# THE THINGS THEY ARE STILL CARRYING

By

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ABSTRACT

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Much research about the transition experiences of military combat veterans returning to civilian life and college emphasizes the role of identity development and post-secondary institutional support for veteran students during their time of transition. Contemporary discourse tends to frame return experience through the lens of post-traumatic stress disorder. This study uses phenomenological methodology to inquire into the lived experiences of four student veterans attending the rural campus of a Midwestern community college. The focus of the study is to evaluate military-learned habits in light of present transitional circumstances. Analysis of the educational stories rendered from the veterans' sharing of their experiences, from the time they joined the military, through their combat deployments and subsequent return home to civilian life and college, reveals findings that suggest that the veteran students are still carrying with them upon their return habits learned from their time in the military and during deployment. Through analysis, a novel understanding of transition emerges, one that brings into relief the human struggle to grow and find meaning during times of transition. The crucial role of past educative experience and re-learning is examined. The dissertation concludes with recommendations for practice within the walls of community college and beyond.

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## Introduction Vignettes from Within the Walls of the Community College

### *Some Stories*

*Grant's Sharing in Class.* The second class meeting of a developmental reading and writing course I teach at a rural Michigan community college was drawing to a close. Students were at computers busily responding to some questions about their past literacy experiences I had posted. As I worked my way around the room answering questions and giving feedback, one student, Grant,[1] looked up at me and said something that no student has ever said before in my nearly seventeen years of teaching composition at the college.

"You know," he said. "I have survived two tours in Iraq, and I have never felt as scared as I do now being in college for the first time." His blue eyes met mine. They shone for a fleeting moment, and then he looked back at the computer screen and continued writing.

*Ray's Introduction.* At the beginning of each semester in the first-year composition course I teach at the college, I ask my students to write an introduction of themselves for the class and to post their introductions to the discussion forum. Doing so continues the first week's getting to know each other activities and gives students a chance to dust off their writing chops and to use writing to express their thinking as the semester gets up and running. They often write about their jobs, their families, where they grew up, where they went to high school, why they are in school, their dreams.

Ray's post began like so many others, but soon took a turn after he wrote about the tiny rural Michigan town he grew up in, why he is in college, his wife, three kids, and the drafting job he had worked after high school out in Montana. When the economy collapsed, Ray joined the Army. He had told the class last time during introductions that he had been deployed to

[1] All names are pseudonyms.

Afghanistan and that he had been discharged just a couple of years ago. In his post, Ray wrote the following:

> I would have to say the great change that changed my perspective was the change from military life back to civilian life again. I did not think it would be as hard as it has been. I have been out of the military for a few years now and I still struggle with relating to civilians sometimes. Everything is different from military to civilian, from language and how people talk to common courtesies, like holding doors or talking in the middle of hallways so no one can pass. My wife refuses to take me into Walmart now, because a few times I flew of the handle on a few people, over what I thought to be common courtesies. Most of my military skills don't apply to civilian life so finding a job has been difficult.

*Larry's Perspective.* Larry sat near the back of the class with his arms folded and he looked directly at me as I spoke about the major goals of the college reading and writing class in which he was enrolled. It was mid-May, the start of summer semester, and we were just beginning to get our feet on the ground with the class. I wanted the class to talk about their goals for their learning this semester, and, during our discussion, Larry spoke up from the back of the room. He was older than the other students, in his late forties. His words would rise and fall through the air as he spoke, in a kind of rhythmic, sing song way. He told the class that he did not learn to read when he was younger, that it was his mother who had helped him learn when he was in middle school by bringing him here to the college for tutoring. He wanted this class to help him continue his learning so that he could successfully finish his automotive degree. And be a role model to his young granddaughter. He wanted her to see that if Grandpa could earn a college degree, so could she.

Larry also shared in class that day that he was a veteran of the First Gulf War, serving in the Navy, which he had joined right out of high school at his mother's urging. He had retired recently and was now embarking on a new stage in his life. As it turns out, the class I was teaching that summer was his very first college class.

I got to know Larry much more deeply a few months later, when I was speaking with a small group of students at my community college about their experience of learning to belong. Larry chose to speak of his time in the Navy, of learning to fit in with the other sailors, his training, and how to carry out missions when he was deployed. He also spoke of coming back to civilian life and the difficulty he had, and was still having, when it came to living here after having been there, in the service, for so long. For Larry, there were two worlds, either military or civilian, which he characterized in unequivocal terms, as either ordered or chaotic, disciplined or unruly. You belonged to one or the other, and, as we talked more, I could tell that he believed he still belonged in the Navy, despite being back in the civilian world for good. There were things that he had learned while there that he was still clinging to tightly now that he was back here.

*Rhonda's Husband.* Rhonda, a colleague who works in the college's Personnel Services Department, stopped me in the hall late last winter semester and said that she had heard that I was writing about veteran students. She asked me about my work, and I told her what I had been up to. She then told me that her husband is an Afghanistan veteran who returned to civilian life and struggled with alcoholism and anxiety. She revealed to me how much her husband missed the bond he had forged with his military brothers during his time in the service, and it was this missing relationship that was the root of what she believed was the biggest struggle her husband experienced, and is still experiencing, upon his return. She then stated to me that, because he is missing the relational bonds that connected him to others so strongly while in the military, her husband is lost.

*Samantha's Son.* Just last month, Samantha stopped by the Writing and Reading Center during my shift there to say "hi" and to see how things were going with me. Samantha and I have a long history; when she returned to college just a year and a half ago after a number of years

away while working in a nursing home, she found herself in the developmental college reading and writing class I teach. She thrived in that class, passed her subsequent writing course, and had been in the advanced writing course just this past winter semester. For an hour each week that semester, she would come into the WRC to meet with me and work on her reading and writing for that course.

She wanted to tell me that she had passed the advanced writing course and was now confronting her statistics class. Samantha also knew that I had been talking with and writing about veteran students, and she wanted to know how the project was progressing. She was especially interested because her son had deployed twice to Iraq as a member of the Army Special Forces. As we talked, she perked up.

"That reminds me of Andy when he came back," Samantha said as she sat across the table from me. "I told him to take out the trash. He looked at me and said, 'No. You can't tell me what to do. When you've been over there and done what I've done, then maybe you can tell me what to do.'"

Samantha paused. Then, she said, "I mean, I'm still his mother and he thinks he doesn't have to listen to me, you know?"

I could tell she wanted to talk more. I listened. She continued.

"I called him the other day. I heard something in the background, like a click, click, click. I said, 'Andy, what is that?' He said, 'I'm loading my gun.' I couldn't believe it. I told him that he doesn't need to do that anymore. He is not over there anymore. Like, he needs to understand that, you know?"

*Broad Thematic Threads.*

I chose to share these vignettes from my students, all of whom are military combat veterans, as well as the mother of a veteran and a colleague who is the spouse of a combat veteran, to introduce this inquiry project into the experiences community college veteran students have had while there, in the service, and here, now that they have laid down arms and have returned to the civilian world and school, because these vignettes provide a broad orientation to some important themes I will take up much more deeply in the pages that follow.

*Struggle.* There is the sense from the vignettes that the veteran students are struggling during the time of their return. This struggle, for Grant, is expressed as his fear of being a first-time college student, a fear of the uncertainty that is facing him at that moment in his life; both Larry and Rex seem to find little connection between the world of the military in which both had been immersed and the civilian world to which they have returned, and they struggle to see themselves belonging effectively now that they are back. There seems to be a sense of frustration and disappointment behind the words of each vignette.

*Searching for the Past in the Present.* In all of the vignettes, there is a sense that the veterans are searching for meaning, but the meaning they search for seems defined largely in terms of the military, which seems to be the case for Rex and Larry. They are not finding here in the present what they had found there, in the past, while in the service. The upshot of the searching has caused Rhonda to believe her husband is lost, because he is not finding the bond and connection that he had formed with other soldiers in the military now that he has returned here, to civilian life. Samantha seems shocked and saddened that her son, by needing his weapon and by not recognizing her motherly authority, is not letting the military go now that he is back. He seems to be holding onto much of what he had found meaningful and useful there, and her

words carry with them her recognition that he does not need those things anymore now that he is back.

*Powerful Learning Experiences.* An important theme that emerges from these vignettes, and that will be analyzed much more deeply in the pages that follow, is about the struggle the veterans are enduing as they search for meaning and belonging now that they have rejoined the civilian world. This points to the power of the learning experiences they had while in the military. My veteran students like Grant, Rex, and Larry, as well as Samantha's son and Rhonda's husband, were all initiated into and educated by the military in ways that were intended to shape them into the soldiers the military required them to become. Their military education taught to them ways of being, of belonging, and of relating to others within the group. They were taught to have the backs of other soldiers, and other soldiers were taught to have theirs. The bond forged through their education in the military was strong, indeed. They all learned to become dependent on the military for structure, and they were required to strive for incredibly high standards of performance, and were held accountable when they failed to do so. Our veterans have had to learn things that were important and useful to their belonging and functioning within the military.

And they are still carrying these things[2] they learned with them now that they have returned, but there are things that need to be re-learned if our veterans are going to move on and find meaningful belonging now that they have come back.

Not only do the vignettes raise these broad and important themes I outline above, but they come from my own practice as a professional educator in the field of post-secondary education, who decided long ago, even before I completed my Master of Arts degree in English, to make

[2] I am indebted to Tim O'Brien's short story "The Things They Carried," and his collection of stories by the same name, for the carrying metaphor I use here and for the title of my work.

my career in the American community college. This decision displeased some of my graduate school professors, who thought such “service work” was beneath the talents of this person they must have seen as a budding young scholar destined for a life immersed in research and publishing at a university.

At the time I was finishing my MA and aspiring toward a community college career, I could not put my finger on why I wanted to teach in that context, other than that I was a graduate of the community college[3] and that I felt I wanted to teach. I was also a dropout from that very same college. To be honest, I could not have been the former without first having been the latter, for I learned so much during my time away from college while working in a local chemical plant for an insulation contractor, prior to my return and eventual transfer to the university where I earned my undergraduate and graduate degrees.

While I could not put my finger on my motives at the time, I think I now have a better understanding of why I felt a calling to do the work that I do now, with so many students of widely diverse academic, personal, and life backgrounds in the midst of their educational and lived journeys. I see now that the American community college has always been, since its inception in its current form, a site of dynamic and interrelated meanings, of imagination for the possibilities of what higher education can mean, what it can do for people, what people can do with it, and how these possibilities can be realized through teaching.[4] Since the 1960s, America’s two-year community colleges have come to be seen as a distinctly American innovation, in the sense that they have attempted to democratize access to higher education for

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[3] I have made my teaching career at the same small community college from which I graduated.

[4] W. Norton Grubb et al. *Honored but Invisible: An Inside Look at Teaching in Community Colleges.* (New York: Routledge, 1999). The authors make a compelling case for the importance and centrality of teaching to the community college vision, but their research ironically reveals that institutions do little to support teaching.

students who likely would not have had such access, primarily through open admissions and comparatively low tuition costs.[5] For many, the community college is seen as the doorway into the American middle class, a promise of a better life.[6] Although I could not think about it at the time, I do believe now that this is why I was called to do my life's work in this particular post-secondary educational setting.

I have met many fascinating and interesting people during my seventeen years at the small Midwestern community college at which I teach, people who are in transition and who are seeking meaning in their lives. The community college that has become so central to my life is where all of our lives intersect, if only for a moment, but intersect they do. I have met displaced factory workers, recent high school graduates, parolees, homeschoolers, and dual enrolled high school students, in addition to the veterans I have had in my classes like the ones I wrote about above.

In the pages that follow, I explore in much more depth the experiences of serving, returning, and learning of a small group of Iraq and Afghanistan combat veteran students attending the community college at which I work and with whom I spent a number of hours in conversation. By writing about the experiences they so generously shared with me, I hope to advance an understanding of their struggle to return to civilian life and grow and flourish here by considering the significance of what they carry home with them from their initiation into and learning from their time in the military.

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[5] W. Norton Grubb et al, *Honored but Invisible,* 3-6.

[6] Mike Rose, *Back to School: Why Everyone Deserves a Second Chance at Education.* (New York: The New Press, 2012). In his introduction, "Why Going Back to School Matters," Rose offers compelling vignettes that attest to community college's promise of a better life through education.

In the next chapter, I say more about why I am interested in writing about and learning from the experiences of combat veterans attending community college. Then, I review the relevant recently published literature about veteran students' experience of transition and return. I then advance the contribution I hope to make through this project to what is being said and written about veteran students.  I devote the rest of the first chapter to outlining the methodology and method I used to collect the experiences from the veteran students with whom I spoke, before finally previewing the remaining chapters.

# Chapter 1 Student Veterans/Veteran Students

## *Why Student Veterans?*

It was Grant's admission of fear that day in class that caused me to really begin to think carefully about the return experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan combat veterans, especially those like him, like Larry and Rex, who return to community college. Grant's comment immediately struck me at the time, and I remember how I thought about his comment more after class. At first, I could not understand how someone who had been through what he had been through could be frightened of being in college. After all, here was someone who had been highly trained in the military, who was highly capable, and who had spent time in one of the most life-threatening and frightening situations in which a person can find himself; yet this new place, college, and, by extension, the civilian world to which he had returned, was frightening him more. How could a tough ex-soldier, capable of doing so much, admit to being so vulnerable?

I wondered if his fright during his combat deployments had been mitigated by his military training and by the relationships with others there with whom he had probably formed close connections. He had people who had looked out for him, and he for them; he had been in a place where he had learned to fit in, to belong, and where his contributions had been validated by others. In class that day, Grant allowed me to witness his vulnerability, and by bearing witness to his vulnerability, I saw not the tough ex-soldier that I had assumed Grant to be, but someone in the midst of the human struggle to grow and make meaning in his life.

As I think more about Grant's admission that day and my initial reaction of disbelief toward his words, I worry about the assumptions I was making about him and about combat veterans in general, assumptions that might have had their roots in popular news media and Hollywood. Such popular sources often portray veterans as capable and strong, which is true, but what is also true is that our veterans are human beings who are vulnerable. I worry that I was

seeing Grant as a stereotype, but his words helped me to hear and see his humanity in ways that our popular sources so often gloss over.

Therefore, an important reason I chose to write about veteran students at the community college at which I teach is because I believe their teachers and others outside of the walls of the institution need to hear and see their vulnerability, their humanity, similar to what Grant allowed me to see that day. When we see others in ways more human than we otherwise would, we begin to recognize the ties that bind us together as human beings.

What is more, veteran students are, like all of my students, in my care, but they have had life experiences through the military and combat that are quite different from their fellow students and their teachers, like me. Understanding the range and depth of their experiences is another important reason why I chose to write about veteran students. Caring for them necessarily means that I must seek to understand as deeply as I can the lived experiences they bring with them to the classroom while they are in my care. Writing about combat veterans for these reasons also gives me the opportunity to honor their lives as fully as I can by learning from their experiences as deeply and as fully as I can.

In addition to seeing our Iraq and Afghanistan combat veterans as fellow people engaged in the human struggle to grow and live fruitfully now that they have returned and who are in my care as students, another important reason for why I have chosen to write about them has to do with college enrollment trends. Given the recent drawdown of American combat troops, as many as 1 million Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are laying down arms and are returning to civilian life in the United States.[7] According to one estimate, the end of major combat operations in Iraq and

[7] M. Randall, quoted in Holly A. Wheeler, "Veteran's Transition to a Community College: A Case Study," *Community College Journal of Research and Practice,* 36 no. 10 (2012), 775.

Afghanistan might mean a 20% increase in the number of student veterans on college campuses.[8] Veterans are choosing to enroll in colleges to take advantage of the Post- 9/11 GI Bill, which provides financial aid for college to qualifying veterans. More veterans returning and embarking upon a new era in their lives opt to enroll in the public two-year community college rather than other institutions of higher education;[9] their choice is based on both financial reasons[10] and on the fact that community colleges, with their "open door" policy, are particularly suited to serving non-traditional student populations.[11] Practitioners at two- and four-year institutions and researchers are asking serious questions about how best to serve this special population of college students.

*Published Literature on Student Veterans' Return*

There exists a small but growing body of published empirical studies concerning the experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan combat veterans in the field of higher education. Two themes emerge from this body of qualitative research: an assessment of the needs of veteran college students and the experience of transition from active duty soldier to college student. I now briefly review what researchers in the field are saying about veteran college students.

*Assessment of Needs.* Two recently published empirical studies attempted to understand the needs of veterans as they embark on their college educations. Although their exploratory study was also concerned with the experience of transition from a military role to the role of

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[8] Kristin G. Wurster et al, "First-Generation Student Veterans: Implications of Poverty for Psychotherapy," *Journal of Clinical Psychology: In Session,* 69 no. 2 (2013), 127.

[9] Ibid, 130.

[10] Nathan Durdella and Young K. Kim, "Understanding Patterns of College Outcomes Among Student Veterans," *Journal of Studies in Education,* 2 no. 2 (2012), 111.

[11] Corey Ruman, Marisa Rivera, and Ignacio Hernandez, "Student Veterans and Community Colleges," *New Directions for Community Colleges,* no. 155 (2011), 54.

college student, Zinger and Cohen[12] also set out to understand the needs of student veterans so that they could make recommendations for how community colleges could best support these students. Persky and Oliver's[13] case study looked specifically at the needs of student veterans at a community college with the goal of making recommendations for how community colleges can support this particular population of students. From data collected through interviews, observations, and focus groups, the authors uncovered five themes related to the needs of student veterans, including the need for streamlined credit and programs, faculty/staff training, a range of difficulties these students experienced, and what institutions can do to promote a veteran friendly campus.[14]

*The Experience of Transition.* While a small number of published studies focus on returning veteran students' needs as college students and what the institution can do to meet their needs, the majority of recently published studies in which student veterans have participated focuses on the experience of transition from active duty to college student. DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell[15] published one of first studies of the transition experiences of the current generation of combat veterans who enrolled in college. The purpose of their study was to learn from veterans themselves about the transition from military to college.[16] The authors set out to understand and discover the challenges this particular group of students faces, as well as to

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[12] Lana Zinger and Andrea Cohen, "Veterans Returning from War into the Classroom: How Can Colleges be Better Prepared to Meet Their Needs," *Contemporary Issues in Education Research,* 3 no. 1 (2010), 47.

[13] Karen R. Persky and Diane E. Oliver, "Veterans Coming Home to the Community College: Linking Research and Practice," *Community College Journal of Research and Practice,* 35 nos. 1-2 (2010), 111.

[14] Ibid, 113.

[15] David DiRamio, Robert Ackerman, and Regina Mitchell, "From Combat to Campus: Voices of Student Veterans," *NASPA Journal,* 45 no. 1 (2008), 73-102.

[16] Ibid, 74.

understand the kinds of support services colleges can provide for them.[17] Sixteen themes emerged from the interview data collected, and the authors included recommendations for how campuses support services can utilize what they call a holistic approach to supporting student veterans on college campuses.[18]

A number of published empirical studies exploring student veterans' transitions followed the work of DiRamio, Ackerman, and Mitchell. Ackerman, DiRamio, and Mitchell's[19] study was based on their earlier study, but this one put more focus on how administrators and student services personnel can support veterans during the transition. Three more recently published empirical studies also focused on student veterans' experience of transition from active service to college student. Wheeler[20] conducted a case study at a community college and gathered data using semi-structured interviews with nine student veterans. Through an examination of the transition experience of veterans who left the military and attended community college for the first time, Wheeler uncovered three themes to describe the transition experience: academic experiences, personal relationships, and benefits.[21] Wheeler used these themes to provide recommendations for institutional support and faculty training.[22]

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[17] David DiRamio, Robert Ackerman, and Regina Mitchell, 74.

[18] Ibid, 93.

[19] Robert Ackerman, David DiRamio, and Regina Mitchell, "Transitions: Combat Veterans as College Students," *New Directions for Student Services,* 126 (2009), 5-14.

[20] Holly A. Wheeler, "Veteran's Transition to a Community College: A Case Study," *Community College Journal of Research and Practice,* 36 no. 10 (2012), 776.

[21] Ibid, 775.

[22] Ibid, 790.

In the second study, Jones intended to describe and understand veteran students' identity development during the time of transition from the service to college.[23] Through interviews conducted with three veteran students at a university, Jones found three themes related to student veterans' identity development during the transition process, which he named the process of adapting a civilian identity, higher education's role in the transition process, and the need for comprehensive services for veterans.[24] Recommendations from these findings included a call to student services personnel to strive toward providing the best learning environment possible for this particular student population.[25]

Schiavone and Gentry[26] conducted the third recent study of the experience of transition from military service to college student. The purpose of their case study of six student veterans at a Midwestern university was twofold. First, the researchers wanted to understand the challenges faced by this particular student population.[27] Second, they wanted to use study findings to inform institutions of higher education of how to best serve this growing population.[28]

Other recent studies of the transition experience focused on students having to withdraw from college and then re-enroll after a deployment. Ruman and Hamrick[29] looked into the transition experiences of combat veterans who had re-enrolled in college after having been

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[23] Kevin C. Jones, "Understanding Veterans in Transition," *The Qualitative Report,* 18 no. 74 (2013), 1.

[24] Ibid, 11.

[25] Ibid, 13.

[26] Vincent Schiavone and Debra Gentry, "Veteran –Students in Transition at a Midwestern University," *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education,* 62 no. 1 (2014), 20.

[27] Ibid, 30.

[28] Ibid, 37.

[29] Corey B. Ruman and Florence A. Hamrick, "Student Veterans in Transition: Re-Enrolling after War Zone Deployments," *The Journal of Higher Education,* 81 no. 4 (2010), 431.

deployed.[30] Using the four themes, which included role incongruities, maturity, relationships, and identity redefinitions, that emerged from semi-structured interviews with six student veterans at a research university, the authors made recommendations for how institutions can support student veterans during the transition from redeployment to reenrollment in college.[31]

Bauman[32] also studied the transition experience of twenty-four combat veterans re-enrolling in college after a deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan had caused them to withdraw. Through his analysis, Bauman devised a novel model of the mobilization process, made up of three phases, the first of which he named "Hurry up and Wait" (balance of student/military member); the second, "In the Box" (the deployment/break from civilian life and relationships to deployment and fellow service members); and the third "Coming Home".[33] It is during this stage that student veterans are most vulnerable because they are essentially caught up between their roles as soldiers and students. Bauman discovered four themes central to an understanding of the third phase which he claimed has relevance to support personnel in higher education during these transition times student veterans in the study experienced.[34]

This review of the small, but emerging, contemporary body of published research on veteran college students in transition makes clear researchers' main focus on needs assessment and identity development while veterans are in transition. The recommendations the researchers give make sense and are grounded in the data the researchers gathered and analyzed. Many

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[30] Corey B. Ruman and Florence A. Hamrick, 436.

[31] Ibid, 440.

[32] Mark Bauman, "From the Box to the Pasture: Student-Veterans Returning to Campus," *College Student Affairs Journal,* 31 no. 1 (2013), 41.

[33] Ibid, 45.

[34] Ibid, 46.

researchers in the field of higher education, then, are focused on talking about how institutions can meet the needs of veteran students as they transition into their newly emerging identities as college students.

*What I hope to Contribute to the Conversation.* What I hope to contribute to this conversation within my field, and to the public conversation surrounding returning veterans—one which often emphasizes the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder[35] on returning veterans—is what I hear missing from both conversations. What I do not hear is the significance of the role of past learning coming to bear on the present during the struggle to grow and make meaning in life. That is, the veteran students being talked about all had to learn to become soldiers and to fit in within a particular social organization, the military, with its own particular rules for participating and goals toward which members initiated into the group had to strive. Our veterans learned how to participate and to contribute within this particular organization, but eventually many chose to leave it for good.

However, they left carrying with them habits that they learned while there—habits that do not seem so useful to them now that they have returned to a pluralistic and democratic civilian world. The habits they learned while in the military and on deployment are not bad and certainly served them well while there; it's just that the military did not provide them with the habits they need in order to continue to grow and flourish now that they are civilians once again. As a result, veterans like Grant, Larry, and Ray, and other veteran students I've met, taught, and spoke with at my college, along with Samantha's son and Rhonda's husband, often struggle upon their return.

[35] My intention here is not to deny that PTSD is a real disorder with a real clinical basis. Rather, I believe PTSD dominates the discourse regarding veterans' return experiences, almost to the extent of being the only way of talking about struggle with return. My hope is to situate the significance of past learning and struggle alongside PTSD to broaden the discourse.

I believe that we can arrive at a richer and more nuanced understanding of the nature of the return experience of veterans like my former students when looking at the phenomenon from the perspective of educative experience. PTSD might not be the only way, or even the best way, of characterizing and talking about the experiences of our veterans return, but much of our contemporary discourse emphasizes disorder.

I also believe that the perspective of educative experience brings a human dimension to the conversations, both in my field and among the public, regarding veterans' return. As adults with a wealth of learning experiences accumulated through our lives, we all must continually re-learn during times of transition if we are going to move forward with our lives, grow, and ultimately flourish. It is through the stories I relate from four Iraq and Afghanistan veterans with whom I've spent time talking that I hope to make this contribution to the conversations in my field and the public at large regarding their return.

*Four Veteran Students: An Introduction.*

To make the contribution to the discussion concerning veteran students I outline above, I spoke with four veteran students attending the rural campus of the Michigan community college at which I teach. I spoke with each over a period of four months. Lolo Last,[36] a former student of mine whom I had already spoken with about his military experience, was the first person with whom I spoke. He was in his late twenties and nearing the end of his studies at the college in general technology. I next spoke with Philip Reed, who was in his mid-twenties and who was going to transfer to a university the following fall to study international relations. I then met Dan

[36] Lolo was the only one of the four veteran students who chose his own pseudonym. I gave Philip his name because he wanted to write a book about his experiences in Afghanistan, and I suggested he read for inspiration Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*. I also suggested that he read Truong Nhu Tang's *A Vietcong Memoir.* Dan reminded me of someone I knew who had retired from the Army, both in looks and because Dan had spent so many years in the Army; the way Hank spoke reminded me of someone with whom I used to work in a restaurant a number of years ago.

Gray, the oldest of the four, in his late thirties. When I spoke with Dan, he was just beginning his college education. Finally, I spoke with Hank Mondale, who was using his college education to enter the criminal justice field.

All four had joined the Army and had been deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan, and all four chose to leave the service to return to civilian life and school. At the time of our conversations, each veteran had been back for a couple of years. Aside from Lolo, I did not know the other veterans prior to our conversations. To solicit interest, I sent out an email announcement outlining my project to the veteran students enrolled at the college, around eighty total. Philip, Dan, and Hank sought me out not long afterward and expressed interest in speaking with me about their experiences and all four agreed to allow me to use what they shared as data for this project.

*Methodology.* Because I am interested in understanding the meaning of the phenomena of returning and embarking on a new phase in the lives of these four veteran students, I have chosen to use phenomenology, a qualitative research methodology which concerns itself with lived experience.[37] By using the phenomenological methodology, I have attempted to describe and make familiar what it is that is often taken for granted when people live the experiences I am interested in studying and writing about. As we live in the world every day –in ways that place us bodily in the world without reflecting on our lived experiences – we often do not see and appreciate the meanings of the experiences that we have. We simply live them. Such experiences

[37] Max van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (New York: SUNY Press, 2001). I rely on van Manen's phenomenology because he emphasizes the importance of research as a moral enterprise that seeks the good of people, and that research should have pedagogical significance because our lives have pedagogical significance: everyone is a teacher and we can all teach and learn from one another through our shared humanity.

involve our immediate, pre-reflective consciousness of life.[38] They can never be grasped immediately, but only through narration of one's past experience.

*Conversational Interviews.* To collect the stories of lived experience I needed to arrive at a deep understanding of the meanings of the experiences of being in the military and their eventual return to the civilian world and school, I held a series of conversational interviews[39] with each person. We met in my office on campus and spoke face to face with the door closed. I recorded each conversation and ended up with about twelve hours of recorded material.

Each recorded conversation happened on a different day and lasted approximately one hour, during which time each veteran spoke of his experience in either the military, returning, or in school. Sometimes, though, the conversations overlapped, because going to college, for example, was part of some of the veteran's return experience. This was fine, and I did not intervene as the discussion unfolded; if that was the moment the person wanted to be in, then I let him tell the story of that particular time.

I conducted the three separate interviews with each veteran in the following way. I asked each to tell a story of a single experience in the military during active service, then, in the next talk, of returning to civilian life, and, finally, of embarking on the new stage of their lives as community college students. I was careful to allow the content of the narrative accounts to be wide open. They chose what to share with me with little prompting on my part. I prompted only as needed, when the conversation ebbed or if the person happened to lose his train of thought.[40] I was also mindful that some of their experiences might be too painful or uncomfortable for them

[38] Ibid, 35.

[39] Or "personal life stories," van Manen, 66.

[40] I maintained a purposefully more patient and silent approach in the interviews, a tactful way of gathering material suggested by van Manen, 68.

to share with me, and therefore did not prod when I sensed moments of painful uncertainty. I wanted each person to share or not to share as freely and openly as he wished.

As each person spoke, I took notes and paid careful attention to what I was noticing initially from their stories – other people who populated them, the setting of the story, the time it occurred and the time of year, how they felt. Essentially, I was noting guideposts along the way that would allow me later, while writing, to reflect on the meanings of the veterans' lived experience.[41] It often did not take the veterans long to tell the story of their experience, so I would circle them back to some of the key noticings I had and would then ask them to elaborate more deeply on their relationships to others, the places they inhabited, and so on, with concrete details. Their generosity and sharing with me as I have described it proved to be a fruitful method for gathering the material I needed to create the storied accounts of their lives and experiences that constitute the upcoming chapters.[42]

It is important at this point for me to comment on what van Manen calls the natural attitude during this time of sharing stories and collecting accounts.[43] The narrators of stories of experience must remain pre-reflective and grounded in the narrator's everyday sense of the world, of being in the world. The story tellers in this project did not, in the first place, reflect on their experiences during their telling of them, nor did I prod them into a reflective stance by asking them to explain "why" they experienced something in a certain way. Neither did I ask them to express their opinions on the experience.

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[41] Max van Manen, 101.

[42] I must point out here that Philip expressed to me more than once during our conversations that he felt comfortable talking with me, that I was the only one to whom he felt he could open up about what he had experienced while in Afghanistan. I suspect the others appreciated opening up to me in the conversational space we shared, as well.

[43] Max van Manen, 67. A reflective attitude takes the speaker away from concrete experience as lived, and the concrete is what I was seeking during the time I was collecting the veteran students' stories about which I would later write.

I believe that I achieved the goal of having them narrate their experiences as they had been lived. I had each story teller remain concrete, to recount experiences in the natural attitude, and to avoid detours of why it is important, why it means what it does to them, and/or what caused the experiences. While some reflection is inevitable in a conversational interview, my aim was not to let reflection interfere with more concretely embodied narration. It is my role, however, to transform the lived experience accounts into the textual representation of their essences through reflection.

*Writing.* The only way I can access the lived experience of the veteran students with whom I spent so many hours speaking is through conversation, writing, and reflection on the meaning of the phenomena of serving, returning, and their learning in these life contexts. Once I had completed all conversational interviews, I spent the following three months transcribing each and every word from the recordings into an electronic document. Although this was a time-consuming process, especially because I did not use any transcribing software, it was a fruitful way for me to gain a deeper understanding of the storied experiences each veteran had shared with me.

Once I had competed transcribing all sets of transcripts, I began to read and reread them repeatedly. At this point, my goal was to transform the raw narrative material into stories of each veteran's experiences in their various life contexts. To do so, I had to take notes as I read in the margins of the transcripts. I also used a yellow highlighter to make key bits of narrated experience stand out from the transcript so that I could come back to it later as I wrote.[44]

[44] Max van Manen, 94. van Manen calls this the "selective or highlighting approach" to discovering important thematic elements within the narrative data.

Through this reading and re-reading, I was able to select the key moments of their experiences to render into storied portraits of their lives.

I suppose this process could be referred to as a kind of “data coding,” but I approached this phase of writing as more of a rendering of the rawness of the full data set into stories of the participants’ experiences—there, here, and in community college. I wanted the stories I rendered from the data to be compelling, moving, powerful, and beautiful,[45] and so I sought to reconstitute the raw material into new narratives of Lolo, Dan, Philip, and Hank’s experiences, narratives that orient the reader toward what is meaningful about their experiences in the military, their return, and their time as community college students.

I chose an authorial voice for each account that is roughly similar across accounts. For each narrative I rendered, I decided to use a third-person voice, every now and then letting the voices of the veterans come through in quotes and through dialogue with others as they had recounted to me during our conversations. I believe doing so allowed me to shape language in ways that gave a storied life to the conversational data I had collected.

However, since I am bound up in the lives of the veterans, as a teacher here at the college and through our face-to-face conversations, I am a character in their stories, too, although a minor one. Therefore, I begin each narrative with a first person account of how I came to know each person, and that account reflects the work I do at the college in various capacities, such as my teaching, committee membership, and other service work. The rest of the narratives I wrote

[45] Max van Manen, 121. The narrative of a powerful phenomenological text should compel the reader, lead the reader to reflect, involve the reader personally, and move the reader.

feature the key orienting moments I refer to above, but every now and then I would experiment with narrative form, using flashbacks and then letting the story unfold into the present.[46]

After I had completed writing each of the four narrative accounts I rendered from our conversations,[47] I read and re-read them as I did the transcripts, but this time I was looking for thematic threads that ran across all of the stories. My approach at this point was not to cut the narratives apart into specific themes and isolate them for analysis; rather, I chose to leave the stories whole and to think more generally about what I had written and what my writing suggested about the meaning of the veterans' experiences. It was through this process of reading and reflection on the narratives that I began to notice how past learning habits being brought into the present seemed to be strongly related to their experience of struggle upon their return.

*Cautionary Notes and Opportunities.* Before I finish this chapter by summarizing those that remain, I must offer a couple of cautionary notes. First of all, the group of veteran students attending a Michigan community college who took part in this project is quite small, only four in number. Therefore, neither I nor the reader should attempt to use what I have found about the veterans' experiences to generalize too hastily about the larger population of other student veterans. What is more, I am looking at their experiences of struggle and return through the singular perspective of educative experience, so, therefore, what I have written is limited by virtue of that lens, although this was by design.

In addition to this caution about limits of generalizability because of the small number of participants and the novel perspective I am bringing to the analysis of the veterans' experiences,

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[46] D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 164.

[47] Both Lolo and Dan read and commented on early drafts of their chapters. Philip and Hank were unavailable to read theirs.

I am a white male who spoke with four other white males who told me their "manly" stories of war and adventure, which I then rendered into "manly" narratives. Our stories, theirs and mine, are all deeply situated and rooted in a white male Midwestern social milieu, as well.

Of course, there are women and minority veteran students, but their stories are not told in the upcoming pages. To be sure, I would have been pleased if a female student veteran or a veteran of color had come forward to participate in this project, but this did not come to pass, possibly because there are fewer women and minority veterans on campus than white males, or possibly others did not feel comfortable sharing their experiences with me. It is possible the male veteran students sought me out because I was another white male with whom they felt comfortable sharing. Be that as it may, I could only listen[48] to the people who happened to make themselves available to me, so I cannot claim that this project necessarily speaks to women's or people of color's experiences there, here, and in community college.

In spite of limitations in terms of generalizability and the maleness of this project, I believe there is opportunity here. First, my hope is that what I have written represents a plausible *possible* description of the phenomenon I am seeking to make heard and visible. While it is true that I am writing about a specific population, veteran students, I also hope that what I have written strikes a chord with every reader and that they come to see something of themselves through what I have written about the veterans.[49] I also hope that the analysis I offer through the lens of educative experience is a novel one that can add to the growing body of published conversations about veteran students.

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[48] Listening/hearing is a key metaphor of phenomenological research.

[49] Max van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience,* 27. The phenomenological nod, in which we recognize an experience we have had or could have had through reading a descriptive research text, is what I am thinking of here.

Second, other researchers and writers have the opportunity to take up from where I have left off and focus on the experiences of female and minority veterans returning. There are other stories and other voices not represented in the upcoming chapters. There is still much we can learn from these stories and voices as we move toward an understanding of the phenomenon that is as full and as richly deep as possible. Through this continued inquiry, we can continue to learn what people in whose care veterans find themselves can do during the time veterans are re-learning to belong effectively now that they are back, whether within the walls of school or outside of them,

*Chapter Previews.* The upcoming four chapters showcase a narrative portrait of each veteran student I rendered from our hours of talks together. Lolo's portrait leads the way, and then I write about Philip. Dan's story is next, followed by Hank's. I ordered and named chapters two through five in the ways I did because the ordering and titles seemed to connect to some broad thematic threads that emerge from each narrative I rendered.

I gave Lolo's chapter, "Following Lolo's Lead," this title because he learned to become a leader while in the Army and in the classroom, and Philip, in his chapter titled "Philip Finds His Path," had to leave the path he had followed into the Army not long after he joined in order to forge his own. In "Dan's Redirection," the fourth chapter featuring Dan's story, the narrative I rendered shows the many instances in his life and experience where his journey ended up changing direction, both by his own design and through the design of others.

The last narrative chapter, Hank's story, which I titled "Hank Held Close," intimates the complexity of what he holds close to him and what holds him close. He is both holding onto things and being held by things. This broad theme of holding onto something while simultaneously being held that emerged from the narrative I rendered about Hank seemed a

natural transition into the last chapter, in which I consider the specific meanings of the stories through the lens of educative experience.

In the final chapter, titled “Toward a New Understanding of Veterans’ Experience of Return,” I first revisit each veteran’s story by summarizing significant moments from the narratives I wrote about each veteran in the preceding chapters, both as a way of reintroducing each to the reader and of setting the stage for the upcoming analysis of their stories from the perspective of educative experience. Then, while acknowledging that the accounts I rendered can be read in multiple ways depending on what the reader brings to the textual encounter, I suggest that the accounts be read as stories of education, of initiation, trial, and return, and, importantly, stories of the human struggle to grow and find meaning during times of transition.

An analysis of the narratives using the lens of educative experience comes next, and I rely on John Dewey’s ideas about closed social groups and the narrow educational aims such groups have as they initiate and educate their members at this point in the chapter.[50] Dewey’s ideas here are helpful as I shine a light on three important and interrelated habits the veteran students learned while in the military that they continue to carry with them in the present that seem important to understanding the struggle from the perspective of educative experience: structure, standards, and accountability.

After this analysis, I return to Dewey and his insights about educative growth and development as a way to offer some suggestions for community college practitioners and others who find veterans in their care. I also relied on the ideas of some other important educational

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[50] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1944). Chapter 7, “The Democratic Conception in Education,” and Chapter 8, “Aims in Education,” were the most useful to my analysis in the final chapter.

writers and thinkers in this final chapter for my analysis and discussion, including Mike Rose,[51] Jack Mezirow,[52] and Paulo Freire.[53] I also used the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin[54] to help me to reclaim developmental education from the dominant discourse, arriving at a richer and more generous meaning as a result of my analysis.

*Audience Considerations.* I would like to say a few words about audience before I leave this chapter.[55] Because I am a practicing teacher in the field of post-secondary education, specifically within the American community college, I could not help but imagine myself writing these chapters for other practitioners and administrators within those walls. However, my audience must be larger than just this tiny group behind the walls of the community college, for so many others share their lives with veterans who have returned and are in their care.

While it is important that I write about veterans deeply and sympathetically in ways that their teachers might not always see, I believe many more people have a stake in what I am writing. I imagine myself writing these chapters to mothers, fathers, siblings, spouses, partners,

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[51] Mike Rose, *Lives on the Boundary* (New York: The Free Press, 1989). In Chapter 7, "The Politics of Remediation," Rose provides narrative accounts of college students' struggles with academic literacy, but he attempts to understand their present struggles through their previously learned literacy habits and personal backgrounds. This notion of past learning habits becoming barriers to present learning is highly influential to my thinking and analysis in the final chapter.

[52] Jack Mezirow, "Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice," *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education,* no. 74 (Summer, 1997), 5-6. Mezirow's concept of "habits of mind" is particularly useful to my analysis of past learning habits the veteran students acquired.

[53] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2003). Part of becoming fully human, for Freire, is to be both a student and a teacher, a teacher and a student. It is this important concept from his second chapter that I intimate in the last chapter.

[54] Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1988), 270-273. Bakhtin's dialogized heteroglossia is helpful to my reclaiming of "developmental education." Dialogized heteroglossia is the opposition to normalized, official, and, hence, privileged uses of language and absolute meanings. To dialogize is to de-privilege accepted word meanings and to reclaim them for different uses. From the narrative data, I attempt to reclaim developmental education from the current discourse and restore a more generous, human, and lived meaning.

[55] Clandinin and Connelly, 149. Clandinin and Connelly strongly advise narrative inquirers to have a firm sense of audience and what value the written research text should hold for that audience.

friends, anyone whose lives touch veterans and whose lives are touched by them; but, even more, I see these chapters written for all of humanity, all of whom undertake life journeys, as we must always learn how to belong to varied and multiple social groups. Learning to belong means learning to be adaptable to constant change, which means we must always re-learn as we go forward, especially when it comes to fruitful growth and development. But we cannot re-learn by ourselves; we need others there to help us along the way, to teach us, and it is this message that I hope my audience hears through the upcoming pages.

And now, Lolo leads the way.

## Chapter 2 Following Lolo's Lead

I first met Lolo a couple of summers ago after I had visited the developmental writing class he was taking at the college. I had asked the instructor if I could come to his class and talk with the students about belongingness as part of a writing project I was doing. I was specifically interested in the experience we have of learning to belong when we feel that our belonging is initially at risk. Lolo was among a few students who had contacted me after my visit and expressed an interest in talking more about an experience of learning to belong they had had. Lolo and I ended up spending some time later that summer getting to know each other a bit more and talking about his experiences learning to belong in the military when he was at his first duty station and during his two combat deployments, the first of which was to Afghanistan, the second to Iraq.

I was pleased that fall when I saw his name on the class roster of the section of the first year writing course I regularly teach at the college. Lolo's developmental writing course the previous semester had served him well; he was a keen reader who brought critical insight to the texts. I knew I could count on him to pound his critical wedge into a reading, crack it open, and lay the text open in front of us for the class to discuss. He was a strong writer, as well, and his laptop was with him wherever he went.

We were getting down to the last twenty minutes or so of class one day later in the semester, and I was up at the white board finishing an introduction to the last essay of the semester. The essay asked students to reflect critically on the choices they had made while researching for and writing one of the longer pieces they had been working on over the last month of the semester. This narrative metawriting essay would give students the opportunity to

think carefully about their writing situation and how they tailored source choices and writing choices, such as style and purpose, for the particular audience to which they were writing.

After I had finished introducing the assignment, it was time to turn it over to the class, to hear their questions and their ideas so that we could dialogue around them and they could begin to plan their way into this new piece. I asked if there were any questions. Lolo perked up immediately from the back corner of the room.

"Yeah," he said, looking up over the screen of his open laptop. "*Why* do we have to write this essay?"

For a fleeting moment, while I stood there in front of the board, marker in hand, I just wasn't sure how I would respond. Our talk during the summer had taught me that Lolo did not hold back, that he would ask you to explain yourself. Or tell you how he saw things. Straight up. Maybe he wanted me to be straight up with him and order him to do it. Maybe I should have said, "Because it's a required assignment that I just told you to do." But that wasn't the way. Perhaps I had detected a sense of his frustration embedded in his question with having to write another essay. Perhaps, but not quite, for I also remember quickly thinking that the question could be one of his wedges driven in to crack open more rationale for the assignment.

Suddenly, a reply came to me. I followed where I thought he was leading me.

"That," I replied. "Is a great question, and I hope all of you were wondering the same thing as Lolo. Why do we have to write this essay?" I asked the class.

"Because you told us to," Josh immediately shot back from the front row.

We all laughed.

“Yes, that I did,” I replied as our laughter subsided. “But, why, though, beyond the fact that it is a course assignment tied to course and department learning outcomes? Can we find some connections that go beyond just the assignment?”

“I’m going to be a nurse,” Jen volunteered. “And I know that I will have to explain decisions that I make to doctors and to patients.”

“Yeah,” I said. “What else?”

As the class talked around Lolo’s question, more perspectives emerged. That day, I think the class arrived at a broader perspective on the assignment and how it could have implications for writing and thinking that went beyond the four walls of our first year writing classroom at the college. As we were leaving class for the day, I asked Lolo if his question had been answered.

“Yeah, boss,” he said from the back corner of the room as he stood and gathered up his coat and laptop. “See ya next week.”

Lolo’s question in class that day was provocative; it was not meant to provoke me, at least not in a way that would fluster me in front of the class. I took what he gave to us through his questioning as a lead, and I, along with the class, followed it into some important territory that we had not yet explored in class – how the writing moves we were learning and developing have important connections to life and work situations, not just to the minutiae of assigned coursework.

*The Incident in Baqubah on the Road Toward Soldiering*

*If this poem had wires for words,/you would want someone to pay.*[56]

At one point during his deployment to Iraq, the second during his tenure in the Army, Lolo’s platoon sergeant decided to reward them with a day off at Joint Base Balad, near

[56] Kevin Powers, *Letter Composed During a Lull in the Fighting* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 2014), 31.

Baqubah, because they had been working hard. The joint Army/Air Force base was almost like a vacation spot for soldiers on deployment, with a mall, fast food places, and a large, deep underground pool. Lolo was jealous of the soldiers who were lucky enough to be stationed on the base, but he was looking forward to spending a brief respite there.

While traveling through Baqubah on the way to Joint Base Balad, Lolo's convoy began taking small arms fire from the rooftops of the nearby buildings. The platoon sergeant, Sergeant Kale, ordered the convoy to a stop. Then, "we just started getting bombarded, man," Lolo recounted to me. The convoy was being hit by rocket propelled grenades and fire from AK47s; the grenades were the worst, because their impact would blast off pieces of armor from the trucks in the convoy and shake around the soldiers inside.

Sergeant Kale had had enough. "We're gonna go destroy the enemy today," he had told his soldiers. "So I hope you noobs are ready!"

Lolo and the others exited the truck and began advancing on a large four story building. Kale came running up from the rear, shotgun in hand, wholly intending to blast the door open so that the others could rush in and begin clearing the building. As he was standing with the others in front of the door, something about the situation struck Lolo as not quite right. It seemed to him that Kale was being too hasty to rush into the building, and that they should be a bit more cautious and assess the situation more carefully.

"Yo, dumbass. Look up!" Lolo had called out to Kale, stopping him just in time from pulling the trigger and unleashing a blast from his shotgun into the door lock.

In that brief moment in front of the door, Lolo had noticed a computer modem mounted above the door. Hanging out of the back of it were four pieces of copper wire; when the door was

opened, the modem would send a signal through the copper wire into an IED, which would then explode, wreaking havoc on anyone who attempted to enter the building.

"You can't do that," Lolo had said to Sergeant Kale, referring to his hastiness to break through the door without having assessed the situation first. "Pay the fuck attention!" he had exclaimed in admonishment. Kale had then looked up and noticed the trap. He promptly ordered the squad to fall back to a new position.

At the base, the squad had some time to unwind. They were all hot and tired; some soldiers were relaxing and chilling out with video games, and others were Skyping with wives, girlfriends, or parents. Outside, the trucks were being outfitted for the next day's mission. Lolo's teammates had been surprised that he had spotted the IED.

"You? You saw that?" they had asked him in the barracks.

"Roger," Lolo had replied.

"No way!" they had insisted.

"I saw it," he had affirmed. Even Lolo's squad leaders praised him with "Good on ya, man. Good on ya."

This moment in combat was a turning point in Lolo's experience of being a soldier. It was after this experience that Lolo began to feel as though he was respected and valued by the others in his section, that he could do both the job of soldiering and have the backs of his section mates. Spotting the IED had prevented other soldiers from being wounded, perhaps even killed, and the others in his section began to listen to him and trust his judgment. On other missions, if Lolo saw something that did not look or feel right, he would call the convoy to a stop. The commanding officer would respond, "You heard the man! Stop convoy!"

Other commanding officers Lolo had encountered after this event appreciated having him around the battery. After he had gotten back from Iraq, and before he had re-classed and had moved on to Fort Gordon, Georgia, Lolo had been stationed at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, with his section. After his deployment to Iraq while at Fort Sill, the section chief Sergeant Joi, "a big Samoan guy," with whom Lolo had forged a friendship, would "tell the new privates, you know, 'Go learn from Lolo. That guy, he's on it.'"

During PT one morning, Sergeant Joi summoned Lolo over to him. Lolo fell out of formation, and he and Joi walked to his barracks room.

"What's up chief? What you got for me?" Lolo had asked Moi when they got to his room. He poured him a cup of coffee.

"Nothin, man," Joi had replied. I didn't feel like goin for a run today, so let's sit here and chill, maybe play some *Call of Duty*."

"Chief?" Lolo had inquired.

Joi had replied, "I don't feel like runnin, so we're just gonna sit in here."

And so, on that particular morning, while the others in the section were doing PT, Lolo and Sergeant Joi hung out, drank coffee, and played video games together. Joi had wanted a companion, and he had found one in Lolo who, at this time in his Army career, had become "squared away," a "better soldier." Back when Lolo had been in advanced infantry training, Joi, who at that time had been a specialist, not yet promoted to sergeant, had taught him "the tricks of the trade and taught me how to be a soldier." On the way back to formation, when PT had finished, Joi had told Lolo to keep their skipping out on PT together between themselves.

Lolo and Joi's interlude during morning PT that day is an example of how a soldier superior in rank had recognized that Lolo had learned to be a soldier, partially through the

incident in Baqubah and partially through Lolo's own determination and dedication to soldiering that had unfolded over his time in the Army up to that point. By this time, others had wanted Lolo around the section for his soldiering and for his companionship. Another example of how Lolo had felt wanted was when he was preparing to leave the battery for Fort Gordon to become a computer specialist, or, as he put it, a "computer nerd."

Lolo remembered how Sergeant Cross had told him that he was "just the most wet behind the ears private I have ever seen in my life" when he had first arrived. Cross, an E8 First Sergeant, told Lolo, who was then an E4, a specialist/corporal, that he was not allowed to re-class. Cross "needed squared away soldiers," and so he told Lolo that he could not leave the battery.

"To have somebody who stands so much over you in rank and authority tell you that they need you where you are or else his battery is going to fall apart" was uplifting for Lolo. Cross' words were an uplifting reassurance to him that his contribution had been recognized and valued.

Being a squared-away soldier who felt as though he belonged and was a respected, valued, and trusted member and leader of the team, however, did not come right away for Lolo.

"When I first started," Lolo told me, "I was not a model solider, man. I was what in the military is known as a shitbag. And for the shitbag to do something so drastic, so lifesaving" as to spot an IED in Baqubah was indeed the source of surprise among his section mates and why they had questioned him when they had found out that he had spotted it mounted on the door.

Lolo had joined the United States Army near the beginning of 2008 when he was twenty-two years old. Part of his decision to join had been motivated by financial concerns and part of it had been motivated by his desire to get away from home. He and his family moved to a small

rural town in Michigan's Lower Peninsula when he was about ten years old. Growing up there was boring. For entertainment, and to cool off during the humid Michigan summers after playing in the local park all day, Lolo and a small group of his friends would head down to the bridge that was about a mile from his house. There was a deep pool in the river under the bridge, and he and his friends would leap off and fall fourteen feet into the cool water below. The local police had warned the boys not to jump off the bridge, that it was dangerous and they were risking injury or death, but they did not care and jumped anyway. When the police did show up, the group would scatter off into different directions until the threat had passed. Then, they would assemble again at the bridge and do it all over again.

After graduating from high school, Lolo began working at a state run institution that provided communal living and care for people with special needs. The facility was near his home, and Lolo's mother had worked there for a number of years. She had helped him to get the job as a resident assistant; his job was to assist residents in the completion of their ADLs, or Activities of Daily Living, which the state had mandated that all residents be able to perform independently before being released. Every now and then, there would be a disagreement among some of the residents that would escalate, and Lolo would have to physically restrain anyone whose behavior was threatening toward other residents. He had made good money working at the facility.

However, because of budget cuts and a dwindling client pool, Lolo got laid off from the institution after only a few years on the job. It was not long after that the state closed the facility permanently. The layoff put him into financial desperation. Prior to being laid off, Lolo had bought a new vehicle and he needed the money to pay for it. This was right at the time the country entered the economic recession, so he could not find other work. To him, the Army

seemed like a solid option to secure some measure of financial stability and to move on in life and see the world while he was at it.

After Lolo had completed basic training, he was assigned to his first duty station in Seattle, Washington. While there, he began to feel as though the others in his squad did not consider him to be a valued member of the team. While the rest of the soldiers in the section would hang out with each other on the weekends, Lolo would remain back in the barracks by himself. They had never invited him to go along with them.

"I'm not gonna lie to you," he admitted to me during one of our conversations. "I sat around and I felt sorry for myself constantly. Like, why don't these guys like me? Oh, wait, because I keep screwin up and getting them in trouble."

He described himself as brash and with no thought as to how his actions would affect the others in his section. He also had no confidence in himself nor in others. He also had no sense of respect for anybody else, and had a hard time controlling his mouth. Whatever came to his mind at a particular moment would come out of his mouth, which ended up having repercussions on those around him.

One action that he had trouble controlling while in Seattle was his lateness. One morning, Lolo had arrived fifteen minutes late for PT.  Because he had overslept, he caused the rest of his section to have to do extra PT later that day after work for over four hours. He had arrived late for work another time and, once again, he, along with the others in his section, had to pay for it with extra PT. While the entire squad was doing pushups, Lolo overheard another of his section mates swearing at him under his breath. He looked to his left, and glaring back at him was PFC Walls.

"You're the reason why I'm here, asshole," Walls grumbled accusingly.

Lolo wanted to hit him in the face right then. “Shut up, Walls! Just shut your mouth!” he had yelled.

The section chief, who towered over Lolo and outweighed him by at least one hundred and sixty pounds, had overheard the exchange between Lolo and Walls. If this man had wanted to, he could have picked up Lolo and squashed him like a grape. He came unglued. The chief grabbed Lolo’s uniform and started shaking him around and screaming at him, all the while jabbing his fingers in Lolo’s face for emphasis.

“If you’re gonna survive here,” the chief had screamed. “You’re gonna learn how to watch your fuckin mouth!” He jabbed his index finger into the tip of Lolo’s nose to punctuate each word that blasted out of his mouth. It was at this moment that Lolo had realized that his actions and his words did carry consequences for the others around him. And there were consequences for how the others viewed Lolo and his place in the section. They essentially considered him to be dead weight, something which Lolo did not want.

“I didn’t wanna come to work every day feelin like I was hated, like everybody else on my team was just like, you know, ‘Screw you, Lolo. You’re just gonna get us into trouble anyway,” Lolo had told me.

Eventually, though, Lolo did learn more about soldiering and about his role as a contributing member of the team. Certainly, his actions in front of a door in Baqubah had prevented casualties, for which his squad and commanding officers were grateful. As he continued to learn to be a soldier during his time in the Army and on deployment, his relationship to others evolved, as well. Joi had been the section chief who had come unglued on Lolo after his exchange with Walls; recall also that, as Lolo was preparing to leave the battery

for his new assignment as a computer specialist at Fort Gordon, Georgia, his sergeant did not want him to leave the battery because of the solider he had become.

Before he left Seattle and his first duty station for his deployments overseas, another solider from the section had invited him over to dinner with his family. Most of the entire section would be there. Even Walls. Lolo accepted the invitation. For Lolo, the dinner party with his section mates meant that he was coming along, that others were recognizing him for his contributions, rather than for his actions and mouth that would get them all into trouble. He was feeling that he was no longer dead weight on the team.

One afternoon, with only a couple of months remaining of his last combat deployment, Lolo was with his squad on patrol only about two miles outside of the forward operating base. The soldiers were riding in a convoy of very large armored trucks. The interior of these gun trucks was spacious, and the equipment that came along with the squad in each truck had its own wall mount so that it would be secure. One of Lolo's soldiers, though, did not strap a hundred-pound fire extinguisher into its appropriate mount. No one noticed the problem as the truck rolled along on patrol, until the IED blast knocked it loose. The fire extinguisher fell from its place on the wall and landed on Lolo's shins, fracturing the bone in both legs. Lolo's leg injury had been the only casualty resulting from the blast.

Even though the hairline fractures healed, he had been unable to move like he had prior to the accident. Running in particular became a problem; after only about a quarter of a mile into a run, the pain would become unbearable and he had been unable to finish. This was around the time that he had decided to reenlist and re-class to Fort Gordon as a computer specialist. However, although he had completed the required twenty weeks of training, he was unable to pass the PT test to be able to graduate because of the leg injury that had occurred just a few

months prior. Even though he had tried his hardest to complete the PT requirement, he could never get within the time frame needed to pass the running portion of the test.

His captain at that time laid out the options for him. She informed him that he could either stay in the Army, but not as a computer specialist, or he could go home. At that point, he had been in just over four years.

"Send me home, boss. I'm done," he had told the captain. "I'm done."

*Check-Out Lanes and Other Odd Jobs*

After being honorably discharged from the Army, Lolo returned in 2011 to civilian life and the area where he had grown up. He found a job at Wal-Mart as a cashier shortly after he had arrived home, but quickly found that job frustrating.

"It's where good workers go to die," Lolo said about his stint as a Wal-Mart cashier. "It was just a fuckin joke, man. That place will just make you not care about anything anymore."

Dealing with customers while working the checkout line had been difficult for Lolo. One time, a customer came through his line and had said something to him that insulted him. When he told her not to insult him, she then took a glass jar of spaghetti sauce and hurled it at him. He moved out of the way to avoid the flying jar, but it flew past him and hit the cashier in the lane next to him in the back of the head, exploded, and knocked her out.

When the frustration of the job became unbearable to him, Lolo went to the customer service manager and said, "Screw it. I'm done. I'll go work somewhere else."

By this time, his mother had remarried and had started a new life with her husband, and Lolo did not move back home with her. So, he split his time living with his brothers. He would spend some time at one brother's place, then move in with another for a few months, all the while working odd jobs here and there.

One day, shortly after he had arrived home from the Army, he was at a family BBQ at one of his brothers' houses. Lolo was the youngest of three brothers, and like older brothers tend to do growing up together, they used to descend on him and rough him up just for the fun of it. When Lolo walked through the sliding door into the back yard, the two of them were standing there, waiting for him to come back outside. They looked as though they were getting ready to descend on him like they used to do.

Lolo noticed. "Now, are you sure this is the road you guys wanna walk down?" he had asked them.

His older brother, Kip, replied, "Oh, yeah! We wanna go down this road. We haven't gotten to kick your ass for a long time!"

"It may not be so easy for ya now!" Lolo had warned.

In the Army, whenever an issue arose between soldiers that could not be handled through words or when they could not just let it go, there was what was called The Arena. The Arena was the method for settling grievances, and it involved two soldiers squaring off, their hands tied behind their backs, and each soldier, by tackling, kicking, head-butting, would do whatever he could to get his opponent to the ground. Whichever soldier ended up on the ground lost, and the winner not only established his dominance over the other, but was acknowledged as correct through the whole chain of command.

Lolo took on his brothers all at once, and indeed they did not have an easy time defeating him. He still lost the fight, though. They had the numbers, but he had the determination to prove to them that he could hold his own this time. This time, however, they knew he had been there and that they had been in a fight, and he had felt satisfied that his past grievance with his older brothers had been addressed.

Lolo had also learned over his four years in the Army and during his two combat deployments the ways of being and interacting with other soldiers. He had learned to be in charge of other soldiers and to provide leadership during his interactions with them. Not only had he become used to soldierly interactions, he had also become used to giving orders directly to his subordinates.

"When I was a leader in the Army," Lolo had told me. "All I had to do was just say to one of my guys, you know, 'Hey! Get this done! Do it or it's your ass!"

Later at the BBQ, while people were milling around, eating and talking with each other, Lolo's young nephew, Kip's son, came up to him with a new toy and had asked him to help him put it together.

Lolo had looked away from the person he had been talking to and down at his nephew. "Not now, Donnie!" he had barked at the boy. "Read the TM!"

Donnie stood there for a moment, looking down at his shoes, then looked up at his uncle. "Uncle Lolo?" he had asked. "What's a TM?"

"The instructions, buddy!" Lolo had shot back.

"Ohhhh…I don't know how to read."

"Ok, well, let's slow down and go back and Uncle Lolo will help ya," he had replied, realizing that he could not speak to a child and order him to do something on his own that the boy was incapable of doing.

Donnie had smiled and then led his uncle to the bedroom he shared with his sister. Lolo had noticed right away that the kids' bedroom was in disarray. Clothes were on the floor, hanging out of dresser drawers, and toys littered the beds and the floor.

After Lolo had helped his nephew assemble the toy, he issued Donnie a command. “Clean your room! I want it to be spotless!” Then, “I’m not asking, it’s not a request, I’m telling you to do it.” Lolo then went back out to join the others at the BBQ.

One early spring day, during one of our conversations together, Lolo said to me, “You’re a college professor, an English professor, so you’re used to talking about English with people.”

“Yeah,” I replied.

“Well, I was a soldier, so I was used to talking about soldiering.”

I had been teaching rhetorical analysis in my English courses for years at the college, so I understood what Lolo was referring to when it came to making language choices depending on the audience you were speaking to and the purpose you had for communicating with that particular audience. I was intrigued about how his soldierly talk had continued in his life and in his interactions with others after he had returned to civilian life.

Not long after the BBQ at his brother’s house, Lolo met the woman who eventually would become his fiancé. After she had agreed to go out with him on their first date, Lolo told her that he would arrive at her house to pick her up at nineteen hundred.

She just sat and stared at him.

“What does nineteen hundred mean?” She had asked, a look of confusion on her face.

“Really? You don’t know military time?” He had replied, laughing.

She stared back.

“Oh, yeah,” he said, checking himself. The realization that she did not know what he was talking about then came to him. “Sorry. Seven o’clock,” he clarified.

“Oh, ok,” she replied, smiling.

As his relationship with his fiancé developed, Lolo began to realize he had to deal with others in his life in ways that "weren't military," as he put it. Being with people and interacting with them in non-military ways was all the more difficult for him because he had become accustomed to the life of a single soldier living in the barracks. Both his command and combat experience had come later in his Army career, and had given him a feeling of being in charge of others in his unit. The structure of the Army, the rank and file, had become familiar and had provided order and routine to each of his days. He felt more freedom to say what he wanted to other soldiers while in the service and on deployment. Then, to come back home and to meet a woman with a two-year-old autistic daughter and get engaged "was just like a complete three hundred and sixty degree reality shift."

Part of this reality shift for Lolo had to do with compromise. He had to change his lifestyle in such a way that it revolved around his fiancé and her daughter. No longer was he able to stay out and party all night. No longer was he able to spend his money on video games or other non-essential items. He had to buy diapers, food, gas, and his own clothes, all of which he had not had to worry about before. The transition back into being a "regular old working class Joe again that has to struggle for the nice things he wants in life" was a bumpy one for him.

While his fiancé was at work as a direct care provider, Lolo would stay home at their apartment and take care of the child. One day, he found himself wishing he could just go back to combat, because at the time he felt that that had been so much easier than caring for the child. To "go from killin people and fightin in wars to dealin with children and child development…it was a wonder that I did not pull all my hair out and pull all my teeth out," Lolo had told me, chuckling.

In the military, he knew that if he gave an order, his soldiers would hear it and carry it out. A two-year-old with special needs, however, was another matter altogether. Getting the child to listen to him had been extremely difficult at the time, “an impossible standard,” as he put it. However, in spite of the difficulty he faced, he felt an obligation to the child and to his fiancé and changed his entire lifestyle around to become a father figure to the child.

However, the relationship was not meant to be. As much as they had tried to make it work, his fiancé decided to leave Lolo. He had accused her of cheating on him and she had felt he was too angry all the time. So, one day after she had arrived home from work, she simply told him he had to move out of the apartment. She also told him that she did not want him to see her daughter again. Lolo had felt they had been working on building a life together and he had begun to grow accustomed to the role of father figure and provider, but he had moved on in his life before and did so again. He moved back home with his mother.

During his time in the service, Lolo had learned that the mission was what mattered, and it was the mission that needed to be accomplished at all costs. He did not really need to feel hope or to feel love and compassion for others and their viewpoints. Everything else, including such supplementary emotions as love and compassion, were cast aside and left to wither. He simply did not need them.

His mother was glad that he had moved back in with her and was helping him to get back on his feet after his fiancé had left him. He had found a job and was able to save some money while back at home. His mother, though, was becoming more and more distraught with his drinking.

One night, as he was going out the door and to the local bar, she expressed this viewpoint. “I don’t think that going out to the bar and getting drunk on a night that you have to go to work the next day is a very good idea.”

Lolo stopped, doorknob in hand. He turned to her and replied, “Yeah, well, after two combat tours *you* can tell me what to do!”

His mother stood and looked at him, feeling hurt at what her son had just said.

He then slammed the door behind him and went off into the night to find solace staring back at him through the ice in the bottom of a glass. He did not care that he had hurt her feelings. On top of not caring, he did not even realize that what he had said and done had hurt her feelings in the first place.

As the weeks passed, Lolo continued to work various jobs off and on and he continued to live with his mother. One day, the phone rang. Lolo’s mother answered. She spoke quietly to the person on the other end, then hung up the phone.

“You need to call your father,” she told Lolo, who was sitting at the kitchen table. “It’s Kip. He’s dead. What will happen to Donnie?” She looked down at Lolo.

He stood, went to the phone, and called his dad and told him about the news, that Kip, his older half-brother whose welcome home BBQ he had attended when he arrived home after being honorably discharged from the Army, had died. Because of their age difference, Lolo had not known Kip well growing up, and his childhood memories of Kip were of the older boy beating him up for no reason, but the two had become closer later in life.

Lolo’s father had asked him if he was doing ok with the news of his half-brother’s death.

“Sucks, dude,” Lolo said to his father flatly through the receiver. His mother stared back at him, silent. Then, “People die.”

Lolo hung up, turned, and went outside to smoke a cigarette.

The family spent the next few days preparing for the funeral. Lolo's father was still angry at him for the insensitive comment he had made about Kip's death. Lolo, though, had become accustomed to death during his time on his second deployment to Iraq. He had seen fellow soldiers, his friends, killed in combat. What little time for mourning there was for the others in the squad while on that deployment had to be measured out between IED explosions and people shooting at them, which both often happened in quick succession. Whenever a soldier would be lost to a mortar that found its way over the wall and into the compound, there was not much to say or do other than to press on. The mission took precedence over mourning; the assigned job needed to get done at all costs. This kind of situation in which Lolo and his squad mates often found themselves did not offer them the opportunity to reflect on what had happened, to reminisce about how good of a guy Baker or Slavos or any other soldier who had been lost had been. Yes, they had been good guys, but accomplishing the mission was all that had mattered at that particular moment.

After Lolo had viewed Kip's body lying at rest in his casket, he sat in a chair and waited for the funeral service to begin. His sister-in-law came up to him and stood over him. She had heard about what he had said to his father.

"Oh, 'people die'?" She shot at him.

Lolo looked up at her.

"That was my husband. That was Donnie's father. Are you an asshole or just insensitive? I think it's both!" She turned and walked away.

Lolo sat in the chair and thought. Her accusation caused him to wonder if he should feel guilty because he did not care as much as people thought he should. Then, he wondered about

who he should even feel sorry for. His sister-in-law? Donnie? His father? As he sat and thought, he realized he did not know, that he did not care enough to feel sorry for anyone, really. Burying himself in the mission and being cold and heartless about it was how he got through Kip's death.

In fact, Lolo began to look at his life in the civilian world as a mission, but not a combat mission in the sense he had experienced while on his combat deployments. It's a different mission that has to be performed a different way; this new mission has different parameters, as well. The mission parameters now dictate that he cannot be violent; neither can he be destructive nor angry. On this mission, he believes he has to treat people with respect and dignity if he, in turn, wants to be treated with respect and dignity. He is engaged in a kind of combat, but in a whole new theater of war, but this time, there are no more guns. There is no more rank, at least not in the military sense, and Lolo is in charge of no one else but himself.

*Lolo's College Mission*

Lolo's current mission is to finish college. He qualifies for benefits under the Post 9/11 GI Bill and has taken out some federal student loans to help pay for tuition. He is pursuing a degree in computer networking and security at MMCC, inspired by what he learned in his computer specialist training in the Army when he had re-classed to Fort Gordon after his last combat deployment. Once the mission of graduating from college is complete, his next mission will be to find a job so that he can move out of his mother's house. His end game is to be a systems analyst, so he will need to transfer to another college after he finds a job so that he can finish the requirements for the degree that will qualify him for this kind of work.

Coming to college and working on an associate's degree in general technology so that he can become a systems analyst was something Lolo wanted to do for himself because, for so long up until the point he started college, much of what he had done in the Army had been for

someone else. He wanted to be his own person again and he did not want to have someone else's back anymore because he had done so for so long. For Lolo, college meant the opportunity to do something for himself that he could feel proud of, an accomplishment that belonged to him and gave to him a sense of his individuality.

Granted, he had found a place to belong in the Army as a contributing member of his section who was valued, wanted, and needed, but his leg injury and his desire to move on had settled the matter of his future in the Army. The various jobs he had held in the year and a half since he had been honorably discharged were also being done for someone else's benefit, he had felt, and not something that left him with a sense of fulfillment; these jobs had not left him with a feeling of accomplishment. The jobs he had held since quitting the checkout line at Wal-Mart had provided him with a paycheck and a weekly schedule, but little else, save frustration and just the feeling of keeping his head above the water.

Lolo's advisor had helped him to create his first semester schedule of courses, which included the developmental writing course where I had first met him and a developmental math course, along with a computer class. After having had his entire day planned out for the better part of the past seven years – the strict regimen and order of daily military life and a weekly work schedule – having so much freedom was hard for him to get used to at first. Time did not belong to him, either, when he had been in the Army. He had been told where to be, when to be, how to be, how to dress, when to eat, when to sleep.

When he got out of classes for the day that first semester, he would go home to his mother's house and sit and wonder what to do next. The awkward feeling of not quite knowing what to do with himself on the days he did not have class was even more pronounced, but eventually he would just fly by the seat of his pants each day, doing some homework here,

playing some video games there, going to class based on whatever schedule he created each semester.

Learning to be in charge of himself and his own time each day when he had first come back to college was only half the battle he engaged in while on the current mission. Lolo has had to struggle with being with other people who have not had the life experiences he has had. So many of the students in his classes and walking the halls of the college have not had the same kinds of life experiences he has had, and many have not likely been out of the rural county in which their homes and the college are located.

One of the first things Lolo noticed when he first began classes at the college was the excuses he overheard students give for not completing an assignment. One day in his developmental writing class, Lolo overheard the instructor asking a student for the final draft of an essay. After the student had replied that he did not get it done, the instructor asked why. Lolo then heard the student's excuse and felt a moment of frustration and a flare of anger.

He sat in his chair in the classroom and thought to himself, "Man…grow up! Man up! You knew what you had to do. Execute! No excuses. Just do it!"

Lolo could not believe that someone could not complete a three-page essay by the deadline the instructor had set. It was just too easy, and his frustration had been fueled not only by the student's excuses, but by the fact that the student did not realize just how easy it was.

"How long would it take to write the essay? An hour? Two hours?" Lolo sat and wondered. "Ooooo…big whoop!"

But at that same moment, Lolo had felt a twinge of something, but just what he did not know at the time; he later realized after class that it was a slight burn of jealousy. He wished he could have been able to give excuses like that when he was eighteen years old and just out of

high school. But, no. He had gone to work full time right after graduating and then, when he had been laid off, turned to the Army for opportunity and financial stability. He would have gladly gone to college right after high school, but that had not been a possibility at the time. To Lolo, the excuses were signs of immaturity, of a lack of seriousness, of a lack of respect, and of a lack of standards.

To someone who had to grow up quickly, both on the job at the Regional Center and, perhaps even more quickly, in the Army and on two combat deployments, this was infuriating for Lolo at first. If he did not complete a task on the job as a resident assistant, he could have been fired; in the Army, there were dire repercussions for not completing an assigned task. Lolo had experienced such repercussions first hand by having "my ass handed to me on multiple occasions for failing to do something or doing something wrong," as he recalled later. He wished he could have given some excuse at the time so that he would have gotten away with it.

But he had been torn because he wished he could have had the luxury of being what he felt was an irresponsible young college student like the one he had observed in class that day. For a brief moment, he wished that could have been him.

That first year, Lolo had to struggle with not only learning how to be in charge of himself again as a college student, but also how to treat others with the respect and dignity that the parameters of the current mission of graduating from college demanded from him. He felt a lot of anger when he had first started taking classes at the college, which made this part of the mission particularly difficult. Not only did he feel slightly jealous of students who, in his view, had had the luxury to give excuses for not meeting deadlines, he also felt anger toward them because they had been able to go to college right after high school and did not have to grow up so quickly. Each day, he would overhear students talking in the halls about their future plans and

goals, and his anger would flare at what he considered mindless babble about nothing of any real consequence.

Lolo did well in his classes that first semester, and other students had noticed. So, they would seek him out for tutoring and for help on their writing assignments. There was one student in particular he had tutored in math, showing him how to do tricky problems so that the student would eventually be able to get through them on his own. The student had wanted to do well and Lolo helped him with his homework and with studying for exams, and the student's math grade went up. He also began to do his homework more independently, thanks in part to Lolo's tutoring and the student's willingness to work at learning math and to do the best he could at it.

Another time during his first year at college, a student had found out that Lolo was doing well in his writing class. The student had asked him about what he was doing that enabled him to do so well and if he would help out on the next writing assignment. Lolo agreed, and gave the student some tips on how to write the paper based on how he had been approaching the essays that semester. Lolo had been hoping the student would emulate the modeling he had provided for him. In this case, though, in spite of Lolo's tutoring, the student did not score very well on the essay and had wondered why. Lolo explained that he had not done the work that he had advised him to do. The student had not put enough into the assignment, so the output equaled that. Lolo had felt frustrated that the student had not been willing to work harder on the essay.

When he would agree to meet with other students to read a draft of an English paper or help them to research for an assignment, he began to feel let down because the same kinds of excuses students had given their instructors would be given to him. He felt the other students were not holding up their end of the arrangement, that they were not serious about doing better, and were not trying hard enough. So, it wasn't long before he stopped offering to tutor other

students altogether. Although there were times when a student would show up for tutoring and would be serious about getting his help, now Lolo does not even plan to help other students any more as he nears completion of his degree. It's not that he is being cold and withdrawn toward others; it's just that, for so long, his time did not belong to him. It had belonged to someone else and, now that he gets to decide how to use his time, he does not want to waste it on someone who is not willing to hold up their end of the bargain. And the work demands of college just did not seem all that difficult to him after what he had done in the Army.

What had seemed difficult for Lolo, though, was finding respect for some of his instructors who, as he saw it, abused their rank by not treating students with respect and dignity. The Army had taught Lolo about what he considered to be real rank, involving superior officers and subordinates; he had experienced this as both a new private with drill sergeants outranking him and as an E4 with superior rank over his soldiers. He had to take orders from those of superior rank and carry them out, no questions asked, and his subordinates had to do the same for him when he had been in charge. While Lolo respected the title of instructor, it was their actions toward others that mattered. And now, he does not have to keep his mouth shut and bite his lip to keep quiet, as he had for so long in the Army.

In one of his math classes a few semesters ago, the instructor was giving a lecture. The instructor was going over course concepts and material quickly, so quickly, in fact, that Lolo felt that the only way to learn so much information would have been through something like osmosis. Lolo had asked the instructor a question, and he felt that the question had not been answered sufficiently. So, he turned to the student next to him, a friend of his with whom he does homework and studies, and asked if she had understood the concept. The instructor then singled

out Lolo and told him to be quiet, followed by, “If you don’t know the answer to that, you need to go back to the developmental math class.”

Lolo felt like he was in eighth grade again.

“I promise you I am not some eighth grade punk who doesn’t know anything. I will respect your rank if you respect mine,” Lolo had shot back. “This is college, and people are going to have questions. It’s not up to you to go a million miles an hour.”

Other students in class had been shocked that Lolo had spoken to an instructor with such candor, and he had been shocked that others had not spoken up. As class went on, and the instructor reviewed some of the troublesome concepts for the class, Lolo remembered sitting there thinking about how the other students must believe that because he’s the instructor, they have no right to say anything if they are confused or do not understand something.

“You’re just a teacher,” Lolo said to me one day during a conversation. “I mean, with all due respect, you’re just a teacher. You’re a human being. You’re not some deity that comes down from heaven to make all the rules and make our life living hell.”

“Yes,” I replied. “You are right about that.”

What struck me about Lolo’s comment was that he is seeking out the person behind the title, something more genuine than the title itself. He is seeking out a person, an authentic person who sees him as not just a student. He is seeking a person who recognizes him as a person and his experiences and all that he is bringing with him to the classroom, who values that, and who will help him. Lolo told me about one instructor in particular who did just this. He was one of Lolo’s computer instructors, Brian Walsh, probably the person from whom he has learned the most while at the college and who became Lolo’s favorite instructor.

“He’s old and surly,” Lolo said about Walsh, chuckling. “He really is an asshole, but he’s the funniest asshole you’ll ever meet in your life.”

Each class period was like a comedy routine because Walsh would play up the role of a soured old instructor. He would act the part of a mean old man. Walsh would walk into class and ask everyone how they were doing, but before they could even get the first word out, Walsh would shoot back, “Ah, shut the hell up!” Other times, in keeping with the comedy routine, he would encourage students to report him to the dean if they had a problem with him, but he would always advise them to be sure they had spelled his name right.

Lolo responded to this playfulness, but, more than this, he respected Walsh because when he said he would help students, he meant it. He was the most helpful instructor Lolo had had. But there was a catch to Walsh’s offer for help. When Lolo had been struggling with understanding an assignment in his Microsoft Excel class, he had asked Walsh for help.

“Can you meet with me some time, so we can work through it?” he had asked.

Walsh replied, “The only time I have is tomorrow morning.”

“That works for me,” Lolo replied.

Walsh then looked at him and said, “If you don’t show up here tomorrow morning, I’m going to yank out your intestines and hang you from the ceiling with them.”

“That’s very descriptive,” Lolo said slowly.

“It’s also very honest, because I really like my time. My time is valuable to me.”

“Ok, I’ll be here. Don’t worry.”

Walsh helped Lolo the next day with the assignment, and he ended up getting an A on it.

Just the other day, Lolo came to my office at the college for a visit. The wind was strong that day, and the trees outside my office window bent against it, and some of the first leaves of

the fall were being whipped around after having been pulled from their branches. The wind would swirl these leaves upward, and then the leaves would catch a current and quickly shoot off somewhere. Lolo is finishing the last few classes of his associate's degree in general technology. He looked tired and run down that day, probably because he was fighting a cold and probably because of the coursework piling up as the semester picks up. He's also trying to kick a pack a day smoking habit.

After we had caught up a bit, he told me he had been struggling with a problem in his website design class and had to seek out one of the computer technicians on campus for help. He spoke in a slow way, measuring out each word.

"I'm so close to the end of college now that, that's kinda really the only thing I'm focused on," he said.

"Hey, that's not a bad focus to have," I said.

He continued. "I dunno, call it me not wanting to have anyone's back anymore, me wanting to get my individualism back, me…" he paused. "Wanting…to just be my own person again, call it whatever you will, but, I mean, I was tired of living my life for other people. Like, I wanted to live it for me. I wanted to do something that I could be proud of, for me."

I could hear the importance he was placing on college as an individual accomplishment, because his accomplishments up until the point he had begun college had been for the larger group. I am sure he must have felt some pride of individual accomplishment in the military, but from the perspective of having been back in civilian life and in college these past few years, he began to see it as accomplishments for others, not so much for him. He is at a point in his life now where he is trying to put himself and his accomplishments first. But this is not at the expense of others. On this mission, his squad mates are his parents and his girlfriend. He knows

that his parents are proud of what he is accomplishing in school, as is his girlfriend, who attends classes at the college and whom Lolo helps with her writing assignments.

As we were finishing our conversation the other day, Lolo said to me, “I don’t wanna be known as that grumpy, asshole dude with PTSD that acts like a jerk to everybody. I wanna be looked up to and respected. I don’t want people to treat me like I’m a jerk for the rest of my life.”

We shook hands, and Lolo left to go track down the computer technician for help on his website design. His words lingered with me, and his desire to become and be the kind of person his words described seemed to float in the air where he had just stood. I thought about what he had said about his current mission of completing college, and while that mission will be accomplished soon, his mission of being the person he wants to be is one that will be ongoing. But I also realized that it is not just his mission; we are all engaged in that continuing conflict of becoming, belonging, and being.

## Chapter 3 Philip Finds His Path

I have been a voting member of the Curriculum and Academic Standards Committee at the college ever since fall, 2002, my first semester as a full time English instructor. The chair of the committee, one of the nursing faculty, had been recruiting membership early that fall and had called my office, explained the purpose and charge of the committee to me, and had asked if I wanted to join. At the time, much of my work involved leading the developmental English side of the Academic Support Center, which housed the Writing and Reading Center and which provided instructional space for developmental writing and reading classes. The committee had been in need of a faculty representative from the ASC, and I had eagerly agreed to join as the rep from that area.

Over the years, my work on the committee has been the finger on the pulse of the curriculum at the college. My committee seat at the large round conference table has been a good one from which to witness and to follow the growth and change of the curriculum. Faculty across the college have brought many new and innovative ideas to the committee for deliberation, along with some ideas that are not so new and innovative. Sometimes, deliberations about curricular change are lively and interesting, and sometimes the drudgery of being mired in the minutiae of policy language is just something to be tolerated. However, all of the work I have done on the committee, from reading agendas, proposals, and minutes to deliberating ideas with others around the table, has a common thread: the faculty who dream them and write them, and the administrators who support the faculty, are responding to the changing needs of a dynamic institution, a dynamism which could stem from anything including changes in student demographics, changes in transferability of courses, program changes, or mandates from external accrediting bodies. And changes that come from just good ideas for teaching.

I’ll admit that nearly thirteen years on the committee, along with my changing role within the English Department and my involvement in so many other initiatives and challenges at the college, have sapped some of my initial excitement about committee work. I do not, however, mean this to sound like curmudgeonly bitterness; no, that is not the case. It is just that, like other aspects of our lives, there is a certain kind of structure and routine and performance that become predictable, and you go into it with preconceptions on how things will probably unfold. The committee will be called to order, announcements will be entertained, and the minutes will be silently reviewed until a motion to approve is made, then seconded, then voted upon, then old business, new business, and so on.

So, when I received the agenda for the mid-April committee meeting in my inbox, I quickly glanced over it. This was one of the last meetings of the semester, so we had already heard and deliberated over some of the more innovative curricular proposals in the previous months. Much of what was on this agenda was typical for an end of the semester meeting. We needed to clarify some course equivalencies. Some informational updates needed to be given regarding three program reviews that had been presented at the March faculty professional development day. The last item, though, caught my eye. As part of her work on a college task force involving the issue of human trafficking, one of the committee members from the nursing faculty had asked a current MMCC student to present at the upcoming meeting as an effort to begin raising awareness of the severity of this issue college-wide. Perhaps by infusing it into the curriculum, the goal of raising awareness could be met.

I noticed Philip Reed right away the day of the meeting when I walked into the conference room. As we regulars milled around the room and found a seat at the table, Philip sat upright in his chair, his elbows on the table, his hands in front of him, fingers interlaced. Papers

were arranged neatly in front of his hands. He watched people as they arrived and listened to the pre-meeting conversation, people who had not seen each other regularly except at meetings like this catching up and others commenting on how busy they were at this late point in the semester. He was dressed in a sport coat and was wearing a tie. He was young.

The chair called the meeting to order and the committee proceeded through the agenda quickly because all items were for information and not for deliberation and voting. Within fifteen minutes, and after a short introduction by the nursing faculty member who had invited him to speak to us, Philip had the floor. He spoke clearly and told us a bit more about himself. He grew up in Saginaw, Michigan, but now lives in in a small rural town. He is planning to go into international relations, is graduating from MMCC in a couple of weeks, and is transferring to Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo in the fall, where he plans to finish a bachelor's degree, then graduate school. He had taken Eng. 222, Advanced Composition, this past semester, and the main assignment in that class was a lengthy research paper that focused on a problem within the student's area of study. He had written his paper about the problem of human trafficking and shared his work with the committee.

He spoke passionately about his subject. I could tell that he cared deeply about being a voice for those who have been subjugated and exploited by others for profit. I knew very little about human trafficking, and I remember being shocked by some of the statistics he shared with us: the shockingly high number of people worldwide being held against their will as slaves; the number of people from other countries being trafficked into the US each year; the number of people worldwide who are bought and sold; and the projected growth of human trafficking on a global scale and in the United States if little continues to be done to confront the problem and

stop it. When he had finished his presentation, we applauded and Philip took some questions from the committee before we adjourned for the semester.

Just a day or two later, I was walking back to my office after class, and a colleague stopped me in the hall. She knew that I had been talking with student veterans on campus about their experiences in the military, while on deployment to Afghanistan and/or Iraq, their return to civilian life, and their return to college. She excitedly told me that one of her students was an Afghanistan veteran and was eager to share his experiences with me after she had told him about my work. He was a student in her advanced composition class, and had just finished his semester paper on the problem of human trafficking. His name? Philip Reed. The young man about to graduate from MMCC planning to going into international relations at WMU in the fall who had spoken so passionately about the problem at our last curriculum meeting. The coincidence was just too rich. I found it curious, though, that when he introduced himself the other day, he had not said he had served in Afghanistan. My colleague immediately went and emailed Philip, asking him to get in touch with me about a day and time to meet and talk. By the end of the day, Philip and I had planned our first meeting.

*Philip, World Traveler*

Philip looked different when he walked through my office door that day and sat down in the chair across from me. The coat, tie, and slacks had been replaced by sweat pants, a t-shirt, and a baseball cap. He had just come up from the rec center downstairs after having a quick workout on the weight machine. I told him that I had enjoyed his presentation the previous week and that I had learned a lot about the problem. I had realized neither the scale of the problem nor even its multi-faceted nature before he talked to the committee about it. What was not different about him, though, was the way he spoke: clearly, passionately, intensely at times, reserved at

others. He chose his words thoughtfully. The more we talked, the more I recognized that the air between us was his canvas, his words the paint that he applied to it to create his complex composition of his storied life.

Philip's interest in the problem of human trafficking, about which he has written not only in his advanced composition class, but also his ethics class this past semester at MMCC, and his interest in international relations have both been the result of his extensive travel around the world. At first, he thought he wanted to study hospitality management because he enjoyed traveling so much. Indeed, a career in facilitating other people's travel plans and accommodations appealed to him. His career goals changed, though, when he began to witness and think about the darker reality of peoples' lives in countries around the world. So, his challenge in life went from wanting to help people to have fun while traveling to wanting to help people in the poorer parts of the world whose plight is being overlooked, who cannot help themselves, and who are being exploited.

Philip traveled by himself much of the time through parts of the Middle East, Asia, and Eastern Europe soon after he had left the military. He views himself as more of a traveler than a tourist, an adventurer more than a vacationer. As we talked, I could tell that he struggles with the concept of "tourism" and relating to people who have admitted to "seeing the world." While he admires that others have traveled, what bothers him is that they have seen only the tourist destinations, the "nice places," as he calls them. To him, a four-week vacation in Spain, hanging out in Pamplona for the running of the bulls and spending a weekend in Morocco just does not expose someone to what he calls "the real stuff" of Spain's economic problems, high jobless rate, and suffering people. When people who have traveled to Western Europe, to Paris and London, and tell him that they have seen the world, he simply replies, "No, you really haven't."

Philip's mission on his travels was to get into the bowels of the places he traveled to, and the less touristy, the better. When he was in Laos, instead of riding a tour bus, he loaded himself and his gear onto a smoky, rickety old loud bus full of chickens and ducks. For eight hours, the bus lumbered slowly along the countryside, up hillsides and through dark mountain tunnels. Farmers and village folk would get on and off at the various stops along the way. The driver had been drinking the entire trip.

The people in neighboring Vietnam were the nicest people Philip had ever met. When he was there, they would invite him into their homes and do whatever they could for him to make him feel welcomed and comfortable, going out of their way to be as hospitable as they could toward their guest. Philip remembered that he had initially thought that it was crazy to stay with families and people he did not know; he did not know what would happen. But Vietnam ended up being one of his all-time favorite countries to visit.

Just a few months ago, during discussion in his ethics class, Philip had mentioned that he loved Vietnam and the people there. His classmates were in shock.

"You went there?" a student asked him. "And they didn't kill you?"

"Oh, you're crazy!" another student exclaimed. "You didn't do that!"

His experience of getting to know the people there gave Philip what he had needed to defend the people that he felt were being slandered by others who did not have firsthand experience like he did. Virtually all of the other students in his ethics class have never been out of central Michigan, unlike Philip, who has travelled to over forty countries. The discussion in class that day turned toward ethics and poverty, and Philip had been shocked by what one student in particular had been saying about other countries, the generalizations, the inaccuracies, and the absolute blanket statements they were making about the people who lived there.

Philip had to speak out. “Who are you talking about? Have you been there?”

“No,” the student replied.

“Well,” Philip said. “How do you know it works like that, then?”

The class was silent, waiting for what would come next.

“I have been there. So why don’t you explain to me how it works there and where you are getting your information.”

After class, Philip’s ethics professor took him aside and told him that his cosmopolitanism breathed freshness into the class discussions and that he had appreciated it.

When he was in Thailand, he left his travel companion, who had only been interested in partying, at the place they were staying. Philip had certainly done his fair share of drinking on this trip, but there was something more, something hidden that the famous historical sites could not reveal to him. So, off he went on his own. What he saw of how people lived when he got further away from the tourist spots gave him a greater appreciation for the opportunities he had. He learned not to take his life for granted.

Learning not to take life for granted became especially apparent to him when he walked the streets in some of the rural villages in India. Philip admitted that these parts of India were the worst places he had ever been on the earth. There were dead bodies lying bloated in the streets. Trash was piled in stinking, fly blown heaps in the streets. Children picked through the rubbish piles. Philip wished he was back in Afghanistan. There were dead in Afghanistan, too, but, as difficult as that had been for him to rationalize, he could see the reason why people were dying there.

*An Adrenaline Junky Pushing the Envelope*

When Philip volunteered for the United States Army in 2010, the country had been at war in Afghanistan for nine long years. He had not volunteered due to financial hardship; his father had been working at the Post Office for decades, and his mother worked as a nurse. Although he had had a stable home life growing up in a township on the edge of Saginaw, Michigan, his parents divorced when he was in eighth grade. When his mother and father had fought, which was not often, Philip would think to himself that they were going to get divorced. One day, it happened. When his mother left his father, it was like his biggest nightmare had come true. He just bottled up and decided to stay with his father because he had been so unhappy about his mother leaving.

Nor had Philip joined because he had no prospects for college. His grades were not the best, but they were not the worst, and others with whom he had graduated would end up going to one of the local colleges, Saginaw Valley or Delta, right after high school. But not Philip. He had stopped caring about school when he had been very young, in second grade. “Not caring” did not mean “dropping out.” It meant simply going through the motions every school day, of going there, being there, enduring there, and, after so many years of this, eventually being done there.

His main focus since second grade was hockey. The game consumed him while he was growing up, and he put all of his effort into it. He was not on the ice to score goals. He was on the ice to smash other people. He was not the largest player, so he had to skate fast and hit others hard. He loved playing rough. One time, he played a little too roughly and picked a fight with the wrong opponent. Philip swore his face had been made of cement; every time he hit him, his opponent hit him back harder.

Nor had Philip volunteered for service in a war time Army as a way to put him on the straight and narrow. Although Philip had not joined the military for this reason, there was one particular time in his past life that might seem to legitimize it. He ran with a small group of friends who loved adrenaline and who pushed the envelope. They would skateboard, often trespassing on private property to do so; they would climb on buildings in Saginaw's downtown, they would jump out of moving cars, and they would paintball houses. They were always scoping out places that would sell them alcohol. A friend, whose father owned a successful construction company, drove an H2 Hummer, and the group would take the vehicle for joyrides, running over things for fun and ramming the vehicle into whatever obstacles that just so happened to be in their way, whether placed there intentionally or not. The main rush for the group of adrenaline junkies, though, was vandalism.

The thrill of the rush possessed them one night after a friend had been in a fight with a neighborhood kid. With retaliation as their motivation, the band of four vandals grabbed their hockey sticks and ran from Philip's house down the street to where the kid lived. In the driveway sat a brand new Trailblazer the kid's mother had just bought. The streetlights gleamed off the polished exterior, making the vehicle shimmer in the darkness like some big black gem. The vandals encircled the Trailblazer like a pack of wolves around their prey, each positioning himself at a window. The hockey sticks sliced through the night air virtually in unison, the windows of the vehicle bursting under their impact. The pack ran back to Philip's house to laugh about what they had just done and to experience the rush.

The police came to the school the next day and intervened. It had not taken much investigating to discover who had been responsible for the vandalism. Ironically, the kid's parents whose vehicle Philip's group had vandalized did not press charges. They admitted that

their son was a troublemaker who had started so many problems with so many different people that they were happy with the four paying $12.50 each to cover the insurance deductible. The kid's father made them promise they would not do something so stupid again. They had agreed, and the case was closed.

*Walking in His Grandfather's Footsteps*

Philip had volunteered for military duty as a combat engineer during a time of war for none of these reasons. For a long time when he was growing up in Saginaw, he had known he was going to join the Army. He had even been involved in a Delayed Entry Program through his Army recruiter the year before he left for basic training. The DEP allowed Philip to ease more gently into his military service; the program gave him the chance to begin physically training his body prior to the start of basic training and it also allowed him to earn his first promotion prior to beginning basic. He went in as Private First Class. His desire for a change in his life, to get out of Saginaw and to see the world, specifically, Germany, the country of his family's origin, was a powerful motivation for him to volunteer. As was his sense of pride in becoming a future American soldier. However, an even more powerful influence had been his grandfather's experience.

Philip's grandfather had volunteered to serve during the Second World War and had later served in both Korea and Vietnam. The military had allowed his grandfather to travel the world, something he would not have been able to do unless he had served. His grandfather had met his grandmother in Germany, married her, and brought her back to the United States after the war. And Philip had wanted the same thing for himself. He knew going in what he was getting himself into, and he would have hated himself if he had not volunteered, given his grandfather's background.

After the plane from Lansing had landed at St. Louis airport, Philip and the other trainees boarded a large charter bus and headed for Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, to begin basic training. After exchanging his civilian clothes for Army fatigues and gear, Philip and the other trainees were told to board a rickety old school bus. The hot late spring Missouri air wrapped itself around everyone and held tightly to them, in spite of the open bus windows. Drill Sergeant Diller boarded the bus after all the trainees had found a seat. Diller looked terrifying. His head was shaved clean and he was tall, six feet two, and lean. He could not have weighed more than one hundred and fifty pounds.

As Diller walked down the aisle, he spoke to the trainees, who lifted their duffel bags onto their laps as he passed. "I just wanna thank you guys," he said in a soft, sincere voice. "For doing something only a certain amount of people do."

The bus was silent.

Diller continued. "I wanna thank you for standing up and accepting the call."

The bus then became abuzz with talk, as soldiers looked at each other, some saying "You're welcome" back to Diller. Philip said to the person next to him, "This guy's really nice."

Diller then started to scream. "Shut those fucking windows! Get that shit off the floor!" Diller commanded, pointing to the duffel bags the soldiers had put back into the aisle. "Hold it above your head, now!" Diller yelled.

As the bus lumbered down the road, Drill Sergeant Diller began to climb over everyone, kicking their duffel bags out of their hands and into the aisle or onto someone in front of, behind, or next to them. Diller looked like a screaming, insane spider monkey as he continued to wreak havoc with the trainees on the bus.

It felt like the ride took forever, but the bus finally pulled into the barracks. Trainees spilled off the bus, wet from sweat, some vomiting from heat exhaustion, others falling over. The shark attack then began in earnest. The trainees were ordered to line up and hold their duffel bags over their heads as Diller continued to scream and made them chant along with him over and over again. Philip was so scared. He did not want to be the first person to drop his bag or do something wrong. Then, Drill Sergeant Diller went along the line, handing a pencil to each trainee. He ordered them to hold the pencil vertically in their right hand at arm's length in front of their face. The trainees stood in line in the late afternoon Missouri sun holding their pencil. Philip had thought a pencil was light, but as the hours dragged by, that small yellow stick of wood, lead, metal, and rubber began to feel like it weighed a hundred pounds. The trainee next to Philip, whom everyone would call Radar later in basic, began to cry after a while; Philip was surprised by how much pain he could endure. He knew then that he was going to be fine.

With the terror and pain of the first day behind him, Philip began to get used to the basic training regimen. He knew coming in that trainees were never supposed to look a drill instructor in the eye, but, on the second day, he slipped up during morning formation and did just that. Drill Sergeant Burton was a large, frightening man. A gigantic wad of chewing tobacco was stuffed in his mouth.

"Where I'm from," he warned Philip, "if you stare at somebody like that, you fight." He paused. "You wanna fight?"

"No, Drill Sergeant!" Philip barked back immediately. The drill sergeant moved on down the line.

Philip felt relieved. From that moment on, he resolved to do two things over the next sixteen weeks of basic training. First, he would stay of the drill instructors' radar; in addition to

not looking them in the eye, it was always in the trainee's best interest if the DI's did not know his name, unless he did something commendable. Second, he would learn what not to do from other people's mistakes.

As the days went on, he also learned what many other trainees did not seem to learn right away; that is, not to take what the drill instructors did and said too personally. Philip began to recognize that they were playing a role, acting hard and abusive, in order to teach the trainees to become soldiers. They actually cared about what they were doing to make the trainees into soldiers. He was very observant of his surroundings during basic, and this insight came to him one day when he saw Diller and another drill sergeant, Morningstar, who, like Diller, had a wiry frame and loud mouth, joking around and laughing. He began to realize that if he could not deal with somebody screaming at him, then how would he ever be able to exchange fire with an enemy in a combat situation? Although Morningstar acted like a real jerk, Philip was convinced that he really cared about the soldiers. He heard the care in his words every time he was teaching the group something and they were not getting it, or they were not seeing the importance of what it was they were learning. Morningstar would say, "You think this is all fun and games now, but when you go out there, you'll be smoked if you're not prepared, if you don't take this seriously."

He began to realize, too, after the first few weeks of basic training that if he stayed focused on his goals and was smart about what he did and, then it would not be that bad. He would keep his goals focused during personal time, also. He would spend some of his time writing letters to people back in Saginaw and staring out of the window, thinking. Living in the barracks during basic training was like being in a prison without bars, and he had to endure the same routine every day, but he would remind himself that there was so much out there for him to see and places to go that the Army was making possible for him. Philip was so close.

Being smart in basic training for Philip also meant learning from others' mistakes. He learned a lot about what not to do during his time at Fort Leonard Wood from other people's mistakes. Just like in the kind of prison with bars, there were certain items that were considered contraband and were not allowed within the walls of this prison without bars. Chewing tobacco was one such contraband item, but it always found its way into the trainees' barracks. It did not bother Philip that virtually all of the drill instructors had their mouths full of the stuff; it was not a contraband item for them, and they had already paid their dues so they had earned it. Philip and the others of course would indulge whenever someone had managed to sneak some in a pouch or two of the contraband. However, Philip soon learned not to be the one who was caught holding on to it.

Radar, the trainee who had been crying while standing in formation holding a pencil out in front of his face next to Philp that first day of basic, and who would eventually be dismissed from the Army, always had a lot of chewing tobacco. He kept it hidden in a drawer in his wall locker. Instead of keeping the key to his wall locker with him when he left the barracks, he would tuck it underneath the sheet of his bed. Although this was a good way to avoid losing the key, the problem was that Radar could not make his bed very well. When the unit was outside doing exercises one morning, their PT activity was interrupted by Drill Sergeant Diller, who appeared at one of the windows of the building screaming something crazy at the group.

Diller had gone into the barracks for an inspection and had noticed how poorly Radar's bed had been made, so he flipped it. The key flew out and tinkled on the floor; Diller opened the wall locker and rummaged through it, quickly finding the contraband. Diller then rampaged through the barracks like a hurricane, flipping beds and throwing blankets, shoes, boots, and other gear everywhere, screaming the entire time.

Diller came out of the barracks and ordered the group to fill buckets of water and dump it on the grass until the ground became muddy. Then, he ordered the group to put on all their gear; next, he ordered them to crawl through the muddy grass over and over again. This went on for hours. The final phase of the punishment involved each person cleaning their soiled gear with a toothbrush until every piece met Diller's standards for cleanliness.

There was no such thing as individual punishment, and everyone had suffered so much for Radar's infraction. If one person offended, punishment was meted out to the entire group. And everyone resented Radar intensely after the incident and were mad at him for quite some time. Philip learned that not only do you not want to be the person caught holding the bag; you do not want to be singled out as the one who had caused all of this mayhem for the group.

*The Path Takes an Unexpected Turn*

Upon the completion of his sixteen weeks of basic combat training, Philip had put in a request to be stationed in Germany. As he stood in formation awaiting orders for his first duty station, his battle buddy and best friend from basic, Vince Reese, by his side, Philip felt so anxious. He desperately wanted to go to Germany, to walk in his grandfather's footsteps, to see and be in his ancestral homeland; Philip shook with anger as the orders were doled out down the line and he could hear others complaining about having to ship out to Germany.

"Oh, I wanna go back to Texas to be near my family," one soldier had complained upon learning he was going to Germany.

Philip could not believe what he was hearing. There is so much out there, he thought to himself as he stood next to Vince, his as yet unknown orders coming down the line. He could not believe why someone would want to be stationed back in the US.

Philip could not believe what he was hearing, either, when he had his orders in hand and had read them back to himself. Germany. Heidelberg, Germany, with the Eighteenth Engineer Brigade. He was elated. He turned to his friend, Vince, they hugged, then shook hands. Vince was destined for Afghanistan with the 541st Sapper Company.

After graduating from basic training and spending a two week leave at home, Philip was on a flight bound for Frankfurt, Germany. A group of personnel was at the airport to meet him when his plane landed. He greeted them, smiling. The first sign that something was amiss, though, was when he was given amended orders. Instead of going to Heidelberg, he was being diverted to Bamberg to join the 370th Sapper Company. From the airport in Frankfurt, it was a two-and-a-half-hour bus ride to the base.

As soon as Philip had arrived at the base, he moved his belongings into his room. Other soldiers kept telling him that he had better not get too comfortable. He asked them why, and they told him that in seventy days, the company was being deployed to Afghanistan. Philip's head spun. He felt like he could not breathe for a moment, nor could he speak. He just stood there, a complex of emotions bound up like a fist and hitting him in the body like his opponents used to do on the ice back in Saginaw. There was no way for him at that moment to sort out the emotions and to make sense of them, but he felt something like betrayal, that the Army was going back on its promise to him; that feeling of betrayal made him angry. He felt shocked, then scared and unsure of himself. He had only been in the Army a few months. While he had expected to see combat, he had not expected to see it so soon. He felt sad and disappointed that he would not be in Germany for much more than a couple of months. All the plans he had of retracing his grandfather's footsteps through the countryside and meeting relatives who still lived in Germany, plans he had spent the past few years outlining in his notebook, would simply not come to pass.

The team leader, Sergeant Menendez, summoned Philip to a tiny meeting room in the remodeled World War II barracks on the Bamberg base shortly after he had arrived and had unloaded his gear into his room. When the Army needed to meet company quotas for deployment, leaders would divert soldiers to different companies until the right number of soldiers filled the ranks. Sergeant Menendez explained this practice to Philip and then made the rumor of the impending deployment official.

Philip looked at him and asked, “What if I don’t have enough training?”

Sergeant Menendez responded in a very straightforward way. “Well, you might get smoked in the first mission, but that’s the way things go.”

Menendez’s words echoed in Philip’s mind for a moment. “That’s the way things go.” Menendez’s words were like a gust of wind that blew into the room and lifted the veil that had colored the concept of military service that Philip had defined for himself and had been seeing up until this moment. Menendez’s words reframed for Philip a reality of service to the military. Philip had been seeing military service as his to use. It was his route to adventure; it was his to use to get him closer to his grandfather’s experience, his ticket to travel to the land of his relatives. This had been his plan all along. When Menendez’s words blew the veil away from his eyes, he recognized now that it was the other way around. The military would be using him for its needs, as it had just done by reassigning him to a company about to be deployed to Afghanistan, and that was the way things were going to go for the time being.

The short weeks before his deployment to Afghanistan were filled with long, incredibly busy days on the base in Bamberg. Philip worked hard to distinguish himself from the other soldiers by going above and beyond what every task he had been assigned required of him. He would even wake up forty-five minutes early to make sure the floor in his room had a high shine

and that everything was in its place for morning inspection. The team leader began to notice how good of a soldier Philip was; a position in the company's operations office on the base had recently opened up, and the team leader recruited Philip for the positon. Philip was moved into the headquarters platoon, which handled all the logistics, communication, and paperwork, such as writing awards.

Philip found himself afloat in a massive volume of information that needed processing in the short time prior to deployment. Philip's day in the operations office would begin at five am and stretch until midnight, with no time for PT with the others and very few breaks. A record of each soldier in the platoon needed to be created in the database. Information that needed to be entered included next of kin, emergency contacts, hair color, eye color, blood type, religious preferences, and so on. After a while, Philip began to feel like he was going out of his mind from the repetition of the data entry, from sitting in this small room behind a metal desk all day, every day, from the lack of physical exercise, sleep, and very little food. The mission consumed him.

Philip needed to enter his information into the database, and, as he sat there entering his father's name as his primary beneficiary to a five hundred-thousand-dollar life insurance policy with a hundred-thousand-dollar funeral allotment, his wishes for organ donation, along with all of the other required information, a weird feeling fell over him. He felt like he was outside of himself, as though he were entering this information for some other soldier about to be deployed to a war being fought in Afghanistan, some solider named Philip Reed. This feeling of weirdness evaporated as the weight of the moment sunk in. Here he was, twenty-one years old, confronting his mortality, contemplating it, even planning for it, for the first time in his life. It was then that he felt acutely estranged from himself. However, he had been assigned a mission, and it was the mission he had intended to complete.

October quickly ended, as did the pre-deployment train-up and qualifications the company had to complete prior to arriving in Afghanistan at the start of November. Philip kept his operations job while in Afghanistan, but the volume of work and the pace of the work had slowed considerably. Philip worked directly with the company's first sergeant. He was always at the first sergeant's side and rode in his truck. This man was one of the most intimidating human beings he had ever met in his life. He stood five foot nine, weighed two hundred and twenty-five pounds, looked grizzled, and had been hardened by battle. Over the course of his eighteen years of service, the first sergeant had been deployed to Kosovo once, Iraq four times, and to Afghanistan twice. But from the first day he had met Philip in Bamberg, the first sergeant liked him, most likely because Philip had gone out of his way to be the best soldier he could be while on the base awaiting deployment and consumed by work in the operations office. His efforts and hard work had not gone unnoticed. To be connected to the highest person in the company, next to the commander, was a big responsibility, and Philip took seriously the trust that the first sergeant had placed in him to complete not only administrative tasks, but also to help protect him in case their lives were threatened while out on a mission.

As proof of this bond of trust that had formed between them, one day, as the soldiers loaded and prepped the trucks for a mission, the first sergeant called Philip over and handed him a grenade launcher to attach underneath his rifle.

Philip took the launcher and held it in his hand, looking it over. "Uh, I've never fired this or used it before," he admitted.

"Well," the first sergeant replied. "You better learn quick because you might need to."

His first sergeant trusted Philip's quickness to learn to manipulate the weapon and use it if the situation had called for it. Although Philip never had to use the grenade launcher, he did

find himself in some frightening situations when he rode along on missions with his first sergeant.

*One Day, On Patrol*

*...war is just us/making little pieces of metal/pass through each other*.[57]

Philip felt fortunate to have only gone out on twenty missions during his year in Afghanistan. He felt fortunate because, every time he went out, he felt like a magnet for the bullets and the IEDs. Although he was riding along in the back of a fighting vehicle in a convoy of other fighting vehicles and felt a measure of safety there in the back seat, the bullets would still fly, and they would fly by uncomfortably close. The IED detonations were worse because no one ever knew when one would go off and the blasts were able to penetrate the armored vehicles much more effectively than the bullets could. Whenever an IED went off, time just slowed down for Philip.

As the convoy followed the road down into a valley that day on patrol, the vehicle just ahead of the one Philip was riding in suddenly disappeared into a cloud of brown dust, immediately followed by the slam of the explosion and the hollow thump in the chest.

Immediately, over the radio, someone demanded "Who's in that truck?"

A soldier Philip had gotten to know had been in the vehicle up ahead, and at that moment, he wanted to run out and go after whoever had done this. In real time, everything played out so quickly, but in Philip's mind, it was like a slow motion movie sequence. As the convoy slowed to a stop, soldiers started to exit their vehicles to go to the aid of the people in the vehicle that had been hit. They began to yell cautious warnings, because there were people in the mountains above them and they had no idea who they were or if they were going to begin

[57] Kevin Powers, *Letter Composed During a Lull in the Fighting,* 5.

shooting at them. Philip left his vehicle and found the soldier, who had been hit badly by shrapnel from the explosion.

Sitting there at the bottom of the valley with the wounded soldier, Philip just waited for what was going to happen next. He felt so tired, but alert at the same time. He could feel his heart racing because his adrenaline was so many times higher than normal, and his face was stuffed full of chewing tobacco. He looked down at the soldier, then around him at the mountains, still unsure of what the people up there were going to do. He had no idea what was going to happen. He did not know if they were going to start firing RPGs at them or if they had machine guns and were intending to use them. He did not know if the convoy had stopped in the middle of a minefield. The only thing he knew was that the wounded soldier was alive, as was he. But the uncertainty of how long loomed around him like the dust from the IED explosion that tore the air just minutes before.

"Get the fucking medic up here now!" a soldier who arrived on the scene yelled. There were more wounded in the blast than just the soldier Philip knew.

Philip could hear the wounded gunner behind him, still in the broken vehicle's gun turret, yelling "I can't breathe! I can't breathe!"

The helicopter arrived within moments to medivac the wounded, the roar of the engine and blades fading as it lifted off and chopped through the sky and out of the valley. The shepherds up in the mountains went about tending to their animals, and no bullets were rained down from above onto the convoy. Nor were there more IEDs in the road that wound through the valley as the convoy headed back to base that day. As he rode back to the base, Philip had a brief moment to reflect on what had happened that day. The first thing he realized was that that could have been the end of the world for him or for someone else. Although he did not know exactly

how at that moment, he knew that the experience he had had at the bottom of the valley and the complex of feelings – the stress, the frightening uncertainty, the fear – along with the chaos and the noise, would forever change the way he would view the rest of his life.

*The News that Hit Harder than any Mortar*

Philip continued working his job in the company's operations office on the base at Bagram. The volume of work was certainly less than it had been in Bamberg the month prior to his deployment, but there was still enough paperwork and data entry to keep him busy. The indirect fire and mortars that would rain down on the FOB regularly, especially at night, kept everyone busy and on alert. When the lights at the base would go off at night, the mortar fire would begin. The base's airfield became a primary target. The first few times the mortar attacks happened scared Philip. Other times terrified him. The other times were terrifying because they were so close. He could hear the "SWOOSH" of the mortars coming in. Then, the alarm would scream, and others would yell, "Incoming! Incoming! Incoming!"

Then the concussive thump and crashing "BOOM" of the mortar detonating would hit both his body and his mind. He would feel the uncertainty like he did at the bottom of the valley on patrol that day, the hurt soldier on the ground near him, the wounded gunner crying out, the people above him in the mountains, not sure of what was going to happen next. After this brief moment of uncertainty, which seemed much longer than it was, down the hall to the stairs he would run, and down into the bunkers he would gather with the others for shelter. And then, he would hope that these concrete bunkers were strong enough to withstand the attack.

About six months into his deployment, a small group of National Guard arrived at the base and were staying there while they carried out their mission, which Philip believed had something to do with financial operations. As Philip lay in his bunk relaxing one night, he could

heard the sound of mortars thumping in the distance, probably a mile or so away. The National Guard soldiers were beside themselves with fear because this was the first time they had experienced a mortar attack, although one quite some distance away from the base. One of them ran up to Philip in his bunk and told him to evacuate to the bunker with them. Philip did not move. The mortar attacks had become so commonplace that he had become desensitized to those that were not immediately threatening the base. If the base was not being targeted, he did not really care.

March twenty-second, 2011, began as a normal day in the operations office in Bagram. Philip had been working at his desk when one of the platoon sergeants whom he looked up to came in that morning with the most dreadful kind of news.

“Hey,” he said as he entered the room. “This just came in. 541st has two KIA. That’s all we know right now.”

Philip needed to know more. What he did know was that his battle buddy and friend from basic training, Vince Reese, had been with the 541st and he knew that the FOB where the 541st stayed was in a rough part of the country. He had heard that there were a lot of engagements and a high rate of casualties in that particular area. Part of Philip’s job on the base was to procure provisions and uniforms for his company as a liaison with the supply and logistics people, whom he disdained because of how they approached every task with singular bureaucratic efficiency. His position gave him access to the people who always knew more than others about what was happening, where, and to whom.

When he approached the supply and logistics people to learn what they knew about the incident with the 541st, one corporal spoke up.

"Oh, yeah, 541st. Their first truck got hit by a RPG," he said, looking over a computer monitor as he sat as his desk in the office. "And it blew two soldiers' faces apart."

Philip caught his breath. A name, he thought to himself. He refused to believe that his battle buddy had been one of the two until he heard a name.

The corporal continued. "They identified them with the ID cards in their pockets."

Not only did Philip's office job work give him access to the people in the know; it gave him access to the supply and logistics people's database, what the office staff called the secret system, that contained specifics, such as who was on what mission, where, and when. It did not take him long, only a few quick taps on the keyboard, to find the mission the 541st had carried out that day, March twenty-second. Philip was able to find out who had been in which truck in the convoy. As he scrolled through the information, he had a feeling that what he had dreaded the most was going to come to pass. He thought to himself, "That was my buddy. I know it was."

Sure enough, the system confirmed for Philip his deepest fear. There the name was in the list of casualties. Vincent Jay Reese. KIA. Philip stood there in shock for a few moments, reading the brief list of details over and over to himself. It seemed like for every time he re-read the details, the less he could believe that it really had been Vince in the first truck. But it was undeniably so. Vince's body was scheduled to be flown to the airbase in Bagram the next day before being sent back to the United States. Philip went back to his office to resume his work.

The next day, one of the supply and logistics people came to his office door.

"Oh, hey," he said. "We need you to go and do the funeral thing." Vince's body had arrived on base, and a detail was needed to go and transfer the casket to the next flight bound for the west.

"No," Philip replied, holding himself in check, trying to sound calm.

"You know, that's insubordination."

"No," Philip said again, this time more forcefully. He stood. "This is my friend. And you people don't care about him."

"But this is an honor."

"I am not doing it," Philip replied bluntly. "I don't care. You can take my rank, you can do whatever. This is too personal to me, and you do not care that the person I knew is dead. You just care about filling a duty detail." Philip wondered to himself how he could maintain so much self-control in the midst of the grief he had been feeling over Vince's death. He knew that the old Philip, the one growing up in Saginaw, would have picked a fight with the corporal right then.

He had been thinking about Vince ever since he had read his name in the system yesterday. Vince from Florida, a gentle giant of a man, who rarely spoke and, when he did, his voice was so quiet. He had joined the military at twenty-six years old because he had just lost his job and had no other options. The Army would provide an income on which he could support his new wife and infant son. As he thought about Vince, he remembered the time in basic training, when on a field exercise, he and Vince had to walk five miles to the training site. This was late spring in Missouri, so it was miserably hot and the two men were sweating and uncomfortable. After they had arrived at the site, they pitched a pup tent, a short, narrow shelter in which both men would somehow have to fit into to sleep that night. Then, the downpour began. He and Vince scrambled around outside of the tent with their tiny entrenching tools, Philip smashing away at the ground in an attempt to dig a trench around the tent and Vince trying to build a dam in a combined attempt to divert the water. Meanwhile, the water poured into the tent, soaking their gear. The two men laid there in the tent for the next two days, soaking wet from the rain and sweat and covered in bugs.

“Man, this is terrible,” Philip said to Vince as the training exercise dragged on.

“Yeah.” Vince was so soft spoken. “But as long as it takes care of my kid and my wife, I don’t really care.”

All Philip could think at that moment as he was lying in the tent was “wow.” He knew then that he was in the midst of a genuinely good person, not some self-proclaimed good person, but the real thing whose actions showed that he would literally give you the shirt off your back if you had asked him, no questions asked.

Vince’s death was the most traumatic experience Philip had while he was on deployment in Afghanistan. The mortar attacks and the incident in the valley while out on patrol paled in comparison to the loss of his friend. And now, here was some supply and logistics stooge who was just blowing smoke. He did not care about Vince’s death, nor did he care about who Vince had been; the supply sergeant, whom Philip was convinced was just a scatterbrain lost in the sauce, had ordered the stooge corporal to assemble a duty detail, and he was just looking for soldiers so that he could complete the task. And that’s all the corporal cared about. Completing the task and moving on, regardless of what people or resources were exploited in the process. Philip felt so offended, and this feeling made the trauma of Vince’s loss sting that much more.

The corporal eventually found enough soldiers for the detail, and no disciplinary action was taken against Philip. However, Vince’s death caused Philip to sink into the depths of depression. He had a deep, deep feeling of guilt over the loss because he felt that he had not done enough while on deployment, that he had not been hurt. Nor had he killed anyone. The sacrifice of his leaving Saginaw for the military, and not being stationed in Germany right away, paled in comparison to Vince’s sacrifice; he could hardly call what he had done a sacrifice, nor did he

think of himself as heroic for his service. Philip felt this way for a long time, and he eventually ended up talking with someone about his depression, which did help him to cope.

He spent the remaining few months of his deployment in Afghanistan at his desk, going out on an occasional patrol with his first sergeant, and thinking about the growing disillusionment he was feeling toward the Army. This was not his grandfather's Army, the time-honored one of tradition focused on camaraderie, duty, honor, and battle. This was one focused on petty self-interest, self-advancement, money wasting, and time wasting, all of which were slowly eating away at what Philip had believed had been the greatest fighting force in the world.

*Moving Out: The Transition Program and Travel*

The remaining two years of his Army contract were spent on the base in Bamberg. A couple of months before his term of service was set to expire, Philip began attending a required Army transitions program that was designed to assist soldiers in their return to civilian life. All soldiers needed to complete the program in order to receive their orders to terminate their service and to return home. He sat through meetings that were held in classrooms and led by a federal employee whose job it was to teach soon-to-be ex-service members how to find a job once they arrived home and began their civilian lives anew. Some class sessions focused on how to write an effective resume; another, on "cold calling." As each Power Point slide flicked onto the screen, the instructor would read from it, explaining how to go about calling a business and asking them if they are hiring and what they look for in an employee.

In addition to resume writing and cold calling, the sessions focused on how to access veteran benefits through the VA and unemployment benefits. The benefits instructor informed the group of how much unemployment money was available to them. He encouraged them to

sign up for unemployment as soon as they returned home because they would be eligible for up to forty-four weeks of payments.

Although the prospect of unemployment money made many in the room happy, to Philip, the benefits, as well as the entire transitions program, with its focus on finding employment, were nothing short of a load of bullshit. He struggled with the entire concept of the program. He saw it as a blanket program that was supposed to cure every one of their deficiencies so that, once they get back to the States, there they would be, back to the days before they joined the military, normal civilians happy and cheery. The problem he had with the program was that it was setting people up for failure by the limitations he saw it placing on them, as well as on himself. The blanket program made too many assumptions about his and the others' needs, and, consequently, did nothing to address each person's individual needs. Philip was getting out of the military at twenty-four years of age; he felt capable and he was able to think for himself, both of which the program assumed he was not able to do. The military had not been his last resort. He had had jobs before joining the military, so he felt that the resume writing and benefits coaching had been patronizing.

The biggest problem he had with the transitions program was that it completely overlooked the fact that he was planning to go to college at some point after he returned home. There was nothing in the program about accessing educational benefits through the Post 9/11 GI Bill. The program simply assumed that soldiers would either find a job by submitting their resumes or by cold calling or become dependent on unemployment when they returned home. The program seemed to assume that none of the soldiers had higher aspirations than that. On top of this, the transitions program also seemed to Philip to be out of touch with what he believed to be the current reality of the job market. He felt he needed at least a bachelor's degree to find

employment that paid a living wage and provided good benefits. To Philip, the program's unrealistic view of the job market placed limits on people's potential was its greatest source of failure and the primary source of his frustration and disillusionment.

Where the mandated transitions program had failed to prepare him for and to ease his movement back into civilian life, Philip's extensive travel as soon as he left the Army succeeded far better. On his last day of military service, instead of boarding the flight back to Saginaw, which the Army had paid for, Philip took a different route. He bought a plane ticket to Moldova, one of the poorest countries in Europe and one of the only countries he had not yet visited. He spent the next three and a half months traveling through parts of the Middle East and Asia, not having to shave or cut his hair, wearing whatever he chose to wear, taking in as much alcohol and culture as he possibly could before flying back to Michigan, to home, late that fall.

*Back Where He Started*

The feeling of being back in Michigan after his years in the Army and his months of extensive travel was like hitting a brick wall at one hundred and fifty miles per hour. Everything in his life had been going so fast for the past four years; there had been so little time to think and so much time to do and to experience that moving to a small town in rural middle Michigan from Saginaw to live with his father, stepmother, and stepbrother just seemed to slow everything down to a sudden stop. "Wow," Philip thought to himself. "I'm really back."

A couple in his circle of friends seemed to be doing exactly what they had been doing when he had left for the Army. Philip would often make the nearly hour-long drive to visit one of his best friends who still lived in Saginaw. It seemed like nothing had changed. They picked up right where they had left off before Philip had gone out into the world. They went right back out into the garage, where they worked on fixing a motorcycle together, then into the house to stay

up all night drinking and playing video games. The next day, they would go to the range and shoot, then come back to the house and just spend a lazy afternoon together, as inseparable as they were before, enjoying each other's company.

But his interactions with others were not exactly like they had been before. Philip got in touch with an old friend, someone whom he had known his entire life and a part of his small circle of close acquaintances, shortly after arriving home. She happened to be back in Saginaw from Texas visiting family over the holidays. On the day they reunited, she was so happy to see him. She wanted to know everything that had happened to him in the Army and during his deployment to Afghanistan. Philip told her what he had been through, recounting the events as they had happened. He did not like telling what he called "cowboy stories," embellishing events to make them sound more like what someone would see in the war movies. She told Philip that she would be flying back to Michigan in about a month to attend a wedding, and she invited him to go with her. He happily accepted.

Philip has not seen her since the wedding, and the two do not talk any more. Philip felt that the novelty of his being a soldier home from war had been lost on her, but there was more to it than just that. Losing touch with someone with whom he had grown up bothered him deeply, but what he did not realize at first when they had reunited was that she had been moving forward with her own life. She had already graduated from college by the time he had returned home and had moved to Texas where she worked as a nurse. The initial interaction they had had upon reuniting had felt so good that Philp had been blinded to the realization that others now had their own lives. Many of his friends had been in college when he had left for the Army, and many now had careers. Philip would be just starting college soon. He could not always go back to how it had been before he had left, even though he had reclaimed some of that when he worked on the

motorcycle and played video games with his friend. He was realizing that he, along with others who had been close to him, were growing up. And part of growing up is growing apart, and losing touch with those who had been close to him depressed him. Losing touch also scared him.

Philip sat idle at his father's house for the next couple of weeks, thinking about his next move. It was not long before he began to fight with his stepmother. He disagreed with how she would never lock the house at night. This was a small rural community, a tight knit one in which most neighbors know one another. The chance of a crime being committed in the city limits was quite low, but there have been gas thefts from parked cars and an item has turned up missing from a garage every now and then. Philip, having grown up in Saginaw, an urban city whose homicide rate has shot up dramatically over the past decade, was not used to this. Although he had become desensitized to them, the mortar attacks on the airbase in Afghanistan still thumped in his memory, as did having been shot at while in his truck out on patrol. Being from Saginaw, in combination with his military experience, made him feel vulnerable and paranoid, and her refusal to lock the doors fueled his paranoia. He bought a lock for his bedroom door and installed it in spite of her objections. She was very upset with him installing the lock, and they argued over it. More arguments ensued, and Philip ended up leaving his father's house for an apartment in another small rural Michigan town not too far away.

*Following His Own Path*

For quite some time, since before he had even had left the Army, Philip had known his next move would be to go back to college. Around the time he was in the transition program, he had called MMCC for information about the college. Not long after he had returned, he had scheduled an appointment with an academic advisor at MMCC to plan his schedule of classes for the upcoming semester. Philip told her that his past academic performance had been terrible,

especially in math, and that he needed help. MMCC relies on a placement assessment to help students decide which writing and math classes to begin with, but when the advisor learned that Philip was a veteran, she waived the placement test. She asked him to tell her what he felt comfortable with, and she made it so that he did not have to enroll in any of the lower-level math courses. He did enroll in one developmental math course as a refresher, though. The advisor took care of everything, and Philip was feeling reassured that he could do college.

He also felt like the advisor had respected his service to the country by waiving the placement test, and it felt good that someone had acknowledged his service, something that he was proud of. He had even bought the Afghanistan license plate for his car after he had returned home. Philip never boasted to others about what he had experienced during his deployment and he was not ashamed of it; he wanted others to recognize what he had accomplished when he came back. It felt good when strangers would come up to him at dinner, after having overheard him talking with his family about his service, and thank him. But this perspective, this feeling that others owed him respect and recognition for his service, would change soon after he began his classes at MMCC.

When Philip started classes, he was one of about eighty other student veterans at the college. A good portion of these veterans had served during the Iraq/Afghanistan years. It was not difficult for him to spot veterans walking the halls of the college because of the camo backpacks or, as he described it to me one day, still wearing half of their uniform, or even just a military issue t-shirt, with their dog tags hanging out. This seemed odd to him, because, as soon as he had arrived home from the service, he packed all of his camouflage uniforms and other military gear he brought home with him in boxes at his grandparent's house. And there it all remains. He has one dress uniform that he kept out of storage and it hangs in a closet in his

apartment. The only time he wears any of his military issue clothing, a hat or camo, is when he goes fishing, shooting, or hunting. To Philip, wearing military issue clothing to school and in public is not appropriate. He is not in the military any more, and he feels he does not have to prove anything to anyone about what he has done. He knows what he has done and accomplished, and he is comfortable about that and knows that no one can take those accomplishments from him.

When Philip overheard other student veterans on campus complaining that they only got a small cup of coffee and a cookie on Veteran's Day, it took all of his strength and self-control to keep himself from fighting them. He just stood there in the hall and wondered why anyone would feel that they deserved a bigger handout than what they got. If anyone deserved a handout, Philip thought, it was the veterans of the Vietnam era, many of whom had been drafted at very young ages to fight in the harsh jungle, facing immense risk of casualty. Philip wondered how anyone could feel that they were owed anything for their service because of how nice he felt he and the other soldiers had it while on deployment in Afghanistan. When he did go out on a mission, he had been protected in large part by the thick steel walls of the fighting vehicle in which he rode with his first sergeant; afterward, the unit would come back to a base with a fully stocked mess hall, sleeping quarters, and video games. He would even Skype with family and friends while on deployment.

Philip knows that his time in the service has passed, that he is in the midst of moving on, of becoming something more than what he had been. These other student veterans on campus whom he encountered were, to Philip, people unsure of themselves; he saw people holding on to some piece of their past that seemed to be the only thing that defined them and gave them a sense of who they were. Wearing military issue clothing to school seemed to scream out, "Hey, look! I

was in the Army! Nice to meet you! My name's Army!" And their need to walk around and proclaim it, flaunt it, boast about it even, both infuriated and disgusted him. Philip is in the process of defining himself anew, of changing, of growing, of moving on, of finding a place to fit with others, and part of his struggle and the work he must do every day is explaining to others who this person is becoming, not just who he had been. His military past is a big part of who he is, but he does not think it solely defines who he is at this particular moment of his life. Nor is he running from his past in a fruitless attempt to escape from it. In fact, his military experience has shaped his work ethic now and his attitude toward course work. It's just that he does not want others to attribute his past to who he is becoming in the present.

Everything he does in every class matters, and he pushes himself to give his full effort to be the best at what he does. He would stay up all night working on the paper on human trafficking for his advanced composition class a few times throughout the semester. When he told other students about his work ethic, they would reply that he was pushing himself too hard, that it was just a paper for a class. For Philip, though, it was not just a paper; it was the fight of his life. Then, when he would hear other students in the class complaining that they could have done something else over the weekend instead of working on the paper, he would become angry at their excuses. He could not believe that six computers all crashed over the weekend before a draft of the paper was due for class on Monday. Excuses were easy; fixing the problem was difficult. Ironically, his computer did indeed crash, over Easter weekend. Philip left his family's house, which upset them because he did not eat dinner with them, went to his apartment, made a pot of coffee, and sat up all night with a Blue Tooth keyboard and iPad and retyped the entire draft so that he could turn it in on time. He was miserable and his girlfriend was upset with him,

and his professor told him that other students would have just told her that their computer died. But that would have been the easy wrong instead of the hard right.

When we last talked, Philip was just about to graduate from MMCC with an associate's degree. He would be graduating with honors, but was not planning to attend the Honor's Breakfast, an annual affair held a few Fridays before graduation, during which those graduating with honors would be recognized for their achievements and awarded a certificate. Philip felt the same way about the Honor's Breakfast as he did his service to the country; he knew what he had accomplished, and that was enough for him. He did not believe the chintzy metal and cloth had justified what he had accomplished in the service, and he did not believe the square piece of paper would justify his accomplishments at MMCC.

In just a few weeks, Philip will be moving to Kalamazoo and transferring to Western Michigan University to begin working toward his bachelor's degree this fall. He still has a hard time believing he is bound for WMU, given how much he had failed in school prior to starting college at MMCC. His dream of going into international relations has manifested itself in what he calls a learning map, a chart he has created for himself of what he plans to learn and read, both in his classes and on his own, to develop his knowledge for his career in international relations. International relations is in the center bubble of the map. Off that is politics, and off the politics bubble is foundational western and eastern political philosophies. Philip has so much drive and passion for his education because he sees it as the way to help others who cannot help themselves.

## Chapter 4 Dan's Redirection

One morning, this past May, just before the start of the spring semester at the college, there was an email in my inbox that had been sent the night before from someone named Dan Gray. The subject line read, "older veteran starting spring classes." The year before, I had been involved in a couple of meet and greet activities with the campus Student Veteran's Club; I had volunteered to take over as temporary advisor and had been attempting to increase the club's visibility and recruit membership through these meet and greets.[58] My email address was still on the student veteran's resource page on the college's website, so I guessed that is where Dan had found my contact information. Or his advisor might have suggested he contact me because of my work in the Writing and Reading Center, or perhaps because of the workshops I have led in the past on college study skills and reading in college.

Regardless, I was glad that he had found my contact information and had sought me out. I remember being intrigued by the subject line. After filling my coffee mug, I opened the email and read "hello i am new to this whole school thing i am a us army veteran and i am going to be attending school in spring is there anything i need to know or need to stay away from thanks"

I remember feeling a couple of things after I had read Dan's email. First, I felt happy that he was seeking me out and looking for advice, but, more than that, I remembered Grant, a former student of mine and Iraq combat veteran[59], looking up at me from his chair in front of the computer screen the year before. I remember what Grant had said to me that winter day at the end of the first week of our developmental reading and writing class. That day in class, Grant had openly expressed his fear to me of being in this place, in college for the first time, and,

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[58] The Student Veteran's Club is now advised by the college's Veterans Resource Representative.

[59] I shared Grant's sharing in the Introduction.

although I did not detect a scared tone from Dan's message, I did detect a feeling of uncertainty, of vulnerability, similar to the feeling Grant's words conveyed to me then.

Below the surface of his message was a tone of uncertainty because he did not know what to expect from college, because he was just starting for the very first time, and this was a message sent to me by someone who was seeking guidance; he was seeking someone who might give him an idea of what to expect from this strange new place. I got this impression of uncertainty when he said he was "new to this whole school thing" and whether there was anything he needed to know.

I detected a sense of vulnerability from Dan's message, especially from his last few words in his email about what he should "stay away from." When I read his email, it was this part of it that hit me the most. I remember thinking that he must be worried about some influence at the college unknown to him to which he would be vulnerable and that would cause him some kind of trouble. When I read the message, I realized that I could not think of anything he should stay away from, only what he should stay close to.

So, in my reply that morning, I thanked him for getting in touch with me and sent him advice that I felt a first time college student should know, and, as I read the reply now, I see how much I stressed the importance of being connected to others and being in contact with others – instructors, other students (and student veterans on campus), staff in the Writing and Reading Center, his advisor, student groups – and even being connected to his goals so that he could see how his courses were leading to what he wanted to get from his college education.[60] There had

[60] Terrell L. Strayhorn, *College Students' Sense of Belonging,* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 107. Strayhorn suggests that engagement and involvement in college can lead to a heightened sense of belonging there, and I was hoping Dan would seek out connections as he began his first semester at the college.

been nothing in my reply about what he should "stay away from." I guess that one threw me for a loop. I did not have anything to offer.

But then, Grant's admission of being scared had thrown me for a loop, too. I remember my initial reaction, and how he, someone who had been in some of the most frightening situations any person could experience, could feel so scared in a place like this; it was only afterward when I had been walking down the hall toward my office that I checked myself and began to think about it from the perspective of learning to belong and be with others. He had done so before, but was now having to do so all over again. And now, here was Dan coming forward to me, seeking me out, and searching for advice to ease his uncertainty and vulnerability at this moment of feeling at-risk about connecting with others and belonging.

About two weeks later, Dan sent me another email. This time, he was asking about what opportunities there were to get other veterans on campus together for activities over the spring and summer, like paintball or even skydiving. Dan had a connection with Allen Force, a non-profit group out of Illinois that helps veterans transition from military to civilian life, and all he had to do was provide Allen Force with a list of names and they would provide the money for a skydiving trip. He had mentioned in his email that he ran the Midwest chapter of Team Defiant, an organization for disabled veterans. In my reply, I told him that it was a great idea to get other veterans on campus together, and I gave him the contact information of the Student Veteran's Representative on campus who could help him organize some meetings and who could put him in touch with other veterans.

After I had replied, I thought about how, in his most recent email, he was seeking out connections with others around campus, specifically other veteran students. I kept thinking about this, and, a week or so later, I emailed Dan and asked him if he'd like to meet with me and talk

about how things were going for him during his first semester and if he was having any luck getting MMCC student veterans together for activities. Dan replied quickly, within just a couple of hours, saying that he would like to meet and talk in my office on campus about being an older first year college student and a military veteran with ten years of service. We set up a day and a time to meet on campus for the following week.

Dan was running late that morning. He seemed a bit frazzled when he showed up at my office door about a half hour past our meeting time. We shook hands.

"Sorry I'm a bit late. Plumbing problems. That's what happens when you live in a house with a bunch of disabled veterans. I had to make sure the shower worked before I left home today," Dan said as he walked in and sat down in a chair across from me.

He was dressed for the early June weather in sandals, cargo shorts, and a t-shirt. He set his backpack against the wall and folded his arms, which were adorned with tattoos, and leaned back in the chair.

I asked him how his classes were going so far this semester, his very first as a college student. He told me that he is taking a full load, including two developmental courses, one math and one English, along with a speech class and a computer class.

"You know," he said, smiling. "After I sent that first email to you for advice, when you told me, 'Just go to class.' Hey, that's a good idea! I use your words. I need to come to class every day."

"I'm glad my advice helped," I replied.

As we talked more, Dan shared with me that he runs a local non-profit organization for disabled veterans and veterans who are struggling with their transition from military to civilian life. He organizes paintball teams and competitions for veterans and sometimes has had to miss

classes this semester to pull everything together. When he described how he had to organize a recent paintball competition, my head was swimming with all of the details of the work he had to do for getting the teams together and making sure they had equipment and that travel expenses were covered. All of this meant hours on the phone, not only with fellow organizers, but with veterans anxious to hit the road and go play.

Dan smiled a lot when he talked. His words were often punctuated with a chuckle, and his voice would rise every now and then in imitation of others who played a part in his stories. I enjoyed listening to him as he told me more about his work with local veterans. He has opened his house up to displaced and homeless area veterans and is currently living with a number of them in a small town in the middle part of Michigan. Dan runs his house with strict guidelines, and he expects those whom he takes in and for whom he provides shelter to abide by the guidelines. Lately, though, because of his college schedule, he is away from home and the veterans more than he had been, so he has had to create a chore chart with assigned household duties for each resident to perform while he is away. The way he sees it, he's gone, and the veterans are there, so it's only fair that they should be doing some of the daily house work to help out. Except for the plumbing; Dan did not mind taking care of that. And providing a home for the veterans who needed one. That he did not mind at all.

*Home(less)*

Their fight that evening had been one of the worst yet. Since he had moved into his parents' house after getting out of the service a few months before, he and his father had been fighting more and more recently, yelling and screaming at each other. Their fights had been fueled and heated by alcohol. Dan's father had been an alcoholic for years; since he had left the Army and moved back into the house, Dan's drinking had escalated to the point where he drank

to sleep, to maintain. He wanted to drink everything away. But he could not drink away the disagreements between his father and him about how things should be done around the house

Their fight this particular evening had started because, earlier, Dan had gone to the refrigerator upstairs and had taken the last can of pop out of the cardboard container. He had thought nothing of leaving the cardboard carton empty on the shelf. Later, after he had arrived back at his parent's house from the bar, he went downstairs to his bedroom he had set up in their basement and immediately noticed that someone had thrown the empty carton onto his bed, which he took to be a kind of passive aggressive indicator of his father's displeasure with the fact that Dan had not removed the empty carton. Worse, Dan took it as an invasion of his privacy. He went upstairs and confronted his father, who was sitting in a recliner in the living room, watching TV, a stiff drink in his hand.

"What the hell?" Dan demanded, and flipped the carton onto the floor at his father's feet.

"That's what you get for not picking up after yourself!" his father yelled. Dan could tell he had been drinking. But then, so had he.

"I didn't realize it was empty, and I apologize," Dan said.

His father stared at him, then at the carton. "Pick it up and throw it away. Now!"

Things came to a head right then.

"No!" Dan yelled. "I'm thirty years old, I'm a combat veteran. I'm not gonna do that. That's stupid!"

"You hadn't better wake your mother," his dad warned. "And if you're going to live in this house, you had better do things the way we want them done, when we want them done. Do you understand me?"

"Ok." Dan replied. Then, after a moment. "Screw it. I'm out!"

He went back downstairs, grabbed a footlocker he had brought home with him after he had been discharged from the Army, and stuffed it full of whatever clothes he could grab, went outside to his car, and threw the footlocker in the back seat. He drove off into the night.

For the next four months, Dan lived in his car. He spent his days moving around and looking for work. He went to every business, every place he could think of within a seventy-five mile range that might hire him. When he had arrived home from the military a few months earlier, his former boss at the restaurant he had worked at all through high school had offered to hire him back. Dan had refused the offer. Now, he was beginning to have second thoughts about refusing the offer.

He also spent much of his time drinking and going to bars, not caring much about anything at all. He drank more and more because he could not find work. He was angry all the time. He had a couple of friends, and they understood the situation he was in and sympathized with him, but did not do anything to help him with his homelessness, his anger, and his alcoholism. They just kind of let him be. Dan was a loner living in his vehicle.

It was getting close to winter, and Dan still hadn't found work. He was at a gas station spending the last of his cash when someone called out to him as he was walking back to his car.

"Dan? Is that you?" Dan recognized the person at the pump. He was an Army buddy's brother. "Hey, where you livin at? We haven't heard from you."

"I'm in there," Dan said, pointing to his car.

"No," his buddy's brother replied in disbelief. Right then, he called his brother, told him about Dan's situation, and gave the phone to Dan.

"You're livin in your car?" Ben asked.

"Yeah."

“Not anymore,” Ben reassured Dan. “Come live with my wife and my two kids.”

Dan accepted Ben’s offer without hesitation. For the next year or so, Dan lived with Ben’s family and slept on the couch. He paid rent and helped with the bills. Ben helped Dan get a job with Direct TV in a town about an hour away, working six days a week as an installer. Dan hated his job with Direct TV. Going in and out of people’s houses to do installation work was uncomfortable for him, and he had been horrified by some of the things he had seen while in other people’s houses. But, he had a job and he had a roof over his head. On the weekends, Dan worked for free drinks as a bouncer in a dive bar in a small town just a few miles away from where he had grown up and gone to high school.

*Leaving Home for the Army*

Growing up in a small Midwestern town had been rough for Dan. It had been rough because his father drank quite a bit and, if something had not gone well with his father’s day at work, he would come home and take his frustration and anger out on Dan or on one of his two brothers. Dan had a small group of friends with whom he had grown up and with whom he had gone to high school. High school had not been easy for Dan. When it came to his school work, he was a bit behind everyone else. His mother told him he had a learning disability, and that was why it took him longer to keep up. Dan was also hyperactive, always going, going, going and always doing his own thing. He had not been the “traditional” high school kid who played sports and went to dances, although he did join the swim team, but quit after a month. Being somewhat overweight when he was younger, he felt self-conscious among the others on the team when he wore the Speedo swim briefs during practice. He felt like a loner and an outcast for much of his time in high school, in spite of his small group of friends and the fun they would have together

while in school. Dan never got in trouble in high school, because if he had, his father would have come down hard on him.

When he was a freshman, Dan found a part time job at the Big Boy restaurant in town, and he worked their throughout his high school years. His friends worked there, too, and he enjoyed the camaraderie on the job and the extra spending money the job provided him. The job also got him away from the house most afternoons and evenings and became part of his routine; he would go to school during the day, get out of school, go to work at the restaurant, get home after work, do homework, and then start all over the next day. Because his family life at home was not good, the daily routine kept him away from his mother and father.

Dan had known when he was a freshman that he was going to join the Army immediately after he graduated from high school. To him, the Army represented his only means of escape from his difficult life at home with his parents; the Army also would provide him with an escape from the drama that he had felt growing up in a small Midwestern town. The Army not only meant escape from home and the town; it also meant opportunity for him to travel and to see the world during this time when the United States was not involved in any major conflicts in the world. The Army beckoned to Dan and offered to him the promise that he could do something meaningful with his life.

*The Shark Attack and Boot Camp*

Dan graduated from high school in June of 1998. His recruiter met him at graduation, and that very day he left for boot camp. Dan did not want to stay for the summer. He just wanted to get away as soon as possible, so off he went downstate to Lansing for his physical, then, that afternoon, boarded a plane for Fort Benning, Georgia, for boot camp. The first two weeks of boot

camp at Fort Benning dragged out slowly. There was so much to do, from getting shots and more physicals to getting issued all the equipment new soldiers needed.

Finally, at the end of two weeks, the busses, or cattle cars, as they were called, pulled up. Dan, along with all of the other new recruits, boarded the cattle car, each with a duffel bag and their Army issue gear. After a short ride, the cattle cars came to a stop in front of the barracks. Then, the drill instructors boarded and ordered the recruits off the bus; the recruits ran, full speed, and then stopped and stood in formation as the drill instructors descended on them in what is known as the shark attack. Dan was scared. The whole experience seemed like a blur to him with drill instructors yelling and screaming, telling them what to do and how to do it. It was the first time he had been yelled at by a drill instructor, and, although he had been yelled at before by his father growing up at home, this was different. There were eight drill instructors swarming around the line of new recruits; this was the frenzy of the shark attack. Some of the recruits stood and cried the whole time, while others shut down and stared straight ahead. Dan kept his mouth shut and listened to what they were saying. He did not want to draw any unnecessary attention to himself. Besides, his recruiter gave him some good advice: never look a drill instructor directly in the eye. The sharks had swarmed, but they did not bite him too hard that day.

Boot camp was about turning raw recruits into squared away soldiers; however, it was also about weeding out those who were not meant to belong in the Army. Dan had recognized that early on. The stress of those first weeks in Army boot camp had been too much for some recruits. During a fire drill at the barracks one day, everyone had been evacuated from the building except for Dan's first battle buddy. Dan looked around for him and eventually found him slumped over a toilet. His first battle buddy had attempted suicide by removing the blades from a safety razor and cutting his wrists. He did not graduate.

Dan, though, had been determined to become a soldier. He had been determined to graduate. He had also been determined not to be recycled. He had dreaded being recycled. Recycling was a way to get a recruit up to speed who had failed to qualify for an activity, such as marksmanship or physical fitness. To get up to speed, the recruit would have to repeat the activity until he qualified. However, being recycled meant being set back in one's progress through boot camp as well as being moved to a different unit. One time through would be good enough for Dan. He became what is known as the gray soldier during his time in boot camp, the one who listens and who does not cause any trouble in the ranks and who stays out of the drill instructors' crosshairs.

PT had been especially difficult for Dan, because he had not played sports in high school aside from his short time on the swim team; nor had he been physically active prior to joining the Army. In addition to being out of shape, Dan was overweight when he had started boot camp. So, on the day of the very first PT test, Dan found himself in a drill instructor's crosshairs. The drill instructor pulled him aside after noticing his weight and his struggle to complete a physical activity.

"I know we're gonna have to recycle you!" the drill instructor fired at him, shaking his head.

"Negative, Drill Sergeant!" Dan had responded, breathless, his hands on his knees.

"Prove me wrong!"

"Roger, Drill Sergeant!" replied Dan.

"You're gonna be on the Fat Boy Program! You eat what I tell you to eat when I tell you to eat it!" the drill instructor commanded.

For the next eight weeks, Dan pushed himself to work extra hard in the muggy heat of the Georgia summer. He would do extra pushups and sit ups on his own, determined to pass the PT test and graduate from boot camp on schedule. Although the Fat Boy Program had given him other food options, Dan chose to have a hardboiled egg, a yogurt, and water for breakfast every day so that he would be in and out of the mess hall quickly.

By the time graduation day rolled around, Dan had lost nearly seventy-five pounds. His physical appearance had changed so drastically in that relatively short period of time that his parents, who had come down to Georgia from Michigan to see him graduate, did not even recognize him. They had to look at his name tag a couple of times before they could actually believe that, yes, this was their own son. At that moment, standing with his parents, with the blue infantry cord on his shoulder and his fit body as two tangible symbols of all of his hard work and determination, Dan felt an overwhelming sense of accomplishment and purpose like he had never felt before up to that point in his life.

*Airborne School*

So much had happened over the next few years in the service. Airborne infantry sounded like a cool job to him at the time, so after he had graduated from basic training in the late summer of 1998, Dan stayed at Fort Benning and began airborne school. Immediately after the graduation ceremony and after he had said goodbye to his parents, he changed out of his dress uniform, put on his fatigues, and boarded a bus to the Patch Building, where his classes were going to be held.

While getting into formation for PT the very next morning, Dan heard a voice behind him call out, “Hey, Gray soldier!”

That voice sounded familiar. Dan turned around, and his eyes went wide. He saw to whom the voice belonged, and exclaimed out loud, "Oh, fuck!"

"What, you ain't happy to see me?" Drill Sergeant Lincoln asked, his North Carolina accent twanging each word. His large Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he spoke; his lip bulged with chewing tobacco.

Dan remembered how, just a few short weeks ago in boot camp, when his new battle buddy had messed up, Drill Sergeant Lincoln had intervened. Although Lincoln was not as strict as the other drills, and he would talk to you as a person, if you messed up, he would make you pay for the infraction by doing pushups until he got tired. And he never got tired.

"Not really, Drill Sergeant!" Dan admitted. "Not really happy to see you!" Then, all kinds of thoughts went through Dan's head: "I'm screwed! I'm gonna be in trouble! He followed me here! Oh, no! Did I forget to do something in the barracks?"

Lincoln saw Dan's eyes grow wide with recognition and dread. "No, no, no!" he said. "I'm not a drill sergeant right now. I'm a student, just like you. I'm *Staff* Sergeant Lincoln."

Dan breathed a sigh of relief, but it was a cautious sigh, nonetheless. He hadn't known that there would be no drill instructors in airborne school, and when he saw Lincoln that first moment, he couldn't help but see him as such. Over the past months in boot camp, Dan had worked so hard at so much. He had worked at conditioning his body so that he wouldn't be recycled. He had also worked hard at being the gray soldier; he listened to what the drill instructors had been trying to teach the recruits about military discipline, and he had worked as hard as he could to avoid being singled out, especially by name. The last thing he had wanted was to have a drill instructor call his name. When a drill calls a recruit's name, any and all manner of punishment can be rained down on them, up to and including the dreaded Article 15.

Dan tried as hard as he could to avoid having a drill instructor call his name. In fact, he avoided trying to have any kind of an experience or interaction with one.

To see Lincoln as a fellow student in airborne school, especially so soon after having had him as a drill instructor in boot camp, was, as Dan put it to me one day during a conversation, "freakin weird." But Dan began to see that he and Lincoln were virtually equals in the context of airborne school; he began to see that Lincoln was a student, just like him, and they were both there to learn how to jump out of perfectly good airplanes. So, Dan was not as scared as he was at first, but he was still nervous as hell.

The following three weeks were filled up with classes. Airborne school culminated with jump week, during which time trainees would qualify by jumping out of an airplane five times. During jump week, that was all that Dan had to worry about – jumping out of an airplane. Dan was feeling scared and nervous before the first jump, but he was also feeling confident. So confident, in fact, that he volunteered to be the first one out the door. The first live jump of airborne school is called "stand by, go." Everyone jumps out of the airplane one by one when the green light comes on. When the command was given to line up at the door, Dan was the first one there, standing and waiting for the green light. He was scared to death.

He kept looking down at the ground. The jumpmaster, Sergeant Airborne Bello, who called everybody "Knuckles" for some reason, scolded him. "Quit lookin at the ground, Knuckles!"

"Oh, ok!" he replied weakly. He stared off into the distance, and then the green light came on, Bello slapped him on his behind, and out the door Dan went. In school, he had been trained to time the jump by doing the count one thousand, two thousand, etc. Instead, he yelled, "Oh, shit! Oh, fuck! I'm gonna die!" All he could see at that moment was the ground rushing

toward him. His exit from the plane had been weak; as he went out the door, the risers got twisted and he could not raise his head to look up and check the canopy, as he had been trained to do in the classroom. To untwist the risers and to free his head so he could look up, Dan grabbed the risers and started pedaling his feet in the air, like he was riding a bicycle. The risers then corrected themselves, and Dan checked his canopy. He was in a thermal updraft, and actually had some time in the air to look around and enjoy the view.

"This is awesome!" he thought to himself as he floated toward the ground.

Then the ground hit him. He lay there for five minutes because he needed to be sure he had not broken any bones or injured himself. He was so excited that he had completed his first jump; as he lay there on the ground after his first jump, he kept hoping he had not broken anything, because if he had, that meant certain recycling. But he hadn't. After five minutes, he got up, gathered up his chute, and was ecstatic. He did not sleep that night, nor the next after he had completed his second jump. By the second jump, he could not wait to go. He was having fun. Dan successfully completed his five jumps, qualified, and graduated from Airborne School. He was now Airborne Infantry, and he reported to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, the home of the Eighty Second Airborne, for his first duty station. Jump week was a memorable moment during his time in the Army; it had been a good time.

*9/11*

"That pilot must be drunk, or something," one of the NCOs in the mess hall said that morning, kind of as a joke, when they had seen the news report on TV about a plane crashing into one of the World Trade Center towers in Manhattan. They had found it hard to believe that a sober pilot could hit a building that big. The only way it made sense to them was to conclude that the pilot was under the influence. The entire division was out on a training exercise, but Dan and

a couple of the other NCOs, some specialists, and a private had stayed behind on base to attend classes. Dan remembered feeling something about that day, something he could not put a name to, but just that something felt off about that day. After they had finished their breakfast, they went into the day room. Some of the others were sitting around, getting ready for class.

"Hey, did you guys see the news?" one of the other NCOs had asked. "A plane just crashed into a building." The NCO went to the TV and turned it on. Just as he did so, the second plane crashed into the South Tower of the WTC Complex. Dan looked over at one of the specialists and said, "We're goin to war." Dan had just given words to the feeling he had had earlier about that day.

The entire post then went on lock-down. A warning order went out that all personnel, including all of the units that had been out on training, had to immediately get back on post. Communications were blacked out. No telephone calls could come in to the base or go off it, and cellphone service had been blocked, as well. No one knew exactly what was happening that chaotic morning, and speculation about what was going to happen next spread among the personnel on the post. Married soldiers were desperate to contact their wives, including Dan, who had just recently been married, to reassure them that, no, they were not going to deploy that day, and, yes, things would settle down eventually.

One member of the company lost his entire family that morning. His mother, father, brother, and sister all worked in the buildings. It was about a week later, after repeated attempts to contact them went nowhere, that the reality of their loss settled in. Soon after, the soldier was given an honorable discharge so that he could go home and pick up the pieces of his life. Prior to the soldier's early discharge, Dan and the other NCOs had sat with him and talked with him to console him; all the talk and consolation, though, did not help.

“What do you say to somebody that just lost their entire family?” Dan wondered aloud to me one day during a conversation. “There’s nothing you can say.”

So, they watched him each day and made sure he got up each day, showered, and ate. They watched him and made sure he did not go on a drinking binge, that he did not become self-destructive. This was all they could do to care for him over those two weeks prior to the soldier’s honorable discharge, which was really the only thing that could have been done for him.

A large number of soldiers in Dan’s airborne division were from New York and New Jersey, and they volunteered to go and help at the World Trade Center site in the aftermath of the attacks. Dan had volunteered to go along with the others, about one hundred and fifty from his division. Dan spent the next month at the site helping with searching and with cleaning up, along with disaster relief. Dan had mentioned to me during our talk that day that his volunteering had been the right thing to do, even though no one had been looking. I think what he meant was that most of the country’s attention had been focused on the first responders and not so much on the assistance that had come in the following weeks and months from volunteers, including military personnel. His role had not really been noticed. Dan had heeded the call to be a volunteer and to do what he had felt was the right thing to do at that moment in history, in the interim of his service during peace time and the upcoming time of war. Soon, though, his volunteer combat role in the Army infantry in Iraq would be seen by not only the country, but by the world.

*A Brief First Deployment and Reenlistment*

A couple of months after he had helped out at the site of the 9/11 attacks, Dan received orders to deploy to Afghanistan. He had never seen the desert before, at least not desert like this. He had seen the California desert a couple of years prior when he had been at Fort Irwin National Training Center. But that had nothing on the Afghanistan desert – the big rocks, the mountains

and the rugged terrain. However, Dan would not be in the desert long. This would be a very brief deployment, only six months, and Dan's role involved more logistical support than combat.

When his brief deployment to Afghanistan had ended, Dan arrived back in the United States and reenlisted for another four years in the Army. In spite of all the excitement involved in jumping out of airplanes, the novelty of the jump had worn off quite some time ago and he had tired of it. So, for his reenlistment, he had decided to change his military occupational specialty, or MOS, from airborne artillery to field artillery. Specifically, he wanted to be a forward observer. The idea of working with a small team more or less independently of a platoon or company coordinating indirect fire in the field appealed to Dan. He would be the one on the team responsible for directing artillery toward an enemy target. Sometimes, forward observers had to work in enemy territory or even behind enemy lines, and Dan was excited by the adventure this kind of work could bring with it. He also liked having a choice of MOS as part of his reenlistment.

Somewhat ironically, for as hard as he had worked to avoid being recycled during boot camp, Dan got to experience boot camp again prior to the start of his FO training at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. However, he did not have to repeat boot camp. Because there were no rooms off-post for him to stay in during the month prior to the start of FO training, Dan had to stay in the barracks with the basic trainees. This made for an awkward moment when he had first arrived. Dan was now an E5, a sergeant, and the basic trainees had been suspicious when he had showed up and began unpacking his footlocker. They swarmed around him the day he first arrived in the barracks at Fort Sill, wondering who this new guy was.

Dan remembered his experience with Lincoln when he had first started airborne school four years previously. He explained to them why he was staying with them in the barracks, to

address him as Sergeant Gray, and that he could not make any of them do push-ups for messing up, because that was the drill instructor's job, not his. His rank and status also meant that he would not be punished with the other trainees in the event that punishment was warranted.

The basic trainees with whom Dan was staying in the barracks accepted him into their ranks quickly as he settled in with them and they got to know each other more. He was there as a student and nothing more. Sometimes, though, the drill instructors did not recognize that Dan was a student and not a basic trainee. When he had first arrived at Fort Sill, Dan had been wearing his dress uniform and red beret, the marker of airborne infantry. A drill instructor spotted him and ordered him to remove the beret; another time, when he had been taking a smoke break across the street from the barracks, a drill instructor came charging over to him and threatened him with an Article 15. The drill instructor had thought Dan was a private sneaking a cigarette. All tobacco products were strictly forbidden in boot camp. The drill instructors did realize their case of mistaken identity, though, and Dan had fun seeing boot camp from a different perspective during the time he was in FO training.

Dan described to me the days and weeks after he had completed FO training at Fort Sill as a huge blur. Things were happening so quickly; this was early 2003, and the United States was making the case for war with Iraq, and Dan knew that he was going to be deployed there. Immediately after he had graduated from FO school, Dan was duty assigned to Fort Benning, but he spent only four days there. After those brief four days, he packed his wall locker and prepared to leave the country on a plane bound for Kuwait, where he met up with his unit.

*Deployment to Iraq*

Forward observers work in a small team of four and they work in a Bradley fighting vehicle from which they perform their job of supporting troops by coordinating indirect fire in

the field. Dan's team met him as soon as he had stepped off the plane in Kuwait. However, with Dan included, there were five on the team.

"Hey!" the lieutenant on the team greeted him. "You're a Bradley gunner!"

Dan was confused. "I've never touched a Bradley!"

"What?" the others replied, looking at each other.

"I have no idea how to run this thing!" Dan admitted.

So, with just three days left before they crossed the border into Iraq, Dan's team quickly trained him to be the gunner. Dan spent the next eighteen months as part of the first wave of soldiers in Iraq with his team of FiSTers[2] coordinating fire from the Bradley.

In boot camp, Dan had learned about the bond of trust and dependence that had to be formed among soldiers. It had been drilled into them. As they stood in formation, the drill instructor would command the recruits to look to their left, then to their right, to their front, and to their rear. Then, he would tell them that, no matter what, those men were going to have his back. There were times when Dan would look around the formation and wonder, "That guy? Really? I gotta trust him to have my back?" The bond of trust and dependence might have been loose in some cases, perhaps with others who tended to be loners in the ranks, but it was a bond that formed, nonetheless.

The bond that had initially been forged in the ranks of boot camp by the drill instructors continued to strengthen among the men as they moved on to their duty stations. These were people who lived together, learned together, worked together, suffered punishment together, pushed each other, and who motivated each other. They continued to be together and had learned to read each other. If one of them was having a bad day, another would sit and talk to make sure he was good, and then they would smoke and laugh about it. The worse thing that could happen

to a soldier was to become alienated from the others because he had done something stupid. Because when it came time for battle, and the time for battle did indeed come, it was each other for whom they were fighting.

Dan and his team were on the roof of a building just outside of Fallujah. They began taking fire from a big three story building nearby. And one of his buddies on the team got shot. When he turned around, all the others could see was blood. In spite of the Kevlar he had been wearing, the bullet still found its way around it. Immediately, the others on the team grabbed him, got him down, and tried to assess his condition. At first, they thought he was dead. He had been shot in the head. But he was still breathing.

"Fuck this!" Dan had yelled, standing up. Dan was angry that his buddy had been shot. He and his wife had just had a baby. At that moment, Dan was fighting for him. He wanted the person who had shot him.

"I'm gonna blow this fucking place up!" he resolved to the others.

Dan and two other soldiers jumped off the roof onto a rickety shack adjacent to it and began to call in close air support. While he was on the radio, he was trying to pop a smoke grenade. Suddenly, the shack collapsed. Dan and the two others tumbled over with it. He hit the ground hard and lost his breath, and the smoke grenade rolled away.

Then, they sat up and looked at each other. "You good? We good?"

"Yep! Let's go!"

It wasn't long afterward that air support arrived and the building from which the bullets came was leveled. Then, there was no more gun fire from the building. There were no more RPGs. There was nothing.

The team sat and watched the plume of dust from the building bloom and drift over Fallujah, wondering at the relative silence and strange calmness of the moment. They sat back and checked each other, Dan checking on his buddy, reassuring him that they got who had been responsible for shooting him that day. Then, they all talked about what had happened and had laughed about it as they coped and made sense of that day. Their team mate and buddy was fine, so they were fine. They pushed on.

Not long after the Battle of Fallujah, Dan suffered an injury that marked the countdown to the end of his time in the Army. As he had finished conducting a crater analysis of a mortar round that had fallen near the forward operating base and was walking away, the live mortar detonated. He was lucky to have lived, but enough shrapnel had lodged in his spine to warrant him being sent back to the States to recover. During a full body MRI as part of his recovery, the doctors discovered that he had cancer. A cancer diagnosis means the end of a soldier's military career. After undergoing chemotherapy, his cancer went into remission, and Dan left the service after just over nine years.

When he walked out of Fort Stewart alone on the day of his discharge, he stopped outside of the base and stood, staring at the road in front of him. He did not know where to go. The road went off in three directions. If he went left, he would head west; if he went straight, the road would take him home, to where he grew up; if he went right, he would go east. Dan stood, perplexed, and thought about what direction to take. He decided right away not to go east. That just did not feel right. He seriously thought about going west, because that would mean a new beginning for him, a way to start over again with his life and do what he wanted to do. But something compelled him to take the road down the middle, to head back home. So, that's what he did.

*Home Again*

Dan sat on the stool in the corner by the door, checking patrons' IDs as they entered the bar and keeping an eye on the place. The past week of Direct TV installs had made him tired and the work had frustrated him, but the misty buzz of the alcohol lightened both his head and his spirits. It was the opening weekend of deer season in this rural Michigan town, deer hunter's weekend. So, the dive bar in town was packed with hunters. It was not long into the evening when the combination of alcohol and machismo mixed into an explosive concoction, and an insult provided the spark to touch it off. Voices rose, curses were hurled, chairs screeched on the floor, and the two contenders were on each other in the middle of the circle that had formed. Although he was drunk and tired, Dan was fast. He also knew who had initiated the fight from his corner observation post, grabbed the guy, and threw him out of the door into the cold mid-November night.

Dan did not even feel it at first. The adrenaline and alcohol had had a momentary effect on his senses, not unlike morphine. He stood there, panting.

A number of patrons had followed the action out into the street. "There's a knife stickin' in you," someone told him.

"I don't care!" Dan shot back, still pumped by the excitement of having broken up the fight. But a giddy feeling was beginning to settle over him, like a sheet falling onto a bed. "I'll just pull it out!" He sank to his knees.

"It's probably deep," someone said over him.

"Who's gonna take me to the hospital?" Dan looked up at the patrons standing around him on the street. He was too drunk to drive himself.

They stood and stared at him for a moment, mumbled, some shaking their heads, then single file, walked back through the door into the bar.

Dan was pissed. “Fuck you guys!” he spat at their backs, then, in spite of his intoxication, drove himself to the hospital in a neighboring town.

“You’re drunk,” the doctor observed as he finished stitching Dan’s stab wound.

“Yup,” Dan sighed. “And I got stabbed.”

Over the next few days, as he lay on Ben’s couch resting and recovering from his wound, Dan thought. He thought about the path down which his life had been heading. He was in his early thirties, he was homeless, he hated his TV installation job, and he was an alcoholic working as a bouncer for free drinks in a bar on the weekend. And he had just been stabbed in a bar fight. He had survived combat during his deployments overseas. Being home was turning out to be potentially deadlier than Iraq. As he lay there thinking, he realized that he could not do this anymore. If he continued down this path, he was going to sink deeply into the darkness of his depression. He believed there was the real possibility of never seeing the light again.

Lying on Ben’s couch, Dan decided he did not want to be that person. He did not want to continue to drink, to fly off the handle at the smallest provocation; he did not want to continue not to care. He wanted to care, to empathize. He just did not know what he could care about and with whom he could empathize. But he did have the desire. He could be a better person. This moment was the turning point in his life. Good things began to happen to him quickly over the next couple of weeks.

*A Time to Gain*

His recovery from the stab wound was quick and easy. Quitting drinking cold turkey had been a challenge, but he did it and has been sober now for eight years. After months of trying to

find a job with no success, he finally found a decent job as a security guard in a casino in a nearby town. He had been thankful to Ben for helping him out with the Direct TV job, but he could not quit fast enough. Dan met a woman, and the first relationship since his divorce blossomed. He packed his footlocker, thanked Ben and his family for their hospitality, and bid them farewell. He had a job, he had a relationship, and he had a home with his girlfriend; Dan was also getting help for his PTSD. He began attending regular therapy sessions with a doctor at the VA in Saginaw. Dan's life was going well for him the first time in a while since he had returned to civilian life. But only for a while.

The security guard job at the casino involved a kind of routine and structure that Dan needed at the time. Having to arrive to work at his scheduled time at the same place each night, not to mention the required guard uniform he had to wear, was a welcome change for him. There were rules and regulations, as well as standards for doing the job. The job also gave him some authority to make decisions when he was walking the floor on his shift each night. Some of his co-workers did not understand why Dan would walk the floor during his shift. They were more comfortable sitting in the security room watching the monitors and listening to their radios than going on foot patrol. However, if an emergency happened to come up while he was on patrol, he would be the first one there within minutes to assist. The few co-workers who had served in the military, though, did understand his style more than the others. The routine, structure, standards, and authority that came with his job seemed to echo his past life in the military, and that meant something to him. He and his former military co-workers imagined themselves in military roles on the job: they were officers in command of a squad of privates; the shift manager was the newly promoted lieutenant who did not know what he was doing. He felt like he had reclaimed something that he had lost from his life this past year since he had left the Army.

During one shift, after Dan had been working at the casino for some time, both security supervisors had left for the night and had left a guard with the most seniority in charge. As soon as the supervisors had left, radio transmissions from the other guards ceased. It was as though Dan's co-workers had simply left. Dan had just sat down for his lunch break after a few hours of his foot patrol on the casino floor when a call came over the radio for a guard to escort a worker to another part of the casino so she could start her shift. Even though there were three other guards in the breakroom, sitting and talking, none would respond to the call; then, the same call came over the radio a second time. Dan began to get frustrated; he had just completed half his shift walking the floor and did not understand why no one would respond to the request for an escort.

He slid his chair away from the table. "What the fuck?" He stood. "I'm off break," he said, turning toward the door.

"Why?" one of his co-workers asked. "You just sat down."

"Yeah, but who's going to take the call? No one answered," Dan replied hotly.

"What's going on? Why are you pissed?" asked another co-worker.

Dan put both hands on the table, leaned in, and looked him straight in the face. "I can't even sit down to eat my lunch and you *lazy fuckers* can't even get up off your asses to do an escort!"

One of the shift managers had heard the exchange from his office across the hall from the breakroom. He poked his head in the door. "Get in my office. NOW!"

Dan sat in the chair across the desk from him. "What the hell is going on?" the manager asked.

Dan explained his side of the story, but was given a short suspension as punishment. His co-workers had not appreciated him calling them "lazy fuckers."

*A Time to Lose*

It was not long after Dan had returned to work and was walking the floor when he had another encounter with the shift manager. This encounter, and the ensuing exchange in front of patrons, would cost him his job. Dan had still strongly believed that the other guards had not been pulling their weight, that they were not meeting the standard of the job. He blamed the shift manager for not enforcing the standards. When Dan saw him on the floor that night, he began to explain this to him, but his frustration got the best of him, and the exchange escalated quickly. Dan yelled at him, and he yelled at Dan. Dan called him a lazy shit and then told him that if he ever saw him in the street, he would punch him in the face.

In the military, there was what was called the wood line. If a soldier had a problem with another – and rank did not matter in this case – their grievances were settled there. And what happened in the wood line stayed there. The two would settle their grievances of whatever nature, personal, professional, whatever, it did not matter, by fighting them out. Whoever won the fight was correct, and bygones would be bygones. The grievance settled, everything would be fine and everyone would carry on as though nothing had happened.

Later in his shift, Dan had gotten the call to go to the Human Resources office, where he was notified of his termination, effective immediately. On one hand, he was glad to be done with the job, because he simply could not come to terms with the weak enforcement of job standards and, most of all, what he saw as laziness among his co-workers. On the other hand, he was now unemployed once again. For a few weeks after being fired from the casino, he actually considered joining the Army again. Things seemed so much more clear and defined there, and he

missed that place where he felt like he had belonged and where he could contribute. Dan thought about that often. However, in the weeks after he had been fired, the VA determined that he was unemployable, and so he began to receive full regular disability payments. He did not need to work anymore.

Dan's girlfriend supported him emotionally during this time. More than once, he had wanted to turn to alcohol to help him cope with his job loss and with the anxiety and lack of empathy, both of which had stemmed from his combat experiences. Their relationship had been growing since they had met shortly after he had been stabbed, and they were growing closer, especially now that they were living together. She was the reason he did not pick up the bottle; she was the motivation for his weekly trips to therapy at the VA in Saginaw. In spite of all that had happened since he had returned home, she saw in him potential that he did not see himself. She made him want to be a better person.

Their closeness, ironically, was what ultimately drove them apart last October after nearly five years together. The closeness of their relationship bore her witness to some of the darker events from Dan's past, events that he had suffered over in silence since he had come back, the pure evil he had witnessed that had sapped his will and ability to empathize with others. He had seen pure evil first-hand in Iraq and had since struggled with the question of just who could put a bomb in the road and sit and wait for someone to drive by before detonating it? And the kids, playing by the side of the road, caught in the blast, who lost limbs. Or who had died because of the blast. Although he had been learning to empathize through his therapy sessions, she did not perceive his reactions to some situations as healthy.

"You're cold hearted," she had accused him one day, shortly before she had left him. "You haven't learned anything. I can't handle it anymore."

By this time, in the face of her accusation, Dan would shut down and not say anything. Then, after a while, “Sorry. I just don’t know how to do it yet. I’m still learning.”

“You’re just cold hearted.”

Supporting him emotionally had begun to weigh too much on her, and she had felt that she was being dragged down deeper into a place she could not go with him. The emotional support had made her weary, so she moved on. She had to let go if she was going to keep afloat.

Dan sank. Her leaving caused him to sink to his lowest spot yet. But he still held on to his sobriety, and he still held on to his therapy sessions. And, he still gripped tightly the desire to become a better person that she had given him during their time together. She had told him more than once over the past few years that he should go to college, like she had, because a college education could open up doors to him, like it had done for her. She had told him it would make him a better person.

*Starting College*

Dan picked himself back up. Shortly after he had moved into his house and opened it up to other area veterans, and after he had become involved with local non-profit veteran organizations, he made use of his Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits and enrolled at MMCC. After enrolling in a full course load, Dan thought to himself, “Ok. I’m going to college. Gonna do something with my life.” However, Dan had no idea what that something might be; college was unknown to him, and he was excited about the unknown prospects that might come with it, and the doors that might be opened to him because of it. In addition to excitement, he also felt fear. He had not cracked a math textbook in well over a decade. He had not done well in math in high school, but as he looked forward to starting his developmental math class in college, he was determined to learn math so that he could become better at balancing his budget.

The mixture of excitement and fear at starting college brought back to him the feeling of the first time he had jumped out of a perfectly good airplane nearly twenty years ago during Jump Week, the first one in line to step out the door, the ground far beneath his feet, buoyed by his faith in the parachute on his back to hold him aloft and to slow his descent. I think back to his email to me last May. I wonder now if I had been the parachute he had been seeking those early weeks of his first semester in college.

Being in school again was weird for Dan. He had been in school in the Army, but this was weird. And strange. It was weird and strange for him first of all because, at thirty-six, he was one of the older students on campus and he could not help but think to himself that he should have gone back to school a long time ago. Being surrounded by young people who simply did not share the breadth and depth of experience that he had was also weird for him. He did not feel as though he had anything in common with them. They seemed to him to be walking around with blinders on, clueless to the larger world because they were so new to it. Many had never been away from home for any length of time, and many were still living at home with their parents in one of the surrounding rural communities. The door to a larger world was just being cracked open for them.

Dan is outgoing and friendly, and during those first few weeks of the semester, when other students had learned that he had spent so many years of his life in the Army and had seen combat in Iraq, they were naturally curious about his experience, especially his travels. He enjoyed talking with them about Hawaii and Australia and some of the funny situations that had occurred in the FOB when he had been deployed. They enjoyed listening. He had to learn, though, to avoid using Army nomenclature because, when he did, he was met with blank stares. He purposely avoided telling them about his combat experience because he felt they were too

young to hear about his experience with mayhem, death, and destruction. On a couple of occasions, during a class discussion or in the hall between classes, a student would raise the one question Dan had dreaded being asked: “Did you kill anybody?” Dan would look the student in the face, firmly reply that he did not feel comfortable answering the question, and then he would walk away.

Although he felt that some of his fellow students were aimless, he could not be too critical because he feels rather aimless himself right now. “They are kinda like me,” he told me one morning during a talk this past summer. “I don’t know what I wanna be when I grow up,” he said, laughing. And there are days when he just does not feel like being an adult, and there are days, the bad days, and the anniversary days on which he had lost someone close to him in the past, that he cannot be in school. In spite of not knowing what he wants his college years to lead him to at this moment, college, for Dan, means the opportunity to become a better person, to learn and to grow in ways that he might not otherwise have the opportunity to experience.

Being in class these past few months has given him the chance to help others. In his Speech 101, the class was required to collaborate in a small group to produce a persuasive speech, the final speech of the semester, encouraging an imaginary audience of entering college students to take the class. Dan had been struck by how many students had quit coming to class as soon as they had been given the group speech assignment, the final speech of the semester. He could not understand why someone would quit with the semester almost finished. He had also been struck by other students’ reactions to the assignment: “they were stressing out about it, like freaking out.”

Dan urged his group members to relax. This was going to be a fun and easy speech to give. First of all, it would be fun because they had decided to deliver the speech in a creative

mode, like a gameshow. Second, Dan pointed out to his group that they persuade others all the time, like if they want their parents or friends to give them something, they do it persuasively. On top of that, the speech did not require any outside research, just their own experience from having taken the course that they could use to persuade their audience.

The group was still skeptical, in spite of Dan's urging. "We are going to be given a group grade," said one of the group members anxiously during their planning time. The group had become concerned about one of their members, an international student from Saudi Arabia. Dan's take on group work was that everyone should share their individual strengths with each other so that the group would become stronger as a whole, rather than looking out for themselves. He felt that the group was talking down to the Saudi student, even avoiding working with him because of the language barrier, but Dan asked them to treat him like everyone else. He also suggested that they allow him to open the speech, sort of like the gameshow MC, but the others disagreed, saying that he would make them look bad. Dan did not like to watch people flounder, so he helped the student create note cards to help him during his speech and to get better at public speaking.

Dan had noticed an older woman in his computer class who was learning computer technology for the first time in her life, and she was having a very hard time with the class. She would become frustrated with using certain features, and she was quite vocal about her frustration. Dan noticed her frustration in class one day, so he went over to her and broke it down for her "Barney-style," a phrase he had learned in the military. Barney was a purple dinosaur who appeared in a popular children's show; breaking something down Barney-style involved explaining it slowly, step by step, in a way even a child could understand. Dan explained the

search bar to her, how she could use find and replace features, and so on to ease her frustration and to help her become better at using the computer.

Helping other students has not been a struggle for Dan, nor has accepting help from others. Like the student who gave him her notes from a class he had to miss because he was having a bad day; or his English teacher who simply had to look at him to see in his face that he was having a bad day and who reassured him that it was ok if he needed to step out of class or leave for the day. What Dan has had to struggle with, though, has been holding himself in check so as not to snap.

This struggle of holding back played out most clearly in his developmental writing course. Students vote as a class on a topic to spend the first six weeks or so researching and reading about as a way to study the rhetorical moves writers with very different audiences make when writing about the topic. The class wanted to read and learn more about ISIS and what their mission was. Dan's initial reaction in class that day was quite straightforward: why? Why would you want to learn about terrorists? Seriously?

Dan sat back in his chair and listened to the class talk. His instructor looked at him out of the corner of his eye. Here's how the discussion played out in his mind:

"Are you kidding me?" Dan stood up and yelled at them. "You wanna learn about ISIS? Join the military!" His command echoed off the walls and bounced up from the floor.

The room went quiet. If this were a movie, the camera would have tracked in to him from across the room until his face was square in the frame. "You'll get full time experience learning about their fundamentalist activities. And their mission? They just wanna kill you. That's all they wanna do. They just wanna kill you!"

The camera would then pan around the room; some students in the frame sat at their desks, eyes downcast. Others stared, some straight ahead, others at Dan.

Dan surveyed the room; the camera would have shot from his perspective, from face to face. “I just wanna learn how to write a paper better and I don’t wanna write about ISIS,” Dan quietly told the class on the screen in his head.

As much as he had wanted to say all of this out loud to the class, he did not. He sat and listened to the conversation play out, and, eventually, the class decided to read and write about nanotechnology.

He remembered having to fight himself not to yell, though, not to make the movie in his head a reality, not to snap when the class had been discussing the possibility of ISIS. He had to fight himself really, really hard. Since he had started college, he had been mindful about how others perceived him as a veteran. He had learned about how others had preconceived notions of what an Iraq veteran was ever since he had arrived home and the conversation he had had in the bar one evening. Upon learning that he had served in combat, a woman said to him over her drink and the bar noise, “Oh, you’re probably crazy, aren’t you?”

He had noticed that some students became quite nervous around him earlier in the semester when they learned he had served in combat, although his humor, his conversation, and his willingness to help all worked to show them that he was a student just like them. They also learned that he had something to offer them. But the struggle not to snap, not to fly off the handle, is something Dan must face every day. He has had to work at learning to define himself for others as something more than what he himself has lived as the stereotypical Iraq combat veteran – homeless, alcoholic, angry. Having lived the stereotype as he defines it, he is now

living past that and redefining himself as he becomes what he calls a better person, and this becoming involves holding others and himself to high standards.

In the military, Dan had learned that failure is not an option; you finish what you start and you hold yourself accountable to the standards and structure that produce excellence. That is why he desperately did not want to be recycled when he was in boot camp and why he changed his diet so drastically; he did not want to have to repeat physical training and have his graduation delayed. Dan immediately learned when he first started college last spring that it is certainly less rigidly structured than the military. No one is going to command him to go to class or to do his homework, but there are still standards. Dan holds himself and his instructors to high standards; he will be the first one to tell his instructors if he does not understand something. He will ask his instructors questions and have them break it down Barney-style for him. But he is still struggling with math, which comes as no surprise to him. He did poorly in math in high school and knew that he would be in for a struggle in college. Although he has gotten better as a result of his developmental math course, he is failing the class.

Dan continued to go to his math class throughout his first semester despite his low scores and having given the course his best try. He has enrolled in the same developmental math course with the same instructor this fall, and he is looking forward to it. “If I gotta take that class two times to learn it, great!” Dan said when he told me he was retaking the class. As I think about Dan’s situation in his math class now, two things strike me.

First, “failure” seems now to be an option for Dan. It seems that failure is so stigmatized in our popular conversations about education that we forget that we do not always learn something the first time around, especially if what we are learning is more abstract, like math,

and is something with which we have struggled before. “Failure” can be ok in situations like these when it is a part of learning.

Second, as I think about what Dan said and as I write this, I had wanted to say that he was being recycled through math. That, however, is inaccurate. It is not the same thing. Dan is not in the military anymore, so it does not make a lot of sense to call his retaking of the math class being “recycled” through it. More significantly, it is his choice to retake the course, and I think that is why he thinks it is great that he is doing so. The opportunity to retake the course represents for him a second chance and he is fully embracing that opportunity. Dan does not know what he will use his education for in terms of a vocation, but that, like failing math the first time through, is ok. There is something that Dan sees in his college education, something that he feels about it, something that he cannot pinpoint exactly or name other than that it will make him a better person.

# Chapter 5 Hank Held Close

I opened my email one morning in late June, about a month after Dan had reached out to me for advice on what an older veteran could do as he began his first year of college. An email from someone named Hank Mondale sat there in my inbox. I opened the message and learned that Hank was taking classes at MMCC over the summer and heard that I had been talking with student veterans on campus about their experiences in the service, returning, and as students at a small rural community college. In his email, Hank shared with me that he had joined the Army National Guard at the age of seventeen, had deployed to Iraq twice, and had served twelve years in the military, nearly half his life, as I found out later. He was currently awaiting discharge. In his message, Hank wrote that he would not be opposed to sharing his experiences with me, and that if I was interested, I should respond with more information.

I was interested in talking with him, of course. The broad sketch of his background he had shared certainly indicated to me that he had stories to tell, stories that would help me to understand what it was like for him to develop, grow, make meaning, and learn to belong in very different life contexts, with others, and the struggles he experienced during those times. I was interested, as well, because Hank had come forth on his own and had sought me out to share with me important and meaningful experiences from his life. His coming forth was significant to me because he had felt compelled to share with me, with no other motivation than to share, and I felt compelled to listen to what he had to say.

After a few more email exchanges, we decided to meet and talk on some Thursday afternoons throughout the month of July right after Hank got out of his humanities class for the day. Hank showed up at my office on campus for our first talk a week or so later. He was wearing work boots, jeans, a t-shirt, and a baseball cap. He put his book bag down on the floor

next to his chair, sat across from me, leaned back, and folded his arms. We began to get to know each other a bit.

Hank was still in the Army National Guard, but was awaiting discharge. By the time he was twenty-two years old, he had made the rank of E6, Staff Sergeant. Hank had just been given the Civic Recognition Award, one of the highest forms of recognition for community members' service to others within their communities. He had received the award for his work with the Veteran's Affairs office, helping local veterans during their adjustment to civilian life after having been deployed. He was also passionate about helping local veterans with other transition-related issues, such as navigating VA benefits and PTSD. He would visit veterans in hospice care to talk with them and would even volunteer to answer phones at the county VA office when he was needed. He worked part time for the local Sheriff's Department and was getting close to finishing his Associate's Degree in criminal justice from MMCC.

Hank lived in and had spent most of his life in a small rural Michigan town after moving there with his mother, father, and brother from a larger town about an hour away, when he was younger. Hank had a few years of Catholic school there before moving, and was on the academic track in junior high. He sang in the boy's quartet and was mechanically inclined; he enjoyed working on engines and vehicles in his spare time.

In high school, he participated in the student government and played football. He liked to have fun and was friendly and got along with everybody. At school, Hank did not tolerate other kids getting bullied or excluded because they were not as popular as other kids. His sense of fairness, friendliness, and having fun translated into him being an advocate for others when they could not advocate for themselves. He had thrown a lot of parties at his parents' house while in high school, and, while he never got in any real trouble, one time the police did come while some

friends were over. He was still allowed to have parties after this incident, but the rules became much more stringent. In spite of the rules, Hank gained notoriety among his classmates in high school for throwing the biggest non-alcoholic party in the history of his graduating class. When he told me this, he chuckled and gave thanks to his parents. It was because they had allowed the party and had supervised it that he had been able to get the credit from his peers for having thrown the party.

Throughout most of his high school years, Hank's plan upon graduation had been to go to college and pursue coursework in criminal justice and social work. He had not planned on joining the military. Ironically, his brother's plan had been to join the military upon graduation, but, instead, he ended up going to college. By the time he was a junior, Hank was at the point in his life where he wanted to do something other than sit down and read a book; he had been in school for years now and was ready for something different. He was ready for the military. He was ready to be a part of something bigger than himself. Hank had ended up joining the Army National Guard under the Split Training Option in April, 2003, at the age of seventeen while he was still a high school junior. This option allowed him to attend basic training during the summer between his junior and senior years of high school and to train with his local unit, the 1460$^{th}$ Transportation Company based near his hometown, one weekend each month during his senior year.

*First Mail Call*

Hank turned eighteen while he was in basic training at Fort Benning, Georgia, the summer between his junior and senior years of high school. He embraced his training and the fact that he would be going back to high school in the fall with basic combat training under his belt, something that virtually no other student could claim he or she had done during the summer

break. He had hoped that his training and his improved physique would benefit him on the football field that fall when he returned to play his last season with the team.

Hank went into basic training with his eyes wide open. He knew that, by going to Fort Benning that summer, he was going to have to prove to himself and his drill instructors that he could become part of the team, that he could become a soldier, and that he belonged in the Army. He expected to be put to the test. He knew that he was going to be immersed in a highly stressful place with others who wanted to put him to the test, to see what he could handle and what his breaking points would be. One of the first tests Hank had to endure came during the first mail call of basic training.

Drill Sergeant Denny walked into the bay, the walls of which were lined with bunks, and called out, “All right, privates. Everybody gather around. We got some mail here.”

The privates stood at attention all around the bay at the foot of their bunks, their toes on the black line that ran in a rectangle around the bay. Denny continued in a conversational tone. “All right, privates. We’re gonna be livin together for a long time. If I pronounce your name wrong, be sure to let me know. I need to know how to say your name when I’m trying to yell at you.”

Some of the privates exchanged smiles at each other, responding to the lightness of Denny’s quip and the expectation of letters from their families and friends back home they would soon be getting.

Denny began calling out names. “Private Smith.”

“Here, Drill Sergeant!”

“Here you go. Private Anderson, here is your mail.”

Finally, Denny got to Hank’s mail. “Private MANdale” he called out.

“That’s Private Mondale, Drill Sergeant,” Hank casually responded.

Denny stopped where he stood in front of Hank and turned to face him straight on. He leaned in so that he was only a couple inches from Hank’s face. Hank could see the redness blooming on his cheeks. Then, Denny yelled. “You don’t tell me how to say your fuckin name!”

Denny threw all of Hank’s mail over his shoulder and out into the kill zone. The kill zone was the rectangular center of the bay. The floor of the kill zone had to be kept exceptionally clean at all times, and the drill instructors required the privates to maintain the highest shine possible on the kill zone floor. No one was allowed into the kill zone; while in the bay, the privates had to stay behind the black line, and when they stood at attention, during mail call, for example, they all had to keep their toes on the line so as not to inadvertently enter the kill zone. The only time a private would be allowed into the kill zone was when he had been called into it. Hank was just about to be called into the kill zone. He was about to be smoked for the first – and last – time.

“If you want your mail that you so desperately want to read, Private MANdale, you will go into the kill zone and retrieve it!” Denny snapped. “But you owe me, Private MANdale. You owe me twenty-five pushups for each letter!”

There were over ten letters in the pile that lay spread out in the kill zone where Denny had tossed them. Hank ended up doing over two hundred and fifty pushups for his mail that night. At one point, he almost quit and wanted to tell Denny that he would get the remaining mail the next day. But, he stuck it out, endured the punishment for having insulted the lead drill instructor, and received his mail.

From that point on all throughout the rest of his time in basic training, Hank resolved two things: first, that he would never again speak out of turn to a drill instructor, because, as he had

learned after the mail call incident, not doing so was all part of the test involved in developing the attributes of a soldier that came from basic training. Not speaking out of turn was a way for him to deflect the drill instructors' attention away from him so that they did not know his name. He had learned early in basic training that if a drill instructor does not know your name, then you were doing well. Second, he vowed to become a valued member of the team.

It was not hard for Hank to meet his first resolution. He followed orders and stayed under the radar after the mail call incident with Drill Sergeant Denny. There was another time later in basic training, during the final rifle qualification, which had caused Hank to wonder if he was being singled out again by a drill instructor. Throughout basic training, all privates had to show an extreme amount of respect to higher ranking soldiers and they had to be extremely disciplined. Extreme respect and discipline were parts of the military culture that were infused into basic training from day one. So, when Hank was in a foxhole firing his rifle at the target downrange, and Drill Sergeant Van Wieren walked up and sat next to the foxhole and began talking with him, he was quite unsure of how to react to the drill sergeant's questions. Van Wieren asked Hank if he had played football and what position he played. Hank told him, and Van Wieren had replied that Hank reminded him of himself when he was Hank's age. Hank was taken off guard by how personal Van Wieren was being with him. After all, no drill instructor had ever spoken with him like this before, and he was not used to it. This kind of personal interaction between a drill sergeant and a private was just not something that happened. Hank just answered his questions and felt rather confused by the interaction. When Van Wieren left his side at the foxhole, Hank felt proud because he had reminded this person, who had been successful in the military, of himself. The unsolicited and at first awkward interaction with Van Wieren had given Hank a boost of confidence during the time he was learning to become a

soldier. In addition to feeling pride and confidence from interaction with his superior, Hank felt that day like he was being recognized as a member of the team.

While it was not difficult for Hank as an individual to stay on the good side of the drill instructors by flying below their radar, what made it difficult was that if one person on the team offended, then all had to be punished for that singular offense. This kind of punishment represented a breakdown of the team that basic training was there to form and solidify. Privates began to resent the one who had caused the punishment in the first place.

This resentment began to manifest itself when Hank overheard the drill instructors one evening joking with each other and with other soldiers in the platoon about whether they had bought their tickets for fight night. What this meant was that privates who did not get along with each other, for whatever reason, whether the actions of one brought punishment to all or one private snitched on another for having contraband, would settle their differences by fist fighting during unsupervised time. There were sanctioned ways for privates who had differences to come to terms with each other, but a fight between privates during unsupervised time often led to punishment for the entire platoon and, sometimes, dismissal from the service. Hank did not think fighting like this was going very far toward building a team, a cohesive unit, and, besides, he did not want to be punished along with everyone else for someone else's mistake.

What Hank did the next time he heard the rumor of an upcoming fight night between privates was talk to the two men who were about to fight and suggest that they try something else to settle their differences, something else that would not cause the drill instructors to come down on the entire group. Maybe they should have a pushup contest instead of a fist fight; no, the drill instructors made them do pushups all the time. When Hank suggested they arm wrestle to settle their grievance, the idea instantly took off. Not only did the two privates who were about to fist

fight arm wrestle each other to settle the score; pretty soon, everyone in the platoon was arm wrestling, and more often than not for fun. Hank ended up beating everyone in his platoon at arm wrestling. Not only was he known as the arm wrestling champion of the 1460$^{th}$, he was also known as the one who had the great idea of taking something negative, people fighting and getting others in trouble and bickering with each other, and turning it into a positive event where everyone had fun and got to know each other. The group also began to bond together and form the cohesion and trust that is essential among the soldiers these privates were learning to become.

Hank did well in basic training that summer, because at graduation that fall, as he was introducing his parents to one of his drill sergeants, the drill sergeant replied "He did a good job because I don't know who he is." Hank finished his senior year of high school and then went to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, for six weeks of Advanced Individual Training, or AIT. Hank's military occupational specialty, or MOS, for which he was training at Fort Leonard Wood, was as a motor transport operator. His job would be to drive military vehicles and transport cargo and personnel. Hank had enjoyed driving and working on vehicles, so this MOS seemed like a good fit for him at this time in the service.

*Deploying as a Replacement*

After he had completed AIT at Fort Leonard Wood, Hank returned home and started working with a recruiter stationed at the local National Guard Armory and spent one weekend each month at training drills. While at a weekend training drill, an officer called Hank up to the office and sat him down in front of the first sergeant. The first sergeant leaned forward across his desk and handed Hank some papers. He told him to read them.

Hank read the papers, then put them down on the desk and leaned back in the chair.

“Well,” the first sergeant said after Hank had finished reading. “What do you think about it?”

Hank was somewhat taken off guard by the first sergeant’s question and not quite sure how to respond just then. “What do you mean, ‘what do I think about it’?”

“Are you gonna go?” the first sergeant asked.

The papers were orders to active duty.

“Well, yeah, I kinda have to go, don’t I?” Hank replied.

The first sergeant sat back and folded his arms. He looked directly at Hank. “No,” he said. “You can elect to stay here, but we’re probably gonna kick you out.”

When he had enlisted, the 1460th Transportation Company, Hank’s home unit, was already in Iraq, and he had expected to be deployed sooner or later. American ground forces had entered Iraq just a month before Hank had joined the Army National Guard, and he quickly accepted the orders. He had enlisted for a reason, and he was ready to go. He had been pulled as a replacement for one of seven soldiers who, for whatever reason, was unable to complete the required training prior to mobilization with the 1436th Engineer Company based in a city across the state.

While active duty itself had not necessarily surprised Hank, being pulled as a replacement for another company did. He could not help but feel he was just a body being inserted into a vacancy left by someone whom he did not know. He did not feel that he belonged with the 1436th. The reason why he did not feel as though he belonged with the unit he was deploying with was because units ordered to active duty go through the training period together prior to mobilization. The training builds camaraderie, trust, and cohesion among the members of the unit. As a replacement, he would not have formed a bond with a battle buddy nor a support

system with the others. Besides, the 1436th was already in Iraq, so Hank had entirely missed the train up with the unit prior to deployment.

However, Hank was not the only replacement for the 1436th; there were six others who had been pulled. One soldier was from the 1460th and five others had been pulled from across the state of Michigan. Soon after he had received his orders, Hank and the other replacements went to El Paso, Texas, for training prior to their deployment to Iraq. While in El Paso, Hank and two other soldiers from the replacement group, Leigh and Josh, became close. The three of them formed their own support system for one another and were able to forge some semblance of unit cohesion among themselves.

*Iraq, Construction, and Mortars*

The overwhelming heat slammed into Hank full on the moment he stepped off the plane in Iraq in the early morning darkness. He felt like he had walked directly into a gigantic oven with the thermostat turned to broil with the door closed. In the midst of the noise and confusion of landing in country for the first time emerged a soldier who approached the group of replacements with their assignments with the 1436th. The small group that had formed to give each other support was about to be split up. Leigh was ordered to supply, Josh to second platoon, and Hank to first platoon.

Because he had missed out on the team-building exercises with the 1436th as a replacement, he did not feel welcomed when he had joined the company in Iraq. He felt that the others were being aloof and stand-offish toward him because he was new and nobody knew who he was or what he was like. It just did not feel like a friendly atmosphere because he did not feel like he had become part of the team. On top of not feeling like he was a welcome member of the team, he had just walked into a combat zone. Before Hank had even set his bags down, the base

was being mortared. He met the others in first platoon as they were rolling out of their beds and scrambling to their stations while the alarm blared over all of the chaos. So, the stress of waking up to mortar rounds falling just outside of the wall at five-thirty in the morning probably contributed to Hank's not receiving a warm welcome from the others. But he still could not shake the feeling that he did not really belong with this unit because he had missed out on everything that leads up to it being a unit. He missed being with the others from the 1460th, with whom he had trained and prepared. He missed his home unit.

Hank soon settled into the barracks with two roommates, one of whom convinced Hank that he was quite intelligent because he solved a Rubik's Cube Hank had bought prior to his deployment within five minutes of Hank handing it to him. The other roommate convinced Hank that he was a slob who played video games at all hours of the night and, when he did sleep, snored so loudly that Hank would have to throw a stress ball at his face to get him to stop.

Hank worked on a couple of big construction jobs as a truck driver during his first deployment to Iraq, driving five-ton dump trucks loaded with dirt. One of his first big jobs was at Abu Ghraib, and their mission was to expand part of the prison located there. An advance party had already gone in and moved all of the equipment the group would need to the job site at Abu Ghraib, and Hank's crew were to be flown in. They would then convoy to the job site at the prison. The crew left the barracks and boarded a Chinook helicopter in the middle of the night. Hank dozed off, but was suddenly startled awake by the sound of all three gunners aboard the helicopter firing rounds toward the ground below. Hank did not realize it until after the helicopter had landed that he had just had his first experience of being shot at while in an aircraft.

Hank's first experience with the effects of mortar attacks came while on the job site at Abu Ghraib. His crew had arrived for work one day, and there had been a major mortar attack on the prison compound the night before. During the daily briefing, the commanding officer informed the group of the attack and told them all that there was a high probability that body parts would be lying around the work area and that the crew should keep their eyes open.

After work that day, he and his crew relaxed and enjoyed their time away from the job site by watching a movie at the compound at which they were staying while working on the prison expansion. In the compound was a room that had been set up with stadium style seating and a movie projector with a screen. Hank and his crew were watching some movies in the room when they heard an explosion; then, the percussion hit them. They all looked at each other and then went back to their movie without thinking too much of the explosion outside. Not thirty seconds later, another explosion, followed by the percussive thump. Dust rolled into the room through the rooftop windows. This explosion was much closer than the other one had been. The crew looked at each other and, not saying a word, got up and left the room for the safety of the bunker located down the corridor from the movie room.

That was the last mortar to fall that day and later, outside of the compound, Hank and the others found where the last rocket had hit, probably within only fifty meters or so of where they sat watching the movie. The rocket had hit the very top of the compound wall, and it appeared to him at the time that that if the rocket would have hit a bit higher from whatever direction it had been fired from, then it probably would have gotten over the wall and into the compound, potentially causing casualties to the people inside.

None of this -- the mortar attacks, the risk of casualties, being shot at while in an aircraft -- was outside the norm of the combat zone, and Hank had been trained for these normal and

anticipated combat events. His training allowed him to respond automatically to such situations without having to think and analyze what was happening. He just knew what to do, as did the others around him. While someone who has not been trained to expect such events while in a combat zone might wonder how anyone can function in such extremely frightening and dangerous situations, Hank, while he was in Iraq, thought of them as nothing much more different than driving to work or school every day. There was the expectation of being shot at in this particular environment, and shot at constantly, that followed Hank through his first tour. It was not a matter of whether he would be shot at or would feel the percussive thump of a mortar landing close to him, but when.

*Iraq, Road Repair, and IEDs*

After the job at Abu Ghraib had been completed, Hank was reassigned to a crew that had been tasked with repairing roads. Sometimes, the damage they had to repair on a road had been caused by IED explosions, the damage from which ranged from nothing more than a pothole in the road to a crater. Other times, the damage they had to repair had been caused by heavy use or other reasons. Hank's crew travelled around quite a bit doing road repair and he got to see much of the country while he was with the crew during his first deployment. One road job in particular involved a washout near a canal that ran through a small village a couple of miles outside of the base. The crew had constant contact with the local people while they were repairing the washout and most of them were happy with the work the crew was doing because the washout was threatening the two roads that ran in and out of the village. Hank learned a lot from the engineers on the job, about how earth could be built up and preserved so as to prevent a washout from happening again.

Hank's job with the crew was to operate a military-grade metal detector that he had been trained to use a couple of weeks prior to starting the washout job. Hank would drive out to the job site, suit up in protective clothing, and sweep the area before the crew began work for the day. For some time during the repair job, this routine seemed to be nothing more than a formality because there was little threat of an IED being planted at the job site, given how the repair was benefitting the local people.

One day, though, when the crew arrived at the washout site, they immediately noticed that the site had been disturbed. The tools and some of the smaller pieces of equipment they had left at the site were all gone. There were footprints in the freshly moved dirt all around the site. The children from the local village arrived each day shortly after the crew did for candy, food, or water, and, when they showed up that day, the interpreter asked them who had been there disturbing the work site. The children answered "Ali Baba," the term Hank had heard them use before to refer to a bad person.

The washout had been built up about half way, and the crew noticed that a hole had been dug in the soft earth bank of the ditch they had been building. An odd smell of Sulphur hung in the air around the site.

"Mondale!" the platoon sergeant called. "Get down there and see if there's anything in that hole."

After he had suited up and prepared the mine sweeper for use, Hank began walking slowly toward the hole in the ditch bank. He did not feel comforted by the fact that everyone else on the crew were standing far away. The closer he got to the hole, the more pungent the smell of Sulphur became. His nerves tingled with each uncertain step he took forward, the smell becoming even more overpowering. As he swung the metal detector back and forth over the

ground, it began to beep and chirp; his training told him that he had to begin mapping out the area until the detector rang with a solid tone. Then, he would be able to guess the approximate size of the object the detector was hitting upon buried below the surface. From the tone, he guessed he had found a 155mm round, which insurgents had routinely used as IEDs. The only thing Hank could think of at that moment was just everything going black.

He informed the others of his discovery and they all immediately evacuated the area and called in the Explosive Ordinance Disposal. They had to cordon off the area and remain approximately five hundred meters away from the area as the EOD, fully outfitted in a bomb suit like the kind that Sergeant First Class William James wore in the 2008 movie *The Hurt Locker*, worked. But in this real life drama as Hank experienced it, the EOD probed the area, found the object Hank's detector had located, and then blew it in place. As it turned out, the object was likely not an IED because, had it been so, there would have been a secondary explosion after the primary blast of detonation. Hank did feel relieved that there had been nothing there, and that he had done a good job that day, but the tension of the situation, the not knowing and the uncertainty as he mapped out the site, were as real as ever.

About two weeks later, Hank's company would be hit with an IED on the other side of the canal near their work site at the washout. Surveyors from the company were across the canal and two Humvees went across the bridge to pick them up and bring them back to the work site. Hank was on the other side of the bridge in a five-ton dump truck that the company had converted into a gun truck. He had just climbed into the back of the truck with the gunner to have lunch. Suddenly, there was a terrific explosion just behind them across the canal. As Hank and the gunner looked toward the noise, they saw the two Humvees roll out through a mushroom cloud of dust.

“Fire this thing up!” Hank yelled to the driver.

The gun truck lumbered toward the Humvees, now sitting at a standstill just past where the explosion had occurred, to escort the others to the hospital back at the base. A few hours later, after everything had calmed down, the crew found out that the only person who had sustained injuries in the blast was the medic. A piece of shrapnel about the size of a softball came through the floorboard near where he had been sitting in the rear of the vehicle, hit him in the bottom of his foot, angled upward to the right and tore the turret gunner’s pants, then out through the turret, right in front of the gunner’s face. Hank realized how lucky both men, the turret gunner especially, were to have not lost their limbs, let alone still be alive after the IED blast.

After Hank told me this story of his time on the job at Abu Ghraib and with the road repair crew, I asked him what had been going through his mind at the time when he had been shot at, had experienced the mortar attacks, had found the potential IED with his mine sweeper, and had witnessed the blast that hit the survey crew’s Humvees, all of which were his first real experiences with the effects of combat during his first deployment.

“To be honest with you?” he replied. “Nothing, really. It’s like, ‘Oh. Ok.’” He thought for a moment. Then, “I don’t think much of that stuff hit me until I got home, you know. The realization of what was actually happening.”

*Hank’s First Return Home*

At the age of twenty, Hank returned home from his first deployment to Iraq. On the way back to the States, he had been counseled on what to expect when he returned home. They had warned him that even some of the most routine activities, like taking out the trash, would become

a big deal to him as he learned to live in a setting in which he did not have to be constantly vigilant about his surroundings nor count on someone else to have his back or he theirs.

Initially, during this time of his return from his first deployment, Hank had felt he had no significant problems sliding right back into his life. He was still going to drill once a month, but he also began taking courses at Delta College. He was interested in working as a corrections officer and was eyeing a major in criminal justice. His interest in corrections also led him to landing a job at the local county Sheriff's Department. He had moved in with a friend and had rented a house on the same road on which his parents lived, quite close to where he had lived prior to his first deployment.

But this living arrangement did not last long. Hank had been trained in the military to deliver maximum firepower in return if he was ambushed or found himself in a situation that caught him off guard, such as an IED detonation. Or, if maximum firepower was not an option, to break contact. Just because he was home did not mean that his training had been left behind in Iraq; it was still there, subconsciously, ready to spring into action if the situation called for it -- and the spring was tightly coiled.

His roommate had some friends over to play poker one night not too long after Hank had returned home and had moved into the house. Hank also had some friends over, but not specifically to play poker. They were just hanging out and catching up after having not seen each other during the time he had been away. His roommate and friends asked them to buy in, so they did, and quickly began to play winning hands, which began to upset the others. The play continued, Hank and his friends continued to win, the others' frustration built, words were muttered, and one thing led to another. Before Hank could recognize what he was doing, the dining room table and chairs were lying scattered across the front lawn and he was kicking his

roommate and the others out of the house. This was the moment when Hank began to realize that something might not be normal with his behavior. Lightning-fast reaction without hesitation and heavy-handed retaliation to a threat are normal and expected in a combat zone, but, he began to realize, not so much here, now that he was back to civilian life. This place of conflict had different rules of engagement.

The initial ease of quickly sliding back into civilian life when he returned home from his first deployment began to slow and become difficult, especially when it came to his interactions with his father. Hank felt he had grown up while in the service, and he struggled getting this across to his father, that he was no longer the kid he was prior to his enlistment and deployment to a combat zone. The past three years had changed him in ways that he felt his father did not recognize. Hank felt that his father still wanted to father him, to be a father figure, to give guidance and advice, but that is not what Hank wanted from him at that particular time in his life. Hank did not need what his father thought he needed from him.

Hank returned home from his first deployment certainly more mature, but he was also more mechanically astute because he had learned how to build and repair machinery during his time on the prison expansion job at Abu Ghraib. The deck on a flatbed utility trailer he had bought shortly after he had returned home needed to be replaced, so Hank bought some new plywood and began drilling and tapping holes so that he could bolt the plywood directly to the metal frame of the trailer. His father saw him at work and walked over. He began advising Hank what to do; Hank stopped his work, put down the drill and said, “You don’t realize what I was doin’ where I came from. I don’t need you to guide me on how to drill a hole, put a tap through it, and bolt this wood down. Leave me alone and go do your thing.”

To Hank, the job seemed cut and dry. So, when his father began to break down every step and explain it to him, as though he had never done something like this before, he reacted quickly and told his father to leave him to his work.

Hank's quick reactions to situations in which he felt threatened and his father's inability to see his son as not the kid he was when he left both slowed his initially quick slide back into civilian life when he had returned home from his first combat deployment. But there was something else that made the experience of his time in the civilian world crawl by the longer he stayed within it. When Hank would go out in public, whether it was to the store to pick up groceries or to the mall to shop, he would be hit with a heavy discomforting feeling of uncertainty and panic. The feeling of anxiety would become so uncomfortable that he would just get in and out, completing his initial purpose quickly, and then leave.

His anxiety would settle in around him during his classes at Delta. Hank had difficulty sitting in his chair for the entire class time and it was hard for him to be in a room surrounded by others whom he did not know and seemingly tightly closed in by them. He felt unsettled and unsure each class meeting. He told some of his friends in the military about the anxiety he had been experiencing in the classroom, and they told him to try smoking a joint every now and then to calm him down. He did so and was both surprised and pleased with how his anxiety evaporated through the calm the drug imposed upon him. He was able to focus while he was in class, but, still being in the Army National Guard, he could not rely on marijuana to ease his anxiety for long.

*Iraq Again and Camp Bucca*

Hank was at drill one weekend and some of his buddies were talking about another unit getting ready to deploy overseas. It did not take long for him to decide. Hank volunteered to go

along with the unit. This would be his second deployment overseas, but he had been back in the civilian world long enough for now and was ready to move out of it, to move on, to leave it behind him. The pull to volunteer for the deployment also had been strengthened by camaraderie; eight of his closest friends who were soldiers were going along. In addition to being with his friends on the upcoming deployment, Hank's course work at Delta College had given him the background in corrections that would be necessary for the job on this deployment. He had hoped to gain the hands-on experience that would help him find work in corrections later as a civilian. Hank finished his classes at Delta College and began training for his eventual arrival with the unit at Camp Bucca in Iraq.

This second deployment had been easier on him than the first because he had been in country before and knew what to expect in terms of the heat and terrain from his first experience there. He had trained with his home unit, the 1460$^{th}$, prior to the deployment and had felt a sense of unit cohesion as a result of the training together. He had not been pulled as a last minute replacement in a different unit as he had been on his first deployment. Hank's position and role had changed by the time he had arrived with his unit at Camp Bucca. Perhaps this is what made his second deployment feel so much easier than the first: Hank felt as though his spot in the unit had been solidified this time around, that he belonged there, that others could trust him to contribute. Now a staff sergeant, others would rely on him to share his expertise and leadership on the job during this deployment.

Camp Bucca was a large internment facility near the Kuwait border, where a number of people had been detained for suspected insurgent activity in the country, and Hank was placed in charge of the Centurion Dig Team. A dig team would perform tasks much like corrections officers do in facilities back home, including searching detainees, their living quarters, recreation

yards, and so on. As part of his leadership role and his educational and job-related background in corrections, Hank was placed in charge of teaching others how to perform their tasks. Hank's teaching technique was to model a certain kind of stance or formation, and then to have his trainees practice the stances and formations in a setting much like a drill in basic training. As the trainees went through the motions, Hank would walk among them and observe. When he would see a trainee having difficulty or doing something in the wrong way, he would go over and show him or her how to perform the task. Hank found meaning and importance in his teaching; by doing so, he believed he was ensuring that each team member knew how to perform all of their tasks correctly for their own protection and for the protection of others.

Through his teaching of the others on the dig team, Hank began to feel the other soldiers looking to him as the go-to person for advice on how to perform the duties necessary for the job on this deployment. He began to feel not so much like a "father figure," but perhaps something more like an older brother in the military family, someone to whom others would come for information or advice on how to carry out their duties. Hank was becoming a leader.

He began to notice other soldiers looking up to him. The other soldiers gave him this respect because Hank was never afraid to be abrasive with others of superior rank if he felt there was a legitimate issue that involved his soldiers. Hank's resolve to do what was right by his soldiers was put to the test not long after he and the team began work at Camp Bucca. This particular job was big and involved all teams at the facility, not just Hank's, in searching prisoners prior to transport. The phone rang in his office not long before the job was supposed to begin.

Hank answered. On the other end was the E7, sergeant first class.

“Hey,” he said. “The Colonel said there was going to be some changes to the operation. But don’t be worried about it. I will talk to you when I get down there.” He hung up.

Hank took the E7’s words to mean that he would come to the tent that served as the base for Hank’s team prior to going out to the job site. About an hour went by. Hank and his crew sat tight, waiting for the E7 to arrive with the amended job orders. Then, the phone rang.

“Where are you at?” demanded the E7.

“We’re still at the dig tent waiting for you,” Hank replied.

“No, I want to talk to you down at the site.” All of the other teams were there except for Hank’s.

Hank said, “We’ll be right down there.”

“No,” the E7 shot back. “You stay put. I’m gonna come down to that tent.”

Meanwhile, Hank assembled his team and told them to get ready to go the site. It did not take long for the E7 to arrive. When he did, he came into the tent screaming, yelling, and swearing, demanding to know why Hank’s team had not gone out to the job site. As he yelled, the E7 used Hank’s first name. Hank yelled back in defense of his team. He believed they had done nothing wrong.

In the Army, it is acceptable for senior ranking individuals to call those of subordinate rank by their first name. It is not acceptable, though, to do so vice versa. As a staff sergeant, Hank was subordinate to the sergeant first class, so there was no violation of rank when the E7 called him by his first name as he was yelling at him. Finally, Hank looked at him and said, “Hey, Sergeant First Class. You wanna talk to me like this? Then you can address me as Staff Sergeant Mondale.” The point Hank was making was that at this moment, the two were not on friendly speaking terms; Hank made it clear to him that, despite whatever protocols were

followed, using his first name during this exchange was not appropriate. Hank was not giving the E7 permission to use his first name.

This just made the E7 even angrier, and the exchange became even more heated. Because his office was located in a large tent, all of Hank's soldiers from the team could hear it as they stood outside waiting for their orders. At one point, Hank cut off the E7 right in the middle of his yelling.

"Just hang on a second," Hank told him. Then, out of the tent he went, walked up to where his waiting team had gathered, and said to them, "You guys make sure you are ready to go. Get on the truck and stand fast." Then, he ducked back into the tent and went right back to yelling as though there had been no interruption at all.

When the E7 and Hank had finished their less than personable exchange about the communication error, it was time for Hank and his crew to move out to the dig site. The crew rode in silence, their attitudes about the upcoming job having been soured by both the sheer scope of the mission, for which they were now late, and by the argument they had just witnessed. Hank rode out to the dig in the back of the transport with his soldiers. As a staff sergeant, he had his own Humvee to use for his personal transportation, but he usually let four others ride in that, so he would join the others in the larger transport vehicle. A staff sergeant riding with the regular Joes, as well as his standing up for them in front of the E7, meant that the others started to look up to him and respect him, not just his rank.

Sometimes, other soldiers came to him just to sit and talk, especially after the exchange with the E7. The others began to see that Hank would defend them and that he would be a good go-to person whenever they felt like they could not talk to anyone else about whatever issue they might have had at the time. Although Hank believed in separating personal time from work time,

that there was a clear line between work and leisure, all the time he spent with other soldiers became personal in a way when he was over there in Iraq. There were times when Hank would just sit and talk with others to relax and hang out to simply enjoy each other's company; there were times when he would look the other way if something had not been done right. Then, there were some more extreme instances that he would feel compelled to attend to as a leader. If a soldier had to be taken to the hospital in the middle of the night to have his stomach pumped because he had drunk several bottles of cough syrup, then Hank would do so if it meant the soldier would be back on the job the next day. Sometimes, the primary reason a soldier would volunteer for service would be to provide health insurance and an income for his wife and family. Sometimes, the wife would meet another man while the soldier was overseas and become pregnant, and Hank would then sit up nights and reassure the soldier to whom this had happened.

The brick that was Hank's leadership role in his unit was being set in the wall and cemented in place. The cement was a mixture of his knowledge of corrections he had brought with him from his college classes, his role as a teacher, his willingness to stand up for his soldiers, and his leadership style. This style facilitated an atmosphere of openness among his soldiers, regardless of whether the openness was about the extremely personal issues they faced or if they simply wanted to enjoy each other's company during their time together at the base away from the job. It was during his second deployment that Hank felt like he had become a leader and had something to offer as such. However, in spite of feeling like his leadership role had solidified his place in the unit, the screaming match with the E7, the anger that bubbled just beneath the exchange, cast a shadow on his accomplishment. He could not let it go.

*Home under the Shadow of Afghanistan*

After the job at Camp Bucca had concluded, Hank and his unit returned home from their second deployment. Hank had rented out his house when he had left for Iraq and Camp Bucca nearly two years earlier, so he had to move in with his parents. Not long after he arrived home, he bought another house. In fact, soon after he had bought the house, he could stand outside and see completely through it because of the extensive renovations he began doing to it. Hank busied himself with renovating the house and with work. His full-time job at the local county sheriff's department was waiting for him when he returned, and he worked the midnight shift at the jail.

Hank continued going to drill once a month as an Army National Guard reserve member. He had been a soldier now for nearly ten years, had two deployments to Iraq under his belt, and he had proven himself to be a capable leader to whom his soldiers looked for instruction and guidance, both in Army matters and in their personal lives. Hank felt a strong sense of accomplishment in his staff sergeant role, especially with the second deployment behind him and so fresh in his memory. Even though he had some difficulty adjusting, especially to living with his parents after he had done and seen so much overseas, he threw himself into his work with renovating his house and his work at the county jail. Being home this second time, though, just felt right to him at this time of his life.

Word came to Hank while he was at drill one month that the 1460th would be mobilizing for deployment. His name was on the roster. This would be Hank's third deployment, this time to Afghanistan, and from the moment he heard about it and the impending train-up down in El Paso, the idea of this third deployment did not sit well with him. He began to question seriously for the first time what he was really a part of in the Army now after ten years of service and two deployments. It was one thing when he was younger and had worked hard and had quickly rose

through the ranks to staff sergeant in charge of his own team of soldiers. The screaming match with the E7 at the dig site at Camp Bucca was still fresh in his thoughts; it seemed to him that things got done mostly through angry outbursts and yelling, and Hank was becoming tired of that facet of military culture. He was also beginning to tire of being told what to do all the time, especially after he had become a staff sergeant. There were times when he had felt like he was being treated like a private, rather than the capable and seasoned senior non-commissioned officer that he was. His thought was that if the officer who was treating him as such could do a better job, then they should let him be a private again, and he would have been happy as he could be.

Hank's questioning of what he was a part of now at this point in his life and Army career was not limited to the screaming and the micro-management; there was a familiar old feeling that had clouded his first deployment and that was now nagging him on the train-up for his third. The 1460$^{th}$ did not have enough soldiers in the unit for this deployment, so other soldiers had to be pulled in from other units across the state, essentially creating a unit made up of a patchwork of other units. This meant that many new people were being introduced, people that had already learned to be part of another team elsewhere and now, with so little time prior to the deployment, had to learn to become part of this one. During the train-up, Hank was not feeling the cohesion among the unit, the camaraderie and the trust that comes from the experience of the time spent living and learning together, just as he had felt when he had been pulled for deployment with the 1436$^{th}$.

Hank's questioning of what he was now a part of as the unit was preparing to deploy to Afghanistan led him to struggle with whether or not he even wanted to stay in the Army. On the one hand, his years in the Army had influenced his decision to go into law enforcement in his

civilian life. That is why he took a job at the local county jail when he had been home from active duty between deployments. The Army had also influenced him to enroll in criminal justice courses at Delta College. The Army also gave to him a sense of duty and responsibility to and for others in his charge, and he had risen through the ranks and had become a good leader. The Army had provided Hank with a sense of structure for his life and a sense of clarity in what was right, essentially a guidebook for how he could live his life.

But he knew that if someone spends their entire career in the Army, they must want to be there, and that feeling of want was something he was becoming sure he did not have with each passing day of pre-deployment training. Everything was adding up for him to not want to stay – the angry exchanges among the officers, the micro-management, the lack of cohesion among the unit – and he began to express his lack of interest in going to Afghanistan.

"We need you," his commanding officer told him. "You've already got two tours under your belt. What about these guys who have never gone?"

"But what about the guy who's already gone twice?" Hank wondered to himself. He understood the need for experienced leaders to be present among those who have never deployed, but he could not shake the feeling that deploying the same person multiple times was a kind of back door draft.

During his physical examination just prior to the unit leaving for Afghanistan, the doctor asked him, "How do you feel about going on your third deployment?"

"Well," Hank replied as he stood up to leave the room. "I'll be honest. I don't wanna go."

"What do you mean?" the doctor asked. "What are you doing here for the exam, then?"

"That's a good question," Hank said as he walked out of the examination room.

He then expressed his lack of interest in going on his third deployment through the chain of command, but the officers told him the same thing: "You're on the roster."

Hank then contacted the VA and had a meeting with a representative, who asked him why he did not want to go.

"I've already gone twice," Hank told the representative. "It's not an easy process to come home from that kind of thing. If you didn't have a job when you left, you have to find one, especially at my age when you're supposed to be leaving your parent's house and doing your own thing."

Hank paused for a moment, then continued. "I've got all this stuff goin on and they wanna take me on a third deployment. I'm working, I'm building my house, and for the third time, I'm just supposed to drop everything in my life and put on the uniform and go drink the Kool Aid?"

Hank knocked the cup right out of the Army's hand. He did not go on the third deployment but, instead, returned home from active duty. This was his final return home and he would be there to stay this time, but it was the most difficult return for him to endure. Even though he had not felt the cohesion among the soldiers in the unit with which he was training for the deployment to Afghanistan, he could not help but feel that he had abandoned them by not going, that he had let them down.

He had to move back in with his parents because the house he had bought and had been renovating was not yet ready for him to occupy; he returned to his full-time job at the county jail working midnight shifts. Even though he was home and settling into a routine at work, Hank was still struggling with his decision not to go to Afghanistan after having gone through virtually all of the pre-deployment training with his unit in El Paso. In spite of feeling like he had let the

others down, though, he believed that being home was right for him. His time in the Army was over and he was ready to move on with his life; it was time for him to reinvent himself. Hank knew that if he stayed in the Army, who he could become would be limited to what the Army said he could become, and the fact of being Staff Sergeant Mondale for the foreseeable future did not sit well with him. Still, he could not shake the feeling that perhaps he had not made the right decision to return this last time, even though it felt like the thing he had to do. The internal conflict in which Hank was engaged began to expand outward into his interactions with others.

The high standards with which Hank had performed tasks in the Army were still meaningful to him and were informing his work on the job at the jail. He had just come home from the train-up with his unit, so he would become extremely frustrated when his coworkers were not pulling their weight on a shift. In the Army, it was crucial that everyone work as a team and that everyone watch out for each other. One night, Hank had been at the back of the jail and, after finishing his tasks there, approached the door to the front office to request that the officer at the desk buzz him in. He looked through the thick glass window to see the officer passed out asleep at the desk on the other side, and it appeared to Hank that the officer's radio had not even been turned on. His coworker's lack of vigilance and adherence to standards while on the job seemed sloppy to Hank, and he became increasingly frustrated with his coworker's behavior on the job and attitude toward it. Whenever he found his coworker sleeping or not upholding his duty, the frustration Hank would feel would become so overwhelming that he would leave work in the middle of his shift. He would simply write some vacation time for himself, then take off for the nearest bar and drink the rest of the night. It was when he was at the bar after taking off from work that he began to get into trouble with fighting.

After leaving work one night out of frustration and arriving at the nearest bar in town, Hank became bothered by the way another man had been behaving around a group of friends he had met up with there. Hank informed the man of his displeasure and gave him at least two different opportunities to walk away that night; the man refused, and he and Hank found themselves outside in the parking lot taking swings at each other. A crowd of others had followed them outside into the parking lot and were cheering them on. Hank had been in training only a few weeks prior to this, and the man was soon fighting an uphill battle. It did not take Hank long to neutralize the threat. Then, Hank, the troublesome man, and the others all went back inside and finished their drinks, then left.

The next day at work, Hank had to sit down with his sergeant and disclose what had happened. As he informed the sergeant, Hank watched him the whole time, reading his reaction to the story that unfolded in front of him. Hank braced himself for the write-up that he expected to come from his words, or, worse, "You're fired." Instead, the sergeant grabbed his glasses, pulled them slowly off his face, and started laughing. "So," he chuckled. "Old Georgie got his ass kicked, huh?"

As it turned out, Georgie had been in and out of the county jail over the years, and the sergeant had asked Hank to write a report in case Georgie ever came back and tried to seek some kind of retribution.

Hank was not exactly sure what to think about not facing some kind of disciplinary action for the fight, but he did not question it. It was not long, though, before the frustration with the sloppy adherence to standards on the job crept back to cause him to leave work for the solace of the local bar, just down the street from the county jail. Hank sat down at a table with his drink and soon overheard two young men at the table next to him talking badly about the local police.

Hank had no patience for this kind of talk. He did not even know what the young man had said specifically, but Hank hit his breaking point, spun his chair around, and, arm extended, thumped him in the chest with the side of his hand.

Everyone in the bar turned to look.

"You need to shut the fuck up!" Hank exclaimed.

The bar seemed to await the young man's rebuttal.

"You need to shut the fuck up!" he said, mimicking Hank's words.

Hank cautioned him. "You don't wanna do this. I'm the real deal."

"Well," he said. "Let's go outside, then."

They walked outside and stood facing each other.

"Thank you," the young man said.

"What are you thanking me for?" Hank asked. When he got no reply, Hank got right up into his face like a drill sergeant, the bill of his hat touching the patron's forehead. "What the fuck are you thanking me for?" Hank demanded, moving forward slowly while the young man backed up to a brick wall.

"For being so stupid!"

The two exchanged some more words, but neither took a swing at the other. Suddenly, Hank heard someone yell behind him. When he turned to look, a fist seemed to come out of nowhere and landed squarely on Hank's forehead, between his eyes. The young man's friend had snuck up on Hank and had ambushed him. Both of them were now standing in front of Hank, his back against the brick wall. He grabbed both young men in a bear hug, but then his feet went out from under him. It was winter outside, and a slick glaze covered the asphalt of the alley outside of the bar. Hank regained his feet and kicked at one of the young men, but slipped on the ice and

lost his balance again and fell backward over a trash can. As he fell backward, he grabbed the man and brought him down on top of him. Hank's arms flailed as he tried to land a fist on either of the men, it did not matter to him at that point which one; he was unable to see because blood had run down from his forehead into his eyes. He was beginning to feel winded with both men on top of him in a tangle of limbs and angry words.

Hank felt someone, a bystander perhaps, grab his arm. "Let them go," he said. Hank did so, and all he could hear were feet hitting the pavement as they ran off down the alley and away into the winter night. He got up and walked over to a snowbank. A group of bystanders had gathered and were watching Hank as he scooped some snow into his cupped hands and rubbed it over where he had been hit. The cold soothed the ache of his wound. He could see the snow was red in the low alley light and he threw it down. Hank turned toward the group of people as he walked toward where the young men had ran off. The people in the group looked at Hank as he approached, and then parted like a wave down the middle as Hank walked through them, intent on finding them.

The city police drove by soon after the fight had ended, which signaled to Hank that his pursuit of the two young men was over. He stopped at a nearby gas station, bought some Super Glue, and glued his forehead shut. Then, he went home.

Hank went in to work a couple of days later with a cut between his slightly blackened eyes, and told his sergeant about the fight that had happened in the alley outside of the bar a couple of days before. His sergeant in turn told the jail administrator, who appeared during Hank's shift a few nights later. Hank knew that he was there to speak with him about the fight, because a person of his status does not need to be at the jail in the middle of the night.

Hank, his sergeant, and the administrator all went downstairs to talk about what had happened. After Hank had recounted what had happened, the administrator said, “We have insurance available for you to take some time off if that’s what you feel you need.”

“That’s, that’s exactly what I need,” Hank replied gratefully. “I need to take some time off and regroup.”

*Learning to Let Go*

Hank’s time away from the county jail gave him time to finish renovating his house and to move out of his parent’s house. The personal leave also gave him time to think about and to reflect on the past few years of his life. He began to feel that being in the civilian world was simply a way to be let down by others. In the Army, he had been highly trained to be the best of the best, to rely on each other, and there were rules, regulations, and high standards that were upheld and enforced. Meeting standards was expected of everyone in the Army. If a soldier did not follow a rule or did not meet a standard, there were repercussions for failing to do so. The standards of the civilian world seemed like bullshit to Hank because so often they had not been upheld, or, if they had been, they were upheld loosely. There always seemed to be a loophole.

He kept thinking about his co-worker at the county jail who would sleep on the job and there would be no repercussions for doing so. To Hank, the sleeping coworker was no longer a valued member of the team. In fact, that person was putting his partners at risk, as well. Hank believed that he should be able to trust his coworkers in case a life threatening situation occurred on the job. But how could he trust someone who was sleeping? The jail administrators were putting others at risk also because they were not enforcing the standards of the workplace. Hank had seen what would happen in the Army if someone had been caught dozing during guard duty.

The repercussions ranged in severity from being reduced in rank, losing pay, performing extra duty, all the way down to having to do pushups.

But it was not the sleeping coworker and the lack of enforcement of job standards in particular that had caused Hank's struggle with his job at the jail; it was his readjustment to life in the civilian world in general, his learning to let go of so much that had become a part of him and that had shaped him and his life up to this point. He was in the midst of reinventing himself and part of this reinvention meant that he had to learn to relax some of the standards he'd had because they simply did not mean as much here as they did there.

Although reinventing himself meant learning to let go and relax some of the standards toward which he strived but that others did not value as he did, reinvention also meant perhaps withholding from others the fact that he was a veteran. The more he thought about it, the more he began to wonder if others viewed him in certain ways because of his veteran status.

One night, during his rounds at the county jail, an inmate spoke to him. "Hey, Mondale," the inmate called to Hank from his cell. "Why don't you just go back to squeezing triggers?"

Hank had not lost much sleep over what the inmate had said, but something about it did linger in his thoughts, and during his time away from work, his thoughts would turn to those words; it was as though the words meant that he was only cut out for soldiering, not for life and work in the civilian world, and that he should go back to the only thing he knew how to do and had done well. Hank was bothered by the presumption in the inmate' words that veterans only went into the service because they were not smart enough to go to college, that they had had no other options, that he would not be good at anything else.

As Hank continued to reflect on how others saw him in the civilian world, he became bothered by how others wanted to thank veterans for their service. This presumption on the part

of others that veterans wanted to be thanked, although well intentioned, concerned Hank because the act of thanking might inadvertently trigger memories of experiences there that the veteran had been trying to forget now that he or she was here once again.

But civilians were not the only ones who were at fault for ascribing meanings to a veteran's identity that were not quite accurate; some veterans played a part, as well. Hank believed that some veterans were painting a ridiculous picture of themselves by lying about what they did while in the service or, if not outright lying, then embellishing their experiences. Probably no one would know the difference, anyway. So, the picture that some veterans would paint of their experiences there would be more like the Hollywood version than what had actually happened.

During his time off from work, Hank was able to research his GI Bill benefits and found out that he could attend college full time and earn a livable wage through a work study program offered at the college. When he had felt well enough to return to work at the county jail, he used up his remaining vacation time, resigned from his full time position there, and started college once again. He still worked for the jail, but on an on-call basis only, which was a much more convenient arrangement for his schedule and for his project of reinventing himself.

The credits Hank had earned at Delta College a couple of years prior transferred to Mid-Michigan Community College when he enrolled there at the start of the winter semester to pursue an associate's degree in criminal justice. He had taken classes at Central Michigan University the previous fall, but the drive from Gladwin County to the university campus each day was a bit far, and he had no intention of moving south to Mt. Pleasant. MMCC also offered lower cost tuition and Hank liked the smaller class sizes that a community college like MMCC offered. He also liked that the work study program and GI Bill benefits, along with his

occasional work at the jail, provided him with enough income to keep up with payments on his house and ten acres, but he did feel some pressure because he had to be enrolled at least three-quarter time and had to earn passing grades in all of his classes. If he failed a class, he had to pay the tuition cost out of pocket because his benefits would not cover tuition in that case.

*Struggling to Let Go*

Going back to college seemed right to Hank this time and he saw his return to the classroom as part of his project of self-reinvention. Although he felt like he was working toward something through his classes and his work study time, he tried not to set his expectations too high; expectations, Hank believed, were really just a way to let himself down. He soon began to feel some of the old frustrations. And he found himself struggling with some new frustrations, as well.

In lab one day, a student, one of Hank's lab partners for the semester, walked by him and belched loudly. Hank looked right at him and said, "Did you ever think about turning your head the other way, or maybe belching into your elbow?"

The student laughed and smiled as he looked at Hank and walked past him.

"I'm fuckin' serious."

The other students in class overheard what Hank had said and turned and looked at him. The student's face became flushed as he stood silently in his spot. After a moment, the class resumed and the students went back to their lab projects, focusing on their work for the day.

After class, Hank's lab partner caught up with him in the hall and said, "Man, I didn't know what was about to happen in there." Apparently, the way Hank had tried to get his point across to the other student about what Hank took as his lack of respect for others had caused a moment of tension in class that he had not witnessed. But Hank's only intention had been to

emphasize his point to the other student about being respectful, something which he saw lacking among students in some of his other classes.

Hank had spent a number of years among others in a system that he came to see as structured in large part on respect. While he did not respect every person during his years in the Army, he did respect the person's rank. Being in this place, school, once again where respect is not readily given was difficult for him to navigate. While he was not afraid to go toe to toe with an instructor who overstepped his or her authority in the classroom by refusing to listen to what students had to say, Hank believed that an instructor deserved a basic level of respect from their students from day one. The instructor had that title for a reason. He was puzzled when students would sit with their laptops open and earbuds in during the entire class period and then would not be able to answer an instructor's question when she had called upon them. Unlike the Army, there were virtually no repercussions in college for showing what Hank believed to be a lack of respect for other students in the class and for the instructor.

There were times when Hank did not feel as though he could relate to most of the other students in his classes. The naiveté of some students became apparent to him during class discussions of current issues. In his social work class, students were talking about the salary disparities between professional athletes and those of government employees, such as police and soldiers. No one in the room seemed to know much about police and soldiers' salaries, nor why there could be a gap, so Hank explained some of the reasons for the disparity by pointing out how athletes' salaries are driven by consumption and how those of police and soldiers are supported by taxpayers. Hank was able to speak about issues such as this because he had lived and experienced them; he had been both a solider and a police officer and had a worldly understanding of both roles, a kind of worldliness he believed the other students in his classes

lacked, for the most part. They could sit down and read about some issue, but if they never got out in the world and experienced the issue for themselves, to see it, to get their hands dirty digging through it, then Hank felt like they really did not understand it and did not have much to really say about it.

He began to think that maybe he should step down and let others who had not had a chance to talk through concepts to do so during class discussions. Group work, like discussions in class, is common in college, so, when it came time to form groups as part of a few projects in his humanities class, Hank would sit back and see who would come forward to provide leadership. He wished for his days in the Army when it came time to form groups in class; there had been a defined leader, rank, and structure among group members there. The others in the group would have to carry out whatever orders the leader had given them. Here, he consciously would not volunteer to lead within the group, preferring instead to see who would step up to do so. Hank had resigned from his job at the jail because he did not want to be in a leadership position anymore; because he was in the process of leaving the Army, he did not see himself as the boss anymore. He had come to college to step out of that role, and, if someone else did not have the experience being a leader, he was more than happy to oblige them and to give them an experience of which he had so much but that they had not yet had.

*Still Being Held Close*

I remember the last conversation Hank and I had about his experience as a student attending a small rural community college. Every now and then, as Hank spoke, he would become flustered and tongue-tied; something was bothering him and he was struggling to articulate it to me. I sat back and let him speak openly and freely.

That day, he talked about how he wished he had someone holding him accountable for meeting standards, both outside of the classroom and inside of it. He spoke about the closeness of the Army when he had been going to drill once a month during his time at home between deployments and, of course, the closeness of the Army when he had been immersed in it during his deployments. The Army had held him close and his place within it had been solidified through his training, experience, leadership, and rank. His days were structured and his work clearly specified and there were standards he and his team were expected to meet. If the standards were not met, then he and his team would be held accountable and face repercussions.

The structuring of his days was entirely up to him now that he was in college full time and working at the jail at nights only when he was needed; when he was not in class or doing work study on campus, he would be home essentially doing whatever he wanted to do with his time. He was faced with endless decisions about what to do. There was no one telling him what needed to be done, something that he had gotten used to over the years. None of his school work would get done at home because he felt no obligation to do it because no one was there holding him accountable to do it.

In college, some of the assignments were open-ended and up for interpretation, especially in his humanities class where students were expected to create meanings from human artifacts and to debate these meanings, to contest them. Academic work in the humanities is characterized by multiple perspectives, complexity, and uncertainty. Hank told me about his frustration with the class, that there was no clear definition of what students were supposed to do in the class, and that, at first, he was sure he was going to bomb the class. His frustration was not with his assignments, though. He was passing the class with an A. He had just completed the midterm essay for the class and had aced it, which had surprised him. The problem for him was that he

still did not feel as though he understood the material, so he did not feel that he deserved the high score.

As Hank continued to talk that day, it became clear to me that he was preoccupied with something that had happened recently. It turned out that he had been putting the final touches on a four-page paper that had been due in class earlier that day, and his computer had crashed. The paper was lost. He told his instructor, who was flexible and understanding. He told him that it would be fine to turn it in later in the week with no points deducted. But Hank could not shake the fact that the paper had been due today and that it was not in his instructor's hands. No points being deducted did not relieve him, although he was grateful for the extension. Just because his instructor said it was acceptable to turn in the paper late did not mean that it was acceptable to him. He did not meet the deadline that had been set; to Hank, this met that he had not met the standard.

Perhaps worse for him was that there was no one holding him accountable for not having met the standard of having the paper in by the deadline. It was this that he could not shake and that seemed to be bothering him so much that day we last talked. What Hank had wanted was for the instructor to enforce the late policy.

"If it's in the syllabus," he said. "You're supposed to take my twenty points because it's late. It's just like I was mentioning about work." Hank was pointing back to our conversation the previous week about the relaxed standards at the jail when he was working there full time and the same old frustration that had eventually pushed him to resign.

But Hank had no intention of resigning from college; doing so would mean resigning from his project of reinventing himself. With his Army discharge nearing, he was fully immersed in his project of becoming, setting goals for his future through his education and letting roots

sink deep into the soil of the ten acres he owned along with his house in Gladwin County. His volunteer work was connecting him with the community, as well.

As he got up to leave that day, when our conversation had finished, we made tentative plans to talk some more the following week when Hank casually mentioned to me that his thirtieth birthday was just around the corner. I wished him a happy birthday and gave him a little reassurance. The way he mentioned “thirtieth birthday” made me feel as though he needed some.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “Thirty is a lot like twenty-nine, just with a higher number.” He laughed, we shook hands, and he walked out the door and down the hall carrying more with him than just his backpack.

# Chapter 6 Toward a New Understanding of Veterans' Experience of Return

## *From the Aesthetic to the Expository: The Stories of Four Veteran Students Revisited*

In the preceding four chapters, I shared the stories of four people – Lolo, Philip, Dan, and Hank – who voluntarily joined the United States Army, were trained as soldiers, who experienced combat in Iraq and/or Afghanistan, and who returned to civilian life after their combat tours concluded. Each person was attending the rural campus of Mid-Michigan Community College, where I have taught for seventeen years, at the time I got to know each through a series of conversational interviews.

My hope is that the stories I have rendered about each person are aesthetically pleasing; that is, my hope is that readers find the portraits of their lives beautifully written, compelling, and emotionally stirring. I would like to let the narrative renderings of the hours the veterans and I spent in conversation in the preceding chapters end this dissertation, to stand as they are and to speak for themselves.

There is, however, more that I need to say. I must draw readers' attention toward a social conversation about the aesthetically rendered portraits from the preceding chapters. To do this, I have decided to shift my textual strategy from the aesthetic and literary toward the expository mode in this final chapter. Shifting to the latter textual strategy and foregrounding it seems the best way for me to involve readers in discussion about the storied lives I have presented.

There is a complementary way to think about the preceding aesthetically formed chapters, and to advance that way of thinking about them necessitates this shift to the expository mode. I acknowledge that doing so runs a twofold risk. On the one hand, I run the risk of reducing the multi-dimensionality of the first five chapters to categories. On the other hand, the

expository mode involves the risk of losing the complexity and richness of the aesthetic texts I have created up until this point.

Now that I have acknowledged these risks inherent in the shift from the literary to the expository mode and have placed them out in the open, I believe that I can now move forward with this chapter and engage in a social conversation regarding the stories I have written in a way that will not seem jarring to the reader, nor unexpected. In this chapter, then, I consider their stories of serving and returning from the standpoint of past educative experiences and how such experiences can have significant bearing on present ones as people undertake their life journeys.

As a professional post-secondary educator in the open-access American community college, my ultimate goal in this chapter is to contribute to my field's understanding of veteran college students in transition from the novel perspective of educative experience. No one writing about veteran college students in transition has hit on the fact that there are certain things the military has taught these people, things that are not wrong and that have served them well within that particular context; however, there is no boot camp for the transition back into civilian life. The veterans have learned some habits from their time in the military, habits they are still carrying, that might not serve them well in the transitional context if they are going to progress toward more productive growth in the future. I will say more about this later as I analyze the storied portraits from the preceding chapters.[61]

For now, I briefly summarize their experiences from our conversations in the preceding chapters as a way to reintroduce the participants to the reader before suggesting a particular way

[61] In an earlier draft of this chapter, I claimed that the veterans needed to "unlearn" their military habits during this transitional time of return in their lives. I recognize now that "unlearning" is not a useful claim. To paraphrase Lady Macbeth, what's learned cannot be unlearned. A more useful and generous notion is that of re-learning – given the habits they learned in the military and still carry with them, the veterans, indeed all of us, as I will take up later in this chapter, need to continually re-learn how to belong and participate in a more open, pluralistic, and uncertain world.

of reading and making meaning from the renderings I have made from our lengthy conversations.

*Revisiting Renderings*

All four men[62] had Midwestern roots and, with the exception of Philip, who grew up in a more urban setting, grew up in small towns in the middle region of Michigan's Lower Peninsula, attended school there, and eventually left when they chose to join the United States Army. While the details of their reasons for joining the service are varied – Lolo joined, for example, because the Army promised him financial stability after a layoff and Philip joined because he wanted to walk a similar path as his grandfather had years before, and he believed the Army would provide him with that path – all four shared a similar desire to be a part of something larger than themselves and to encounter a world outside of their familiar Midwestern surroundings.

And go out into the world they did. Each of the four endured basic training and, through their endurance and experiences there, learned how to become soldiers through the education they received from their drill instructors. It was during their time in basic training that each person began to develop a sense of bond and connection with other soldiers as a result of their education in the military. They had to learn how to rely on others, to have their backs, as it were, and others theirs, which would become especially important during life-threatening situations. They learned to adhere to standards often set for them by their superiors, to recognize rank, to carry out orders, and to suffer punishment along with their fellow soldiers when one member of the group erred. Essentially, the men learned what it took to shape them into the soldiers they became, to fit in, which their eventual graduation from basic training certified to them, as well as to their families and to the military into which they had been initiated.

[62] I discussed the maleness of the participants and their stories in Chapter 1.

The world they entered into after joining the military expanded after basic training as Lolo, Philip, Dan, and Hank were ordered into combat in Iraq or, in Philip's case, Afghanistan. The men experienced traumatic events; there was the uncertainty of when the next mortar round would land and how close it would be to them and their units, an uncertainty that hung over them like the dust the mortars themselves stirred upon impact. A vehicle could roll over an IED, or a soldier could trip a wire, and the not knowing of when or where a hidden explosive could detonate fueled the fire of uncertainty. Hank experienced being shot at, and both Philip and Dan had to tend to wounded comrades during battle, and all had to face loss, both the constant possibility of it and the eventual presence of it, while on deployment.

While their deployments brought with them such traumatic events, all four experienced a developed sense of contribution to the group, a sense that each was able to carry his own weight and have others' backs while in the midst of their deployment. Lolo found out what it meant to him to have others trust his judgment after he had spotted the IED rigged to a door of a building in Baqubah, Iraq. Philip gained a sense of having the trust of another through his close work with the company's first sergeant, and Dan taking care to talk with the soldiers underneath him. Hank, too, experienced a heightened sense of fit and contribution when he took on the task of training his soldiers and later standing up for them on the job site when he had felt they had been wronged.

None of the men intended to make a career of the military and eventually left the service. Just as the reasons for joining the military varied for each, each person left for various reasons, including physical injury and the sense that the military was no longer serving them and where they saw their lives going. It is important to note here that there is a deep current of disappointment, frustration, resentment, and disgust with the military that flows beneath the

words at certain moments of each person's account which, at times, bubbles to the surface. For example, Hank developed the belief during his years in the service that the military had let him down, and Philip felt deep disgust toward the way his friend's death in Afghanistan had been handled in such a depersonalized and cold bureaucratic way. But this current of disappointment bubbles up not only during the accounts of military service, but also during stories of return. Each person left the military and headed for home carrying more than just a duffel bag; each carried with him these feelings toward the structure, bureaucracy and, in some instances, hypocrisy of the military, as well as what they had learned there as soldiers.

All four men returned to virtually the same places they had left years before; even though each could have gone anywhere in the world, and Philip did through his months of travel upon leaving the service, each, Philip included, came back to live with their parents or with other family members at home or close by. Their leave-taking from where they had grown up was indeed temporary. The return home was rough for each of them. They had been initiated into the military and had learned to fit and contribute, to belong in mandated ways with others within that specific social organization, but none of them had an initiation back into the civilian world they had left and to which they were returning. Philip's disappointment with the brief transition program the Army offered soldiers returning to civilian life points toward how the military itself seemingly did very little for him to ease his transition.

All of them struggled upon their return. They struggled to relate to family members and friends, who had not experienced what they had. Their quickness to anger, fueled in part by their disappointment with the military and in part by alcohol, would flare and be unleashed on family, friends, or coworkers. They began jobs, but would become frustrated with coworkers who did not adhere to and maintain the standards and accountability they were looking for but that

ultimately did not manifest to them in the ways they were seeking for them now that they were back in the civilian world. They lost jobs, sometimes their homes, and relationships were changed or lost altogether.

Being students attending the rural campus of a community college in Michigan near their homes also was the source of some struggle during their transition to civilian life. All four struggled to relate to the other students in their classes, who had not experienced what they had during their time in the service and on combat deployment. They often had little patience for fellow students because of what they took to be their naïve lack of worldliness and lax work ethic.

But they were also quick to offer help and support to other students, both civilians and veterans, and would often guide class discussions with insights from their military experience. In some ways, being community college students opened a path down which they could navigate their lives now that they were back in the civilian world, whether as a computer technician, an advocate for human rights, or a corrections officer, in the cases of Lolo, Philip, and Hank. Dan saw his college education opening doors to some unknown, but ultimately better, path than the one he had been walking down since he had returned, a path that would lead him to becoming a better person, as he so often said of his time in college.

*Making Meaning of Storied Lives: Some Reading Suggestions*

My hope is that the reader finds each person's story I rendered from the hours of conversation we shared together powerful, compelling, and moving. My goal in writing was to create a storied portrait of each person in such a way that highlighted the range of experiences they had in different contexts of their lives, from prior to having joined the military through their return, and the accomplishments and struggles they had along the way.

*A Range of Possible Readings.* The stories I have written about each person span various genres, as well. Clearly, there are elements of biography in each story, a sketch of the life of each person, their histories, what they did; readers could also read the stories as those of adventure, of young people leaving home, of what happened to them during their voyages, and then their eventual return. The war story is a kind of adventure tale, and the stories I have written can certainly be read like one.

Of course, readers will read the stories in whatever ways they wish and will create meaning from them freely as they interact with the text, bringing to bear on it their backgrounds, interests, and perspectives.[63] While there are multiple ways of reading the four stories I have written about each person, all certainly legitimate and meaningful, I do have an obligation to the people I wrote about and to the reader to suggest a way of reading them so that I can make visible what it is I would like the reader to think about the stories I have written from the accounts I collected.

All research is voyeuristic in the sense that it is a peering into the lives of others, a kind of spying. That being said, I do not want the stories I have written to be simple acts of voyeurism. I have an ethical responsibility as a researcher and writer to guide the reader to see the stories in a specific way; I also have an ethical responsibility to the reader in the sense that I cannot simply dictate the one way of reading what I have written and the meaning that must be made from that.

In addition to biography, adventure, and war stories, the stories I have written about the four men could also be characterized as what is known in literature as the *bildungsroman,* or the

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[63] Scott Carpenter, *Reading Lessons: An Introduction to Theory,* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2000), 142. Reader response theory inquires into how "*different* readers develop *different* interpretations of the *same* material" (italics in the original).

story of education. In this story of initiation, the main character experiences the loss of innocence through the experience of gaining maturity.[64] Initiation is also essential to the mythological hero's journey, in which the hero must experience trials and ordeals, that is, some rite of passage, prior to transformation and return. Joseph Campbell[65] is widely regarded as one of the world's experts on myth and has written widely on the subject, and his insights reveal to us how myth speaks to essential qualities of what it means to be human.

Campbell's concept of the monomyth[66] and the archetypal stages of the composite mythological hero's journey are useful ways of reading the stories I have written. In sum, Campbell's model of the monomyth involves the hero beginning the journey by separating from the common world and embarking on an adventure. The hero crosses the first threshold, and then experiences initiation, or a rite of passage through which the hero is changed and from which he or she gains some kind of reward. Campbell suggests that, ultimately, the hero's sense of being is expanded as a result of this rite of passage. After having undergone the experiences of initiation, trial, and gaining the reward, the hero returns to the common world he had left and bestows upon others the gifts he had gained as a result of the adventure.[67]

*Stories of The Human Struggle to Grow and Find Meaning.* Because the stories I have written about the veterans evoke the archetypal stages the mythological heroes experience during their journeys, from separation/departure to initiation and eventually to return, I would like readers to apprehend the stories I have written as those about the human struggle to grow and to

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[64] J.A. Cuddon, *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory,* (London: Penguin Books, 1999): 81-82.

[65] Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2008).

[66] Ibid, 23.

[67] Ibid, 28-31.

search for a meaningful place to fit in with and to belong with others and to grow. The stories are about people who did not feel they belonged initially when they first joined the military; therefore, the stories about the veteran students are also about belonging and learning to do so. Eventually, though, through initiation, rite of passage, trial, and ordeal, each person learned to belong with others in mandated ways in the military and found a meaningful place of fit, contribution, and trust while there. But even though each person I have written about has returned to civilian life, more specifically, to their lives in the central part of Michigan, there are things they are still carrying with them from their experiences of having learned to belong and contribute in the military. This notion of what they carry with them still raises another way of apprehending the storied lives of the veteran students.

Each veteran student has left the military and is now living the life of a civilian: working, going to school, caring for family and friends, volunteering in their communities, and so on. But this is not to say that the military has left them when it comes to their seeking a feeling of belonging in their civilian lives. There are many moments in the stories of their return that reveal how they still carry with them a strong sense of what it meant for them to belong and to contribute with others in the military, including structure, standards, trust, and accountability, all things the military taught them and that make up part of the rich tapestry of their educative experiences.

Each person inhabits a space in between their lives as soldiers and as civilians, a liminal space.[68] These liminal spaces these people inhabit, especially now since they have all moved on from their time in the military, are neither fully military nor fully civilian, but in a fascinating way, both, simultaneously. Because their past comes to bear on their present in fascinating ways,

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[68] Victor W. Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage,*" *The Proceedings of the American Ethnological Society,* (1964), Symposium on New Approaches to the Study of Religion, 46.

this suggests that the people I have written about are in between; they do not feel as though they belong in the military anymore, nor fully in their civilian lives as workers and as community college students as they are in the process of negotiating movement among and between life contexts. Understanding the in-betweeness of the veteran students in transition I have written about is important to understanding not only their particular experience of being in transition, of struggling to grow and find meaningful places of belonging in life, but also of the human experience.

And this is where the stories I have written about Lolo, Philip, Dan, and Hank deviate in some important and significant ways from the classical myths and the archetypes that are central to the story of the hero's journey I am suggesting as a way of reading the stories of the veteran students. While this way of reading is helpful in guiding the kind of reading I believe the stories evoke, of initiation, rite of passage, trial, and return--for these are elements that speak to important conditions of being human in the sense that we all undertake journeys in our lives and need to learn how to transition from one life context to another--I need to be clear that real life is certainly much more complicated than what these mythic stories suggest. It is simply not adequate to map the archetypal patterns over the lives of the veteran students, or over anyone's life, for that matter, at the risk of romanticizing people's experiences, even fictionalizing them.

The problem with Campbell's monomyth is that people do not simply take up their current life journeys when their past ones end, and then happily proceed on their way. That is, for Campbell, the cycle is singular in nature. These types of transitions happen over and over again throughout our lives, though, and are not singular in nature. Life keeps going.

Our lives require us constantly to take up multiple transitions as life continues, often not waiting for us, unlike the story of Odysseus and his return to a faithful wife and life largely

unchanged from what it was like prior to his departure.[69] The liminal spaces multiply, as well, for us and for those close to us, who find themselves in-between in relation to us during the life journeys we must continuously undertake as we traverse thresholds[70] from one life context to another and navigate through relationships with others. And this is where the concept of educative experience becomes crucial in understanding veteran college students and their experience of initiation into the military and their return to civilian life.

*Finding Significance in the Stories of Initiation, Return and Life Journeys: The Importance of Past Educative Experience in the Present*

An essential point that emerges from the stories I have written about the veteran community college students is that each were given an initiation into the military, but none were given an initiation back into civilian life upon their return to it. The military did an exceptional job teaching each veteran student how to be soldiers, and what they learned about soldiering was important and useful within that particular context. There is evidence in their storied accounts of their experiences in basic training that suggests their receptiveness to what they were learning and how they perceived their learning in that context applying to their functioning within it as contributing members to the group. Certainly, the military taught these men valuable habits that were useful, even necessary, for their fit, growth, and, while on combat deployments, their very survival, within that particular social and life context. The importance of what the men learned while in the military is woven into the tapestries of their stories of their experiences there.

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[69] Homer, *The Odyssey,* Trans W.H.D. Rouse, (New York: Mentor Books, 1937), 253.

[70] Jan Meyer and Ray Land, "Threshold Concepts and Transformational Learning," *Teaching and Learning Research Programs (TLRP) Occasional Report* 4 (May, 2003), 1-14. Not only is the concept of threshold central to Campbell's monomyth and Turner's liminal spaces and the way I am looking at veteran students' return and our lives' journeys; Meyer and Land argue that the concept constitutes a central metaphor to learning in college. Learning from their perspective is seen as a crossing over of disciplinary thresholds.

However, there is much evidence from the storied accounts I have written about each veteran student that suggests that the educative experiences they each had while in the military do not suit them well upon their return to civilian life. When looked at from the perspective of transition, there is evidence that the kind of educative experiences they had while there can be considered as a kind of miseducation now that they are back here.

John Dewey[71] cautioned of the possibility of miseducation when he wrote about the ambiguity of the words "society" and "community" when used loosely. For Dewey, there exists no ideal community tent under which all gather. He recognized the multiplicity of communities, or social organizations, that form and into which they initiate and educate their members so that the members can function productively. Because there are various social groups, ones more open and those more closed and insular, there are various kinds of educative experiences depending on the aims of the group. I share Dewey's concern with the educative experiences members of a closed group can have. While these experiences might well be essential for belonging and growth within that specific group, such experiences could lead to maladaptive habits when one moved outside of that group – or, if one stayed within it and had little to no contact and discourse with others outside of the group.

The veteran students have had the kind of isolated educational experiences within a closed social group which Dewey cautioned about.[72] Viewed from Dewey's perspective, it could be said that the military is a kind of closed social group.[73] It is within this kind of group that members are educated based on the aims of the organization; that is, the kind of learning

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[71] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education,* 82-83.

[72] Ibid, 82.

[73] I must be clear, however, that the military is not a *completely* closed social group; members do have connections and interactions with other groups. The educative aims of the group, though, are closed and reserved just for military group members because of initiation.

experiences are designed to ensure the organization functions and achieves its particular goals. Group members do learn and grow as a result of their learning, but growth is confined to the group and the quality of growth is measured only by the organization's goals. Members of closed social groups tend to be homogenous and learn to become dependent on the organization and to depend on the others within it, and the bonds that solidify their belonging with others within it are limited to few shared interests.

Even though the military did something important to these men, as well as doing a great job of educating them to become soldiers squared away to fit in with others in structured ways and to carry out military aims, orders and combat missions, the problem with all of this is that the military did not do much to educate them for the next stage of their journeys in life. They left the military with little preparation for rejoining the civilian world. All four returned to civilian life carrying much with them from their initiation into the military, the trials they endured, and their educations there, as well as the disillusionment and frustration. However, they carry very little with them to aid them in navigating their lives and relationships with others now that they have laid down arms and have returned. They must re-learn to join and belong with multiple groups now that they have returned, including their families, friends, co-workers, fellow students, and so on.

I now shine a light on the kinds of habits the four veteran students learned while in the military that have contributed to the roughness of their transition back to civilian life by pulling from their stories brief illustrative examples in the next section. I do not "retell" what I have already written; I leave all that in the previous chapters. I simply refer back to various pertinent examples and rely on the reader to fill in the details after having read the narratives I have written about each veteran student. By briefly referencing pertinent examples from the

narratives, I hope to contribute to the conversation of veteran students and their experiences of return by suggesting an understanding of the phenomenon through the lens of educative experience as I have outlined it above.

*The Things They Are Still Carrying with Them in the Present: Past Educative Experiences as Key Insight into Veterans' Experience of Return*

As I think about past educative experiences and the resulting habits of being in the present, I am reminded of Larry, a past student of mine about whom I wrote in the Introduction. Larry had spent years in the Navy and was a veteran of the First Gulf War. Larry told me one day of his experience, speaking in metaphorical terms of his time of initiation as an act of whittling a piece of wood, an intentional stripping away of all that is non-essential to get at the shape of the wood the whittler desires. The education the military provided the men shaped them into the soldiers they became, to fit them within the military organization.

All of the men learned the habits that were consistent with the aims of the military that served them well within that particular context for much of their time of learning to fit, to belong, and to contribute to that social group for its specific and mandated aims. The education they received taught them the habits they needed to carry out orders, to have the backs of their fellow soldiers, and essentially to depend on the organization to provide them with their basic survival needs, including food, housing, clothing, income, employment, and, of course, education. It is evident from the veteran students' stories that they developed specific habits of mind[74] regarding structure, standards, and accountability that they learned through their initiation into the military, a set of habits that are interrelated and that they still carry with them. These interrelated habits have played important roles in their struggle to return to their civilian lives

[74] Jack Mezirow, "Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice," 6.

and grow and flourish now that they are back. Their struggles are rooted in their difficulty with letting go of these habits that do not resonate in the civilian world like they did in the military world.

*Structure.* So much of the men's experience in the military was of the structure the organization used to achieve its specific educational aims; that is, to whittle them into squared-away soldiers to achieve military objectives. While it is true that they would have time to themselves to write letters, play video games, watch movies, work out, and so on, most of their days were structured and organized not by them, but by the military. Their daily activities were predetermined for them and became routine and predictable. All of the veteran students experienced feelings of disorientation when they returned, unsure of what to do with themselves because they had become so used to the military determining for them how to go about their days. Both Hank and Lolo, for example, expressed a desire, even a need, to be told what to do after they had returned, because they had been told what to do for so long, ironically at the same time each was expressing a desire to be individuals again.[75]

In addition to the pre-determined structuring of daily routine, the military has a hierarchical structure of rank and an observable chain of command made tangible through symbols such as the insignia military members wear on their uniforms. Their experience of this kind of structure followed them home, as well. As he sought familiarity in his work at the casino, Dan and some of the other veterans with whom he worked imported the familiar rank structure from the military onto the management, perhaps as a way to create uniformity of their experiences there and here and to navigate through what they saw as bureaucratic inefficiency in their jobs as security guards. Dan's reference to the "cherry lieutenant" manager suggests that,

[75] This particular irony is illustrative of the in-betweeness they experienced during their return.

just because there was rank, there was not necessarily respect for all persons of rank. Lolo, too, sought to impose a structure of rank from his experience in the military onto his life in the civilian world, most noticeably when he spoke of one of his college teachers and how he had felt he had been talked down to, claiming that he would acknowledge the instructor's rank if the instructor acknowledge his, as a student capable of understanding the material if given the opportunity to do so.

*Standards.* At the same time their military experience immersed them within a highly structured and hierarchical organization, all four men had to learn how to attain incredibly high standards of performance to carry out their assigned duties determined for them by their drill instructors. Lolo spoke often of the difficulty he had in meeting some of the standards his drill instructors enforced, and his experience during rifle qualifications stands out as a clear example of attaining the high standards set for him by Sergeant Kehoe. Kehoe, indeed, would stand hard and fast to the standards he had set, refusing to accept anything less than perfect from Lolo and the other basic trainees. Dan, too, spoke of the standards he had to meet during his time in Airborne School and his fear of not being able to do so. Failure seemed not to be an option when striving toward standards.

I should point out here that there is evidence in their stories that each person would push himself to meet military standards, as well, and that they did not always rely on a superior pushing them to do so. This becomes clear from Dan's account of his diet and weight loss while in basic training and Philip's pushing of himself to go beyond the standards of his clerical work during the time of his deployment to Afghanistan, which manifested itself here when he stayed home over Easter break to complete a paper which he had lost to a computer crash. The men

took it upon themselves to reach toward the high standards for which their drill instructors demanded they strive during their time of learning to fit in with the group.

*Accountability.* The veterans learned about being held accountable for meeting the high standards set by their superiors within the organized structure of the military. Failure to do so was met with swift disciplinary action. Therefore, all four learned that if they did not perform a task to the dictated standards, they were going to be held accountable and were going to make up for their lack of performance through some kind of punishment, which varied in range and intensity. Simply put, there were consequences for their actions.

Lolo's story from the shooting range is an example of being punished by having to start over again to reach Sergeant Kehoe's standard of perfection, and Dan often spoke of his fear of being recycled for not passing a qualification in basic training the first time through and, as a consequence, getting behind his peers. Often, the entire squad would be held accountable for one soldier's transgression, including a drill sergeant's discovery of contraband within the barracks or a trainee's talking out of turn.

Ultimately, the structures, standards, and accountability to which the veteran students became so habituated led them to adopt a frame of reference[76] through which they came to understand their experiences in fairly unequivocal ways. That is, they were assigned a task or mission, and the goal was to complete the mission quickly and efficiently to the high standards dictated by the organization, or they failed. Failure resulted in punishment; they either completed the task or were punished if they did not. In the case of combat situations, failure to complete a task or mission could result in casualties. They learned that there was a level of certainty in this

[76] Jack Mezirow, "Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice," 5-6.

equation and that tasks had to be carried out quickly and completed well prior to moving on to the next assigned mission.

*Resulting Struggles in the Present Because of Previously Learned Habits.* There is evidence in the men's stories that indicate that they struggled upon their return as a result of their experience in the military and learning these interrelated habits regarding military structure, standards, and accountability that were dictated to them and upon which they learned a kind of dependence. One resulting struggle that stands out clearly in relation to an unequivocal view of the world is Hank's experience of his humanities class.

As a discipline, the humanities is concerned with the interpretation of works of art, literature, music, and popular culture through various approaches, or lenses, of interpretation.[77] Hank struggled to interpret the various meanings of a pair of men's boxer shorts as a class assignment, but did well on it in spite of his lack of surety with the assignment. He struggled making sense of why his grade was so high in the class because he felt he did not meet the standard of understanding the material, and therefore did not deserve it and should have been held accountable for not having reached it, according to his view. This was similar to his experience in another of his classes, in which his instructor allowed him to turn in his writing late without docking any points. Again, Hank struggled with why his instructor did not hold him to a higher standard of accountability and punish him by withholding points because he did not get the paper done in time.

One result of not finding what they seek here in the civilian world in terms of these interrelated habits they learned regarding structure, standards, and accountability that manifests

[77] In this particular class at MMCC, students practice fourteen different approaches for interpreting works in the humanities.

itself in their stories is a struggle to relate to others upon their return, especially others who have not shared in their experiences while in the military.

Evident in all of their stories of return is a pronounced struggle to relate to their family members. From their experiences of initiation and learning to fit in with others within the structure of the military as narrated in their stories, it could be said that the bonds they forged with others while in the military became so strong that they supplanted the familial bonds they left behind when they joined. All four veteran students spoke of the intense bond that they had to forge with their fellow soldiers while there to carry out the mission the military dictated to them and for their very survival during combat situations. They had to train together, learn together, suffer punishment together, settle their grievances with each other, and so on. The men described the bond as a "brotherhood," and that, ultimately, they were fighting for their brothers while on deployment.

The closeness they formed with their military brothers that each veteran spoke about lasted beyond their time in the service. All of them spoke about how they would keep in touch with former comrades with whom they served, often travelling out of state to visit with them and counsel them when in need. All of them also spoke about the importance of anniversaries of the loss of a fellow soldier and how, in Dan's case, especially, because he spoke often of this, they would need to take time away from work or school in order to grieve. It is likely that the men miss the bond and camaraderie they had to learn to forge while they were in the military. The military taught them to have a level of certainty about what the family relationship meant and entailed while there among their brothers, a certainty that is not quite so evident now that they have returned.

In addition to their struggle to relate to family members, the men's stories are pregnant with moments of struggle with relating to other students in their classes, with some of their teachers, and with their co-workers, struggles that often center on the veterans seeking of the kind of familiar structure, standards, and accountability that they had learned previously and that they carried with them into the present and were expecting others to share. Dan and Hank's accounts of what they believed were their co-worker's laziness and management's lax standards and accountability certainly stand out from their stories as important examples of these moments of struggle as a result of their past learning.

Anger would often be the result of not finding what they sought. All four veteran students spoke of times when their anger erupted quickly and sometimes with little prompting, which surprised them. Hank's throwing the table during a card game with friends after he had returned home is one example that stands out from the narratives, as well as Lolo and Dan's anger toward their parents. Philip became angry when fellow students in his classes would generalize about people from other countries, and they all would often have little patience with others who did not shared in their experiences of having to be accountable to standards. For example, Lolo began to refuse to help his fellow students when they would give excuses and not, as he said, "man up" to their end of the agreement and meet with him during agreed upon times or complete the writing or math problems that they had been assigned.

Before I leave this section about the veteran students' struggles with return being related to some of the habits they learned while in the military, I would like to make it clear that there is evidence in their stories of return that each person is aware that he is in transition, in a liminal space. This comes out clearly when Lolo admitted that he can no longer be destructive, that he sees he is on a different mission than the one he had while in the military. Dan, too, sees his time

as a civilian community college student as a path toward becoming, as he said, “a better person,” and Philip used his travel experience that resulted from his time in the military to help others who cannot help themselves. Of this awareness of being in transition, Hank probably said it best when he said that he was in the process of reinventing himself now that he was back in the civilian world for good. In spite of each person having an awareness of their transitional moments, the point that I hope is beginning to be clear is that they should not feel as though they must go through the transition alone.

When these interrelated habits are taken together, the resulting sum is a dependence that all four men formed on the organization they learned to fit into and the others with whom they learned to belong and to whom they learned to relate during their time there. They learned to belong in ways consistent with the aims of the education the military gave them. The men’s prior educative experiences in the military have played what I believe to be an essential role in the roughness of their return to civilian life and their resulting struggles to relate to family members and others and the anger they felt as they inhabited the space of liminality. They have returned to civilian life seeking structure, standards, and accountability they learned in the military, but do not find them here, at least not of the kind they had learned while in the military. They exist, certainly, but just look different.

Each person also carries with him a sense of disappointment and frustration toward the military. This sense of disappointment and frustration they carry home with them, along with what they have come to believe constitute structure, standards, and accountability, is not insignificant and is an essential part of what they learned from their time in the military. Hank admitted to me directly that the military let him down. When considered through the lens of educative experience, Hank’s admission resonates with the other veterans in that the military did

not provide them with what they needed, upon their return, after each had outgrown his fit and sense of belonging in the military, to navigate their civilian lives and to grow, flourish, and to learn to belong anew here.

Nor should it, and I will say more about this later. As I discussed above, they all came back with a set of habits that did not suit them well here and have caused them to struggle to grow and find meaning in various ways, making their experience of return fraught with difficulty as a significant result of their past educative experiences coming to bear on their present.

*Educative Experience for Continued Growth and Development*

A key concept to consider at this point in relation to the veteran student's military learning is *growth* and *development*. Growth is the very purpose of education; it is an essential outcome of education and sets the direction toward which we develop, given the particular social organizations to which we belong. Educative experiences we have that lead to further growth and development in a productive direction are the criteria essential to determining the kind of growth that results from learning.[78]

I should say more at this point about "productive direction." John Dewey's insights into educative growth and development based on the experiences we have had are quite useful at this point. Dewey recognized that all education is productive, and he did not, in the first place, judge the kinds of education people received. For example, Dewey did not judge the education that bank robbers received as they learned to function within that particular social group as negative (or positive, for that matter). It was an education that was purposeful, and the quality and value depended on the aims of the group. In this case, the aim was to rob banks, and to do so, one had

[78] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education,* 81, 100.

to have had experiences that allowed him or her to do so as a contributing member of that particular group.[79]

Although Dewey does not necessarily judge educative experiences as positive or negative, he does explain the criteria that determine the quality and value of such experiences. In other words, Dewey *does* judge the aims towards which groups work. For Dewey, the educative experiences that lead to productive growth are centered around two desirable traits for civic life, which he called interaction and cooperation.[80] The former trait has to do with having wide-ranging and deep interactions with other social groups to which one does not necessarily belong so as to recognize and act upon the many shared interests that potentially exist among different groups. The latter trait has to do with full and free cooperative discourse between social groups with the ultimate goal of continuous learning and readjustment to varied situations that life in a democratic and pluralistic society require.[81]

These two traits describe the educative experiences that are essential for participating in and contributing to a democratic, pluralistic, diverse, and globalizing social context. Dewey was writing in the twentieth century, and what he was writing was useful then and is still useful and meaningful when it comes to continually growing and developing as citizens able to navigate within and among various social groups in the twenty-first century. Indeed, this is a defining quality of productive social life today. Change is constant, and we must be adaptable, especially when we must learn (and re-learn) to interact and cooperate with multiple groups to which we

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[79] Ibid, 82.

[80] John Dewey, *Democracy and Education,* 83.

[81] Ibid, 86-87.

might or might not belong. Change is a simple fact and adaptability is therefore essential to productive educative experiences when Dewey was writing—and remain so today.

*Toward Recommendations for Practice*

In Chapter 1, I briefly reviewed the current discussion researchers in my field of postsecondary education are having about veteran college students. Recall that the discussion is focused around two major areas of research: first, assessing the needs of veteran college students who return to civilian life and attend a college or university; and secondly, identity development during the time of transition. The idea is that colleges and universities can act upon recommendations and institute policies and offices to help veteran students. The contemporary discussions we are having about returning veterans, as well, seem to place a large emphasis on the role post-traumatic stress disorder plays in their struggles once they come back. Although these conversations are useful in our attempt to understand what it is like for these people to come back, and our attempts to help them, they might not be the only ways, nor even the best ways, to understand these people's experiences.

I have learned through the hours spent in conversation with Lolo, Dan, Philip, and Hank, and the accounts I rendered from those conversations in the preceding chapters, that past learning experiences play a powerful role in learning in the present, especially when being in the middle of transitional moments in life. That is the important takeaway from all of this, and that is what I wrote about in this chapter. From what I have learned from each veteran and have written about them, I believe that the conversation about veterans' return should also focus on the role of educative experience, which has been largely left out of the published research and our public conversations about our sons, daughters, siblings, friends, and students who have served in the military.

Researchers have not examined the real and powerful role educative experience plays on veterans' experiences of their return, and the emphasis on PTSD frames struggles with return as a disorder. While it is true that the veterans with whom I have spoken have experienced traumatic events, a discourse almost exclusively narrowed to PTSD and identity development serves to narrow the discussion to just this particular group. I believe we need to be looking at the issue from the larger and more inclusive perspective of human experience.

Simply put, we all have had moments in our lives when what we learned in a past context just did not set us up to grow and flourish in a present one into which we are transitioning. Our lives are full of moments of initiation, transition, and the struggle to grow and find meaning. We need to continually learn to belong with others throughout our lives if we are to continue to grow and develop. Without re-learning continually, we are stuck and try to rely on habits that do not always lead us to grow and flourish, only to live in the liminal spaces, stagnant, angry, and frustrated.

Certainly, we might not all have experienced exactly what the veteran students about whom I have written experienced, but, as human beings, we are all connected in that we are continually learning and growing. As Dewey teaches us, though, all learning and growth must proceed toward aims that allow us to go on growing—to change, adapt, interact, and communicate with others outside of our immediate groups if we are to thrive in a pluralistic society. But this is not easy, certainly not for the veterans, nor for others. We need help during this time of transition, and others can provide help as we progress toward continued learning growth.

*In the Community College.* As professional educator in a community college, I am surrounded by this conversation—focusing on veteran students, in the here and now.[82] Colleges are asking themselves how they can be more friendly toward veterans as they embark on this new phase of their lives as college students. For example, my college recently brought on an advisor whose sole job is to help veteran students navigate through the complexities of their benefits and to organize a veteran's center on campus. While all of this is important and needed work to help veterans during their time of transition, I believe that professional college educators can play an important role, as well, in their learning.

There is evidence in the accounts from each veteran student about whom I wrote that teachers can play powerful roles in how they learn to adapt to civilian life during their time of transition. Present in the stories are teachers who acted with tact toward the veterans, and the veterans' experience of these interactions show how they were touched by their teachers' tactfulness. For Dan, just a glance from his developmental English instructor carried with it his instructor's understanding that he was having a bad day. Philip seemed proud when his ethics instructor called him cosmopolitan. Acting with tact on our part toward veterans, as well as toward all of our students in ways tactful to them, can help them in their transitional learning, not only within the narrow scope of learning in our disciplines, but also in their lives.

There is another side to this coin, however. In all of the veteran students' stories, there were teachers at the college who seemed to compound the frustration the men were experiencing as part of their return. For example, all of them felt insulted by some of their teachers in various situations, from instructors assuming they did not know how to perform some mathematical

[82] I regularly get emails announcing student veteran-related webinars and conferences focused on how institutions and educators can make campus and classroom more veteran friendly; later this semester, a panel of veterans at the college are going to share their stories. Our campus veteran representative spoke to the faculty at this fall's orientation session.

operation to instructors whom they felt acted differently toward them because of their veteran status. The point here is that educators should think carefully about what they say and how they act to help learners deal with habits learned in their past, habits that might not always lend themselves to the adaptability and change that is so important in the current moment and toward continued growth in adulthood.

But teachers do not bear the burden alone, so there is more complexity here when it comes to the classroom relationship. The veterans will need to change and adapt, too, to various teaching and learning situations they face in college. While all four veterans struggled with relating to some of their teachers (and it should be clear that I believe their teachers could have acted with more tact than they did in those situations), the veterans do need to adapt to novel styles, orientations, and modes of teaching. This means recognizing when a teacher is challenging them with complexity, when a teacher wants to provoke them toward growth, when a teacher wants them to learn with others students, when a teacher seems unapproachable, and so on. Tact works both ways.

Adult students like Lolo, Dan, Philip, and Hank all bring with them a wealth of lived experience to the classroom, life experiences that can be both productive toward future learning growth and development, but also potentially miseducative—that is, experiences and learned habits that are no longer adaptive to the current learning moment. As adult educators, we can help our veteran students, who have accumulated a wealth of experiences and learned habits, learn how to re-learn. For such re-learning is essential when habits no longer suit the aims of participating in social organizations predicated upon choice, interaction, and free participation

with others. Key ideas from learning theorists such as Rose, Mezirow, and Dewey can help inform classroom pedagogy for adults.[83]

Sometimes, students will want to revert back to habits they have learned previously, that have worked well in the past, but not so well now, in their present learning situations.[84] Or, there may be times when their past learning has created a powerful aversion to certain learning opportunities in the present, and they will avoid them. College instructors who become aware of the powerful role past educative experiences their students bring with them play in their current learning can help their students to move toward changing them.

One way I do this is by asking my students in the developmental reading and writing course I teach to write about their past reading and writing experiences. By doing so, I am trying to get them to take stock of their past literacy experiences, the good and the not so good, so that we can begin to move forward with developing habits and attitudes toward productive growth as college readers and writers. Having students take ample time in class to write about their past learning experiences and the habits they have learned, and then asking them to reflect critically[85] on them through writing and through dialogue with others in class, can be a powerful and useful tool toward helping adults to rethink the habits they have learned in the past that might not be useful for further growth.

[83] Although I do not draw on his ideas in this chapter, Malcolm Knowles is another adult learning theorist whose ideas are useful for those who teach adults, specifically his concept of andragogy. Andragogy, or the teaching of adults, is distinct from pedagogy, or the teaching of children, according to Knowles, because adults bring with them a range of different and complex learning needs distinct from those of children. I use the term "pedagogy" interchangeably, however.

[84] Mike Rose, "The Politics of Remediation." Rose's chapter is populated with stories of adult college students who rely on past learning habits that do not suit present ones, and he offers a more generous understanding of student struggles with academic literacy through the lens of past learning coming to bear on the present. Further, Rose suggests that teachers must play a role in helping college students to reframe these past habits and acquire new ones.

[85] Jack Mezirow, "Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice." Critical self-reflection, in which one reflects on experience, is essential to transforming learning and thinking habits acquired in the past that no longer tend to work in present learning situations.

The point here is not to make adult college students like the combat veterans think that their past learning has been bad; to do so would be to ignore Dewey's insights on the role of continuity *and* change in learning—insights which I have been relying in this chapter to explore the role of past educative experience in the veterans' experiences of return. Dewey is not, in the first place, judgmental. He is pragmatic and does not assume that certain experiences are the only ones we have that allow us to adapt in the present. He sees that all past learning might play a role in future learning, but he does warn of consequences of past learning. Recall that it is the direction that matters, how past and present learning proceeds toward future growth and development, along the aims that allow people to flourish as adaptive and interactive agents among diverse others, who are able to continue to change and learn all through life. When the veteran students came back looking for structure, standards, and accountability, there was nothing wrong with that. It is useful to have those things. But what they did not learn how to do was to change and adapt to seek the kinds of structure, standards, and accountability that exist in multiple and fluid ways in the civilian world, and that they often have choice themselves when it comes to defining those things here.

I must note that, while I have been writing about a specific population of adult community college students, veteran students, a population that will continue to find their way into classrooms across the country, what I have learned from the veterans' experiences of return through the perspective of past learning can be applied to virtually all adult students who return to school. The veterans' experiences can help community college educators better understand the transition experiences of other diverse adult populations who come to us. Over my years at the college, I have had in my classroom people who have just been released from prison and are starting anew, factory workers from a neighboring town whose jobs were outsourced and who

saw college as their path toward a new career, international students, and, just this semester, a twenty-five-year-old woman who is a recovering addict and who sees her college education as opening doors that otherwise would have remained closed to her as she continues her life's journey of sobriety.

I should not forget to mention another group of adults coming to college who struggle with past learning habits – recent high school graduates. In the same class as the woman I mention above is a young man who openly discussed in class the other day his struggle transitioning from high school, a learning context where he said everything he did had been structured for him by other teachers, including not only his study regimen, but what he had to learn. He spoke of how now, in college, no one is telling him how to structure his time and that he is being required to be more autonomous with his learning, which is causing him to struggle to learn to change and adapt to this new learning environment.

And we college instructors can better understand ourselves in our relationships with these people in transition as we listen to their stories and learn to adapt and change to meet their learning needs based on their depth of unique life experiences they bring with them. I know that if all of my students are going to continue to grow and flourish – and find effective belonging in college and in their lives – then I need to re-learn along with them if I am going to aid them in their journeys.

*Reclaiming Developmental Education*

Throughout this chapter, I have been writing about growth and development in relation to the kinds of learning the veteran students have had and the kinds of learning that will be important for productive life and effective belonging now that they are back in the civilian world. From this writing and seeing into their experiences of their struggle with return from the

perspective of past learning habits coming to bear on their present, I have come to think of "development," as it is used in educational discourse, in a different light. I would like to take a moment to reclaim[86] the term from the current discourse surrounding it from what I have learned through research and writing.

Within the walls of the community college, developmental is understood to refer to a very narrow range of teaching and learning practices, mostly informed by a cognitive and affective view of human development. These practices have informed my work as a developmental educator teaching developmental college reading and writing courses.[87]

Briefly, developmental education as I have been practicing it during my career has involved assessing incoming students' reading, writing, and math skills; if students score low enough in any of these areas, the assumption is they are not ready for college-level[88] work and they then must take courses to develop their skills in these areas prior to moving into a college-level writing or math course. Developmental coursework in reading and writing at my college is designed to give students practice in recognizing and acting on their own reading and writing processes; to do so, they practice a range of reading and writing strategies so that they can flexibly and adaptably navigate a range of postsecondary literacy situations and the demands inherent in them. All of the veterans about whom I've written have had to complete at least one developmental reading, writing, or math course.

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[86] Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination.* I rely on ideas from Bakhtin's fourth chapter, "Discourse in the Novel," to do this reclaiming.

[87] Eric J. Paulson and Sonya L. Armstrong, "Postsecondary Literacy: Coherence in Theory, Terminology, and Teacher Preparation," *Journal of Developmental Education,* 33 no. 3 (Spring, 2010): 4, 6. Paulson and Armstrong's definition of "developmental" most closely fits what I describe here.

[88] "College-level" is tricky to define and might in some cases be an imagined construct. Be that as it may, "college-level" typically means first-year composition and math courses designated as 100-level gateway courses.

But my thinking about developmental education has changed as a result of writing about the veteran students. I now see it in a more generous and lived way, something broader and richer, far more human, than the kind I have been practicing cloistered within the walls of the institution. Unlike the developmental courses the veterans and other students (myself included, when I was in my first year of college) take that conclude at the end of the semester, the kind of developmental education that we all live never ends. Throughout our lives, we must constantly learn as we journey through our lives, and we must continually develop if we are going to grow. I see developmental education now as something happening in all of our lives as the world opens up before us, is *de-veloped,* meaning to be unveiled before us,[89] and we enter into it. Entering into this opened-up world means that we come into the world, interact with others, and learn to navigate through it as we do so. Developmental education in this sense is a condition for living meaningfully with others and necessarily must continue as we struggle to grow and find meaning as we take up the many journeys in our lives, including those within the walls of institutions like college and without.

*Conclusion: Beyond the Walls of the Community College*

Learning to belong to multiple groups now that they have returned ultimately means the veterans must *re-learn* as they navigate through and among the various liminal transitional spaces in which they find themselves. The military, when viewed as the kind of closed social group Dewey describes, is often not always capable of providing the educative experiences that are necessary for productive life in a democratic and pluralistic society when members initiated

[89] www.etymonline.com The earlier meaning of the word "development," to unroll or unfold, that helps me to do this reclaiming comes from an old French word "desveloper," which means to "unwrap, unfurl, unveil; reveal the meaning of. "Des" means to undo, and "veloper" to wrap up.

into the group leave it; other people, however, can be capable of doing so. As I said above, the veterans should not feel that they are alone during this time of transition.

The point here is also that not only do the veterans need to re-learn how to be in the civilian world now that they have returned; so, too, do their spouses, parents, sisters, brothers, friends, co-workers, fellow students, teachers, anyone who has remained here and who interacts with veterans in some way. The student veterans need to learn about making choices for themselves again, deciding for themselves how to structure their days, and to let go of the rigid standards they learned in the military in favor of those more aligned with life in a democratic society, in which standards are upheld and people are held accountable, both on the job and at school, in ways different from what they had learned in the military. Here, change and choice outweigh stasis and dictates handed down by superiors that had become so familiar to them while there.

And we can all play roles during this transitional time. We, too, are in transitional, liminal spaces, along with the veterans, because we need to learn how to welcome them back in responsive and tactful ways in our interactions with them. We all can do more than just thanking a veteran for his or her service upon their return; if we are really sincere about our respect for their service, then all of us can and should serve them by teaching and aiding them in their transition from what they have learned in the past from the military so that they can have more productive leaning experiences now that they are back. The goal is for them to continue to grow and flourish now that they are civilians. We can help them to learn to move on.

Throughout this chapter, I have been focusing on and discussing the specific experiences of Lolo, Dan, Philip, and Hank and the habits they learned in the military that they have carried with them upon their return to civilian life. These habits are cause for both their struggle and

their liminality at this stage of their life journeys. These habits also have the potential of not leading to further growth in productive and positive directions if others do not aid them in re-learning to be civilians now that they are back. Now, I need to push past the specifics of the four veteran students and consider how past educative experiences and the habits we learn are part of the human experience of the struggle to grow and find meaning throughout the various journeys we take up.

All of us must learn how to belong to multiple groups throughout our lives. Just as we all have a role in welcoming back veterans and serving them as teachers, we, too, need to learn how to move on as a result of educative experiences during our life journeys. This is not a need just limited to the four veteran students I have written about, but it is something we all must do. It is a kind of developmental education in which we all have a role as both students and teachers, simultaneously.[90] Our veteran sons, daughters, spouses, siblings, friends, and students are examples of what we all must face as a condition of living productively throughout our life journeys. This is an essential human need. We must always face initiation into multiple groups, especially in the democratic, plural, diverse, and global social environment in which we find ourselves increasingly immersed in the 21st century.

We all have learned habits in our pasts, habits that might have served us well during our time on that particular life journey, but that might not serve us well on current journeys. We need to constantly learn and re-learn, in relation to others and with others, teaching them along the way, and learning from them when they seek to teach us. An essential part of our humanity is teaching and learning from each other. Doing so should serve continually to give us what we

[90] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* Freire's second chapter is particularly useful in characterizing this kind of student-teacher relationship in which all learn and teach from each other simultaneously toward the goal of mutual humanization.

need to carry with us on our varied and many life journeys so that we can learn to belong more effectively, more fully, and in ways that continue our growth and development.

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