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# Veteran Participation in Operation Song: Exploring Resiliency in a Songwriting Experience

RESEARCH

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## ABSTRACT

This study takes a phenomenological approach to explore the experience of Operation Song, a United States nonprofit organization's songwriting program for military veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Six participants completed semi-structured interviews to identify the structural, textural, and composite descriptions of the Operation Song experience. Findings were analyzed through an interpretive phenomenological analysis, which led to themes describing the essence as a "catalyst to invoke personal change." When restructured for this article, original key themes describing the overall experience were reestablished as a setting that promoted authenticity, trusted social support, uniquely skilled songwriters, songwriting, and listening to the songs. Through a review of the biopsychosocial impacts of trauma and resiliency factors, this study offers a unique outlook supporting social and creative experiences as complementary mechanisms to enhance treatment outcomes for military veterans with PTSD.

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Military veterans transitioning to civilian life must connect to the world through biological, psychological, and social connections. Purpose can be created by relating to the surrounding world through a subjective awareness of the chronological sequence of events where past experiences influence the decisions made for living each day and how to move forward into the future. Identities are influenced through personal narratives that allow meaning to be created through shared experiences. When an individual experiences trauma, fragments are created in their ability to process these experiences (Baker et al., 2015). When these fragments affect a veteran's perception of reality, they may find themselves stuck between worlds of past, present, and future. Studies have shown that songwriting (Baker et al., 2015; Tamplin et al., 2016), the telling and sharing of personal stories (Caddick et al., 2015; Daniels et al., 2015), and group music therapy (Bensimon et al., 2012; Carr et al., 2012) have an influence on helping our minds restructure a positive sense of self in order to enhance or reestablish resiliency factors that could help find meaning again.

Operation Song is a US based nonprofit organization where intangible stories become tangible through the creative art of songwriting. Musical stories paint a picture of emotions that for some have been held back for decades. The benefits of Operation Song are easily observed while in the nonprofit environment, but "defining the power of change experienced when trauma and healing are transferred into words is difficult to describe" (Lauber, 2018, p. 6). This study presents a phenomenological analysis of the veteran experience of this nonprofit songwriting program in an effort to identify impacts of this experience that may support these types of programs in holistic posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) treatment services. The purpose of this study is to address: What is the experience of veterans participating in Operation Song programming? Findings seek to enhance the evidence-based literature looking at how military veterans with PTSD can experience resiliency through community based programs. No studies are known to the authors that combine the specific concepts of songwriting and resiliency into this type of qualitative investigation.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### TRAUMA & RESILIENCY

Military service members are surviving wars at an increasing rate due to advances in combat tactics, medical technology, and training during the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts (Museum, 2017). Lives are being saved, but they are often being complicated by complex physical

and psychological injuries. Hoge et al. (2004) found that major depression, PTSD, and generalized anxiety increased following deployment. The complexities of these injuries and impairments provides an opportunity for healthcare providers to explore unique treatments that focus on diverse, holistic options. However, a majority of standard treatment programs continue to focus primarily on single issue medications and talk therapy.

It is estimated that 12% of Desert Storm Veterans, 11–20% of Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom Veterans, and 15–30% of Vietnam Veterans in the US have been diagnosed with PTSD (US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2016). PTSD results when exposure to a traumatic event leads to symptoms of "intrusion, avoidance, negative alterations in cognition and mood, and alterations in arousal and reactivity" (Pai et al., 2017, p. 4). A shift takes place in the brain following traumatic experiences that disrupts the regular communication systems connecting memory and emotions (Bremner, 2006). Since these connections are responsible for our ability to interpret depression, anxiety (Baker et al., 2015), and stress, individuals have difficulty drawing upon the coping mechanisms that have worked in the past. These individuals may find that their ability to move past the trauma with a sense of resiliency is challenged. Resiliency is our "will to live" (Simmons & Yoder, 2013, p. 19). Resiliency drives the coping mechanisms that help us adapt to change by relying on a sense of personal control, hardiness, and a supportive social environment (Simmons & Yoder, 2013). Focusing on these aspects of resiliency may be beneficial for inclusion in standard community reintegration treatments focused on trauma recovery.

### SONGWRITING

Songwriting combines the psychological impacts of storytelling with the physiological impacts of music. By structuring fragmented stories into a sequential order, songwriting allows for a creative form of musical expression that allows individuals to structure traumatic memories (Orth, 2005). Songwriting activates the areas of our brain that are affected by trauma, emotions, and memories (Tamplin, et al., 2016) and has been shown to decrease depression and anxiety symptoms (Baker et al., 2015). When musical listening is involved, our brain reacts by activating communication between the areas where emotions and memories are housed (Tamplin et al., 2016). Because music activates these communication networks, this may additionally assist with reorganizing cognitive deficits in emotion and memory (Bensimon et al., 2012). Songwriting may help individuals who have lived through

trauma find a holistic means of redefining their path towards the future.

## OPERATION SONG

Operation Song is a nonprofit organization in Nashville, Tennessee that facilitates songwriting programs for military service members, veterans, and their families. Their mission is “to empower veterans, active duty military, and their families to tell their stories through the process of songwriting” (Operation Song, n.d., para 1). Songwriting programs take place independently through Operation Song, and in partnership with military installations both locally and throughout the country, the Veterans Affairs (VA), and other clinical treatment programs. Overall goals seek to help participants tell their stories through song by way of individual, group, and retreat sessions. In all settings professional songwriters work directly with participants.

This organization was chosen for this research project based on the primary researcher’s experience as a VA recreational therapist, Operation Song board member, and organizational volunteer. From an outsider looking in, the benefits of Operation Song are easily observed. Participants in the programs appear to experience enhanced resiliency, improved social interactions and mood, and a sense of accomplishment, but an exploration of the actual program experience through the perspectives of those who have participated had not been conducted prior to this research project.

## METHODS

### PARTICIPANTS

Following Institutional Review Board approval, eight participants were initially contacted through a purposeful sampling technique (Palys, 2008) in collaboration with Operation Song’s CEO/Executive Director to ensure diversity of participants with the following criteria: able to be contacted and previously completed an Operation Song program. Participants were initially contacted via text, phone call, or email. Six participants completed interviews with five being male veterans and one female spouse helping her husband participate. Veterans served during multiple war eras including Vietnam, Operation Desert Storm, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation Enduring Freedom. Participants’ ages ranged from 35 years old to 69 years old.

### PROCEDURES

Semi-structured, casual interviews (Clandin, 2013) were conducted with interview questions designed as open-ended inquiries into a variety of aspects of the Operation

Song experience. Interview questions were piloted with several graduates of Operation Song programs who did not participate in the study to ensure appropriate wording and verification of question importance without influencing outcomes. In-person interviews took place, and one telephone interview was completed. Each was recorded on a handheld recorder and all participants verified agreement to informed consent. Interviews were completed during a 2-week time frame and lasted between 20–111 minutes. Transcription and analysis of data was independently completed by the primary researcher (Lauber, 2018).

Analysis of interview findings was conducted through the lens of interpretive phenomenology. This qualitative approach seeks to understand the core essence found within the collectively lived experiences of individuals engaging in a chosen phenomenon while allowing for the primary researcher’s experiences and professional understandings to serve as a benefit to the overall interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By focusing on understanding individuals’ lived experiences, this method also allows for smaller heterogeneous groups (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data analysis followed guidance by Creswell and Poth (2018). Initial codes were identified from significant statements analyzed from interview transcriptions, then were clustered into meaningful themes. Following initial theme development, all interview participants were contacted to verify initial codes. Two participants were reached, and one requested to add more information to their interview. This helped further scrutinize themes to establish a textural description of what participants experienced, structural descriptions of the context of the experience’s influence, and a composite description of the overall Operation Song experience.

### ETHICS AND CONSENT STATEMENT

Detailed precautions were taken to protect the privacy of participants in this study and the organization. All identifying information had been removed. Participant names, song and program titles, locations, songwriters, representatives of Operation Song, and clinical or community partners have all been extracted or replaced with pseudonyms for confidentiality. There were no conflicts of interest identified within this project.

## RESULTS

The overall essence of the Operation Song experience was found to be “a catalyst to invoke personal change” (Lauber, 2018, p. 44) through five themes describing the experience from veteran participant perspectives.

## A SETTING THAT PROMOTED AUTHENTICITY

Veterans described feeling “genuine” during the programs. This enhanced their ability to share both within the Operation Song experience and beyond. Adam described the environment as “fun ... It made me comfortable in my own skin, you know? I wasn’t worried about tryin’ to impress.” Operation Song programs and retreats took place in a variety of different settings for these veterans, but the nature of Operation Song itself existed as a comfortable atmosphere that helped veterans “talk about things easier.” Adam explained this as an important influence in jump starting an ability to feel genuine and an ability to share,

Operation Song is that warmup, you know, that warmup to create you. To create that comfort zone to get you started ... it gives you a way to talk about it ... sometimes you know that’s the biggest issue ... It’s almost like a-I hate to use the word precursor, but I mean it is a precursor. But it’s so much more than that you know? I mean, it. I could walk into my therapist now and talk to her a whole lot more effectively because of Operation Song.

Further details or verification of the differences in clinical versus Operation Song environments was not explored in this study. However, it is important to note that an individual’s expressed perception of what is or is not valid helps define their explanation and understanding of an experience regardless of outside verification.

Perceiving better abilities to talk to a therapist or clinical provider following Operation Song is important and was described several ways by participants primarily in terms of the ease of expression. When compared to clinical services, veterans described the Operation Song environment in terms of real and/or perceived expectations that can affect a willingness to be honest and true. Malcom described this in terms of an open reception of military humor within the Operation Song setting that was different than in the clinical environment. He described clinical settings as limiting in this specific sense where saying, “something that’s kinda funny that’s kinda not funny” can get you “labeled nuts.” Adam reiterated this by describing role intentions within clinical experiences as potentially limiting veterans’ ability to be “raw” and “genuine”:

I think sometimes we get wrapped up in the clinical experience to where we are, how do I want myself portrayed to a doctor. Do I want him to think I’m crazy? Do I want him to think, “oh he’s not as bad off as,” you know what I mean? So, who are you really in a clinical environment? In a clinical environment

are you really being raw? Are you really being genuine?

The ability to be authentic and raw in the Operation Song setting was further described as being “amongst friends.” According to one participant, Operation Song “creates a comfortable atmosphere where I can just be myself. And when you can be yourself is when you can be genuine.” Operation Song was a “safe place” where “as soon as someone plays guitar and they all start laughing, it becomes group therapy.” Participation in activities such as music and songwriting were unique experiences that enabled participants to feel comfortable during Operation Song programming. Hubert stated, “I’ve spent a lifetime of destroying things. It feels good to create something.” The experience was “a great little tool” where veterans were able to creatively share a story and find a sense of accomplishment, pride, and “a new outlook on the values of therapy.”

Veterans described the influence of this authentic setting as helping them feel “like a new person since that day.” Adam now felt confident enough to not “mind you know, setting up an acoustic [guitar] here in the corner and playing in front of people.” When asked if he would have done this before Operation Song, he replied “Hell no.”

Hubert found the motivation to visit the grave of a friend who was killed in action that he had not yet visited. At the grave he unexpectedly met his friend’s uncle, which led to the meeting of the entire family where this participant was able to give them the song he had written about this friend. Hubert attributed the entire chain of events as “potentially not happening without Operation Song” having taken place first. He described the impact as being “more than me.” Hubert was able to creatively and authentically tell his friend’s story through his song and stated,

I was telling his story, but in a different way than I ever have to a total stranger, which I would never ever, ever, ever do. I always would tell his story to other veterans I served with as I moved on through my career, different units, or veterans at the vet center, or another veteran, but never anybody outside of that. Or my story, at all ... I was able to get a lot out that I thought I probably needed to after 5 years.

## TRUSTED SOCIAL SUPPORT

All participants described this experience as an environment of trusted social support that enabled them to share their stories. The importance of camaraderie within the circle of military culture was expressed as an inherent aspect of the Operation Song experience. Adam

shared, “We essentially now are hybrid, you know, we’re civilian and military, and we’re tryin’ to get through life being some of what is understood and a whole shitload of what’s not understood.” This hybrid nature of split identities was compared to difficulties communicating and being understood in therapeutic settings versus the ease of Operation Song. Lori stated, “the bar is really so much higher when you’re dealing with veterans, it really is” and described the importance a veteran will place on fellow veterans’ statements over a professional. Participants described military relationships as being unique and influential to feeling understood when telling personal stories that may deal with traumatic memories. The Operation Song setting promoted “a relaxed situation” where peer sharing was encouraged. Randy explained, “you can kinda see yourself through them sometimes.” A environment of social support was created during Operation Song where veterans saw their own stories in the shared stories of peers. For some veterans this peer conversation and engagement helped them make sense of the experience more so than in clinical sharing settings. Hubert shared,

It kept me kinda straight, cause’ it was hard not to fall apart writing the song. But with him [songwriter/veteran] there bein’ a colonel, it was like “I gotta get through this”... It was another veteran in the room ... Him there kept me from breaking down I think ... It kept me focused. It kept me not driftin’ off and tellin’ too many stories about him because I wanted to focus on the song.

Being in the same room with another veteran had impact on the sense of concentration and emotional control. Relationships with the civilian Operation Song personnel were also discussed as an important influence on this sense of trust and social support. Allen described a squad mentality that develops in the military where “everybody protects each other and they can talk to each other no matter how bad or whatever happened.” During Operation Song, the songwriters became “part of the squad” regardless of veteran or civilian status.

You develop something that when you’re in combat that I cannot describe to people how it works and that’s why veterans actually talk to each other too. There is something about sharing that type of experience whether you drove a truck or you sat poppin’ grenades. The fact that you shared that experience is a brotherhood. A sisterhood too. And that’s why it’s nice having a brother come into our groups, which is [songwriter].

Operation Song created an environment of trusted social support that extended this sense of brotherhood and sisterhood to non-military specific songwriters. Hubert described this sense of comfort as influencing his ability to share his story and the story of a fallen comrade that inspired his song outside of just military circles.

I became very busy, and I wasn’t that way before. Before Operation Song I wasn’t like that ... Before that, I wouldn’t have done it, because I wasn’t ready to get out and about and do all this stuff. I was visiting buddies here and there, but I was only keepin’ it with Army buddies.

### UNIQUELY SKILLED SONGWRITERS

A unique and unexpected theme found in the description of the Operation Song experience emphasized the caliber of talent found among the Operation Song songwriters. The professional talents and interpersonal skills of the songwriters were described by all participants as a core component of the experience. Neil shared, “There’s quite a few different songwriting kinds of therapy/music therapy programs out there obviously. I don’t know of any that have, you know, hit songwriters as the as the actual people that you work with.” Participants experienced a unique level of trust and confidence in working with songwriters that had successfully written famous songs for famous people. This was not described as a sense of being starstruck or in awe. It was a respectful sense that these songwriters were the top talents in their field whose opinions and ideas could be trusted more than others. Neil further explained,

I think that the way Operation Song goes about approaching it with true—I mean these guys are freakin’ tremendous songwriters. They are the best in the country ... I really feel like that, that has an even greater ability to reach people simply because you know these guys are great songwriters. And not only great songwriters, but they are there for the right reasons.

The knowingly successful careers of the songwriters helped participants open up, but it was the songwriters’ empathetic listening and compassionate interactions that created a natural environment of trust that encouraged participants to truly share their stories.

Malcom stated, “They’re not telling the story, they’re helping you tell the story ... They’re the professionals, so they’re the ones that know how to put the music—All they’re doing is helping you tell your story.” Allen described the songwriters as having “that empathy to be able to talk to them [veterans], pull out their stories, and hit them exactly

where they are trying to go to. It's absolutely perfect." The trust created through these genuine interactions was described as a break in the conventional relationship barriers that take place within traditional therapeutic settings where boundaries are necessary but may limit true expression. Veterans felt a different experience opening up to the songwriters and feeling an empathetic exchange that was described as feeling free from judgment. Allen shared, "They [songwriters] listen and they take it in ... They answer. They don't make judgements. They don't tell em' [veterans] what's wrong, what's right. And that is probably as important as anything else—listening. And meaning it."

Veterans felt the songwriters "are there for the right reasons" and found importance in seeing the value placed by Operation Song personnel in the work that they do. Allen shared,

He [songwriter] actually cared about those people he was talking about ... He could pull the stories out of everybody, and I've never seen anybody that could do that ... [songwriter] actually thinks this is the most powerful most important thing he's ever done in his life."

The passion expressed by the Operation Song songwriters, founders, and volunteers/staff was described as uniquely influential to the overall experience for the veteran participants and their families.

### SONGWRITING

An enhanced clarity was expressed in creating the stories veterans were trying to tell through songwriting. The songs were described as a "condensed version [of] your story" where the key points were retained without having to "go over every little thing all the time." The musical aspect of songwriting was described as influencing a "universal language" that everyone can relate to. Neil explained this as potentially helping "bridge the gap" in reaching people who are not finding successful recovery from traumatic experiences by other means:

When you have posttraumatic stress disorder, the tendency is to block certain parts of your life from changing. And you stop evolving those areas and you have a blockage ... you're not able to fire on all 7 cylinders you know? You're blocked in at least one area. And when this happens, it's incredibly hard to reach somebody. So, songwriting is really one of the best tools I believe there is for that.

The uniqueness of songwriting during the Operation Song experience was described as an influencer for

"posttraumatic growth." Participants described this as helping them "process something" through the personal nature of this experience. It helped "connect dots in our lives" by focusing "concentration" on "a place they're not used to normally putting it." Analyzing the steps of songwriting was not a purpose of this research project. However, a very basic understanding of the process can be that songs typically have structure in several ways.

Lyrical verses often rhyme and flow with a sense of direction telling a story. A hook stands out from the rest of the song that may temporarily change focus or direction, but typically exemplifies a special part of the songs. Music adds a deep dimension that brings the entire process together. Engagement in the songwriting process gave an experience of structure that helped veterans piece together memories and thoughts. Neil further described this as a catalyst in "finding a little bit of purpose" after stopping "takin' pills ... Songwriting for me, has been something that helped dig me out of a really, really deep spot of depression and specifically songwriting about fallen, about my military experience." The experience of songwriting during Operation Song helped veterans feel a sense of purpose.

### LISTENING TO THE SONGS

Operation Song participants described a unique experience in both listening to the songs and being able to share these songs with peers, friends, and family they were previously unable to tell the stories to. Being able to hear the story "in your head" being told as a song with music created feeling—"you hear it, you feel it." This positively impacted participants' abilities to share the stories with their families and the families of those the songs were written for. Hubert shared, "There was something about getting it out. And the way we did it with the song ... it's something that I could take to the family." Getting the story out, hearing the story, and being able to share the story with others was an important aspect of the experience. Adam explained this as now having a unique way to start a conversation about his military experiences with those who are close to him.

If I wanna tell you about this, if I wanna tell my mom, my daughter, or somebody like that about it, how do I even start this conversation? ... I was able to hand my mom that CD and she listened ... She had a nice little start, you know. I mean, it meant a lot to her. She got a look into what I couldn't really say.

Participants described the act of listening to each other's songs as "cathartic" because it helped create a sense of relatedness to the group through their stories. The sense of having a shared story created an opportunity for

participants “to hear that you’re not the only one.” One participant described this as “that’s everybody’s song.” Malcom shared,

When you come here and listen to the songs ... it’s kinda nice, because you get to see people that you’re like “hey that could have been my song” or you can relate to most of the songs ... I could relate to almost every song.

Neil described the difference the Operation Song songwriting experience had on his ability to observe the emotional impact of an audience listening to one of the songs.

It really reaches people ... and I had to realize that’s why everybody cheers at the end ... they’re cheering because they got brought to the point of nearly crying ... They’re all feeling it and when the song is over and they start cheering, it’s because we’ve moved them to that place. And we’ve caused them to remember, and I didn’t realize that before I wrote that song with [songwriter].

## THE ESSENTIAL, INVARIANT STRUCTURE

All themes combined into one core truth for participants answering the question, “What is the experience of Operation Song?” This soul of Operation Song exists as a *catalyst to invoke personal change*. “Operation Song literally changed my life” may be the pinnacle of statements describing this truly unique experience. Veterans described outcomes of the experience to be new feelings of “freedom,” “trust,” “calm,” “fun,” and “purpose.” Feelings of openness and a rejuvenated outlook on life were part of a process that helped in “connecting dots and seeing what I need to do” to move forward. Rufus said, “That day after I left, I felt different, I felt good ... I was like my old self again ... It’s opened me up ... I feel like a new person.” Wyatt shared, “Because of things like Operation Song, journaling, meditations ... I think that’s why I am so happy you know? I just accept it. Acceptance is key.”

Neil had performed with Operation Song several times on a professional stage. He shared a story of how he felt guilty for receiving a standing ovation the first time he performed because “I didn’t want it to be for me. It was supposed to be a song about the fallen ... and that hit me hard.” He went on to share that after writing his song, he was able to realize that the audience was cheering for the song, not the performers, and he was able to perform again without experiencing guilt.

That’s where the bridges—that’s where the gap connected for me ... the concept of that song is that they’re in my heart and my heart might be broken, but I have a mission still. I have somethin’ that I still have to go do. And the next time I went to the [venue], I didn’t feel guilty the next day.

Two veterans specifically attributed their experience with Operation Song as a motivating factor in quitting smoking and reducing dependence on “mood stabilizer,” “sleep medications,” or “nightmare meds.” Neither participant described these significant changes as a direct result of the program, but both specified that the combination of Operation Song with other positive actions led to these results. These were not verified by record but are taken into consideration as descriptive factors of these veteran’s perceived outcomes experienced from Operation Song.

After seeing what Operation Song “did for me once,” Adam began journaling daily again after previously ruling it out as a therapeutic tool. Malcom and Lori noted that Malcom had re-experienced enjoyment with writing after the first session with Operation Song. Other participants attributed their experience of Operation Song to taking on new tasks and interests that improved their quality of life. Hubert elaborated, “I’ve been lookin’ at different things since Operation Song ... ever since ... I’ve got so many projects going on ... It all started there. That’s where it all started.” Neil shared his experience of finding a way to expose something that helped him connect dots within his memories and thought process that influenced a sense of acceptance:

I think for a lot of veterans who don’t ever get it out, they lock it up and they-we-they don’t accept that you can’t make sense of it, they just ignore it. They try to hide it. They try to hide from it and in doing so-in doing so they are never able to know themselves again ... and this is where I believe Operation Song has had a lot of impact in my life-by helping me connect to see so I can finally understand this, because I mean there’s just no way to rationalize some of these things. Some things you just have to accept, but you truly have to accept them. And if you don’t confront them and if you don’t find a way to expose them, you’re never going to find a way to accept them.

Participants found purpose through new missions of helping inspire others or in sharing information with other veterans or even in creating multimedia platforms to share the created songs. Regardless of whether Operation Song was experienced as a catalyst to invoke personal change



through mechanisms that could be seen or not seen, the core essence of the experience was the creation of each participants’ ability to begin something new as a catalyst to invoke personal change. Table 1 presents additional quotes supporting each major theme.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study is to discover what the experience of Operation Song is for veteran participants. Five key themes describe the overall essence of the experience as being a catalyst to invoke personal change. These themes described by five veteran participants and one assisting spouse were a setting that promoted authenticity, trusted social support, uniquely skilled songwriters, songwriting, and listening to the songs.

## SETTING THAT PROMOTED AUTHENTICITY

Veterans find a unique sense of trusted social support, a freedom to be who they are, and less pressure to fit into any expectation or role in the Operation Song experience that differs from clinical environments. The experience naturally creates an encouragement for authentic expression of self that veteran participants describe as influencing their ability to share both during the program and beyond. A sense of safety and release in feeling free to express a trueness of who veterans are helps participants tell stories many had never shared or did not share outside of specific military communities. Operation Song directly helped several participants be able to talk to their therapists more, talk to civilians, and find a sense of comfort in their own self. All of this enhanced motivation, confidence, and an ability to move forward as a result of this creative and non-clinically specific environment.

KEY THEMES	PARTICIPANT QUOTES	
Trusted social support	Well, the thing is too the bar is really so much higher when you’re dealing with veterans, it really is ... They’re gonna put a little more weight into what the other guy is saying as opposed to so and so with the license on the wall.	It’s [Operation Song] a safe place...The other thing that most VA people don’t understand, cognitive researcher—whoever, is after you go through that experience of any of this therapy, you need a place to come down. They don’t offer that ... there’s no place that they can get back to their squad to their safe place.
Uniquely skilled songwriters	I think that the way Operation Song goes about approaching it with true—I mean these guys are freakin’ tremendous songwriters. They are the best in the country ... I really feel like that, that has an even greater ability to reach people simply because you know these guys are great songwriters and not only great songwriters, but they are there for the right reasons	
A setting that promoted authenticity	Maybe reiterate who I am. Made me comfortable with who I am ... It made me comfortable in my own skin, you know? I didn’t—I wasn’t worried about tryin’ to impress, or I wasn’t worried about, you know, it was a fun environment that was comfortable enough that I could share.	The whole thing, I mean from the time you meet the writers that we, you know, that you’re workin’ with to the time you end with a CD in your hand that has songs and stuff on it. That whole experience will never go away. It’s, it’s almost like that little boost to once you’re out, or once the program is over or whatever, you know, it leaves you feel so good, in a calm that for me ... it’s fun, its enjoyable.
Listening to the songs	It was a lot different than I thought it would be. Yeah, I don’t get very emotional anymore for a various number of reasons, but I got a little more emotional than I thought I would, so it was very good	It’s one thing to sit around and think it in your head, you know, a certain scenario or certain situation. Whatever, but it’s another to hear it. And you know anytime music’s involved there’s feeling also, I mean, you hear it you feel it. And I think the whole process of Operation Song is tangible.
Songwriting	So we sit down with [songwriter] ... and he goes, “well tell me about [friend]” ... it felt good. I was telling his story, but in a different way than I ever have to a total stranger, which I would never ever, ever, ever do. I always would tell his story to other veterans I served with as I moved on through my career, different units, or veterans at the vet center, or another veteran, but never anybody outside of that. Or my story, at all. So, I was able to get a lot out that I thought I probably needed to after 5 years.	It’s a little bit personal and I don’t like to put myself that far out there and I don’t think that many of the other veterans necessarily do either. I think that what we get from writing songs like this is it helps us connect dots in our lives and whether you know other people aren’t necessarily gonna see it, but it causes ... one’s concentration to go to a place that they’re not used to normally putting it I guess, when it comes to writing music. And I think that that helps influence posttraumatic growth.

**Table 1** Additional Quotes from Participant Interviews.

Note: Participant quotes that were not fully quoted within the main text and quotes that add support to the key themes are listed above.

This article will not argue against the importance of clinical services—these are absolutely necessary for safe and structured therapeutic programming and some Operation Song programs do take place within clinical settings even though they are facilitated by Operation Song personnel. However, a positive influence of non-clinical, songwriting experts and an environment that focuses specifically on songwriting does exist for veteran participants of Operation Song. This is described by veteran participants as directly helping them tell their authentic story in a more impactful and unique method than talking to a clinician. Caddick et al. (2015) found evidence of similar experiences for military veterans participating in a surfing charity in the United Kingdom. These veterans described a sense of freedom in the non-clinical setting that naturally created an opportunity to discuss problems as opposed to clinical environments that can be forced or guided. Hoge et al. (2004) also identified a sense of stigma felt by military veterans as a reason for not seeking mental health treatment. Caddick et al. (2015) found that social engagement with other veterans reduced stigma in comparison to expectations within clinical environments.

### TRUSTED SOCIAL SUPPORT

The unique environment that is Operation Song creates an atmosphere of support through a combination of camaraderie, non-clinical songwriters, and reduced stigma that helps veterans share their story. Veterans described a sense of safety in the inherent backbone of a shared military experience where their “hybrid” sense of identity was understood in a group of peers. This hybrid identity has further been understood as a sense of “veteranness” where military veterans’ definition of what being a veteran means is intertwined within sense of identity, purpose, and behaviors (Young et al., 2022). This is important in treatment services designed for military veterans because a separation between military and civilian worlds does exist. Pew Research Center (2011) found that 84% of post-9/11 veterans and 71% of civilians in the United States acknowledge a gap between military-civilian understanding (Pew Research Center, 2011). Social support has been linked to PTSD symptom severity (Caddick et al., 2015; Cai et al. 2014; Smith et al., 2017; Vella et al. 2013) and improvement in “psychosocial well-being” (Vella et al., 2013, pp 259).

### UNIQUELY SKILLED SONGWRITERS

Operation Song songwriters are highly influential on the veteran participant experience. These professionals naturally built a sense of trust through empathetic listening and a perception of professional excellence. The essence of the Operation Song experience is directly impacted by

the songwriters’ ability to listen and transition the highly expressive, emotional, and at times fragmented stories into a song. This is a unique finding, as no previous literature was found by the primary researcher that specifically looked at the impact of non-clinical songwriting professionals on self-expression, trust, or related aspects of PTSD treatment for military veterans. Veterans emphasized a uniqueness in the fact that the songwriters were masters of their field, but not clinical professionals. The unique inclusion between civilian songwriters and veteran participants that took place during this experience is an important example of how community-based programs may break stigmas that lead to social isolation and inhibitions with seeking treatment.

### SONGWRITING

In telling stories meaning is created (Caddick et al., 2015). Narrating these meanings helps us describe the human experience (Polkinghorne, 1988). Individuals who experience trauma may find disruptions in their ability to process this human experience because of changes in cognitive functions of verbal declarative memory, autobiographical recall, and dissociative amnesia (Bremner, 2006). Greater difficulty exists in sequencing chronological memories associated with the trauma and processing these stories can be difficult because of an inability to accurately recall and retell them. Music, memory, and emotion are all connected through neural pathways (Tamplin et al., 2016). Music can help with this cognitive reorganization through an inherent requirement of managing multiple input stimuli simultaneously (Bensimon et al., 2012).

For these Operation Song veterans, each associate with having experienced trauma. This specific songwriting experience helps participants find a way to structure a “condensed version” of the story chosen to tell. Songwriting gave veterans a sense of clarity, a creative language to share, and positively influenced traumatic growth. Findings support previous studies where songwriting helped reduce anxiety and depression (Tamplin et al., 2016), restructure traumatic memories (Orth, 2005), and strengthen both positive self-identity and self-confidence (Baker et al., 2015; Tamplin et al., 2016). Previous researchers have evaluated songwriting within the context of PTSD treatment; however, songwriting was part of a more larger music therapy program (Bensimon et al., 2012; Carr et al., 2012). Several studies have explored songwriting as an inpatient therapeutic modality during rehabilitation (Baker et al., 2015; Tamplin et al., 2016), but have not specifically looked at military specific PTSD.

### LISTENING TO THE SONGS

Veteran participants of Operation Song describe the experience as creating feeling and finding a sense of

relatedness through the act of listening to the songs created within the programs. When listening to the songs of other peer participants, a sense of camaraderie and relatedness is created through listening to and telling stories. Experiencing these stories through song and lyrics was described as giving another perspective to hear the same story potentially in a different way where others could truly listen and potentially have a better understanding. One study by Daniels et al. (2015) found that a group of US Vietnam Veterans who participated in a facilitated reminiscence group showed greater improvement with PTSD symptoms in comparison to a standard psychotherapy group. Although this study was the only study known to this author that specifically looked at the impact of storytelling on military related PTSD, it does well in suggesting that the peer sharing of self-narratives focused on trauma in a group of peers has value for enhancing standard PTSD treatments. For Operation Song participants these benefits extended beyond just the participants of the programs. Outside individuals such as family, friends, and therapists were able to hear the veterans' stories in a unique and different mechanism than they had previously been able to experience.

Being able to listen to these stories through music was another important factor of the Operation Song experience. Music has also been shown to improve resiliency factors through increased engagement, increased sense of safety and trust, and improved identification or expression of emotions (Carr et al., 2012). Music disrupts the pattern of negative brain communication networks (Tamplin et al., pp. 116) associated with poor self-image, intrusive memories, poor recall of traumatic events, negative beliefs, alienation, or self-blame that are associated with PTSD symptoms (Friedman, n.d.). Findings from this study support previous social impacts found by Bensimon et al. (2012) of increased sense of connectedness, belonging, and acceptance, as well as several studies that found group music settings to create a protected space where traumatic emotions and memories can be processed more easily than just talking (Bensimon et al., 2012; Carr et al., 2012; Tamplin et al., 2016). The therapeutic benefits of music for individuals with PTSD have been associated with reduced sensory hallucinations, reduced antidepressant usage (Bensimon et al., 2012) and reduced symptoms of PTSD (Carr et al., 2012). Two participants in this study mentioned reduced dependence on medication.

## LIMITATIONS

Limitations in this study exist in the methodology of phenomenology itself. Each individual experiences the

world in an abstract perspective that is unique to their own understanding. Despite any similarities each individual's experience is still unique to that individual and may create a variety of perspectives when collectively being analyzed. Forms of phenomenology that encourage bracketing of a researcher's experience could be a limitation. This study takes an interpretive approach that embraces this basic understanding of the phenomenon being studied as a requirement for understanding (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For the primary investigator, prior personal and professional experiences enhanced the understanding of the research. A limitation may also exist in the sampling exclusion of participants who were not easily able to be contacted and the exclusion of Operation Song graduates who did not complete a program. Future studies could involve a larger sample size and may look at reasons why some participants did not finish. The final limitation that might exist lies in the relationships between participants and the researcher. All participants had met this researcher prior to initiation of this study. The interview format chosen acknowledged these previous interactions while respecting the importance of trust and ease of conversation through directed questioning.

## CONCLUSION

It would most likely be impossible to suggest that any one transition or treatment service could accommodate all of the expansive impacts of trauma, individualized for every veteran in the United States. Relying on single services limits the creativity and uniqueness anyone has on his or her sense of self and sense of control in their own pursuit of personal goals. Clinical therapies have a myriad of benefits, but some veterans are not seeking desired outcomes. Sayer et al. (2010) found that over 41% of US Iraq-Afghanistan combat veterans identified ongoing issues with "taking part in community activities," "enjoying or making good use of free time," "belonging in 'civilian' society," and "finding meaning or purpose in life" (p. 595). These are important factors in the community reintegration process that cannot be served through a perception that one treatment is the better and/or only option at solving all of the problems with the transition to a veteran lifestyle.


Operation Song is one program that created a foundation that helped veterans move from not knowing how to share their stories or not knowing what stories to tell, to actively engaging in a creative and multisensory experience that enhanced their ability to start new journeys. Veterans experienced reduced guilt, a new sense of purpose, a feeling of freedom, and calmness, leading one participant to describe Operation Song as having "changed my life."


There is more to explore in this experience and outcomes of specific organization, but findings do suggest an important influence of activity based peer and community engagement in relationship to traumatic rehabilitation. Findings seek to build on the evidence-based potential for complementary and alternative services such as Operation Song's songwriting programs to be seen as viable treatment opportunities through an exploration of the perspectives from military veterans who have participated in the program. Findings also offer support for songwriting and community-based programs as influential services that can enhance treatment outcomes for military veterans with PTSD.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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