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A Phenomenological Study of the Process of Transitioning Out of the Military and Into Civilian Life from the Acculturation Perspective

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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE PROCESS OF TRANSITIONING

OUT OF THE MILITARY AND INTO CIVILIAN LIFE FROM

THE ACCULTURATION PERSPECTIVE

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Doctor of Philosophy – Public Affairs

School of Public Policy and Leadership
Greenspun College of Urban Affairs
The Graduate College

University of Nevada, Las Vegas
December 2017

UNLV | GRADUATE COLLEGE

Dissertation Approval

The Graduate College
The University of Nevada, Las Vegas

October 31, 2017

This dissertation prepared by

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entitled

A Phenomenological Study of the Process of Transitioning Out of the Military and Into Civilian Life from the Acculturation Perspective

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy – Public Affairs
School of Public Policy and Leadership

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the process of transitioning of veterans the perspective of acculturation. The study explored the lived experience of veterans, by attempting to gain a better understanding of the transition process of post 9/11 military members.

The study used the acculturation framework to view the experiences of transitioning from military to civilian culture. Limited research exists examining the connection between acculturation and transitioning for veterans. The phenomenological methodology was used to explain the veterans' experiences.

The study revealed that TAP, the government-mandated transition program did very little to prepare veterans transition back to the civilian world. Veterans either walked away with little-to-no information, or a lack of understanding of the help they needed to do to move on. Themes emerged such as veterans helping each other, broken channels of communication, and the importance of families, friends, and faith.

Keywords: acculturation, service member, transitioning, veteran

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

share their stories of service, courage, sacrifice and transition. Without them, this research would

not have been possible.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Why is it important to tend to the needs of our veterans? In 1865, President Abraham Lincoln, in his second inaugural address, made a promise to veterans, which the U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs (VA) adopted as its mission and carries forth today: "To care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow, and his orphan." This promise is fulfilled by serving and honoring the men and women who fought and currently fight for this country (VA, 2017).

In recent years, the number of transition programs available for military personnel has increased (GAO, 2014) commensurate with numbers of transitioning service members. The ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which were implemented in an effort to eradicate global terrorism, have jointly proven to be the longest running conflicts/campaigns in the history of the United States (Cassidy, 2015). The U.S. military's all-volunteer force has continued to protect our nation following the 9/11 attacks on America and throughout the resultant "War on Terror" (Holyfield, 2011). To this end, since 2001 over 2 million service members (full-time and reservist) were deployed overseas to serve in support of war at least once, and some service members served multiple terms (Hazel, Wilcox, & Hassan, 2012; Cassidy 2015; Roberts, 2015).

According to a report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO, 2014), more than one million service members are expected to return to civilian life in the next five years. Though many veterans who served in the military after September 11, 2001 have separated from active duty and successfully transitioned back to civilian life without substantial difficulty within their first few years of being discharged, others have experienced significant obstacles (GAO, 2014). Not surprisingly, veterans who return from combat or extended deployment face a variety of challenges in transitioning back into the daily routines of the civilian world, their families, and

communities (Faurer et al., 2014; Roberts, 2015). For veterans returning with physical or psychological disabilities or moral injuries sustained during war, these challenges are further compounded (Roberts, 2015). To offset these impacts and provide veterans with the best chance for a productive post-military life, which includes successful employment, effective transitional programs are critical (GAO Report, 2014). Various shortcomings have been reported concerning existing programs according to the GAO 2014 report. A particular work-seeking disadvantage some veterans have encountered, as Allen (2014) argued, is that civilian employers often ignore the knowledge and training that veterans have obtained during their military service. Simultaneously, Judson (2014) explains that current transitional programs fail to acknowledge, value, or translate veteran's specialized skills into strengths that could be well utilized within the civilian workforce.

Statement of the Problem

In the near future, nearly one million service members in their prime working years are projected to exit from the military, and prepare to transition back into civilian life and workforce (Hazle, Wilcox, & Hassan, 2012; GAO, 2014). In 2014, a decrease in the U.S. military to its smallest size in decades was anticipated with President Obama's order for full troop withdrawal from Afghanistan (Ackerman & Roberts, 2014). In the same year, 5.3 percent of veterans (573,000 individuals) were unemployed (Cassidy, 2015). Although the 2014 order could not be fully executed, taking into account the current state of the economy and still-projected cuts to the military (Ackerman & Roberts, 2014). Over the next six years, there could be an influx of approximately one million veterans into the existing civilian employment market. Even with the help of assistance programs offered by the government, a troubling percentage will remain unemployed (Faurer, Rogers-Brodersen, & Bailie, 2014). According to the VA's veteran

population projection model, the total population of all living U.S. veterans has been approaching 22 million (VA, 2016).

Veterans return home facing an array of psychological, social, and physical issues that have not been properly addressed pre-separation from the military (Wands, 2013; Cassidy, 2015). In the first few years after discharge, some veterans experience financial, employment, housing, relationship, legal, and substance abuse issues, all of which lead to less stability (GAO, 2014). These matters can make transitioning a difficult challenge for veterans. Perceived shortcomings in governmental and societal support for transition, which could help veterans address these issues, causes some veterans to experience alienation, in general, upon returning to civilian life and to be overlooked as job candidates in particular (Ahern et al., 2015). The difficulties that veterans experience are a multitude, complex, and both extend beyond and intersect among individual organizations and services (e.g., health care, disability, and employment services), which require more organized case-management services (GAO, 2014; Kukla, Rattray, & Salyers, 2015).

It is imperative that well-coordinated, effective transitional support exists to adequately serve the influx of military members that will seek to rejoin the civilian workforce. Without clear pathways and coordination by service providers, some veterans might not receive all of the benefits and services available to them to achieve successful employment, because emotional and physical scars prevent them from seeking and piecing together all the resources themselves (Cassidy, 2014). It should be noted that additional external factors can play profound a role in understanding employment transition and about which inadequate education and information is available. For example, due to state licensure requirements and limited equivalency of skills,

military medical assistants are not directly transferable into civilian medical assistant positions. (Cassidy, 2014).

The assistance program most well positioned to identify service members at risk for having a difficulties readjusting is called the Transition Assistance Program (TAP; commonly referred to as "TAPs" by service members). Congress established TAP in 1991, through the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1991 (Public Law 101-510) at a time when significant reductions in military forces were expected. The Obama administration and Congress mandated that the departments of Defense (DoD), Veteran Affairs (VA), and Labor (DoL) to work together to improve the military–civilian transition process and create better programming for military members (GAO, 2014; Kukla, Rattray, & Salyers, 2015) and in so doing substantially revised TAP for the first time in 20 years. Each branch of the U.S. Armed Forces— Air Force, Army, Coast Guard, Marine Corps, and Navy—is required to implement a pre-separation training or a workshop for veterans (GAO Report, 2014; Cassidy, 2015). However, not all service members participate, and the program does not completely cover the extensiveness of issues many veterans face once they leave the military (GAO, 2014; Faurer et al., 2014). Branches have the flexibility to design their workshops as they see fit, resulting in variances in the delivery and content of the programs.

Within this variation across service branches, however, TAP generally requires service members to complete a set of assignments in an effort to demonstrate their readiness for a civilian career. Furthermore, as part of TAP review and the effort to revamp the program, the GAO identified five essential elements of effective programmatic implementation and evaluation: (1) systems to track attendance; (2) processes for ensuring quality of instruction, content, and facilities; (3) mechanisms to assess career readiness; (4) mechanisms to ensure

participation and completion; and (5) measures of performance and processes to systematically evaluate effectiveness (GAO, pg. 1,2014). However, due to the flexibility of the TAP curriculum across the military branches, variability in both data type and data collection make cross-branch comparisons regarding the effectiveness of TAP difficult (Faurer, 2014). Faurer et al. (2014) indicated the initial program appeared to fall short of offering adequate assistance. In 2014, the DoD and partner agencies launched a revised TAP within the context of a "Military Life Cycle" transition model and included a curriculum titled, "Transition GPS (Goals, Plans, Success)" (Cassidy, 2015. However, the new program still does not address some post-military service issues (Cassidy, 2015).

Context and Background

The current War on Terror is a very different war (Lafferty, Alford, Davis, & O'Connor, 2008). Over 1.5 million post-9/11 veterans have re-entered into civilian life, and one million more are predicted to return to communities over the next several years (Roberts, 2015). Lafferty et al. (2008) explained there are three distinctions of the war affecting the ability of veterans to transition following service in Iraq and Afghanistan. These distinctions are: (1) duty tour length and pattern; (2) level of danger; and (3) disengagement from civilian culture (Kukla et al., 2015; Lafferty et al., 2008). Approximately 44 percent of current Operating Iraqi Freedom (OIF), Operating Enduring Freedom (OEF), and Operation New Dawn (OND) veterans state that readjustment to civilian life was difficult, compared to just 25 percent who served in previous wars (Roberts, 2015).

The transition process is viewed as difficult and sometimes insurmountable because it requires relearning (or learning) a new way of life outside of the highly prescribed, rigorous organizational structure of the military. Based on the demographics of the current military, many

service members joined the military at around 18 years of age. It is not surprising, then, that

transitioning veterans, having entered the military at an influential and identity-seeking age, will

struggle to transition to civilian life in their coming years. This is largely due to active service

men and women entered into the military as young adults. (Cassidy, 2015).

Jones' (2013) study revealed that veterans also experience constant dynamic tension

while transferring from service member status to a new status such as student or worker.

Veterans often go through a process of creating and recreating their identities. Those leaving the

military are not only leaving a job, but also a way of life—a culture. This fact has to be

considered when working with a veteran in transition (Jones, 2013).

According to recent studies (GAO, 2014; Maiocco & Smith, 2016; Kukla et al., 2015),

several veteran groups—specifically, those veterans that served in combat and younger

veterans—are considerably more likely than others to experience transition struggles or to be

diagnosed with a mental health disorder. Veterans are often dealing with both the visible and

invisible injuries of war. Some veterans frequently talk about civilian life as "normal" while it is

clear that many aspects of civilian life no longer feel normal upon returning from military service

(Ahern et al., 2015). This observation reflects a mismatch between expectations and reality:

Coming home is expected to be "going back to normal" whereas the reality of changes within the

veteran results in feelings of alienation or of being an "alien" (Ahern et al., 2015).

The VA is charged with veterans' overall transition back to civilian life (Cassidy, 2015).

Despite the network of outreach efforts and the range of benefits and services administered by

the VA, many veterans struggle to receive support, and the agency remains to face long-lasting

challenges in providing benefits in a timely fashion (GAO, 2014). The current transition

programs lack a all-inclusive approach that (a) imitates the military culture that service members

are comfortable with and (b) accounts for the effect that military service had on the individual's ability to readapt (Cassidy, 2015). The VA could be missing opportunities to improve assistance to veterans by lacking the ability to provide necessary services early in the veteran's transitioning process (GAO, 2014).

Military service members' transitioning challenges are compounded by enduring military-related psychological trauma; persistent physical injuries; the changes that come with having lived under all-encompassing rules and regulations; social stigma; lack of understanding in the community; lack of access to resources in the community; unemployment; divorce; single parenthood; lack of child support; lack of housing; and other factors that make life less predictable and manageable (Hazel et al., Wilcox & Hassan 2012; Osborne, 2013). Veterans not only must navigate a set of challenges as they approach reconnection to civilian life, but also must navigate complex systems to obtain the very resources meant to alleviate transition difficulties. The limitations of TAP have been shown to hinder the success of the transition process (Faurer et al., 2014). Although several of articles, studies, and reports have been published about the experiences of veterans, very few discuss how recently separated veterans are adapting to civilian life, and the concern of how well veterans are coping is still not well understood (Faurer et al., 2014). The GAO final report concluded that the body of research addressing service member transition and veteran needs is limited and incomplete (Cassidy, 2015 GAO, 2014).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of OEF/OID veterans' personal experience with transitioning into civilian life following military service to guide transition-service providers and educators, those in veteran-services fields, policymakers, and

employers. The study applies an acculturation framework by taking into account the concepts of integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization as part of the service members' lived experience in transitioning from military to civilian culture.

Conceptual Underpinnings of the Study: An Acculturation Perspective

The acculturation perspective is not new to the fields of anthropology, psychology, and sociology and research therein. However, Bichrest (2013) reported in his formal literature review that there is limited research examining the connection between acculturation and the transition process for veterans. *Acculturation* is defined as the dual process of cultural and psychological change that occurs as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members (Berry, 2005, 2008; Sam & Berry 2009; Schwartz, 2010). The phenomenological process of acculturation is often used to explain the lived experiences individuals of a particular cultural background transitioning into another unfamiliar culture (Sam & Berry, 2009). Chirkov (2009) and Bichrest (2013) further explain what happens during acculturation, viewing it as a social process in which newcomers and members of the host culture are in dynamic contact with one another (Chirkov, 2008; Bichrest, 2013).

Military sub-culture (hereafter referred to simply as "military culture") is a defined culture with a unique language, set of rules, values, and rituals (Rausch, 2013). Military members have learned since boot camp, and thereafter, how to function within the military culture (Holyfield, 2011). The new norms and behaviors adopted by service members, in an acculturation-like process, upon entry into the military often persist into their post-military lives.

Upon exiting the military culture, veterans must relearn, to different degrees, the norms, and behaviors of their culture of origin (Bichrest, 2013). Acknowledging and understanding the many unique characteristics of the military culture is essential before attempting to intervene and

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work with individuals (Bichrest, 2013). Understanding military culture—which includes such elements as language, structure, why members join, commitment to mission, and the role of honor and sacrifice in military service—will enable agencies to adequately intervene and offer care to military members and their families (Bichrest, 2013). Military personnel returning from Iraq and Afghanistan will need their needs met on their terms. A military worldview and deep understanding of military culture, from within the military structure itself, (Hall, 2011) would best inform a transition process utilizing the acculturation perspective because it would take into account the unique requirements of this population (Bichrest, 2013).

Using the acculturation framework, this study incorporated the concepts of integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization as part of the service members' experience in transitioning from military to civilian culture, which is their culture of origin.
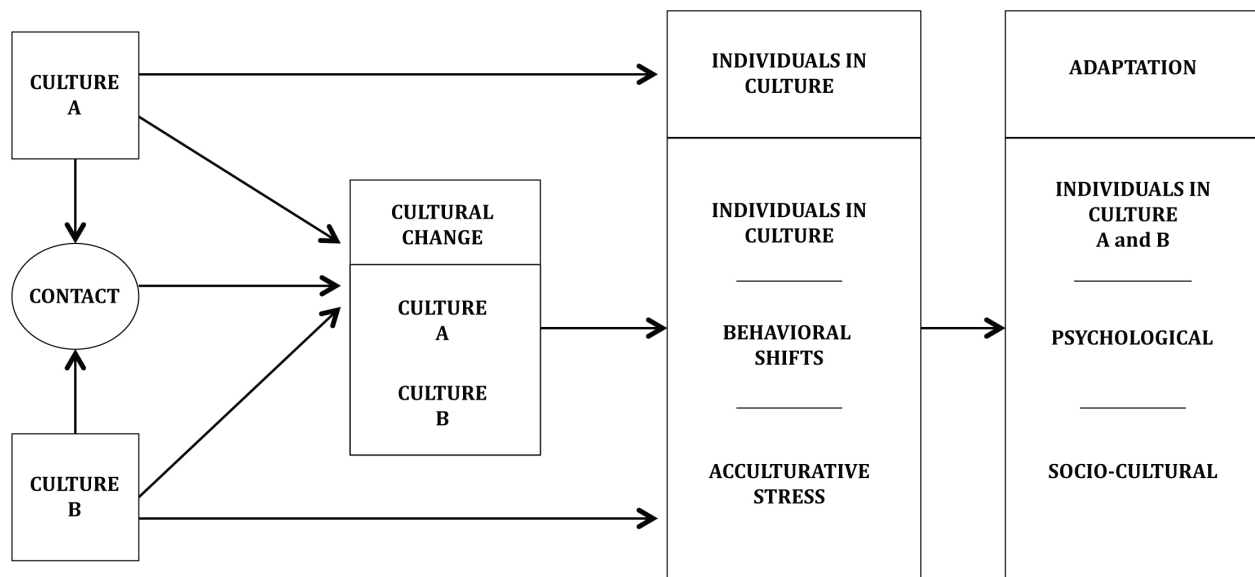
Figure 1. General Acculturation Framework Showing Cultural-level and Psychological-level Components, and the Flow Among Them (redrawn from Berry, 2003, page 365).

The pioneering concept that changes occur when an individual moves from one culture to a different, dissimilar culture was introduced by Berry as early as the 1970s (Sam & Berry, 1970; Sam & Berry, 2009). Berry's (2009) acculturation framework for understanding this concept

organizes and delineates the acculturation process at the group and individual level (Figure 1). In the most simplistic scenario, two different cultures come into contact; however, contact among multiple groups is also possible and plausible. In an effort to fully understand any given instance of acculturation, researchers must consider the key features of the two original cultural groups (indicated as Culture A and B in Figure 1, above) prior to entering into direct contact with each other. Acculturating individuals and groups bring cultural and psychological qualities with them to the new society, and the new society also has a mixture of such assets. The compatibility (or incompatibility) in cultural values, norms, attitudes, and personality between the two cultural communities in contact is examined as a basis for understanding the acculturation process that is set in motion. The resulting cultural changes in both groups that emerge during acculturation are also examined. No cultural group remains unaffected following culture contact; acculturation is a reciprocal interaction, resulting in actions and reactions to the contact situation (Sam & Berry, 2009).

At the level of the individual, an acculturation perspective provides the vital framework with which to examine psychological changes experienced and behavioral changes displayed by the individual as a means of adapting to a new situation and assessing overall success in adaptation. Different types of changes occur during acculturation. Berry (2006, 2009) demonstrated these changes could be biological, social, physical, etc. Concerning physiological acculturative changes, Sam and Berry (2009), identified three main consequences: the affective, behavioral, and cognitive, which together form the *ABC's of Acculturation*.

Changes can also be psychological (e.g., sense of well-being or self-esteem) or sociocultural (e.g., acquiring a new language; Sam & Berry, 2009). The affective aspect of acculturation, relates to emotional features (i.e., the internal processes involved in cultural

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change) of the process and centers on outcomes such as psychological well-being and life-satisfaction or lack thereof. The affective aspects of acculturalization are represented by the term, "Acculturative Stress" in Figure 1. Acculturative stress occurs when the emotional challenges experienced as a consequence of living in a new culture cannot be resolved. Acculturative stress is defined as a reaction in response to life events rooted in the experience of acculturation (Berry, 2009).

The behavioral aspect of acculturation relates to the facility with which one adapts their behavior for the express purpose of adjusting to a new culture. When an individual enters into a new culture, difficulties will undoubtedly arise in managing everyday social encounters (Sam & Berry, 2009). To overcome these difficulties and successfully negotiate their new cultural environment, acculturating individuals will need to identify, learn, and apply new, culture-specific behavioral skills. Adaptive behavioral changes include such shifts as adopting new ways of speaking, dressing, and eating that fit the new cultural environment and tend to contribute to a successful transition. Other behavioral shifts—such as isolation, which insulates the individual from having to face the difficulties of acculturation—tend to prolong or impede positive outcomes in the new cultural environment. Less adaptive shifts result in acculturative stress as manifested by uncertainty, anxiety, and depression. Thus, it is important to note that the affective and behavioral facets of acculturation are interconnected and interdependent.

The cultural learning approach considers the role of the behavioral aspect and focuses on understanding intercultural communication styles, which includes verbal and nonverbal components, rules, conventions, and norms, and their influence on intercultural effectiveness. Cultural learning corresponds to the "Behavioral Shifts" component shown in Figure 1 (Sam & Berry, 2009).

Lastly, the cognitive aspect of acculturation tends to focus on how people perceive and think about themselves in the face of intercultural encounters. The cognitive aspect mostly symbolizes how people process information about their own group (in-group) and about other groups (out-groups), including how people categorize one another and how people identify with the categories (Sam & Berry, 2009).

The acculturation framework addresses the strategies that individuals and groups use to acculturate (Figure 2); two main issues are identified in the framework. The first issue addresses of culture and identity. The second issue is the degree to which people desire to have interactions with those who are outside their groups and share in the daily life of the larger society. Where an individual lies on this continuum leads to the adoption of one of four different acculturation strategies that Sam and Berry (2009) have categorized as assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization.
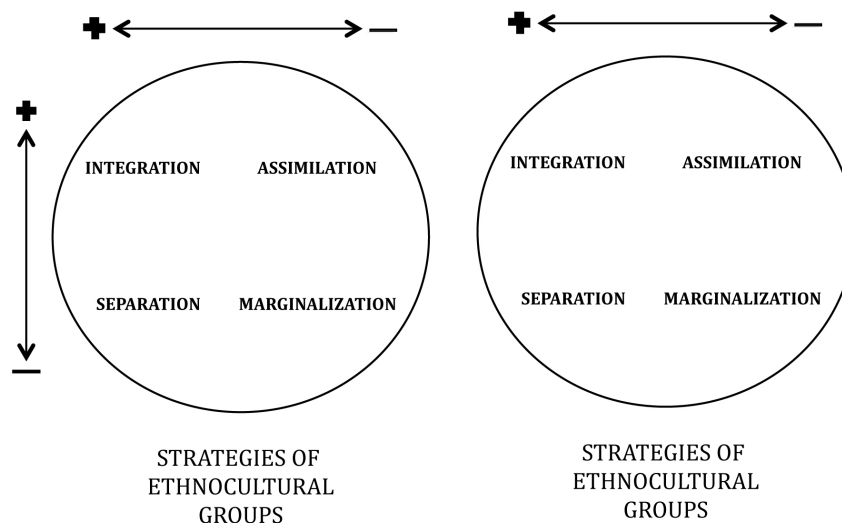
Figure 2. Acculturation Strategies in Ethnocultural Groups and in Larger Social Groups (redrawn from Sam & Berry, 2009, p. 366).

Acculturation strategies are explained as follows (Berry, 2009, p. 365-366):

1. *Assimilation* is described as the strategy used when individuals do not wish to maintain their cultural identity and seek close interaction with members of the new society.

2. *Separation* is the strategy taken by individuals who place a high value on clinging to their original culture and avoid communication with members of the new society.

3. *Integration* is the strategy used by individuals with an interest in maintaining one's original culture while having daily interactions with members of the new society. Some degree of cultural integrity is maintained; however, individuals who integrate also desire, as a member of their ethnocultural group of origin, to participate as an integral part of the larger social network.

4. *Marginalization* is the approach of those with little possibility for, or lack of interest in, cultural preservation as well as little interest in forming relationships with members of the new society.

Berry (2009) explains these four strategies are not static, nor are they end outcomes in themselves. Rather, the strategy one adopts can and will change depending on situational factors (Sam & Berry, 2009).

Research Questions

This study utilizes the acculturation framework to explore the phenomenon of military–civilian transition through analysis of veterans' lived experience, and it examines how existing services may have helped or hindered the acculturation process. Data gathered in this qualitative study consist of the responses of 20 veterans who participated in in-depth interviews. The research questions are as follows:

1. What was the service members' integration experience transitioning from the military to civilian culture?

2. What assimilation strategies did the veteran employ while transitioning back into the civilian life?

3. What type of support services or assistance was utilized during separation and afterwards to help or hinder the veteran transition?

   a. Describe military support provided while transitioning.

   b. Describe non-military support provided while transitioning.

   c. What recommendations would the service member provide for the transitioning process?

Significance of the Study

An influx of U.S. service members are expected to return from deployment and go through the process of transitioning out of the military back into civilian life. The OIF/OEF/OND wars are not expected to end soon. Therefore, more soldiers will be deployed in the future and, likewise, will endure the transition process. This research explores, through the lens of the acculturation perspective, the complexities of U.S. service members' transitions to civilian life following military service and their re-adaptation to their culture of origin. Furthermore, it considers the services in place to assist in the transition.

Fox (2013) explained that an individual's behavior is strongly influenced by culture, and when one's culture of origin and culture of residence are not the same, the outcome is commonly acculturative change. Acculturation is a long-term, extensive, fluid process that can lead to lasting change across multiple dimensions to involved individuals (Fox, 2013). Understanding

acculturation as a process will be vital to understanding the veteran experience and managing outcomes (Bichrest, 2013).

This research can serve as a guide for veterans, agencies, families, and organizations to understand the current population of veterans that have served in the OIF/OEF/OND wars and the particular difficulties they face when exiting the military. The research will provide clarity on the lived experiences, and educate scholars and practitioners on potential ways to provide assistance to veterans informed by the input and suggestions of veterans as to what was essential to their transitioning process. As stated in the GAO Report on Transitioning (2014), there is still a significant amount of work to be done to improve the transitioning process required by the government for service members. This study can provide insight to the DoD, VA, and Department of Labor as these agencies create and revise policies and procedures for the Military Life Cycle Model implemented in 2015 for TAP and its associated curricula, workshops, and materials initiated by the Obama administration.

The Transition Process and the Plight of the Veteran

This section explains the transition process and details the various issues that veterans face during their transition back into civilian life. The transition process is complex and in it, the likelihood exists that a veteran will experience many stages of transition before they feel that they have readjusted to civilian life. As Wands (2013) stated, "No one gets through okay," and veterans often return from combat with a variety of physical and mental issues that should be addressed during the transitioning process.

Transitioning from Military Life to Civilian Life: A Multifaceted Process

Transitioning back to civilian life for the military service member is no easy feat: The process can be overwhelming at times as well as a bit disconcerting. *Transitioning* is a process

that not only military members experience, but anyone who is going through an unfamiliar change in their life or experiencing a different way of life. The *act of transitioning* is defined by Brammer (1992) as "a sharp discontinuity with previous life events." Rumann & Hamrick (2015) define *transition* as "any event or nonevent that result in the change of a relationship, routine, assumption and role." Importantly, the individual's interpretation of their own transition, along with their ability to functionally execute their coping skills, coping skills, will determine and the amount of distress and effectiveness in working through their the process of transitioning (Brammer, 1992).

Furthermore, transition has been studied as a process of steps that an individual takes in order to adapt to the new position in their lives. Schlossberg (1981) presented a model of three major sets of factors that interact to influence adaptation and that produce the ability or failure to adapt to a given transition. The three sets as defined by Schlossberg are as follows: "(1) the characteristics of the particular transition, (2) the characteristics of the pre- and post-transition environments, and (3) the characteristics of the individual experiencing the transition" (Schlossberg, pg.15, 1981) Consequently, any transition experienced by an individual is a multifaceted experience (Schlossberg, 1981; Robertson 2013). According to Schlossberg (1981), four aspects influence an individual's ability to cope, the *Four Ss*: situation, support, strategies, and self. Schlossberg's work suggests that a person approaching transition will rely on situational characteristics, support from others, coping strategies, and their own personal resources to deal with their transition process (Robertson, 2013). Transitions can have both positive and negative effects for the same individual, and the four factors can influence the transition outcomes (Rumann & Hamrick, 2015).

Transitioning from Military Life to Civilian Life: What's Still Needed

Between 2014 and 2020 it is estimated over one million service members will separate from the military and (GA0, 2014) transition into civilian life; many will rely upon the programs governed by the VA for support during their transition. For several veterans, this transition process will go fine and without major difficulty. Conversely, for others, the first few years of separation from the military will be difficult. The government is still working on ways to help veterans to make a smooth transition, as well as reviewing issues of support and services that veterans are still struggling to access (GAO, 2014).

While TAP helps recognize some of the risks of having a difficult readjustment, the program does not cover the full extent of problems many veterans face upon leaving the military. TAP limitations and inefficiencies can result in high unemployment rates in veteran populations. Veterans were reportedly having trouble transitioning into civilian employment. In response to the concern of those reviewing TAP, Congress passed the bipartisan VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011 (Public Law 112-56; VOW Act), to help lower the rate of unemployment among veterans (VA, 2013). The VOW Act mandates that the DoD require departing service members to participate in a workshop to assist in finding employment as part of TAP. The government, as part of the VOW Act, initiated a redesign of TAP. In an effort to improve TAP; President Obama directed the departments of Defense, Veterans Affairs, and Labor to lead a taskforce to oversee the first major redesign of the program in 20 years. This redesign was viewed as imperative in the putting together the post-military structure necessary for the anticipated increase of returning veterans (Faurer et al., 2014).

The Plight of the Veteran

Preparing the veteran for a civilian life after the military is a very complex and sensitive task. The wounds that soldiers endure during war and deployment are physical, emotional, mental, and social. Transitioning back into the civilian life is a process that requires time and an array of assistance. Jones (2013) studied the transition of veterans from war to civilian life, focusing on individuals who were students at the University of Florida. This research showed that veterans undergo constant dynamic tension while transferring from service member to a new status such as student or worker. Veterans often go through a process of creating and recreating their identities. Additionally, those leaving the military are not only leaving a job, but a way of life (Jones, 2013). These are undeniable factors that have to be considered when working with a veteran in transition.

Many soldiers returning home from the recent Operations Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Iraqi Freedom (OIF) wars will suffer significant brain injuries and posttraumatic stress (PTSD) disorders; and, these disorders will have a direct effect on their ability to transition to civilian life (Wands 2013). Additionally, a veteran's ability to perform well in a working environment suffers when a mental health problem is present (Wands, 2013). Wand's (2013) mixed-methods study explored the subjective reintegration experience of veterans coming home from the war. It also aimed to integrate qualitative and quantitative approaches to describe the complicating health issues of a veteran.

The mental health of a veteran has to be addressed before returning to civilian status, upon returning to the states, and before entering into the workforce. The behavioral issues that most veterans are likely to face after returning home from war cannot be ignored. These issues will eventually surface in a work environment (Wands, 2013). Especially in a civilian job that is

vastly different from the military. There are programs in place that address mental health, PTSD and TBI awareness, and transition advocacy assistance in place to help veterans with behavioral issues, and to prepare mentally for employment outside of the military (Wands, 2013; Faurer et al., 2014).

Veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts receive supplementary benefits and services from the VA compared to veterans of previous wars. These service members may be entitled to receive educational benefits through the Post-9/11 GI Bill. This Bill allows eligible members up to 36 months of education benefits to cover the costs of post-secondary degrees, technical training, and other expenses, such as books and supplies, and housing, among other costs. Veterans who served in combat are generally qualified to receive five years of free health care through the VA. Moreover, all post-9/11 veterans who enter the VA health care system are referred to the Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)/Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)/Operation New Dawn (OND) Care Coordination Program. These programs screen veterans to determine if they need extra assistance with accessing VA and community resources (GAO, 2014).

The current OEF/OIF conflict has seen a rise in suicide rates committed by veterans; an average of 22 veterans commit suicide daily. According to the VA, the number of suicides for the veteran population is expected to decline from 20 veterans to in 2017, to 13.6 in 2037 (VA, 2017). Nine percent are female (VA, National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2014). In comparison to their civilian counterparts, veterans and service members disproportionately die by suicide. According to Schuman & Schuman (2016); Cox & Nock & Biggs (2017), the rate of suicides exceeded that of combat deaths in 2011, and became the second leading cause of death for U.S. service members following accidents. Additionally, former service members are estimated to make up 20 percent of the country's suicide deaths.

In recent years, more stories are shared about veterans who have experienced the trials and tribulations of transitioning. For example, the Oscar-winning film, "American Sniper," (Eastwood, 2015) tells the true story of Navy SEAL, Chris Kyle, based on his own memoirs (Kyle & McEwen, 2013). The movie clearly and poignantly portrays the life of a soldier without propagating the misperceptions that many civilians have of soldiers and what actually happens during war. War is discussed as a necessary evil in society, and when that "evil" remains in a solider, it is not through any fault of their own; rather it is because they were well-trained to be a warrior (Bolt, 2013). Bouts of anger, rage, nightmares, depression, anxiety, and PTSD are real. During one scene of "American Sniper," Kyle, who has returned home after nine months of combat is shown watching war images on television and hearing gunshots ringing in the background. Meanwhile, his two children are running around him, but he does not even notice them because he is fixated on the images on the television's screen. However, it is revealed to us, the audience, that the television is not on. The images that he sees (and that we are shown) are in his head (Bolt, 2013). Kyle exemplifies veterans still trapped within the "war" even when physically at "home." Kyle's story tragically ended when he was shot and killed by a former Marine named Eddie Routh who also suffered from what family members believed was PTSD, and who sought out Kyle for help (McGraw, 2015).

Limitations

Creswell (2013) defines qualitative research as a situated activity that positions the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretative and material practices to make the world visible. These practices include the collection of field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. Qualitative research also involves an

interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. The researcher tries to make sense of, or understand the phenomena in terms of the meaning that people bring to them (Creswell, 2013).

Possible limitations of this qualitative research study include the following: (1) A sampling criterion of a minimum of 20 and no more that 30 veterans. (This decision is based on the desire to have a large diverse group of veterans that will provide a broad perspective of the issues with transitioning and specific experiences that occur during the process.) And, (2) the potential for researcher bias, which is a common limitation in qualitative studies along with the lack of control over the attitudes, perceptions, and experiences of the interviewees.

Delimitations

Many external factors (e.g., the role of the government) can influence the study. This study focuses on the analysis of data collected on the veterans' lived experience transitioning to and from the military, and seeks to learn about their experiences entering the military, while they were in the military, and exiting the military. Therefore, this study will proceed on the following assumptions:

1. The participants (male or female) have served within the last 15 years in any branch of the military.

2. The participants have separated or retired from the military and are in the process or have experienced the process of transitioning out of the military back into civilian life.

3. The interpretation of the data collected accurately reflects the perception of the participating respondents.

This study was delimited by the researcher in the following ways: (1) the study explored the experiences of the retired or separated veteran who served during the OIF/OEF/OND wars and their personal and professional process of transitioning out of the military; (2) the selection

of the veterans will be generated from a combination of veteran students from the Nevada System of Higher Education (NSHE), Veteran Services Organizations (VSOs), and snowball or chain leads referred to the researcher by individuals who are aware of other veterans who meet the criteria of the study.

Dissertation Overview

Chapter 1 provided an overview, background, research perspective, and questions for the study. The study focuses on the phenomenological process of service members/veterans who have transitioned from the military and back into civilian life. It gives an overview of the challenges veterans face both navigating the post-military system of benefits and assistance and adjusting to a new life. The study seeks to reveal the lived experiences of these individuals and capture a holistic view of the individual's process. Chapter 2 will review the literature on military culture, the impacts of serving in the OIEF/OEF/OND wars, and the role of family and social support. Chapter 2 will also explore in depth the theoretical framework of acculturation and demonstrate how the acculturation perspective applies to military service members and their relevant transitions. Chapter 3 will describe the phenomenological methodology used to capture the lived experiences of the veterans who have undergone the phenomenon of transitioning. Chapter 4 will provide profiles of and detailed accounts of the transition process by 20 veterans as revealed in one-on-one interviews. Chapter 5 is the final chapter summarizing the overall dissertation, and it also discusses the study's practical implications, recommendations, and suggestions for future work.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, literature related to U.S. military culture, including entry into the military, the experiences of service members while in serving in the military, and the process of exiting the military will be examined. The literature review continues with works describing the impacts of the current conflicts as well as the role of family and social supports. As reported in Chapter 1, approximately one million service members are expected to transition back into civilian culture (GAO, 2014) and that number is increasing according to the VA (2017). Subsequent sections within this chapter provide the theoretical grounding for this study. In an examination of the literature on the acculturation framework, the relevance of this concept to understanding service members' experiences in military–civilian transitions is also shown.

Service members experience a life very different from that of the average citizen. Dedication to the country, to their service branch, and the fight for the democracy will likely lead them into harm's way. For the past 15 years, over two million troops have fought in the longest war in America's history, which has significantly impacted the service members who have served during the War on Terror. Many members of the military who have served since September 11, 2001 have been deployed at least once to Iraq and Afghanistan. These veterans are returning home to face the process of transitioning out of the military back into civilian life. The purpose of this study is to investigate the process of transitioning for military members from the perspective of acculturation.

Overview of the Military

Historically, the U.S. Military service has been categorized as a "moratorium" in the transition to adulthood; this is to say it serves as a period or pause in which young men and women can postpone such adult responsibilities as marriage, childbearing, establishing a

household, and obtain a full-time career (Ketly, 2011). In past generations, for American recruits who were not looking to be career service members, military service was typically just that, a pause, enduring only a few years. Since 1973, however, the U.S. all-volunteer force has grown; and, military service has become less of an interval in the transition to adulthood, and more of an experience whereby young adults serve a 20-year career; many who enlist in the military to gain training, skills, or educational benefits to utilize for college (Kelty, 2011).

The current age configuration of the U.S. Military differs significantly from the civilian labor force. Throughout all military branches, approximately 50 percent of the force is between 17 and 24 years old. The age range of males and females in the military is similar, but there is a clear gender discrepancy with men significantly outnumbering women. Women make up approximately 15 percent of service members (Kelty, 2011).

The all-volunteer force relies on market changes in combination with individuals' desire to serve to fill its ranks. Numerous social-structural characteristics are imperative in determining not only who serves, but also the experiences they have while in service. The characteristics of age, gender, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, and social class are essential in deciding who enlists, what they do, and the experiences they have—all of which impact one's transition to adulthood in the military context (Kelty, 2011). Today's military force is more diverse than in previous wars; however, there is still an emphasis on young working- and middle-class recruits throughout the country. Research continues to indicate that individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to enlist in the military (Holyfield, 2011).

In 2009, the recruiting environment for the military has been particularly favorable. . Successful recruiting efforts are attributed to the continued weakness in the civilian labor market, which produced a lengthy period of historically high unemployment rates (GAO, 2014). Young

adults have experienced challenges finding employment. According to the Department of Labor, unemployment rates for 16- to 24-year-olds ranged from 15.5 percent to 18.4 percent during FY09 through FY13. As a result of this economic turmoil, most of the military branches have steadily met recruitment goals. Moreover, the recruiting environment has permitted recruiters to be increasingly selective in the quality of newly enlisted recruits, resulting in a notably higher compliance rating than ever before. (DoD, 2014).

While today's recruiting atmosphere continues to be advantageous for the military, it is important to plan for a future in which that is no longer the case. Without adequate preparation and resources, military recruiting will be described by "boom and bust" periods, as has been the case in previous years. Substantial care must be taken to guarantee recruiting-resource cuts are not so harsh that they cause recruiting failure and reduced military readiness when the economy recovers. Since the military does not provide for lateral entry, new accessions are both tomorrow's career force and tomorrow's leaders. If the military access low-quality recruits today, it threatens future readiness.

Military Culture

Culture has traditionally been defined as "the belief systems and value orientations that influence customs, norms, practices, and social institutions, including psychological processes (e.g., language, care taking practices, media, and educational systems) and organizations (e.g., media and educational systems)" (Storm et al., 2012, p.68). Part of the reason why military indoctrination has been so effective is because it occurs at an impressionable age when people are establishing their identity as a young adult. Being away from family with a desire to belong, young men and women n to tend define themselves within the military culture, impressing its belief systems (Grassman, 2009).

While culture is challenging to define, and most multicultural scholars acknowledge that there is diffusion and overlap between cultures, components of this definition apply to veteran status (Storm, 2012). First, inherent in military structures is the use of a shared language that helps in effective communication. A specialized vocabulary is imperative not only for proper communication, but it also helps soldiers to understand unspoken dynamics. Second, although each branch of the military has cultural components that are both distinctive to that branch and shared across branches, a specific cultural group or subgroup is defined, in part by a shared set of beliefs that affect the thinking and behavior of many members of the group. Among veterans, shared values arise from service to one's country, common training experiences, and a shared mission, specifically preparation for war and/or national defense (Storm et al, 2012). There is a set of fundamental cultural beliefs and norms that characterize veterans from civilians and these beliefs and their consequences hold substantial implications (Storm et al., 2012). The concept of a military sub-culture seems to initiate from both real-world experience, as well as the military and psychological literature (Storm et al., 2012).

The military is a distinct culture of its own. Goffman (1961) identifies the notion of a "total institution" as a rigid setting in which individual's identities are broken down, reformulated, and separated almost entirely from former identities in order to serve the institutional mission (Holyfield, 2011). This description, while originally used to describe an asylum, fits the military culture, which also has its established language, sets of rules, values, and rituals that are unique to it members and that must be acquired through indoctrination. Military principles set the standard for behavior, establishing rules to standardize all aspects of daily life for soldiers and military personnel (Rausch, 2013). Additionally, the military is subset of society. It represents complete culture governed by rules, traditions, values, and laws.

Entry into the Military

Many rules are established when members enlist in the military. In basic training (also termed recruit training or boot camp), new recruits learn how to be soldiers. It is undeniable that basic training is difficult: "Drill sergeants are tasked with weeding out those who are physically unfit or are not mentally ready for military service (Holyfield, 2011, p. 23)." Individual independence is not represented in the military culture; rather the military utilizes a collectivist approach (Rausch, 2013). Throughout the course of military training, a high value is placed on teamwork, leadership, loyalty, hierarchy, obedience, and community. An emphasis is placed on an authoritarian ideology, stressing the importance of discipline, control, rules, and regulations (Strom, 2012). Holyfield (2011) describes the entry into the military as an initiation of rites such as those found in basic training, which reflect a powerful transformation. Civilians experience other rites of passage in their communities or religions. Rites can intensify a service member's commitment to the military

As part of the military culture, service members are taught strategies during deployment, such as denial and emotional detachment to assist them in dealing with combat-associated stressors. These coping strategies, while effective in one specific set of circumstances (i.e., combat), may negatively affect post-deployment societal functioning (Rausch, 2013). Soldiers are expected to show no fear, sadness, or even joy; anger may be considered acceptable for men in some settings (Holyfield, 2011). However, "soldiers must embody mastery over weaponry, technology, and certain emotions – all things that threaten the rational. By successfully demonstrating mastery, individuals are implicitly actualizing the gendered division between rational and irrational, between men and women (Holyfield, 2011, p. 25)." Beginning in basic

training, military training teaches soldiers to shut off their emotions completely, a practice which is commonly known as the "soldier's switch (Holyfield, 2011)."

During Military Service

The military has been compared to sociologist Erving Goffman's explanation of a "total institution" as a rigid setting in which individual identities are broken down, reformulated, and separated almost completely from their former identities in order to serve the institutional mission. Another interpretation of this idea is to view the military as an exclusive community that necessarily defines itself in opposition to civilian life (Holyfield, 2011). Upon completion of basic training, service members receive their orders to report to their duty station where their mission begins. It is during their mission where they begin to implement the strategies for adapting to the new culture of the military that they learned in boot camp.

The soldier's switch (mentioned in **Entry into the Military**, above) is again emphasized and taught during deployment to help soldiers cope during combat. Another part of military rationale includes the use of edgework to make life-or-death decisions on the spot. "The term *edgework* was coined by sociologist Stephen Lyn to describe the purposeful activity of risk taking that involves negotiating the boundary between order chaos, life and death, sanity and insanity, and a desire to control the seemingly uncontrollable" (Holyfield, 2011, p. 47). Edgework is primarily understood in a masculine framework, which is motivated by a need to experience independence and self-mastery while being on the "edge" (Holyfield, 2011).

It is important to acknowledge that neither service members nor veterans form a wholly homogenous cultural group; instead, these groups comprise individuals from diverse backgrounds and interesting identities. However, based on aforementioned elements, it can be assumed that as service members, and veterans lived under a sub-culture that differs dramatically

from civilian culture, and that warrants distinctive clinical attention (Storm, 2012). While serving in the military, many service members become acclimated to its culture and structure of discipline and hierarchy. Service members give priority to the group over the individual (GAO, 2014). Once they separate from the military and become veterans, they must learn to become a civilian again. However, military beliefs continued to exert their influence throughout the individual's lifespan (Grassman, 2009).

Military culture often requires that its members identify exclusively with their military community by creating boundaries and moral grammar or common language to facilitate conformity and separation from solider and citizen. Military life results in a social identity that is developed through an overpowering identification with a single community. Additionally, joining any branch of the U.S. military translates into being a member of the "total institution" that is an exclusive community with stringent and binding rituals that demands extreme commitment and rigorous maintenance (Holyfield, 2011).

Service members ultimately do what they are told to do, and this is what they need to do in order to function effectively in the military and to stay alive. The structure of the military and the chain of command does not allow for any "back talk." Service members must follow orders and are accountable for accomplishing tasks. Control is crucial. It is important for service members to contain emotions and never show signs of weakness (Slone, 2008).

A common feature in the military culture is geographical intransience, i.e., service members are transferred among various duty stations in a variety of geographical locations during their tenure. These uprootings, while a necessary part of military operations, can limit the chances for military personnel to network and develop local community ties or learn about future career opportunities in those communities (Rausch, 2013). Military careers for service members

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are more likely chosen based on characteristics other than values and interest of the individual. (Rausch, 2013). Many men and women who join the military do not make it a career. The military is commonly viewed as a transition between high school and higher education or into the civilian workforce (Ketly, 2012). Veterans' choices concerning careers often reflect their social and cultural worlds. The cultural world experienced by veterans in the military will undeniably affect the process they will use to make future decisions (Rausch, 2013). At the end of their service, service members find themselves preparing to exit the culture to which they have grown accustomed and to return to a society that is now a very different for them.

Exiting the Military

Since 2001, the United States has deployed over two million soldiers to Iraq and Afghanistan. The Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts have created an influx of returning service members who are in need of assistance on a variety of levels. Increasing cultural competency includes understanding the military population. The sheer number of enlisted service members produces an extensive impact society as military personnel transition into civilian life at the end of their careers (Rausch, 2013). Veterans themselves feel the importance of this impact, as do their families, their workplaces, medical facilities, mental health services, and career counselors. Veterans who transition from the military culture to civilian life requires readjustment for veterans. Transition from the military culture to civilian life requires readjustment for veterans. Although individual soldiers separate from the military and are redefined as "veterans" on a regular basis, there is minimal understanding regarding their transition and future career advancement. Preparing veterans to handle the systemic influence of reintegrating into society depends on the availability of support (Rasuch, 2013).

Impacts of Serving in the OIF/OEF Wars: Social and Personal Development

Two Largest American Veterans impacted War

There are vast differences between Vietnam-era veterans and OEF/OIF veterans, two of the largest cohorts currently served within the VA and federal agencies. During the Vietnam era, the military comprised individuals who volunteered for service and those who were drafted. Comparatively, OEF/OIF veterans currently serve as a part of an all-volunteer force and substantial portions of OEF/OIF veterans are in the stages of life that involve securing self-identity and careers and forming and maintaining relationships (Strom, 2012).

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury

One of the most controversial discussions surrounding returning service members and veterans is their challenge of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD was not validated as an official diagnosis until 1980. However, that does not mean that it previously did not exist. Past generations referred to the same collection of symptoms as "battle fatigue" or "shell shock," and traits that are now clearly associated with PTSD can be traced back to biblical references that acknowledge these symptoms (Grassman, 2009).

It has been estimated at approximately 30 percent of returning veterans suffer from PTSD, a mild traumatic brain injury (TBI), or depression (Rausch, 2013). The acronym "PTSD" has gained frequent use in everyday conversation and popular literature to explain some of the mental disturbances that military members experience after combat. The stigma associated with seeking help for these mental issues is starting to change. In previous years, military personnel were expected to 'solider up' and overcome the turbulent times on their own (Hall, 2011). Many had been forewarned that pursuing professional help "could be detrimental to career advancement or seen as a sign of weakness by their chain of command" (Hall, 2011, pg. 15). The

mental concerns of PTSD, TBI, depression and other illnesses that soldiers face are becoming more intense and serious of the last decade and can no longer be ignored decade (Hall, 2011).

Veterans have described their traumatic experiences as having "fallen apart," and they struggle to rebuild after returning home (Rausch, 2013). Most soldiers who return from Iraq and Afghanistan will not experience the common physical injuries of war, but will experience PTSD. The new war injuries are TBI and PTSD, which are now known as America's diseases (Holyfield, 2011). Even veterans who do not have PTSD or TBI experience some disorientation upon re-entering the civilian workforce or classroom (Lafferty, 2008).

TBI is not an uncommon head injury, however it is not surprising that TBI rates from war injuries are high since soldiers, and others within a warzone, are exposed to suicide bombers, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), or explosive devices encountered while driving in convoys (Holyfield, 2011). Even when lives are spared in such explosions by the protection of, for example, armored vehicles, neurological brain damage can still result. Military service members who experience TBI often displays symptoms resembling those of PTSD by being hyper vigilant. However, they are very different conditions. PTSD has been described as a psychological disorder where a soldier remembers too much, whereas TBI is a physiological experience where they do not remember enough (Holyfield, 2011; VA 2017). Many military members with TBI have dizziness and difficulty balancing. Soldiers with PTSD re-experience the trauma through "recurring or intrusive recollections, distressing dreams or reliving experiences through hallucinations, illusions, or flashbacks (Holyfield, 2011, p. 116)."

PTSD is defined as the result of experiencing, witnessing, or being confronted with an event or involved in an actual or life threating injury (Holyfield, 2011). Symptoms of PTSD are now being described as conditions that last more than one month in duration and harm one's

social or work-related performance (Holyfield, 2011). In acknowledging the occurrence of these mental issues the U.S. military now offer programs to help soldiers cope with psychological problems and finish their deployments (Holyfield, 2011). Adjusting to life after combat with the diagnosis of PTSD and TBI can be difficult for military members and veterans.

Depression After the War

Recent studies GAO, 2014; Holyfield, 2011; Wands, 2013) have found a broad percentage of readjusting veterans who experience various mental health conditions. These studies indicated have found that at least one-quarter of readjusting OEF/OIF veterans had such conditions. The most prominent reasons are—post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression—that might affect their ability to successfully readjust to civilian life, such as their hyper vigilance, loss of structure, and always being on alert (GAO, 2014; Holyfield, 2011; Wands, 2013). According to the GAO, (2014), some groups of veterans could be more likely to experience readjustment problems or be diagnosed with a physical or mental condition than others (GAO, 2014; Holyfield, 2011; Wands, 2013), which affects family and social life.

Family and Social Support

Family and support systems play a vital role in the life of a service member and veteran. There are a variety of challenges that the military members and families face, these include: an comprehension of the acronyms, the rank and grade system, the beliefs and expectations—both spoken and unspoken—held by most who chose this lifestyle, the fears, goals, and difficulties of living with long and numerous absences of one parent as well as, mandatory frequent moves, and other indirect lifestyle changes that military families tolerate and survive with amazing resiliency and success (Hall, 2011). Also, it is important to be aware of unspoken rules and understand the restricted environment of the military with its many restrictions, rules, regulations, and traditions

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(Hall, 2011). Families go through the harsh experiences of war and living in fear for the lives of their loved ones. However, sometimes families are less inclined to share their issues of transitioning with their returning military member and the significant impact that it has also played on their lives.

The service members' devotion to the country and fellow soldiers can create difficulties for family. Military members may often view see themselves as part of what might be labeled as a second family (Hall, 2011). "While it has been shown that military service members who have solid families perform better on the job, it is always a difficult balancing act to be a part of two families who are so integral to the success of the mission (Hall, 2011, p. 13)."

Also, from the standpoint of the military's extended family style and strains, the mission takes priority, and consequently, military member's relationship with their peers is found to take preference over the relationship between the member and their spouse, children, or parents (Hall, 2011). "Although, the military may take precedence for the service member, family is still essential to the transitioning of military when the separate from their inherited family units" (Hall, 2011, p. 13).

As service members and veterans begin to work to readapt to civilian life, many veterans can experience relationship problems. Recent research showed some veterans expressed trouble adapting to family life, and often times they felt that they could not tell their families about their struggles (Rausch, 2013; Holyfield, 2011). Those veterans who talked to their families felt that their family members did not understand them very well (GAO, 2014). Transitioning to civilian life and healing emotional wounds often comes from talking with other veterans (Holyfield, 2011)

Furthermore, faith and spirituality was found as another form of support for veterans.

Spiritual health and well-being are considered helpful mitigating suicide risks and help to reduce discord in how the veteran deals with what they have experienced while in the military (Kopacz & Connery, 2015). Spiritual connectedness has been shown to provide a influential framework of meaning to help survivors in making sense of trauma and rejoining with their families, their communities, and God (Currier, Drescher, & Holland, 2016). Spirituality also has a direct role in alleviating PTSD in veterans; it can provide coping skills and bring about comfort to veterans who have had traumatic experiences. Prayer and meditation can aid individuals by providing a method to transcend symptoms and generate positive emotions during struggles with PTSD (Currier, Holland, & Drescher, 2015).

Theoretical Framework: Acculturation

The study will compare the process of transitioning to the acculturation process. Transitioning is defined as a process of step-by-step change, working throughout occurrences across a timeframe, and requiring adjustment through several of life's dimensions (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008). Transitioning is seen as manageable and understandable, and the person experiencing it can be aided while moving through the process (DiRamio et al., 2008). The more clearly service members understand the process of moving in, moving through, and moving out, the better the transition they may be able to make from their roles as service members to non-military society (Birchrest, 2013).

The traditional and respectable definition of acculturation is based on anthropologists' which describe it as understanding that "[a]cculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups" (Ozer, 2013, pg. 339). This definition emphasizes the belief of contact, reciprocal influence and change

in groups.

In 1967, Graves introduced the idea of *psychological acculturation*, referring to the changes in an individual who is a member in a culture contact situation, being swayed both directly by the external culture, and by the changing culture of which the individual is a member. There are two reasons for maintaining the cultural and psychological levels distinctions. The first level, is that cross-cultural psychology views individual human behavior as interrelating with the cultural environment within which it occurs. Given these two distinct levels of phenomena, separate ideas and measurements are required. The second level is that not all individuals enter into, and participate in, or change in the same way; there are vast individual differences in psychological acculturation, even among individuals who live in the same acculturative field. Namely, while general acculturation is taking place at the group level, individuals have variable degrees of participation in them, and variable goals to achieve from the contact situation.

Acculturation looks at the transitions of an individual within a new culture with a focus on the cultural change that an individual experiences while adapting to a new culture. However, acculturation is explained by Berry (2005) as the dual process of cultural and psychological transformation that occurs as a result of interaction between two or more cultural groups and their individual members. Berry, explains that even in separating psychology and culture, they both exist simultaneously in the person, and they can occur at different levels. Acculturation at the group level comprises of changes in social structures and organizations and cultural practices. The individual level of acculturation includes changes in a person's behavioral range. These cultural and psychological changes occur through a long-standing process, many taking years, generations, and even centuries (Berry, 2005). Acculturation is also d as a method of cultural and

psychological changes that contain numerous forms of shared accommodation, leading to longer-term psychological and sociocultural adjustments between both groups.

Change and contact occur for several of reasons, including colonization, military conquest, immigration, and sojourning dwelling (e.g., tourism, international study, and overseas posting); it endures after initial contact in culturally plural societies, where ethnocultural communities retain descriptions of their heritage cultures (Berry, 2005). Though acculturation is a process that remains for as long as there are culturally different groups in connection, some longer-term adjustment to living in culture-contact settings takes different forms resulting in some form of longer-term modification among the groups in contact (Berry, 1992). This often involves, learning each other's languages, partaking in each other's food preferences, and embracing forms of dress and social interactions that are characteristic of each group. Occasionally, these mutual adjustments take place rather easily, but they can also create culture conflict and acculturative stress during intercultural interactions (Berry, 1992).

A vital aspect of all acculturation phenomena is the adaptability with which they occur: there are large group and individual differences in the ways people decide to go about their acculturation (termed acculturation strategies), and in the level to which they attain acceptable adaptations. In addition to cultural group and individual differences, there are variations within families: among family members, acculturation often proceeds at different rates, and with different objectives, sometimes leading to an increase in divergence and stressing challenges to make adaptations (Berry, 1992).

Acculturation has been taking place since the earliest interactions occurred among differing societies; however, a contemporary interest in acculturation grew out of a concern for the effects of European domination of indigenous peoples (Berry, 1992). Later studies focused

on how immigrants changed following their entry and settlement into receiving societies (Berry, 1992). Veterans' experiences are similar to those of immigrants. When service members exit the military culture and enter into civilian culture as veterans, they leave their culture of origin and are forced to adapt to a new culture, while simultaneously trying to maintain their previous which is explained as dualist culture (Luedicke, 2011). Arguably, this dualist culture exists with service members who live in both the military and civilian culture.

In recent years work on acculturation have been involved with how ethnocultural groups relate to each other and change as a result of their attempts to live together in culturally plural societies. Currently, all three concentrations are important, as globalization results in ever-larger trading and political relations: Indigenous national populations experience neo-colonization and show opposition, while new waves of migrants, sojourners, and refugees stream from these economic and political changes, and large ethnocultural populations become established in most countries (Berry, 1992). There is an increasing concern that acculturation is happening among the long-settled populations, as they struggle to preserve their societies in the face of increasing cultural diversity in their midst. These two areas of interest (i.e., on the established as well as on the newer populations) embody the mutual or reciprocal nature of acculturation: everyone is involved, and everyone is doing it (Berry, 2005).

The first formulation of acculturation is seen as one aspect of the broader concept of culture change (resulting from intercultural contact), and is considered to produce change in ''either or both groups''; that is, acculturation occurs in the settled or dominant group as well as, in the non-dominant group. Acculturation is separated from assimilation (which may be ''at times a phase''); that is, there are many alternative courses and goals to the process of acculturation. These are important differences for psychological work. In the second definition,

some extra features are added including change that is indirect (not cultural but ''ecological'') and delayed (internal adjustments, presumably of both a cultural and psychological character take time). Significantly, acculturation can be ''reactive''; that is, by refusing the cultural power from the dominant group and changing back towards a more ''traditional'' way of life, rather than unsurprisingly towards a greater similarity with the dominant culture (Berry, 2005).

Acculturation Model and the Military

Recent research has started to connect the cultural impact that the military has on individuals. The body of literature of acculturation and its comparison to the experience to the military is limited. In 2013, Bichrest exhaustively reviewed veteran acculturation within the specific context of transitions by former military personnel into higher education, finding that the concepts of transitioning and acculturation for veterans were not new, but that scholarly works devoted to OIF/OEF/OND veterans as students were limited. Bichrest argued that a military culture clearly exists and the phenomenon of transitioning for service members into the world of academia appeared to fit the concept of acculturation (Bichrest, 2013). Service members experience a distinct, learned military culture that interfaces with the established existing civilian culture of origin and any of its sub-cultures (i.e., academia, workplace, etc.).

The phenomenological process of acculturation is often used to explain the individuals of different cultural backgrounds transitioning into another unfamiliar culture (Sam & Berry, 2009). Additionally, acculturation occurs as a result of contact with two or more cultures (Chirkov, 2008). Acculturation is also seen as a social process that happens in a framework of which newcomers and members of the host culture are in dynamic contact with one another. Acculturation is an important part of personal development (Bichrest, 2013). Acculturation is explained as, "what happens to individuals," who have developed in one cultural context, when

they attempt to live in a new cultural context (Berry, 1997; Simons, 1901; Teske & Nelson, 1974) – migrants adopt either assimilation, integration, segregation, or marginalization strategies, depending on their attitudes towards original and new cultural contexts (Berry, 1980, 1997).

Military members have endured experiences that could affect them for the rest of their lives (Slone, 2008). Military members have likely been surrounded by a totally different culture than that at home (Slone, 2008). Those that have experienced military would not question that they have become part of a new culture. The military functions within learned norms and behaviors. Understanding the military culture helps members to adjust to the military. They also tend to carry these traits and benefits that continue after their military tours or service. Furthermore, when member exit the culture, they must re-learn the norms and behavior of their culture of origin. Re-learning their original culture may seem easy, since it is their culture that they were raised in, but the culture that they are returning to may be different for each person. Additionally, traumas encountered during service may intensify the veteran's transition back into the original culture (Bichrest, 2013).

Oswald's study (1999 provided another crucial conceptual element that drastically shaped the subsequent consumer acculturation theory. Based on theoretical purposes, Oswald borrowed Berry's constructs of "home culture" from which they came and "host culture," into which they enter, initially created to gauge an immigrant's tendency to accept or reject either of two homogeneous systems of meaning. Whereas Peñaloza (1994) referred to these areas carefully as "culture of origin" and "culture of residence" to prevent compromising on potential cultural diversity, many post-1999 studies readily adopted Oswald's dualistic home/host notation without questioning its reductionist style (Luedicke, 2011).

The concept of transition as acculturation in relation to the experience of veterans is a growing phenomenon. There has been research that correlates an individual's veteran status with their level of success outside of the military (Bichrest, 2013). Such research and ideas support the notion of a need to understand veterans as distinctive culture groups in order to better assist their acculturation. This means that military personnel returning from Afghanistan and Iraq back to our society must meet the needs of these veterans on their terms, to assist in their acculturation according to their individual needs (Bichrest, 2013). Also, many veterans were accustomed to being "out of the country," and once discharged from active duty and assuming veteran status, they remained "out of country" even in their own country (Grassman, 2009). Furthermore, a recent study on military service members transitioning to college explained that military service members adopted a bi-cultural literacy in which they successfully adapted and functioned in both cultures (Rumann & Hamrick, 2015).

Chapter 2 Summary

Military members experience two cultures: their culture of origin and military culture. This chapter provided a literature review of military culture, the impacts of serving in the OIF/OEF wars, and the role of family and social support within military culture. Finally, it reviewed acculturation as a framework that can be used to more accurately understand and explain the process of transitioning for military members between two cultures. Acculturation occurs as a result of an individual's contact with two or more cultures, which is what service members experience upon entering and exiting the military. Transitioning between military and civilian cultures requires a process, much like ethnocultural transitions; and, the acculturation perspective considers culture as an integral part of the transitioning process. Chapter 4 will delineate the phenomenological research design of the study.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of OEF/OID veterans' personal experience with transitioning into civilian life following military service. To this end, a qualitative phenomenological approach was used to explore, while maintaining an acculturation perspective, the phenomenon of military–civilian transitioning. The rationale for using this approach was discussed in Chapter 2 and will be further described below. The investigation conducted 20 in-depth interviews with veterans according to phenomenological research methodology as described within this chapter.

Qualitative Approaches to Inquiry

Phenomenological research is a type of qualitative research. The *lived phenomenon* is the real-life experiences of individuals in regard to a particular phenomenon and how they interpret those experiences (Creswell, 2013). The primary purpose of phenomenology is to distill people's experiences with a phenomenon into a universal principle (Creswell, 2013). For this study, the approach enabled an exploration of the lived experience of veterans in order to determine the essence of the military–civilian transition phenomenon, which arises from the cultural change service members undergo when reentering a civilian society. Qualitative methods allowed the study to capture the perceptions of veterans in interviews and to develop themes that emerged from their voices. Creswell (2013) explained *phenomenology* is not only a description, but it is also an interpretive process wherein the researcher interprets meaning from lived experiences. The phenomenological research methodology defined by Creswell (2013) and Moustakas (1994) was deemed the best approach for this inquiry and will be described within the next sections.

Rationale for Qualitative Design

Denzin and Lincoln (2013) noted that use of the word *qualitative* places importance on the qualities of entities and on procedures and meanings that are not experimentally studied or measured in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency. Qualitative researchers emphasize the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and the information being studied. While quantitative research has yielded data on the subject of military service members attending TAP and the population of each branch (GAO, 2014), there are still limited data on the lived experiences of the transition process from military back to civilian culture. Qualitative research appears to be the most effective way to capture the essence of the transition process. The social constructivism framework also aligns with the qualitative research of military transition by focusing in on the participant views of the situations (Creswell, 2013).

Qualitative Process for Phenomenology Research

Moustakas' (1994) procedure as revised by Creswell (pg. 60-61,2013) will be applied utilizing its systematic steps in data-analysis and guidelines for assembling the textual and structural descriptions of the study. The following are the indicated procedural steps:

- The researcher determines if the research problem is best-examined using phenomenological approach. The type of problem best suited for this form of research is one in which it is important to understand several individuals' common or lived experiences of a phenomenon.

- A phenomenon of interest to study.

- The researcher recognizes and specifies the broad philosophical assumptions of phenomenology. Researchers must bracket out, as much as possible, their own experiences.

- Data are collected from the individuals who have experienced the phenomenon. Polkinghorne (1989) recommends that researchers interview from 5-25 individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon.

- The participants are asked two broad, general questions (Moustakas, 1994): What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon? What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon?

- Phenomenological data analysis, which includes building on the data from the first and second research questions and highlighting significant statements, sentences, or quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon.

- Use textural description by writing the statements and themes of the description of what the participants experienced. The researcher may also use structural description to write a description of the context or setting that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon. Researchers can also write about their own experiences and the context and situations that have influenced their experiences.

- From the structural and textural descriptions, the researcher then writes a composite description that presents the "essence" of the phenomenon called the essential, invariant structure (or essence).

Research Participants

The study focused on veterans who served during the Operating Iraq Freedom (OIF), Operating Enduring Freedom (OEF), and Operating New Dawn (OND) campaigns. The participants in this study are persons who met the following criteria:

1. Served in the Air Force, Army, Coast Guard, Marine Corps, or Navy or during the any of the OIF/OEF/OND campaigns.

2. Must have transitioned out of the military within the last 16 years, on or after September 11, 2001.

3. Must have experienced the TAP program offered through the DoD.

A total of 20 participants were selected to participate in the study. The participants were recruited through the Nevada System of Higher Education (NSHE), Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs), and snowball sampling. Participants are interviewed onsite at the NSHE Institution or at another local site acceptable to the participant. The participants served as either enlisted and/or officers, OIF/OEF veterans who transitioned within the last 15 years, and served in four of the five branches of the military.

Data Collection Procedures

The data were collected through the use of a voice recorder to record the interviews that ranged from 32-72 minutes long. The interviews were, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with participants. The participants were asked a total of eleven questions. The interviews were then transcribed and analyzed for emergent themes.

Interview Questions

   The purpose of this research study is to gain insight and understanding about the experiences of veterans who have transition from the military and back in to civilian life. Participation in this study was completely voluntary. The interviewees had no obligation to answer the questions and could choose to withdraw from the study at any time. The 60-minute interview was digitally recorded (audio) with the consent of the interviewee.

Demographical questions

1. When did you join the military?

2. What branch did you join?

3. How long did you serve?

4. What rank were you when you separated from the military?

Transitional Questions (Acculturation perspective)

1. What kind of programs or assistance did you receive before separation?

2. Explain your process of separating from the military?

3. What strategies/steps did you use to transition?

4. What recommendations do you have for services members/veterans transitioning into civilian life?

5. What type of assistance did you receive from the VA, social groups, friends, and family to help you transition back into the civilian life?

6. What recommendations do you have for the military transitioning assistance program (TAP)?

7. Please give an example of any challenges that you experienced during your transitioning process?

This research information provided by the interviewees will be completely confidential, and a pseudonym will be used to identify participants. Participants' personal identity and other personal details will not be released. All of the interview recordings will be secured according to the Human Subjects (IRB) guidelines.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed by using a coding method. Information was coded using the Excel and Word documents to categories and code the information. The data were secured per the requirements of the use of human subjects and confidentiality of the participants was upheld and pseudonyms were used.

Reliability

Creswell (2013) explains that reliability can be enhanced if the researcher keeps detailed field notes and utilizes a good-quality recording device. The tape also needs to be transcribed to indicate the trivial, but often crucial, pauses and overlaps. Additional coding can be done "blind" with the coding staff and the analysts conducting their research without knowledge of the expectations and questions of the project directors, and by use of computer programs to help in recording and analyzing data (Creswell, 2013).

Ethical Considerations

Researcher's Standards

As the researcher, it is imperative to be objective and allow the data to speak for itself. It is important to acknowledge that the researcher have supported veteran family members who have served during the current War on Terror, and her father is a retired Navy Master Chief. The researcher has witnessed the transitional changes veterans face both personally and professionally. Also, the researcher has been employed by the U.S. Department of Veterans

Affairs (VA) within the VA of Southern Nevada Healthcare System in its Education Department for more than five years (2012–2017). As a VA employee, the researcher had the opportunity to directly interact with veterans and serve them. The researcher experienced the systemic structure of the VA and the attempt to improve the programs and services provided to veterans.

The approach to this study was to gain knowledge about the challenges of veterans during the transition process and possibly provide insightful research to the VA to use in future programming efforts. The researcher worked to be objective and adhere to *epoché,* which Moustakas (1994) defines as, "refraining from judgment, to abstain from or stay away from the everyday, ordinary way of perceiving things." The researcher sought new ways of looking at the findings, and to objectively review the information that is reflected in the data, by relying on the data to reveal the issues, and not to assume what they findings were prior to conducting the research.

Trustworthiness of Data

Trustworthiness is vital in qualitative data. Trustworthiness can be explained as the rigorous process researchers take to ensure that their study meets the standards of qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). In qualitative research, trustworthiness should be performed regardless of the type of research and specific attention should be given to trustworthiness in data collection, analysis, interpretation, and the presentation of the findings (Creswell, 2013). Creswell (2013) also expands the term trustworthiness to include *validation* and employing validation strategies for all types of qualitative research.

The validation strategies employed in this study included the following (Creswell, 2013 pg. 250-253):

1. *Prolonged engagement and persistent observation* in the field including building trust with participants, learning the culture, and checking for misinformation that stems from distortions introduced by the researcher or informants. In the field, the researcher makes decisions about what is salient to study, relevant to the purpose of the study, and of interest for focus.

2. *Peer review or debriefing* provides an external check of the research process. Lincoln and Guba (1985) define the role of the peer debriefer, an individual who keeps the researcher honest. This reviewer may be a peer, and both the peer and the researcher keep written accounts of the sessions, called "peer debriefing sessions."

3. *Negative case analysis*, the researcher refines working hypotheses as the inquiry advances in light of negative or disconfirming evidence. Not all evidence will fit the pattern of a code or a theme.

4. *Clarifying researcher bias* from the outset of the study is important so that the reader understands the research position and any biases or assumptions that impact the inquiry. In this clarification, the researcher comments on past experiences, biases, prejudices, and orientations that have likely shaped the interpretation and to the study.

5. In *member checking*, the researcher solicits participants' views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations. This technique is considered by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to be the "most critical technique for establishing creditability. This approach, *writ large* in most qualitative studies, involves taking data, analyses, interpretation, and conclusions back to the participants so that they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account.

6. *Rich, thick description* allows readers to make decisions regarding transferability. The writer describes in detail the participants or setting under study. With such detailed description, the researcher enables readers to transfer information to other settings and to determine whether the findings can be transferred "because of characteristics" (Erlandson et al., 1993 p. 32). Thick description means that the researcher provides details when describing a case or when writing a theme.

7. *External audits* allow an external consultant, the auditor, to examine both the process and product of the account assessing their accuracy. This auditor should have no connections to the study.

The strategies listed above by Creswell (2013) were employed by the researcher to increase trustworthiness of the study. Having each interviewee review the consent agreement prior to conducting the interview was employed per Creswell's strategy (2013). Also, taking notes and transcriptions were important to collecting accurate data. However, due to the sensitivity of the topic, the researcher decided that it may be disturbing to the participant to read over and process their detailed personal and heart-wrenching accounts of their stores. The transcripts may evoke other emotions, feelings, or possible outbursts. Also, many of the participants are still recovering from a variety of mental issues. As a result, each participant was if they wanted to see excerpts that were used in the study to tell their stories. Ultimately, it was left up to the individual to decide to review it or not.

Institutional Review Board (IRB) and Informed Consent

Informed consent and approval of all instruments and methodology was sought through UNLV's Office for the Protection of Research Subjects (OPRS) and granted approval and an exemption in April 2017.

Limitations

The limitations of this qualitative research study are the following: (1) A criterion of a minimum of 20 participants. However, having a sample size of more than 20 may provide a broader perspective of the issues with transitioning, and specific experiences that may occur during the process. It may also allow for some quantitative research and provide cross-reference data. (2) As is common in all qualitative research, the potential exists for researcher bias as well as a lack of control over the attitudes, perceptions, and experiences of the participant/interviewees. (3) The researcher lacks control over the level of willingness a given veteran has to be candid about their experiences and ability to feel comfortable enough to share their stories.

The study is also limited because the research method will primarily focus on interviews. It necessarily cannot include observations within assistance-program settings or analysis of assistance program documentation due to the sensitivity of the topic and maintaining the confidentiality of the subjects. Unfortunately, the lack of observations and agency documentation eliminates the possibility of performing the triangulations that are often used in the analysis of qualitative data.

Delimitations

Many external factors such as the role of the government can influence the study and the transition programs that are currently offered. The study focused mainly on the research and data collected on the veterans' lived experience transitioning between the military, in seeking to learn about their experiences entering the military, while they were in the military, and exiting the military. Therefore, this study will proceed on the following assumptions:

1. The participants (male/female) have served within the last 15 years in any branch of the military. During the OIF/OEF/OND campaigns/wars.

2. The participants are in the process or have experienced the process of transitioning out of the military back into civilian life.

3. Providing semi-structured interview questions to help address the concerns with transitioning and allow for participants to give their personal stories.

4. The interpretation of the data collected accurately reflects the perception of the participating respondents.

This study was delimited by the researcher in the following ways: (1) the study explored the experiences of separated veterans who served during the OIF/OEF/OND wars and their personal and professional process of transitioning out of the military; (2) The selection of the veterans was generated from a combination of veteran students from the Nevada System of Higher Education (NSHE) and Veteran Services Organizations (VSOs); and (3) veterans were recruited using snowball sample or chain leads referred to the researcher by individuals who were aware of other veterans who met the criteria of the study.

Table 1. *Connections Between the Research and Interview Questions*

Research Questions	*Focus Area*	*Interview Question*
1. What was the service members' experience transitioning between the military to civilian culture?	• Entering the Military • While in the Military • Exiting the Military	When did you enter the military? What branch did you join? How long did you serve? What was your rank when you separated?
2. What strategies or steps did the veteran employ while transitioning back into the civilian culture?	• Integration • Assimilation • Separation • Marginalization	• What kind of programs or assistance did your receive before separation? • Explain your process of separating from the military? • What strategies/steps did you use to transition? • What type of assistance did you receive from the VA, social groups, friends and family to help you transition back into civilian life? • What recommendations do you have for the military transitioning assistance programs (TAP)? • Please give an example of a challenge you experienced during your transition.

Chapter Summary

This study aimed to investigate the transitioning process for veterans as revealed by the

analysis, through the lens of acculturation, of their own accounts of their lived experiences. The

focused on the difficulties that veterans face transitioning from the military back into civilian life.

Participants comprised 20 veterans with the following characteristics: 1. Served during in the

Army, Air Force, Marines, Navy, or Coast Guard during the any of the OIF/OEF/OND

campaigns. 2. Must have transitioned out of the military within the last 15 years, during or after

September 11, 2001. 3. Must have experienced the TAP program offered through the DoD.

Using a phenomenological approach, I devised a series of questions with which to collect

qualitative data from the participants in the form of interviews. Analyses of these data will be the

subject of Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

As described in Chapter 3, this investigation into the transition experience of veterans used a phenomenological study design. Qualitative data, in the form of interviews, were collected from 20 veterans who served during the post-9/11 conflicts, which are still ongoing. Chapter 4 will present excerpts of their lived experiences: Rich, in-depth, personal accounts of reestablishing oneself in a civilian life (and culture) that had been left behind to join the Armed Forces. It is important to note that acronyms constitute part of military language; in describing their specific experiences, participating veterans used many acronyms. To elucidate the meaning of these terms without changing the voice of the respondent, the acronyms are spelled out in brackets immediately following its first use. Respondents' names have been changed to protect their identities. Another finding was that most of the participants were eager and willing to share their military experiences. Some were a little shy, initially, but when they began to speak, their words flowed out powerfully to produce a heartfelt story of their lives during and after the military. They seemed to feel proud of their service and honored that they were asked about their experiences.

Analysis

Analysis involved an in-depth review of written field notes and recordings of each interview that were obtained with respondents' consent. The 20 individual interviews lasted between 32 and 115 minutes. Most respondents were eager to talk and tell their stories, however, there were some who were still processing their experience and were not as comfortable sharing personal information. In an effort to make a connection with each veteran, the researcher told him or her about her experience being a daughter of a retired Navy Master Chief and working for the Department of Veteran's Affairs (VA). The researcher also shared her passion for veteran

issues, which helped to develop a bond with the veterans. Based on several years of experience working with veterans, the researcher observed how much many veterans value and respond to expressions of respect, connection, and compassion. It was important to the researcher that they knew, in the interview, that she wanted to help them and others to have a positive experience transitioning out of the military.

Within this chapter, respondents have been grouped according to one of four categories of separation, in other words, the reason for their transitioning out of the military. The categories are as follows: *Medical Discharge*; *Chose Not to Re-enlist*; *Voluntary Separation*; and *Retirement*. Figure 3 illustrates the breakdown of respondents in each category.
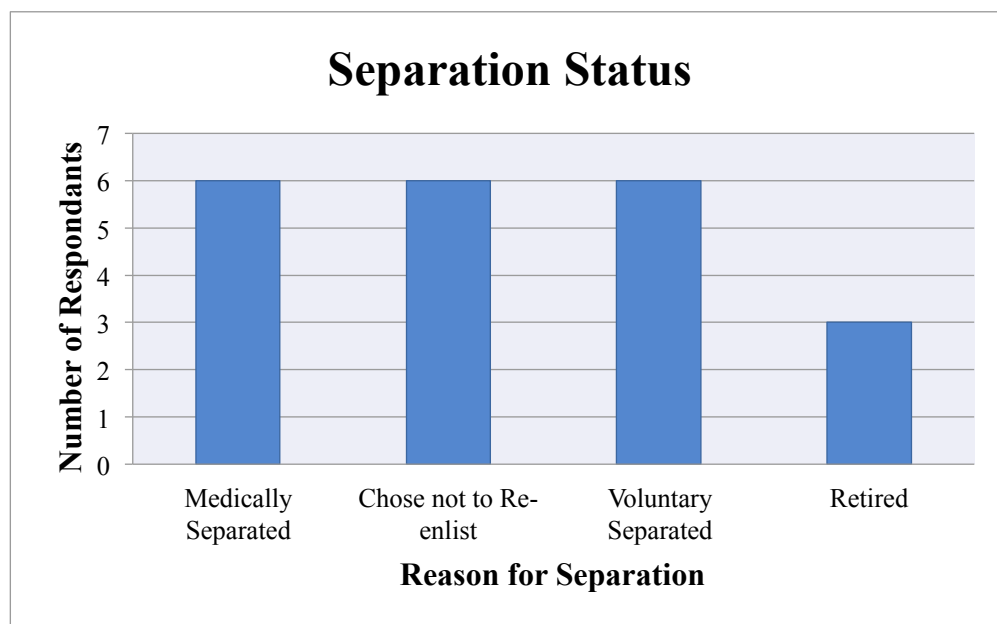
Figure 3. Number of Respondents in Each Category of Military Separation.

Medical Discharge – Lacking the Physical Ability to Serve

Six of the 20 veterans interviewed were medically discharged. It is clear that this reason for separation, from the perspective of the veteran, felt like being "forced out." Some were aware of their conditions, while others were not. Respondents in this category did not believe their

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conditions would keep them from serving in the military until they were faced with the

determinations of their Medical Evaluation Board (MEB) and Physical Evaluation Board (PEB).

The MEB is made up of at least two medical doctors, who prepare recommendations for the PEB.

Following receipt of these recommendations, the PEB makes a formal decision regarding

whether a service member is fit or unfit for continued service. Six veterans in this study were

declared unfit for duty and therefore were released from military service. The stories within this

section reveal the process of transitioning after medically separation.

Linda

Linda is a female veteran who joined the military right before 9/11. Linda served in the

U.S. Army in active duty for 12 years and seven months. She planned on making the military her

career until an accident interfered with her ability to serve. She explained that it was not her

choice to get out of the military,

> …[my separation] was forced because I was medically discharged. I got injured during
>
> like a competition. I fell off a 12-foot wall. I was a Non-Commissioned Officer, who was
>
> a military competition, and then I fell off a 12-foot wall during the obstacle course, and
>
> that started my injury. It wasn't combat related but it was still an injury.

> Linda's injury had an impact on her physical abilities in the military. She explained:

> I can't run as much as I could and it actually affected my physical fitness, like how I
>
> tested during that time, because you know we have physical fitness tests. So instead of
>
> running I would basically walk. And I didn't listen to the doctors so I kept running and it
>
> got worse. Because, you know being, I was a medic. I was a medic. So, worst patients are
>
> medics. So, we think that we can treat ourselves. And I was like, 'Oh, I can take off

running,' and it got worse and worse and worse and worse, to the point where I can't really run anymore.

Jeffery

Jeffery is a Purple Heart veteran, which means he was wounded during combat. He joined the Army in 2008 and departed as a Sergeant (E-5). He told his story about transitioning from the military after nearly seven years of service. He explained his story:

> In my case it was different because I was wounded in combat, so I went to a medical board. So, my transition, as you said, was not quite as smooth, but it was more help. It was more helpful than the rest of the people who transition out because TAPS is only a one-week program.

Jeffery enrolled in school while he was still in the military because of the time he had been given to recover from his injury:

> The only time that I was in school was after I was wounded in combat because I had more time. I was in the Warrior Transition Battalion, so there was more of recovery, get better to see whether you're going to stay in the military or you're going to separate or were they going to separate me through a medical board. So, I had time for that for me to be able to go to school and do internships and things like that for me to, you know, better prepare myself to, you know, to transition out of the military.

He also explained what happened to him while his was recovering from him injury:

> They gave me a choice. I mean, I had a choice whether to recover at least 100 percent for me to get back to active duty. But I had to change my job in the military, and so that's when I realized, 'You know what? No.' I don't want to do it. I'd rather just get out through the medical board and get medical retirement from the Army and also get all my

benefits through the VA while I transition out of the military. I made sure that happened first before I can actually say, 'You know what? Yes, I'm going to get out.' But that is to show is that the Army gave me either, like I said, medical board or stay in but have to change my MOS [Military Occupational Specialty].

Jeffery shared his experience with the medical examination board process:

It is very long. It took me almost two years for me to actually finish it, to get out and make sure that I got all my benefits because the Army didn't want to fully medically retire me. They wanted to put me on a what's called 'TDRL' [Temporary Disability Retired List]…I just forgot what it stands for. It was saying that I was not…I was still fit for the military, but I have to, I was able to get out, continue my medical process on the VA side, and then when the VA says, 'You know what? He is good to go.' The Army can call me back into service.

During this process Jeffery was deemed temporality disabled, while on active duty. The Army was also still paying him during this time. He said:

Every year I was going to be doing some kind of an evaluation through the VA to see how I was doing physically and mentally, if I was still fit for duty, and then the VA said, 'yes,' you know, 'we think that he's good to go.' [And] the Army can call me back if they need me. If not, I was going to get my DD 214 and be finally out of the military. The VA said, 'You know what? He's a 100 percent disabled veteran.' It's going to be pretty much at that time they're going to consider him as a veteran already because they knew I was going to be, I was going to get out. But the Army didn't want to do it that way. The Army is the one who say, 'You know what? We think you're *temporarily* disabled. We want to keep you in.' But then I was going through just so much that I was like, 'You

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know what? I don't want to stay in anymore,' I just said. I call the Warrior's Transition

Battalion, 'a black hole of the Army'.

Jeffery explained the strategies that he used to transition back into the civilian world:

The strategies that I used were, of course, I went back to school while I was transitioning

out of the military. Definitely get as many of the college credits paid for from the military,

so you know, I will save my GI Bill when I get out. So, I was able to get at least 20, I

think it was 21 credit hours, before I transitioned out within a two-year period, and also,

they had this program that was called, well, only for wounded warriors, that was called

Operational War Fires, where it was this program that will put transition Active Reserve

or National Guard that are going through transition to be able to go and do an internship

with whatever department they wish to go for. I decided to go with the Department of

Homeland Security because I'm very interested in Homeland Security. So, I did about an

eight-month internship with TSA [Transport Security Administration].

Connie

Connie, who had joined the U.S. Air Force in November 2006, appeared to be very

emotional in telling her story about transitioning out of the military. Connie did make the choice

to separate, but received a medical discharge. "I did not elect to get out and I think that's one of

the things that makes me the saddest about looking back over everything, because I was

medically separated." Connie recalled she actually joined on Halloween, but, due to a lockdown,

she stayed in the hotel until the next day. Connie's boot camp experience began on November 1.

She explained why she chose to join the Air Force:

It is a funny story and I still laugh about it till this day. My dad is a retired Naval officer

and I still remember going on his ships when I was little, like I remember the way the

ship smelled, the way the paint felt, like all that diesel smell. I remember it really well, but when I considered going into the military and told my dad about it, he said, 'well, you can go into the Air Force.' So, I thought it was really weird that my dad was not going to let me join the Navy like he did, but I was like, 'alright that's fine.' I mean, I have heard good stuff about the Air Force, I guess that's what I will do. So, that was what I did.

As previously stated, it was not Connie's choice to get out of the military, and as she started to tell her story she became emotional:

I did not elect to get out, and I think that's one of the things that makes me the saddest about looking back over everything, because I was medically separated. Back when I started my med board, it was actually really funny the way I even found out about my med board. I did not have a really great relationship with my primary care manager, my Primary Care Manager (PCM) at the time, but I had gone in because I had this just awful cold, like I felt like I was dying. I was literally just lying on the bed that they give you in the office just feeling like a dog's butt. She came in and she was like, 'oh yeah, it looks like you've got a cold and, you know, while you're here, let's talk about your med board.' I was just kind of, like—it took me a second to even process what she was saying— because I was like, 'What?' I was like, 'I am here because I am sick.' And she's like, 'Oh,' —and I'll never forget these words, like it is engraved into my mind—she's like, 'oh well, you've never done well with colds.' And it was just kind of like, I felt like I had been suckered into a trap because I was there because I was sick. Like I had made the appointment because I was sick, like I wanted to find out what was going on with me, get some care recommendations, you know if I was so sick that I needed to be on quarters or was going to infect people, find out about that and instead of addressing the issues that I

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was there for, she was like, 'We are going to med board you.' It was, I like, broke down.

I like called my supervisor because I don't understand, like, and I'm sick while this is

going on, so it was a really bad experience.

Connie explained her medical examination board experience:

So, for this med board, there are different processes that it goes through, there are

different steps and they would tell me what the next step was and they would say, 'okay,

it is going to take three months.' So, when you are a single parent and you know you are

going to be getting out of the military, you are thinking about a lot of things. One of the

main things that I did not choose to get out; it was thrust upon me. Involuntarily

separated through a med board. I was really unlucky because when I got out, the way the

process was is the military gives you a disability rating and then they would send all your

paperwork to the VA to get your VA disability rating. The process is a lot more

streamlined now, so that when people get out, they get their rating, it's all in one, it's

packaged and good to go. They do not have to wait like I did, but I will never forget that

when they told me, the military, they are like, 'you are 10 percent disabled.' So, I was

like, 'Let me get this straight. I am so broken and fucked up and destroyed that you don't

want me in the military, but I am only 10 percent? That's messed up.' It felt like they had

just done whatever they had done to just push me out, and it really hurt because it was

like, you are too broken to stay in, but you are barely broken. It was kind of like you guys

need to make up your mind where which one it is, like, 'Am I broken or not?'

Connie's transitioning process was made even more difficult by marital issues. At the

time, she was going through a divorce, and she had a toddler to think about. She was always

concerned about her son's welfare and the possibility of his father taking him from her.

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U.S. Coast Guard veteran Samantha joined the Coast Guard in 2011. She served a total of 16 months and separated as an E-5 Cadet. Samantha, like Connie, underwent a medical separation due to a medical board decision. She tried to appeal the process, but her appeal was denied. She is still unsure as to why she was 'forced out.' She felt isolated from the military community that she had come to love. She had come from a family of Coast Guards, and she had planned to make a career in the Coast Guard as a medical doctor. During the separation process, she expressed concern as to what she was going to do with her life. Reflecting on that time, she said, "I loved the military. It was a big part of my life." She sought connection, but did not have anyone in the military with whom she felt she could confide. She ended up reaching out to her family, which helped her through this difficult time in her life. She said she felt sad and depressed for months, and felt like she was nothing without the military.

Larry

Larry is a combat veteran, who served in the Army for 10 years, 9 months. Prior to our interview, Larry walks around campus with a service dog, and appears to be very friendly. However, after attending one of the veterans' events on campus to promote my study and seek volunteers, he was one of the many who signed up right away. Larry, who was diagnosed with PTSD in April 2009, felt his transition experience differed from those of others. Already injured, he was transferred to Fort Erwin where he was re-injured and started experiencing mini strokes. His emotional, mental, and physical issues led to alcohol dependency. A Sergeant Major talked to him about his future and encouraged him to stay in the military, but because of his health issues, he eventually went before a medical board. In 2012, he was sent to a Naval Medical Center in San Diego. During his 14 months there, he began TAP. Larry's TAP benefits included career counseling, a therapist team, an education specialist, and a social security recruiter. He

explained that he went straight into school following his separation because his particular TAP program had prepared him to do so. He received comprehensive care and was provided regular checks because he was a wounded veteran. Regarding his time at Naval Center, he said:

> The first three months were stressful. I had a hard time, but the community came together and connected to me. I have been out for four years and they still follow-up. There were about 40 soldiers in my program. They try to make sure to release you to a unit closer to home. I spent 14 months day in and out getting physically and mentally healthy. I spent 56 days in patient care and eight weeks in outpatient care.

Larry felt his most difficult challenge with transitioning was going to school and entering the workforce. He placed a great deal of importance on camaraderie, continuing relationships with other veterans, and being involved by joining non-profit organizations like Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and U.S. Vets, and going to the VA Hospital. He also stated that a week (four to five days) of TAP is not sufficient to cover everything one needs to know to get out. Service members need more assistance and "a lot of soldiers don't like to ask for help."

Chose Not to Re-enlist – Getting Out and Moving On

Ralph

Ralph shared his story about being 18 years old and joining the U.S. Marine Corps in January 2009. He joined right out of high school, as did many service members with the hopes of serving his country, finding his way, and making a difference in the world. He served for a total of four years of active duty, and according to his contract, he remained four additional years on an Individual Ready Reserve (IRR) contract. According to Ralph (2017) the IRR contract allows the government to contact the enlistee at any time it deems necessary until the contract period is

up. Ralph began his story of transitioning out of the Marine Corps, which repeated a frequent refrain of respondents in this study. Ralph explains:

> There were no organizations or individuals that reached out to him to aid in the transition process. I did not have any help. It was hard for a while. Unemployment was the only income I had coming in. I applied for jobs before leaving the military but I could not get employment.

Perhaps Ralph's difficulties in obtaining employment can be attributed to the economic recession that was underway in the U.S. when he got out. To his credit, he had saved money over the years. When he separated from the military two months early, he could still count on two more paychecks. Afterwards, he was forced to file for unemployment for approximately one year. If he hadn't saved the money that he did, his family would have truly suffered.

Al

Al is a U.S. Army veteran that served six years in active duty and two in the reserves. During this time, he was able to use his GI Bill benefits to obtain an Associate's degree. Regarding his experience leaving the Army, Al said that he went through a transition program. He described it as "a still-new program" that included a checklist to help the participant fulfill all the requirements necessary to get out. He stated:

> You just get out thinking—or shall I say, not thinking—you just get out and just transition, not even transition, because you are still an American citizen. You feel, well, I am just going to do what everybody else does and then you realize it is not the same, but you are never exposed to that until you are out. And once you're out, you're out. Could I have turned around and gone back in? Probably. Did I want to? No. Most of us when we get out, we are happy to get out.

Once out of the military, Al eventually found employment at a local casino. He did not know what benefits he was eligible for until he started talking to a co-worker at the casino. At the time, Al was experiencing some troubling health conditions and needed to do something. Al expressed:

I said, 'This is not working. I gotta do something.' And, someone told me, 'well if you were in the military.' A friend of mine who was a security guard, he says, 'well, why don't you go to the VA and see what they can do for you because you have a heart condition, and it was diagnosed in the military.' I was like, 'yeah.' So, I found out where the VA enrollment thing was, which was on 916 Owens, and I went there and told them what was going on with my heart. I kept having issues with my heart, and they sent me to a cardiologist …Did all of this and he says then, 'you had an incident with your heart?' '—Yeah.' '…and they discovered such and such?' '—Yes.' '…and hypertension?' '—Yes.' So, hypertension and cardiovascular, enlarged left atrium with hypertrophy, whatever. It was like all that. He says, 'and you are not rated?' I said, 'no. What is it to be rated?' And that is when I found out about being service connected. This was four or five years in Vegas before I found out about this. It was 2006. I think I got probably my first check in 2007.

Al explains most of the information he learned about ratings, healthcare, and other services were through word-of-mouth advice of friends and acquaintances and not through the military.

Jasmine

Jasmine shared a heart-touching story about her challenges with joining the military as a Reservist, but since the country was at war she was called to serve two 1- year tours in

Afghanistan. Jasmine served a total of six years as a Sergeant (E-5) in a combination of active duty and reserve service. She gave a real-life perspective on what happens to some service members after they get out of the military. Jasmine joined the Army as a young lady in 2003. She had no work experience when she joined, and like many service members, she did not have anyone close to her in the military.

When Jasmine joined, she had the desire to become a photographer, but had to engage in some surprising conversations and maneuvers in order to eventually spend time in a unit with photography and receive training. After a tough battle with her sergeant, Jasmine was eventually sent to photography school. Later, after her second tour to the Middle East, Jasmine tried to go on Inactive Ready Reserve status. She said:

> But when I got out, there was nothing. I talked to the incoming company commander, and I basically said like, 'I did two tours, I'm tired. I don't want to do this anymore, and my contract is going to expire anyway.' I said, 'Great.' I pretty much did just under seven years because I went to go talk to him in February or March of 2010, and that's when he let me sign my papers. My contract was going to expire in August of 2011. So that's all that it was. I was able to talk to the company commander. He said, 'Are you sure you want to get out?' And I said 'Yep.' And he said, 'Okay,' with that, and they sent me the paperwork from an e-mail. I signed it, sent it back, and that was it.

Jasmine did not attend any type of transition assistance program when she got out of the military. According to Jasmine she received:

> Nothing. The only time I received any type of anything was when we came back from tours. So, the first tour was pretty much nonexistent, pretty much, 'You are eligible for the VA, don't drink, and drive,' you know, stuff like that. Then the second time it was

pretty much the same thing just a little bit more expanded. You're so out of it, you're so

tired that you just sit there and in your place. You're not even listening. But, yeah,

anyway, the VA person came and said, you know, they talked about the healthcare part.

They don't really talk about the VA part. They told us that we had five years of free

healthcare because we're combat veterans, and like, I don't even remember who the

representatives were to be honest. That's the only thing I remember, and that was it.

Basically, Jasmine had no knowledge of her full benefits, such as the GI Bill or disability

services. She was only told about healthcare, to some extent, but found that she had to do her

own groundwork herself to be able to use it.

When asked what steps Jasmine took to transition out of the military, she was the only

veteran who answered by saying she did not take any steps to prepare to get out. She explained:

That's why I was so messed up for such a long time because, for example, when I came

back from my first tour there was none of that. There was no preparation to reintegrating

you into the world or back into the civilian world. Basically, we came back to Fort Bragg.

We were there for a week, you know, turning shit in and going to these stupid meetings,

and you know, going back through physicals to get released, and then that's it. They send

you back. So, in one week they expect you to decompress and know what to do when you

go back home, and it didn't work like that. I was real fucked up when I was at home the

first time, well both times, actually. But I was more the first time because my first tour

was the one that was more eventful. So, I just went back home thinking I could pick up

where I left off, and then I realized there was something wrong, I didn't know what. Like

I would drive and like I would be real careful and like stop people coming too close to me.

I would like brake, or sometimes if things like, I don't know, it was like a constant, not

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panic, but it was, it wasn't comfortable. Like I lived in an apartment with my mom at the time, and I actually ended up moving out because of my neighbors. I shared a wall with one neighbor, and her kids liked to listen to music pretty loud, and that wasn't true for me. So, I would fight with the neighbors because of their music. But for other people, it didn't bother them, and now looking back it wasn't even that loud, but for me at the time it was, and I just didn't do real well when I came back because I didn't know what was happening to me. I didn't understand that it was PTSD at the time. I had no idea. I went back to work maybe a month later after I came back, and there was a door that would slam to go to the outside, and the first time that door slammed I dropped under the desk, and nobody knew what to do. They just kind of looked at each other, like, do we say something, and do we not say something? It was real embarrassing, and then after that I just had to deal with the door shut, and every time I would jump because it would bug me. But I didn't understand what was happening to me.

Jasmine was experiencing many symptoms of PTSD but she did not know what was happening to her. No one told her what the symptoms of PTSD were. She expanded on her experiences:

Well, the first tour when I came back it was 2007, and a lot of this stuff like TBI and PTSD, it was just starting to come up. Same thing with TBI. I didn't know what was happening. I didn't know why I had light sensitivity and sound sensitivity, and that's why I would fight with my neighbors because I had sound sensitivity. It had only been about five or six months since I had—since the blast happened— so I was still real kind of messed up, and, like, I have real nasty vertigo, like, we're kind of walking through the mall, and I straight fell on my ass because everything starts turning. I didn't understand

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what was happening. I go to the clinic, and she said, 'Oh well, here are some pills. If it keeps happening give us a call.' That was it. No TBI screening, nothing, nothing like that. They didn't fully understand at that time what it was. When I came back from my second tour, they were screening for TBI and PTSD before they even let you go. But it didn't matter that I still had some of that stuff because it didn't happen during that second tour. It didn't matter, and they just pushed me through again.

Jasmine went on to explain that after her first tour she felt okay, but her second tour was different. Her second tour was when she knew something was different. She began to realize that she was having an issue with PTSD and TBI:

By about the end of 2007, he (my boyfriend) basically was like, 'There's something wrong with you. You need to go to the doctor.' And so, I went. I went because I was going to school…and the hospital, Long Beach VA, is right next-door. So, I just drove over one day because it was convenient. It was just right there, and I went into the walk-in mental health clinic, and they realized there was something wrong. But even then, they didn't diagnose me with PTSD. They just said it was depression, and they gave me some pills and sent me on my happy way. Even then they didn't diagnose it or catch it. And that was at the end of 2007, and so I still saw both of them. I got deployed in August of 2008, and I stopped taking my meds because I didn't want to disclose to the military that I was taking anti-depression drugs. I didn't want that anywhere in my file, so I didn't disclose. So, I went to the therapist, and I said, 'You need to give me any pill that you can give because I'm going to be deployed,' and she said, 'Well, you need to disclose it,' and I said 'Are you fucking crazy?' You don't do that. You don't tell the military, 'I have depression. I need to take pills.' It doesn't work like that. It was still a very strong stigma

at the time. So, she gave me 120 days and sent me on my way, and I made it last until I could while I was deployed. I ran out during deployment and, of course, that didn't help, but I came back worse the second time than I went in.

Jasmine was given anti-depressants and sent on her way. She deployed twice, for a year each time. She explained that the PTSD started in the first deployment, but it was in full effect after the second tour. She married her boyfriend shortly after she got back to the States after the second tour. Jasmine says that because of the mental instability, her marriage was bad.

She continued to search for help and found a women's health center in Long Beach, CA. She explained:

At least when I was going to Long Beach, they actually had a full building for women's mental health. It was all right in the back. I mean, I wish every VA had this. But Long Beach had a whole building, and so I would go there off and on because I didn't like it, I wasn't ready, I guess, to address all of the shit I was carrying, and so the moment we would start to make some progress, I would stop going because it just got very uncomfortable, and I wasn't ready. Realistically I wasn't ready I guess. So, I was still going, and then I moved inland and ended up at Loma Linda VA. Loma Linda's VA doesn't even have—or at that time— didn't even have a mental health clinic that I could walk into. A lady would call me every two weeks for 30 minutes to see how I was. That was it. That was my mental health treatment at Loma Linda 's VA in 2010. That was it. That's all they had to offer.

When Jasmine was asked who helped her to maneuver through these transitions going on in her life after getting out of the military and dealing with her mental health. She answered the following:

It was just my husband and myself at the time. That was it. I didn't have any friends. I had one friend, but she was married and had kids and I would hardly see her. I don't really talk. I'm not real close with my sisters, so I didn't talk to them, and they didn't know how to talk to me either because back then I was, but it was bad. Like if you said the wrong thing, I would go off. Like it got to the point, right now my mom tells me that they would be afraid to talk to me because they didn't know how I was going to react. It was pretty sad.

Jasmine went on to explain one of the most powerful and moving stories that have been told during this research. She shed light on what can happen to a person that does not know what to do after they get out of the military. In her case, she did not understand all that was going on inside of her and she felt unsettled. It was so overwhelming for Jasmine that she did not think she would ever get better. She tells the story of her darkest hour,

So, it's been pretty much all…me. When we moved here to Las Vegas in 2012, and we settled in, that's when I decided to give the VA another chance. I went to the Northeast Clinic because that was the closest one at the time. The other clinics were just starting to open. So I went over there, and I got lucky. I got a PA, Tina H____, she's still there, and she sat with me for two hours because she couldn't believe how mistreated I had been. So she sat with me for two hours and listened to everything, everything I had to say, and just all the ailments and how broken I was, and like, I remember sitting there with her, and I remember telling her how I felt, how depressed I was, how bad it was, how bad it had been. And she's the one who started me on the path to getting care basically. She listened to everything I had to say. She ran all kinds of tests, and she just put me with the right people basically. She made sure I was put with the right people, and that's how I started.

And that was in October of 2012. Well, when I got hired in February of 2013 and then that's when I started to help myself because I was on the inside, and I understood the system better now and I understood the providers. And I understood how it worked, and that's how I actually started… that's how I started to get better. But then like, just my personal life started to fall apart, my marriage started to fall apart, and then I stopped going. I stopped going to see the therapist; I stopped going to see the doctors. This was by April 2014. By this time, well, no that's not true. I had been seeing a therapist pretty much all of 2013, and then but my marriage started to fall apart and all that stuff, and then I had my VA the CPT appointment, right for PTSD because I got diagnosed with PTSD here, right. This is where they finally figured it out, and so I put in my CPT for all that stuff in 2013 and finally got an appointment in 2014, and I went to that appointment or whatever. But I wasn't really prepared for what that woman was asking me, and so it dug up a lot of stuff that I hadn't dealt with from my first tour. And my marriage was falling apart. I was pretty much, I was already divorced by this time, and there was another guy in the picture. Point being, it got so bad one day, and I was already manic, and I didn't know it. I was already manic, and it got so bad. I remember it because it's this jackass' birthday, it was March 22nd, it was on a Sunday, March 22nd 2014. That day was a dark day for me, and I decided that I wanted to check out. So I sat in my, I had a big walk-in closet. I had a huge house at that time. I had a big walk-in closet, and I sat in my half-empty walk-in closet with a bottle of red wine and all of my pills that I had collected from all the pills that the VA gives you. I drank 50 days' worth of Flexeril, 60 days' worth of Ambien, 60 days' worth of some other shit. I ended up drinking like 120 pills of all kinds, like a cocktail of shit with a bottle of wine. The only reason I'm alive is

because my ex-husband came to the house, and he found me. He found me, and I was barely breathing and he called the ambulance, and luckily at that time Centennial Hospital was less than one mile away. By the time I got to the hospital I had stopped breathing, but I was already there. They intubated me. I was in ICU [Intensive Care Unit] for four days. I got out, and then they sent me to the fucking looney bin for another 7 days, and then I got out. I went to the therapist for about two months. I was manic again, and then I stayed manic all the way up until pretty much March of 2016. No care, just drinking, partying, and all kinds of other crazy shit.

Jasmine explained that she understands herself much better now. She realized that she experienced mania for a long time, and unfortunately, the VA was causing it. She said:

They were giving me a higher dose of anti-depressants, which was causing and maintaining my manic episodes because they hadn't caught that I was bipolar at that time. So they were pretty much keeping me manic until about January of 2016 when I felt like I was cycling too quickly, going from up to down, up-down, up-down, and it got to the point where it was too hard to want to be alive again, and because I had already tried before and I knew how easy it was, I knew that it would be a matter of time until I did it again. It was in January. And I found this on Facebook of Wounded Warrior starting their Care Network, and I called them or whatever, and they said that it was a three-week outpatient program for PTSD and MST and all this stuff, and I signed myself up. I went to my boss, and I basically said, 'Either you approve the three weeks or I'm not going to be alive much longer.' So, they said, 'okay,' and in May of 2016 I went to Chicago and I went to medical, and that's where they figured out that I was bipolar, and they figured out all kinds of stuff, that the meds I was on were wrong. It took eight months to get the

correct medication, but I haven't felt normal, not for a very long time. But for the past I

would say four weeks now since we found a good combination of meds, I've been going

to a therapist every week for pretty much since I came back from Chicago, and we do like

Army and stuff like that, and I think it's only been about a month that I can truly say that

I have felt normal again.

Jasmine told how it has been 14 years since she joined and, prior to a few months ago, she felt

misplaced. She felt that she could not fit anywhere. She fought everyone, including co-workers.

She was just angry all the time. However, she said she now feels comfortable being a civilian.

She explains, "I can say that, yeah, I am a civilian now, but how long did it take? Ten years. It's

crazy. I mean, well seven years if we want to count it from my second tour, it's been seven years,

and I just now feel like a normal human being just entering society."

Like Jasmine, the interview with Thomas was very enlightening and offered an in-depth

view of the difficulties that a combat veteran experience. Thomas is a Marine Corps veteran,

who separated as a Corporal (E-5). Thomas was one of the many who answered the call of duty

at the attacks on 9/11. He entered the military on December 11, 2001. He served in the Marine

Corps for four years. His contract, like Ralph's, was to serve four years active duty and four

years inactive, with the expectation of being called up if necessary. He decided to separate from

the military after four years.

Thomas

Thomas expressed that he felt like the VA was for broken people, and for that reason he

contemplated not going. He said, "I used the GI Bill but I didn't see that as part of like the VA,

like, it wasn't like VA healthcare, I didn't really use." Thomas also explained that he did use GI

Bill benefits to attend school. He had a friend who was a college counselor who encouraged him to use it. He explained:

> She taught me about tuition assistance. Like, I had never even heard of tuition assistance until my last few months of being in. And, she told me about it and was like, 'you've had this benefit this whole time? And you didn't know or care?' I was very lost, and, like 12,000 bucks, it's like 4,500 dollars a year, that you can use for school, but if you don't know about it. Like in the Marine Corps it's kinda, I don't know, very, like, anti-anything that's not Marine Corps.

Thomas elaborated on how doing schoolwork was not encouraged in the Marine Corps:

> You're at your garrison and you're doing homework for school, like, they'll go 'Why're you doing that? You should be doing your MCIs,' like, Marine Corps Institute, you know, correspondence courses for, like, you know, math for Marines or spelling for Marines.

He explained that, in his experience, the Marine Corps would rather Marines focus on Marine Corps work than do college work. He got the sense that they believe, "*that* is what the VA is for and you have signed up with us (the Marines) for four years." He went on to give his perspective of military culture duality:

> It's always like two cultures in the military. You've always got like the official culture, and then you've got the actual culture. So, there's like the stuff that, you know, Congress passes down and higher ups pass down from the East Coast, and that's what you see and stuff, and they're talk about, you know, college and stuff. And so, they have a little college center on the base area but no one ever goes in there. Stuff like that. So, it's like the official stance is like, 'Yay, college…we promote college and transition…because we put together this little pamphlet.' But when in practice, it's, you get the pamphlet two

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weeks before you're getting out, you know, and college is being discouraged because it's detracting you from the Marine Corps stuff, getting your uniform ready and preparing your unit for the field and cleaning rifles and all that.

Thomas, like other veterans in this study, started planning out his post-military future while still in the military. He said the TAP class did not mean anything to him; it represented little more than "just checking off a box." Thomas made an illuminating observation that transitioning does not end:

That's the thing too, like when they talk about transition now it's like…you talk to Vietnam vets who are in their late 60s and they're still transitioning. Like, like there's no end to it. You never really fully just get right back in where you did before you went in, like, you're always going to be a changed person. Always going to be different.

He continued by touching on the aspect of relevancy and the difficulty some service members might have in judging the relevancy of transition materials while their focus is on other matters:

But, I think that, like, trying to do transition stuff while you are still in, like, as a troop, like, you're not even paying attention. Like, even now, when they have, like, the two-week—I think they have expanded TAP—because there has been a lot of pressure on it. So like, you need to be doing more, you need to do it more, and even then, guys are like, they are just going through the motions and, like, they are just focusing on, you know, 'When are we going to get out of here?' '—I have a party to get to,' you know, whatever. Their focus is on the end time, and you don't know what you don't know kind of thing, like, and kind of. I've been to war twice. I've been corporal and at the top of my thing, a leader of Marines, a leader of my troops or whatever, in charge of all this really

expensive gear, like, you know, college is really a piece of cake. Everybody loves the

military, no matter where I fly, they're gonna hire me because, you know, I've got the

professional attitude.

As the researcher began to ask more questions, Thomas disclosed more personal details

about his experience in the military and discussions he has had with fellow veterans. He said:

It's kind of weird because, like, I was talking to somebody else about this the other day,

and she was, like, saying how, you know, she was, like, talking about the frustration that

she feels with the veterans themselves that, like, you know, they don't reach. She was

like, 'I don't understand, they don't reach out for help, like, they just isolate and just keep

to themselves and, you know, they only hang out with other veterans and they don't reach

out for help. And then they wonder why bad things happen or, whatever, you know, why

things like, even if they want to help, they, like, they don't, they're not open to the help

or they don't reach for it.' And it's like I was kind of laughing about it in my head saying,

'Well, yeah, that's why the disorder part is in PTSD.' Like if we were able to reach out

for help and able to interact with other people, it wouldn't be a disorder.

He suggested that veterans seek out appropriate mentors to help them transition. He added:

Or someone else who's already been out for a while to kind of guide, to serve as a guide,

but at the same time it's gotta be someone that had a similar experience to you while you

were in because, like, when they use that term 'veteran', like, it doesn't really tell you

much. Because it's like the Air Force guy isn't the same as a Marine, and even within

each branch, it's like, you've got all these different job specialties, and you've got all

these different duty stations. Um, some people get deployed to combat zones; some

people don't... and then even when they get deployed, like just because you got deployed

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to Iraq doesn't mean that you did anything. Like, there are a lot, you know most of the people that went to Iraq usually get to the base, like they are just stuck and do logistics stuff for the guys who are outside. They do communications and stuff, like…there's so many different cultures within the cultures within cultures and, um, so there's even that.

He also spoke of the differences between combat vets and non-combat veterans:

…between, like, com veterans and non-com veterans…they're almost like adversaries. It's like, because combat vets, they do have issues. We do have issues. Like we had 18 suicides from my unit. I did four years in the mental institution after I got out. So, um, lots of people end up in prison and just all these bad things happen. And the non-combat vets get annoyed because they get associated with that and they're like, 'Look, I didn't see combat, you know, I don't have PTSD, I don't have any of these disorders. They're like, you know, 'I served my time and I did it honorably, and now I just want to go to school, use my GI Bill, and be a productive member of society,' and, you know, so they kind of look down on these other combat vets and get frustrated like, 'You know, why are you—? Just pick yourself up by the bootstraps and get to work and, you know, do what I do, you know, it's not that hard.

Like James, Thomas, also drew parallels between exiting the military and getting out of prison, and he talked about life after the military. He said:

Yeah, when you get out it's like, to me, it's like doing a prison sentence. Especially, if, like, when you get in and you're going to serve the four years and you're just counting down days until that four years is up. It's almost like doing time. You know, you're just kind of counting down the days, counting down the days, and you start fantasizing about how great your life is going to be once you're out, 'No one's gonna boss me around

anymore. I'm not gonna have to get up at 5:30 anymore. I can do whatever I want.' And it's like, and you get out, and maybe you do after a while. But, after a while, it starts to catch up to you and you start realizing you can't, you're not connecting with your civilian counterparts. And you're having nightmares or whatever…it's…it's whatever…a lot of stuff… and, so yeah, it takes a lot of like…for me, like I didn't go to the VA until 2009.

So, it was, like, it was a good three years that I'm just a mess when I got out. You know, just drinking heavy. Um, getting in fights and road-rage stuff and, like, I would drop classes. I would be three-fourths of the way through a class, get frustrated by something, by some discussion in class or something, and someone would…oh, that 'war-for-oil stuff'…and, you know, whatever, and get triggered. And I would just, I'm not going there or going back. You know and just drop the class. Um… stuff like that… So yeah… I mean but there's like… I mean everyone has their story of transitioning and stuff where it was… you know… yeah, for a while there, me and my wife split up, you know, because, you know, I blacked out once and you know, I had her by her throat up against a wall…or, you know, or I woke up in the middle of the night and was pacing around the house with a gun…or just, all these crazy stories. And then, um, and it only takes, it doesn't take much, for it to cross too far.

So like, you know, guys I served with who are doing life sentences in prison for killing their wives or killing their kids or…you know… all the mess…but then you have people who got out and did really well. They went straight to work and now they're cops and they've been cops ever since…They've been married since before first deployment…It seems like chance to me, really. Like, um, 'Couldn't they hit rock bottom early enough to realize that they needed some help and actually went and sought it out, or

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was referred by family member or something?' 'Cause usually it's some kind of point, some impetus, or something. So like, for me, it was a domestic incident with my girlfriend at the time, where I pulled out a knife and scared the crap out of her, and she called the police and that landed me four years in the psychiatric hospital, up in Oregon.

Um, or like, for other people it's, like, it doesn't take much to go too far. Instead of just threatening her with the knife, like, now you've actually cut her… gotten into a full black out or something. So I don't know. Because alcohol involved, like luckily for me, I wasn't under the influence or anything. Yeah… and some of the guys, like, they're just still kind of floundering, like, you know, they're using drugs or still drinking…like they're still doing the same stuff that they were doing when they first got out but they just haven't had anything bad enough happen or really anything to, you know, to wake them up yet or, so, I don't know. But those are the kinds of worries, it's, like, just a matter of time.

Thomas went on to further compare the military to the prison system and how the transitions are similar. He said:

There's so much similarity between the military and jail... or prison… like… um… it's like uh…like when a new person comes in to a prison and everybody is kind of sizing him up…and, 'lemme see your papers'…or, you know, 'what are you here for? What did you do?' And it's like that in the military…but like when you get out…so it's like once you get out and now you try to interact with other veterans they're kind of hitting you up that same way of like, 'okay, you know, where did you serve, what did you do?'

Thomas talked about how society doesn't have a complete picture of the reality of war, and what it means to have served in combat, or the consequences of war on individuals:

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…like, you want to go to work fighting a nation, you want people to see the reality of war, and they kind of support war, or you know people who are, oh, 'Thank you for your service,' and pat you on the back and then that's it. Yeah, if people start facing, like, the reality of war then it's, like,…we might not have a stomach for this…and we might not want to do this…. I think people need to know what's coming out…need to know of like the full impetus…of like…you know…if you want to go to war…we are taking all of the…consider all of the ramifications…like, whatever, the consequences…like it's not just, you know, the people who died on the battlefield, like that's…that's a small percentage of you know all the damage that's going to happen when these guys come home.

Thomas went to prison for four years after a violent domestic violence incident. In prison he met many veterans, including Korean and Vietnam Veterans. He explains:

The Vietnam vets, you know, they kind of took me under their wing and were like, 'Look man, when you've got a chance, like you've only got a four-sentence, you know. Us, we're doing life, you know, we're here forever. We're going to die here, you know, so, you know, you gotta get out and make something of yourself and have a family and do all the things that we haven't had a chance to do. You know, because you got a second chance, because you got this short sentence, and you know, and they were, like, and you've got to tell our story, you've gotta tell people that we're here, you know, tell people this is where we ended up.' Like, you know, that kind of thing.

Thomas also talked about his attempt to commit suicide in prison. He said:

I mean I tried to commit suicide when I first go in there…um… and…yeah…and I was just, like, this is just going to be my life and I was just angry and bitter and just fighting,

and you know, always getting put in the hole, the padded room… um…you know until those guys kind of scooped me up, I guess. Yeah…yeah…because like, 'Look at me…look at me…look where I'm at…you know look where continuing in that behavior gets you? Do you want to be like me? You don't need this. You're gonna get out of here.' And…so…um…if I can just make a difference in somebody else's life like they made a difference in mine…

Thomas now focuses his life on sharing his story of survival in the hope of making a difference in the lives of other veterans.

David

David was my first interviewee who had a positive story to tell. David is a veteran who joined the Air Force at age 24 in the summer of 2010. He had served four years as a Senior Airman (E-4) when he separated. He talked about his TAP experience as a four-day workshop with different speakers each day. The focus was mostly on preparing resumes and applying for jobs. David said he remembered that the Department of Labor was at the workshop, but did not recall seeing the VA there. David explained that TAP seemed more like a requirement that needed to be checked off of the list for him to separate. However, it did get him to start thinking about going to school. He decided to enroll in college and pursue his degree. David relocated to Nevada alone, having no family or friends locally. At times he felt discouraged because he was a non-traditional student, and it was difficult because he was in a state alone without family and friends. David decided to connect to the campus Veterans Service office, where he made friends and connections. David emphasized that it is important for veterans to connect with students, the veterans' office on campus and others, so the veteran is not alone. In our interview, David kept

emphasizing the importance of "not being alone." He said that when you are alone you start doubting yourself and then depression could set in.

Voluntary Separation – Volunteering to Exit before Scheduled Discharge Date

The following veterans were presented with the option to voluntarily separate from the military prior to the end of their contract. The four veterans who decided to voluntarily separate from the military were honorably discharged and given a time frame to exit the military and as a result, they had more time to plan for their future after the military.

George

George is a veteran who joined the U.S. Air Force in 2004. He served a little over two years and held the rank of Senior Airman when he separated. In response to questions about transitioning, George revealed the difficulties he faced with being deployed multiple times per year and, particularly, the strain it had on his marriage:

I was deploying in TDY ["Temporary Duty Yonder"] 250 days a year…so it had a strain on my marriage…and me and my wife were separated for about nine months. She left the city to live with her parents, and to reconcile the marriage…um…I requested to separate from the military early…they were offering an early out…um…so it was a very troubling time because, I was, what I didn't know at the time was, I was on the brink of divorce. So, one of the services I used before I even knew I wanted to get out was the chaplain service for counseling, marriage counseling. Um, when my early out was approved.

George explained how he prepared for transitioning:

You know that transitioning into civilian life is not going to natural…or not going to be smooth…that it does take work…it does take time…so thinking that and someone

validating it was helpful. I think what you said is kind of accurate. The things running through my head with divorce and leaving the military and not being covered for medical, dental, and not have a steady paycheck were things that were weighing heavy on my heart…so paying attention in the class was really secondary.

George started to go down a dark path and he described his challenges with depression during his transitioning period. George explained how his family was his biggest support system and who he relied on to help him through the transition process. He said:

My father said that he experienced the same thing…he kind of pushed… supported me…not pushed me…but supporting me…he drove me down there because I didn't know where it was at and having a support…because if I had no one supporting me I would probably just fall into depression, fall into fits of anger, because of everything that was going through the divorce and all that…but even though I didn't know why I needed it and know why I wanted it…those people supporting me, not pushing me, but supporting me were really helpful.

George sought out help with the VA and, although it was difficult for him, he recognized that it helped to talk to someone,

Oh yeah, it did, but it was like a tough love…like it's painful going into a clinic and talking about the worst parts of your life but it was, at the end of the day, helpful…it's hard at first…but you know it's, it's in the long term, beneficial, so kind forcing yourself but it was beneficial.

He went on to explain the times he would go to the VA and would sit in the car contemplating whether go inside:

It was just initiative by myself…um…in the military you are pushed every day to learn new things, try new things, and achieve at higher and higher and higher level…but when I got out nobody was doing that anymore…so I had to find it in myself. No one was going to get me off my ass and go to the doctor… no one was going to get me off my ass and, you know, drive myself to the clinic…and that was kind of like a little bit of a culture change…so my family was there to support me…no one ever pushed…although I, you know, I was needed with loose things I was dealing with, I was dealing with anger issues and all that but, um, yeah it was pretty much myself. And I saw, you know, I saw other veterans who decided not to do that, but they fell into things like drugs and alcohol…and I guess it has always been a fear in me of having those kinds of things take over my life…like, you know, being a slave to gambling or a slave to drugs or alcohol, so you know, but it definitely, it had to come from me. Now, some things did take more time than they had to…like seeking mental health treatment for anger issues and those things…. And, there was times I would drive to the clinic, sit in the parking lot for 20-40 minutes and then, then leave…never go into the clinic…and there's times where, you know, I would do that two to three times before I actually went in and talked to somebody…but when I did finally go in and talk…you know I knew that, you know, I didn't know everything and that talking to the people who talked to other vets, you know was beneficial…just to kind of maybe get things off my chest or, you know, talk to someone who maybe is not a veteran but they treat veterans every day, who I know have gone the same, if not worse, experiences that I have.

Sharon

Army veteran, Sharon, had served for more than six years and held the rank of Staff Sergeant (E-6), when she separated. She shared her experience about her decision to end her military service when she and her husband, who is also a service member, found out that she was expecting their first child. According to military rules, a female is required to return to service four months after giving birth. Sharon did not want to leave her child and possibly face deployment after returning, so she opted to request a separation under the rules of the military that allows for pregnant mothers to separate from the military. She also felt the transition process was beneath her level of need: "I knew how to write a resume. I had leadership skills and management experience. I needed to know how to translate my skills to the civilian side." She related how she even changed her job titles just to make them understandable to the civilian sector.

Sharon believes her experience in transitioning differed from the experiences of others because, in addition to being a service member, she was also military spouse; therefore, she was entitled to the benefits and services offered to military spouses. She explained, "I was protected while figuring everything out. I had the security of a spouse and I could take my time in selecting a job." Sharon expressed the opinion that it is important for veterans to have a plan and not assume that civilians know what you need. She also spoke about the difference between the military and civilian sectors in terms of competition and "proving oneself" as they relate to employment. She said:

> In the military, you don't compete for your next job. You compete with yourself based on the job and the need. It is very different from the civilian world where you have to market yourself. You are given respect due to your rank and what you do. You have to prove

yourself again on the civilian side. It can be very difficult to wrap your mind around having to prove yourself again.

Jonathan

Jonathan, another veteran who voluntarily separated, discussed his experience in looking for a civilian job. When Jonathan began to clarify his transitioning process, he explained how he prepared to get out and went through different recruitment firms as follows. "A lot of military recruitment firms attend these workshops. They prepared you for interviewing. They helped you to think through questions and learn how to communicate. It was a good opportunity to make that transition." He also explained how recruiting firms set up mock interviews with service members, asking them questions, as a means of interview preparation. He said he attended a recruiting event with 15 different firms seeking employees; he interviewed with seven to eight of them during that event, recalling, "If companies felt that you were a good fit, they would schedule a second interview with you."

Jonathan said the recruitment firms played the biggest part his preparation for transitioning into civilian life. However, he felt he was in a different position than other separating service members because he took a voluntary separation, which allowed him ample time to plan. He said, "I had an idea that I had about two months in addition to the leave time I already had saved up. So, I immediately started the process." He proceeded to work his way through the TAP checklist.

Reflecting on the type of assistance he received to help him through the transition, Jonathan said, "My sister was in the military, and I relied on her for questions that I didn't know. She helped me to understand the options." He said he went on terminal leave in July for two or three months of leave. He also relied on other veterans who he had met through the years and

with whom he had stayed in contact. "We had an internal group of officers that worked with each other to share info."

Retired– Planning for Life after the Military

Harry

In Operation Desert Storm, Harry was on the front line; from there, he only had a few weeks to process and go back to civilian life. He had a job as a salesperson when he came back. However, his earnings decreased from $1,000 per week to $200 per week. He found himself left with zero services, and empty promises. He had to start all over again.

"It was brutal! You do all this for your country and you don't get any help." Harry's wife was pregnant at the time of Harry's combat in Operation Desert Storm. Because he was positioned in an undisclosed area, she had no idea where he was and had to fend for herself. When Harry returned home, he had no health insurance because he was not considered active. "They treat you like a second-class citizen! You serve your country and you are mistreated when you get out."

Harry provided insight into the experience of coming back from war and having to survive and provide for his family: "You have to try to find a way to make it work. You don't have to think, you just jump back into the scene as a working reservist." What is surprising about Harry's story is that after 21 years in the military, he didn't know that he could go to the VA. He did not realize that he could receive services at the VA until he was hired as an intern at the VA Healthcare Center, and he stated, "No one ever briefed me on the resources that were available at the time. Nowhere along the line did I hear that the VA hospital was available to all veterans." Harry served as a frontline medic during the wars in Kuwait and Iraq, and he still was unaware of his medical benefits.

During Harry's internship at the VA he learned about the VA benefits. He found out he was eligible for the GI Bill, healthcare, and all other services. These services could have helped Harry and his family when he was deployed multiple times and returned home with no job and very little money. He never received any type of follow-up after returning home from war. He was totally clueless.

James

In all of the preceding accounts, transitions out of the military have been fairly challenging. The next respondent may have been more prepared than others simply because of the way his careers played out for him. For instance, a Chief Master Sergeant named James served 25 years in the Air Force, having climbed up the ladder after joining in 1983. Prior to his retirement, he planned for future employment to follow his tenure with the military. His circumstances were such that he was able to retire from the Air Force with employment in the civilian sector already in place. He said:

> I had arrived at the conclusion that I was tired and done. I basically decided that I did not
> want to wear these boots anymore. Once I made the decision, I announced to my
> supervisors and began the to out process.

Once he made the final decision to retire, he then needed to choose a place to live. He knew he wanted to continue working, so he began sending resumes to potential civilian employers. He stated, " I started exploring options after the military and began my prep-work. The work cannot be successful if you are not doing your due diligence.

Significantly, James drew a comparison between military separation and being released from incarceration, "Getting out is almost like getting out of jail after 20 years! You feel a sense of fear, lack of confidence, and you don't know how to get used to being back into society."

Helen

My interview with Helen started off a little different than the other interviews. Helen
retired from 22 years of active and reserve duty in the Army; she was a Sergeant (E-7) when she
retired. She was a medic and had served in both Desert Storm and the OIF/OEF wars. I asked her
what made the current conflict different from the other wars. She said:

I honestly think in previous wars—like I'll use World War I and II as an example—we

knew who our enemies were, and we knew the territories we were going to take or the

town we were going to take over. Right? But here, there is no clear defined ending, so

we don't know when the government will say, 'Okay, we met our objectives' or 'We

accomplished our mission to what we sent you guys there for.' So the Middle East is so

vast, and Iraq is just a small part of it, and now Afghanistan. I mean, where do we stop?

When do the politicians say, 'No, this is what our objective is, and we've achieved it, and

we're getting out of there.' So I honestly think the difference between the previous wars

and now is they had a clear defined mission in what they want in goals and gains

basically. With the current conflict, they don't have that clear strategy. When you're in

the military and you're worrying if you're deploying, right, it's like 'Oh, I'm going,' and

you're anxious. You're anxious with all these thought processes going through your mind,

but now that I'm retired and I read, you know, I still read news about the Middle East and

Iraq and Afghanistan, and even the Saudis because I was in the first Desert Storm, I told

you that, and I look at it, and I question why are we really there, you know? We're

wasting millions of dollars. For what really? What is our clear objective? What are we

going to, as a nation, get out of it, you know? The investment that we're making, what

are we getting out of it? And I don't think that there is an answer by anybody. If you were

to call up your congressman or any of your military leaders, I don't think even they can

answer that.

During both conflicts, Helen was a combat medic. She explained:

Yes, well, during the last conflict I was with a combat support hospital, so once they

bring the casualties into our hospital, we're like the first to, you know, that they get to see.

We're the first line of defense. Once they get hurt out in the battle field, they get

medivac'd to us, and then we fix them up and send them back to Germany or send them

back to line of duty.

Helen started to discuss her transitioning experience. She explained that she retired out of

Fort Hood, Texas, and Fort Hood at that time was one of the places that were experimenting with,

the ACAP/TAP new program. Helen explained that during her process she relied on a friend of

hers to help her navigate through the system. She said:

One of my other friends, military friend, she was also retiring, so her and I were pretty

much supporting each other, and also our first sergeant. She was really good to us, and

she made sure that we went to all our appointments and followed through on some of the

workshops. In fact, I still keep in touch with her. She's a sergeant major now.

So ultimately, they helped each other get out. Helen indicated that there were special VA or

veteran programs and support through the VFW or similar groups.

Helen also spoke to the mental issues that may surface and cause more difficulties with

transitioning. She stated:

Well, the anxiety and depression and PTSD, all those things that we talked about, they

have a direct impact on how successful or how well they transition into the civilian world,

you know. Some people have a severe case versus some, or some people have a better

coping mechanism for those things versus others. So, I guess it all depends on your

capability as far as handling all those issues because all of us saw a lot of things out there

in combat, but it's how well you adjust to that, what you want to do there and even after

you transition into civilian life. I think all of your life experiences, not just the ones in the

military will help or will guide that as far how well you adjust. Because you can't tell that

you served a two-year enlistment, and you are so completely affected that you can't

function back into civilian life, you know, that's kind of hard for me to believe because

the first year you spend probably the first three to four months in basic, then you get job

training, and then the next year that you have left you're just barely learning some things

in the military, and then get out, you know.

Helen commented on the role of boot camp and the similarities and differences among

the branches. She explained:

Part of boot camp is to make you resilient to stress, right? That's what boot camp is

about, to get you used to stressful situations. So, of course, boot camp is going to be

stressful. You knew that when you enlisted, you know. They're not preparing you to be a

baby sitter. They're preparing you for combat roles, especially Army and Marines. Air

Force, they just go to a hotel room when they deploy. You know, I make Air Force guys

mad every time I say that, too.

Sam

The fourth veteran who retired was Sam, who retired as a Tech Sergeant (E-6) after 21

years and 2 months of service in the U.S. Air Force. He explained that a one-week TAP

workshop was part of his separation process. He said: "They had, oh, they had different speakers there, I believe.... They had different accounts there, workstations; bring your resume in different places with organizations like Opportunity Village and some other places."

Sam, like the others, spoke to fellow veterans to get insight on how to navigate the system. He talked to those who had already retired or were getting ready to retire to determine what he needed to do to prepare him for life after the military. He was granted a 70 percent disability rating after over a year of fighting, filling out paper work and going back and forth with the VA.

Earl

Fortunately, one of the last interviews conducted was a very powerful interview with a retired Marine veteran. Earl joined the Marine Corps in 1979, and proudly served his country for 32 years and 4 months. He retired in September of 2011 as a full bird Colonel (0-6). Earl had been a special intelligence officer. His specialty was interrogation because he was a linguist. He said he would have been in longer if his wife had not unexpectedly passed away from breast cancer. Since he had three children at home, he had to be there for his family. Also, he lost his father 25 days after the passing of his wife. So, he was called to serve his family, and as a result he decided to retire from the Marines. The Marines wanted him to stay in longer because his job was so specialized, but he was unable to continue his service.

Similar to the other service members, he went through some type of transition assistance program upon exiting the military. However, due to the nature of his job it was a little more technical and confidential. Certain information was reviewed with him and he had to sign off on a lot of paper work. He explained his experience:

So, it's not just signing paperwork. You have to deal with your retirement. You have to deal with the things that you had, obligations that you had to fulfill or didn't fulfill or things to that effect, which wasn't an issue for me, but in my case simple things like a new ID, you know, switching from active duty to retirement, things like that. Information that was given to me in regards to my healthcare or to services that were going to be available to me. They also wanted to know where I was going to be at, you know, if I was going to be stateside or stay in Europe.

When Earl decided to retire he had to inform his Commander and the extent of his situation. He said:

Then it went to me dealing with the paperwork that would ensue from that that came from their office because of my rank, my job. So, some came through them, some came through separating through with that base, and then that was all I really had to do with them, really, and then the process was started. Then you go through a procedure of signing paperwork and dealing with debriefing as they call it, you know, where you're debriefed. Then after you've done everything that is required of you for what you've completed and what you've done in your service and your time, then it goes through what's going to happen with you… where am I going to go? Am I going to be staying in Europe or coming back to the United States? What services are available to me if I stay there, which were minimal because I was overseas? There were some services I had access to and always would have because any serviceman would or any American would if they were there in a military installation. But so that was part of it, and then it came down to the nitty gritty of my days, my DD 214. What was going to be on it, you know,

always making sure that my file is correct and all my honors and everything was done? That was basically all that was happening there; basically that was it.

Upon exiting the military Earl went to talk to a friend in California who was still active and got some insight on next steps. Then he went to the VA in Reno to receive his health card and find out more about his benefits. Earl was more informed about the benefits available to him because of his rank in the Marines. He stated:

> I had to inform all my men and women of the benefits myself because they had income, monies coming from their check depending on when they joined… because at different times, whether it's the GI Bill or Montgomery Bill or if it's the Post 911 or whatever, they're all different. Where they commit a certain amount of their monthly pay to this, and then the military, again depending on when they joined, would either meet it or double it, it would depend on whatever there, and I would explain the benefits. That was part of my, I had a small, my position dealt with less than 30 staff members, and so they were informed of all the benefits that they had during and when they left.

He talked about the difference between serving in this war and the wars of the past. He explained:

> As you probably are already aware of it, a lot of men that came out in the '70s and even in the 80s were mistreated because of Vietnam and because in the early '80s it was Vietnam and the Falkland Islands, different things. These were different conflicts that had occurred in that timeframe. Whether they wanted to go or not. They held that against them. They would spit on them, mistreat them, and even the government didn't give them their just due, and they up, it took years, 30 some years for them to even acknowledge Agent Orange, the men that had this put in their bodies. And so finally it started to

change. And so a lot of men that were from the '70s and '80s that left, separated in that

timeframe were mistreated, and now we have a lot of people, veterans that get out, you

know, of the service that are lost.

Earl had overcome many challenges in his life. He was a biracial man during a time when

it was not as well accepted. He also recognized when he needed assistance with a challenge. So,

when he was faced with PTSD, he knew this was one of those times. He explained:

So I knew that I needed assistance, so that's why I did something different. So why do I

think that others don't? A lot are unaware. I know this from interacting with them, and

they didn't know, they didn't know that the VA. They had heard of the VA, knew about,

but didn't know about it. They didn't know it was available to them. They didn't know

that, and some of them didn't know until later, years later. They didn't know that the

bigger cities have transition housing or assistance for them or help whether it's group

counseling, individual counseling, or medical for them, and they don't realize that, for

example, if they are unable to get healthcare for themselves or don't have enough income

that, whether they're retired or not, they get healthcare free.

He also explains that although the healthcare is free, many are still unaware of it. Unfortunately

there are many that leave the service not knowing about their benefits. As he continued to talk

about coverage he explained:

The VA only covers less than 1 percent of the vets in the world, United States, or the

world; they only cover less than 1 percent. You either have to have 100 percent disability,

being basically a quadriplegic. The majority of people that receive dental care are

veterans that have had severe cases of PTSD or brain damage of some sort usually, and

just you've lost your leg or something doesn't count. You have to be quadriplegic to be

disabled to get free dental. Sad. It's really sad. It's absolutely disgusting. So that's why the 90 days, it's really, and they it's there, and then right below that is to go see the VA, though they don't say VA, they say Veteran's Administration in your city, in your local city, something to that effect. I don't remember the exact wording, and that's it. That is it.

Earl acknowledged that he still goes to counseling on a weekly basis, and he has gone through group counseling when he needed it. He battles with whether he should attend counseling. He stated:

I'm saying to myself, I always say to myself. My God, I don't need to be here. These people need this place more than I do. That's what I'm constantly, and then like I said I was also saying that there are different levels of need, and you still need it and so, but this that's _____ (35:29). But it's just, I see these, I feel horrible for these people. Like I said, there was a Marine inside one course that was one of my students. Same rank as me, not as long in, so he was in the scheme of things. He was below me in rank because I had more time in grade, and I was more rank, more time as a colonel, even though he was a colonel also, I was longer. So he, his name is Jerry, and so he suffered horribly from PTSD. He was constantly tense, and I usually pulled him aside after class and talked to him for a little while and said, "Are you okay?" I knew from just the way he looked down on himself when he made mistakes in class or his homework or test or whatever it might be, or the way he would sit in class, extremely Marine-like, which is normal, but he was very tense, very, you could just, I knew that there were some issues. The students in the class just thought he was a grumpy old man, but you know, he was about 55, 53, just he wasn't. He's just the way he is, and he needed help; he refused. I said, maybe you should go see somebody. He goes, No. He was very; it's a sign of weakness to them.

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Earl discussed the stigma that is associated with veterans seeking help. He said:

It is a stigma. So you don't do it while you're in because it's believed, and I know it's

true because of what I did, that not, I didn't but other people would judge you if you saw

a psychiatrist. Because anything you do in the military is documented. Whether you get a

parking ticket, you see a psychiatrist, whatever it might be, it's documented. It's in your

file.

Earl has found that the Department of Defense and the VA do not work together to help

the veteran, and this is likely due to the fact that they two separate entities with different

purposes. The lack of continuity between departments has an impact on the ability of service

members/veterans to transition successfully. Earl also talked about the current generation of

veterans and the troubles they face. He said:

A lot of it has to do with the fact that it is; when you're in that situation you feel a sense

of camaraderie. You feel a sense of brotherhood or sisterhood or family. Right when you

leave that situation though, you're separated from that, whether it's to go to the hospital

or back to your family, you have a different feeling. It's almost like you got fired in a

sense that you can't go back to that position, or if you broke up with your divorce or

whatever, there is a sense of loss, emptiness, and it's hard for them, in my opinion, to

transition because of the fact that there is a lack of assistance in the way they lack the

assistance when they're leaving the military. So, when they leave that family, you know,

that unit, whether they're hurt or whether their tour is done, their contract has ended,

whatever, or they're being relocated to a different position or they're whatever, it's

difficult for them to let go of a lot of things that they've seen or dealt with. So, one of the

big problems, which has been a hidden secret, I wouldn't say it's a hidden secret but kind

of an issue, is for the women, and some men, is rape over there. And it's quite rampant, especially ironically amongst the Army. I'm not saying that the other services it doesn't happen to, but they're less. Marines because Marines are first to fight, so women are not put into combat situations like the men are, so there is less females in trenches. There are no females in the trenches actually compared to the Army. They're after the Marine Corps, so it's a different type of, they're like behind the lines, and so it's a different type of situation for them. But yeah, that's a big problem. And it happens to men too, not saying it's happening to women only. It happens to weaker men or whatever. And there are a lot of issues in the military that are going on, but that's one of the things that upsets me amongst many other things, but that's with any job. But back to your question. I think that there needs to be some type of, almost a workshop orientation. It's like when you leave a job. I have friends of my mother or father, when they retire they go through HR [Human Resources], they go through an orientation to learn whether there are possibilities for HMO [Health Maintenance Organization] for "POE," whatever that is, I forgot the name of it, and how they want their retirement taken out and so on, so on, and so on. What kind of retirement, and what are the possibilities for that. So, they go through a type of a couple of workshops or orientation that deals with that type of debriefing from leaving the military. And that is where it should be that way, but it's not. It's when you contract in, you know, because you sign the paperwork, and you're just, that's it.

Earl also shared who helped him through his transition process. He said it was not the military; it was his family and friends in the military that assisted him.

Kim

Kim is a veteran who served 26 years in the Army National Guard. Kim explained how she believed her transition to be little better than that of most, because she already had some work experience in the civilian sector before entering into the military. She described her prior work experience as follows:

I paid for my own college, so I worked when I went to school. I was in the workforce; you know I've got everything and anything that you could think of…retail sales, foodservice industry, in front of the line, behind the line…food service. I did a lot of different things.

Kim said that the structure of the military does lead to challenges for some, "Because it's such a controlled; and disciplined environment, and the civilian world is not controlled, it's not disciplined. There's so much politics, you know, especially in this town." Kim explained the perceptions that she encountered with many employers. She said:

It just, it would boggle somebody's mind if they're unfamiliar with this type of territory, you know, and I talk to a lot of employers, a lot them of course… 'Oh yeah, we love hiring military' and '*blah–blah–blah*.' Well, they want to hire military at the lower level, you know, at the initial level onboarding. They don't want to hire managers or supervisors or executives that have, you know, that type of experience in the military. They want entry level, and they do like it because there is the military, the discipline, the duty, the dedication, you know. You have people that actually show up on time and do their jobs.

Kim also spoke to a VBA counselor about her job-search difficulties and to request information about jobs she would be qualified for based on her experience. She learned that

because she did not have a master's degree, she would be excluded from civilian-sector positions that matched her experience level. She explained:

So, then I went to see the employment counselor, and I was telling the difficulties I had finding a job. He did a little bit of research. So by the time I got home, I had an e-mail. I don't know if he called me or there was an e-mail. And what it was, was I had all this experience, but I had a bachelor's degree. So, he had asked me that if I was interested in pursuing a master's degree, to let him know.

Therefore, she chose to pursue her master's degree and enrolled a program using her GI Bill benefits. Shortly after getting her master's degree, Kim got a job with the VA. She said that if she had not gotten a master's degree she probably would not be employable. The military, ironically, had given her too much experience, which presented a problem for her in finding a job. Kim concluded that civilian sector employers minimize military leadership experience based on a belief that military structure compensates for leadership ability or a lack thereof. She explained that military experience and leadership can be devalued, which translates into less opportunities and lower starting pay. She said:

Yeah, I also found there was a lot of misconception out there, you know. A lot of the interviews I went on, a lot of the civilian companies, I thought, well you know, [in the military] you have a captive audience, you could direct people to do what you want them to do. And in a sense, yes, it's true. But in another sense, you can't fire those people. You have to work with what you have. You have to take care of what you have. You have to hold people accountable, you have to discipline, you know, so it's completely different than the civilian, you know. They're just like, well, you give an order, and people do what you tell them to do. Well that's not true, you know, human behavior is still human

behavior, and, in fact, you had to use more managing skills and more leadership skills in the military, and the higher you got up the more politically savvy you had to be and the more diplomatic you had to learn how to be. So, it's a little different than what people perceive as far as leading and supervising and managing, but I wasn't even looking for those jobs. I just wanted a worker-bee job. I wanted a job in operations or project management or training. So, then again because of all of my experience, I think that they got, you know, most companies don't want to pay that kind of money for, you know, for a person. I mean, I applied for a job at Allegiant as their training coordinator for like, and it was based here in Las Vegas, it was for like four of their hubs. I mean, I came [down?] a lot in my asking. I only asked $60,000 a year. Well that was too much for Allegiant. Well, you're not going to find somebody experienced to do that kind of a job with that kind of responsibility, you know, for under probably 70 or 75, and I was willing to take 60 to get my foot in the door, and they wanted to pay like 35.

Transition Assistance Program (TAP) And Its Impact On Veterans

Upon Sharon's separation from the Army she attended the Army Career and Alumni Program (ACAP) ACAP/TAP program, which as she explained was "a voluntary two-day workshop…with no clear process. I guided myself and there was no one pushing me through the process."

Linda explained that she was fighting the system during this time because she did not want to get out. Linda also explained that she attended the ACAP/TAP program she said:

They teach you about how school is gonna go, if you're gonna retire. They teach about GI Bill. But it wasn't really so much with GI Bill, what I got, because I was on the senior side, so they mostly talk about fishing and hunting for the rest of their life. Because I was

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with higher ranking, retiring, and to me, I'm like, well, I'm going to school, what can you

do for me? Those things they talk about at the lower ranking side of the TAP; they

separate you.

She also expressed her disappointment with ACAP. She said:

…it was disappointing to me because I didn't learn anything from TAP and I thought a

two-day workshop. I mean they did tell us about resume and stuff. But, at that point, I

already had a resume ready because I was, had been researching on my own. And, when I,

I got picked up before I got out. I was on my positional leave. And that's when they

actually looked at my resume and, it was like, oh this is already ready. I said, 'yeah, I got

picked up for a job already, temporary job, before I go to school.'

Fortunately, Linda had acquired some knowledge from conducting her own informational

research; however, she was still discouraged by the lack of guidance she received from the

military. She explained:

…[I] showed them my resume and they said, 'Alright, it looks good.' I was like, 'Ok, I

know, but could you give some more pointers?' (laughs) They didn't give me that. Um,

so most of the stuff I really researched on my own. Like the GI Bill, I had to ask other

people about it. And…um…I called the VA myself. Basically, when it comes to the GI

Bill, it was just me. I didn't get really any help. I called the school that I was going to in

North Carolina. I called the VA to get my COE [Common Operating Environment],

which is my certificate of eligibility. And I prepared a year out, on my own.

In Connie's situation, when it came to attending TAP, she requested and received a waiver

because her husband had threatened to take her son while she attending TAP workshops at her

former base. She explained:

So, when I got here to Nevada, I went through TAPs, like, again. Like, I actually

voluntarily went through it. I signed up for it at the Nellis, and I don't think it was

Education Office, but it might have been. I actually then really got to go through TAPs

and learn about it in more detail. Because, I mean, I had gone to the first day with my son

and explained to them like what was going on, just because I was trying to cover my

bases, and I think they had given me some information, and, like, I was looking at the

school track, but that was not much concern, and I was getting out, like, *I was getting out*.

I didn't know what I was going to do, so that was kind of like tucked in the back of my

head, so getting to come back to TAPs for me was, like, a good thing, because it provided

me a lot of the information that was, like, a prerequisite to me going back to school. So

even though I did not use that information, when I did go to TAPs that second time, that

actual time I sat through the whole class, I used that information when I came back to

UNLV [the University of Nevada, Las Vegas] this last year. So, it wasn't a straight line.

She explained how the TAP workshop she attended was taught by the Department of Labor. She

thought it was informative, but it did not seem that a representative from the VA was present.

She stated:

Honestly, I think it would be a good idea if they did TAPs with the Department of Labor

and, hey, maybe the VA too. What if they did it together? Something like that might be

great. No, but something like that would be amazing and that would be something that

they could do because the VA is about to play a much bigger role in your life than it ever

has, so that's a really good point, and I think that would have been really helpful to have

it taught by those two entities, instead of it being all on one or the other. Because

transition is moving from one state to another, so, hey, maybe have both of those partners interacting.

Samantha's case was unable to attend the TAP at her base, but she did attend a TAP class on another base, where TAP was the standard course to prepare veterans for life after service. However, Samantha was so overcome with depression by her situation that it did not necessarily help her. She still fights today for her veteran benefits. She is still working on receiving education benefits and a disability rating, considering the level of depression and mental distress she endured during her tenure in the Coast Guard.

Brandi attended the mandatory one-week TAP program on transitioning from the military into civilian life. She recalled the program being "pretty quick" and focused on filling out paperwork. She stated:

> There was a lot of paperwork. A day of how to dress for an interview…what to wear and not to wear. And, two to three hours to work on your resume. It is not enough time to do everything. Basically, they put together a packet and added links to show how to transition into civilian life. It is not even enlisted personnel; it is contracted workers.

When asked how she handled the information she received from the medical board and subsequent transition, Brandi replied, "It was hectic." When the medical evaluation board informed her of its decision, Brandi had approximately one month to leave the island of Okinawa. She had never been on her own before, having entered the military right after leaving high school. She explained, "I had to get everything together and shipped to my new location. I had no help and it was very scary. It was a lot to do at one time."

Ralph explained that at his base everyone was required to go through TAP, and it was a week-long program. He noted, "They try to gear it towards what you planned on doing after the

military, such as school, employment, or technical training to learn a trade. I went into the employment section of TAPs. It gave me some resume tips, and gave me a chance to write my name on the list for employers to contact me if they were interested."

Jeffery expressed a belief that TAP courses should be longer:

> Maybe it could have longer and more time to spend with each individual topic, because they usually just give you by hour-to-hour to explain something, which is, within one week. It is too much information for you to, you know, be ready to transition out of the military. But I did. I had a lot of assistance, like you know, while transitioning I was still going to school, while I was transitioning out of the military.

Al said he went through a program similar to TAP that helped participants prepare their resumes; information was provided regarding how to describe one's military occupation in terms that would be suited for a civilian resume. In response to the question of whether Al thought the program was helpful, he responded, "It was a waste of time. It was an absolute waste of time and resources. It probably would have been better if I did the research on my own." Al expressed that contractors and not the government delivered the TAP program. Al had been financially savvy and frugal during his years of military service, but he had many internal concerns about life and employment after separation. He received no help with addressing these concerns from the military. He explained:

> I remember I thought about it. I said, well, here I am in California and in the military. Fortunately enough, I had cash on hand, but there was…I could have worked for the local contractor, which is known as Johnson Controls, but I didn't want to be a mechanic. One thing is, I am a piano player, and I didn't like scratching my fingers up. Second thing is, to me, there was not enough thought going into the daily work. I mean, you get into a

routine of fixing transmissions, you fix transmissions. You know their housing, torch

convertor, you know a dry terrain, and it is what it is. Honestly, this is not the life for me,

which is why I went to school while I was there. So, long story short, I got out, and I was

just completely lost. Not knowing what benefits were available to me, but I literally was

like where do I go from here? What do I do? What am I going to do? Where am I going

to live?

George also explained that he went through the week-long TAP. He explained:

It's a class that most, most active duty members do. It was a weeklong and it seemed like

your very typical out-processing briefing. One of the things I didn't know at the time, but

was very, very, um, very effective, very beneficial to me is a gentleman from the

Veteran's Benefits Administration actually presented, and not only did he tell us about

the veteran's benefits that we had available to us, he almost assertively insist that we take

advantage of them because they were that good.

Thomas said that he attended a TAP course that was basically a four-day class. He said

the course focused mostly on providing attendees with access to recruiters (i.e., 'headhunters')

from different organizations (e.g., representatives from law-enforcement agencies and defense

contractors) that were seeking veterans to recruit. As for the VA's role in the class, he explained:

There was a VA counselor, rep, or whatever that had you bring your medical record with

you. And you just handed it to this guy who was, like, he was at a desk, and he just

thumbs through your medical record real fast and just hands it back and goes, 'Nah, I

don't see anything qualifying.' And then, that was it. That was the extent of the dealing

with the VA. And, I didn't deal with the VA again until I had been out for, until 2009.

Thomas explained that there should be a defined period when a service member is assigned someone that can continue to help them. Countdown materials exist, but they are provided so late in the separation process that one can't complete tasks according to the advised sequence. He said:

I took this four-day TAP class like maybe two weeks before the end of service. They gave me this thing talking about 18 months ago, but it's, I'm out in two weeks so this is kind of useless and…

James explained how he attended TAP workshops, which focused on resume building, mock interviews, and information from the VA. He said he attended a one-week program where he received some vital tips. As a Chief Master Sergeant, James was in 'management' and led people; so, he had an idea as to how to prepare for next steps after the military. However, he struggled with how to market himself as a civilian. He said, "Sometimes you don't know what you are worth, and you may take a job just to have a job." He emphasized that veterans need to be able to translate their military skills to civilian skills.

Kim explained that her transition process out of the Army involved attending a half-day TAP workshop on job searches:

It wasn't really [a transition training]; it sucked. 'This is how you search.' They gave you different websites searching for jobs, that pretty much was it. It was geared more for the younger, you know, one or two…What do I want to call it?… those that only served one or two terms.

Kim attended another TAP workshop at another base that was geared toward NCOs and field grade officers, and Kim seemed to have found it more useful. Kim explained:

The VA wasn't there, but there were veteran service officers guiding you through, and they actually had us bring in our medical records and helped us fill out the form to apply for our, you know, compensation.

Kim added that having the guidance of veteran service officers really helped attendees to complete their claims. She completed her own claim in three months when, according to Kim, on average, it can take a year or more.

Kim believed that because one of her jobs in the military had been to be a recruiter, she was already aware of what needed to be done to get ready for transitioning. She referenced her training as a career counselor and stated, "80 percent of the military: they're 'one term,' they do one term and they get out. 80 percent…. At least, when I was doing recruiting and retention, that was the figure." Since she worked as a career counselor she knew where to go to get the information she needed.

Sam said that the VA was present at his TAP workshop. They talked about the different things that will occur once you process out. Sam talked about the topics that are covered during the TAP briefings. He said that they go through finances, housing and other areas that will impact service members when then get out. He explained how with the new technology a lot of the information is done on-line. One thing he stated that was eye opening is that once you make the decision to retire you cannot change your mind. He explained:

Once you submit your retirement and you change your mind that you want to come back in, that's not allowed now unless you are listed essential, you just made rank, and or something else essential. There is no way to come back in unless you have scored for a test for rank, and while you're in the process of retiring if they get promotable, you can either accept the promotion or decline it and still retire. Or your unit needs you, and

you're just that good and they need you. But that wasn't the case. We were over 140 something short in my unit, so you're good.

Sam also explained that during TAP he signed up for GI Bill and disability benefits. He said that his school approval was processed immediately. However, his disability claim took a little longer. He retired in February 2010, but he did not receive any payments until August 2011. It took over a year for him to receive any income from the VA. He said that it was a difficult process and fighting the VA was like a full-time job in itself.

Helen went through TAP at the Fort Hood Army Base in Killeen, Texas, which was one of the bases pilot testing new TAP material that had been renamed 'ACAP.' She explained:

> It was six months prior to your retirement you had to attend an ACAP briefing and then you had to, you can, attend any of the workshops that they offered including employment interviews, resume writings, and I attended those.

Helen said that anyone who was transitioning out of the military whether retirement or separation could attend the workshops. It was mandatory for the soldiers to attend the training. And then the VA also came and did their briefing. Helen said she found the VA helpful in her transition process. She responded:

> Yes. Because I honestly didn't know any of the benefits that I would file or that I could use immediately. I thought you had to be hurt really bad in order for you to use the VA. I didn't know that you just had be a veteran with a rated disability, you know, VA rating.

Based on the 20 interviews conducted for this research study, it became clear that there was a trend that had formed in the research that distinguished the transition experience and how they exited the military. In one of the first interviews conducted with Connie she indicated that it is important to ask the veteran if they were "forced out" or if the volunteered to separate. It

became apparent that these differences set the tone for the veteran's process of transitioning. In reviewing the interviews with the veterans many described their transition experiences beginning with how they arrived at the decision to separate. Below is a figure that shows the experiences of separating from the military based on medically discharged, voluntary separation, chose not to re-enlist, and retirement. Based on the research, the medically discharged had an extremely difficult time transitioning because it most cases they were unaware of the decision made by the military to discharge them. However, the retirees tended to fare better than the other groups because they had served over 20 years and anticipated separating from the military. The also had ample time to prepare.
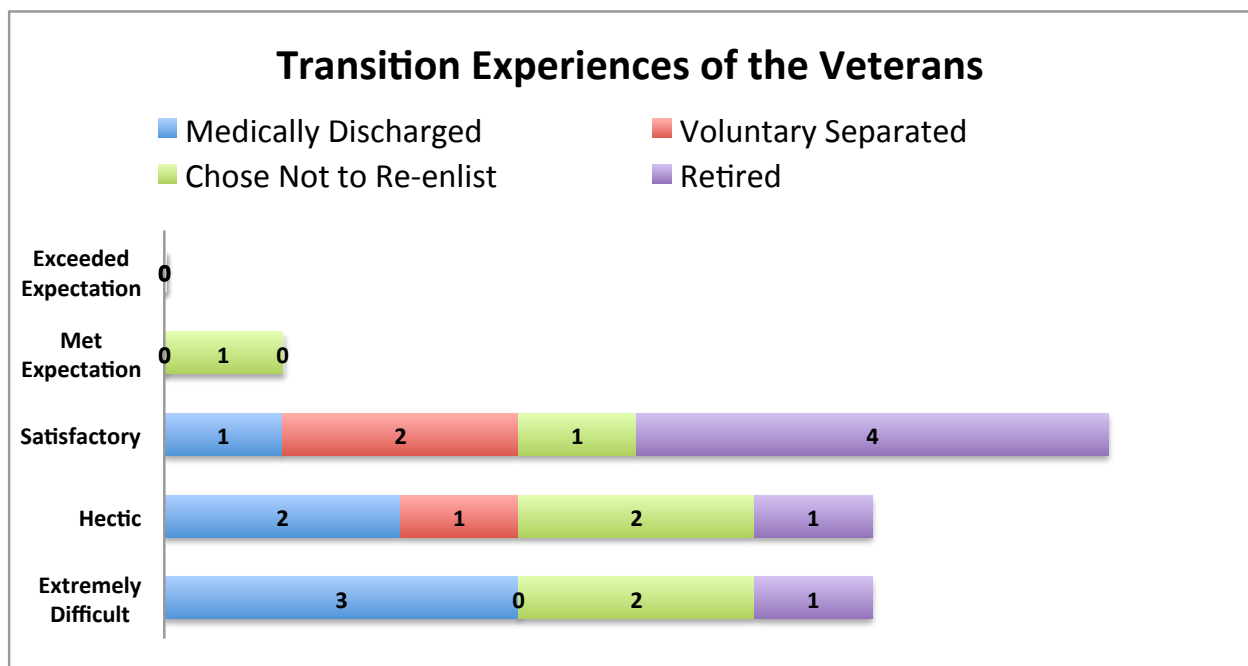
Figure 4. Number of Respondents Ratings in Each Category of Military Separation.

Chapter 4 Summary

Chapter 4 told the touching, heart-wrenching, and hidden stories of the military life (and after the military) that most of us in the civilian world have never heard. In their own words, 20 respondents described the military as its own unique culture, provided insight into the variable

process of transitioning, shared their experiences with TAP and noted its shortcomings. Lacking clear direction from their organizations, most sought the advice of friends and family for support and information regarding how to transition and obtain military benefits, including educational and medical benefits. Some of the participating veterans have had to cope with severe mental health issues, unemployment, financial problems, depression, and isolation. Amazingly, they have overcome many issues and are still here to share their stores that will benefit other veterans.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Chapter 5, as the final chapter, will present and discuss the findings of this dissertation research. It will provide a study overview, analysis, themes, recommendations, future research, and conclusion.

Study Overview

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of OEF/OID veterans' personal experience with transitioning into civilian life following military service to guide transition-service providers and educators, those in veteran-services fields, policymakers, and employers. The study applied an acculturation framework by taking into account the concepts of integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization as part of the service members' lived experience in transitioning from military to civilian culture.

Chapter 1 provided the foundation for this work, giving an overview of the issues that service members face in adapting to their lives after the military with existing transition services. It also introduced, specifically, the reality that over two million service members have served in the "War on Terror," the longest war in history, and one million service members are expected to return to civilian life in the near future and be challenged with readjustment. Next, it posited that the military organization has its own culture (i.e., language, rituals, rules, ways of conducting oneself, etc.), distinct from U.S. civilian culture(s); and military culture is deeply ingrained in service members during their progression through the military. From this position, it followed that acculturation theory would be a highly applicable framework with which to explain how service members exist in dual cultures as described by Berry (2005, 2009). Finally, Chapter 1 presented the study's research questions. These questions were as follows:

1. What was the service member's/veteran's integration experience transitioning from the military and back into the civilian life?

2. What assimilation strategies did the veteran employ while transitioning into civilian life?

3. What type of support services or assistance was utilized during separation and afterwards to help or hinder the veteran's transition?

    a. Describe military support provided while transitioning.

    b. Describe non-military support provided while transitioning.

    c. What recommendations would you provide for the transitioning process?

In Chapter 2, literature was reviewed related to the existence of a unique military culture; the impacts of serving in the "War on Terror" including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and depression; family and social support; the acculturation framework; the acculturation model and the military; and the process of military-civilian transitioning by service members along with the challenges they encountered during the process. Chapter 2 further revealed the applicability of acculturation theory as a relevant framework to describe the military-civilian transitioning experience.

Chapter 3 detailed the rationale for using a phenomenological methodology and acculturation theory as the framework to explain the phenomenon of transitioning. The lived experiences of 20 participants were obtained through semi-structured, recorded interviews with specific open-ended questions, each of which were aligned to specific aspects of the transitioning related to that of the acculturation framework.

Chapter 4 presented the accounts of the 20 participating veterans to reveal their process of integrating and transitioning back into the civilian world as part of this study. In Chapter 4,

respondent stories were organized according to categories reflecting the reason for the respondent's military separation (i.e., medical discharge; chose not to re-enlist; voluntary separation; or retirement) because leaving the military marks the beginning of the transition process.

Many joined as young adults looking for an opportunity to get out of a poverty-stricken environment, while others joined out of family tradition. Some joined because of the anger they felt on 9/11, and others joined with the hopes of paying for college after they got out. Whatever the reason, they all went through the necessary requirements to be an Airman, Coastie, Marine, Sailor, or Solider.

In this analysis, each veteran was different. The researcher interviewed 11 combat veterans and 9 non-combat veterans. The findings showed that combat veterans still experienced some type of PTSD, depression, and anxiety. Combat veterans, including respondents in this study, have seen their worst nightmares come to life and have witnessed death and destruction on a level that civilians could never understand. They are constantly haunted by fears of fighting the enemy and for their lives. When Jasmine was asked for recommendations she would give combat veterans, this was her answer:

> Obviously, if they're combat veterans, they're probably going to be a little fucked up in the head. So I would tell them that, yes, the adrenaline feels great. I mean, you just relish in it, but eventually it's going to not feel that great, and they need to basically decide whether they're going to hold onto it, or if they're going to choose to let go and find that type of high or satisfaction doing something else. So, I think if people are transitioning out, if they go to their doctor and they explain and they talk about their symptoms or what they go through, and they tell them they have PTSD, they need to take that shit seriously.

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Like, it will save them years of their life and quality of life if they make that choice to

address those issues head-on right when they're getting out versus waiting until it

basically breaks your life apart and then you're building it.

George, a non-combat veteran, expressed the following about his PTSD and other

emotional experiences,

I just knew that… the first couple of times that I went in and talked about it, it was very

painful… so when I go in and I talked about things, for example, I talked about you know,

um the nightmares I was having, the hardships I was having with my marriage…I would

feel emotions like sadness, rage, just polar opposites… like seven different emotions at

one time, and I didn't know how to handle that… and I sure as heck, if I was feeling

violent or if I was feeling like, um, yeah that energy that I was feeling violent, I certainly

don't want to walk into a place where people need help and act out, whether it be in my

voice and the things I say or physically… I found out that all our transitions were very

similar… we all struggled, we all struggled with anger, we all struggled with, um, we all

struggled with, uh, sleeping… we all struggled with civilians… we all struggled in our

relationships… I wouldn't talk to my father about it directly… PTSD… but he... I know

he could see the signs and symptoms and he did the things that needed to be done to… to

um… to help me…

Thematic Results

The lived-experiences provided by respondents revealed five key themes important to

these veterans' transition experience. They are: "Theme 1–Don't Go It Alone; Theme 2–The

Channels Are Broken; Theme 3–Getting Everything Lined Up; Theme 4–Support that Helps the

Fallen Rise; and Theme 5–Faith. The next five sections will discuss each of these themes

individually, provide exemplifying quotes, and make recommendations based on the findings for the given theme.

Theme 1 – Don't Go It Alone

During this study, it became clear that it is not healthy for veterans to be alone. Veterans are used to higher levels of camaraderie, teamwork, and cohesion that is developed in the military and is typically not found in civilian life (Sloane, 2008). Throughout their military service, individuals who are now veterans relied on the deep bonds they formed with their fellow service members. When they first separate from the military, any time there is a void in their lives, or when they are no longer around friends and family, they feel empty. The feeling of emptiness and being alone can lead to memories of past traumas, depression and, anxiety. Correspondingly, the first prominent refrain that recurred among the respondents in this investigation centered on the importance of "not being alone." Specific examples included:

- "Do not be alone." (Thomas)

- "Get Help. Go to the VA." (Brandi)

- "Most of the veterans isolate themselves instead of getting involved with people around their community." (Jeffery)

- "Reach out to other veterans." (Brandi)

- "It is important to give other veterans help." (Brandi)

- "Get past your ego, and ask for help." (George)

- "Don't be too proud to ask for help." (Jeffery)

- "I don't understand, they don't reach out for help, like, they just isolate and just keep to themselves." (Kyle)

Theme 1 Recommendation

Mentorship program. Transitioning service members could benefit greatly from having someone to talk to on a regular basis, someone who could provide informed guidance and responses to questions, and who could also serve as an accountability partner during the transition process. This assistance can derive from a group therapy setting where participants are dealing with similar transitioning issues (Sloane & Friedman, 2008) and sharing their experiences with each other. It can also provide a resource of   knowledgeable about relevant veterans' programs, services, and policies, which can create a mentor program focusing on the mentee's experiences, the military culture in general, and veteran needs. Mentorship relationships can form through this connection and pair veterans as appropriate to other veterans who have transitioned within the last five years. The mentorship program would be delivered by a cadre of passionate volunteers who undergone an application process and background check, received training, and are provided with all necessary guidelines and materials for success, including program assessment tools. The planning, development, and implementation of such a program should use current research, reflect an understanding of acculturation, be holistic in its content, and involve veterans at every step.

Theme 2 – The Channels Are Broken

Although transition services have been developed and delivered for more than 20 years, and the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) provided by the Department of Defense (DoD) and its agency partners was revised and updated in 2008 according to the GAO Report in 2014. Birchrest (2014) also spoke of the issues with the current transition program.. Respondents in this also study indicated that the channels are still broken. Different shortfalls in transition programing were apparent to different respondents. Some respondents felt that once one has

received or heard about VA services and has gone through TAP, no one cares about you anymore (i.e., no further communication is received). Most of the enlisted and lower ranking officers considered TAP to be a joke. Whether they attended two-day or week-long TAP workshops, they felt that there was not enough time for presenters to adequately deliver the information nor for the attendees to absorb all the necessary information to be prepared to go back into the civilian world. Many stated that VA representatives were not present at their workshop, and so participants received no information regarding what their medical benefits were. Most respondents felt that the VA was not there for them. In some cases, the base had contracted out with private entities to deliver TAP courses. In these cases, there was an obvious disconnect between the material being presented and what was truly needed by the transitioning service member; and the disconnect was compounded by the fact that the contractor did not understand military culture or the service members' experiences. Comments from respondents that exemplify this theme were as follows:

- "There were no organizations or individuals that reached out to me" (Ralph).

- "It wasn't really [a transition training], it sucked" (Kim).

- "I got out and I was just completely lost. Not knowing what benefits were available to me, but I literally was, like, 'Where do I go from here?'" (Al).

- "When I got out, there was nothing" (Jasmine).

- "There was no preparation to reintegrating you into the world or back into the civilian world" (Jasmine).

- "No one ever briefed me on the resources" (Harry).

- "I felt like the VA was for broken people" (Thomas).

- "There should be a defined period when a service member is assigned someone that can continue to help them" (Thomas).

- I never even received any type of follow-up after returning home from war. He was totally clueless. (Harry)

- The Department of Defense and the VA do not work together to help the veteran (Earl).

The profound importance of understanding the veteran experience when working with veterans cannot be understated; a very poignant comment came from Jeffery (a Purple Heart Army veteran), who explained how he interacted with doctors depending on their veteran status. He stated:

> I used to go up to my appointments, especially behavioral health appointments. I usually asked them first whether they were veterans or not or if they were civilians. So I only share, I would share only half of the things that I went through to a civilian counterpart than actually a veteran doctor. I will pretty much tell everything to a veteran doctor because I know they will relate to me. And I think, you know, especially after you get out of the military, the VA should, especially on the behavioral health part, I should say that they should give those jobs to veterans only.

Theme 2 Recommendation

The VA makes an effort to have benefits information available to veterans during TAP and at local VA offices. Veterans may visit any VA facility in their city or state. Many of the VA services are now available online through "My Healthy Vet" or other VA programs (VA, 2017). Veterans can either call or visit their local VA to get information about healthcare, burial services, and additional benefits, which include disability, GI Bill, and vocational rehabilitation

among other services. The VA also utilizes the Internet to provide information on services and instructions on how to apply for services eligible for veterans on-line. Sometimes the perceptions that the veterans have about the VA keeps them from seeking the help they may need. Furthermore, it is strictly incumbent upon the veteran to reach out if they need assistance.

Re-revising TAP. As stated in the GAO, 2014 report, the TAP program needed to be revised to address the needs of the veterans. Additionally, this study indicated that an increase in the length and depth of the transition program is necessary for improvement. For the respondents within this study, TAP lasted anywhere from two days to one week. One week or less for transitioning out of the military compared to the three–six month process involved in entering the military appears to be off balance. It sends a message to the military men and women that they are disposable. It is important that each branch tailor and deliver its own TAP program based on one unifying curriculum. Each branch should initiate TAP 30 days prior to an individual's separation from the military. The curriculum should be military-culture informed and could include the components that follow. (1.) Employment: How to conduct a job search, resume building, contacts of employers that hire veterans, and coaching sessions (2.) Healthcare Benefits: The Veterans Healthcare Administration (VHA) could provide information on how to be service connected and what services are offered at the VA in primary care, dental, prostatic, physical therapy, and mental health care. (3.) Non-Healthcare Benefits: The Veteran Benefits Administration (VBA) could dedicate a week of classes on how to apply for disability, GI Bill benefits, Post 9-11 Bill benefits, VA Home Loans, and other non-healthcare-related services and benefits. (4.) Program Fair: All of the veteran-serving private agencies and nonprofits could be invited in to talk about the different programs and services that are provided for veterans across the community. The setup could be similar to a community fair with an array of information on

the programs available to help homeless veterans, assist in employment, provide mental health services, and fulfill the need for connection. The existing TAP program should be re-evaluated again following its last evaluation by the GAO in 2014 to see what is and is not working. Review panels as well as new programs should include and involve veterans to provide the best perspective and insight on veteran needs.

Theme 3 – Getting Everything Lined Up

The TAP course this study's respondents described focused mainly on resume building, career coaching, and information on a limited number of potential employers. Some veterans expressed what they really Hodge (2008) explains that at the end of a service member's journey they develop a vision, voice, sense of community and victory. Each one of the aforementioned words can be used a catalyst to help lead the service member to plan for their future (Hodge, 2008). Master Chief said, "[I]n the civilian world you may feel a little devalued and you take any job you can get because you don't know how to market your skills." Taken together, a variety of respondent comments formed into the theme that transitioning could be better if one "gets everything lined up." This theme encompasses an array of remarks related to preparing for one's future. Remarks that exemplified this theme are as follows:

- "Have a plan—you cannot expect someone else to do the work for you." (James)
- "It might be a shock on the other side to realize, like, 'Oh, okay, I really need a plan in order to be successful. I need a budget. I need to make sure that everything is lined up.'" (Jeffery)
- "Make sure that you are ready to get out, if not stay in until you are ready." (Ralph)
- "Go to school." (Jonathan)
- "Save your money." (Al)

- "Be mentally prepared for the transition." (James)

- "It's not their job to prepare us for the civilian world. It's their job to prepare us to go to war. [It's] your job to prepare yourself to go back to civilian life." (Helen)

- "I started exploring options after the military and began my prep-work. The work cannot be successful if you are not doing your due diligence." (James)

- "Guys especially couldn't adjust when they get out of the military because, you know, when you're in the military over 20 to 30 years, it's hard for you to adjust to civilian life. Some will commit suicide because of that." (Sam)

Theme 3 Recommendations

Follow-up with veterans. Currently the TAP program does not include a "follow-up" component with veterans to provide guidance after separation (GAO, 2014). The VA could create a program that could send out a tailored transition packet (with all content developed with military culture in mind), which contains information about healthcare and being service connected; contacting or visiting the local VA for help; information on mental health services; financial guidance; information on the GI Bill; and all necessary documents to be completed to apply for benefits for which they are eligible. Also, the packet should include the name and contact information of someone who they can directly contact for more details. This package should be sent out 30-60 days after separation from the military and should be consistent with and connected to TAP.

Outreach and education. The VA could implement an outreach program similar to the grassroots "Stand Down" community events that are offered (by the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans and others) for veterans. Many community networks across the nation have come together to do what they can to help make the transition from combat to home easier for

veterans and their families (Sloane & Freedman, 2008). Special events can be held in cities across the country four times a year to provide outreach on burial benefits, healthcare, disability, and other benefits and services, and the events can be advertised through mailings, television, radio, billboards, etc. Veterans can attend these events to receive information directly from the VA and to connect with other governmental, local, and nonprofit community agencies.

The perception that respondents had of the VA appeared to depend on the individual veteran and their particular mindset when getting out. Some respondents did not know about the VA or what benefits it offers. It would be worthwhile to investigate this observation further and take the necessary steps to reduce any barriers that perceptions create in limiting access to the VA and its services.

Theme 4 – Support that Helps the Fallen Rise

The fourth theme to emerge from this study dealt with the concept of support and its role in being able to "rise" that is, transition and reintegrate into civilian life. The respondents in this study made it clear that the support system that they relied upon to help them transition existed outside of governmental agencies. Overwhelmingly, 17 out of 20 respondents said their family and friends were their most important support system. Research has found the importance of incorporating family into the veteran's transition process. Sloan (2008) expressed that veterans need the support of family and friends for a health readjustment. The following remarks exemplified Theme 4:

- "My sister was in the military, and I relied on her for questions that I didn't know. She helped me to understand the options." (Jonathan)

- "My father helped me financially for the first few months after I got out, but it was very difficult for me to adjust, I did not have enough time to prepare. It was very quick." (Brandi)

- "I had friends in the military that were assisting me, but that weren't even where I was." . (Earl)

- "My father said that he experienced the same thing… he kind of pushed… supported me… not pushed me… but supporting me… he drove me down there because I didn't know where it was at and having a support… because if I had no one supporting me I would probably just fall into depression, fall into fits of anger." (George)

- "I had a network of veteran friends who helped me." (Jonathan)

- "My wife, in-laws and parents helped me during my transition and recovery." (Larry)

- "One of my other friends, military friend, she was also retiring, so her and I were pretty much supporting each other." (Helen)

- "A friend of mine who was a security guard, he says, 'well, why don't you go to the VA and see what they can do for you.'" (Al)

- "For me, it was a domestic incident with my girlfriend at the time, that changed my life." (Thomas)

Theme 4 Recommendations

Family and friends support assistance. The VA could offer quarterly programs for families and friends of veterans that are having difficulties transitioning. Programs can be offered to help families to understand how to be patient with veterans and also provide an ear for them

when they are ready to share their experiences (Sloane, 2008) Despite how long ago the service member returned from war, the family members can endure the impacts of how the service member was impacted by the war (Hodge, 2010). Based on my research, families and friends played an integral role in veterans' ability to stay motivated and to fight for their benefits, as well as helping to restore their health. The family (or friend) has a holistic perspective on the veteran. They knew the veteran pre- and post- military. They will also be the most accessible support system for the veteran on a regular basis. For this reason, the VA could provide information and guidance, skills training, and tools to help loved ones interact with the veteran and best support them in this process.

Theme 5 – Faith

Faith was found to be another extremely important characteristic mentioned among the respondents of this study. Accordingly, it formed Theme 5, validating the findings of other researchers who have investigated the spiritual features of military service, combat, warzone experiences, and related injuries. Faith and spiritual health and well-being, are considered helpful to mitigate suicide risks (Kopacz & Connery, 2015). Faith and spiritual connectedness have been shown to provide a powerful framework of meaning to help survivors in making sense of trauma and reconnecting with their families, their communities, and God (Currier, Drescher, & Holland, 2016).

Veterans in this study expressed how their faith got them through the hardest times in their lives. George said that his faith kept him grounded when he got angry and wanted to pick fights are be combative with his family and co-workers. Also, some reached out to their former base Chaplains to discuss issues they may have dealt with while in the military. So, faith steps in

and acts as a mediator to move forward. Here are some examples of the role of faith in the experiences of this study's respondents:

1. Jeffery, a Marine veteran who went to prison and had severe mental issues said that he had talked to several psychiatrists, therapists, and counselors over the years to help him with his PTSD and anger issues. It was not until he spoke to a pastor that said that God had already forgiven him that he began to feel free from the years of pain.

2. "The biggest thing that… the biggest thing that I appreciate about my transition was my relationship with God… I chose to turn to God rather than some of the other things that veterans were turning to… to cope with hard times." (George).

3. "When I was feeling anger or sadness I went to talk to the Chaplin." (Samantha).

Theme 5 Recommendation

Engage the faith-based community in assisting veterans. Provide the faith-based community with information, pamphlets, a list of resources, and handouts readily available to give to veterans in need of help. Involve the faith-based community in events such as the support-programs fair described within the recommendation associated with Theme 2. Veterans may connect with their local faith-based community to help with issues such as depression, isolation, and feelings of shame and guilt. Veterans can also be encouraged to visit the local Chaplin at the VA Hospital. Also, Chaplains could possibly be incorporated in the transition process. There are various methods of faith-based help and therapy available to veterans. The faith-based community needs to be connected to the process, and the individual needs to find what works best for them.

Recommendations for the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs

Respondents remarked time and time again sentiments such as, "VA doesn't care; no one ever called me; there is no follow up; I did not know what the VA did; and I thought the VA was just for broken veterans." It should be made clear that the VA is for all veterans that served their country. The VA provides healthcare and other benefits to veterans who apply. Education and outreach by the VA will help to provide the correct information to all veterans as well as to let veterans know that they are important to the VA. The aforementioned programs such as revising the current transition assistance program; providing mentorship; create outreach and education opportunities in the community; engage the faith-based community, and design a follow-up program are just a few recommendations the VA could implement to improve their services provided to veterans.

Study Limitations

The limitations for this study were as follows:

1. Sampling criterion consisted of 20 veterans. (This decision is based on the desire to have a large diverse group of veterans that will provide a broad perspective of the issues with transitioning and specific experiences that occur during the process.) Twenty interviews were conducted and provided a sufficient amount of data to determine emerging themes. However, a more specific criterion would have been useful, such as ensuring there was a representative of each branch, and interviewing representatives from the VA or other veteran groups would have provided a diverse perspective on transitioning.

2. The potential for researcher bias is a common limitation in qualitative studies along with the lack of control over the attitudes, perceptions, and experiences of the interviewees. The research revealed interesting findings that may have been missed if the researcher imposed their own biases on the study.

3. The researcher lacked control over the level of willingness a given veteran has to be candid about their experiences and ability to feel comfortable enough to share their stories. Many of the veterans were open and candid about their experiences transitioning out of the military. However, conducting a second interview may have provided more information once the researcher had established a rapport with the interviewee.

4. The study was also limited because the research method primarily focus on interviews. It necessarily cannot include observations within assistance-program settings or analysis of assistance program documentation due to the sensitivity of the topic and maintaining the confidentiality of the subjects. Unfortunately, the lack of observations and agency documentation eliminates the possibility of performing the triangulations that are often used in the analysis of qualitative data. Linking the veteran interviews along with VA, DoD and DoL through agency data and interviews would have provided a holistic perspective on the transitioning process.

Future Research

This effort yielded a variety of ideas for future studies in the area of veteran transition research, which are outlined in this section. A future line of research could distinguish whether a differing degree of transition preparedness exists among various ranks (e.g., between officers and enlisted). In this research, it appeared that the veterans who were higher-ranking as service

members were more prepared for future jobs and more likely to pursue education than were lower-ranking veterans. This could be due to the leadership and management skills that the higher-ranking service members develop while in the service. One respondent, a Captain, explained that he encouraged his entire crew to go to school and to try to advance themselves, especially if the military was not going to be their career for the next 20 years.

Additionally, the VA should consider conducting a future analysis of resources and service provided to the veterans to make sure they are meeting the needs for the veterans and determine ways they can improve these services and access to them. Many veterans in this study spoke of the lack of assistance by the VA, whose sole purpose is to aid the veteran, his widow, and orphan. It appears that veterans may be unaware of their benefits and that the line of communication between the veteran and the VA needs to be improved. It is commendable that the VA has many resources available for them to utilize, but it is disheartening when the veterans in this study consistently expressed they didn't know where to get help or if they were eligible for assistance.

Another area of future work relates to how the current war will impact generations to come. How is this longest war in history going to impact the military? Will the military be able to recruit more active duty members and reservists? Especially, with the role of the reservist changing in this current role, many were called to war at a moment's notice and then returned back to civilian life a year later. Their experiences were inconsistent because they were both active and reservist and did not quite fit in to either environment culturally.

Studying families is another possible avenue for research. Family members appeared to be the biggest support system for many veterans in this study. Family members knew the veterans before they went into the service and who they had become by the time they got out.

Society tends to forget that the family also goes to war with a service member. In many cases, spouses and other family members, likewise, deal with service-related depression and anxiety. In marriages or other close family situations, the spouse and family member(s) remaining at home will have to learn how to operate without the deployed individual, as well as dealing with the lingering fear that this person may never return home. Incorporating family members into the TAP program may be beneficial to the veteran and family members.

Finally, further research could be conducted on the concept to extend and expand Goffman's 1961 research in relationship to the unique attribute of the veterans of the current conflicts and present prison culture. Both the military and prisons have been described as Goffman (1961) as "total institutions." It is a place where one works, lives, sleeps and eats (Goffman, 1961). Military bases provide all the needs of service members from a grocery store, movie theater, library, gym, gas station, auto shop, a church, and shopping centers etc. It is an environment where one does not necessarily need to leave to obtain items from the surrounding community. Ironically, prison is the same. However, the reasons for a person being an inmate are due to punishment for a crime and not a voluntary action. Interestingly, two interviewees mentioned in this study they both felt like exiting the military was similar to getting out of prison, because of the lifestyle that was enforced upon them and the removal of independence.

There is research on the parallels of these two institutions and ways that they are similar and different. There currently exist an array of governmental and non-profit programs that have been designed to help prisoners reintegrate and address some of the issues they have readjusting to society. Conversely, some of the same principles and programs used for transitioning prisoners could also be helpful for veterans. Also, preparing the veterans for transitioning throughout their time in service, similar to prisoners, instead waiting until the end of their service

could provide a better transitioning experience for the veteran. Further research could consider the acculturation perspective to investigations exploring the relationship between military service and criminal activity.

Implications and Contributions of the Study

The study was consistent with the findings of the 2014 Government Accountability Report (GAO, 2014), which outlined the need for revisions to the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) because veterans' needs weren't fully being met by the program. As noted in the 2014 report, TAP had not been revised in 20 years, making the last revision prior to the current war on terror. A series of steps were recommended in the report to improve oversight, implementation, and assessment of TAP, many components of which were expected to be in place within the same year. Veterans in this study said that TAP is still not long enough, and it is inefficient. While the Department of Defense (DoD), the Department of Labor (DoL), and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) were tasked to work in collaboration to help smooth the transition an individual makes between the statuses of service member and veteran, there still seems to be a breakdown in communication. The service members who recently became veterans are required to work with the VA for services and assistance after separation from the military. Many veterans in this study expressed that the VA does not provide adequate information and guidance. The veterans ultimately rely on each other for help and are reluctant to go to the VA.

Also, as respondent Jeffery emphatically noted, "The VA doesn't do anything for you, nothing. They don't do nothing for you. You're the one who has to go out there and fight for whatever benefits you're entitled to." The fight Jeffery spoke of directly contradicts the promise and foundation of the VA as put forth by President Lincoln. Veterans should not have to battle at

home to be the beneficiaries of a promise that was made by our government to care for those who fought for this country.

This study was unique in its merging of acculturation theory with an exploration of the phenomenon of transitioning for veterans. Acculturation theory is not a new concept to the social sciences and other disciplines or new in its way of explaining the experience of one individual or a group moving into a new culture or living astride two cultures. However, there has been little previous research linking acculturation to veteran outcomes during the transition process. Past work has used acculturation theory in the examination of service members and veterans who become students and transition into the culture of higher education (Bichrest, 2013; Arminio et al., 2014).

John W. Berry described acculturation as the dual process of living in two cultures simultaneously (Berry, 20015, 2009). The research study showed how military personnel leave their culture of origin, which is "civilian" life to enter into a "host" culture, which is the military. Berry explains that the steps usually followed in this process consist of *assimilation* when individuals do not desire to maintain contact with their new cultural identity. This step can occur in the process of boot camp when a service member is trying to *assimilate* to their new environment. Also, Berry (2009) explains how *separation* can occur in this study when service members try to hold on to their culture, and simultaneously wish that they could avoid interaction with others, like their fellow service members that led to separation. Thirdly, Berry explains when there is a desire to preserve ones original culture and interact with the other culture, then *integration* is achieved. Where the person has embraced both cultures. Lastly, when there is very little prospect or concern in cultural maintenance, then this is defined as marginalization. When there is no desire to be part of either culture (Berry, 2009).

Chapter 4 of this study explained in detailed the different levels of acculturation that each participant experienced and are currently experiencing. The impacts of acculturation on veterans is so significant that it can have a lifetime affect on their perceptions of the military and life after the military. As titled by Charles Hodge's book in 2008 *Once a Warrior Always a Warrior*. This implies that even when one separates themselves from the military culture, there is still a part of them that is a warrior.

As indicated in the military–student studies, and reviewed herein in Chapter 2, the military is described as a "total institution" and a culture of its own. Undeniably, the military is a culture of norms and uses its own language. The duration of service of the 20 individuals interviewed in this study ranged from as little as 1.5 years and as many as 32 years. Regardless of the length of service, all experienced the culture of the military, as well as the process of entering and exiting the military. They served in various sub-cultures of the military, which are distinguishable by their branches and other significant factors beyond the scope of this study (e.g., combat and non-combat; gender; rank, enlisted or officer; and race). For example, the marine veteran, Thomas, in this study said he was part of the infantry squadron, and there was no time to study for school or read a book unless it was about weaponry. The Marine's mission is very defined and it is important that service members do not loose sight of that mission. However, the Air Force Captain, Jonathan, stated that he encouraged his enlisted Airmen to attend school. He encouraged school as part of their growth as an individual, and life after the military. This shows that even within different branches the goals and objectives are different for each service member.

The individuals in this study entered the military for different reasons. Some wanted to follow in the footsteps of their parents, grandparents, and family traditions. Other individuals had

been attracted to the future opportunities that the military could provide such as, education, and a chance to learn skills that would benefit themselves, their families, and their country. Only one of the 20 interviewed left the military with a "happy story." The remaining 19 who shared their stories had resurrected images and memories that they thought they left behind. Although participants are no longer actively serving in the military, the military is actively still part of them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the researcher embarked on this research with the goal of revealing a key essence or essences of the phenomenon of military–civilian transition at this time in history by veterans who have participated in the current conflicts [Operation New Dawn (OND), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), and Operation Enduring Freedom (OND)]. The military has its own culture, which is a sub-culture of U.S. life and thus the study was designed with an acculturation perspective as its foundation. It was enlightening to go deeply into the military culture. The contents of the lived-experiences of the participating veterans were extremely moving, particularly hearing stories ranging from those of individuals who felt lost and shaken having been discharged with a 30-day notice to detailed accounts of suicide attempts by the veterans. Transitioning is a process. It is not easy. The researcher set out to find out the strategies and the steps of transitioning from the military back into the civilian life. Fortunately, the researcher had an opportunity to hear their many words of wisdom.

The study revealed how TAP, the government-mandated transition program, has been experienced in real life. Respondents in this study expressed the program did very little to prepare them for the transition back into the civilian world. A one-week (or shorter) training for service members on the cusp of separation—and who might not even be in the state of mind to

retain the information presented to them—is very ineffective. Veterans in this study tended either to walk away with little-to-no information or to not have understood what they needed to do to move on with their lives and to get the benefits they earned. Ultimately, it appeared there is no "one" way of transitioning; it is up to the individual and what works for them. Overall, the idea has been, "if you don't give up you will readapt and become comfortable with your civilian side." While this is certainly true, shortfalls exist in the current support efforts that could be remedied to make the process more clear and compassionate.

Civilians often hear heroic stories of how our men and women conquered the enemy that attacked our country and threatened our freedoms. However, what do we hear about the stories of the enemies that live on within many veterans who fought the good fight? Also, what about those who had to take the lives of the innocent in order to survive? Most service members went to war excited to make a contribution to their country and to protect their loved ones, only to find that their expectations did not match reality in terms of how they would feel or be treated, later, as a veteran.

The families of service members can also carry the scars of living in the military culture. Families "go to war" along with the veteran. They have to be strong for themselves and for the veterans. Spouses, children, families and loved ones deal with the aftermath of war. The stories told in this study helped to give a voice to the issues that still exist in the process of transitioning from the military back into the civilian world. By no mean, is the process of transitioning easy; it takes patience, strength, dedication, and resilience, which ironically are many of the same skills taught when entering the military and are the same skills applied when exiting the military..

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APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL FORM

UNLV Social/Behavioral IRB - Exempt Review
Exempt Notice

DATE: April 10, 2017

TO: Jessica Word, PhD
FROM: Office of Research Integrity - Human Subjects

PROTOCOL TITLE: [962604-1] Military Transitioning Programs and Civilian Life Preparedness: A
                       Phenomenological Study about the Process of Transitioning out of the Military
                       and into Civilian Life.

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS
EXEMPT DATE: April 10, 2017
REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category #2

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this protocol. This memorandum is notification that the protocol referenced above has been reviewed as indicated in Federal regulatory statutes 45CFR46.101(b) and deemed exempt.

We will retain a copy of this correspondence with our records.

PLEASE NOTE:
Upon final determination of exempt status, the research team is responsible for conducting the research as stated in the exempt application reviewed by the ORI - HS and/or the IRB which shall include using the most recently submitted Informed Consent/Assent Forms (Information Sheet) and recruitment materials.

If your project involves paying research participants, it is recommended to contact Carisa Shaffer, ORI Program Coordinator at (702) 895-2794 to ensure compliance with the Policy for Incentives for Human Research Subjects.

Any changes to the application may cause this protocol to require a different level of IRB review. Should any changes need to be made, please submit a **Modification Form**. When the above-referenced protocol has been completed, please submit a **Continuing Review/Progress Completion report** to notify ORI - HS of its closure.

If you have questions, please contact the Office of Research Integrity - Human Subjects at IRB@unlv.edu or call 702-895-2794. Please include your protocol title and IRBNet ID in all correspondence.

Office of Research Integrity - Human Subjects
4505 Maryland Parkway . Box 451047 . Las Vegas, Nevada 89154-1047
(702) 895-2794 . FAX: (702) 895-0805 . IRB@unlv.edu

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APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT FLYER

Welcome Home

How is Your Transition Going?

The UNLV School Public Policy and Leadership, PhD Candidate, Wilisha Daniels and Dr. Jessica Word, Project Investigator, are looking for post 9/11 student veterans between the ages of 18-50 years to participate in a study titled "Military Transition Programs and Civilian Life Preparedness." The study will focus on veterans and their transition process from the military to civilian life. The study will consist of a 1-hour interview scheduled between the hours of 8am—5pm on April 17—May 19, 2017 at the Military and Veterans Services Center in the Student Services Center, Building A, Room 311.

Are you interested in participating in this academic study? If so, you may also contact Wilisha Daniels at Wilisha.Daniels@unlv.edu for more information.

A $5 coffee gift card will be provided for your participation in the study.

Disclaimer This study is confidential, however demographic information (rank, age, race, gender) will be used for research purposes only.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR SERVICE!

UNLV | VETERAN SERVICES

ARMY ★ NAVY ★ MARINE CORPS ★ AIR FORCE ★ COAST GUARD

Supporting Our Veterans

APPENDIX C: RECRUITMENT FLYER

Email to Participants

Greetings,

The School of Public Policy and Leadership, PhD Candidate, Wilisha Daniels, and Dr. Jessica Word, Project Investigator, are conducting a research study about the process of transitioning from the military to civilian life. She is looking for 20 veteran students to be part of her research and share their story about transitioning for her dissertation titled "Military Transitioning Programs and Civilian Life Preparedness."
If you are interested in participating please contact her at Wilisha.Daniels@unlv.edu. Each participant will be interviewed for 1-hour at the Military and Veterans Services Center and will receive a $5 coffee card for their participation. Interviews will begin on April 17 – May 19, 2017 between the hours of 8 am -5 pm. Please see the attached flyer for more information.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,

APPENDIX D: DEMOGRAPHICS

The following are graphs of demographical information collected on the 20 veterans who participated in the study.
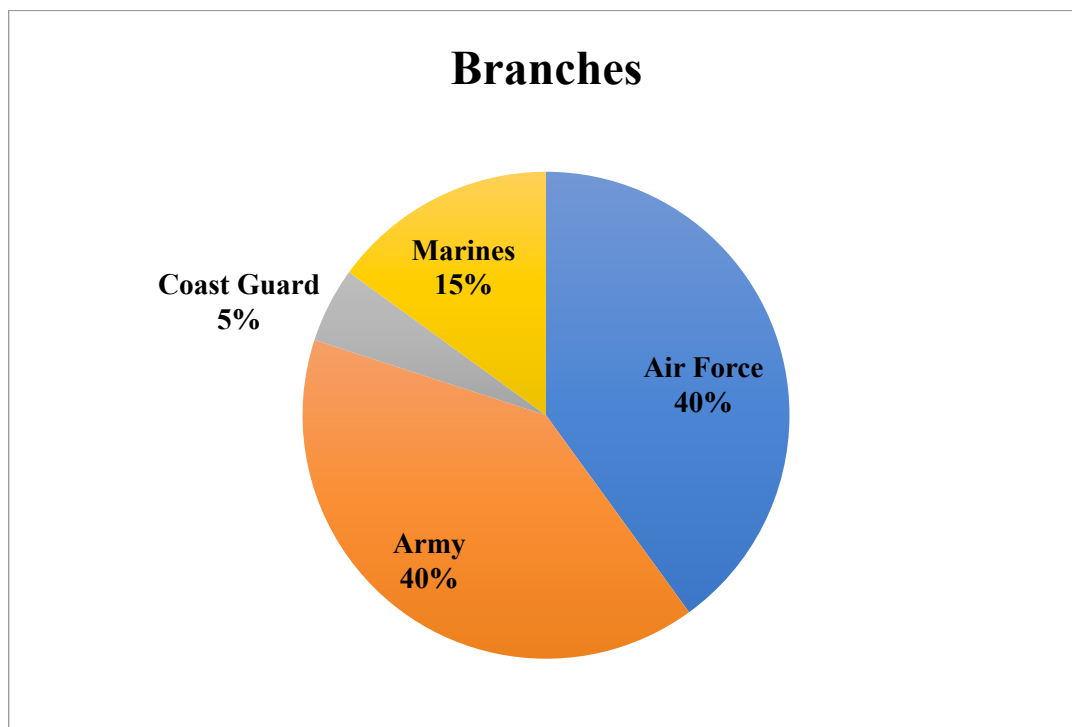
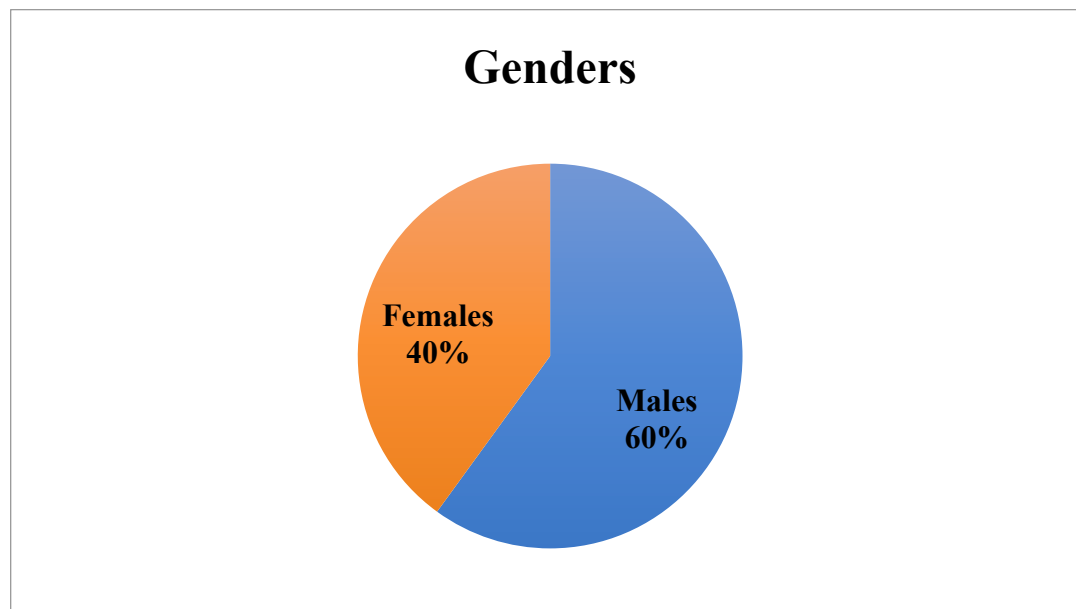*Figure 5. Veteran Interviewees by Branch of Service (n=20)*

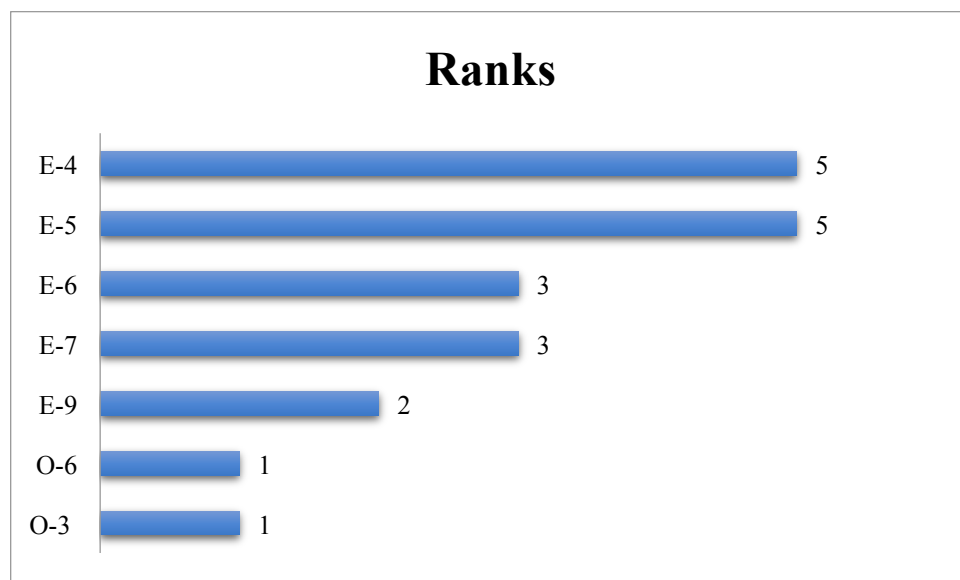*Figure 6. Veteran Interviewees by Gender (n=20)*

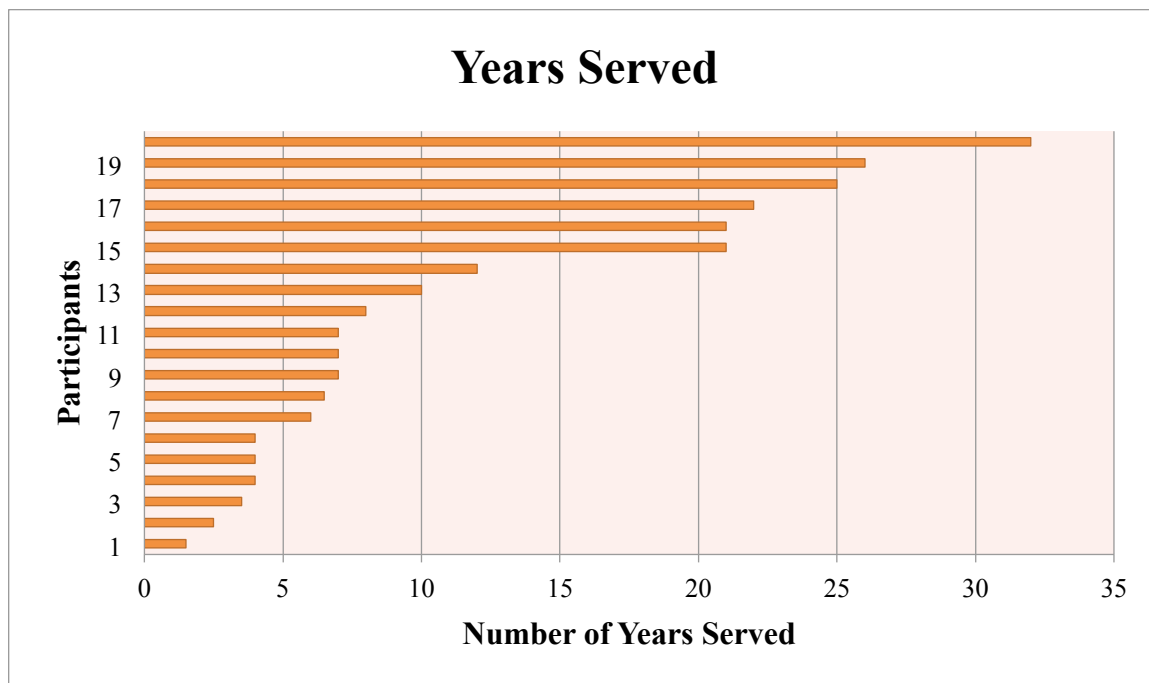*Figure 7. Veteran Interviewees by Final Rank (n=20)*

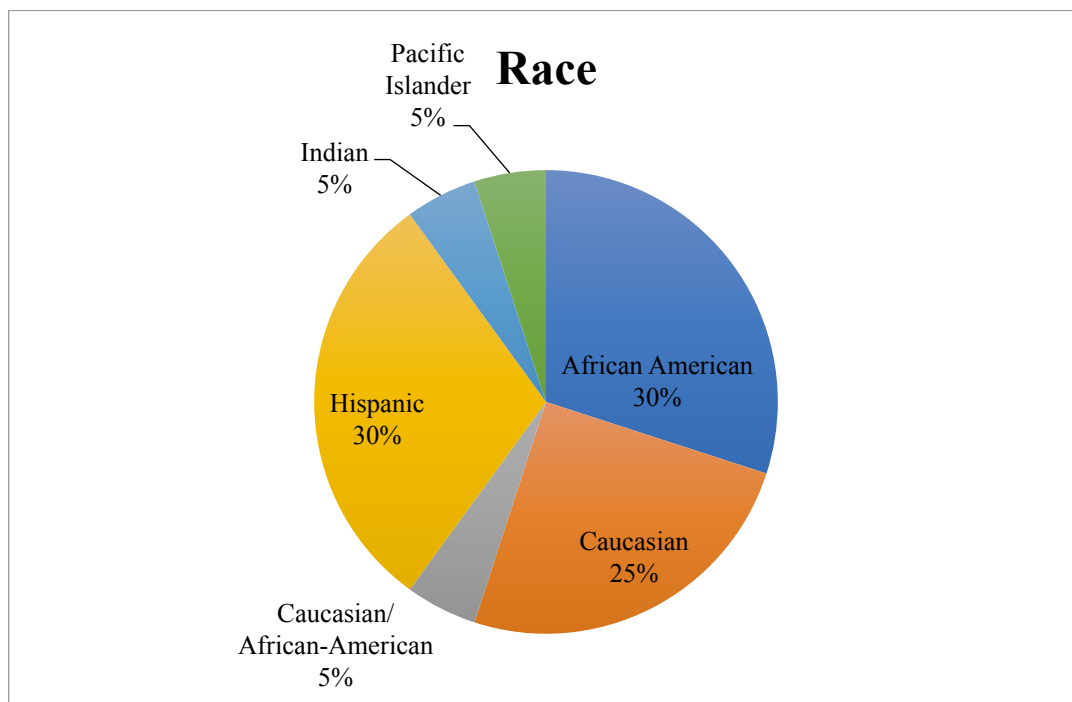*Figure 8. Veteran Interviewees by Length of Service*
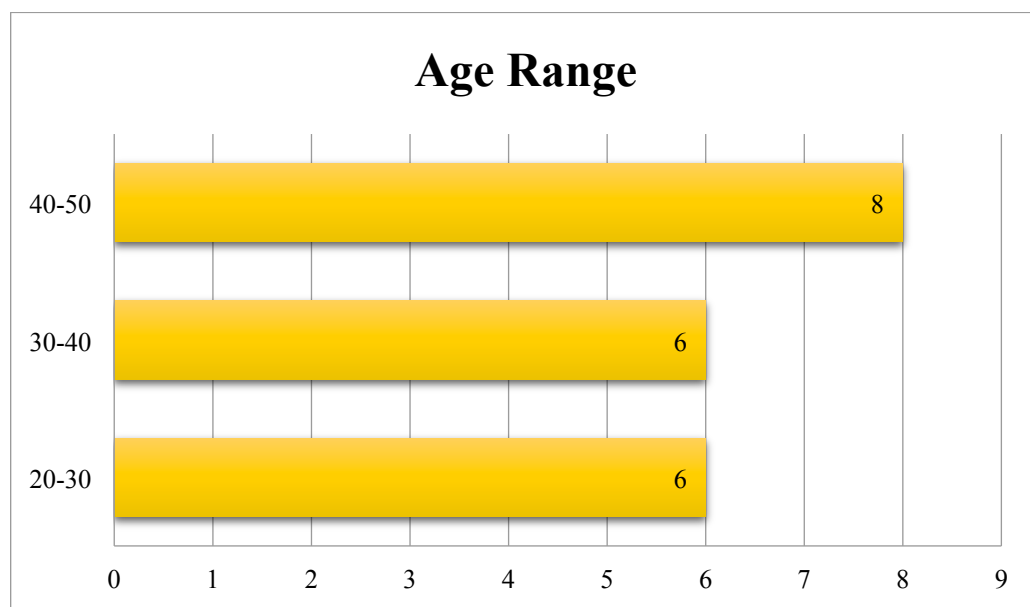
Figure 9. Veteran Interviewees by Race (n=20)

Figure 10. Veteran Interviewees by Age Group (n=20)
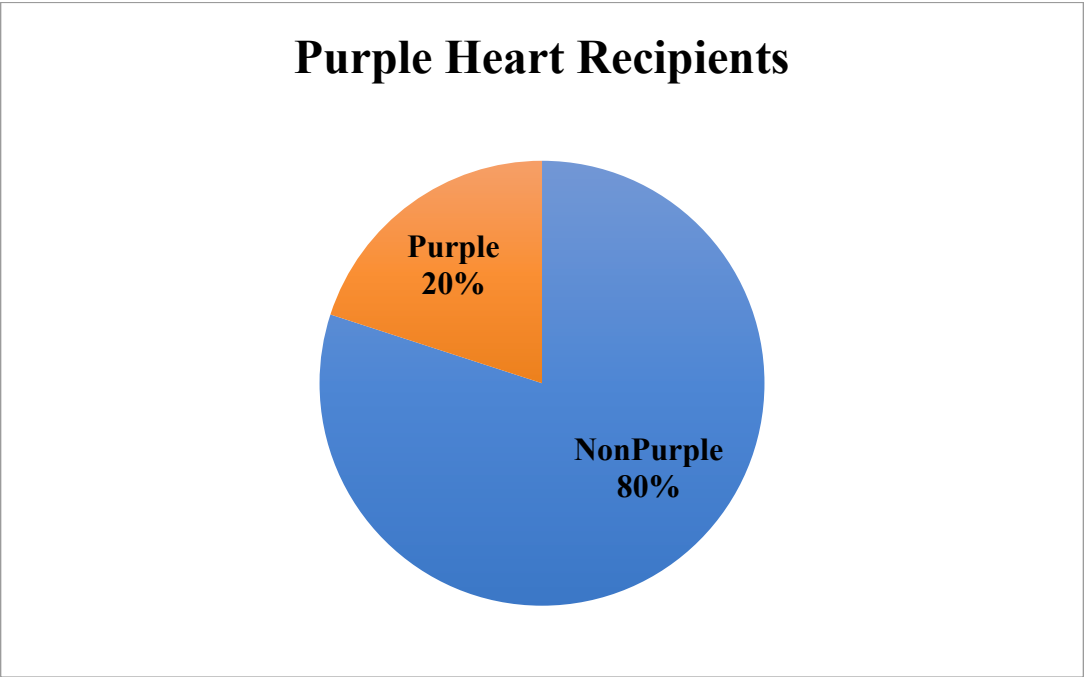
Figure 11. Veteran Interviewees by Purple Heart Recipient Status (n=20)

Separation Status

Number of Respondants

7	
6	
5	
4	
3	
2	
1	
0	

Medically Separated | Chose not to Re-enlist | Voluntary Separated | Retired
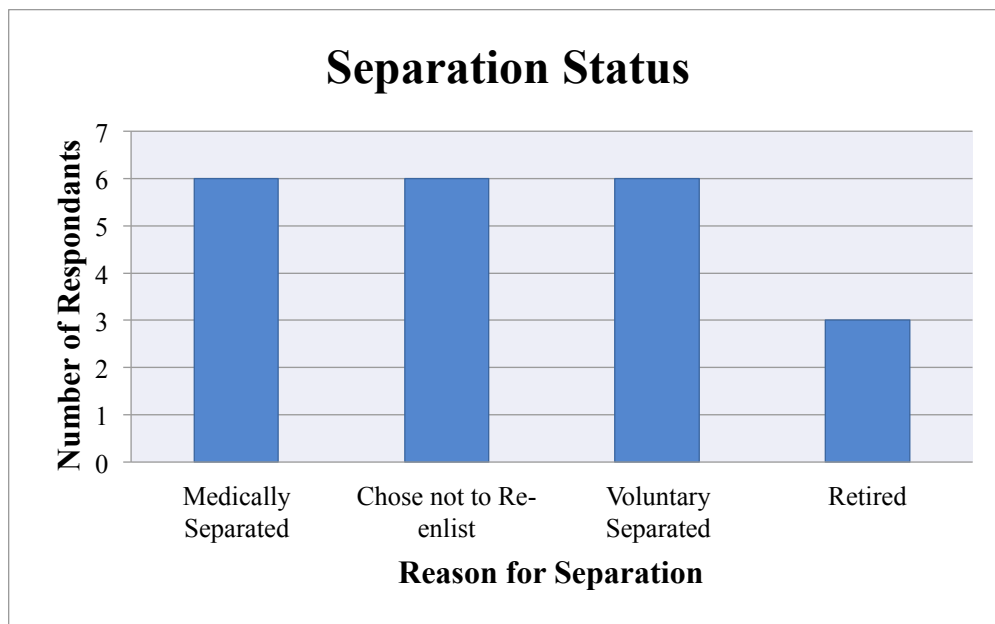
Reason for Separation

Figure 12. Veteran Interviewees by Separation Status (n=20)

CURRICULUM VITAE

Wilisha C. Daniels

Email: daniel137@unlv.nevada.edu or WilishaDaniels@yahoo.com

EDUCATION

University of Nevada, Las Vegas
- **Doctor of Philosophy in Public Affairs, Candidate,** December 2017
- **Master of Public Administration,** May 2002
- **Bachelor of Arts in Communication Studies,** August 2000

EXPERIENCE

Veterans Affairs, Southern Nevada Healthcare System – Education Department
Education Assistant/Intern, 05/12 – Present
(Las Vegas, NV)
Supervisor: Harry Ray, Chief Education Officer

Develops Educational Activities
Current experience coordinating major training events for management and veterans as well as instructing bi-weekly customer service classes for new hires to apprise them of VA core values and practices; Assisted with New Employee Orientation (NEO) by conducting live presentations, computer training and one-on-one orientation. Prepared the Education Service quarterly progress, outreach proposals and special reports for the national VA and various federal organizations. Create and implement annual Education Needs Assessment/Survey for the VA Southern Nevada Healthcare System. Also, conducted interviews of the services Chiefs to determine the needs of their department. The Needs Assessment is reviewed by Executive Leadership to determine training needs for the upcoming year. Also, establish relationships with professional and/or related internal and community groups.

Creates and Implements Education Activities
Assist in the development of training resources for supervisory and leadership courses. Also, created and instructed training courses for PSA/MSAs on courses such as effective communications, promoted the training using authorized all employees messaging. Microsoft office and educational resources available to VA employees. Provide administrative support to the Education Chief by scheduling meeting dates and time and taking meeting minutes. Assisted in the development of a regional Administrative Office training program and participated as a member of the AO training committee. Coordinated the Employee Engagement Program in compliance with the national effort to increase internal engagement for VA employees. Coordinating a 2-day Employee Training Seminar hosted by a nationally recognized employee engagement expert. Also, worked with the University of Nevada Las Vegas to establish and instruct a veteran sensitivity course for all VA employees. Also, represents the education service in the community. Evaluated the courses using the Kirkpatrick evaluation methods to determine

findings and outcomes. Developed Employee Engagement newsletter regarding the experience of the Employee Engagement Training Seminar.

University of Nevada, Las Vegas, School of Public Policy and Leadership
Graduate and Teaching Assistant, 08/14 – Present
(Las Vegas, NV)
Supervisor: Dr. Jessica Word

Develops Educational Activities for Adult Learners
Instruct adult upper-division courses for 50-70 undergraduate public administration students on leadership administration and risk management during a15-week long semester and issue grades upon the completion of the semester. Also, instruct first-year seminar courses for over 60 freshmen students to prepare them for college courses, research, campus resources and ways to be successful in college. Coordinated special guests to visit the classes, such as university staff, community members, and career professionals to discuss college preparedness and career opportunities in their field of study.

Developed and instruct graduate-level mixed research course for 20 MPA graduate students. Also, instruct and develop online education courses including, leadership in government, IT in Public Sector and Public Personnel courses for 70 students. Assist in the development and instruction of online courses through the Black Board Classroom services. Research content and lesson plans to include in online courses.

Research and Evaluate Special Projects
Assist professors in research coordination and development for the Public Policy and Leadership Department; attend professional and academic-related meetings; assist in the coordination of the Summer Business Institute Internship Program with the Clark County Human Resources and County Commissioners Offices for 100 high school students.

Provide administrative assistance as to faculty, staff and students as requested.

Innovative Research & Analysis LLC
Research Consultant, 01/15 – Present
(Las Vegas, NV)
Supervisor: Dr. Justin Gardner

Develop Education Activities for Veteran Research
Conduct research on veteran programs for the Veterans Policy Leadership Institute to report to the Nevada Division of Veterans Services. Create and write reports on the status of Nevada legislation rules that impact Nevada Veterans.

Conduct interviews with retired veterans to develop a status report on benefits for senior veterans for the legislature. Transcribe interviews to report to Nevada legislatures on the impact of policies. Compiles outcomes measure for reports.

Convert data files into Excel Spreadsheets to create graphs and charts used for reporting purposes; assist in the creation of online training and instruction programs for state agencies by developing content, self-tests, quizzes and provide assistance on special projects as needed.

Dixie State University, Department of Biological Sciences
Youth Program Coordinator, 04/16 – 09/16
(St. George, Utah)
Supervisor: Dr. Erin O'Brien

Evaluated Educational Activities
Coordinated and developed a Diverse Outdoor Leadership Institute (DOLI) Program promoting environmental awareness and STEM research with federal, state and local partners for underprivileged youth in Southern Nevada and Utah. Coordinated efforts between the faculty and staff at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and Lake Mead National Park Service to create an environmental awareness event to recruit youth students 16-25 years old.

Coordinated and assisted in the development of a cross-curriculum map incorporating science courses and environmental events offered at UNLV, Dixie State University, Southern Utah University and the National Park Service. Assisted in the development of community partnerships between the Clark County School District and other secondary schools to pilot the DOLI Program.

University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Division of Educational Outreach – Community2Campus
Program Coordinator, 07/10 – 02/12
(Las Vegas, NV)
Supervisor: Dr. Peg Rees

Developed Educational Activities
Developed, implemented and managed the inaugural UNLV Summer Youth Educational Program for over 25 children in both elementary and middle school; created and implemented a 3-year strategic plan for the Summer Youth Program.

Recruited and hired six licensed Clark County School District teachers for the Summer Youth Program and developed and implemented a 3-day training workshop for the Summer Youth Program teachers and staff.

Coordinated educational projects with various federal, state, local and private agencies; and researched, submitted and received a $30,000 state grant for an educational program for middle school students.

Operated as the primary liaison between the Division of Educational Outreach and the educational community, including the Clark County School District and UNR Cooperative Extension. Meet with the CCSD to promote the Summer Program and recruit teachers.

Conducted program assessments and evaluations, which reviewed accountability measures and outcomes; participated in community outreach events to promote programs; as well as worked

with Educational Outreach Marketing Director to develop and implement marketing plan for programs.

Managed and maintained $120,000 Summer Youth Program budget; created and oversaw the inaugural eight-member Summer Youth Program Advisory Board as well as supervised five employees. Developed and managed board meeting agenda and minutes.

University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Division of Educational Outreach – Public Lands Institute
Business Manager 06/08 – 07/10
(Las Vegas, NV)
Supervisor: Dr. Peg Rees

Provided Accountability Measures for Federal Task Agreements
Created and managed budgets for 12 federal task agreements and contracts for $250,000 – $6.2 million with federal, state and local governmental agencies including the National Park Service (NPS) and the Bureau and Land Management (BLM).

Acted as the lead coordinator and developer for the Indirect Delivery and Indirect Quantity (IDIQ) proposal, which was received and approved by the Government Service Administration (GSA), resulting in UNLV being the second university in the nation to be successfully being added to the federal GSA schedule.

Approved new hires based on budgetary obligations; provided strong attention to detail for government contracts; coordinated multiple projects and set priorities to meet deadlines; monitored and reconciled funding accounts.

Prepared financial projections and analytical reports for executive leadership and program managers. Acted as a liaison between the Office of Sponsored Programs and the Institute to develop Request for Proposals (RFPs), modifications for Task Agreements and bids. Developed, reviewed, edited and submitted quarterly and annual progress reports for federally funded grant projects/programs for auditing and reimbursement. Also, archived files electronically for record keeping requirements.

Created, edited, and maintained quarterly departmental e-newsletter reaching over 30 employees.

Program Manager/District Coordinator, 11/02 – 06/08
Conservation District of Southern Nevada,
(Las Vegas, NV)
Supervisor: Jodi Bechtel

Developed and Implemented Activities
Developed and coordinated a long-term student outreach program for the Clark County Department of Air Quality and Environmental Management (DAQEM). Developed and implemented a 2-year strategic plan for the student outreach program. Interfaced with various governmental agencies to provide information to the community. Administered government

grants and contracts for the Conservation District. Organized partnerships with state and county agencies to help inform the community about air quality issues.

Oversaw air quality presentations with the Clark County School District for over 300 elementary school students. Created eight marketing brochures and pamphlets for distribution to the general public; participated in over 30 annual outreach events to educate the public about air quality.

Arranged Special Events
Coordinated and managed the annual governmental display tent and event for over 10 federal, state and local agencies at the Clark County Fair in Logandale, NV. Managed operational, project and grant budgets for three programs. Obtained logistical support for the event.

Performed office duties including bookkeeping, payroll and accounting; prepared agendas and meeting minutes for CDSN elected board of supervisors; organized and implemented diversity and public outreach training programs for over 20 employees. Coordinated and implemented an annual environmental poster contest with the Clark County School District.

Composed comprehensive quarterly and annual reports for DAQEM for auditing and reimbursement purposes; supervised two employees.

CERTIFICATES

- Crucial Conversations Completion Certificate, June 2008
- Kepner Tregoe, Problem Solving and Decision Making Completion Certificate, September 2012

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

- Black Graduate Students Association, Vice President, 2015 - 2016
- Virtual High School Academy, Board Member 2011-2012
- Partners in Education for Cultural Connectedness (PECC), Co-Chair 2008-2010
- Connecting Hands: Offering Life Long Learning Adventures (CHOLLA) member 2005-2008
- Partners for Education about the Environment (PEAE) member 2005-2008
- Diversity Outdoor Leadership Institute, Advisor 2014-present

ACADEMIC PRESENTATIONS

- Invited to present at the annual Academy of Human Resource Development Conference in San Antonio, Texas in March 2017. Presented on my dissertation topic titled, *Military Transitioning Assistance and Civilian Life Preparedness: A Phenomenological Study about the Process of Transitioning out of the Military into the Civilian Life.*

- Invited to present at the annual Graduate and Professional Student Association Research Conference at the University of Nevada Las Vegas, in Las Vegas, NV in March 2017. *The research topic presented was on Military Transitioning Assistance and Civilian Life*

Preparedness: A Phenomenological Study about the Process of Transitioning out of the Military into the Civilian Life.

- Presented a poster on *Military Transitioning and Civilian Life Preparedness* at the University of Nevada Las Vegas, College of Urban Affairs Research Symposium.

VOLUNTEER SERVICE

- Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. Member
- Victory Missionary Baptist Church, Children's Ministry, Teacher Volunteer
- Victory Neighborhood Services Center, Board Member

REFERENCES

Dr. Margret (Peg) Rees
Vice Provost for the Division of Educational Outreach
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
peg.rees@unlv.edu

Dr. Jessica Word
Associate Professor
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
jessica.word@unlv.edu

Harry Ray
Chief Education Officer
Veterans Affairs Southern Nevada Healthcare System
Harry.Ray2@va.gov