to create, review, and reevaluate the project as it moved forward and my perspective deepened and shifted. Further field texts were

created via interviews and personal experiences with participants and through my own investigations into related matters such as my interviews with two subject matter experts on moral injury.

Data Analysis

Data was compiled into organized computer files backed up and password-protected on 2 separate storage devices. All field texts were transformed into research texts for the purposes of write-up, review, and reflection. Transcripts of interviews, as well as my personal reflections of the interviews, were shared as requested with participants for further reflection and review. Secondary and tertiary meetings were also documented via field text and transcribed into further research text material. The most important component of the research process was that participants felt a sense of ownership within the study as related to their own contributions, and that their voices remained at the forefront of the narrative throughout the temporal, spatial, and social progression of the project.

Ethical Considerations

All participants consented to the study, and retain the right to revoke any material as it pertains to their own experiences at any time, up to publication of the manuscript. The participants remained anonymous throughout the study, and were only identified if they explicitly made such a request. As noted, I made strenuous efforts to accurately portray the participants' unique experiences of moral injury and of life in a post-combat world, to include continuous and consistent member checking, and the purposeful cultivation of genuine connection, care, and concern over the course of the year.

Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations

By virtue of its methodology, this study rejects the assumption of objective truth as delineated by positivist theories. It is concerned with the particular experiences of a subset of individuals, where truth and purpose, good and evil, right and wrong, are all uniquely related to the one person whose experiences are being expressed and explored in the moment.

Generalizability of this study to the larger population is thereby limited, although it is my hope that some of the data that comes forth from this study will be noticed among others who are researching the phenomenon of moral injury, and perhaps motivate them to perform further studies that take into account the multiplicity of factors inherent within such a complex experience of the human condition.

Timeline

The proposal for this research was defended at the beginning of the summer, 2019, with IRB approval arriving midsummer. Solicitation of participants began via snowball sampling in August, 2019, and continued into September and October, 2019. As noted previously, all of the eventual participants in the study were found via snowball sampling from faculty and military connections. Collection of field texts continued into the mid-fall of 2019, with all interviews and journal entries being completed around Thanksgiving, 2019. From that point forward, all field texts were transcribed to research texts, with additional member-checking. The target date for a full draft of the dissertation to be submitted to the committee for preliminary review and revision is March 6th, 2020.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the utility, uniqueness, and beauty of the narrative method as a form of genuinely valuable research. Narrative inquiry is neither simple storytelling nor extremely precise, quantified data analysis. Yet, it contains elements from both ends of the

experiential spectrum, and much more in between. The storytelling elements inherent to a strong narrative inquiry allow for a depth of exploratory conversation between narrator, participants, and audience that is unmatched among other methodologies. Likewise, the quantifiable guidelines through which the narrator is expected to conduct the study, interact with participants, record and recount conversations, and ultimately make meaning of the project, lend themselves to a coherent, clear analysis of the inquiry's subject matter. In common parlance, the narrative method offers up the best of both worlds.

Equally important is the oft overlooked significance of matching one's individualized proclivities and predispositions to a methodology capable of maximizing the author's enthusiasm and passion for a project. After all, common lore in academia suggests that the dreaded "All-But-Dissertation" phase of doctoral work (a.k.a., "ABD") is where most students flounder and, ultimately, fail. The best piece of advice I received during my first semester of doctoral work—by two separate members of my eventual dissertation committee, no less—was to follow my passion when considering a potential line of research. What took me longer to realize was that such passion should not be reserved only for the subject matter, but also for a chosen methodology, when possible. This makes sense given that many early-career researchers invest an equal amount of time in becoming experts at one or two methodologies as they do in understanding their research topics. Much as in writing literature, knowing and appreciating the *forms* through which people do their best work matters in equal part to the *subject* material that elicits the selfsame level of craftsmanship.

For my own part, it was a gift of previously unimaginable scholarly proportions to discover the existence of narrative inquiry research. A lover of literature, an individual with an insatiable desire to read (and unfortunately, purchase) a diverse array of titles, and a man who

enjoys both the art and science of literary composition, this discovery was a rare moment of propitious happenstance in my life as a student and nascent researcher. Furthermore, as the common saying urges us to go where our great passion meets the world's great need, the confluence of my passions for storytelling and military identity have met—here in this study—on the larger crisis of moral injury amongst our warrior caste. The next chapter will tell the individual stories of such injury among a group of participants willing to share their time, energy, resources, and memories with me on occasion after occasion. It was a privilege I will not soon forget, and my hope is that the stories will linger in the minds of the readers for the duration of subsequent discussion and analysis, and perhaps beyond into a future where veterans are neither vilified nor deified, but rather seen as the complex, fully human people they are, with a variety of assets to offer back to the community following their time in service.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

Introduction to Findings

This chapter is concerned with telling the stories of the men who participated in this study, with as much detail and nuance as possible. Each veteran is given an introduction, which specifies how I came into contact with them, my first impressions, and other details that might aid the audience in understanding these individualized histories and worldviews. Subsequently, the storyline of every participant is broken into three categories: (a) training; (b) deployment; and (c) life after combat. This format was amenable to my aim of providing an accurate, longitudinal depiction of the particularities of each story given a worthy frame of reference to time, place, and person. The stories end with an epilogue on the journey of the veteran, which continues in the present. At times, I included anecdotes from my own history in the narrative, but only where I believed it would serve the purpose of accentuating participant voice and story. Likewise, at times passages of poetry or other literature were included to speak to components of experience better than I could with my own words. The end of the chapter summarizes the content and prepares the reader for commonalities and disparities among stories, which will be discussed in Chapter V. I hope that you are moved by these stories as much as I was listening to them.

Aaron's Story: A Complicated Legacy

Introduction

Given the metaphorical use of Cain and Able's saga to open this endeavor, it is fitting that the first participant introduced in the narrative itself is named Aaron, another biblical reference. Similarities between the two of us are extensive. We are of an age, both coming into manhood at the precipitous moment of 9/11, with vivid memories of that day, its portent for the

world, and a prescience concerning our own future roles in the wars to come. We both have roots in Pennsylvania—he in western PA, and I in the eastern part of the State where my Quaker family originated. We both originally joined Army National Guard units as field artillerymen, although I transitioned out of that position into the active army as an infantryman and infantry officer later on. Aaron was given notice of deployment on his birthday, and I flew into Iraq under combat conditions on mine. Both of us spent time at in-patient facilities when suicidal. We both held sacred the notion of a career in the military, and both of us left the service disillusioned by our experiences. Likewise, both of us sought redemption through the healing arts in general and clinical mental health counseling, in particular. Like me, Aaron is a doctoral candidate in a Counselor Education and Supervision program.

At a deeper level, it seems that Aaron and I also share an understanding of the world; one in which asking questions, looking past the surface value of statements and ideologies, and a self-reflectivity that acknowledges and embraces personal flaws all have a place and power to transform. Speaking with Aaron on the phone was, at times, like speaking with myself in the mirror. He struck me as earnest, idealistic without being naïve, forthright, articulate, wounded, and deeply empathetic to the “otherness” that so many military members either do not, or choose not, to see in their comrades and (especially) in the enemy. For these reasons, I will open his story with a quote from Henry Nouwen, the famed Catholic priest and author of *The Wounded Healer* among other well-known spiritual tomes. On my mother’s fridge, my step-father, who knew Henry Nouwen as a ministerial acquaintance, keeps a signed note from the author. It pleases me to connect that note, 30 or more years old, to the present moment and to my reflection on Aaron’s journey and character in the following Nouwen excerpt:

“Through compassion it is possible to recognize that the craving for love that people feel resides also in our own hearts, that the cruelty the world knows all too well is also rooted in our own impulses. Through compassion we also sense our hope for forgiveness in our friends' eyes and our hatred in their bitter mouths. When they kill, we know that we could have done it; when they give life, we know that we can do the same. For a compassionate person, nothing human is alien: no joy and no sorrow, no way of living and no way of dying” (Nouwen, 1979).

Training

Aaron developed an interest in joining the military during his junior year of high school, when his father informed him there would be no money forthcoming to support a college education. Prior to this, thoughts of military service were only passing in nature. His best friend at the time was joining an Army National Guard unit and had an uncle in the same unit who was a recruiter. This friend put Aaron in touch with his recruiter uncle who delivered to Aaron all the requisite half-truths and quarter-promises that constitute a touchstone of the military recruitment process in the United States Army. Aaron watched 9/11 happen on the television during his senior year of high school and joined his National Guard unit the following January. He had no particular interest in field artillery; it was simply the type of unit that existed in his area. Nor did Aaron possess an abiding interest in overseas combat, although he admitted to a certain form of patriotism influencing his decision to join following 9/11. Additionally, situated in the early 2000's as he was, Aaron was unable to gain much knowledge of what to expect in his training, or even in his job in the National Guard following training. While the internet did exist, a person was limited in their ability to garner information by slow connections and limited websites.

Aaron did his Basic Training and Advanced Individual Training at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, known in certain military circles as the “armpit of the Army.” Aside from the foul taste of the water, the most uncomfortable part of Aaron’s training was being forced to adapt to the change of being away from home and suddenly alone and vulnerable around a group of strangers for the first time in his life. His Drill Sergeants spoke freely and continuously about the realities of wartime service; how all of the young soldiers could expect to be overseas shortly following their training. Despite these dire warnings, Aaron believed he would be able to return to normal life, attend college, and move forward with his plans beyond the military. When asked, he did affirm that his training in field artillery was a type of crucible experience, a way in which he started to make his own way in the world after being given the news that he’d have to pay for college himself. It was a first and powerful step along the lines of individuation needed by young men moving into adulthood. This sense of stepping into and owning his life circumstances helped buoy Aaron when he was inevitably harassed by his drill instructors or came into conflict with other recruits.

Aaron believed that his parents were proud of him for joining the Army, although his mother was worried, and his father—an alcoholic—often seemed indifferent to the choices his son made. His father never served in the military, coming of age at the tail end of the Vietnam era. However, both of Aaron’s grandfathers served in World War II, and he had several uncles who served in the military as well. His one sister seemed oblivious to his choices, as she was embroiled in her own private affairs at the time. Yet, Aaron does seem to have an historical sense of a familial legacy in the military.

Aaron finished his training, came back to Pennsylvania, and enrolled at Slippery Rock University in the fall of 2003. At this time, Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) had been going

for nearly 2 years in Afghanistan, and the first wave of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) was 6 months old. It only took until December of that year for his unit receive its notice of imminent deployment; it was delivered on his birthday. Aaron's reaction to this news was one of turmoil and dismay, given his fresh enrollment in college and building momentum in the civilian world. However, he also recognized that many of his fellow guardsmen were worse off, having to leave established careers and large families to fight in the war. Furthermore, he was still in shape from his training, his "boots still shiny"; many of the older Guard members were drummed out of the unit when they failed their deployment physicals. In some ways, Aaron believes, the war was the best thing to happen to the National Guard, as the deployments culled the ranks of those blatantly unfit to serve in our Guard and Reserve units.

Additional training occurred for Aaron's unit at Ft. Pickett, VA, and Ft. Dix, NJ, prior to deployment. National Guard and Reserve units were doubly burdened by deployments in the OIF/OEF theaters. Not only were they part-time soldiers, Marines, sailors, and air personnel, with livelihoods well beyond the military; but as such, they were often required to do stateside deployments as "train-ups" prior to the actual deployments themselves. This meant that many guardsmen such as Aaron were away from home an additional 2-6 months beyond the actual deployment phase, albeit in a stateside location and in relative safety.

In Aaron's unit, the soldiers gathered on the mandated date/time at the armory and took buses in an escort across the State to Ft. Dix. He described the mood of the unit as "scared shitless" despite their combat-arms designation as field artillerymen, and he thought that the bravado some members put on only confirmed his belief that most of the unit was indeed frightened for what was to come. The train-up itself was a joke, wildly out of touch with the reality of desert warfare; it was described by Aaron as "in a foot and a half of snow watching

Army cartoons”. The unit received no training for the realities of Iraq, such as close-quarters battle training (CQB). Instead, they were forced to watch a replaying video of the twin towers falling in New York set to a death metal playlist by some of the training staff as a form of war propaganda.

To make matters more complicated, the unit was click-ish, as many of the members had either grown up together or served together in the unit for years prior to deployment. The platoon sergeants, in particular, seemed to bond over an identity as old-hands in the artillery world, made more pronounced by the unusual fact that many of them were ex-Marines. It was during his time at Fort Pickett that Aaron was given a nickname so painful and derisive, that 16 years later, he was still unable to speak it aloud to me. This moniker followed him throughout his time in the Army and has complicated the relationship he feels with his honorable and worthy service record. At its nadir, Aaron felt that he ceased to have a real name, even amongst the officer corps. In his own words:

“I didn’t have a name. I had a nickname and it was a terrible nickname at that... I was reminded constantly that I wasn’t the same as everybody else. So, I started looking for other people who were like me, and the closest I could [find] were the people we were over there supposedly trying to help and/or fight...this really strange experience where I think I empathized more with the Iraqi civilians than I could some of the guys in my own unit.”

One of the strange little ironies in Aaron’s heartbreaking story: this occurred at a military based named after a Confederate civil war general given the derogatory label of the “goat” after his time at the United States Military Academy for finishing dead last in his class. Additionally, Pickett’s name later became forever tied to the ill-fated and eponymous charge at Gettysburg, for

which he was blamed and derided yet had little control over the course of the catastrophe's outcome.

Deployment

Like virtually all units moving into the OIF theater, Aaron's field artillery group stayed first in Kuwait for approximately two weeks, where they were surrounded by soldiers from countries as diverse as Japan, Russia, Germany, and Australia. Once in Iraq, Aaron and his colleagues conducted the "right seat, left seat" transition with the outgoing unit they were to replace. The new soldiers first drove with the seasoned unit (i.e., in the passenger seat, a.k.a. "right seat") across their sector, learning the ins and outs of the neighborhoods, etc., before taking over the wheel (left seat) as the old hands began to step away from ownership of the AO (Area of Operations). Aaron considered this his best training, especially given the fact that their Field Artillery unit was being asked to step into a Military Police role while in-country. This type of transition was unfortunately common among National Guard and Reserve units deployed to the Middle East; whatever job they were supposed to do was often superseded by the needs of the military in the moment. Thus, the specified artillery training Aaron received prior to deployment would prove largely pointless in his time in the war, working instead as a "utility knife" for the needs of his unit and the Army.

To make matters worse, Aaron's unit came to the war at a time when the Humvee vehicles were not yet "up-armored" to protect against the Improvised Explosive Devices (IED's), Explosively-Formed Projectiles (EFP's), and small-arms fire of the Iraqi resistance/insurgency. Aaron described the vehicles they were gifted as "zombies with sandbags on the side". There were bullet holes in the engine blocks and doors, with some having fractured windows from explosions or rifle fire. While the sandbags were an improvisation used to protect soldiers from

being shot through the sides of the vehicles, they overburdened the engines of the Humvees, not yet designed to take the additional weight. As a designated driver, Aaron was often and routinely relegated to the motor pool between missions to try and fix the constantly malfunctioning vehicles.

Aaron described his unit's in-country function as "just numbers and bodies". They provided security details, convoy escorts, and innumerable other functions as needed, driving all over the countryside despite being stationed on the outskirts of Baghdad. Serving as a Specialist/E4, Aaron developed the following mentality to the war:

"For me it was taking it at face value. I really was just trying to keep it simple. There were a lot of guys over there that were asking too many questions. and I learned from the kind of shit that happened to them not to ask them any questions. Do what you're told... it just made me more miserable to start asking questions about the people that I was serving with and their competencies."

Due in part to some of his experiences as an enlisted soldier, Aaron developed an ambition to become a commissioned officer, where he believed he could do a better job than many of the officers he was forced to take orders from during the war. Unsurprisingly, given his high level of self-awareness, Aaron knew this was a clichéd type of enlisted ambition, and yet knew it to also be a factual reality that he could do a better job, all the same.

Without going into too the specified details of his combat experience, Aaron described the war in terms known intimately by veterans of previous generations: "a lot of really dull, boring moments of monotony interrupted by periods of chaotic disaster." To complicate matters, his unit was in the difficult position of having to remain mission-flexible at all times. Regular Army units (such as mine) were usually given a more-or less definitive sector and mission; it was

rare to be called away for additional duty beyond a one-off request every few months unless one's platoon or company was "loaned out" to another battalion or brigade (as in Joe's story, to follow). Many Guard units, however, were forced to constantly shift their locale and duties to accommodate an ever-changing agenda from higher command. This sense of constant change proved difficult for Aaron and his fellow guardsmen throughout the duration of their combat tour.

Life After Combat

Aaron's dream to become an Army officer ended abruptly during a training accident following deployment. This was, perhaps, the most pronounced moment of moral injury he experienced in the military, along with the bullying he received early on; neither incident was directly tied to combat. In 2007, his Guard unit went to Fort Drum, NY for summer field training. Home of the 10th Mountain Division (LIGHT), this was my home base, although I was deployed in Iraq with the 2nd Brigade Combat Team (BCT) when Aaron was present. Nonetheless, I am intimately familiar with the field setting in which Aaron's unit found itself. Ft. Drum, like most major army installations, is a conglomerate of unit structures, family housing, and auxiliary needs buildings (commissary, hospital, etc.) attached or surrounded by vast swaths of untamed land used for training purposes. Unpaved and unmarked fire roads crisscross the dense brush of the upstate New York flatlands leading every which way to firing ranges, artillery sites, field camps, land navigation courses, and others. It was quite possible to take a wrong turn and pull on to a firing range in use despite signage and warnings posted with relative frequency.

It was in this setting that Aaron suffered a major training injury. Trying to unload a heavy piece of weaponry from an overhead turret by himself (it was a 2-person job), a fellow soldier lost his grip on the weapon and dropped it on Aaron, who was standing below and facing away

from the vehicle. It struck him on the head and back, flattening him on the ground. Aaron experienced tremendous pain, was in and out of consciousness, and was unable to use his legs due to shooting pain up his back whenever he tried. Instead of calling for an emergency Medevac via helicopter, however, his commanding officer (CO) placed him in the back of an open-air Humvee while he dallied on the radio, attempting to find his own position on the map. Aaron was given a saline IV by a medic, but the fluid ran out after half an hour; he had a dry line that was moving air bubbles toward his bloodstream and which would nearly kill him before an ambulance arrived on scene an hour later and rushed him to the hospital.

More than the physical injury, the emotional impact of this incident left a deep, abiding imprint on Aaron's psyche and soul, something he aptly described as *the loss of an ideal*. The utter incompetency displayed by his CO during the incident was a revelation to Aaron; he grew embittered with the military knowing that these types of officers were in charge; men who would risk a soldier's life and well-being so not to lose face, or who were too stupid to find their way out of the woods without help. In Aaron's retelling of the incident, I was reminded of countless experiences of my own where superior officers put their career interests ahead of their soldiers' lives. Instead of hardening his resolve to push into the officer ranks, this incident pushed Aaron permanently away from his military aspirations along with the long healing process required from his injuries. To give something his dream up was a devastating loss, a form of disenfranchised grief, through which Aaron took years to process and come to a space of acceptance. In his own words:

“I didn't feel like I could talk to my wife about it because I felt... I just couldn't, I didn't, didn't know who to talk to about it. I didn't know how to relate it to anybody because I

didn't know if anybody really understand what it's like to lose that type of ideal. I don't know. I think it's because, *it's like popping a balloon*, I guess”.

Instead of allowing the loss of his military ideal to derail him, however, Aaron left the service driven to succeed, diving headfirst back into his academics. While the military served him well in his new-found abilities to remain focused and disciplined in his pursuits, Aaron’s unresolved issues from the war continued to linger and disrupt his life. Like many combat vets, Aaron struggled to find a professional footing that spoke to him after the service, working in 5 jobs over 7 years, in nearly as many places. By 2013, Aaron bottomed out with a stay in a psychiatric ward for suicidal depression, which was the turning point when he began to realize how many things demanded address from his wartime (and non-wartime experiences) in the military. Beyond his actual combat experiences, Aaron still needed to work out his relationship to the bullying and harassment he’d received by his own comrades, the meaninglessness of the war itself, his affiliation and empathy for the Iraqi people—sometimes above and beyond any connection with his own unit—and where he wanted to move into the future from a professional and personal perspective.

One memorable moment came when a State Trooper arrived at his house for a wellness check on a suicidal Aaron. A fellow vet, the officer told Aaron how he became a Trooper to feel like part of a team again, which resonated deeply and made Aaron realize how much he had missed the camaraderie and larger mission of military life. Listening to this part of the story, I was shocked by how closely the officer’s story resembled my own reasons for joining the State Police-- to be challenged again, to live on the edge again, to find a team and live for a cause bigger than individual gain and advancement... it was as if I were the Trooper who had come to speak with him, and we were having the same conversation.

Part of what complicated Aaron's return to civilian life and, perhaps, contributed to the fact that he had a delayed reaction to his wartime experiences, was that he did not know how to speak to people about his complex experiences or even what to say. Despite his intelligent, articulate, easy-going style of conversation, as well as his eventual inclusion in the mental health workforce, this was nevertheless the case. As he succinctly put it: "When it's your stuff, there's no way to be objective... I didn't realize how bad I was fucked up until I realized how fucked up I was." Reading the book *Matterhorn*, the author Karl Marlantes' harrowing account of his time serving in Vietnam as an infantry Marine, helped Aaron realize that others had similar experiences in warfare.

Even now, in his mid-30's, Aaron is still processing his experiences and finally beginning to understand the wide-ranging implications and consequences of his military service. A natural giver, he's gravitated toward counseling work as a means of expressing his innate empathy for the condition of his fellow human beings. However, as time goes on, he's now wrestling with the reality of having given too much of himself, to too many, for too long. Like many counselors following the initial years of their careers, Aaron is left wondering where to go next for a person who may not be able to continue in the same selfless capacity forever. With five children and a spouse to care for, as well, there will always be a large part of Aaron's life that revolves around service to others, and yet his future hopes are ones that foresee less direct counseling work and more innovation in terms of working with multiple platforms—speaking, writing, online—to reach a new audience and expand his professional horizons.

Aaron's Epilogue

The word that comes to mind for me when reading through Aaron's story is *redemption*. If one pays close attention, it's clear that there is a thread of ownership to the story that was first

embraced, then perhaps lost (though never gone), and eventually found again much later. Like many young men and women in the early 2000's, Aaron's military service was a way of stepping into ownership of his life and story—he could pay for college and further his life ambitions, while simultaneously serving the country in a moment that, for all of us, appeared to be generationally significant.

As in so many stories, however, Aaron's trajectory was thrown off course by the unexpected and the unforeseen. He could not anticipate, for instance, that he would be bullied and ridiculed by his fellow soldiers at the outset of his service. The damage this caused to Aaron's psyche and well-being should not be underestimated. While schoolyard bullying is unquestionably serious and damaging, there is an additional layer of sadness or dissonance to what Aaron experienced, because the events disrupted what should have been the important process of *joining a team, becoming a family*, within his military unit on the eve of a combat tour in wartime. Instead, Aaron was left on the outside looking in, while entering the intimidating portal of combat through which no one returns unchanged; he was denied the birthright of the young warrior—to be finally and irrevocably included in the group despite (or even because of) the dangers ahead.

There is little an enlisted soldier can feel in charge of during combat operations, much less, one who is ostracized by many of his peers. Add to this the catastrophic training accident following deployment, and Aaron was left with a period of military service neatly bookended by two rarified examples of moral injury related to belonging, betrayal, and the loss of deeply held ideals. Unsurprisingly, what followed for Aaron was a long stretch of time that was unbalanced, dark, and confusing.

Thankfully, this is not where his story ends.

Returning to the thread of ownership, Aaron repeatedly spoke in our interviews about owning his own choices and decisions and of not speaking for others, but only himself. The same burgeoning sense of accountability and self-propulsion that led Aaron to enlist in the Army is still present today, as he clawed his way through a period of suicidal depression, all while raising a family with his wife, and now moving forward with renewed vigor toward goals that are self-affirming, powerful, and unique to his life history, skillset, and innate talents.

As in so many facets of life, there are no clear-cut answers to what happened to Aaron, or how his experiences then impacted his life and character after the fact. For his story, in particular, I believe there is a “chicken and the egg” component that makes clean, easy answers all the more elusive. For instance, did Aaron’s innate sense of empathy contribute to his bullying, or did a dormant empathy suddenly take root because of the bullying which occurred? Would Aaron have connected so deeply to the suffering people of Iraq if he, too, were not also suffering alongside them as an outsider in his own unit? Would Aaron have pursued a career in the healing arts had he not been so deeply wounded himself? The last question is one I often ask of myself, and have yet to receive a complete and unqualified response.

In any event, it is not hyperbole to state that Aaron is a man of courage and resolve, who has overcome incredible obstacles to remain a productive, thoughtful, and contributing member of society today (although he would certainly not put it in those terms... but I do). As such, I end his story with a tribute to Aaron’s character from the book that helped him see his experiences anew, *Matterhorn*:

“He ran as he’d never run before, with neither hope nor despair. He ran because the world was divided into opposites and his side had already been chosen for him, his only choice being whether or not to play his part with heart and courage. He ran because fate had

placed him in a position of responsibility and he had accepted the burden. He ran because his self-respect required it” (Marlantes, 2009).

Rich’s Story: It’s All in the Game

Introduction

Rich is a PhD student in higher education at a school in the southern United States. He was introduced to me by a veteran friend, who described Rich as an Army vet who had done logistics and “been through some shit”. In person, I noticed Rich had some of the defining features of the combat veteran... he was watchful, guarded, profane, and personable. I immediately liked him. When Rich and I began to talk, I discovered—as is so often the case—the many profound layers to his story which lay beneath the surface.

If conversing with Aaron was like speaking in the mirror, talking to Rich was akin to experiencing a dialogue with the angel and devil on one’s shoulders, representing the higher and lower impulses of human nature. If anything, Rich’s journey is one that resembles a rollercoaster—the highest of highs and the lowest of lows, often turning so suddenly and moving so swiftly such that one can barely keep track of where they are on the ride. Through it all, Rich’s sense of humor remains intact, along with a call to selfless service manifesting in both his professional pursuits and family life. Like so many veterans with stories to tell, you would never hear it from Rich without first asking. What follows is brief summation of his time before, during, and after combat. I have found a quote I find appropriate to Rich’s history, where living on the edge was a way of life for him as well as so many others who have faced death time and again, yet chosen to live.

“The Warrior lives a life full of adventure, living on the edge of opportunity. Life on the edge keeps him in a space of heightened awareness and totally in the moment; therefore, no matter what comes his way he is always prepared”. ~ **James Arthur Ray**

Training

Rich was surrounded by signs and symbols of the military his entire life. To begin with, he lived in Washington, D.C., where the nexus of power in the country was outside his door at all times; the Pentagon was straight across the Potomac from his home in Georgetown, with the grounds of Arlington National Cemetery running adjacent to the DOD building. Were you to follow M Street from Rich’s neighborhood east, you would run right into the White House, and further beyond that, the Capitol building. The military was in his house, too, for both Rich’s mother and father were veterans, still working at the Navy Yard and Pentagon respectively when he was growing up. Rich’s father enlisted to avoid the draft during the Vietnam war, served briefly in Southern Vietnam, and then spent the remainder of his wartime service stationed in Korea doing intelligence work. Rich’s mother was a career Marine Corps Officer who served in Desert Storm and retired at the rank of full Colonel (O6).

Rich was an only child, and no doubt, was left with a strong impression of military service from an early age. While his mother’s family had immigrated to the United States in the 1930’s (she was also adopted), his extended family had a long and proud tradition of serving in the military since WWII; his maternal grandfather (“Pop”) served in the Army on Okinawa, where he was shot and also lost most of his hearing, while his maternal uncles served in Vietnam. As Rich put it: “I think with the exception of Grenada, we've knocked everything out since the forties... we've covered it all.” He went on to express the opinion that, in his family, military service was not an option... it was mandatory.

Still, Rich did not immediately join the service upon reaching adulthood. He excelled in high school and started college at a small, private institution in Virginia. Due to a sheltered and strict upbringing, however, Rich's first taste of freedom led him down a path where he was partying more than studying. In his own opinion, he was not yet mature enough to launch himself professionally. When he called home to talk with his parents about leaving college and joining the military, "the conversation was great... 'pack your stuff, you're coming home and you're joining'". Asked about 9/11's impact on his decision to join, Rich stated that it was definitely a catalyst and part of the reason he decided not to stay in college; he knew people personally killed in both New York and D.C. during the attacks. Even 20 years removed, you can still hear the hint of anger in Rich's voice when he talks about 9/11 and the ramifications of that day.

Despite their unconditional support (one might say insistence) for Rich to join the military, his parents were unsurprisingly selective in terms of the type of service they might foresee their only child performing. His mother wanted him to join the National Guard, for instance, which (up until that point) largely kept its part-time soldiers out of harm's way. Without going against his parents' wishes, however, Rich made other plans. He did join the Army National Guard, yet insisted on taking an 11-Bravo (light infantryman) MOS despite scoring well enough on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) to gain any job he wanted. Furthermore, he did join a Divisional Headquarters unit at Fort Belvoir as his mother wished... only to jump ship onto a deploying Guard unit several months later. This theme would repeat itself in the future: Rich hopped units again while in-country in order to stay in the Area of Operations (AO) with an active unit (AC), versus a reserve component unit (RC), and then tried a *third* time (albeit unsuccessfully) to further extend when that unit redeployed to the States many months later. The major difference between active and reserve component units was

that active units were “active” 365 days a year. That is, they were the units where people’s full time jobs were to be in the military. Reserve component units—including the National Guard—were part-time soldiers with other careers outside the military, only recalled to “active” service for the duration of their deployments.

For his infantry training, Rich went to Ft. Knox, KY. The year was 2002. When asked if this was a crucible experience, he simply stated: “Frankly, going into Ft. Knox makes you a man.” During his training, Rich felt that he finally grew into adulthood. In one strange scenario, he was nearly kicked back to another class when he contracted pneumonia, but he was ironically saved by the infamous gas chamber experience, where the poisons cleared out his sinuses and put him on the path to recovery. He did both basic and advanced training at Ft. Knox and would later make it through Pathfinder school at Ft. Benning, GA; 1 of 6 to graduate from a class of 60, and the only enlisted man to make it.

Like fellow participant Aaron, Rich clashed with the older, more established members of his National Guard unit. Despite their infantry status, the guardsmen that Rich encountered were a far cry from the physically fit, well-trained, killer infantrymen that Rich had expected. As part of the 116th Infantry Regiment out of Winchester, VA, many of the members were “good ol’ boys” who were there for an additional paycheck and had no incentive or desire to fight in the wars. Rich, on the other hand, was “ready to go into the desert and kill everything I saw”. To make matters worse, Rich was an outsider to the area, a city kid joining an established unit from the backwaters of Virginia and West Virginia, where many members knew one another, had family connections, and enjoyed a style of life and livelihood that was slower paced and rural, when compared to his mode of being. As Rich puts it now: “I was very unhappy with my leadership. I was unhappy with the people, because I saw fat undisciplined soldiers, whereas I

should have looked at it as these are the boys that are in my life for the next 12 months”. Rich understood only in retrospect how much the soldiers in his unit were sacrificing, the types of burdens they bore: leaving families and careers behind to take on a task that was not within the realm of possibilities when they joined the military. In this sense, there was a sharp distinction between service members joining pre- and post-9/11... the former had thought it would be an easy way to make additional income, pay for college, and have some fun; the latter were joining knowing they were deploying to fight. Despite these many differences, however, Rich was soon embraced by the unit and made several good friends.

When Rich reported, the unit was already at Ft. Bragg, NC, for their train-up phase; he was forced to take military transportation down to the base and report to a group of strangers, where he trained for an additional 3-4 months before deploying to Afghanistan on what was supposed to be a year-long tour. Two months into the “train-up” phase, “Dear John” letters began to arrive. Rich was incredulous that women couldn’t wait to break up with their boyfriends or divorce their husbands until they were at least fighting in the war. While at Ft. Bragg, the unit went through Airborne School, and Rich described the esprit de corps of the unit as “shit”: “It was chaos. It was Lord of the Flies... everybody was fucked up and demoralized, one way or another.” The unit finished its train-up phase and deployed to Afghanistan in 2004, one of the first National Guard units to be deployed on either Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) or Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)—a distinction I’m sure Rich’s mother found comforting not in the least.

Deployment

Rich’s unit flew into Bagram Air Base outside the ancient city of Bagram in the central highlands of Afghanistan. The base is located in Parwan Province, which in its long history as a

site of military expedition has seen campaigns from the likes of Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan, and in which Americans, Soviets, British, Arabs, Turks, and Indians, among others, have all taken their turns fighting and dying thousands of feet above sea level... and thousands of miles from home. The Air Base itself was originally designed and built by the USSR in its unsuccessful campaign to quell the Afghan people in the 1970's and 80's.

Rich's unit was split in two, with one portion staying in Bagram to provide base security, while the other half moved into Ghazni Forward Operating Base (FOB) in Ghazni Province, southwest of Parwan. Unlike its neighboring province to the northeast, Ghazni remained an active hotbed of Taliban activity throughout the continuing war. Indeed, in or around the time I first met Rich in the summer of 2018, the Battle of Ghazni commenced between Taliban and Afghan security forces, a full decade and a half since Rich stepped foot in the AO. The FOB itself, like many such small outposts, was nothing to write home about. Rich notes: "Calling it a FOB was a full robbery. [Saying it was made of] masonry was a pretty generous description. I mean, there were no walls. We were in the middle of nowhere, and it was pretty gangster... dangerous for sure".

The Army National Guard unit took over for a contingent of west coast Marines and was soon in contact with the enemy. However, before too much fighting occurred, the severe winter weather of the region arrived pushing the operational tempo to a screeching halt. Comparable to Aaron's experience with Humvees in Iraq, there was no snow gear available for the Humvees in Afghanistan for Rich: they were unable to do more than sit in their FOB and wait for the weather to turn, while Taliban fighters did much the same in their enclaves. In an interesting twist, my own experiences were the same—only reversed in terms of the weather—during operations in Iraq. Rather than winter conditions impacting up tempo, it was the blazing summer heat that

halted all daytime operations beyond the minimum necessary in the Iraqi river basins. Likewise, enemy fighters would not, as a general rule, choose to engage at midday. Dawn and dusk were the most dangerous times, since insurgents also preferred to avoid the nighttime, where they knew our night vision capabilities would prove a tremendous advantage. The heat was so extreme that even civilian farmers did not work under the noon sun; it was unbearable.

Following the winter months, Rich experienced two devastating moments of combat which forever altered the trajectory of his life. First, he was in the lead Humvee of a convoy when they struck an IED. The explosive was “double-stacked” one on top of the other (meaning a large charge), buried on the right side of the road. For whatever reason, the Rhino Passive Infrared Defeat System (or simply “Rhino”) attached to Rich’s Humvee triggered the device when it was essentially on top of the vehicle. Rich’s two closest friends—Craig and Bobby—were both killed in the blast. Additionally, their interpreter, who Rich had allowed to sit in the front seat so he could enjoy watching the Blue Force Tracker screen (a type of early GPS module), was killed in the seat where Rich should have been sitting. Rich himself broke four ribs, his collarbone, orbital bone, had several fractured vertebrae, a traumatic brain injury, and hearing loss. He was evacuated to Germany for medical treatment but did not rotate all the way stateside as happens with the severest injuries. During his time in Germany healing, Rich grieved the loss of his friends and replayed the incident over and over, holding himself accountable especially for the death of his interpreter who would normally have been in the backseat where Rich miraculously survived the attack. It was not until years later that Rich was able to make his peace with the situation, knowing he was not responsible for anyone else’s death in the vehicle. In the interim, he began to suffer nightmares of the attack later on as he rejoined his unit. When

the medical team in Germany attempted to discharge Rich based on the severity of his wounds, “I told them to go fuck themselves”.

In the second incident, with Rich only recently back in-country, a CH-47 Chinook helicopter was shot down by the Taliban. This happened in Rich’s AO, about 10 clicks (or kilometers) from FOB Ghazni, with all lives lost onboard. The CH-47 is often likened to a flying school bus, due to its elongated, ungainly fuselage. Unbeknownst to many outsiders, the Chinook is deceptively fast; the fastest military helicopter, in fact, of the American fleet. Unfortunately, it is highly vulnerable to rocket attack and small arms fire when hovering stationary or gaining speed; hundreds of U.S. lives have been lost in both OIF and OEF due to Chinook mass casualty incidents (“MassCas”) where they were shot from the sky—a simple RPG (Rocket Propelled Grenade), well-placed, was (and still is) enough to take dozens of lives.

In a nightmare scenario, Rich and his fellow soldiers were assigned to “bag and tag” the remains of the dead soldiers in this crash, which he approximated at around 26 service members Killed in Action (KIA). Rich felt a sense of betrayal at this order, since the NCO in charge did not participate, and there was no help given from mortuary affairs soldiers; in his mind, it was not right to ask infantrymen—fighting soldiers—to pick up the pieces of the dead on their own. This incident, more than any other in the war, came to haunt Rich. In a comparable experience, my unit experienced a “MassCas” incident in which a children’s soccer game was accidentally mortared by the insurgency who were targeting our FOB but had no baseplates on their mortars to stabilize the trajectory of its launched rounds. Dozens of wounded, dying, and dead children were brought into the Patrol Base. Likewise, a retired Coast Guard NCO and friend, who I’d assumed had never seen combat nor anything combat related, once admitted to me that he

suffered from nightmares after having to dredge dead bodies out of Iraqi waterways. My friend didn't have to be under fire to be forever altered by a wartime experience.

Although he never said so directly, I would hazard a guess that the cumulative psychological damage of these incidents was equally responsible for Rich's hard times following the service as his physical wounds themselves. Following these events, he became more fatalistic, developing that strange soldierly sense of detachment that helps human beings endure and inflict great suffering upon their fellow creatures under wartime conditions. Rich also admitted—like Aaron—to a delayed response to these immensely complicated traumas that did not hit him until after his time in the service was complete.

The 25th Infantry Division (ID), known as the “Tropic Lightning” for their lightning patch identifier, arrived in Afghanistan midway through Rich's initial deployment. Still harboring aspirations to move from a reserve component to an active duty infantry unit, Rich volunteered to join the 25th ID in order to stay in-country and continue the fight as an active duty soldier. He wanted to be around more genuine infantry types, and had little incentive to return stateside without having settled down yet, or with an alternate career waiting. His original unit in the National Guard redeployed back to Winchester, VA, the soldiers returning to their lives and their families. Later still, Rich attempted to jump ship from the 25th ID to the 82nd Airborne (“Eighty Deuce”) when the 25th was rotating back stateside. However, by this point the Army was not having any more of his attempts to fight an eternal battle in Afghanistan.

To add insult to (literal) injury, Rich was reclassified out of the infantry due to his wounds suffered in combat... he was no longer fit for combat service. As he put it, “I guess I wasn't good enough for the infantry no more.” This would be yet another psychological wound that would fester over the coming years. In the meantime, Rich found an active National Guard (AGR) job,

where he worked full-time for the Guard in a logistics capacity. He was forced to retrain in a “Loggie” (Logistics) MOS, a dramatic shift away from his infantry roots. He deployed in a support unit to Kuwait in 2008, where he worked for nine months moving supplies across the border into Iraq. Occasionally, he would hop onboard a helicopter flying supplies north, just to feel like he was back in the action, but the deployment was otherwise a dull affair. Rich described the threat level of the deployment “as dangerous as being white in Atlanta”.

Still, Rich expressed gratitude in the present for the gift of being re-classified in an MOS that gave him a real-world skill set, although it wounded him deeply at the time to be let go of the infantry. Becoming a logistician turned out to suit Rich’s growing interest in business, and he considers the switch a blessing that he took a decade to finally and fully appreciate. As Rich knows all too well, most soldiers with an infantry MOS return stateside and have no reasonable skillset to transfer toward civilian employment, at least not on the surface. For combat soldiers coming off active duty, where the genuine purpose of their everyday life was to learn how to win missions by killing efficiently, staying alive, and protecting their comrades; there was no (and perhaps never should be) one-to-one adaptation of the infantry subculture. Rich was lucky enough to have not one, but two skillsets to work with, and the latter non-combatant role turned out to be the propitious one in his post-combat life.

Life After Combat

Rich returned from Iraq in 2009, was admitted to Walter Reed hospital for care of his old wounds in 2010, and was medically retired by the Army in 2011 at the rank of Staff Sergeant (E6). In the span of three years, he went from a coveted AGR position to out of the service altogether with little direction or purpose. To make matters worse—foreshadowing one of the most troubling developments of the decade to come—Rich left the military addicted to the opiate

painkillers he was given without restraint or restriction by Walter Reed and VA administrators.

In his own words, Rich described the scene in the early 2010's:

“It wasn't a thing back then, man, the opioid crisis really hadn't been noticed; people didn't start giving a shit until, you know, '14 or '15 and the VA wasn't no better. I would walk out of the VA with like five grand to purchase. And then when they finally woke up to the fact that, you know, 'we're fucking people', you know, no one gave a damn, you know, there was nothing, you know, they stuck me in the psych ward, they'll let you withdraw and then if you wanted rehab, they pay for rehab and then you're on your own, you know?”

By his own admission, Rich was a serious drug addict from 2011 straight through 2014, despite growing (if tenuous) success in the civilian world. He moved to West Palm Beach, where his parents owned a condo that they only used a few weeks each year. He enrolled in a nearby college and proceeded to plow through his undergraduate studies in 2½ years. Rich followed that up by getting an MBA at the same school, and he became a commodities trader with series 6 license and making a large amount of money. Unfortunately, most of that money went to feed his growing addiction, as did any and all of the financial support his parents offered. Like virtually all addicts, Rich learned to cheat, steal, and lie his way into getting what he needed to continue using. Eventually, he quit his trading job before he was fired, knowing that trading commodities high would lead to the loss of his license. At this point, Rich either overdosed or blacked out on a particularly frenetic drug binge and was found by the condo association supervisor in his parents' house the next day. He was held at the hospital under legislation that prevented his discharge without his parents' consent, while they traveled back from a trip in China to see him. Soon thereafter, they broke contact with their only child and refused to support him further. Rich

admits this was the best thing that could have happened, for he went into rehab, and followed that up with time in a halfway house as he regained his sobriety. Eventually, his brain functioning returned to normal after approximately 6 months sober, and he was able to make financial and emotional restitution to his parents.

In the time following, Rich's mother was told she had Stage 4 breast cancer. Surgery and chemotherapy followed, and the cancer went into remission. When the cancer returned, however, Rich took matters into his own hands, helping his parents sell their house in Washington, D.C, and moving them further south. Wryly, both of them expressed a desire "not to die in traffic." Rich also made the momentous decision to go back to school to learn how to teach, and is now pursuing his doctorate at a nearby School of Education. He described the move from the business world to academia thus:

"I still wasn't happy. It wasn't enough money. No matter how much money I made, it wasn't enough. You know, I just never sat down and thought about what I want to do in life, to be happy. So, I wanted to teach college. I always wanted to be a teacher".

Now, Rich is a caretaker for his parents and a full-time student, assisting in veterans' issues on his campus. When asked whether or not what transpired with his parents during his drug use affected his decision to take care of them now, Rich provided an unequivocal and emphatic yes.

He stated many reasons to be elsewhere, if he so chose:

"I could probably make at least 250 K a year back in Atlanta, and now I make \$375 every two weeks. I'm a conservative in a liberal school, in a liberal college and a liberal mother fucking town. And you know, also single. That don't make it any better".

And yet, he persists in staying, both for his education and for the larger purpose of honoring and caring for his parents.

Rich's Epilogue

“It's fucking hilarious. If nothing else, at least you got to laugh at it... you gotta laugh at the combat shit. You gotta laugh with the drug shit because you know, what else are you going to do, you know?”

As clear from the above quote, it is obvious that Rich maintained his sense of humor throughout his many ordeals. Like many combat soldiers, he has managed to fit into half a lifetime what many fail to see, experience, and accomplish in a full 80 or 90 years. Unlike many of his fellow National Guardsmen—whom he recently saw at a unit reunion—Rich is not embittered by his experiences and does not hold a grudge against the government for sending him to war. As he described it:

“It was a shit show. It was early in the war. No one knew who was on our side or what the fuck we were even doing there. There was no large operational plan that anybody knew of. It's not like they got a report, there was an IED coming up, you know, and they said, fuck it, let's get some medals... it was all in the game, at the end of the day”.

Rich's words remind me of my own realization during the war that I couldn't be upset about getting hurt or killed, because I was out there trying to hurt and kill, too. It was a true “live by the sword, die by the sword” moment. It was fair to be killed when you were yourself a killer; it was—as Rich says—all in the game.

Rich's sense of fair play and reciprocity are most clearly defined now in his devotion to his parents. Given the many reasons he would choose to live elsewhere, his actions strike me as having an almost sacrificial tone, akin to the note many combat soldiers willingly strike under wartime conditions. Perhaps, as for so many other warriors, Rich is merely trying to find his next mission, and what could be more honorable a mission than to care for one's parents in their old

age? He is the only one who can do so and, caught between dueling forces, Rich seems not to have hesitated in making his choice—no more than he hesitated in his desire to fight in the wars.

One thing I noticed with Rich is that he still has an edge, a sharpness that comes into focus when he talks about certain events, certain groups. As a self-described conservative, Rich is at odds with the liberal-minded world of academia. He also exhibits some of the common disdain for civilians and out-of-shape soldiers that infantrymen often possess. Lastly, Rich seemed to think poorly of many of the other drug addicts in rehabilitation, who were (by and large) less educated, with long criminal records. While a judgmental perspective is often viewed as a character flaw by the public, it should be noted that Rich's sense of judgment might very well originate in his identity as a combat soldier and infantryman. Or, if it is a natural attribute, perhaps it was exacerbated by the rigors of training and combat that constantly inform combat-trained soldiers that they are different—and better—than not only civilians, but also all other classes of soldiery. In my own experience, it has been a continuous challenge to let go of the many prejudices that are built into the warrior caste subculture. Even now, it can be difficult to offer non-combat MOS veterans the same level of respect and appreciation as those who served in the frontlines. Perhaps that is as it should be, or perhaps not.

Joe's Story: Doing a Lot with a Little

Introduction

I was put in touch with my third participant, Joe, through a student veteran connection at the University of Wisconsin–Whitewater. Our mutual associate told me that Joe had served as an infantryman in the same unit as me, the 10th Mountain Division. Furthermore, we also shared the commonality of doing police work after our time in the military. Joe still works as a cop, and seems to enjoy the profession much more than I ever did. In person, he is a large, strong-looking

man in his mid-30's with a friendly disposition, and with whom I felt immediate rapport. He was courteous, soft spoken, and direct in all our interactions. Every time we met, Joe drove 30 mins from his house over to the UWW campus to meet with me privately and never seemed to think twice about it. I think that sums up Joe's disposition toward life: one of humility, hard work, and taking everything in stride.

Like many veterans, Joe had a strong family tradition of military service to pull from when he decided to join the Army; one grandfather served in World War II, and the other during the Korean war, while his father was drafted and trained as an artilleryman before fighting in Vietnam. In 2000, Joe's older brother joined the Army on a Ranger (RIP) contract, essentially coming in as an infantryman with the guarantee that he would get a shot at joining the 75th Ranger Regiment.

However, during his infantry training an Old Guard recruiter came to the unit, and Joe's brother volunteered and was chosen for this selective duty in lieu of his Ranger contract. The Old Guard is a specialized unit headquartered in Washington, DC that is responsible for guarding the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and whose members perform various and sundry other ceremonial duties and drills. Two of the requirements of the Old Guard are: to (a) have an infantry MOS; and (b) to be at least 6 feet tall. Joe's brother met these and all other requirements, and shipped out for his new duty station. On the way, he was granted a two-week furlough to visit his family in Cleveland, OH. It was during his time at home that he convinced his younger brother, Joe, to join the Army and go the same route via the Old Guard. It didn't hurt that he would get an Army Achievement Medal (AAM) out of Joe's recruitment, either. Joe's brother ended up serving out his active duty contract with the Old Guard, performing funeral services, doing a stint at the Pentagon, and later again at Walter Reed hospital. After leaving active

service, he initially joined the National Guard but later transferred back on to active duty with the Coast Guard, where he remains employed today.

In contrast, Joe's father served around two years in the Army, including his tour in Vietnam, and rarely spoke about the conflict or any issues he had related to the war. Still, Joe's mother recalled how in the early days after the war her husband would wake up and grab a knife from under his pillow, calling her "Charlie" in the dark. These frightening experiences grew less frequent through the years. Joe stated that his father is much improved now, and never let his experiences in the war effect the way he interacted with his sons. One can see in his father's example how Joe himself seems to present with his own children; he is an active and engaged father, and has no expectation that his kids serve in the military.

Training

Up until joining the Army, which occurred in May, 2002, Joe had enjoyed college, where he played tight end at a small school in the Midwest. However, something felt missing for him. In our first interview, he recalled a story with his mother: "When I was like 13, 14, I told my mom... I think there's going to be a World War Three. I'm gonna fight in that one. So, the military was always there in my mind, and I didn't have any reservations about going to serve my country when I joined up." Especially after 9/11, it seemed only a matter of time before Joe followed in his brother's footsteps. The brothers planned for Joe to also join the Old Guard during his infantry training, and the two could room together in D.C.

Joe left home in the summer of 2002 for a 36-month active duty Army stint. Like his brother, Joe went to Fort Benning, GA, the "Home of the Infantry" for his basic and advanced training. Joe did well in training, mainly because he was a large, strong, and in-shape young man from his time on the gridiron. Like many other future infantrymen, Joe had scored well enough

on the ASVAB to have any job he wanted. He told the recruiter he either wanted to be a firefighter or an infantryman. When asked why he chose infantry, Joe said: “you join to go serve and fight for your country.”

During his time at Ft. Benning, the Old Guard came recruiting as expected. While Joe met all the criteria for selection, the fact that he chose a 36-month contract (versus 4 years, for instance) proved to be a disqualifier, as at that time he only had 32 months remaining on his contract, while the Old Guard required a full 3-year tour of duty from its members. Thus, Joe found himself—instead of going to the nation’s Capital—heading to the 10th Mountain Division and the frozen tundra of Ft. Drum, NY: home of the most deployed light infantry unit in the early parts of the OIF and OEF operations. As befits such a reputation, the 10th Mountain battalion that Joe joined, 1-32 Infantry (IN), 1st Brigade Combat Team (BCT), was fresh off a rotation in Kosovo when he arrived in November, 2002. While members rotated out of the service, the unit was already ramping up for its next deployment, slated for Afghanistan in the summer of 2003. Almost immediately upon his arrival the unit went to the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) at Ft. Polk, LA, for their train-up to the war.

Comparable to his time in basic and advanced training, Joe was accepted quickly and unconditionally by his peers due to his size, physical abilities, and friendly demeanor. When asked about hazing (or the lack thereof in his case), Joe spoke about a well-known fact in combat arms circles: if you’re in shape, fit in, and do your job, nobody tends to mess with you. Accordingly, when Joe arrived at 1-32 IN, his team leader had some of Joe’s fellow members help him pick up clothes and toiletries at Walmart, since he’d arrived with only one set of civilian clothes, his military issue items, and little else. Like elsewhere in his life, Joe was used to doing a lot with a little.

Deployment

When the 1st BCT, 10th MTN Division (LIGHT) deployed in the summer of 2003, the majority of units went to Afghanistan for a 1-year combat tour. 1-32 IN, however, was sent to Iraq with the promise of only a 6-month tour based on their recent time spent in Kosovo. However, as any military member, veteran, or family member can attest; what the military promises isn't necessarily what it delivers: the battalion would end up spending an entire year in-country, with Joe's Alpha Company being loaned out to other units for a majority of that time. The second Iraq war was less than 6 months old.

The bulk of 1-32 IN moved to Iskandaria, south of Baghdad, where they were tasked with constructing a Patrol Base from scratch. Alpha Company, however, was loaned out to a larger unit that was part of the 82nd Airborne ("The Eighty Deuce"). They went to a little-known city 40 kilometers west of Baghdad in the sleepy Al-Anbar Province—its name was Fallujah. Joe and his company would assist the 82nd Airborne in combat operations there for approximately six months, before returning to their unit. However, the entire battalion of 1-32 IN would relocate to Fallujah in the second half of their combat tour when the "First Battle of Fallujah" occurred in April, 2004. This fighting—some of the ugliest in the war—was the result of an infamous ambush where Iraqi insurgents targeted a Blackwater contracting team on what became known as "Blackwater Bridge" in Fallujah. Four American civilian contractors were dragged from their vehicle, either shot, beaten, or burned to death, and then their corpses were strung up along the bridge. Video footage of the incident spread around the globe, reaching American outlets like CNN and FOX News. Public outrage dictated that the in-country coalition forces do something about the unruly citizens of Fallujah.

As in many lower-level unit “loans,” Joe’s company was not given the choice assignments by its step-parent battalion at first. They would provide cordon coverage for operations, or go searching for insurgents among goat herders, or be stuck at a Traffic Control Point (TCP) for an entire shift. After a month or two, however, they started to win the trust of higher command and were giving consistently more respectable missions. Between Joe’s first and second stints in and around Fallujah, he estimated that he was in around 16 IED explosions, most of which were followed by an ambush-style fusillade of small-arms and Rocket-Propelled Grenade (RPG) fire. These were short but intense firefights, where a huge amount of ordinance was thrown out by both sides. Sometimes Joe would shoot, and other times not. While he stated that he never knowingly killed a person in combat, he did relate the following story:

“And then some RPGs came at us and small arms, and I just started shooting back into the fields, not knowing what was out there—it was the first time we went through this area. And then during the daytime we go back and we drive through the same area. And I see there's farm houses and stuff out there and, you know, that creeps into your mind. Like, ‘okay, could I have killed somebody that was just in their house?’ I think it’s kind of good that you don't actually know, because then you don't have the sorrow or the guilt of knowing if you did hurt somebody”.

Miraculously, Joe’s company did not lose any KIA in the entire combat rotation, despite numerous folks being wounded (WIA) along the way. Joe estimated that in his platoon alone, among 40 soldiers, there were approximately 15 Purple Hearts awarded during their combat tour. A practicing and devout Catholic, Joe credited his unit’s safety, in part, to the prayers he said for the unit while he was overseas fighting. Additionally, Joe received a container of holy oil from a Lebanese family friend in Cleveland that he used to anoint himself and any willing buddies

before missions. As time would tell, the hardest parts of the war for Joe were to follow his actual time in combat.

Life After Deployment

Joe returned to the U.S. in June, 2004. Following his leave, Joe reported back at Ft. Drum and was immediately transferred to 1-87 IN (DEFINE). As he put it, “I think their hopes were ‘we need bodies, so we're going to ship these guys out to units that are deploying soon and they'll just get stop-lossed’ because that happened to quite a few people”. The infamous stop-loss policy used in the OIF/OEF conflicts dictated that a soldier with less than a year on their remaining contract—if assigned to a unit deploying for a year-long combat tour—could be “stop-lossed” past the point of their original discharge date in service to the higher mission of the unit. This meant many soldiers were kept in the service well beyond the time they were signed up for contractually in order to serve additional time in a combat zone. More than a few people were killed during stop-loss time in the wars when they should’ve been home already. My entire Brigade, for instance, was prevented from rotating home after a year-long tour due to the troop surge of 2007 which dictated we spend another 6 months in-country; as many or perhaps more soldiers were wounded and killed in that six months than in the entire first year of the tour. Fortunately for Joe, his new First Sergeant pulled some strings, and he was able to leave the unit just short of being stop-lossed for another combat tour with the 10th Mountain. In the 2000’s, the 10th Mountain Division (and most other infantry divisions), were on a constant up-tempo deployment schedule, where as soon as a unit returned stateside, replacements were brought in and training immediately resumed for the next deployment.

Joe returned to Cleveland to visit his family and then moved to Wisconsin to pursue a relationship with a woman he’d connected with while on leave during his combat tour. They later

married and had two children. Joe worked first at a factory, making \$14 an hour. After this, seeking a piece of the camaraderie he felt in the military, Joe became a prison guard, where he had better and closer relationships with his peers. Finally, he moved on to his local police department, where he has worked ever since. While Joe claimed he never wanted to be a cop, it somehow worked out to be a job he both enjoys and is good at doing; Joe stated that 90% of his vehicular stops end with the driver thanking him, a mark that any good cop would be challenged to reach.

In 2006, 1-32 IN redeployed to Afghanistan. One of Joe's good friends from the unit was Killed in Action during this deployment. This friend happened to be from Wisconsin, so Joe and a number of their fellow Army buddies attended the funeral. The group of veterans was asked if they wanted to see the body, despite the fact that their friend was shot in the head and it was a closed casket funeral: "We all went back and saw the body. I regret that because he didn't look like himself and they never do. I was angry then, and I was angry that I got out and I wasn't..., that I didn't stay into fight with the guys that did stay. I was just angry at the fact that he was gone". It took several years for Joe to deal with his anger and guilt over not being present for his friends during the next deployment. Yet, as he put it, "there's so many deployments too. You know, it's like they just keep hammering away. At some point you say, 'no, it's enough' and just get out when you can get out." When asked, Joe did concede that he thought part of the reason the unit wasn't protected in Afghanistan was because he wasn't there to pray for them, and that whatever protection they were granted in Iraq had somehow evaporated in the next deployment.

Joe's marriage fell apart after 7 years, although the couple stayed married for 10. The entire split came as a surprise to him; his ex-wife started to go out to random places and was at one point arrested on a DUI charge before suddenly telling him one January that she was moving

out that week. The two now share custody of their children—Joe gets them on his days off, and before and after work he helps them come and go to school, since he works nights on a 5 –on-2-off/5-on-3-off biweekly rotation. Joe clearly makes every effort to be present at his kids’ sports games and school events.

When asked further about his police work, Joe admitted that it isn’t what he thought it would be, though he still finds pride in his work. For starters, he wasn’t prepared for the political components of the work—a sentiment with which I can heartily empathize. Furthermore, Joe felt as if the culture shifts around policing in the past 5-10 years have dramatically changed the way in which police departments treat their own people. As he put it: “It seems like anytime somebody makes a complaint, whether it’s valid or not...it’s almost like a guilty until proven innocent situation”.

For better or worse, the manner in which departments used to police their own has given way to societal demands to make examples out of officers publicly. Despite the immense difficulties of policing, Joe’s experience echoes sentiments of police around the country, in that they are often asked to do the impossible, understaffed and underpaid, while any mistake is immediately thrown back upon the individual and not the department or the administration. On a staff of 104 officers, Joe stated that the department was usually about a dozen officers short, meaning that required overtime shifts for those working, especially the less senior members such as Joe. While he has not had any run-ins with his bosses, Joe expressed some bitterness at the way that he saw several fellow officers being treated by the departmental higher-ups and the manner in which it now seems that everyone in public assumes he is racist as a cop.

Still, because Joe moved into police work with zero expectations and came from a humble background, he still finds the work meaningful and worthwhile. Financially, he

explained that “my dad never made over \$17 an hour growing up. So... I think \$30, \$31, \$32 an hour now that's a lot of money for me. I'm happy. I don't expect anything more for the compensation of it.” Despite the drawbacks, police work is still a respected profession. While missing the camaraderie of the military was part of Joe’s reason for joining the police, he admitted that it has never come close to the same degree of togetherness expressed in combat. For starters, all the officers drive solo and go home to their families at night. They have busy lives and many other obligations. While there are a few barbecues or get-togethers in the summer months, it pales in comparison to what the infantry life offered in terms of brotherhood, camaraderie, and esprit de corps.

Joe had a single incident of PTSD related symptoms, where he was the first responder on a “shots fired” call:

“I just had this adrenaline going where my hands were shaking and I'm like, ‘Why am I doing this right now?’ Like, I couldn't understand it... I didn't feel like I was scared. I just like, I couldn't control my hands from shaking... Even after the call was over, like that adrenaline was still dumping. Kinda like, ‘dude, just get ahold of yourself, calm it down’... I didn't understand it because I've been in firefights over in Iraq and like, I don't really remember being that scared or that amped up though. I was shaken by that”.

When pressed further on why he thought that singular call elicited such a powerful response, Joe stated bluntly that it was because he was alone, while in the war he was always with his buddies. This makes good sense, given that police academy training constantly hammers into recruits the reality that there is nothing more dangerous than a vehicular stop by an individual officer during nighttime hours. Doing these calls myself, I recall having PTSD symptoms of my own creep up; you can’t see anything from a dark car on a dark night except the silhouettes of heads and

shoulders, anyone could point a gun and fire at you in a second, and you have no defense against it until you approach the car and see the passengers for yourself. Given the further fact that it was an intense “shots fired” situation, it is easy to see how and why Joe’s physiology reacted as it did.

Joe’s Epilogue

Joe is now happily re-partnered with a fellow officer and veteran. Following a visit to her native Puerto Rico after a devastating hurricane, Joe’s partner inspired him to create a nonprofit that they now run together. Their mission is to take wounded veterans out on expeditions to hunt, fish, or camp. When asked why he continued to do this work on behalf of his fellow vets, Joe responded:

“It's sad to see for me that these guys who were so tough over overseas, they come home and they just, for whatever reasons, they fall into hard times that they just feel helpless in life to the point where you know, that they just either sit around and do nothing and drink or they actually hurt themselves. And if I can help prevent that and have some good times with people, then that's what drives me”.

I believe Joe’s cheerful, courteous disposition, and relatively smooth adjustment to the many adversities of civilian life have much to do with his humble blue-collar origins, including a Catholic faith that dominates his perspective on the war and the purpose of his life in all the years that have followed. Joe has done a great deal of good for others with limited means, time, and resources of his own. He seems the very antithesis of me in terms of his disposition for police work, and I have little doubt he will continue to be an exemplar of that profession in the years and decades to come.

Ken’s Story: A Man of his Time

Introduction

Like other participants, I was connected to Ken through a mutual acquaintance. Ken and I met three times, in-person, over the fall of 2019 at his home in Milton, Wisconsin. His house was a modest, one-story rancher on a quiet side street in town. His wife of 30+ years, Karen, kept up decorative themes related to the seasons and holidays in and outside the home; on our first visit summertime emblems, flags, and kitsch items of all sorts were on the lawn and in the house; in the second visit it was Halloween, and in the third it was Thanksgiving. These displays of neighborly and communal welcome seemed extensions of Karen's warm personality, where she attended Ken and I during our talks with an alarmingly continuous supply of food and drinks, and also added richness and color to his stories by giving her opinions in passing.

In contrast to his wife, Ken was most often dour and humorless. As I would come to understand, this had everything to do with his ongoing medical calamities—all of which Ken believed were the result of his exposure to Agent Orange in the Vietnam war. In short, Ken was miserable and misery loves company, as the saying goes. The faculty member who referred me to Ken would later be flabbergasted at the discovery that they were nearly the same age...Ken's body had deteriorated so thoroughly that he resembled a man of 92 more closely than his actual 72 years old. He needed a walker to move, and once settled in a place, it was likely he would not get up again for hours. Ken suffered from drop foot, with one leg essentially immobile. He had a number of heart surgeries including a triple bypass. He went to the VA in Madison—a full hour away from his home—three days a week for medical assistance. At our last visit, he was scheduled for an upcoming ablation process, where the medical staff would use electrical charges to put his heart back on to the appropriate beat. Additionally, one of Ken's sons and one of his son's own daughters (i.e., his granddaughter) were born with a massive hole in the heart that

required immediate surgery as infants. Ken was convinced that this was not a hereditary issue but, rather, one that stemmed again from his exposure to Agent Orange in the war.

Ken's prickly demeanor, understandable as it was when considered in light of his physical condition, set the tenor for our time together. The greatest difficulty turned out to be scheduling. The first two times I called Ken and scheduled an appointment to meet, he confused the dates and times, switching Thursdays for Tuesdays, and became upset when I didn't show up to his house on the erroneous dates. Both times, Ken said he wasn't going to meet after all, because he couldn't be put out like this with his busy VA schedule. Both times I talked him back into meeting again and apologized profusely despite the fact that I had scheduled the meetings for alternate dates. Following these mishaps, I made a point to call Ken every Tuesday before we met in order to reconfirm with him the fact that I wasn't showing up that day but would be by the house on Thursday instead.

The meetings were also uncomfortable, as Ken sometimes refused to turn off the loud TV in the background, making it impossible for me to record. He tired quickly and became cranky when he thought I was asking too many questions. When his wife was not present, Ken also told lewd, misogynistic jokes, and once used the "N word" to describe the degree of black shine on his uniform jump boots. At the end of our third meeting, when I asked Ken if he wanted to talk again, he said: "What the hell for?" This was a good summation of our time together, in which Ken often seemed like he wanted to share his story, only to turn quickly resentful when thinking about his service and all the after effects of his exposure to Agent Orange.

Thinking reflectively about these experiences, I believe Ken is, more than any other participant, what one might refer to as "a man of his time," meaning that the way he makes sense of the world is through the lens he used as a young man. Passing judgment on Ken in 2020 is as

pointless an exercise as passing judgment on the founding fathers in 1800...; what they were and who they were cannot be extricated from the time and place in which they existed. While still existing in the 21st century, much of what Ken thinks and believes belongs to an earlier time, one in which he was still able-bodied, vibrant, and full of life. What follows is a story arc that I believe encapsulates many Vietnam experiences. It is one that touches not so much on broken dreams as on dreams that were diminished by the war, and which turned into a reality that reflects the smallness of the dreamer's later ambitions.

Training

Ken graduated from high school in 1965, the same year that troop levels began to skyrocket in the Vietnam war, going from approximately 20,000 to 180,000 by year's end. Nineteen sixty-five in Vietnam was bookended by Operation Rolling Thunder in the spring and the battle of the Ia Drang Valley in the late fall; the war reached a turning point in 1965 and would never be the same.

Sensing the inevitability of the draft, Ken attempted first to enlist in the Air Force. However, due to the increased number of applicants—also, one might assume, attempting to evade the perilous destiny of the Army infantryman—Ken was put on a waiting list for enlistment. In the interim, his draft papers arrived from the Army which superseded his previous orders to join the Air Force. Ken left his home in Illinois, boarded a train in Chicago, and headed due south to Fort Polk, Louisiana for his basic training. Following this, he was redirected to Fort Benning, Georgia, “Home of the Queen of Battle” (i.e., the infantry), where he trained as a mortar man. This military occupational specialty (11-Charlie) is still an infantry-designated job, but with the additional duty of learning how to operate the company-level mortar, a 60mm tube connected to a heavy baseplate, easily manipulated by a group of 3-4 soldiers. There are

additional? mortar units (albeit requiring more soldiers) at the battalion (81mm) and brigade (120mm) levels that can also direct fire onto enemy positions, comparable to outside artillery units. At the lowest level, the mortar squad remains attached to the company command element during combat operations directing fire onto enemy positions as needed, while the line platoons engage the enemy in small-arms fire on the line. Within the world of the infantry, 11C was considered a slightly safer job than 11B (basic rifleman). However, this safety was offset by the significant strain put on a mortar squad by having to constantly carry the mortar components with them wherever the company roamed; Ken was not the first former mortar man I've met whose first comment about the job was the weight of the mortar base plate he had to hump in the bush.

In another missed opportunity, Ken was designated for Officer Candidate School due to his outstanding test scores, but again he waited and never received a start date. Part of the expectation was that he would serve an additional 2 years in the Army, which he did not want to do, and therefore was never reassigned to OCS. Ironically, Ken would sign on for additional time before leaving for Vietnam, but this was from the perspective of staying with his friends and unit and not for his personal advancement.

After his Advanced Individual Training (AIT), Ken worked odd jobs around base waiting for an assignment. During this time, he spoke of an incident with a fellow soldier that left a permanent mark on his memory. This man had already been to Vietnam and was a "Spec-5", a rank that no longer exists in the Army but which was equivalent at that time to E5 "Buck" Sergeant without the leadership component inherent in the non-commissioned Sergeant rank. This soldier befriended Ken and plied him with stories from overseas. They rode into town together in the man's convertible Chevy Impala, getting ice cream and scanning for girls. One

day, this Spec-5 assigned Ken to Kitchen Patrol (KP) duty, knowing the duties were light and would only take a short while to complete. After he was done, the older soldier invited Ken into a closed barracks room where he had a projector screen displayed on the wall. Ken, having just showered, was only in a smoking jacket and underwear. The other soldier began playing film he'd recorded during his time in Vietnam. What started as benign footage of the man coming off the plane, etc. soon morphed into strange sexual territory, with several local women engaged in acts of bestiality on the recorded tape. At this point, the Spec-5 reached over and grabbed Ken's crotch, asking him if he liked what he saw. In Ken's words: "And I said, 'Whoa. Big mistake. And I about killed him... didn't even show up for roll call the next morning. He was in the infirmary. Nobody knew what happened. He wasn't gonna tell.'"

Sometime after this incident, Ken finally got orders to report to the 101st Airborne Division "Screaming Eagles" at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. Instead of being assigned to a line unit, however, Ken was tagged to become a clerk based on his typing proficiency. Thus, he worked on bulletins for the unit that often shared the names and home towns of the men killed overseas which left an imprint on his psyche. Nevertheless, when the unit went to deploy, Ken was outraged that he was to be reassigned to the 82nd Airborne Division stateside because he didn't have enough time left in the service to go overseas: "I said, I'm 101st all the way... these are all guys I slept with, lived with, eat with, you know, for so long." He voluntarily added six months to his service obligation in order to deploy with his friends; a fitting tribute to the bond of military life shared by members of the same military division on which the acclaimed "Band of Brothers" book and mini-series were based.

Deployment

Ken arrived at Bien Hoa Airbase near Saigon but was disappointed yet again to be assigned to a personnel office rather than a line unit; his Top-Secret clearance was a barrier for reentry to a rifle platoon, as he was seen as too valuable to be so summarily doomed to wounding, death, or—at the very least—the drudgery of a year humping the jungle. Still, Ken was to learn that no one in Vietnam was truly safe. The base where he lived, for instance, was routinely shelled by enemy forces with mortars. During one such alert, Ken continued to type at his desk in a Quonset hut while the rest of the staff went to a protective bunker. Seconds later, a mortar round pierced the metal roof and landed directly in Ken's filing cabinet, right in front of his face. It failed to detonate. Shaken, Ken asked for a reassignment to a line unit, as most of his buddies were already there, and he figured if he was going to die, at least he could do so fighting rather than typing. Instead of another flat refusal, Ken's higher command struck a compromise with him; he would become an air courier for the entire unit, a dangerous job that required him to fly via plane or helicopter to all the remote outposts where 101st soldiers were stationed, delivering mail, messages, orders, and the like. Most often, because he was a lower enlisted member, Ken would show up at a patrol base, perform his duties, and immediately be reassigned to line duty for the duration of his stay: guarding patrol bases, exchanging intermittent fire with the enemy, and taking on outpost duties as required.

On one such trip to the Phu Bai combat base, Ken fell asleep the morning after an overnight guard shift and missed his transport back to the airfield. When he woke up and walked outside, a nearby Sergeant exclaimed, "You're alive!" in bafflement. It turned out that the deuce-and-a-half truck carrying the entire contingent of soldiers to the airfield struck a landmine that

resulted in a mass-casualty (MassCas) incident, claiming the lives of all occupants. This was the second incident—along with the dud mortar round—in which Ken narrowly escaped death.

While in and around the province of Hue, Ken was sometimes ordered to clear out the infamous tunnels built by the Viet Cong (VC) for underground maneuvering, safety, and transport. He described the abject terror he felt during these moments in the dark. While he never found anyone living or dead in the tunnels, he was constantly thinking about an Italian platoon he'd heard about that was wiped out when they unknowingly set up camp on top of a VC tunnel system, allowing the enemy to crawl out at night and kill the entire group in their sleep.

Many of Ken's friends with whom he'd originally been assigned were killed or badly wounded during the year-long tour of duty. He recalled one instance when he heard a good friend from a line unit was wounded at the small patrol base where he was delivering mail and was awaiting medical evacuation (Medevac). Ken went to see the young man at the impromptu medical station, but when he found him he grew sick at the sight: the boy's intestines had been blown out of his stomach and were being held in by several layers of transparent saran wrap as he slowly died awaiting his Medevac. Ken's guilt around not being on the line with his friends never fully dissipated during his time in the war.

Back at Bien Hoa near the end of his tour (being "short" in military parlance), Ken was part of the most pivotal battle of the entire war: the Tet Offensive. On January 31st, 1968, a large number of VC and VC sympathizers from the South Vietnam population launched coordinated attacks against the major US and ARVN (i.e., South Vietnam military) bases—many of which were thought to be completely secure. Scantly clad and poorly armed, these Vietnamese nonetheless managed to briefly throw the entire South Vietnam landscape into chaos. At the time of the attack, Ken was off duty at the major American airbase. When the alert sirens launched, he

dutifully reported to a trench line with his M16 rifle and .45 caliber pistol. The VC came hurtling out of the undergrowth, attempting to breach the concertina wire perimeter in vain. As Ken put it: “I don’t know if I killed anyone...but it was impossible to miss”. The Tet attacks were a catastrophic failure from a military perspective—essentially eliminating the VC as a fighting force from the war—but it was a tipping point in terms of public sentiment for the Vietnam conflict back in the United States. This would play an important role in Ken’s return from the war.

Before leaving for? stateside, Ken was in for two more memorable experiences, both connected to the aftermath of the Tet Offensive. First, he and his compatriots were shocked to find their “Mama-san” among the dead in the wire after the firefight. She was the middle-aged Vietnamese woman who did the unit’s laundry and folded their clothes. Ken remembered giving her extra money to buy additional laundry detergent a number of times. It was a moment of realization for many of the soldiers, Ken included, that the influence of the North Vietnamese extended well beyond the superficial boundaries of temporary nation-states to a deeper sense of a unified Vietnamese identity. Second, and related to the first, Ken was left with the lasting trauma of being ordered to peel the dead VC bodies off the wire outside the airbase. Due to the chaos of the battle, this did not happen for perhaps two weeks, leaving the bodies to rot and stink in the sun. Ken explained that anytime he tried to grab an arm or leg, it would come unattached from the body. Engineering units dug giant trenches with bulldozers and backhoes, where the enlisted men would roll or throw the decomposing bodies into a pit grave. For Ken, it was a lasting tribute to the futility and ugliness of the war, as he rotated home shortly thereafter.

Life After Deployment

Like all Vietnam veterans, Ken returned home to a land divided between support and dissent for the war. Coming into San Francisco, several war protesters greeted the plane, shouting epithets at the off-loading soldiers. Ken was stunned into a dumbfounded silence by this treatment. When he landed in Chicago, a woman with a baby in her arms asked him point blank: “How’s it feel to be a baby killer?” right before he reunited with his family outside the airport. Once home, the reality of this pervasive anti-war sentiment truly set in: “You get back here and you listen to all the news and stuff going on. That Lieutenant Calley that killed all of them in the My Lai massacre, and [the photo of] that little girl running on fire. It was just so many bad things happened over there that you know, I tried to forget”.

Ken threw himself into civilian life, and yet, the war never truly left him. For starters, two of his best friends from home were killed in the war. In addition, Ken worked for a Vietnam vet in a carpet company who used to hit the deck and crawl beneath tables anytime a loud noise occurred. Still, Ken married, had children, and built his own house by 1972. Unfortunately, and as is the case in so many instances amongst combat veterans, Ken’s marriage fell apart. It wasn’t until years later, in the early 80’s, that he met his current wife Karen. They met in a bar, where Ken recalled that this “little short shit” came over and asked him to buy her a drink. They bonded over a shared sense of humor and of having already been married with kids previously. Karen became the most positive influence in Ken’s life, reengaging him with church activities—in which he is still deeply committed—while they rebuilt a life together than now involves eight children and innumerable grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Family and community are at the center of their universe; Karen was unwilling to move from her small Wisconsin hometown, and Ken has now adopted it as his hometown, too.

Unfortunately, more than anything else, Ken's experience of Vietnam is directly tied to his exposure to Agent Orange and its devastating aftereffects. Almost from the moment he returned to the States, Ken began to experience the strange and terrible impact of this poisonous substance. In his own words: "Well, then they dropped this Agent Orange, which killed the foliage, the trees. Monsanto made it all. And Johnson said, 'Go ahead'. If he [LBJ] was alive today, I'd kill him". Ken began to experience problems walking, and by the late 80's had developed drop-foot. Additionally, one of his sons was born with an abnormal heart defect which Ken now says has been linked to the impact of Agent Orange. This son's daughter, Ken's granddaughter, was born with the same defect. Both required surgery as infants in order to survive, and bear the scars today. Ken's heart functionality was also impacted, as he continuously experienced arrhythmic aberrations in his heart beat and eventually needed several heart surgeries of his own.

Today, Ken is practically immobile, and spends the majority of his weekly schedule either commuting to or at the Madison VA hospital, where the medical team is constantly treating him for Agent Orange-connected problems. Fluids are so prevalent in his system that he is 25lbs heavier simply due to water retention. He now has uncontrollable shaking, and was often at odds attempting to raise a glass or can to his mouth. Right before I met him, Ken fell from his front porch and landed in the bushes. He was unable to extricate himself and was saved only when one of neighbors noticed the soles of his shoes sticking out from the ground cover. As Ken stated to me in our final meeting: "If I break anything, I'm in a nursing home, because Karen can't take care of me. She can't lift me up if I fall. I mean, it's bad enough that she's got to put on my shoes." Ken displayed a continuous—and understandable—bitterness about his physical

deterioration at the hands of the U.S. government, whose officials knew the side effects of the spray but chose to use it on and around U.S. ground troops anyway.

Ken's Epilogue

When asked about his wartime experiences, Ken was more positive than I would have believed, given the myriad reasons for him to be bitter. He said: "At first I couldn't even talk about it, but now it's been so long and it's not so hard." Ken joined both the Veterans of Foreign War (VFW) and the American Legion later in life and began to embrace his veteran status once the public acrimony over the Vietnam war had dissipated. Like many men of his generation, he did not have the luxury of coming home and lingering endlessly on his experiences—there was work to be done and a family to raise. Ken also brought several instances up where his wartime exposure to death was of benefit to the community. In a bizarre confluence of coincidences, Ken was present on four separate occasions where someone lost their life in an accident. Several of these people were his friends, yet, Ken was able to maintain his composure and assist in the recovery of bodies. In one detailed and graphic account, a friend left a bar right before Ken one night and got into a fatal accident where his car caught on fire. Following shortly from the bar, Ken was on the road when he saw the burning vehicle. Another friend who was on scene as a police officer told Ken it was the same buddy he'd just been with in the bar. Ken volunteered to help recover the body. He described it to me as:

"He was in the car, yet there was nothing but charcoal pieces, a charcoal figure. His arm was caught between the shifter and the console; it was stuck down there, and the firemen got him loose and put him in this bag and were gonna carry him and put him in the ambulance. But all the fluids started coming out again. This guy [the EMT/Firefighter],

he puked and he lost it. So I said, 'I'm here, let me help you do it'. I can do stuff like that. So yeah, it's come in handy a little".

Ultimately, Ken was able to find some of the positives in his experiences, even while remaining angry about his generation's mistreatment both in the war by the government and after the war by the public. None of this seemed to impact his ability to move forward and get the business of living done. To me, Ken illustrates the blue-collar mentality of so many draftees in the Vietnam conflict who had no time to sit idle and reflect on the existential realities of their experiences post-combat. There were bills to pay and children to feed, and the meaning-making component of combat would have to wait for a later day and time when there was less urgency to make one's way in the world and where, perhaps, there would be more understanding from the world in regards to this lost generations' experiences of war.

Dick's Story: If at First You Don't Succeed

Introduction

My first encounter with Dick was in a newspaper clipping handed to me by a faculty member at the University of Wisconsin–Whitewater. Dick had received praise for his work in creating a substantial veterans' memorial on town property and was also active in the local chapters of the VFW and American Legion. I reached out to Dick directly, and after several text messages, we were able to arrange our first meeting at a small diner near his home. Dick later confided in me that part of the reason he agreed so readily to the study was because of my own background as a combat infantryman.

I knew when Dick arrived, because he drove an SUV with a Purple Heart specialized license plate, and there was a Vietnam Veteran campaign sticker on the back window. He was using a cane and only had partial abilities with his right arm and hand; I made the mistake of

squeezing too hard when we shook hands and nearly injured him. Dick was short and squat, with a full head of white hair in a neat crew cut, and a square face that seemed to be perpetually smiling. In contrast to his Vietnam-era counterpart Ken, Dick was easy-going, affable, and seemed near-impossible to offend.

Dick opened up immediately about many of his most harrowing experiences during that first hour together, and in all our subsequent meetings—done in a private room in the local library—he displayed this same sense of transparent honesty about his combat experiences and the tumultuous life that followed. In fact, Dick spoke so openly about his experiences during our first meeting, that I became worried other customers would hear some of the details and grow too sick to eat their food! Dick’s personal magnetism was such that it was difficult eventually not to view him as a type of surrogate uncle. This was borne out by many of his stories related to former wives and step-children (there were many of both) who remained in his life well after any formal or legal connections were severed. Dick told one story in which, at his retirement ceremony, all four of his ex-wives got up together and did a skit about him in good humor while the crowd roared and Dick laughed his approval. At the end of our final meeting together, Dick gifted me with the photo of him receiving his Purple Heart from General Casey while in the hospital. On the back of the photo is an inscription with the date of his wounding... it will be 50 years ago this May.

Training

Dick grew up in small town Wisconsin, the son of a WWII veteran who received 5 battle stars while serving in the European theatre. His dad was the jeep driver for an Anti-Aircraft battalion commander and saw virtually all parts of the European battlefield, although he was never wounded himself. Dick and his father had an especially close bond that deepened

following the former's experiences in war. Unlike some fathers who had seen service in WWII, it appears that Dick's dad understood and appreciated what his son had gone through, without conflating his son's honorable service with the many unsavory political and military components of that particular conflict.

Dick was a natural entrepreneur as a youngster; he opened up a pizza shop with his best friend straight out of high school. In the midst of struggling to succeed in their business endeavor, both young men received their draft notices on the exact same day. They went to the recruitment office together to try and make a deal for non-combat duty. Dick's friend was able to join the Air Force. Dick, on the other hand, was fed a line by the Army recruiter telling him he'd be able to join the Engineers and avoid all the fighting. Like so many other young people who have joined the service under false promises made by recruiters, Dick signed on the dotted line and was soon on a train to Fort Polk, Louisiana to train as an infantryman just like his fellow participant Ken several years before.

Also like Ken, Dick was offered a slot to go to Officer Candidate School but turned it down in favor of NCO (Non-Commissioned Officer) school, because he'd made a promise to his dad that he would get home in two years to help the old man with his construction business. Thus, Dick went to Fort Benning, Georgia and then through the NCO academy, graduating as a "Shake-n-Bake" Sergeant (E5). The term "Shake-n-Bake" was a pejorative term based on the famous chicken seasoning product, because it made "instant" NCO's with little time-in-service to warrant their rank. These men were nonetheless thrust into noncommissioned leadership positions when they deployed to the war. Following this training, Dick was shipped to Vietnam as a solitary individual, headed to the 1st Cavalry Division (1st Cav) that became famous in this war for being "air cavalry" traveling via Huey gunship in a modern-day replication of the horse

charges of yesteryear. In the well-known scene of *Apocalypse Now* where Robert Duvall and his men assault a beach via Huey chopper formation, they are meant to belong to the 1st Cavalry Division, with its distinctly large badge and unique shape being clear for audience members to see on the GI uniforms.

Deployment

Upon landing in Long Binh, Dick was in-processed and assigned to a combat unit stationed at a remote patrol base near the border of Cambodia. When he arrived via gunship, the unit was out on a week-long patrol. This Area of Operations (AO) was extremely hostile with the small, poorly defended garrison coming under daily mortar and small-arms attack from North Vietnamese Army (NVA) stationed in and around them in the jungle. Members of the engineering unit responsible for the upkeep and defense of the outpost learned that Dick had experience operating heavy machinery. They ordered him out into the open on a bulldozer to create defensive berms for the base's defense. When he started out, NVA began to take pot shots at Dick in the cockpit of the machine. After a few failed attempts this way, Dick and some others welded giant metal plates onto the sides of the operator's seat to protect him from enemy fire. Additionally, two "Kit Carson" scouts—former North Vietnamese soldiers turned to the Southern cause—jumped onto the dozer without protection and returned fire the entire time that Dick built the berms. The bravery displayed by these scouts would have an impact on Dick later in tragic circumstances when they were killed. Ironically, Dick's "trial-by-fire" introduction to warfare came performing some of the very engineering duties he'd hoped to be doing in lieu of frontline duty when he originally enlisted.

When Dick's company eventually returned to the patrol base, he was assigned as an assistant squad leader—his E5 rank dictated a leadership position, while his status as a "Shake-n-

Bake” warranted an interim period in which he was first an assistant leader,. At this time, in 1970, the 1st Cav was doing covert operations across the border of Vietnam into Cambodia as a deterrent to NVA troop movement into South Vietnam; the North Vietnamese smartly used the roadways of neighboring Cambodia and Laos to move its troops, knowing they were technically off limits from U.S. involvement in foreign lands. At the very least, it was more difficult for the Americans to justify bombing campaigns that crossed international borders. However, the US leadership in Vietnam continued to send ground troops across at various intervals and on varied missions in order to stem this never-ending flow of troops and material to the combat zones of the south. What this meant, in reality, was that Dick’s unit was highly isolated, and up against superior numbers in the NVA regiments and brigades that were streaming through the Cambodian jungle and highlands.

Within days of leaving the patrol base, Dick had undergone a true baptism of fire, experiencing several firefights and the innumerable booby traps set up by the NVA in and around their Area of Operations (AO). In time, Dick became acquainted with “walking point” as the lead soldier in the column and was one of the rare men who learned to enjoy this hazardous duty. In his mind, it was safer to be in the front, because he always knew where the fire was coming from; in the middle of the company, it often felt as if small-arms fire was coming from all directions at once. Thus, Dick earned the respect of his compatriots in short order by taking on what was widely considered the riskiest position in the company (minus, perhaps, Platoon Leader and Radio Operator, who were often targeted on purpose). Other experiences that Dick talked about during this time included being hemmed in on all sides by superior NVA forces one night and having to call in “danger-close” artillery missions from far-away batteries that included naval support ships in the South China Sea as well as napalm bombing missions from scrambled

Air Force jets. Dick expressed deep gratitude for the Air Force and Navy for their role in saving his company more than once. That night the rounds were landing as close as 40 meters away from their tightly huddled company perimeter. Additionally, Dick related that sometimes when he was walking point, and the jungle terrain broke up, he could see lines of NVA soldiers moving parallel to his own company to the left and right, tracking the American force like bloodhounds—a disconcerting sight to say the least.

It was in the midst of this chaotic scene that Dick’s battalion launched a “hammer and anvil” operation, with several companies moving in a large sweep of Cambodian jungle (the “hammer”) with the intent to flush out NVA soldiers toward Dick’s waiting company serving as the “anvil” component on which the NVA would be trapped and destroy themselves. The problem, as Dick described it, was that the NVA force coming down on the company would be an entire brigade of regular NVA troops—several times again the size of Dick’s battalion, much less his company of 120 men. The fact that they were operating illegally in Cambodia made intelligence gathering on the enemy that much more difficult, leading to a deadly underestimation of the forces in the area. During this operation, Dick spoke about how it truly became only a matter of days before it was your turn to get hit—every single day brought further casualties in the unit, to the point that as an up-jumped squad leader (all the original squad leaders were KIA or MIA), he barely attempted to speak to new members, as he knew they would soon be evacuated as casualties or in body bags.

True to his instinctual feel for the moment, Dick’s turn came quickly enough. In a particularly intense firefight, Dick was blown by a mortar round into a nearby tree. As American forces pulled back from their position, he was initially left for dead. However, a brave assistant machine gunner ran back out under cover fire from their fallback position and dragged Dick to

relative safety. Unfortunately, one of Dick's most damaging memories was of laying prone and awaiting Medevac with the body of one of his closest friends right next to him, staring at him with dead eyes.

Later, in an emergency hospital unit, a surgeon told Dick he'd have to have his right arm amputated at the shoulder. Dick threatened to kill the man, and said he'd rather die with his arm than live without it, due to the fact that he was a blue-collar guy and would need both his arms and hands to do the work back home. The surgeon conceded, and attempted an operation to maintain the arm. Dick would remain in the hospital for 13 months, and would never regain full use of his right arm or hand. Significantly, he was also never able to say goodbye to his comrades in the field... he had only been in Vietnam a few months.

Life After Deployment

Dick's life after the war has spanned five decades, five marriages, six children, and a lifetime full of stories. Much like his Vietnam counterpart Ken, Dick felt that he did not have the luxury of dealing with his psychological wounds after the war...there was too much work to be done. When he returned to Wisconsin following his medical discharge, Dick fulfilled the promise he made to his dad by working alongside him in his construction company. The two men, father and son, grew closer due to their shared combat experience. Dick maintains that his father shared things with him that no one else in the family—not even his mother—has ever been privy to hearing. Their bond would last up until his father's passing, and Dick still recollects memories of his father with clear enjoyment and pride.

As a burgeoning family man himself, Dick enjoyed less success, at least in the early years and decades following the war. He had three biological children and eventually adopted three more with a later (but not the last) wife. While he has maintained close relationships with his

kids and grandkids, Dick was much less successful at making romantic connections work. He became a functioning alcoholic and workaholic, burying himself in the all-too-common mixture of work and drink that consumed so many 20th century American men.

One of the reasons that Dick struggled in his personal life was a “live-in-the-moment” attitude he’d cultivated since surviving the war. One of the medics who looked after him in the hospital told Dick he likely wouldn’t live past 40 years old, which flipped a switch in his mind about how to go through the rest of life. In his own words:

“When I came back, I had this thing in my head: ‘never look back’. I mean, you might be here today, and you're gone tomorrow, and never look back, because what you did the day before, you don't want to remember. So never looking back... was a big problem in my marriages. I mean, every time there was a situation, whether I brought it up or my wife at that time brought it up, my idea of fixing it was just, ‘let's end this marriage’. And that's why I've been married so many times”.

The tally of this attitude began to pile up over the years and not only in relation to romantic partnerships. Dick was also busy stuffing down his negative memories and experiences from the war, plugging the hole in his heart with alcohol. While he stopped having nightmares in his late 20’s (they would resurface in his 50’s), his temper became a thing to behold, especially when drinking. He related one incident during a time period in which he actually owned and ran a bar (not the best work for an alcoholic), when a young man spit tobacco juice on the bar floor. Dick grabbed the boy by the throat, dragged him to the door, and smashed his head into the pane where the bar rules were posted. Then, he hurled him out of the bar by his belt loops. Strangely enough, this man later apologized for his behavior and became a good friend, which is perhaps a testament to other side of Dick’s nature that is so joyful and welcoming.

In the early 2000's, things came to a head. Dick got in a fight with his co-supervisor during a highway construction project and tried to drag the man out of his car by the head. He finally sought treatment at the local VA and began working with a female psychiatrist to find medications that would help him calm down. Additionally, Dick did some group work at this time with other Vietnam veterans that helped him tremendously. Before treatment, he was experiencing bouts of both suicidal and homicidal ideation with frequency.

In a piece of rare good fortune in his life, Dick reconnected with a woman whom he had fallen in love with 25 years before while he was a married man of 34 and she was a 19-year-old girl. The brief relationship had been the scandal of their small town. Dick went on to get divorced, and the girl grew into adulthood, was married, had children, and then was later divorced, herself. When they met again, Dick had been married four times. This time, however, was different: when the two were married, it stuck. Dick is still happily married to his wife Deborah to this day, 14 years later. In a humorous twist, Dick was named the Town Marshal of the 4th of July parade in recent years, which meant that he and his wife rode in the parade on the back of a convertible waving to the crowd. At one point during the day, his wife leaned over to him and said, "30 years ago we started as a scandal, and now we're at the head of the parade. Can you believe it?"

Deborah was also instrumental in getting Dick sober. In Dick's words, she gave him the following ultimatum: "It's either me or Jack [Daniels]. You can't have both." Since getting sober, Dick is now able to drink in moderation when on vacation or celebrating a special event, but gone are the days of grabbing and throwing people by their necks. At his wife's encouragement, Dick also went to visit one of the movable versions of the Vietnam Memorial. He had originally been suspect, knowing that it was designed by an Asian woman, and that it

was supposedly partially “underground.” However, he changed his mind after seeing the movable memorial, and the pair made plans to visit the actual memorial site in D.C.

When Dick and Deborah went to Washington, they had to start at the Korean War Memorial (in which Deb’s uncle had fought) and then work their way toward the Vietnam Memorial, because it was so hard for Dick to approach it. When he was finally able to go up close, Dick looked for the name of his friend he had lain beside all those years ago—a Sergeant Blue. To his horror, Dick discovered that five other members of his unit had been killed in the same engagement that day; he never knew what happened after he was medevac’d. Dick broke down and was unable to breath. In what must have been a poignant scene, two kindly National Park Rangers came and helped carry Dick away from the Memorial, where one of them simply sat with Dick on the grass while he sobbed and tried to catch his breath, saying nothing.

It was after visiting the Memorial that Dick’s nightmares returned. He dreamt often of the devastating aftereffects of Claymore mine ambushes which sliced human beings apart at waist level with thousands of tiny metal balls. He also began keeping a shotgun by his bedside, afraid he would be attacked in the dark. Finally, his psychiatrist put him on a powerful sleeping medication that he still takes to this day—20 minutes after swallowing it he will be lights out, with no dreams, for eight hours.

Unfortunately, the sleep medication is not the only medicine Dick needs to survive. In constant pain since his wounding, Dick has remained on pain meds for the past 50 years. To make matters worse, Dick—like Ken—now suffers from the horrific consequences of exposure to Agent Orange. He has Leukemia and heart disease, both traced back to the effects of the toxin, and he once had to have his jaw wired shut due to a painful inability to swallow. He received all his foods and liquids via a stomach tube for half a year. At our first meeting, Dick put a single

pill case on the diner top and opened it, pointing with a crooked finger at truly gigantic pill. “\$2500 a pop,” he said. It was a chemotherapy pill he takes every single day, the price of which outside the VA system would be astronomical. Like so many other Vietnam vets, Dick’s thoughts and feelings about the war will forever be tied up in his unending health problems. As he once said to me regarding any guilt and shame he still feels from the war:

“The pain never lets you forget”.

Dick’s Epilogue

During one of the bouts of illness that kept Dick out of work, the construction company he’d loyally served for decades attempted to let him go. Barely able to walk—his wife had set up a walking course around lawn chairs for him to practice at intervals in the garage—Dick nonetheless found the wherewithal to drive down to the company building and confront his employers. When they reached an impasse, Dick insisted on resigning his position rather than being given a severance package, as he’d never been fired from a job in his life. Afterward, he had to ask one of the men to take him home, as he could no longer stand up or see straight.

In retirement, Dick has thrown himself into the creation of an entire park dedicated to American veterans. With his construction background and connections, he was instrumental in the design, contracting, and construction of the park. Dick and I went to see it one day, and I must say that it’s one of the better-looking Veterans parks I’ve seen anywhere in small town USA. There is a gigantic memorial with flags, a brand-new pavilion and lavatory for summer picnicking, and substantial grounds full of trees and well-manicured flower beds. It is a testament to Dick’s commitment to the veterans’ cause, and perhaps to the unforeseen reversal of life’s fortunes that has gifted him so much in the autumn of his life. To close his chapter, and in honor

of Dick's experience at the Vietnam Memorial, I now include the following stanzas from Vietnam medic Penny Kettlewell, written in 1990:

*But the war's been done for twenty years,
Their faces blurred by long dried tears
As I find their names upon the Wall
Fading and forgotten through the pall
I hold them.*

*Endless bodies that once held life
Corpses produced by appalling strife
Through hopeless days and nights of pain
As I seek a way to feel life again
I hold them.*

*They have become such a part of me
When you look at me, who do you see?*

Can I live if I set them free?

Who will hold them

And salvage me?

Chapter Summary

You have now read the stories of these five men, all of whom were combat veterans of the United States Army, but whose individual experiences were so diverse, so expansive, as to make them almost alien to one another at certain times. Yet, there are in equal proportion a number of commonalities among their stories that resonate across time, place, and person. All of this, as well as the subjective realities of my own combat story, must be further inspected for

elements of intersectionality and nuanced consideration. The following chapter will discuss these many elements in further detail. I hope that in telling these stories I have done justice to the experiences of my participants, each of whom deserves much more than was given to him on these pages. Still it is a strange token of admiration for my fellow soldiers that I know how little each of us expects in return for what has been given to the cause:

Was there a man dismayed?

Not though the soldier knew

Someone had blundered.

Theirs not to make reply,

Theirs not to reason why,

Theirs but to do and die

From: The Charge of the Light Brigade by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

CHAPTER V: NARRATIVE THREADS

Telling the stories of participants is only a starting point in narrative inquiry. Within those life experiences are a multitude of intersectional and divergent considerations that demand consideration, deliberation, and expansion. A good researcher will attempt to build a truly three-dimensional worldview of participant life, one that encapsulates the whole of experience related to the subject matter, not only a narrow categorization of data.

Throughout the many hours spent both with these five participants and their stories, a significant number of commonalities and disparities crept to the forefront of the larger narrative body. What follows is an attempt to acknowledge the universal experiences of combat while still parsing out the particularities of generational and individual experience. To hold firm to the qualitative distinctions of the narrative inquiry study, which does not typically seek out themes or categorizations (as in, e.g., phenomenology), I will use the Three Commonplaces of *Temporality*, *Sociality*, and *Place* to help establish the flexibility and nuance that are the hallmarks of narrative study.

To further emphasize certain points, I will include quotations from interviews with Dr. Edward Tick, best-selling author on moral injury among combat veterans. Dr. Tick has worked treating vets in private practice for the past 35 years and was gracious enough to speak with me on a number of occasions regarding my research. The inclusion of Dr. Tick's expertise is another form of layering to add breadth and depth to the exploration of these narrative threads, and his commentary was invaluable in helping me frame my own thinking on the subject matter throughout the months in which I was in direct contact with participants.

Temporality

While all three commonplaces were integral in understanding participant experience, temporality contained the starkest divides between members. Among them was not only the generational divide, but more subtle components related to the unfolding of time, such as comparison points between former generations of combatants and the myths surrounding the “good war” of WWII, experiences of moral injury before and after combat, and the devastating longitudinal impact of Agent Orange on the Vietnam generation. Last to be discussed among temporal factors, there will be a consideration regarding the unreliability of memory as a narrative device despite its necessity in telling any and all stories from the past.

The Generational Divide

The most obvious distinction between participants was their age, as two separate generations of veterans were represented in the study; they could well have been fathers and sons. In fact, the generational component of military service was a factor for almost all of the participants who had fathers, mothers, grandfathers, and uncles who served in the military both in peacetime and in war. All three modern-day veterans were influenced in their joining the military due to a family tradition of service, and while Ken and Dick were both drafted, they each spoke separately about the impact their own fathers’ service in WWII had on them as young men. Dick, in particular, held his father in high esteem as a soldier who managed to survive (and was somehow never wounded) throughout the entire European campaign of WWII. While it remains unspoken, perhaps some of these familial sentiments regarding honorable military service influenced those participants who made the deliberate choice to deploy (Ken) or redeploy (Rich) with the express intent of serving with their peers. In any event, there are particularities

related to military service among all the participants that can be traced back at least two generations to the last world-wide war.

The Greatest Generation Dilemma. When I (the author) worked in veterans' advocacy on Capitol Hill, my boss was a former Army UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter pilot who had flown (and crashed) in Afghanistan. We had a tense working relationship as befits a former infantryman and pilot working in close proximity. One day this animosity spilled over into physical confrontation when he asked me: "How's it feel to know you served in the wrong war?" I was incensed by the question, not only because I deemed it disrespectful to the memory of my friends who died in Iraq, but also because it erroneously presumed (as he well knew) that soldiers were free to choose when and where they fought American wars. Thus, even within the last generation of combatants, there is sometimes a sense of rightness or wrongness in relation to the particular war that was fought and the reasons for so doing according to the government and the public.

The fact remains, however, that the reasons cited for each of the major (and minor) conflicts initiated by the United States since World War II—in retrospect—remain alternately confounding, questionable, or criminal... depending on who is doing the explaining. The Vietnam and Iraq veterans are not alone in questioning the necessity of their sacrifice among American combatants; it is a sentiment ubiquitous among our entire veteran population. The fact that this includes some WWII veterans did not prevent subsequent generations from using the last World War as the standard bearer by which all other wars were (and still are) measured. The members of the "Greatest Generation" remain the placeholders for conducting war according to American ideals: (a) with righteous cause; (b) against a mighty opponent; (c) in a world-wide

conflagration; (d) with the ideals of democracy at stake; (e) and winner-takes-all stakes, (f) in a scenario where only the might of America stands in the way of an objective evil.

The problem then is axiomatic: there has never again been a war that even remotely reached these heights of collective power and expectation and perhaps never can be in the future due to the destructive capacities of modern-day technological warfare. While political rhetoric and public sentiment favor bold proclamations that echo the grandeur of WWII, the reality of what warfare has become in the decades since the last world-wide conflict leaves a chasm between expectation and reality.

Components of this disconnect were on display by all the participants at different times. Ken and Dick, for instance, both suffered from the feelings of inadequacy that lingered for many Vietnam vets when they were inevitably compared (and did their own comparing) to the previous generation of combatants. The “3rd Gen” veterans—the grandchildren of the WWII survivors—compared themselves and their wars to *both* the last World War *and* to the Vietnam war. Ironically, they did not experience the Vietnam veterans as any less established in their bonafides as combat soldiers than the WWII vets, despite the former group’s collective sense of inadequacy or dysfunction when compared to their parents’ generation. For instance, both Joe and Rich took pride in having dads and uncles who fought in Vietnam, while Aaron seemed to think less of his father for evading military service during the draft. This could be due in part to the many war films that often inadvertently glorified the Vietnam conflict for the next generation of warriors through brutal depictions of combat, such as *Platoon*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Hamburger Hill*, *Casualties of War* and, even the seemingly benign *Forrest Gump*.

Another explanation could hinge on the notion that three decades elapsed between major American wars; there was ample time for public sentiment to change regarding Vietnam

veterans. They went from being ostracized and condemned for their part in the engagement to the subject of much public support and sympathy, when it became clear how many ‘Nam vets were dying on the streets from substance use, exposure, or suicide. After the tumultuous anti-war movement of the 1960’s dissipated and dissolved, the young men and women who shouted at people like Ken and Dick, calling them baby killers, had much accounting to do for their behavior in later life. The Baby Boomer generation moved into middle-age, and many took on the mantle of responsibility they had previously spurned. For some, this no doubt included a reckoning with their own actions against Vietnam veterans, which targeted lower-working-class citizens lacking the ability to avoid conscription through a deferment in college or serving in a National Guard unit. Hindsight seems to have opened the eyes of many Boomers to the disparities inherent in the draft system and to the injustice many veterans received at the hands of their government and their fellow citizens.

The standard set by WWII continues to pervade public discourse and private sentiment. Combat veterans since WWII have not only had to defend their actions to the public in real-time, but—it could be argued—are also held accountable by themselves and others for the ways in which they were unable to scale the heights of greatness set by their WWII forebears. Yet, according to Dr. Peck, the glorified soldiers of WWII were no less disillusioned by their service, despite the supposed rightness of their cause:

“Many American soldiers during World War Two were also demoralized and disillusioned and thought that this was a European conflict and an American shouldn’t be in it. Eisenhower viewed and heard that disillusionment and loss of purpose... [that is why] he ordered all American units within 50 miles of any concentration camp to redirect

and walk past them through the camp and see it. His purpose was to restore the fighting purpose [of the men]”.

Thus, Dr. Peck corrected me on one of my assumptions--namely, that the retroactively perceived justice of a cause (in public hindsight) does not necessarily translate to less moral injury or dissatisfaction with the war as it was fought by individuals *at that time*. It is important to remember that while WWII is the “Great War” to many of us now, this was by no means the comprehensive understanding of it to those who did the fighting in that era, many of whom were also conscript soldiers the same as those who would fight in Vietnam 25 years later.

This notion—of how we perceive the justness of a cause in hindsight—may be tangentially connected to the early 20th century combat experiences studied by Grossman (2009) in his seminal work, *On Killing*, in which many WWI and WWII veterans admitted to firing over the opposing soldiers’ heads in lieu of taking human life. It is safe to say that some component of disillusionment was present for these soldiers, even if it wasn’t written about with the same vehemence as in later generations.

Taken on the collective, the results of the current study highlight some of the ways that the WWII generation—while not represented directly in these pages—contributed to the mentality and self-perception of the next two generations of combat veterans. Victors write the history books, as the saying goes, and it may be that WWII was the last moment when America was fully in control of our collective narrative as a “Global Force for Good” (one of the U.S. Navy’s most recent mottos).

Public sentiment concerning American wars continues to be influenced by this perspective despite diminishing returns on its accuracy, veracity, and relevance. Service members are often the ones who continue to struggle with the implications of this false standard

well beyond time in uniform. The Vietnam generation bore the brunt of these unfair comparisons. Modern-day vets are in the unenviable position, meanwhile, of comparing themselves to service members in the opposite theater of war, to their parents' generation of Vietnam veterans, and to the grandparents now mythologized into the pantheon of American lore. It is in this WWII generation where we perhaps last believed in our inherent superiority, based on a moral righteousness as the leading democracy of the world. Everything since has suggested otherwise.

Time Heals and Time Hurts

Related to the generational divide between participants was the following observation: the Vietnam veterans appeared to have firmly made their peace with participation in the war, while at least two of the modern-day vets seemed to still be grappling with many of the issues they encountered in the service. While 10 or 15 years may seem a lifetime since the war to those of us who fought in Iraq or Afghanistan, 50 years actually *is* the lifespan of humans in some harder parts of the world. Both Vietnam vets Ken and Dick went through significant upheaval in their personal lives past the longitudinal point at which OIF/OEF veterans are now living. Dick, in particular, had several divorces and bar fights ahead of him when he was in his mid to late thirties; one might drolly observe that Dick was only getting started on creating the chaos that would mark his passage into middle age. This was an important distinction in the study: while none of the men were serene in their recollections of combat, the distance from those experiences was more pronounced in the older veterans, the memories more granular and faded.

Still, there were moments when the older participants were touched by emotion. Dick, for instance, still grew tearful when talking about his dead friend at the Medevac site and of his time visiting the Memorial. In two separate interviews, he had to take a break from our private library

room and take a walk to recompose himself. Ken was still moved when speaking about his dead Mama-san in the wire and of the close calls he encountered with death. It was clear from these moments and others that certain memories were deeply imprinted on their psyches. There was certainly a moral component to such experiences, as they were also the memories that seemed to make both men question the war and its purpose.

Agent Orange

The most significant temporal distinction between generations, however, was around the physical ramifications of warfare and the moral injury which accompanied both Vietnam vets' experiences of exposure to Agent Orange. Ken and Dick were aged beyond their years by the complications of this horrific poison, and each suffered tremendously in their day-to-day lives due to its continuing consequences on their physical health. Dick's symptoms were complicated by his combat wounding and near death experience. Ken was utterly ruined by the diseases brought on by exposure, and there is no question that his pessimistic attitude toward life and his general unease with social interaction are in direct relation to a continuous level of pain and frustration brought on by the relentless course of his medical diagnoses.

In many ways, Agent Orange was the physical manifestation of the government's betrayal of its warriors during Vietnam. Trapped in an ambiguous war without a clear and distinct rationale for engagement, with the majority of soldiers serving as unwilling conscripts, an entire generation of young, poor Americans was tasked with carrying the heavy mantle of mistakes made by wealthy (and extremely safe) politicians and generals in Washington. The ignominy of the Vietnam conflict was perversely carried forward through time by the unending agonies of the veterans themselves in relation to PTSD, moral injury, substance use,

homelessness, and the long-term consequences of Agent Orange that was deployed with the full knowledge of its deleterious impact on human health.

I found it impossible to engage either Vietnam veteran without constant reminders of their precarious physical condition, due in large part to Agent Orange. Both men could hardly walk, both were forced into early retirement due to their disabilities, both were constantly visiting the VA hospital over an hour away in Madison, and both relied on their spouses to help with basic household tasks such as laundry, cooking, and using the bathroom.

While Dick responded to these setbacks with cheerful aplomb, and Ken reacted in sullen silence, I made a point to remember that neither man had asked for this suffering which plagued them through the majority of their days. I am sure Ken did not wish to take several minutes to answer his door or to be incapable of standing without help. Dick surely did not enjoy taking the handicapped ramp instead of the three small steps into the library everytime we met, or having to wind his way through lawn chairs in the garage as a means of relearning how to walk. I was and still am struck by the precariousness of these men's health at a time when many of their peers are still able-bodied, working, and active. The legacy of Agent Orange will continue forward well past the marker of Dick and Ken's lives as one of the most treacherous and callous forms of moral betrayal ever perpetrated against American service members by their government.

For these two Vietnam veterans, the passage of time has wrought a morbid tradeoff: they remember less from the war and are less impacted by what they do remember, while at the same time are handed increasingly severe physical symptoms as a constant reminder of the Agent Orange that has caused such devastation among their veteran ranks. They are more secure with themselves, and with their actions, than their younger counterparts. They are also much, much more fragile, and the physicality that both men prized as blue-collar workers was irrevocably

seized from them well before the due date demanded by old age. Thus, the conversation naturally moves toward the discussion of moral injury not as a constant, but as a phenomenon that is capable of fluctuation both before and after combat, and not as a singular event of combat alone.

Moral Injury Before and After Combat

Connected to the Vietnam generation's exposure to Agent Orange is the significant finding that many of the morally injurious experiences (MIE) of the participants were either pre- or post-combat. Aaron, for instance, had a sequence of MIE's before deploying, and one catastrophic moral injury (MI) following; the combat itself was not what left a permanent mark on his being. Likewise, Joe had an MIE after combat in witnessing his dead comrade and immediately spun himself up about not being there for his friends retroactively. He was also triggered in police work in ways that could be connected to his wartime experiences, much like my own experiences as a police officer. Ken had the experience of an unwanted sexual advance prior to his deployment that could have impacted his conceptualization of manhood and military service. Dick, Ken, and Rich all suffered post-deployment from the physical consequences of warfare, compounded by an institutional failure on the part of both the military and the VA to care for the wounded in an appropriate and timely manner. Dick and Ken were forced to toil with unexplained physical diseases for decades before the VA admitted they were connected to Agent Orange exposure. Rich was given an unending supply of opiate painkillers without oversight from medical professionals which led directly to his opioid addiction and subsequent struggles.

What these examples suggest is that MIE's (and subsequent MI's) commonly take place in noncombat scenarios, even among veterans. They may be compounded by the stress of an impending deployment or by the physical, mental, and spiritual ramifications following combat; but they nonetheless can be designated as MI's in their own right. This longitudinal

interconnectivity of experiences is underrepresented in the moral injury literature on combat veterans, and may offer a substantial contribution to the burgeoning field of study that demands further inquiry and research. This will be revisited in Chapter VI as part of the discussion on future research.

Memory as an Unreliable Narrator

There is no speaking to multiple generations of combat veterans without also recognizing the limitations and proclivities of memory, which we now know can be highly selective (Woodman, Carlisle, & Reinhart, 2013). In reality, the most obvious and instantaneous example of this was in my continued frustrations with booking interviews with Ken, who routinely mixed up the day of the week on which I would be visiting. Even after watching him write the next appointment on his desk calendar, I found that Ken still confused his days and expected me on a Tuesday versus the correct date on a Thursday. This inability to remember basic dates made me wary of the veracity of Ken's wartime claims, and yet for many, it seems long-term memories are more easily recalled than the short-term plans one makes week in and week out. My own grandfather, for instance, can still recall stories from the 1930's and his wartime experiences in the 1940's, but he will immediately forget what we're talking about every two minutes or so in conversation.

Dialogue about memory amongst present-day veterans is incomplete without acknowledging the impact of traumatic brain injury (TBI) on veterans' ability to recall vital information. With increased protective mechanisms such as enhanced Kevlar body armor and "up-armor" packages on transport vehicles designed to withstand the power of all but the largest IED blasts, the last generation of combat veterans was much more likely to survive the types of explosions that would have been designated as "catastrophic losses" (i.e., multiple KIA) in

earlier wars. Of course, the downside of this increased technology is that the human brain is still susceptible to bouncing around the skull in a tumult no matter how soft the cushioning of one's helmet on the outside. This reality has led to an increase in TBI among OIF/OEF vets, and may have significant long-term effects on their mental health and cognition (e.g., Santhanam, Wilson, Mulatya, Oakes, & Weaver, 2019).

My own continuing struggle with memory from TBI is a simultaneous testament to these amazing protective technologies but also to the hidden ways in which veterans are wounded, sometimes without being certain of it for years. While I adapted to memory loss by creating a system of diligent note-taking (aided by my work as a counselor), my long-term memory has gaps in it that are as large as 2-3 years, in which I can recall nothing that happened for large stretches of my early adult life. If a relation or friend brings up something that occurred, I can then remember it, but left to my own devices, it is as if there is a veil over certain times, places, and people. Of my marriage, which lasted the first three years after my combat tour, I can perhaps recall five or six memories in total. Two of the OIF/OEF participants—Rich and Aaron—were diagnosed with TBI related to injuries sustained during their military service. If TBI was a known diagnosis during Vietnam, I am confident Dick would have also received confirmation that he suffered a TBI when he was literally blown up into the branches of a tree after laying prone on the ground in fighting position a moment before.

While memory is unreliable, it is nonetheless useful in a narrative study to examine the selectivity with which people choose to recall certain moments, forget others, and perhaps accentuate or minimize their role at different times and in particular circumstances. It is notable, for instance, that none of the participants—at any time—chose to portray their combat experiences in heroic terms. This aligns with my own sense of self in relation to wartime

experience—there was a job to be done, and you did it despite being alternately scared, angry, bored, frustrated, tired, and (almost always) physically uncomfortable. Heroism, on the other hand, was not something that ever seemed in the realm of consideration. To be brave enough to stand and fight, to remain calm, to not run away or let your voice break on the radio, this was all a combat leader could hope to do. My number one priority, aside from protecting my men and being fundamentally sound in battle tactics, was to remain calm no matter the circumstance, because this façade of calmness bolstered the confidence of the soldiers and was something that was expected of line-company infantry officers everywhere I served. These components of service, related to memory and selectivity but also to interpersonal relationship, serve as the bridge to move into the discussion on *Sociality*. That is, the human interactions that give our stories meaning.

Sociality

At the outset of the topic of sociality, it is worth considering whether former warriors are more or less forthright when talking with fellow combat veterans in a professional capacity versus their civilian clinical counterparts. While a fellow vet may understand in greater detail what was experienced and why certain actions were taken, there is also the risk of being judged by a fellow military veteran for details a civilian may not notice. A particularity as benign as the unit a person served with, their MOS, or the terms of their discharge, to cite several examples, can immediately lead another veteran to certain conclusions about the speaker—regardless of whether or not the conclusions are accurate, fair, or reasonable.

As an example, in the officer corps of the Army, all cadets graduating in a given year (i.e., ROTC, West Point, etc.) are in competition with each other to “branch” into what are largely considered more popular forms of Army service such as Infantry, Aviation, Armor (i.e.,

tanks), and Intelligence. Cadets are literally ranked from first-to-last across the nation. Each cadet fills out a “wish list” of their branch choices (also from first-to-last; a military theme), and then the Army fills their quotas for each branch down the line one at a time. When there are no more slots available for Second Lieutenants in the Infantry, for instance, they will be dropped to the next highest preference on their list and so on. What this means in practical terms is that Army officers who branch into components such as the Chemical Corps, Transportation, Quartermaster, or Ordnance are often—but not always—the lower ranked cadets from their class. Thus, among Army officers, a pecking order is formed, predicated on something as simple as branch selection, from before the time these young men and women are even commissioned to serve in the military.

At times, animosity exists between groups within a larger branch of the military. Historically, many frontline Army soldiers have resented the Military Police (MP) for their role in holding fighting men accountable for “chicken-shit” violations. While this seemed less pronounced in the Iraq war, due to the fact that MP units were often tasked with the same dangerous convoy missions as all other units, some of these intra-service biases may come into play anytime two veterans meet.

The same holds true for inter-service rivalries between the larger branches of service themselves. The Army and Marine Corps, for instance, who together bear the largest burden of modern warfare, consider one another with what could be equally characterized as hostile cooperation or cooperative hostility. While I personally had only positive experiences working with Marines during the war, I have had several experiences with Marine Corps vets outside of combat that left me aggravated or annoyed. For better or worse, all the members of the current study served in the Army, and the Marine Corps was not represented. However, this was due to

happenstance, as all messaging regarding participation in the study was simply directed at combat veterans with combat-related military occupations.

What these examples illustrate are the various ways that being a veteran when doing research on veterans or clinical work with veterans can be both an asset and a liability; it may simultaneously open certain doors and shut others. What follows is a discussion on the ways that vets perceived their relationships to themselves, to each other, to their families and friends, to the public, and to me as a veteran-researcher throughout the study.

Vet-to-Vet Research

In my professional experience as researcher and clinician, veterans have historically acknowledged more willingness to be open with me based on our shared military histories. Several members of this study stated flatly that my being a combat infantryman contributed to their decision to participate. However, there is (as of yet) no objective way to determine whether veteran-to-veteran disclosures are embellished with the intent to impress a fellow combat soldier, downplayed to avoid the perception of self-aggrandizement, or given without any alternative or supplemental intention. This will be further explored in the Implications for Future Research section of Chapter VI.

Such vet-to-vet disclosure is not limited to clinical or research-oriented relationships. Dick described making friends with a fellow in his hometown with whom he bonded over shared wartime stories, only to find out many years later that the man was a fraud and had never served. Likewise, his former brother-in-law claimed to be a Navy SEAL in Vietnam, only for Dick to find out later the man served 2 years in the Navy brig before receiving a dishonorable discharge. These incidents, certainly, highlight the way a certain group of outsiders wants to be part of the military subculture they find so alluring, but they also demonstrate how Dick shared his

experiences with these men—supposed fellow vets—in ways he would not do with other family or friends (aside from his dad, a fellow war vet). Using the aforementioned analogy, this sense of shared military experience opened doors for communication that otherwise would remain shut.

Ultimately, what became clear from my experiences conducting this year-long process was that veterans *were* more willing to at least talk to me given my military background, even if *when* we spoke their responses may (or may not) have been altered to align with certain perceptions of what I represented as both an interviewer and a fellow combat vet. While admittedly biased in my perception of the process, it remains my view that the veterans I worked with were honest and straightforward in their accounts of wartime service, even given the vicissitudes of time and memory. This was confirmed in their retelling of the same stories, or in follow-up questions to the same, none of which altered in detail over time.

Warrior Identity

A major component of the research questioning in this study was related to the specific experiences of vets with combat-related specialties in the service, and how this impacted their perception of MIE and MI. In other words, how did a *warrior identity* built around the classic conceptualization of the frontline fighter translate to actual experiences of moral injury during wartime service. There were two sharp distinctions related to this critical factor in the formation of soldier identity among the veterans who participated: (a) active duty versus reserve component duty; and (b) conscription duty versus volunteer duty. What follows is a brief account of each consideration, vital to the individual's self-concept as soldier-citizen in wartime, and to their experiences of moral injury before, during, and after combat.

Active Versus Reserve Duty. To the first distinction, there was an irrefutable similarity in the experiences of the two participants—Rich and Aaron—who joined the Army National

Guard. This was in contrast to Joe, who joined the active duty Army, where it was his expected full-time job throughout the tenure of his contract. Both former National Guardsmen, one a field artilleryman and the other an infantryman, expressed dismay at the physical and emotional condition of their units upon arrival from advanced individual training (AIT). Both young men found it difficult to connect and make friends at first due to the insular nature of the National Guard, where members serving together had often known each other their entire lives. Where Rich was able to bridge this gap, make friends, and gain acceptance; Aaron was never allowed to move into the shared space of wartime intimacy—a fact that continues to influence his life trajectory today.

Furthermore, upon deployment, both Aaron and Rich discovered the shocking liability of belonging to a unit that was neither well-equipped nor well-trained for combat. There is truth in the adage about military units that the harder their training, the better the fighting will go. Unfortunately, the opposite is also true: poorly trained units often experience high casualties. While Aaron watched the Twin Towers video with the heavy metal soundtrack as part of his combat preparation, Joe described the methodical and pain-staking manner of train-up in the 10th Mountain Division, where his Company Commander purposively ran the unit into the ground to demonstrate the up-tempo reality of combat. This Company Commander was an unpopular leader, but his method may have saved American lives.

This disparity in training was confirmed in my own wartime experience, where my active-duty infantry unit replaced a National Guard unit from Georgia upon arrival in Iraq. This unit suffered severe casualties early in their tour due to a lack of basic tactical knowledge and a dearth of up-tempo training experience in the States prior to deployment. They spent the remainder of their year—approximately 10 of the 12 months—holed up in their base without

patrolling their Area of Operations (AO) or taking on the missions necessary to maintain control of a hostile population. Our unit was tasked with cleaning up their mess, which cost lives that otherwise may have been saved had the National Guardsmen been better prepared for their mission and more determined to carry it out.

While it may be no surprise to learn that active duty soldiers sometimes consider National Guardsmen and Reservists to be a lesser class of the military, it also warrants mentioning that their activation and deployment was without precedent in the modern history of American warfare. After all, these were the same units that young men in the Vietnam generation—lucky enough to have connections—joined in order to *avoid* deployment to combat. To put that sentence in perspective: the American government decided on a wildly unpopular course of drafting unwilling men to fight in an unpopular war, *rather than* deploying their National Guard and Reserve units in support of the cause—units already made up of military members,. Thus, the role reversal 30 years later, in which the National Guard and Reserve made up approximately half of all troops deployed in OIF/OEF, was an extreme departure from the previous role played by these units—the role that many of its members had come to expect in return for a steady, supplemental paycheck through the 80’s and 90’s in peacetime America.

The unexpectedness of this change in role can be seen in the ways that Rich and Aaron both described low unit morale upon notice of imminent deployment and of their compatriots as being, more or less, “scared shitless.” Clearly, the warrior ethos did not inscribe itself as strongly on the hearts of at least some of these part-time soldiers the way it did on those who served in the active duty ranks. Joe, the 10th Mountain active-duty man, described himself to me as a soldier first, then a father, a man of faith, a partner and friend, and a police officer, in that order. This was in keeping with my own self-concept, which will always be that of a soldier, before and

above all other roles. Joe told me he'd like to be buried in a veterans' cemetery with a military funeral but not one that was "too fancy", and he did not want any involvement from his local police unit whatsoever. Likewise, Rich, who seemed to have the strongest identity of any participant with his military self, spent the duration of his first deployment attempting to get out of his reserve component (RC) unit into an active component (AC) unit, where he felt it would be a better fit among soldiers who took their infantry training to heart. Once this was accomplished, Rich attempted (albeit unsuccessfully) a second transfer to another active duty unit when the first redeployed home; it was critically important to him to stay with a unit that was firm in its identity as a fighting unit.

Conscription Versus Volunteer Duty. The second clear distinction in relation to soldier identity was generational, and that was the difference between the two Vietnam vets who were drafted into infantry service and OIF/OEF vets who all joined combat branches voluntarily. Modern-day combat soldiers do not just volunteer for military service; they volunteer for the Army and then for a combatant MOS. Specialized fighters like those who belong to Airborne units, the Ranger Regiment, the SEAL's, CJ's, and the Green Berets, volunteer through several more layers of obstacles to reach their desired professional occupation. For instance, a Ranger will volunteer to: (a) join the military; (b) join the Army; (c) join the Rangers; (d) and then will voluntarily submit to the rigorous training process to become a Ranger, to include Airborne and Ranger schools, in which there is no assurance of success.

Ken and Dick, the two Vietnam participants, were not only draftees, but they also made attempts to avoid direct-line combat service by joining either the Air Force (Ken) or an engineering unit within the Army (Dick). Their lives were altered forever by a failure to gain admission to the fortunate club of service members who were not expected to do most of the

fighting and dying overseas. Even among service members contributing valiantly and bravely to the war effort in other ways, there was a world of difference between firing shells from a Navy cruiser in the South China Sea or flying sorties over North Vietnam with what was experienced by those walking the jungles below.

While this was the story of Ken and Dick's individual lives, it was also the story of an entire generation of young men who came from blue collar backgrounds like their own and who did not have access to any of the societal mechanisms that could take them out of harm's way. The Vietnam war, it seems, was waged in a strange limbo, whereby it was large enough and important enough to demand a draft, and yet not so large and important—as in WWII—that any young man out of uniform was immediately suspect of deviance, cowardice, or physical deficiency. It was a war in which service was anticipated but only by those in the lower half of the social strata, while the other half was free not only to lead their lives as desired, but also to play judge, jury, and executioner to those service members who returned to a country ripe with animosity and disillusionment toward the cause in which they were unwilling participants. I can think of few ironies deeper and more tragic than forcing teenagers into combat and then blaming them for being forced into it afterward.

In contrast, the ethos of the younger generation was summed up by Joe, who said in one interview: "If you're going to join, you might as well make it count". In other words, why become a soldier unless you actually plan to do soldier-like things, such as shooting guns, blowing things up and, in essence, acting out the warrior code? This was my own thinking when joining the service: I had zero intention of becoming a soldier only to sit behind a desk or do another job that seemed only tangentially related to combat. The Army was a fighting force, and we all wanted to fight.

What all of this means in relation to experiences of moral injury is difficult to untangle. Perhaps the complexity of conceptualizing a warrior identity in the first place is part of the reason why definitions of moral injury remain fluid through the present day. What we can say is that for many veterans, it meant something different to be a warrior in the 1940's than it did in the 1960's or 1970's, and again for the veterans in the 2000's and 2010's. It is my belief that the course of moral injury development is impacted by this shifting sense of warrior-hood, both on an individual and societal level, and the future is ripe for research into the particularities of this longitudinal phenomenon.

Connectivity and Loss

Brotherhood. The familial component of military service is well-known in American culture. Nonetheless, it was moving to hear the personal accounts of the participants in relation to how they felt obligated and connected to their fellow soldiers. Ken, despite all his crude cantankerousness, only deployed out of a sense of camaraderie with his fellow Screaming Eagles in the 101st Airborne Division. As a draftee on a short 2-year contract, Ken was the rare example of a drafted infantryman who had accumulated enough service time to avoid Vietnam due to his ongoing training and delayed unit mobilization; the military could not deploy him without a voluntary extension, as the “stop-loss” policies of OIF/OEF had not yet been invented. Ken had actually won the lottery (figuratively and literally)—he could return home without a blemish, in full knowledge that he'd served honorably and to the best of his abilities. Instead, he extended his service obligation in what amounted to a kind of sentence of doom, in that very few infantry soldiers returned whole, healthy, and happy from their combat tours... especially in 1968. While he now regrets this decision—understandable given the many physical maladies that have

plagued his later years—no one can deny the selflessness of this initial sacrifice on behalf of his compatriots.

It was touching to see the parallels between Ken and Rich despite a 40-year gap in their combat experiences. Like Ken, Rich's role in the war was essentially settled, when he was wounded in Afghanistan and evacuated to Germany. The medical staff was happy to ship him home where he could recover in peace. Instead, Rich refused and insisted on going back in-country with his unit. Also like Ken, Rich is rough around the edges and still has a sharpness to him that the years have proven unable to soften. Yet, when it came time to make a possibly life-altering decision, neither man hesitated to go where loyalty to their unit led them. In Rich's case, this was not only against medical orders, which may have contributed later to his opioid addiction, but was also a "yes" coming from the man who was the sole survivor in a Humvee explosion that killed his two best friends and interpreter. Any person who has been in a serious auto accident can attest to the difficulty of getting back behind the wheel... how much more difficult must it have been for Rich to go willingly back inside the armored box trucks where so many of our fellow combatants perished in horrific explosions of fire, metal, and heat... yet he did so willingly.

Continuing the Legacy. A testament to the needs of veterans to stay connected to a cause larger than themselves following military service is evident through the sustained efforts of participants to engage in larger forms of social service, especially as related to fellow vets. Joe and Dick are both exemplars of this form of societal engagement. The former now co-runs a vets' nonprofit that allows members the opportunity to do small, weekend-long wilderness trips to camp, fish, and hunt together. The latter served as the point person (as, indeed, he did in the war) for the funding, planning, construction, and upkeep of a top-notch veterans' memorial and

park, all on a voluntary basis. Rich works part-time in the vet's office on his university campus. Ken was formerly the President of his local American Legion chapter and also belongs to the VFW. Aaron has served predominantly by becoming a professional healer, working as a clinician to combat the effects of trauma and violence with his clients. These facts echo many of my other experiences with veterans' work, especially during two years in advocacy work on Capitol Hill, where I was exposed to so many veterans who made the conscious choice to give back to the larger military community following time in uniform. The sense of living for a cause larger than the individual is a hallmark of military culture, and for many veterans it seems to transcend the boundaries of a youth spent in the service and impacts all their remaining days.

Lost Connections. I would be remiss not to mention the instances in these narratives where connection was lost and unable to be reclaimed. There were seven divorces among three participants alone, each of which no doubt had lasting consequences related to sociality and relationship for these vets. Aaron, in particular, experienced such a difficult sequence of singularly ostracizing events while in the military that it now seems a point of unresolved tension in his life's story. He is caught in a space where pride and resentment have equal footing in his recollection of military service due to the manner in which he was bullied and mistreated by his peers while still serving honorably in wartime. This experience harkens back to Greene and colleagues' (2010) research, which mentions that the protective mechanisms of military camaraderie are only in place for those members who are unofficially embraced by the unit; those left on the outside looking in, such as Aaron, are pushed further and further away from center where the unique form of military companionship is the strongest. Given his mistreatment, it is, perhaps, not surprising that Aaron is the only participant not to become involved in veterans' specific causes at some juncture of his life. Rather, he has focused more on the healing

of the larger population, which could be indicative of his own need to heal from the costly wounds of military bullying.

Aaron is not alone among participants in missing the strong connections of the military. Joe explained his rationale for joining the police force as, in part, an effort to recreate the powerful sense of camaraderie he felt in his infantry unit before, during, and after the war. This sentiment can be connected to Aaron's experience with a house check from a State Trooper, in which he was considered "at-risk" for suicide and a police officer came to check on him in the home at the behest of a loved one. In their conversation, the State Trooper admitted to the same sentiment as Joe for joining the police: regaining a lost sense of camaraderie. I, too, thought the State Police would be the rough equivalent of the military when I joined in 2009. Like Joe, I was sorely disappointed to find that it was much different. After all, cops go home after their shifts to family and friends, have other interests, and in general don't spend much time in one another's company. The isolation of roadwork in the police is significant; even if you work with a partner, that is only one other individual with you at all times. The majority of police work is done alone in a solitary vehicle. In contrast, everything in the military is about cohesion of the unit and working as a group; if one component fails, the whole team fails, etc. The classic military unit is also brought together through their sense of shared mission, which includes—for combat soldiers—a significant level of physical adversity and danger. While police work is unquestionably one of the most dangerous civilian jobs in the country, is not a realistic comparison to the hazards faced by combat soldiers in warfare; the *place* in which combat occurs is fundamentally different from even the meanest American streets. This leads us to the final part of the narrative inquiry triumvirate.

Place

The beauty of *Place* within narrative inquiry is in its multiplicity: It may simultaneously refer to the desk where I am now writing in Virginia; to the office or library or house where I conducted interviews in Wisconsin; to the combat zone in which each of the participants went through his own singular experience of combat; or to any number of locations connected tangentially to those experiences such as the Pentagon, TRADOC headquarters, Ground Zero, or the White House. What follows are extrapolations predominantly (but not exclusively) related to geographical location as identified by the participants of the study in their numerous interviews. Thematically, the three components of temporality, sociality, and place are all interconnected and overlapping. Thus, it is important to read this last section with the other two also in mind.

The Invader Mentality

In my first interview with Dr. Edward Tick, he made a curious remark about the fact that the North Vietnamese did not suffer from moral injury. Every year, Dr. Tick makes a journey to Vietnam with a group of American veterans who meet with their former enemy and do the hard but powerful work of reconciliation. In all his decades traveling, Dr. Tick claims he has not seen moral injury once among these former Vietnamese soldiers. When I asked him to further elucidate what he thought the reasons for this remarkable happenstance were, he responded with the following:

“They really were nationalists trying to defend and protect their country. They've been fighting battles against much larger, more powerful invaders for 2000 years. We were only the last and most recent one. They said, ‘Our goal was to reunite our country and restore peace. We didn't want to hurt. We didn't want to kill. We didn't want to fight. We didn't have any aggressive goals’.

This is also replicated in other warrior teachings around the world. The Navajo people, for example, had two classes of warriors, which we would translate as aggressors and defenders. The aggressors went to other tribal lands, kidnapped women and children, stole horses and took what belonged to others. They had traumatic wounds from infiltrating and penetrating and violating other cultures. The defender warriors only stayed around the village and protected against attacks. And they did not develop the traumatic wound, because there was no moral injury: ‘We're only trying to stop invaders from killing our people’”.

Whether one believes moral injury does not occur in a population that can be classified as “defenders” is less relevant than the following assertion made by Dr. Tick: that when the government, the public, and the military are all aligned in viewing a war as a defensive operation to save and protect the homeland, it takes on a different moral meaning than the preemptive, self-escalated military campaigns for which the United States is now known.

According to Dr. Tick, this distinction plays an important role in the development of moral injury. Using Farnsworth and colleagues’ (2017) previous definitions, one might say that while the North Vietnamese experienced many Morally Injurious Experiences (MIE’s), their level of Moral Pain (MP) did not reach the threshold of psycho-social dysfunction that would then warrant a classification of such as Moral Injuries (MI). The level of Moral Pain experienced may thus have something to do with the societal expectations surrounding the conflict and the subsequent impact on soldiers’ perception of self in relation to identity, function, and experience in combat.

Questions connected to “invader” status were certainly prevalent in my own wartime experience. Most of my soldiers, and many of my fellow officers, knew there was no real reason

for us to be in Iraq. The best answer we had was that it was some type of payback to Saddam Hussein for gassing the Kurds and, essentially, for remaining in power when we did not want him as such following the first Gulf War. Of all the participants in the study, it was telling that Ken spoke most poignantly about how he viewed the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns:

“[The news] shows all the bad destruction, everything else. And then when they go to some of these houses and talk to these people, they look normal. [I saw] this little girl, she was dressed up real nice. Had a nice dress on and her house was good, and now she was up laid in bed. Her and her brother were bombed [by us]. She lost her leg. She lost her brother too and she's laying there in bed crying and everything because she had shrapnel in her arm. I wouldn't want to be her. What the hell is any of it for?”

Truly, the futility of warfare and its unending cost on civilian populations are undeniable, especially when moral forces are not aligned cleanly or clearly behind the cause. Ken and Dick both referenced in their interviews the famous photo of the naked Vietnamese girl running, covered in napalm burns. Images of children suffering through wars in which they have no part leave a mark on the men and women who have participated in efforts which indirectly led to that suffering. This could be due to Dr. Tick's theory that soldiers of “invader” armies experience greater psychological suffering than soldiers who are simply defending their homeland.

If we follow the invader-defender paradigm to its natural conclusion in U.S. history, only the Revolutionary War can be seen as a true example of the latter form of warfare, in which men were defending their homeland from foreign tyranny, occupation, and overrule. Even the Civil War would not strictly fit the necessitated parameters for inclusion, as both the Federal and Confederate forces took turns playing invader across state lines, and each side was, at times, the aggressor in taking the fight to the enemy. Dr. Tick's theory raises larger questions for future

study, such as if and how generational trauma from wartime service among family members in “invader” wars continues to be perpetrated through the decades, or what this cycle of continuous foreign invasion does to the societal impressions of military service over the same span of time. After all, there is no objective reason why the public pendulum regarding wartime service—having swung all the way from disgust to overt hero worship in the past 50 years—could not swing back to the other side again in the future.

Foreignness and Otherness

The fact that all of the wars studied in this research were waged on foreign soil and against populations that could ostensibly regard themselves as defenders of their homeland cannot be overlooked. Beyond the psychological ramifications of being “invaders,” the soldiers in these wars also dealt with unique variables related to deployment on opposite sides of the earth. Cultural and racial differences abounded in these circumstances, allowing for the dehumanizing of the enemy in all his “otherness” to pervade unit norms. Fifty years later, both Ken and Dick still refer to the Vietnamese in the pejorative as “gooks” or “chinks.” Rich referred to Iraqis and Afghans—two peoples as ethnically distinct as Canadians and Columbians, for instance—with the ubiquitous Middle Eastern moniker of “towelheads.” These terms are part of the parlance used in combat veteran circles and are indicative of the perceived foreignness of far-off lands and the otherness of their peoples.

The last century of warfare has seen English-speaking peoples almost universally united with one another against foreign enemies. At this point in time, it seems unlikely that countries thus united by shared cultural customs and language could ever again become enemies. This recent history of warfare suggests that an “invader” mentality may be accentuated by differences in culture, race, and geographical location. When a student once made a passing reference to how

much I must know about Arabic culture from my deployment, I had to correct them. Living in an overseas war zone as an American combatant is like being in America, only with a different climate and with hostile, foreign-looking and speaking people on the outside looking in, many of whom want you dead. When, in my own experience, you look out at people through a traffic control check point, through a Humvee window, through the barbed wire and concrete of a patrol base, or even through the “eye-pro” safety glasses you wear on duty, their foreignness by being on the outside remained clear. The only Arabic words most soldiers learned were the basic terms for “shut up,” “get down,” or “stop.” There was no cultural exchange in warfare: it was the subordination of one kind of culture over another, and nary the two did meet.

9/11

No conversation about place is complete without talking about the events of 9/11 and its impact on the last generation of combat veterans: “*where* were you on 9/11?” is a commonly asked question even today. Similarly, everyone seems to remember (as my mother still remembers) where they were when they heard JFK was shot. When I was 18 years old, my grandfather, the only other veteran in the entire extended family, described to me while driving together what it was like to bear witness to Pearl Harbor and its aftermath. He said, “David, that was the pivotal moment of my generation. I wonder what yours will be?” We had that conversation less than a year before 9/11, and my grandfather’s prescience was never more impressive, given that the coordinated terror attacks on that singular day in recent American history forever changed the trajectory of millions upon millions of lives.

Joe had a similar moment of insight, when he told his mother he thought there would be a WWII, and that he would be in it. While, thankfully, the conflagration in the Middle East has not erupted into a third World War (yet), there is no doubt that much of what is happening in the

present can be traced back to that fateful day on 9/11, and to the particular locations of the Twin Towers in New York, and the Pentagon in D.C., two of the most significant markers of American power and prowess in the country. Without prompting, all three of the present-day vets mentioned 9/11 as being one of the catalysts for their joining the military. Rich, in particular, had family friends who died in the attacks.

While I joined the service before 9/11 (i.e., in peacetime), that day did fuel my desire to fight overseas in a cause much larger than myself. As a narrative device, I can weave a cohesive story thread from: (a) my 11-year-old self, staring down through glass on the Twin Towers observation deck at the tiny ants moving below to; (b) a 19-year-old Army private watching the television as the buildings collapsed, another soldier softly muttering, “Well, it’s on, now”; to (c) a 24-year-old Army Lieutenant ordering an artillery strike on a lone child planting an IED in a dirt road; to (d) a 29-year-old too afraid to sleep at night for fear of nightmares, to (e) a now 37-year-old therapist who only two weeks past had an online student whose father died in Afghanistan, nearly 20 years after 9/11 and in the same extended conflict for which I was originally trained. Clearly, the ramifications of that day, in two cultural touchstones of New York and Washington, continue to influence the legacy of the latest generation of veterans.

The Wall

While the Vietnam veterans do not have the singular moment of a 9/11, they do have what has become one of the most well-respected and well-known war memorials in the nation. As referenced in Chapter IV, Dick was leery of the Wall at first, because it was designed by an Asian-American woman. However, he gradually changed his mind, and visiting the memorial in-person became an important component of his healing process. Likewise, Ken felt he experienced closure in the war when he visited the Wall earlier in the 2010’s. I do not believe it

was a coincidence that these men had such a strong reaction to a monument so thoughtfully and intentionally made as a reflection of their generation's sacrifice.

During the two years I lived in Washington, D.C., I walked by the Vietnam Memorial nearly every day to and from work. It is located adjacent to the Lincoln and Korean War Memorials; the reflecting pool nearby, with the tidal basin full of cherry blossoms in the spring just a short walk away. You can drive by it on Constitutional Avenue, watching people disappear or emerge from the subterranean walkways to either side of the wall, which gradually dip down out of sight. I remember searching for names of KIA I'd read about in Vietnam memoirs, leafing through the heavy laminated sheets of the registry books, then scanning the names and dates with a finger, trying to find the right location. When you step back from looking at one name, you're immediately struck by the size of the Wall, and of how many small names are stenciled on that shiny black rock. The experience is tragically captivating, overwhelming, and awe-inspiring. None of the other war memorials, for better or worse, quite captures the same mixture of pathos and respect, as the Vietnam Memorial.

In our last meeting, Dick brought up the Honor Flights done for vets to visit the Capitol. Although he's already visited, he was still considering going to celebrate the 50th anniversary of his wounding this May. When asked why he was hesitating, Dick admitted that he thought if he accepted the invitation, then it would mean he was signaling that he considered all accounts squared from his mistreatment at the hands of the public in 1970. When Dick was loaded on a bus full of amputees headed to Walter Reed Hospital outside D.C. (he was still scheduled to lose his arm at that point), a long line of protesters took turns spitting on the men in their litters through the bus windows as they slowly drove away. Much like the motto of those hoping to find friends and family still Missing in Action (MIA: "Never Forgotten"), Dick is loath to let go of

his resentment, even after all these years. He cannot bring himself to get on an Honor Flight if it means letting go of all the wrongs done to him and the others in the past. That sentiment, as much as the Wall itself, is a sad legacy of the Vietnam War-- that even half a century later, a broken-down man, crippled by physical and emotional wounds, cannot bring himself to accept the goodwill of a public that had wronged him 50 years before. Clearly, the places we are from, the places we go, and the places we ultimately connect with our former experiences, all have an impact on the healing journey.

Chapter Summary

At the outset of the chapter it was made clear that narrative inquiry is concerned with the experiences of telling stories and not with the categorizations, themes, and lists that may dominate other forms of qualitative research. Nonetheless, for an endeavor of this magnitude and scope, it is worthwhile to follow some semblance of order and sequence to best tell those stories as well as the story of telling those stories.

I believe the three commonplaces of narrative inquiry—temporality, sociality, and place—provide a view of participant and researcher experience that is at once interconnected, nuanced, and lucid. These many facets of connectivity must be viewed in three dimensions: time, person, and place all have a role in the “five W’s” of morally injurious experience, as in all human experiences, collectively. What a young man experienced at 19, in a unique time and place and society, is fundamentally different than how he experiences the world now at 70. Of course, how this older man now reacts to and makes sense of the world also influences the manner in which he remembers his past experiences, including his wartime service. The messaging he received privately and publicly in the intervening decades has impacted the trajectory of his experiences of warfare for better or worse. One of the hopes of this study was to

illuminate this longitudinal process around the emerging construct of moral injury, and I believe the stories of the participants have succeeded beyond my expectations in offering a fresh perspective on the ways in which moral injury occurs across the lifespan.

The final chapter of this study will focus on my own combat experiences as they relate to my participants' stories, as well as on the present-tense experience of conducting the study as researcher, narrator, and author. The value of the study will be examined, as well as several future lines of research inquiry that hold promise for further examination. The study will close with my personal reflections on the journey of conducting a project of this scope and duration in conjunction with my time as a doctoral student.

CHAPTER VI: EXTRAPOLATIONS

Extrapolation (noun): the action of estimating or concluding something by assuming that existing trends will continue or a current method will remain applicable.

The Narrative Experience

Debating on what term to use for a final heading, I found the definition of *extrapolation* to be delightfully accurate to my hopes of what this last chapter will entail. It is certainly a conclusion, and yet it is no less an estimation of what the work will mean to others or to myself in the future. Likewise, it does (and I do) assume that many existing trends touched upon here will continue, while current methods of engaging with moral injury and warrior-hood within American culture shall no doubt remain applicable in the future. After all, we are not the first culture to experience this phenomenon, and there remain many constants to the experience of moral injury in combat that are sustained through the innumerable records of the generations of fighters from the past.

However, even within the relatively short timeframe of this study, the ground is shifting among moral injury researchers in exciting and innovative ways (as detailed in Chapter II). Many more breakthroughs remain in the understanding and treatment of this phenomenon that I believe will eventually place it on equal footing with PTSD among the predominant concerns connected to wartime service. The articles cited in this project will, at some point, have little relevancy to the future innovations taking place around moral injury. This is as it should be in research; we are all building our understanding of the world together, and each person must remember that they are only a link in the chain that stretches backward into the past and onward into the unforeseen future.

With this in mind, I find solace in a truth I've known since I first began to read in earnest as a child; stories are immortal because they are also universal. The current story, carefully dreamed into being through the narrative inquiry method, is no less universal for its particularities to person, place, and time. While it is destructible in the sense that those particularities at some point in the future will no longer remain, it is my belief that the undercurrents of human experience expressed in these pages (the *energy* they contain, for lack of a more scientific term) cannot be extinguished, even if the human race ceases to exist.

Related to this notion of story-as-inexhaustible is my belief in the power of sharing experiences via the modicum of narrative. This story is, of course, my own experience of working with others to help share their experiences with yet even more people, who in turn will have their own tertiary experiences of the same. These are the layers of audience for which all narrative inquiries must account. And if (as I believe) there is power in the sharing of our stories even when no one is listening, how much more power is there in the sharing of them when someone *is* listening with rapt attention, wide eyes, and a scribbling pen? What impact might this have on a person's healing, self-perception, confidence, or perspective? There is no gauging the result (as of yet) when a person feels that their voice finally matters in research, even if it is only to the other individual in the room.

To say the men who participated in this inquiry deserve to have their stories told belies the fact that *all* people deserve to have their stories told, and yet no story can contain all multitudes of human specificity. What stories can do, however, is tie the particularities of a given person, place, or time into larger universalities of the human condition—which is to say, the experience of living out the baffling paradoxes of existence. What follows is an attempt to tie my own experiences of this study into the larger framework of story and narrative; that is, to add

with more intentionality and focus my own thoughts on what has taken place and what it means as both a form of research and a form of art. It is predominantly an exploration of my personal experiences with these exceptional men, broken down into several categories. At the end of this discourse, a broader discussion on the value of the study and its implications for future research will be included. I believe this to be the appropriate location in the text for these important considerations, as it is also the point at which the reader has the largest amount of data from which to draw their own conclusions on the research. Finally, I will attempt to synthesize all the information from this project into a cohesive closing statement that pays tribute to the participants, to the experience of conducting the study, and to the value of narrative itself.

Returning to the Military

An important question raised during the candidacy defense for this project was: how will this study impact you as a fellow combat veteran with your own experiences of moral injury? To the best of my recollection (notwithstanding the vicissitudes of memory), I answered in terms related primarily to former mental health treatment and not to other aspects of individual experience or character. How I was impacted by the study, though, was predominantly through an existential lens that: (a) shifted my perspective toward a holistic view on moral injury; (b) moved me into a space of deeper gratitude for what I've both been given and been spared as a veteran; (c) increased the connection with my own military identity, which has lain dormant now for almost a decade, and (d) reaffirmed my desire to serve the Military-Veteran-Family (MVF) community in the future as part of a lifelong mission.

The keys to these shifts in perspective were the direct communication and contact I underwent with my fellow veterans who, without exception, were selfless in the giving of their time, energy, and thoughtfulness to this project; only a single individual accepted payment for

their contribution to the study, and that as a one-time-only allowance, not for every time we met (as I had planned and suggested to all participants). In retrospect, what was of particular importance to me were the moments when I resonated deeply with the participants over shared military experiences. These, more than any other components of the study, will be the memories that last the longest.

Resonance with Participants

Similarities to my veteran-participants were manifold. Some were related to personal characteristics, or to common experience, and others still to worldview and perspective. Each member warrants his own subsection to do these recollections justice. After all, what resonated with me about each person may very well resonate with the reader on the tertiary level of audience, and, within the narrative inquiry process, the researcher's own story contributes significantly to the dynamism of the project.

Aaron. Two of Aaron's experiences resonated with my own; one related to preparation in the post-9/11 military climate and the other to the loss of military identity following service. To the former, Aaron relayed to me how his Drill Sergeants in basic training continued to pound it into the recruits how soon they'd be going overseas, fighting, killing, and dying. Aaron expressed to me how this was a constant refrain during his training in a world that was still reeling from the impact of 9/11. In contrast, my own basic training, done in the summer of 2000, had none of this incendiary language, full of imminent doom. In fact, the targets used for bayonet and rifle practice (as well as the subjects of our marching and running cadences) were the antiquated evil Soviets replete with red stars on their helmets; the thought of a catastrophe on the level of a 9/11 was nonexistent.

The massive shift in military language, and targeted animosity toward middle easterners, did eventually catch up to me several years later as a young infantry officer. During the first day of the Infantry Officer Basic Course (IOBC) at Ft. Benning, GA, a full Colonel took the stage in front of several hundred Infantry Second Lieutenants, straight from commissioning at their respective universities. I will never forget his first sentence: “Look to your right... then look to your left... a couple years from now one of the three of you will either be wounded or dead”. Of course, my first impulse (as no doubt it was for many) was to have preemptive sympathy for whichever guy was gonna get it on either side of me, as clearly it wouldn’t be me. Only after hearing Aaron’s story of basic training did I remember this memory in its totality, and how all of our training as young infantrymen was endlessly littered with comparable phrases connected to fighting, winning, and dying. As it happened, the Colonel was wrong in his estimation of casualties. Nonetheless, 2 of the 10 Lieutenants in my officer training squad were Killed in Action (KIA) later on; his words were prescient in their own way as a preparatory tool for what was to come.

To the second component of resonance, Aaron and I were able to speak candidly regarding the loss of an ideal in leaving the military behind, how deeply we each grieved this process, and in many ways, how both of us are continuing to grieve it to this day. Compounded with this grief is a fair amount of resentment at superior officers who were incompetent, narcissistic, glory-hungry, or sometimes all of those things at once. Aaron, of course, had the striking example of his inept company commander attempting to save face by not calling a medevac in what could have amounted to Aaron losing his life in the aforementioned training accident after the war. I have several of my own distinct memories of comparable situations, such as my battalion commander and command sergeant major putting themselves in for a

Combat Infantryman's Badge (CIB) when the first one of our units struck an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) in Iraq... on the opposite side of the Area of Operations (AO) from where the command Headquarters (HQ) was stationed. Many other instances come up, in which officers who were hungry for distinction pushed their units into taking unnecessary risks, often with disastrous consequences. For me as much as for Aaron, there is no recollecting my time in the military without also touching on these bitter memories.

Strangely enough, we both chose the healing arts as a form of regeneration and rebirth from some of the more destructive aspects of the fighting life. I knew, for instance, that I wanted to help and heal after so many years being part of something that most often hurt people (ourselves included) in service to the greater cause. Continuing the legacy of living for a higher purpose, I wanted to influence the lives of veterans the way my own life was impacted by psychotherapy after the war. If I were less connected to my former military identity, I doubt I would be writing on this subject or practicing clinically with the intent to treat my fellow vets; the loss of everything I had wanted since I was a little child ultimately took me, as it did Aaron, to a place where I could continue the mission, only from a different point of view. As will shortly be discussed in relation to Rich and Joe, I will always consider myself a soldier... only a soldier for a different sort of cause.

Rich. The commonalities I share with Rich make me more uncomfortable than they do with any other participant. I think this is because they have a tinge of the infantry mentality to them, which at times can be prejudiced and disdainful to the point of hyperbole toward all other walks of life, including other military occupational specialties (MOS). It is a dangerous precedent to set one's own class of warrior above and beyond all others, and yet that is the exact type of mentality the infantry encourages in its soldiers. After all, "fake it till you make it" is a

cliché for a reason: if soldiers begin to believe their own hype, their performance may well reach a level comparable to such sky-high expectations. From what I gather, this is much the same in different fighting groups, such as Recon Marines, Navy SEAL's, and Army specialists such as the Special Forces (a.k.a., Green Berets).

In Rich's case, this prejudice was geared toward other military specialties, civilians, and especially the academic liberal elite. He routinely used infantry acronyms or words to describe soldiers who worked in less hazardous positions, such as "REMF's" (Rear-Echelon Mother Fuckers) and "Pogues" (i.e., soldiers who never leave the safety of a base; a candy bar is also known as "pogue bait"). Rich described civilians in terms suited to the conversation on hegemonic masculinity in Chapter II, referring to them in emasculating terms. This is the very definition of the hegemonic ideal, with its pervasive attempts to minimize and ridicule the feminine while asserting dominance. In relation to the liberal university in which he was undertaking his own doctoral studies, Rich withheld the deepest of grudges, suggesting— (as the majority of military veterans I know seem to agree) that the liberal components of the government and the public are responsible for hamstringing the military through budget cuts and a generalized lack of support. This popular veteran sentiment, which may seem odd coming from a person enrolled in a higher education program, is not without its evidence; budget cuts under liberal Presidents Clinton and Obama both resulted in drastic troop reductions, the latter of which cost Rich his employment as an Active National Guardsman (AGR). Truly, there were times in the military when I considered it unwise, perhaps even bordering on career suicide, to share with any other infantryman that I was a voting Democrat from a family of pacifist Quakers.

Regardless of how justified the reasons, there is no denying that Rich's military prejudices are an irrevocable part of any continuous conversation with the man—especially as a

fellow infantry veteran. And, where I found the overt racism of the Vietnam participants to be alarming, distasteful, and tragic, I must admit that there is a piece of me that still resonates with Rich's perspective on military service, as black-and-white as it may seem. Deep down, even veterans like myself who believe they've moved well past military experience can harbor feelings of mistrust, skepticism, confusion, jealousy, or animosity toward those who did not sacrifice a thing in the wars of the past or those who sacrificed only a little but now receive the same share of acclaim. After all, and as mentioned at the outset of the study, only a miniscule percentage of Americans have served in an infantry MOS in the military, and this small component of citizens has borne the brunt of the battle as well as its continued consequences well after the end of the war. Even including all the military members who served overseas, it is a slim part of the overall population that carries out the dictates of our government, and by proxy, the will of the public. Joe, who was the most stoic of the participants, was actually the one to put his finger on this sentiment when he recalled a memory from taking leave during the war:

“I got to come home for two weeks of leave during the year that I was there. I remember getting on the metro and sitting, sitting on the train by myself and just looking around. It was like all these kids my age and they were super excited. They were going downtown for a [Cleveland] Cavs [basketball] game. And I just remember sitting there, kind of resenting them. Like, you guys have no idea what this world is all about”.

My own experiences were much the same. I remember walking through the mall, expecting people to stop me and ask how the war was going, even though I wasn't in uniform. I came to the realization that for most Americans, the Iraq War was nothing more than the ticker tape at the bottom of CNN playing in the dentist's office while you boringly waited for your appointment to begin. Thus, Rich was by no means alone in his animosity and mistrust of the civilian world.

A less controversial and more noble aspect of this same mentality was similarly on display with Rich--namely, the dictate to "live by the sword, die by the sword," which struck a deep chord with me. Likewise, Joe also expressed this sentiment in our interviews. In essence, as young men who had volunteered our way through numerous steps to reach the front lines, none of us carried much anger or worry at the thought of being killed in the war. It seemed quite fair to me at the time, as it did to Rich and Joe, that if we were there to kill the enemy, then the enemy was certainly allowed to kill us back. In fact, I had made my peace before deploying that I would not return; it was, in retrospect, easier for me to envision dying a martyr to the cause than to try and figure out what to do with the rest of my life. Neither Aaron (who primarily joined the service for college money) nor the two Vietnam vets (who were draftees) expressed the same level of enthusiasm regarding a premature demise in combat. This seemed a unique facet of the infantry soldier serving in a volunteer Army, versus those serving under duress or for non-combat related purposes (e.g., the GI Bill). Irrespective of origin, I found this connection with the other infantrymen of my own generation to be a fascinating component of our subculture's mentality toward warfare.

Joe. Beyond the aforementioned examples, and the notable coincidence of us both serving in the 10th Mountain Division, Joe and I also shared at least two other striking aspects to our time in the military. The first is a matter of spirituality. Joe detailed that when he deployed to Iraq, he brought with him holy oil that was a gift from a Lebanese Catholic family friend. He would anoint himself and any others who wished with the sign of the cross on the forehead, much like in a blessing ceremony, before going on patrol. Along with personal prayer, Joe credited this religious ritual with being part of the reason his unit didn't lose any men KIA despite suffering over a dozen WIA in the year-long tour. In an eerily similar experience, my

mother, who left the Quakers to become an Episcopalian priest, anointed my head with holy oil when I went to the war, saying a blessing over me as she cried in the parking lot. Also, during the war I had a “praying tree,” a gnarled old thing that somehow withstood the devastating effects of the desert climate (not to mention the war), where I would go and sit and pray, anytime I was back on the “big base” and in safety. While I’m less certain than Joe that these things had a protective influence on me or my men, I am also not one to dismiss such mystical elements out of hand. As the saying goes, there are no atheists in foxholes, although many a person has claimed otherwise after the fact.

Our second commonality was in police work. Joe is a local cop, while I served as a State Trooper for three years following my active duty service (I was still an Airborne Company Commander in the Army National Guard on the weekends). Each of us joined the police force with the hope that it would rekindle some of the camaraderie we experienced in the military. It also seemed a logical fit for former infantrymen who are often good with weapons but don’t consider themselves to have many translatable skills to the civilian workforce. Police work is virtually the only job that overlaps at all with the day-in-day-out of the infantry world. As we each discovered, however, there was a significant difference between the two occupations, with much less bonding and camaraderie available to overworked police who were constantly on-patrol by themselves. In response to Joe’s story about shaking and having PTSD-like symptoms on the way to a “shots fired” call, I asked him why that moment shook him worse than all the firefights he experienced in Iraq. He replied immediately with: “because I was alone.” That statement hit home for me in so many ways. Ultimately, it was the constant bombardment of negative interactions with the public, all the political maneuvering, and the lack of real companionship on the force that drove me out of policing and into counseling work.

In another tangential happenstance, Aaron was visited by a State Trooper on a house-call when he was suicidal, and this officer spoke to him about the exact same topic Joe and I discussed—joining the police because he missed the camaraderie of the military life. At the time I left the Army, this was certainly not one of my main considerations; I think I assumed that friends who felt more like brothers would instantaneously pop up no matter what I did, and of course I was mistaken. Still, I did have strong friendships in the Troopers, due in large part to a live-in training academy which mirrored many of the facets of basic training, and where the adversity faced was more group challenge than individual crucible. Ever since, however, and like most American men moving into middle age, Joe and I have had to take our friends where we can get them and to work hard to maintain the friendships we are lucky enough to still have from our youth.

Ken. Certainly, the least connected I felt to anyone in the study was Ken. As detailed in prior chapters, Ken's personality was abrasive and his temper was short, which I believe to be (in part) the result of the unending agonies and humiliations he experienced from Agent Orange exposure. This made it difficult to work together and, oftentimes, Ken seemed like an unwilling participant in the study even though he was the only one forcing himself to do it. In retrospect, I believe Ken was torn between wanting to share his story and feeling exposed, vulnerable, or weak by doing so, and all the while struggling mightily with chronic pain.

The one point where I felt the two of us resonated was in Ken's near-death stories. While his experiences bordered on what might be considered by some as miraculous, I had relatively tame experiences where a bit of luck or a chance moment may have altered my destiny. As an example, a good friend and I, both going to the same battalion, were exchanged for one another in a sort of "lieutenant swap" between company commanders. It was unofficial policy in the 10th

Mountain Division at that time that an officer who had not made it through Ranger School could not take on a line platoon; he would only be allowed to work with an attachment unit. These were the types of units that worked directly with foreign nationals on a deployment (versus American personnel) and were considered less desirable leadership positions. Thus, my friend, who failed to complete Ranger School through no real fault of his own, was moved out of a line slot and into a position where he would serve as an attaché to an Iraqi Army platoon. I took his place as a Rifle Platoon Leader, since I was Ranger-qualified. Sixteen months later, my friend Kevin was killed in Iskandaria, the same place Joe was originally stationed during his tour the year before, by an Explosively Formed Projectile (EFP) manufactured in Iran.

In a second instance, I was walking down a road on patrol when a Non-commissioned officer (NCO) waved me over for a discussion about our location on the map. A moment later, a HUMVEE drove by and blew up just ahead of where I left the path. I'll never forget the sound that a piece of giant metal made as it flew over my head in that explosion; it sounded like my eardrum was pressed to the centrifuge of a helicopter in midflight. Thus, in sharing these small stories with Ken, it was a rare moment in which we were able to bond and shake our heads together at the seemingly random nature of modern warfare.

I am indebted to Ken, not only for his participation, but for adding a somber, uncooperative note to the proceedings that I believe provided the study with additional richness and depth. After all, veterans are not saints despite some of the liberties taken by politicians and institutions to suggest we are infallible heroes that cannot be criticized or challenged. Ken is a living embodiment of the complicated nature of military service. Indeed, one might say just as readily that he is a living embodiment of the complicated nature of life. I would not want any other veteran to have taken his place.

Dick. In our first meeting together, Dick shared a memory with me that inadvertently stirred up more emotions than all the other comments from participants combined. He spoke eloquently, and for several long minutes, about the night that one of his unit's Kit Carson scouts suffered a horrific accident and died. The man, a former North Vietnamese soldier turned American scout, was sleeping in his hammock draped in the jungle when a branch fell from above and speared the man through the abdomen onto the ground. Unfortunately, the man did not immediately die but lasted through the night, crying for help. Dick's platoon leader spent that same sleepless night on the radio pleading for a Medevac. However, the unit policy at that time did not allow for the transport of Vietnamese soldiers, much less former NVA. This was one of the same scouts that previously stood on the dozer in full view of the enemy and returned fire as Dick attempted to build berms at his patrol base. This man's adopted American unit failed him, and he died in terrible pain. Clearly, Dick was still upset recalling the incident, although he was able to remain stoic in its telling.

Hearing this story, I was instantly recalled to the dimly lit concrete room that served as our company HQ in Sadr-al-Yusifiyah, Iraq, where a young mother stood before us with tears streaming down her face. I was on the radio, first talking, then screaming at the voice on the other end, requesting a Medevac for the Iraqi baby this mother had brought to the patrol base who was blue from a lack of oxygen. Our medic had whittled down a Styrofoam cup to try and feed the baby oxygen, but the mask was too big, and it wasn't helping much. As the Executive Officer of the company, with the commander gone on stateside leave, it was my job to get this child to an American hospital site, and yet all my requests were, again and again, denied; apparently, we did not allow Iraqi civilians on our helicopters, even dying infants. I watched the hope in the mothers' eyes fade, along with the baby's breath. The child died right there. I don't

think the mother ever fully understood the reasons we could not help, and I suppose I did not, either.

Hearing Dick's story was like a time portal back to that moment; one of the worst in the war for me. I was deeply moved that another American soldier in another war felt the same compassion for a foreign national that I felt despite the differing circumstances. Ultimately, we are all human beings. I am fortunate that I never lost sight of that fact, and I do not believe Dick ever did, either.

Lessons Learned

Undoubtedly, every doctoral student who goes through the crucible of the dissertation process learns a sequence of lessons, some more difficult than others, during the campaign to finish a terminal degree. In my case, the first and most lasting lesson learned was simply how much work it takes to complete this type of project. This was hammered home to me by a grueling candidacy process, by which I was not allowed to submit for Internal Review Board (IRB) approval for this study before passing several sequences of tests and evaluations that demonstrated my expertise with respect to counselor education (i.e., teaching, supervising, research, and clinical work), as well as to both the construct of moral injury and the narrative inquiry methodology.

To the last of these, the manner in which I continuously discovered the nuance and beauty of the narrative method was an enjoyable learning experience throughout the project. As a person who loves reading and writing stories, it was (and will remain) my preferred method of data delivery; one that pays homage to the power of the written word and the complexity of the human experience as much as to my own proclivities as a research writer.

More difficult was interposing a narrative inquiry framework onto the doctoral dissertation process, or perhaps vice versa. Due to the necessary and understandable requirement to demonstrate considerable expertise and understanding of relevant issues in a dissertation study, some liberties were taken with the narrative process, such as writing the fifth chapter on common narrative threads, that would otherwise have remained integrated into the larger body of the story. This will most likely remain a challenge as I seek to become a more established narrative researcher in the future. With few narrative-focused research journals in publication, my choices may involve either adapting future research to fit other qualitative paradigms, or starting a separate publication entirely that is committed to a pure narrative research experience. Regardless of those future outcomes, this project put me in good stead to continue narrative pursuits through avenues that are widely accepting of such inquiry as well as those that remain skeptical of the notion that narratives can provide valuable research data.

Challenges

The major point of concern throughout the initial steps of the project was in securing participants. As a counselor, I'm used to being the person who helps and not the person who needs help from others; it was a trial for me to ask for assistance on the study from complete strangers. Additionally, due to the depth required of a narrative inquiry study, I knew I was not asking for people to speak to me only once; our time together would span months and, for most participants, at least several hour-long conversations. Lastly, I knew I was looking for a finite group of people who could meet my criteria: combat veterans, from different wars, who served with a combat-related specialty. Thus, even the relatively small candidate pool of veterans was diminished first by the combat requirement and then again by the combat MOS stipulation. By mid-summer, when I received IRB approval from my university to begin participant recruitment,

I was in a new State (WI), where I did not know anyone and had no contacts whatsoever in the veteran community.

What followed was a broad campaign that included creating and distributing flyers outside the Madison VA hospital, posting yet more flyers around town, contacting the local branches of the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) for assistance, corresponding with the University of Wisconsin Director of Veteran Engagement to gain participants, and even speaking at a Veterans for Peace meeting in a local library. Ironically, none of these attempts paid dividends, although I did receive several leads from the process. Ultimately, it was on the strength of my relationships, professional and personal, that I gained access to a select number of participants who were well suited to my study's parameters.

Cultivating Relationships

As it happened, relationships were at the center of this project as they are for so many disparate elements of human existence. Strong working relationships with my new faculty peers at the University of Wisconsin–Whitewater (UWW) led to a process of snowball sampling that helped me recruit four of the five long-term participants. The last participant was recruited through my personal relationships with the veteran community I left behind in Virginia, where friends spread the word on my behalf and vouched for me as a bonafide vet. Additionally, several of the veterans recruited via UWW connections were swayed to participate due to my military credentials.

Equally important was cultivating genuine relationships with the participants once the study began. One might say that while my military background opened the door to communication, it was my ability to connect with others that allowed me to continue the study to its completion. This connectivity was not only about being friendly; it was also about giving and

receiving respect, remaining grateful, and conducting oneself professionally at all times. To many veterans, there would be no point in having a “friendly” chat if the other person did not show respect by being on time, being prepared, etc. This facet of the process was on full display with Ken who I had to talk back into participating on two separate occasions when he erroneously scheduled our visits for the wrong day of the week. I knew that it did not matter in the least that I was correct; this was his perception of what took place, and what mattered at those moments was *making* it right with my participant, not *being* right. So, each time I apologized profusely and promised to make it up to him and, after the second incident, I implemented my own policy of contacting Ken at the beginning of each week we would meet to remind him of the appointment and to ensure I had the correct date and time down for the visit. This component of professional conduct should never be overlooked when working with veterans.

Respect for my participants did not stop at punctuality and scheduling. After the initial interview, for which I had a universal list of questions vetted by my committee members, I was responsible for sifting through every transcript to formulate a new set of topics for each individual based on their unique experiences, characteristics, and responses to the original questions. In my mind, it would have been a sign of significant *dis*-respect had I simply created another batch of questions for the entire group of participants. The sacrifice of their time, the value of their experiences, and my high regard for each man’s character dictated that I do my very best to come to each subsequent meeting with questions and thoughts definitively connected to what they previously shared.

Furthermore, it was critical to the relationship-building process that when a question was asked or information was voluntarily given that moved one of the veterans into an emotional

space, I did not push my agenda onto them by demanding even more detail about these difficult experiences. With every single veteran, in every interview, there were times when I wanted more information than they were willing—or could—give to me. It was not simply the ethical mandates of research that prevented me from asking certain questions or pulling out more information (though these existed, as well), but also my own experiences as a veteran and a counselor that helped me know where the boundaries were when sharing such vulnerable pieces of oneself with others. I knew the components of my own service that I was unable to articulate with words, or that I was too ashamed to bring to light. Any one of the tenuous relationships built with these participants could have been irreparably violated by crossing certain unspoken lines, known only within the veteran community and, perhaps, among a select number of its allies such as Dr. Tick, who contributed to this study as an expert practitioner without a service record of his own.

The experience of conducting this study has only affirmed my belief in the power of personal relationship to transform the world. From a longitudinal perspective on the research itself, it was clear that the participants became less enthusiastic about engagement over time as the reality of the commitment perhaps sunk in. There were phone interviews where participants forgot to block the time out and either had to reschedule or were surly in their responses based on the perception, perhaps, that I was playing the role of “time thief” amidst their busy days. As referenced in previous chapters, Ken eventually decided he was done talking altogether after three interviews. Yet, I am content in knowing that despite the significant drain on their time and energy to participate, largely without recompense, these veterans continued to take my calls, respond to texts, or schedule visits up to the end point of data collection. I believe this is a testament to the selfless character of the American veteran, but also to the power of relationship-

building that allowed me so much leeway with scheduling, talking, and probing into deeply personal affairs.

Regrets

No study is complete without a few thoughts on what could have been done differently, and this is certainly no exception. The one major regret is easily identifiable: that I had a Korean war veteran ready to participate, but he had a stroke right before we met and died several weeks later. This was a rare opportunity to work with a veteran from a significantly older generation than the Vietnam era participants, with an entirely different set of experiences as a fighter in the least recognized major conflict in 20th century American history. The silver lining of this experience, however, was that the faculty peer who put me in contact with the man said that she had never seen him so excited as when she referenced our upcoming meeting to him after church shortly before his death. This was seconded by the veteran's wife, who told the same faculty member she had not seen him that happy in many years. It is a great loss to be unable to tell his story in these pages, and for the Korean and WWII generations not to have a voice in this story. However, this man, in my mind, is the 6th member of the group and will remain so in my memory in the years to come.

Speaking further on the longitudinal components of the study, I do wish I had been able to find a WWII veteran to participate. Sadly, there are so few left, and those who still remain are, like my own grandfather, often suffering from memory loss and other conditions that blur the mind. Even if I were able to recruit one of these veterans, it is prudent to remind myself that the work toll of the study increased exponentially with every additional member; unlike some alternate forms of qualitative study, the narrative inquiry process demands a deep exploration of experiences that cannot be satisfied in a single interview. Thus, if I were to suddenly have two to

three more veteran participants from our oldest living generations, it would likely have pushed the date of completion back several months due to the depth of inquiry required by virtue of the chosen methodology.

Lastly, I regret that I was unable to recruit participants from more culturally diverse backgrounds. In particular, the experiences of African-Americans draftees in the Vietnam War would have added unique depth and perspective to the study. Several factors limited my ability to find such participants, including the homogeneous cultural landscape of rural Wisconsin and the limited number of marginalized individuals who actively choose combat-related specialties in the modern military. To the former, my canvassing in diverse urban settings did not produce any participants from other cultural backgrounds as I had hoped it would. This may have had something to do with the flyers I distributed that connected the study to academia and institutional learning, two factors that marginalized communities may already find suspect from years of societal exclusion and prejudice.

To the latter consideration, in my own experiences there were perhaps only one or two African Americans in every 120-man infantry company, with maybe a dozen Latino and Filipino members combined, and the rest being lower-class and middle-class white men. It seemed to me at the time, and it is sadly no less true now, that teens growing up in marginalized communities had already experienced their fair share of violence by the time they joined the military and were more interested with a steady paycheck, a respectable job, and future college tuition assistance, than they were with more fighting. In contrast, many middle-class white kids grow up in the safety of suburban or rural communities where there is little danger, and they seem to seek fighting out as part of their genuine rationale for joining the military. Regardless, these are only my own experiential observations, and the larger point remains that there are proportionally

fewer marginalized members of combat-designated units in the military than there are in the greater American population. This made it additionally difficult to recruit members of those communities into the study.

The Value of this Study

As might be surmised from previous comments on the value of narrative research, I remain in solidarity with the opinion of preeminent narrative researchers that narrative inquiry is inherently valuable, in both its consideration of the study of experience as story and its consideration of *that* experience—the one of authorship—a phenomenon worthy of story in its own right (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Thus, two levels of narrative research bring separate value to the forefront: the participant experience and the narrator’s experience of person, place, and time throughout the study. However, Clandinin, et al. (2007) remind us that these unique facets of narrative inquiry study must still be justified at the personal, practical, and social levels, as well as in relation to other research on the topic. While these justifications were given in Chapter III, they will be revisited here along with answers to the research questions, several other considerations related to the value of the study, and the tripartite criteria by which a narrative inquiry study is judged *ex post facto*: authenticity, adequacy, and plausibility (Clandinin, et al., 2007).

Authenticity, Adequacy, and Plausibility

To begin with the last of these (working our way backward toward the more specific), the results of this study are plausible or, that is to say, reasonable, because the participants : (a) were ordinary citizens, (b) met the criteria for inclusion in the study, (c) shared many common experiences of wartime service; (d) were not “outliers” in job description or performance; and

(e) were able to retell many specifics of the same stories numerous times, on different occasions, and without divergence in any of the details.

The adequacy of the study should be clear to the reader from the depth of the narration itself; that the story of each participant warranted many pages of consideration, both in the telling of the stories and by virtue of narrative themes elicited to the forefront of the conversation at varying intervals in the manuscript. With respect to the stories themselves, care was given to pre- and post-combat life and not simply to the wartime experiences which might qualify as morally injurious experiences (MIE) or moral injuries (MI).

The authenticity of the study—its genuine character and factual basis—may be viewed through the specificity of the memories and emotions expressed by the participants. These comprehensive particularities were not arrived at by any half-hearted attempt to conduct research, but by my passion to do the topic justice; anything less than a full effort is something I would have viewed as a failure. In its own way, this passion is a testament to the study itself, as it is, among other things, a singular view of the ways in which modern-day veterans make meaning of their lives. A large part of my own meaning-making journey was in my commitment to this topic and to ensuring participant voices were kept at the forefront of the narrative.

Uniqueness

Beyond these criteria, Clandinin and colleagues (2007) also remind narrative researchers that they must “offer some sense of what it is that can be known about a phenomenon that could not be known, at least in the same way, by other theories, methods, or lines of work” (p. 30). Despite its simplicity, the most straightforward answer to this prompt is the following: the project is unique because it tells the stories of five individuals who, heretofore, had not shared certain facets of their lives with the public. To me, this is no small feature of the study, but rather

the most important component of all. This is because all other considerations and learnings from the study stem from the simple fact that people were able to gift us with their stories full of feeling, insight, wisdom, pathos, and redemption. I am convinced, even more so than at the outset of this endeavor, that there is no comparison among other research modalities to the depth and breadth uncovered using narrative inquiry. However, to illustrate this point, the following sections will focus on answering the three separate blocks of research questions that were part of the original project proposal. The hope is that the answers to these questions, while not always straightforward or simple, will further illuminate the ways this study brings unique value to the fields of moral injury and veterans-focused research.

Research Questions

Research questions 1: *How do experiences of moral injury differ according to the particularities of the war being fought? How do they differ across generations, and as the veterans themselves age?*

The difference in experiences of moral injury between the two generations involved a confluence of considerations: voluntary vs. draftee service, level of training, scale of violence, rules of engagement (or lack thereof), exposure to toxins, public reaction to the war, time elapsed since combat, perspectives on mental health treatment, and availability of veteran-related resources, to name only the most significant. From the narrative accounts of the participants, it is my estimation that Vietnam veterans were at greater risk of experiencing moral injury than their younger counterparts, although this did not prevent the younger vets from also experiencing their own moral injuries.

First, the status of so many Vietnam vets as unwilling draftees coupled with a reduced time in training increased the likelihood that they would be unready for the harsh realities of

combat. This was in contrast to the next generation of vets, who willingly sought out fighting roles with the *hope* of getting into combat and underwent much more extensive training, one component of which was to desensitize soldiers to killing before their respective deployments.

Second, Vietnam was an unquestionably more violent and dangerous war than the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns, combined. The jungle terrain (vs. mountains or desert) decreased the technological advantages of the American forces and also lent itself to a nightmarish form of close-quarters combat. As Dick referenced, many times combatants didn't know where the firing was coming from or who was doing the firing. Advances in offensive and defensive warfare technology since have only increased the disparities in equipment and capability between a dominant nation-state like the United States and the poorer countries of the Middle East and central Asia. As detailed by Grossman (2001), killing via technology and distance does not leave the same imprint on the psyche as close-quarters combat.

Third, the time period of the 1960's and early 70's was a powerful contributor to the development and sustainment of moral injury among Vietnam vets. Remembering Farnsworth and colleagues (2017) functional definitions: moral injury (MI) can only take place when a morally injurious event (MIE) causes great enough moral pain (MP) as to become unworkable or intolerable to the individual. Anti-war sentiment and public disapproval contributed to a society that was rife with the opportunity to remind veterans that they should be ashamed for serving--a sentiment that seems likely to have increased feelings of moral harm sustained during combat (thereby leading from MIE to MI). From the astronomical number of suicides and other premature deaths among the Vietnam generation in the years since, it seems plain that the vitriol this generation of veterans experienced haunted them and worsened their condition, in contrast to the more supportive treatment modern-day vets receive at the hands of the public.

Last, the decades that have elapsed since Vietnam allowed two interrelated phenomena to increase the likelihood for moral injury beyond any point the current generation will (hopefully) ever have to face. These are the connected components of an extremely limited, poorly run, Veterans Administration (VA) and the rise of Agent Orange symptoms among vets. Ken and Dick both shared incidents where they told VA doctors about their symptoms, only to be ignored or told it was an unrelated set of conditions and had nothing to do with the war. As much as the VA continues to struggle to serve the veteran population, it is by all accounts of these veterans, far better than it was in the early 1980's. Whatever wrongs Vietnam vets experienced, executed, or witnessed in the war, they were substantially inflamed by the continued incompetence and indifference of the U.S. government to their plight afterward. One of the major contributions of this study is in its deeper exploration of how longitudinal factors such as these influence the course of moral injury development. Unseen and untreated wounds of war tend to worsen over time—physically, emotionally, and spiritually—when they are not validated by the public or by the healthcare system that nominally exists to care for its members.

Research questions 2: *In what ways does a combat MOS impact the perceived experience of moral injury among combat soldiers and Marines? Does a combat MOS make such experiences easier or harder to handle in the moment? Does a combat MOS make coping with the aftermath of moral injury easier or harder to handle down the line as civilians? Is a combat MOS a continuing source of pride for veterans who experienced moral injury? Does a combat MOS in any way bolster or limit their ability and/or desire to seek out support?*

The second block of research questions did not garner simple, clean answers. Again, important distinctions between generations were an impediment to formulating universal responses to the questions posed. For instance, one finding of the study was that Vietnam

veterans who were drafted did not, understandably, feel the same mixture of pride and esprit de corps as their volunteer counterparts from the later conflicts; it was not a chosen identity, after all, but an assigned one given to the vast majority of conscript soldiers in that war. In contrast, the younger vets were part of a select minority within the larger military population (itself a select minority of the U.S. population) that made several voluntary choices to move into front-line combat service. In common parlance, this means the comparison between groups was an “apples-and-oranges” scenario, yet also one that perhaps was not recognized as such before this study was conducted.

In terms of morally injurious experiences (MIE) and a combat soldier’s ability to cope with such moments as they happened, the narrative body of the study suggests that a combat-designated MOS seemed useful in relation to those parts of the war that could be deemed as *combat specific* (e.g., firefights, artillery fire, bomb drops, IED’s, etc.). It was a different matter altogether when combat soldiers were asked to do something, or experienced something, beyond the threshold of “normal” fighting. For instance, Rich and Ken were each detailed to pick up innumerable pieces of bodies, a job that left them deeply affected and resentful, as it was a job classically handled by mortuary affairs soldiers. Likewise, Dick (and I) experienced an MIE when a foreign national died needlessly and tragically due to the bureaucratic red tape of the American military-industrial complex. Aaron suffered MIE’s through both a training accident and unit bullying, neither of which had anything to do with his combat-specific job duties. Joe was haunted by feelings of guilt and shame after witnessing a friend’s mangled corpse at his funeral; a sentiment I shared, since as the Executive Officer (XO) of my company I had to identify our KIA (and suicides) in the morgue after the fighting stopped.

Relatedly, it is difficult to say whether or not a combat MOS impacted these veterans' ability to seek treatment following war, or whether their identity as combat soldiers gave them additional resiliency in fighting off moral injury (or both). Again, the generational divide must be kept in the forefront of the conversation: the Vietnam vets may not have even known, in that time and place, that there was a treatment to seek. While the stigma against mental health treatment remains alive and well in the 21st century military, it was certainly more pronounced in the past generation, to the point where many veterans did not even know what mental health treatment was or what purpose it could possibly serve. As an example, Dick did not seek mental health treatment until he became alternately suicidal and homicidal in the mid-2000's; he thought that it was only for "nut cases," and so did not seek out help until he considered himself part of that category. For the younger veterans, it does seem that their warrior identity contributed to a greater resiliency in relation to personal and professional setbacks. Aaron plunged into academic life with the same fighting spirit harnessed in combat. Rich did the same when struggling against his addiction and later again in the pursuit of his business credentials and career. All three younger men have exhibited a unique brand of selflessness that I often attribute to frontline fighters; in whose circles the ideal of self-sacrifice or martyrdom to the cause can take on mythical proportions. However, it is difficult to say what parts of these characteristics are attributable to combat training and identity and what parts are simply an organic component of character and constitution.

What was universal among participants, in relation to this set of research questions, was pride in their identity as frontline combatants. While the Vietnam veterans seemingly took longer to find and own this pride—as public sentiment against the war subsided and allowed for more reasonable opinions to prevail on the roles of the combatants—the modern veterans never held in

question the pride they share in service to their country. This was clear throughout the study, and it did my heart good to see the Vietnam vets proudly displaying their wartime service memorabilia on their walls or letting the public know about their service on specialized license plates and Vietnam campaign ribbon bumper stickers. They are role models to the rest of us who struggle to recognize our own achievements in the military, and do not display our accolades without fear of being viewed as arrogant or boastful.

Research questions 3: *What are the longitudinal effects of combat MOS training on an individual across the lifespan, and how do the tenets of the warrior ethos permeate the lives and day-to-day experiences of such veterans? How do older generations perceive their younger warrior counterparts, and vice versa?*

As noted in prior sections, the two generations of veterans represented in this study experienced substantial differences in the level and degree of their combat-specific training that led, among reasons previously mentioned, to different post-combat experiences of the self as citizen-soldier. When asked, neither Ken nor Dick deeply identified with a warrior identity. If anything, they identified more with being part of the “walking wounded” scattered to the winds after the Vietnam war came to its ignominious close. This could be attributed to a number of factors: the aging process, time removed from combat, fading memories of training and war, and a preoccupation with the ramifications of Agent Orange exposure; all may have played a role in this mentality. From a more holistic perspective, Ken and Dick are the proud figureheads of large family units spanning four generations of members. Not a single conversation went by with either man where a grandchild or great-grandchild was not mentioned with pride and delight. It is quite possible that over time the importance of family, community, and connectivity collectively outweighed any identity that remained tied to an individualistic perspective.

For the younger men, their military experiences are closer to the present and remain an important component of identity. All three, at different times in the research process, identified themselves as soldiers first and other roles (e.g., father, son, husband cop, student, etc.) second. At the very least, a warrior identity seems to be the “1A” to another role’s “1B” in their lives; a perspective I identify strongly with, since it is also the case for me. Among other reasons for this permeation of the warrior ethos in the youngest generation of wartime veterans, we may also consider factors that include: (a) an increased specificity, duration, and intensity of combat-arms training; (b) the shifted public perception of military service, which is once again laudable in American society; (c) increased exposure to movies, video games, and TV shows that glorify the role of combatants in warfare; (d) a sense of having undergone a “crucible” experience no longer accessible to most young Americans who do not join the military; and (e) a belief in the inherent specialness of belonging to the select club of veterans who served and fought on the frontlines. When viewing these factors in their totality, it becomes easier to see why the two generations have had such different experiences of the warrior ethos in their post-military lives.

To the final research question, it was clear that respect was conveyed both forward and backward to the opposite generation with regard to their combat experiences. Beyond this, however, there was strangely more sympathy coming from the Vietnam veterans toward their modern-day counterparts, while the OIF/OEF veterans focused more on the awe that was inspired in them by considering the experiences of the Vietnam generation. Certainly, the younger men understood the sacrifices and tragedies inherent in the experiences of their predecessors, yet this only seems to have magnified the ways in which Vietnam veterans now appear as tragic heroes to present-day vets.

One unique reason for this perspective as it relates to combat-arms soldiers of the modern era might be that most of us *wanted* to fight in a war like Vietnam; full of huge battles, high casualties, and opportunities to display courage under fire. Instead, we were given the pocket-wars of Iraq and Afghanistan, where many soldiers died in explosions without ever firing their weapons at enemy combatants. As an historical counterpoint, it might be said that our fathers were given the American Revolution, while we were given the War of 1812. The sheer drop-off in magnitude and scale between the conflicts leaves modern-day vets with an inferiority complex about their own combat service. Ironically, the same struggles the Vietnam generation faced in viewing the preceding WWII generation, are alive and well with the current group of veterans looking back at Vietnam.

Personal, Professional, and Societal Value

Connelly (2007) noted that researchers must situate their findings relative to the three levels of audience: personal, professional, and societal. As already argued, this project has personal value because it tells the heretofore untold stories of five American combat veterans from two distinct generations who gave the full measure asked of them in time of war. As much as it is their story, it is also a continuation of my own; one in which I am able to still live out my warrior identity and ideals by attempting to help other veterans in clinical work, as a researcher for projects such as this, and as a friend to many.

The professional value of the study is in its unique perspective on moral injury, combat soldiering, and military identity. To date, it is the only narrative inquiry study done on any of these three subjects, much less all of them at once. The study points to the longitudinal components of moral injury that are so rarely addressed in more normative forms of research; that is, how a soldier can undergo morally injurious experiences (MIE) before and after the war

that become moral injuries (MI) over time, or which contribute to the impact of combat-initiated MIE's and MI's. It shows us that the full impact of moral injuries sustained in wartime cannot be known in some instances for decades after the fact, and that there are definitive institutional components to moral injury that often accelerate its course and consequences. The study sheds light on pieces of combat soldier identity that are rarely discussed: what it means to serve in war as a draftee in contrast to as a volunteer; how public sentiment prevents or encourages veterans to self-identify with their service history; and how extensive training can reinforce that identity for a lifetime. For all these reasons and more, this research has the potential to broaden and deepen our understanding of how to treat Military-Veteran-Family (MVF) clients in psychotherapy and of certain avenues for further research that will only increase our professional knowledge.

On the societal level, Dr. Tick once explained to me in our conversations that in the traditional continuum of care for warriors returning from battle, it is the societal or communal component that is now missing for our veterans today. In other words, the public does not acknowledge that it bears the responsibility for honoring, healing, and ultimately returning war veterans to constructive societal use. The men and women who do the dirty work of the country too often return home to empty platitudes and promises.

Traditional tribal societies understood that the warrior, while not a victim, was nonetheless the person who bore the wounds and scars from the society's larger decisions to protect, sustain, or strengthen its position in relation to other societal groups. It was only right that these people should be honored and placed in positions of prominence within the tribe. Instead, military service is growing less and less common among our political and business elite,

and the role of the military on the global stage is being directed by people without an understanding of what it means to serve.

This study is one small yet powerful window through which to view the civilian-soldier experience from the outside, and it can serve as a way for those who do not understand this unique subculture to become better acquainted with common struggles and triumphs of the soldiering experience. For those serious about finding ways to integrate veterans more fully into the decision-making apparatuses of the nation, to harness the leadership qualities vets have earned the hard way, or to simply understand vets better as a starting point for more appropriate societal care, this study is a good place to begin.

Future Research

The value of this study and its implications for future research are interconnected, as much of its value is in the unique phenomena unearthed by the narrative method, warranting further inspection and study across a broad range of concepts. I will discuss three potential avenues for future research below: (a) institutional forms of moral injury; (b) vet-to-vet research and clinical work; and (c) longitudinal factors related to combat service.

Institutional Contributions to Moral Injury

Many of the MIE's and MI's of participants can be connected to institutional failings on the part of the executive and legislative branches of the U.S. government, the military, and, in particular, the Veterans Administration (VA). Psychological wounds may have been compounded by *preemptive* failures of institutional moral reasoning (e.g., Gulf of Tonkin incident, Weapons of Mass Destruction, etc.) as well as *post-operative* failures to care for those who bore the burden of the battle (e.g., Agent Orange denial, lack of services, opiate prescriptions, etc.).

Based on the observations made in this study, my own wartime experiences, and other research interviews with veterans done in the past, I am convinced that the longitudinal impact of moral injury is either reduced or magnified by the actions (or inactions) taken by institutional bodies that are meant to represent the ideals of America. As Dr. Tick described it when I explained my own feelings on the Iraq war:

“I’m picturing dozens of warriors from many different campaigns and wars that I’ve worked with and known over the years who all had similar feelings of: ‘I’m called to warrior-hood, but the war they gave me was tragic, unnecessary, illegitimate. And so... my calling became *stained by the cause*” (Italics mine).

When governments take unilateral action to engage in warfare, sending young citizens into harm’s way, there should be unequivocal moral reasons for so doing; the destruction wrought by combat demands it. Sadly, U.S. history is littered with examples of conflicts escalated for political gain and geopolitical leverage. Even more ignominious, the government has routinely failed to care for its veterans on the backend of these wars to the degree warranted by such sacrifice. Even now, a phone call to the Norfolk VA complex where local vets are ostensibly patients will result in a three to six- month wait for individual mental health therapy. I am certain that the macro-level messaging conveyed by such institutional ineptitude and indifference impacts the trajectory of moral injury development amongst our warrior caste. This is an important area for future research and one of vital interest to the public good.

Longitudinal Factors of Moral Injury

This study sheds light on the reality that moral injuries routinely occur in noncombat scenarios among veterans which may then be compounded by the stress of an impending deployment, or by the physical, mental, and spiritual ramifications following combat. This

longitudinal interconnectivity of experiences is underrepresented in the moral injury literature on combat veterans, and I believe it is a major contribution to the burgeoning field of study that demands further inquiry and research. In comparison, just as the mental health professions can no longer view moral injury as an occurrence unique *to* the military, they can also ill afford to view moral injury among military members as a phenomenon that only occurs *in* combat. Longitudinal factors were at play in innumerable ways for all the participants in relation to their experiences of moral harm.

While it is obvious that experiences of combat differ between generations, it is equally important to remember that the ways combatants *perceived* and *processed* those experiences were also a product of their time and place in the world. The typical Vietnam infantryman would have less training for combat, less knowledge of mental health issues, less resources available, and less societal support across the board than a veteran of the modern-day conflicts. Might those factors have contributed to the long-term trajectory of moral injury among Vietnam veterans? My answer is an unequivocal “yes.” Conversely, those same veterans have had decades more time to process and make peace with their experiences, to cultivate a wealth of communal and familial ties, and to build lives beyond their former military identity. Might that, too, contribute to the trajectory (and ultimate resolution) of moral injury? Again, my answer is yes.

The larger point is that moral injury, like any other mental health construct, does not occur in a vacuum. It matters where it took place, when, and to whom in the sense that people change considerably over time, and different versions of ourselves would also have different reactions to the same experience. Society changes as well, and what was once anathema to the public can become meritorious in the next generation as has happened for these two groups of veterans. Furthermore, as we change, and society changes, our perception of what took place so

long ago also changes. Memory is malleable, selective, and much at the mercy of the vicissitudes of time, after all. All of these factors should be considered in future research on moral injury; it is not enough to view it as a phenomenon caught in space and time without fluidity and the ability to take on greater or lesser meaning depending on what came before and what came after in an individual life.

Vet-to-Vet Experiences in Research and Counseling

Following the completion of this project as a veteran speaking with and learning from other veterans, I am intrigued by the possibility of delving deeper into this unique dynamic as a paradigm seen in both my research and clinical work as a counselor educator. Taken at face value, most people assume it is a net-positive to have a fellow veteran on the professional side of this fiduciary relationship. It is true, at least in my case, that being a combat veteran opens certain doors for me with the Military-Veteran-Family (MVF) population. For instance, Veterans seek me out for clinical services, and we seem to build immediate rapport based on a foundation of mutual respect for military service no matter what jobs or branches of service were represented. Likewise, in the role of researcher I was able to recruit through military connections and to offer my military credentials up as a demonstration of authenticity to potential participants. As mentioned, at least two of the participants only took me up on the offer because of my own history as a combat infantryman. Comparable to my clinical experiences with veterans, it has always been easy for me to connect with the same group under the differing conditions of research inquiry; we share a common language and understanding of the unique military subculture, and often a similar view on military service as a higher form of calling amid the many choices available to citizens of the United States that do not involve such sacrifice.

Yet, during the evolution of this project I began to consider that there might be ways that having veterans working with other veterans may also cause undue difficulties or limit specific research and clinical results. I am curious, for instance, whether or not there are certain experiences that are more difficult to talk about with a fellow veteran than otherwise would be with a civilian. As an example, Aaron was unwilling to share with me the nickname given to him by his unit, hinting only that it was emasculating and embarrassing. My intuition is that he might have shared that name with a researcher from a different walk of life, opening up greater opportunity to discuss its import and impact on his military service and his perspective on it in retrospect.

Considering my own wartime experiences, I do believe there are components that I would be more hesitant to share with another veteran versus a non-affiliated citizen; having a fellow veteran judge me would be much worse than a person I did not think understood the full spectrum of wartime realities. I know many combat veterans (and would-be combat veterans) who go through the remainder of their days seeking continuous validation from other vets. There is a reason a phrase such as “trading war stories” is now ubiquitous in the larger culture; it is indicative of the extent to which veterans of past generations needed to not only share, but also to compare their experiences with those of other wartime veterans. Conducting vet-to-vet research or clinical work runs the risk of moving conversation into a lane of “one-upsmanship” if the person on the professional end of the dialogue does not take care to address these unique facets of vet-to-vet interaction.

I now think there is a rich line of research inquiry available to those of us interested in further exploring this unique dynamic. Even something as simple as whether or not MVF members are more likely to initiate services with a veteran-turned-clinician warrants its own

study given the historical stigma against mental health care in the military. Again, my sense is that the data may parallel my own experiences; the vet-to-vet connection opens doors and allows easier access, but it does not guarantee that such access will remain unconstrained for the duration of contact. Much more work remains to be done to further elicit the strands of particularity related to this topic and all of the topics mentioned above.

Concluding Remarks

The Messenger of Allah (Peace be upon him) consulted the Muslims on the day of Uhud. They advised him to go out for battle, and so he put on his armor and took his sword. When his Companions said, "Perhaps we have forced you (to go out) O' Messenger of Allah? Maybe you should stay in Madinah," he answered, "It is not for a Prophet to don his armor (for battle) and then take it off before Allah makes a judgment between him and his enemy."

~ Islamic hadith

Little known to westerners, there is an entire category of Islamic science related to the Prophet Muhammad's (Peace Be Upon Him) person, character, and life. The specificity of this knowledge, carried forth not only in the Qur'an but also in the abundant ahadith (or sayings) of the tradition, is jarring to anyone raised in the Christian tradition, where only bits and pieces of Jesus of Nazareth's life and sayings remain for inspection. Where decades of Jesus' life are unknown to his followers, Muslims may easily memorize the most simple and mundane of observations related to their Prophet (PBUH). As an example of such things I can remember off the top of my head, several years removed from Islamic study, I can still recall that: (a) the Messenger of God (PBUH) had a beautiful, moon-shaped face; (b) he walked quickly and with a slightly bent frame, as if he were headed downhill at all times; (c) he was of middling build, with a strong frame, and exceptionally large hands and feet; (d) he was considered light-skinned or

white for a man of Arabia, but had dark hair and beard; (e) he would rise from sitting to greet arrivals as a show of respect; and (f) his favorite snacks were cucumbers, dates, and watermelon.

In the Islamic world, these specificities, and hundreds more like them, are not suppositions; they are facts. The ahadith of the tradition have been painstakingly documented, generation by generation, all the way back to the famous era of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) himself. For a strong hadith (and there are different categories of veracity, as well), a scholar will memorize the entire chain of narrators from first to last up to the time they became an established part of the Islamic canon many centuries after their occurrence. Any conflicting reports with other verified ahadith, missing chains in the link of narrators, or even character-related issues of the narrators themselves could immediately discredit the hadith and put its utility for religious and scholarly purposes into question. Combine this fact with the oral tradition of Islam, in which many, many followers have memorized the entire Qur'an (thereby earning the title of "Hafiz" or "Guardian"), and you are left with a distinctly narrative tradition, replete with the three-dimensional personalities of its founding constituents, and an immensely detailed chronicle of the early Muslims' rise, fall, and redemption at the hands of their own tribe of the Quraysh.

Above and beyond all else, this seems to me a testament to the power of the narrative form on the grandest scale; that when enough information is conveyed on an important or momentous subject, and that information is synthesized into the larger body of a story, it then has the power to alter the destiny of billions of lives. In this case, my own life and the lives of the younger participants in this study can now be included, in some fashion, to the narrative arc of the Muslim world. One might argue, in fact, that all Americans now belong to that arc, given the events of 9/11 and its consequences to both our world and those of other peoples.

In the struggle to make sense of what seemed, for many years, the broken thread of my own story, I leaned into the selfsame narrative arc of the Muslim world to better understand how I had come to misinterpret a group of people so thoroughly. I discovered in what turned out to be a three-year-long immersive odyssey, that there was a richness and depth to the tradition hardly dreamed of beforehand as well as a magnanimity of spirit in its members that reminded me of the very best I had seen in the Christian traditions of my youth. I was also privy to the dysfunctionality of a religion as vast and heterogeneous as Islam, and to the ways in which different factions sought power, privilege, and voice amidst the innumerable challenges of 21st century geopolitical realities.

In the end, as my own narrative thread became intertwined with the larger threads of this religion and its varied peoples, my enmity was replaced by sympathy, my confusion by consideration, and my derision by a profound respect for the tradition I had previously thought simplistic and exaggerated. My narrative—my story—became one of hope again with a redemptive arc instead of a prolonged deterioration and downfall. I was able to reengage my soldier identity without the baggage of cultural ignorance or hatred of Otherness, and all my work since has benefited accordingly.

I have used the previously cited hadith several times in the past few years to remind myself to finish what has already been started. There were at least three times on the doctoral journey that I considered moving on, including times I was offered jobs elsewhere that would have immediately put my financial anxieties to rest (a common theme, no doubt, for all doctoral students). This hadith, again and again, came to my mind when trying to make a decision whether to stay or to go. The larger context of the story is that the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) had come out to do battle at the head of his army against his own polytheistic tribe that had

turned against him in the years past. While waiting, there was a very long delay, and many of the early Muslims grew tired, restless, or bored. However, because their Prophet and leader refused to take off his armor and stood at attention under the blazing sun, he inspired his followers to remain at their posts. The result was ultimately a momentous victory for the nascent cause of Islam and one that marked the ascent of the crescent moon banner over the entirety of the Middle East in the centuries and millennia to come.

Likewise, I am happy to have remained at my post in order to finish this journey. The encouragement of my advisor and of my family and friends sustained me in the hardest times. Keeping my academic armor on, so to speak, has also allowed me the immense privilege of working with veterans as a researcher and not only as a clinician. The past year's work has enriched and ennobled my life in ways that were by no means clear at the outset, as is so often the case with the journeys we launch ourselves on through the course of a lifetime.

One final irony of this hadith in relation to this study and my broader passion for working with veterans is that we spend a great deal of time asking and helping our veterans to take off their psychological armor and put their memories and traumas to rest. Yet, a soldier identity remains beneath these destructive elements, and this is the piece of armor we must insist our veterans keep; that the discipline, camaraderie, selflessness, and fighting spirit of the warrior remain alive and well in pursuits above and beyond military service. Veterans must be recognized and recognize themselves as civic assets with important work to do in the present. This project represents my own attempt to put this sentiment into action. I will continue to honor the veteran experience through narrative, and—as was the case in the past, and will be the case in the future—I will not take my armor off until the mission is complete.

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