Liberation through Listening: Learning from Student Veterans in the Composition Classroom

Sarah Beth Franco
University of New Hampshire, Durham

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.unh.edu/dissertation

Recommended Citation
Franco, Sarah Beth, "Liberation through Listening: Learning from Student Veterans in the Composition Classroom" (2016). Doctoral Dissertations. 1375.
https://scholars.unh.edu/dissertation/1375
Liberation through Listening: Learning from Student Veterans in the Composition Classroom

Abstract
In this dissertation, I employ a qualitative study to explore experiences of student veterans in introductory writing classrooms. Drawing on the theories of feminist standpoint (Harding, 1986) and rhetorical listening (Ratcliffe, 2005), I describe the current cultural divide between members of the military and civilians (Pew Research Center, 2011) and identify several ways teachers of college level introductory writing classes can bridge this gap to more effectively connect with student veterans at the classroom level and raise awareness about the unique situations of student veterans at the institutional level. Survey data inquiring into student veterans’ experiences in writing classrooms was collected. Findings reveal three major trends about the majority of student veterans surveyed: they will choose to write about their military experience if they believe it to be relevant for an assignment; they are motivated to write about their military experience by the idea of connecting with their civilian readers; and they value empathy and understanding in relationships with their writing instructors. Semi-structured interviews with student veteran participants explore in further detail how the patterns that emerged from the survey are revealed in individual case studies.

Keywords
composition, military narratives, military students, rhetorical listening, student veterans, writing feedback, Higher education, Teacher education, Education
LIBERATION THROUGH LISTENING:
LEARNING FROM STUDENT VETERANS IN COMPOSITION CLASSROOMS

BY

SARAH B. FRANCO
Baccalaureate Degree, University of Rochester, 2002
Master’s Degree in English, Simmons College, 2007
Master’s Degree in Teaching, Simmons College, 2007

DISserTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire
In Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
English

September, 2016
This dissertation has been examined and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English by:

Dissertation Director, Dr. Thomas Newkirk, Professor Emeritus of English

Dr. Cristy Beemer, Assistant Professor of English

Dr. D. Alexis Hart, Associate Professor, Allegheny College

Dr. Christina Ortmeier-Hooper, Associate Professor of English

Dr. Allan Vives, Primary Care/Mental Health Integration Psychologist, Atlanta Veteran Affairs Medical Center

On June 15, 2016

Original approval signatures are on file with the University of New Hampshire Graduate School.
DEDICATION

For student veterans, past, present, and future,
and especially for Joshua, Dave, and Andrew.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would have never finished this work if it had not been for the guidance, curiosity, and ongoing encouragement from the members of my dissertation committee, Dr. Cristy Beemer, Dr. D. Alexis Hart, Dr. Christina Ortmeier-Hooper, and Dr. Allan Vives, and my dissertation advisor, Dr. Thomas Newkirk. I would also like to thank Julie Simpson for her ongoing, efficient, kind support throughout the IRB process. My gratitude also goes out to members of the Writing with Current, Former, and Future Members of the Military Special Interest Group for their wisdom, questions, and dedication to the work. An honored thank you goes to Christiane Donahue and Charles Bazerman for accepting my project to be workshopped at the Dartmouth Summer Research Seminar during summer 2014, and for my cohort there who helped me work through my methodology. I sincerely thank my writing pals, Brad, Meaghan, and Adam, for their time, thoughtfulness, and humor, and especially Molly for helping me see the story. My parents have been my number one support my entire life, and more than anyone else, I owe where I am in my life to them.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the student veterans who participated in various ways in this project, whether that included submitting survey responses, meeting for an interview, sharing their writing and experiences, or chatting with me in line at coffee shops, at libraries, on buses, and in class. Please keep talking, and I will keep learning how to listen.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION..................................................................................................................iv

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.................................................................................................v

LIST OF TABLES............................................................................................................viii

LIST OF FIGURES..........................................................................................................ix

ABSTRACT......................................................................................................................x

I. INTRODUCTION: WAKING UP TO A CULTURE OF SILENCE..............................1

   Experiencing the Military/Civilian Divide.................................................................5

   Reasons for the Military/Civilian Divide.................................................................6

   An Effect of the Military/Civilian divide: A Lack of Empathy..............................12

   Recognizing a Shared Liberation............................................................................15

   The Importance of Rhetorical Listening...............................................................21

II. CHAPTER 1: UNDERSTANDING “GENERATION VET”.................................25

III. CHAPTER 2: DESIGNING THE STUDY.................................................................47

   Part I: The Survey..................................................................................................49

   Part II: Semi-Structured Interviews and Writing Samples..................................60

   Limitations.............................................................................................................63

IV. CHAPTER 3: WHEN VETERANS BECOME STUDENTS...............................65

   Survey Participant Demographics.......................................................................67

   Finding #1.............................................................................................................68

   Finding #2.............................................................................................................72

   Finding #3.............................................................................................................74

   Student Veterans Offer Advice to Writing Instructors........................................83
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Story</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. CHAPTER 4: WHEN VETERANS SPEAK</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joshua</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dave</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. CONCLUSION: FROM HELP TO HEAR</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opening Conversations</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDICES</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1: OPEN-ENDED SURVEY QUESTIONS AND CORRESPONDING PHENOMENA...............................................................53

TABLE 2: CODING SCHEMES, n, AND RELIABILITY PERCENTAGES.........................59
LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1: CODING SCHEME FOR INFORMATION SHARED .......................... 55
FIGURE 2: CODING SCHEME FOR DESIRED FEEDBACK ......................... 56
FIGURE 3: CODING SCHEME FOR RECEIVED FEEDBACK ....................... 57
FIGURE 4: CODING SCHEME FOR ADVICE FOR TEACHERS ................. 58
ABSTRACT

LIBERATION THROUGH LISTENING:
LEARNING FROM STUDENT VETERANS IN COMPOSITION CLASSROOMS

by

Sarah B. Franco

University of New Hampshire, September 2016

In this dissertation, I employ a qualitative study to explore experiences of student veterans in introductory writing classrooms. Drawing on the theories of feminist standpoint (Harding, 1986) and rhetorical listening (Ratcliffe, 2005), I describe the current cultural divide between members of the military and civilians (Pew Research Center, 2011) and identify several ways teachers of college level introductory writing classes can bridge this gap to more effectively connect with student veterans at the classroom level and raise awareness about the unique situations of student veterans at the institutional level. Survey data inquiring into student veterans’ experiences in writing classrooms was collected. Findings reveal three major trends about the majority of student veterans surveyed: they will choose to write about their military experience if they believe it to be relevant for an assignment; they are motivated to write about their military experiences by the idea of connecting with their civilian readers; and they value empathy and understanding in relationships with their writing instructors. Semi-structured interviews with student veteran participants explore in further detail how the patterns that emerged from the survey are revealed in individual case studies.
INTRODUCTION

Waking up to a culture of silence: Recognizing the military/civilian divide

This project, a qualitative study exploring student veterans’ experiences in introductory writing classes at the college level, is rooted in a childhood curiosity about the stories of war. I can remember as a child hearing about my paternal grandfather’s close encounter with enemy fire during his service as an aircraft welder in the United States Army Air Force\(^1\) during World War II. One night, as he slept in his tent where he was stationed in the Philippines, an enemy aircraft flew overhead and riddled the ground below with bullets. One of those bullets tore through the canvas on my grandfather’s tent and burrowed into the pillow three inches from his head. I can remember the dull sheen of that bullet, and the heavy clunk it made against the side of the glass jar that held it for years after that night. Each family visit down to Lewis Run in Pennsylvania included a trip to my grandfather’s garage where that bullet, harmless then in its glass container, kept roost on a high shelf above Grandpa’s workbench. It was the only war story I was ever told as a kid, even though I was always hungry for more. It was not, though, the only story I ever learned of my grandfather’s time in the service.

\(^1\) In World War II, the main branches of the United States Military Services included Army and Navy. Aircraft associated with land based fighting were called Army Air force, and those associated with water fighting were called Naval Air force. It wasn't until after World War II that the U.S. Military divided into other branches.
The other I acquired through eavesdropping, a favorite childhood pastime, and it was more sinister and less detailed. It involved my grandfather and other soldiers from the 864th Bomb Squadron going on patrol and using flamethrowers, at the edge of enemy tunnels. Grandpa could hear the Japanese screaming from deep inside those caves as they burned alive. The rest of the story and the rest of his wartime experiences were left to my imagination.

While collecting data for this project through a survey and interviews with student veterans and writing instructors, I had the privilege of hearing directly from student veterans about their experiences with writing, the military, and their transition from their service to civilian life. I was struck by a common stance I heard repeatedly from the student veteran participants; many of them indicated they did not talk about their military experiences with family or friends. I hadn’t thought of my grandfather’s war stories in years, but I was brought back, not just to those stories, but also to the absence of any others. My grandfather had served in the U.S. military for three and a half years; there had to be more left from that time than two skeletal stories and a brass bullet.

Grandpa passed away in 1985 from stomach cancer, and the little I remembered about him included a scruffy face that was scratchy to kiss, and a general aura of fear at his (to my five year old mind) gruff demeanor. He was a commanding presence on those family visits, but I avoided interacting with him when I could get away with it. It was no secret that what Grandpa said went, and my strategy around him was to fly under his radar. As an adult, my curiosity grew about the handsome man in uniform framed on my mom’s wall of family photos. I wanted to know what other stories he’d shared. I wanted to know what he passed on to his family from those three and a half
years he took leave from his job as a pipefitter for a manufacturing company in rural Pennsylvania, and served as an aircraft welder for the United States Military.

I decided to ask my father what he knew about his dad’s time in the war. But my father, eager to share what he remembered and show me the Army discharge papers he’d saved over the years, told me nothing I hadn’t heard before. I heard again about the bullet kept on the shelf in Grandpa’s garage, lost somewhere during the years following his and my grandmother’s deaths and the selling of the house my grandmother had been born in. I heard again about the screaming Japanese who were burned up when flames, shot from 50-60 feet away, coursed through tunnels with no escape routes. When I pushed for more, my dad showed me Grandpa’s four Bronze stars (which I later learned were decorations issued for acts of heroism, meritorious achievement, or meritorious service in a combat zone), and told me my grandfather had left the Army Air Force as a Sergeant, four steps above Private, all draftees’ rank at the start of their service. Still I pressed, and my father offered one last memory.

“He didn’t say a lot,” Dad told me, “but one thing I do remember is people would say, ‘oh there were a lot of heroes during the war,’ and my father always always said, ‘the only heroes were the guys that died because they gave their life. The guys that came back were just lucky.’"

My grandfather was hardly the only “lucky” World War II veteran who was close-lipped about his time in the service. In recent years, as the generation of World War II veterans ages, there’s been an outpouring of memoir type writing from experiences during the war. Load, Kick, Fire is one such text, published in 2012 and written by 89-year-old Gene Palumbo, a veteran from Newburyport, Massachusetts. Palumbo’s self-
published text offers a narrative, chronological telling of the 22 months he served on the front lines during World War II. There is no overall plot to the text, unless WWII is considered the central storyline. It is more a straightforward retelling of Palumbo’s memories—memories that he directly states in the “Prologue” that he dislikes. Despite his feelings, Palumbo offers his belief that “it’s important to share [such memories] so that people will know what happens in war” (v). Palumbo’s prolonged silence about his experiences in WWII is not unique, and I find myself wondering why, after all those years, he found it important that others need to hear his memories from his time on the front lines.

I imagine the recent boom of WWII memoirs results, at least in part, from the pressure of years of silence, a silence, it seems, of which I was always inherently aware. Phil Klay, a Marine veteran and the author of a 2014 short story collection called Redeployment, describes in a short op ed piece in the New York Times (2014) how that silence derives from a perceived separation of veterans and civilians, reinforced throughout history. He writes,

The notion that war forever separates veterans from the rest of mankind has been long embedded in our collective consciousness. After World War I, the poet and veteran Siegfried Sassoon wrote, “the man who really endured the war at its worst was everlastingly differentiated from everyone except his fellow soldiers.” During World War II, Hemingway called combat “that thing which no one knows about who has not done it.” After Vietnam, Tim O’Brien claimed that a true war story can’t even be told, because “sometimes it’s just beyond telling.” Given the way American history, unlike Iraqi or Afghan history, allows for a neat division between soldiers who see war and civilians who don’t, it’s not surprising that the idea has taken root.

Part of the lure to war stories for me came from sensing the existence of a silence that arises from not being able to understand. I think of my grandfather, Fino Franco, his stoic presence and gruff directness, and wonder if his silence was due to that division
he felt between civilians and veterans. And if that was true, why had he shared the stories he had? Mostly, I want to know what memories of his time in the military went with him to the grave and how, if I had heard them, they could have shaped my understanding of the man my grandfather was, and, subsequently, inform this project and my awareness of how military service affects individuals who return to the civilian world. I also find myself wondering if Grandpa would have reached a similar conclusion as Palumbo did if cancer hadn't taken him. I wonder if he too would have come to the decision that, whether they can understand it or not, people need to know what war is really like.

**Experiencing the Military/Civilian Divide**

With these questions in my head, and growing more aware of the separation between civilians and military personnel that Klay describes in my own interactions with student veterans, I—both eagerly and tentatively—began volunteering to run a creative writing group for veterans at a local Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC). It was during those months of reading the participants’ writing and hearing them share stories of their service with each other, that I really came to sense the power of the silence surrounding, not just stories about war or military experiences, but also the culture of the military itself. While I talked writing technique and craft, the veterans talked to each other about their service experience. Military lingo peppered every service tale they told, and I was often interrupting them to ask about what this or that acronym meant, or what title outranked others. The veterans always clarified for me when I asked, but it was during these workshops when I began to really feel the culture of silence, although not coming from—as I had seemingly inherently assumed—the veterans. Often I found
myself unsure of what questions to ask, of how hard to push, of how much question-asking was appropriate coming from me, the only civilian of the group. Of what I would understand even if I did ask and they answered.

The experience at the VAMC, where I offered two sessions of the writing workshop over the course of two years, raised new concerns for me as both a civilian and—as I moved into the shaping of this project—a researcher. Although I had learned more about military culture and the veterans’ military experiences in those workshops than I had over the course of my entire life, I was more uncomfortable than ever with my interactions with veterans. Reflecting back on this experience, I believe the discomfort arose from my growing awareness that the silence I’d sensed around my grandfather’s service was not contained to those who serve. I, as a civilian, was perpetuating the silence, unsure of what questions to ask and how to ask them. Not wanting to unconsciously open Pandora’s Box, or—as a writing teacher—cross any professional lines by getting too personal, keeping silent was definitely the most comfortable option, and perhaps the safest. I had wanted to help (more on this intention later) veterans by providing the writing workshop, a space for them to put words to their military experiences, but I was increasingly sensing that, as the outsider in this group, I had little to offer.

Reasons for the Military/Civilian divide

The absence of the draft. Prior to my involvement with veterans at the VAMC, my interactions with veterans were minimal. Aside from my grandfather, I knew no one
in the military.\textsuperscript{2} I am not unique in my lack of relationships to military personnel. In 2011 the Pew Research Center released a report called “The Military Civilian Gap: War and Sacrifice in the Post-9/11 Era.” The study found that only 33\% of Americans between the ages of 18-29 have an immediate family member who has served or is currently serving in the military. Considering our nation had been at war for ten years at the time of this survey, this statistic seems stunningly low. Comparatively, 79\% of Americans aged 50-64 have had an immediate relative in the military. This disparity can be attributed in part to the role of the draft in past wars, and its absence in those most recent. In WWII, between the draft and those who volunteered to enlist, nearly 9\% of the nation’s population served active duty. The professional and volunteer force of the past fourteen years comprises merely one half of one percent of the American population, and has resulted in multiple deployments for active duty soldiers, 60\% of whom deployed to a combat zone. Since 9/11, the United States has been in an active state of war, and yet, without a draft, civilians are no longer being uprooted from their families, homes, communities, and jobs to serve their country.\textsuperscript{3} Consequently, civilians’

\textsuperscript{2} My father, who went to enlist during the Vietnam era, failed the medical exam due to a few extra pounds, and was classified 1Y, meaning he would only be called to serve in the case of war or national emergency. Since the Vietnam conflict was never officially a declared war, my father was not drafted.

\textsuperscript{3} Neither are civilians being called to actively support war efforts by “do[ing] their bit” here on U.S. soil, which has been a large part of wars past, particularly World War I. While the media and Hollywood’s portrayal of military culture remains a primary means of civilian access to understanding the visceral and psychological experiences of war, its purpose has changed significantly from previous wars. During WWI, for example, in an effort to garner war support and foster a sense of nationalism, President Woodrow Wilson’s Committee for Public Information went to work developing hundreds of war propaganda posers, more than any other fighting nation, dedicated to recruiting men, women, and children for active service, industrial labor, or the purchasing of liberty bonds, which would increase the war’s financial support. “Do your bit” became somewhat of a war mantra, with some propaganda
exposure to military experience is minimal at best, and this may be contributing to the culture of silence around military matters, particularly the silence from civilians.

**Hollywood’s representation of the American Soldier.** The absence of the draft is not the only factor contributing to the gap between military and civilians. Without a personal connection to military culture, my perceptions about military life have been shaped primarily by Hollywood’s representation of military and the war. And I can fairly safely speculate that I’m not the only civilian influenced by the film industry’s portrayal of war, given the nearly one hundred year alliance between political diplomacy and Hollywood filmmaking born in the year before the United States entered into World War I. Hollywood, suffering the effects of several closed off European territories and desperate for ways to increase its capital, found its audiences depleting as the world was swept up with war (Alvarez, 2010). President Wilson, recognizing the need to join the war after a long period of neutrality, needed to convince the American public to join the war effort and rouse up support. Joining forces promised to raise the national support Wilson needed to enter the fight with Allies against German occupancy, while increasing Hollywood’s capital. To this day, political agendas align with filmmaking industries, as evidenced by Dick Cheney and Karl Rove’s meeting with Hollywood executives shortly after 9/11 “to explore how the industry could be mobilized for the ensuing ‘war on terror’” (Stahl 9).

____________________

posters calling for women to “KNIT YOUR BIT” because “Our BOYS NEED SOX [sic],” and even “Little AMERICANS” could “Do [their] bit” by “eat[ing] Oatmeal-Corn meal mush – Hominy – other corn cereals – and Rice with milk” so as to “Save the wheat for our soldiers.” In other words, all Americans were called to be active participants in the Great War.
A long-term effect of this alliance has been a sort of evolving master narrative of the American soldier, influencing civilians’ perception of military identity. In her chapter, “Becoming More than John Wayne and Rambo: Understanding Military Personnel Identity Through Post-9/11 Films,” Ashly Smith (2015) offers an analysis of the film industry’s shaping of military identity since World War I, and stresses the influence of this Hollywood crafted narrative on the American public. During the World Wars, Smith writes, it was generally understood that actors in war movies represented the military as a whole. Smith names Humphrey Bogart and John Wayne, among others, as holding leading roles; their popularity contributed to reinforcing the military characteristics valued in such films: monolithic unity, masculinity, adherence to authority, and a sense of duty (37). The Vietnam era fueled national discord, and the anti authoritarian attitudes contributed to a shift in the way the film industry presented films about war. Smith’s analysis highlights the separation of a soldier’s personal identity from their institutional military identity as a prominent feature of films from 1966 through the 90s (39). In war films during this era, senior-ranking officers are often portrayed negatively, while the regular soldier is represented positively when their choices no longer reflect obedience and adherence to authority as primary values. This results in the elevation of individuality. Since the everyday soldier is separated out from the military pack, however, resolution to military and war related situations often happens at the individual as opposed to the institutional level, and with extreme measures of violence. In this sense, soldiers are presented as renegades, such as Rambo, and characters who do not step up to this level of violence and separation from the military are often portrayed as cowardly and weak. Such representations of soldiers result in what Bekah Hawrot
Weigel and Lisa Detweiler Miller (2011) have labeled as veteran stereotypes: the Homeric Hero, the combat soldier who is revered and held in high-esteem, much like the strong, silent, and masculine John Wayne type, and the Ticking Time Bomb, the “broken” soldier suffering from invisible mental illness who may explode in violence at any moment. Such minimalist labels are no doubt extremely limiting in their exclusion of the complexities involved in serving, yet they are captured well in Hollywood’s historical grand narrative on the American soldier.

After 9/11 and subsequently Cheney and Rove’s meeting with Hollywood executives, films have presented military personnel as a negotiation of identities from previous eras thus complicating the Homeric Hero and Ticking Time Bomb stereotypes. Instead of the individual renegade, we see soldiers committed and loyal to their fellow military members and the mission. Gone is the isolated violence-infused image of Rambo, and a band-of-brothers stereotype emerges—one that focuses on soldiers’ relationships with and commitment to each other (Smith, 2015, p. 42). This simultaneously reminds the viewing American public of the soldier’s humanity at the same time that it allows Americans to separate the soldier from the war they are fighting. In these films, the larger implications of war or the political reasons behind war are ignored; the focus is on “the service members who are doing the work of the institution without regards to the political reasons mobilizing them” (p. 42). This representation of military members results in a “new patriotism” (Wetta and Novelli, as cited in Stahl, 2010, p. 80), marked by a “loyalty to one’s comrades in arms [which] fully eclipses any sense of duty to ideal or policy” (Stahl, 2010, p. 80). This “new patriotism,” which supports the public’s separation of military members from the political agendas of
war is a move that undoubtedly reinforces the military and civilian gap and contributes to the existence of a culturally constrained rhetoric in conversations about military-related topics.

**Culturally constrained rhetoric.** In the first collection of articles addressing the unique situation of student veterans, *Generation Vet* (2014), editors Sue Doe and Lisa Langstraat address this rhetorical move to separate military personnel from political agendas. From a student veteran’s perspective, they offer, antiwar sentiment may be conflated with antimilitary sentiment, even though the civilian population may consider those aspects completely different. Consequently, the ways in which civilians express their support for veterans expounds upon the culture of silence by preventing conversations that allow for exploration of the nuances of military experience.

A colleague recently shared with me the following anecdote from a writing conference with a student veteran. The student reiterated an experience at a gas station when a man came up to him, patted him on the shoulder, and said, “Thank you for your service.” “I hate that,” the student told my colleague. “People say that all the time, but it doesn’t mean anything. I guess they just do it to feel good, like they’re reaching out. But it doesn’t really mean anything, not to me. I never know what to say to that.”

For the citizen without any knowledge of military experience, the student veteran’s response might seem extreme, maybe even hostile, reinforcing a sort of innate fear of the veteran as a Ticking Time Bomb, an individual who might be set off with something as simple as a “thank you.” I have no doubt the man at the gas stationed was well intentioned, as I have been on the many occasions when I too have
thanked veterans for their service. This type of interaction, however, does not allow knowledge or understanding to pass between civilian and veteran. Consequently, such rhetoric reinforces the military/civilian divide by allowing civilians to acknowledge service people without having to contemplate the physical, psychological, and emotional implications of serving, and without becoming involved. Other phrases heard often, such as “I can’t imagine what you’ve been through,” shut down conversation by inferring that a veteran’s experience is simply unable to be expressed in words. But, as Klay (2014) describes, “Believing war is beyond words is an abrogation of responsibility — it lets civilians off the hook from trying to understand, and veterans off the hook from needing to explain.” It also, I would argue, allows civilians to ignore the elephant in the room: the political agendas dictating service people’s involvement in military matters. Joshua, a student veteran who participated in this project, stated outright, “I hate the saying support the troops but not the war. That makes absolutely no sense.” For many veterans, soldiers and the institution of which they are a part cannot be separated.

An Effect of the Military/Civilian divide: A Lack of Empathy

Although there are undoubtedly other factors to consider, the disappearance of the draft, the influence of the film industry, and the constrained rhetoric around military issues have all contributed to the culture of silence that has allowed Americans’ way of life to remain largely uninterrupted despite the wars of the past 14 years, with 50% of the American public stating that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq “have made little difference in their lives” (Pew Research Center, 2011, Chapter 5). It’s really no surprise, then, that, despite advancements in technology that allow today’s American public media access to some visceral experiences of war, which one might think would
increase the public’s understanding of war, the Pew Report indicates that the lack of understanding between civilians and military personnel is greater than it has been in previous times of war. There are numbers to further support this: less than half of Americans say the public “understands the benefits and rewards of military service” and only 29% indicate the public understands problems faced by those in the military; a greater percentage of Post-9/11 veterans, 84%, feels that the public does not understand the problems faced by military members and their families (Chapter 5).

It’s not terribly surprising then that the American public’s empathy for military culture and the complicated nature of serving is fairly low. According to the Pew Report (2011), of 2003 adult participants, 83% acknowledges the sacrifices made by military personnel and their families, but a large majority of 70% attributes this to “just part of being in the military.” The end of the draft in 1973, resulting in today’s professional and all-volunteer status of the military, and rhetorical moves to “Support the Troops but not the War,” have no doubt influenced Americans’ distancing of themselves from military issues. This detachment, however, has also seemingly resulted in a decrease in or absence of a sense of responsibility on behalf of the American public for military-related issues. The detachment shown by the American public from responsibility for the Post-9/11 era is astounding, with only 26% expressing the soldiers’ burden as “unfair.” Additionally, while 90% of Americans express their pride and support for the troops, nearly half of those surveyed (45%) believe the Iraq and Afghanistan wars have not been worth the cost (Chapter 5).

While the Pew Report (2011) shows that support of military members and their families is the highest it’s been in years, the attempt to separate support of military
members from opposition to the wars of the past 14 years is furthering the division between civilians and those who have or are serving, by decreasing the space to nurture empathy. During the World Wars, between the draft and national movements to garner support, a sense of nationalism, pride, and active engagement from civilians to support war efforts existed. During the Vietnam conflict, however, Americans' opposition to the reasons for war implicated the soldiers who were drafted. Now, the Pew Report shows, Americans' disengagement from military matters has perpetuated the military/civilian divide, and attempts to bridge that gap hold more sympathy than empathy, a distinction that reveals itself clearly in the survey data collected for this project. While the majority of survey participants expressed a desire for writing instructors to express understanding and support, the high majority similarly rejected acts or words of sympathy. There is a fine line between sympathy and empathy, but the survey data, presented in Chapter 3, reveals that veterans are well aware of the difference. Civilians, it seems, are not always.

A lack of empathy. This has been an issue for me over the course of this project, as I have come to believe it’s an issue in local and national conversations on veterans. It’s been an issue in a different way than might be obvious, however. As a fairly empathetic person, I want to push back on this notion of disconnection and deny my ignorance, but I have come to recognize myself in the majority of Pew’s citizen responses. As I moved into this project, I began to identify major assumptions underlying not only my understanding of veterans, but also my thought process in designing this project. My plain truth is that I am an outsider in regards to service people and their military experiences. I wondered often throughout my research
process, how could I be brazen enough to write about student veterans? I worried I would end up sensationalizing war and exploiting those who served. In short, I wondered if I’d do more damage than good.

**Recognizing a Shared Liberation**

Wrestling with my lack of ethos made for a bumpy start on this journey and continues to impact my thinking process, but there is an early moment that resonates with me as a major turning point. It was fall 2012, and I was a third year graduate student attending a book reception at Boston College for the release of Gesa Kirsch and Jackie Jones Royster’s new book, *Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric*. I was taking a class on Feminist Theory that semester, and was especially intrigued by the idea of researching marginalized groups. In *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), bell hooks emphasizes ways in which dominating forces oppress marginalized groups through appropriation, or an attempt to erase differences by forcing conformity (p. 63). As a result, any group or individual who does not fit into preexisting norms is “marginalized,” or seen as existing outside the dominating norms. I wasn’t sure then if student veterans could be classified as marginalized, but it sure seemed like it to me, and consequently my ethos, or lack of it, weighed heavily on my mind. To acknowledge this fear, however, felt like marking myself as an imposter in higher education. I didn’t realize then, that this was a question not just worthy of asking, but in fact necessary.

But that night I was simply hoping to gather some bits of wisdom from the authors, sip wine, eat cheese, and head back home with a signed copy of my book.

Instead, I soon found myself face to face with Jacqueline Jones Royster sharing my recently proposed research study to understand how participating in a writing
workshop may help veterans foster and sustain a sense of community. Before long, I was sharing with Dr. Royster my persistent fear that I lack the ethos for this type of work, having never been in the military or grown up in a military family. In so many words, I managed to convey my desire to help silenced voices and my concern that I was operating from a place of ignorance, which could result in becoming another silencing force in marginalized lives.

Dr. Royster’s response is one I will never forget. First she said we find our way by listening intently to one of the following: our head, our heart, our backbone, or our gut (and she swatted my stomach with the back of her hand for added measure). And then, paraphrasing Lilla Watson, an aboriginal activist, she said, “And you must keep this in mind: If you’re coming to help, go home. But, if you recognize that your liberation is tied up with mine, take my hand and let’s get started. There is much work to be done.”

I thought about that word “help” on my drive home to New Hampshire that night, remembering the jolt I felt when Dr. Royster tapped me on the stomach. I thought about it often in the days that followed and in the designing of this project. What did that mean, to “help”? Who decides who is in need of help, and what that help looks like? I hadn’t realized it, but that tiny word “help,” even with the best of intentions, was creating a permanent hierarchical divide, which reinforced the power of the “helper” and condescended to those “in need of help.” In other words, my well intentioned approach to “help” veterans was preventing me from opening to their experiences, and so perpetuating that divide so apparent in the Pew Report data, and—more importantly—in my interactions with the veterans with whom I worked. I thought back to those writing workshops I held at the VAMC, and recognized that I was so uncomfortable then
because I had been experiencing the truth that Royster had shared: I was there “to help,” but it was clear from the beginning that the veteran participants weren’t looking for or in need of help. But they invited me into their conversations, answered my questions, and filled me in on their experiences as best they could, and in the end, I began to really listen to the stories they wanted to share. I also recognized that while I had wanted to “help” student veterans, what I needed was to shut up for awhile about my concerns about how to respond and just listen. As Klay (2014) shares, “You don’t honor someone by telling them, ‘I can never imagine what you’ve been through.’ Instead, listen to their story and try to imagine being in it, no matter how hard or uncomfortable that feels.” This project has been hard and uncomfortable because, primarily, it has involved learning how to listen. And learning how to listen has involved becoming aware of which questions are invitations to hear about veterans’ experiences, and which perpetuate the divide between military personnel and civilians and further close down possibility of connection and understanding.

In Tactics of Hope (2005), Paula Mathieu addresses this central concern by offering a behind the scenes glance at questions researchers can ask themselves prior to and throughout conducting research with groups of people outside the academy. In considering how the distribution of power between researcher and participants affect their interactions in short term, and service goals in the long term, Mathieu poses several questions to consider: Are those we (as academics) mean to serve interested in being served? Are we prepared to ask questions and listen to answers we may not want to hear? Do we understand the needs of those outside the academy? And, finally, a big one, how can we move beyond our own good intentions to understand how
the work we are trying to do affects and is accepted by those we try to serve? (p. xi)
This last one is especially relevant as I’ve come to experience there are certain responsibilities attached to this position as researcher that cannot be overlooked. It would be easy to believe that “good intentions” are all that is needed, but, given the position of power as researcher, it could likewise be easy to overlook the negative effects of good intentions on groups who do not share similar values. The last thing I wanted to do is reinforce norms that perpetuate marginalization and silence those already stigmatized. For Ellen Cushman (2010), this is the difference between “missionary activism, which introduces certain literacies to promote an ideology, and scholarly activism, which facilitates the literate activities that already take place in the community” (241). Considering the veterans with whom I work, I had to acknowledge I knew very little about military literacy, about how engaging with military literacy would affect student veterans’ learning of academic literacies, if at all, or about what was needed to support student veterans in higher education, if it did. In order to be a responsible feminist researcher, I recognized the need to not only reflect on my own positionality and the limitations that come with it, but to understand the ways student veterans’ experiences both mirrored and differed from mine.

Here, I must return to the concept of marginalization, a term I have tentatively applied to student veterans over the course of this project. hooks’ (1994) definition of marginalization is largely based on social, political, cultural, and economic issues that suggest certain ways of being are more valued and more respected than others. Do student veterans fall into this label? Military culture is very distinct in terms of language and hierarchies especially, but by declaring this group as “marginalized,” am I
dismissing the complex layering of historic and systemic issues underlying the term marginalization? This question became even more of a concern as I began to actively apply feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 1986) to my research approach.

In Ethical Dilemmas in Feminist Research: The Politics of Location, Interpretation, and Publication, Gesa Kirsch (1999) describes this theoretical concept as the “writing [of] oneself into the scene of research,” which involves “situating ourselves in our work and acknowledging our limited perspectives” (p. 14). The purpose of this is not to overcome our limitations, what Kirsch sees as “an impossible task” (p. 14), but to acknowledge that positionality, personal and research agendas, motivations, and experiences contribute to the shaping of research questions and methodology.

Practicing feminist standpoint theory has broadened my awareness of how my background and limited experience with military culture affected my approach to this project, while simultaneously drawing my attention to the rhetoric I had been applying to my research participants.

According to Kirsch, feminist standpoint theory “remains a crucial move for feminist researchers” (p. 14) for it considers how personal, cultural, and historical bias can impact empirical research. She writes,

this theory postulates that what we believe counts as knowledge depends heavily on our cultural, social, and historical location. More specifically, standpoint theory holds that people who occupy marginalized positions in a culture acquire a ‘double perspective’—often as a matter of survival—and, subsequently, understand the workings of both the dominant culture and their own marginal one. Thus, the reasoning goes, people who occupy marginal positions in a culture can offer more insightful, more complete interpretations of that culture than those who do not possess the double perspective. (pp. 14-15)
When applied to this project, student veterans, then, are the ones marginalized from the dominant culture of the academy, and acquire a “double perspective” when entering into higher education. Unlike other marginalized groups who often coexist with their primary marginalized perspective and the secondary dominant culture (white, male, Standard English) as their double perspective, veterans often enter higher education having little to no exposure to the culture of college. Some veterans return to college having been out of the school system ten years or longer, and enter their first class with little to no knowledge of the culture of higher education. Student veteran Joshua referred to returning to college as “entering the Ivory Tower.” Another student veteran participant, Andrew, opened his personal essay with these lines:

The most terrifying experience of my life was not my first day arriving in Marine Corps boot camp, nor was it my first day in Afghanistan. Surprisingly the most terrifying experience of my life came when I traded in my rifle for a pencil, my assault pack for a day pack, and my tactical books for a textbook.

These two veterans’ comments reveal their trepidation in returning to school after time off spent in the military. Furthermore, their words indicate a sense of separateness, of exclusion even. “Ivory Tower,” that age old term suggesting elitist achievements, and Andrew’s admission of feeling more comfortable in a war torn country than in a classroom illustrate just how excluded from campus culture these two veterans feel they are. In other words, where Kirsch suggests marginalized groups can inform research by sharing their double perspectives, student veterans do not exist within the dominant culture of the academy. Their negotiation, then, between their identities as members of the military and their identities as students often begins on that first day in the classroom, right in front of us, their instructors. For sake of this project, I will continue to use the term marginalized to refer to the student veteran population, but have come to
understand the positionality of veterans as more underrepresented than marginalized. I ask readers to keep in mind the historical and cultural complexities involved in labeling student veterans marginalized.

**The Importance of Rhetorical Listening**

While feminist standpoint theory has helped me remain aware of the shifting discourses at play in this research, which in turn has helped me remain open to my limitations as a researcher, rhetorical listening, a theoretical concept developed by Krista Ratcliffe (2005), has provided my primary means of staying curious and open to hearing student veterans’ experiences. In other words, rhetorical listening, an approach to engaging with difference in order to nurture understanding, has helped me cultivate the empathy I’ve needed to bridge the military/civilian divide.

Ratcliffe (2005) identifies four moves of rhetorical listening, which I will briefly summarize:

1. The first move, *promoting an understanding of self and other*, means “listening to discourses not for intent but with intent—with the intent to understand not just the claims but the rhetorical negotiations of understanding as well” (p. 28). Here Ratcliffe deemphasizes the intent of both the speaker/writer and the listener/reader, and draws attention to the multiple discourses at play during any interaction. By becoming more aware of the fluidity of positionality, and factors that influence those standpoints, we lay the grounds for more effective communication.

2. The second move, *proceeding from within an accountability logic*, holds echoes of Lilla Watson’s message. Ratcliffe defines accountability to mean “we are
indeed all members of the same village, and if for no other reason than that... all people necessarily have a stake in each other’s quality of life” (p. 31). By accepting individual accountability, we are acknowledging that our liberation is indeed tied up in one another’s and proceeding from a place that recognizes we are all culturally implicated by the past and therefore accountable to current and future situations.

3. The third move of rhetorical listening, *locating identifications across commonalities and differences*, invites listeners to consciously consider points of connection that emerge where discourses converge and diverge. This added attention to connecting through difference (as opposed to focusing only on common ground) is important for two reasons: the first, it promotes conversation about and across both commonalities and differences (as opposed to collapsing differences); and the second, it emphasizes the discursive nature of discourse and individual and collective standpoints, reiterating Ratcliffe’s second move.

4. The fourth and final move, *analyzing claims as well as the cultural logics within which claims function*, draws attention to the underlying and often unspoken belief systems guiding assertions. Such awareness allows individuals to listen to and appreciate a shared argument or standpoint, regardless of whether or not they agree; this opens a space, then, for honest communication and negotiations across differences.

The act of negotiating across differences is essential to this project. Kirsch (1999) stresses this point, and argues that the goal of feminist scholars and researchers is to “strive to engage in work that dismantles such hierarchies and eliminates the need
to speak for others. Our long-term goal as feminists should always be to allow those we study to speak for themselves, to study their own communities, and to enter public discourse on their own terms” (p. 84). Of course, the hierarchy does still exist, since I as researcher did not only develop this study but also conducted the interviews. I am also aware that I am the only person sharing veteran participants’ responses with others in the academic community. By sifting through transcripts to choose “relevant” pieces to include in my analysis, how can I avoid shaping others’ perceptions of these veterans’ and their responses? To this, Kirsch says “we need to recognize that we may not be able to avoid speaking for others, that we are always implicated in the social and cultural hierarchies we study and seek to transform. As scholars, we cannot escape a position of power or the potential for misappropriating the voices and experiences of others” (p. 85). By being aware of our position of power, and how it may affect research, we can make our motivations for particular research studies transparent to participants and those to whom we are writing. We may never be able to eliminate the social and cultural hierarchies involved in academic research, but this is my attempt to do my best to acknowledge they exist and make them transparent.

Using standpoint theory and rhetorical listening to acknowledge power hierarchies and the ways participants’ situations and, consequently, their values and norms may differ from my own, provided me and the student veterans with whom I’ve worked a space to engage in open, honest communication. So while this chapter is largely about my experience as a researcher, the limitations and challenges I’ve run up against as I’ve moved through this project, and the concerns I’ve had about power hierarchies and appropriation, the goal is that it creates a space for the real stories to be
told. I offer it as my standpoint, believing it provides readers with at least some of the information they need to read past inherent biases that come through my work to hear directly from the student veteran population. Because, after all, this project is intended to provide student veterans with a space to speak to their own experiences, and educators a space to listen to what they have to say. I ask readers to remember, as I have reminded myself repeatedly since this project began, that all of our liberations are tied up in each other’s; and it is my hope that this project can contribute to the work post-9/11 scholars have already begun on student veterans’ experiences with higher education.
On September 11, 2001, the world as Americans knew it changed forever. Across the United States and throughout the world, people stood in solidarity in the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Regardless of age, race, social class, even religion that short time ago, people momentarily put aside their differences and joined one another in displays of patriotism and unity. Immediately after the attacks, people across the country lined up to donate blood, communities set up donation collections, and many others both within and well-beyond geographical range traveled to Ground Zero to volunteer their time, efforts, and resources to saving as many survivors of the attacks as possible. For a while after that blue-skied September morning, kindness among strangers resonated as loudly as the silence of the skies after the government-issued shutdown of civil aviation. Americans saw themselves in each other’s fear and vulnerability, and united over recognizing our raw humanity. “War on Terror” and “United We Stand” became familiar rhetorics, reinforcing both Americans’ fear and patriotism, and garnering support for the impending war in the Middle East.

And war happened quickly. On October 7, 2001, less than a month after the foreign attacks on U.S. soil, the United States declared war in Afghanistan. 17 months after that, in March 2003, U.S. troops moved into Iraq searching for but never finding
Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were long lasting, with Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) becoming the longest American war to date (2001-2014). The immediacy of Americans’ attention and displays of solidarity, however, eventually waned. For many Americans, the wars in the Middle East became distant din, and it wasn’t long after we as a nation were rocked to the core, that life gradually settled back into a new normal.

Post 9/11, higher education began to experience a new normal as well. With the constant presence of war, educators began to anticipate a rapid increase in the number of student veterans on college campuses, and recognized the need to create a space to acknowledge the effects of war and the complicated issues involved in our nation’s current political state. In 2003, mere days after the United States invaded Iraq, the Executive Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) passed a resolution “Encouraging Communication About the War,” which urges “teachers of writing and communication at colleges and universities across the country to engage students and others in learning and debate about the issues and implications of the Iraqi war and any other acts of war perpetrated by the United States of America.”

While this resolution acknowledged that the Committee believes it is a responsibility of higher education institutions to engage academic communities in ways that explore the complexities involved in war, the wording of the resolution positions the United States as a perpetrator of war, and higher education as in opposition to the wars. The resolution implicates the entire composition community as having a civic responsibility to create a space in writing classrooms for conversations about the wars in the Middle East and the issues attached to current and future political unrest; at the same time, the
rhetoric suggests higher education looks unfavorably upon the nation’s choices regarding the wars in the middle east. Consequently, with the political state of the United States in 2003 and in anticipation of the student veteran population growth, the resolution—intended, perhaps, to offer an initial step toward establishing an academic atmosphere that acknowledges the ways war is a shared responsibility among all United States’ citizens—reinforced a division between higher education and the political decisions being made by the United States government.

And when the Post-9/11 GI Bill was signed into effect in July 2008, the anticipated increase in student veterans on college campuses across the U.S. became more than a presumption, and the division between higher education and the United States’ politics became something that needed to be addressed. According to the Post-9/11 GI Bill, any service person who has actively served in the military for 90 days since September 10, 2001 is eligible for some percentage of tuition reimbursement. Service persons who served at least 30 days active duty and were either honorably discharged or discharged with a disability connected to military service are also eligible to participate in the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Additionally, dependents of service persons killed in the line of duty or permanently disabled may benefit from other programs offered by the Post-9/11 GI Bill. At most, the Post-9/11 GI Bill “provides up to 36 months of education

---

4 Tuition reimbursement percentages vary from 40% to 100% depending on the length of active duty service time. For more detailed information, visit http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/post911_gibill.asp and see VA Pamphlet 22-09-01 titled, “Post 9/11 GI Bill: It’s Your Future” (May 2012, Veterans Benefits Administration, Washington DC).

5 For an explanation of requirements for scholarship eligibility for dependents and a breakdown of benefit payments visit http://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/survivor_dependent_assistance.asp.
benefits, generally payable for 15 years following [a service person’s] release from active duty.” Benefits include not only tuition, but also funds for residential costs and supply fees. Additional programs offered within the Post-9/11 GI Bill, such as the Yellow Ribbon program, make extra funds available to student veterans and their dependents.

In addition to the financial incentive, many veterans also see pursuing a college degree as a necessary step toward their occupational futures, and return to school with practical motivations. Instead of seeking a “college experience” or approaching education as a means of self-discovery like many traditional students, student veterans—like other adult learners—are often concerned with acquiring practical skill sets to help them succeed in their occupational goals (Doe & Langstraat, 2014, p. 13).

In the “Introduction” to Generation Vet: Composition, Student-Veterans, and the Post-9/11 University (2014) editors Doe and Langstraat assert that “most student veterans understand obtaining a college degree as a necessity and an opportunity, not an entitlement” (p. 14). In fact, many veterans approach obtaining a degree as completing another “mission,” a perspective that was reinforced during General Erik Shinseki’s remarks at the 2011 Student Veterans of America national conference. In his speech, the head of the Veterans Administration and former army chief of staff declared in regards to obtaining an education, “The mission is clear, defeat is not an option, no one quits, and no one gets left behind” (as cited in Doe & Langstraat, 2014, p. 14). With both the financial and practical incentives, returning to school after life in the military is—in one interviewed veteran’s words—“the next best thing.” And according to the numbers, others agree; following the signing of the Post-9/11 GI Bill in July 2008, student veteran
enrollment in higher education jumped 30% in a single year (from fall 2008 to fall 2009) (Hall as cited in Valentino, 2010, p. 368) and continues to climb.

With the stark increase in the national student veteran population since 2008, some college campuses across the U.S. have acknowledged a need to learn more about student veterans and the influence the recent wars have had on population dynamics at higher education institutions. A quick Google search reveals that some institutions have published in-house handbooks for faculty and administrators in the years since 2008, while others have designated web-space to educating faculty and staff about new trends in student veteran populations. An informal review of nearly a dozen handbooks or web spaces reveals that the majority of information provided to faculty, staff, and administrators include statistics on student veteran enrollment, campus information to provide student veterans who need assistance in navigating the logistics of higher education, a list of student services, and a list of external links to resources for veterans. Despite these efforts at educating faculty about student veteran populations, most material provided by higher education institutions regarding this issue is directed specifically at the student veterans themselves and also focuses primarily if not completely on the logistical details of attending college, including access to Post-

---

6 A Google search using various combinations of search terms including “student veteran,” “faculty,” “higher education,” and “support,” reveals few handbooks specifically designed for faculty use. Those available appear to be associated primarily with community colleges or colleges known specifically for high student veteran populations.

7 This corpus includes handbooks or web spaces from: Columbus State Community College, Eastern Iowa Community Colleges, El Paso Community College, Gulf Coast State College, Los Angeles City College, San Diego Mesa College, Tidewater Community College, University of New Hampshire, and University of Wisconsin La Crosse.
9/11 GI Bill benefits and, again, a list of student services and outside (non-higher education related) resources student veterans may find useful during their years attending college. It is also worth noting that while most of the faculty handbooks/web spaces reviewed range from 1-6 pages, student veteran handbooks were significantly more in-depth, often containing 20-40 pages. This could be an indicator that efforts to support veterans in higher education are often redirected back to student veterans themselves. It could also speak to higher education’s response to student veterans’ requests for more information on navigating academic requirements and expectations.

In addition to college-specific information, a few texts have emerged in recent years that speak more broadly to faculty and administrators about the overarching experience of student veterans transitioning from military life to higher education. One of the first texts to be published after the signing of the Post-9/11 GI Bill in July 2008 was Creating a Veteran-Friendly Campus: Strategies for Transition and Success in 2009 by Robert Ackerman and David DiRamio. Both authors—Ackerman, a Professor Emeritus of Educational Leadership and Vice President Emeritus of Student Services at the University of Nevada, and DiRamio, an associate professor of higher education administration at Auburn University—are prolific writers and advocates for student veterans. Their text addresses several aspects of campus culture that can be reshaped to improve support for student veterans, specifically those who served in a combat zone. It features chapters on student veterans’ transition to college and civilian life, developing and sustaining campus programs in support of veterans, disability issues, female veterans, and the deploying military student.
Called to Serve: A Handbook on Student Veterans and Higher Education by Florence A. Hamrick, Corey B. Rumann, and their associates was published nearly four years after the passing of the Post-9/11 GI Bill in 2012. It too features sections on transitioning from military life, deployments’ effect on military students’ education, and reshaping aspects of campus culture. This text also contains a guided history of higher education’s relationship with military personnel as well as a section that nods to the nuances of veteran experience by addressing issues of gender, race, and sexuality.

More recently published handbooks offer similar overviews of veterans in higher education while contributing in new ways to information already available. Helping Veterans Succeed: A Handbook for Higher Education Administrators in 2014 outlines logistical information regarding enrollment and access of benefits, as do many others, but it also identifies specific challenges unique to this population, moving away from a focus on systemic institutional preparedness and toward the working relationship between faculty member and veteran. Similarly, Supporting Veterans in Higher Education: A Primer for Administrators, Faculty, and Advisors in 2015 incorporates case studies involving student veterans in various academic situations, which offers faculty scenarios to consider. Few handbooks speak to specific pedagogical challenges or offer suggestions, but Preparing Your Campus for Veterans’ Success: An Integrated Approach to Facilitating the Transition and Persistence of Our Military Students by Bruce C. Kelley, Justin M. Smith, and Ernetta L.Fox (2013), addresses this gap by devoting a third of the text to “Innovative Approaches to Serving Veterans in the Classroom.” This handbook, published in 2013, offers readers suggestions in course and assignment design, and, by identifying traits highly valued in the military (i.e. loyalty,
respect, duty, service, and integrity) (p. 136), suggests ways of drawing on veterans’
strengths and integrating aspects of universal design into the course to maximize
veterans’ chance of success in the classroom.

While these handbooks and others offer valuable information to faculty and
administrators, they are not intended as complete, exhaustive resources. Rather, such
texts offer educators an overview of veterans’ experiences and touch on several
aspects of higher education that should be considered for future study. Called to Serve
(2012), for example, folds gender, sexuality, and race into a single chapter that, while
raising key issues for faculty to be aware of, barely skims the surface of how the
structure of the military and its rhetoric promote patriarchal and hetero-normative
hierarchies. The fact that this handbook contains a single chapter devoted to gender,
race, and sexuality reveals at least two important points. The first is that informing
higher educators of all aspects of military culture (from historical turns to current political
states to evolving relationships with higher education to nuances of student veteran
experiences) is an enormous endeavor that can only be broached in a single text and
would benefit greatly by increased support for the cause. The second is that each
aspect touched on in handbooks intended to provide a general overview offers rich
areas for research-supported scholarship that can speak both to systemic college
changes that increase logistical support for veterans and more localized pedagogical
practices for the faculty who find themselves working more and more frequently with
veterans in their classrooms.

Research is especially welcomed considering higher education is often
positioned as a link between veterans’ pasts as members of the military and their
occupational futures as veterans living in a civilian world. Doe and Langstraat (2014) have taken note of the many choices veterans face when entering into higher education, such as deciding whether or not to disclose their veteran status, negotiating finances and time, and possibly directly addressing a physical or mental disability for the first time (p. 14); in considering several facets of veterans’ transition to college, Doe and Langstraat suggest education often acts as a bridge for veterans’ reentrance into civilian life, since it requires veterans to consider some aspects of civilian life, perhaps for the first time… a theory first anticipated in 2003 by the executive committee members of the CCCC. The resulting CCCC resolution, “Encouraging Communication About the War,” however, was focused more on elements and effects of war than on the people fighting them. Furthermore, it positioned the United States—the direct employer of student veterans—as a “perpetuator” of war, which possibly had the effect of furthering the division between higher education and military personnel. Composition scholars have long acknowledged the need for safe academic space for college communities to engage in conversation about the complexities involved in war and its aftermath. But while the resolution calls communication and writing faculty to the forefront in establishing such spaces, Doe and Langstraat, among others, recognize that doing our part involves shifting campus culture to bridge the military-civilian divide, and preparing our campus communities to be supportive and welcoming to the future influx of student veterans. Given the limited information available about effective pedagogical practices, doing our part must also include listening to the student veterans in our classrooms, sharing with each other what we learn from them, and maintaining open, honest
conversations about the complexities of war so that we learn about ourselves and gain insight into our teaching practices.

With the Post-9/11 GI Bill financial incentives and student veterans’ practical motivations for pursuing a higher degree post military, the future influx of student veterans happened quickly after 2008, and with it came awareness that much more work needs to be done to support student veterans and the faculty who work with them. Less than two years after the signing of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, during her 2010 CCCC’s chair address, Marilyn Valentino identified student veterans as a population in imminent need of academic attention. Citing the 30% increase in the student veteran population over a single year, Valentino draws attention to questions of pedagogy. She states that in fall 2008, “our institutions welcomed nearly five hundred thousand veterans, back from one or two or three tours of duty” (p. 368); and, referencing a study done by the Association of Higher Education and Disabilities, Valentino noted that 34.4% of men and 10.7% of women returning from deployments have physical and mental diagnoses that may and do affect learning processes and behaviors (p. 368). Additionally, more recent data from a government report released in February 2013 reveals that 32% of veterans ages 17-34 are enrolled in some level of higher education (National Center, p. 20). Since first year writing courses are required for most, if not all, Associate and Bachelor degree-granting programs throughout the United States, writing instructors are oftentimes the first point of contact for student veterans’, some of whom are not only transitioning into the academy by way of our classes but also from military to civilian life (Valentino, 2010, p. 368). How, Valentino asks, does this type of new student group “affect the ecology of our classes? Do we assign reading or writing on the topic of war?
... What if individuals decide to describe traumatic events?” And when they do, “In what manner do [writing instructors] respond on paper, or in person?” (p. 368) While acknowledging that writing instructors cannot assume all student veterans will have traumas or want to write about them if they do, Valentino raises central questions about how educators can and should prepare for students’ with military backgrounds.

Valentino is not the first to raise concerns about pedagogy, of course. Considering that writing classrooms are often structured as collaborative workspaces and tend to rely on student participation and interaction, the individual student’s role is more evident in small writing classes as opposed to larger lecture halls. Writing classrooms invite and encourage expressions of identity as we help students develop as critical thinkers, and some assignments in first-year writing courses even directly ask students to analyze some aspect of their life which may complicate their perceptions of self. Additionally, the writing process requires students to share and constructively criticize their and each other’s work, and such engagement cultivates a sense of intimacy and vulnerability that is unique to writing classes. Essentially, composition classrooms are often set up for self-disclosure. Student veterans’ military histories—as opposed to other students’, including other adult learners’—however, tend to be less well understood by faculty. Consequently, “making pedagogical connections between the experiences of the military and the civilian sector as well as connections between social groups (across the veteran and nonveteran divide) can be challenging for faculty” (Doe & Langstraat, 2014, p. 13). As the student body began to include more and more student veterans, compositionists began to explore questions of pedagogy.
In 2009, Galen Leonhardy, a writing instructor and former marine, published an article, “Transformations: Working with Veterans in the Composition Classroom.” Leonhardy argues for student veteran inclusion in the composition classroom, and highlights strengths he notices in the student veterans in his classes. Their commitment to work and familiarity with collaboration are highlighted as benefits to inclusive classrooms. Leonhardy also maintains that by utilizing the strengths of student veterans, teachers can facilitate a classroom community that allows for inquiry from other students and connection for student veterans. Leonhardy’s pedagogical suggestions include providing some direct instruction and lots of opportunity to practice writing. He also states it’s important when working with veterans to “lead by example” (p. 74). Leonhardy does this by writing along with students and making his writings public to the class. Ultimately, however, Leonhardy believes that “good pedagogy in the composition classroom is good pedagogy for all students” (pp. 73-74).

While good pedagogy is good pedagogy, it is important not to discount the unique experiences student veterans will carry with them into the classroom. Many writing instructors do not hold the clout that Leonardy, a former marine, does with his student veterans; “bantering” then with student veterans, one of Leonhardy’s suggestions to create a comfortable environment for student veterans, may not garner the same level of success for me, for example, as it did in Leonhardy’s classroom. So a question emerges: How does one practice good pedagogy, which in part means meeting students where they are, when we cannot comprehend where they’ve been?

Sylvia A. Holladay (2009), a writing instructor without a military background, attempted to learn more about where her student veterans are by asking the questions:
“How do we as teachers of English … teach students who have been on the battlefield? Students who have seen and experienced horrors that I can only imagine and share vicariously?” (p. 369) In “Gladly Teach and Gladly Learn,” also published in 2009, Holladay presents feedback she received from a questionnaire asking student veterans about their military experience, motivations for returning to college, experiences transitioning to college, and experiences working with students and instructors in writing classrooms. The insight students provide is sometimes in conflict (for example, some veterans feel more comfortable working alone, and some feel more comfortable working in small groups), which only speaks to the nuances in the needs and expectations of the student veteran population. While the student veterans with whom Holladay spoke “do not expect or want any special attention because of what they have gone through” (p. 376), they distinguish themselves from other students because of their maturity and experiences and find it hard to forge connections in the classrooms. As one student veteran offers, “I feel as though [other students] can never understand what I have seen or done. They cannot understand what it is like having to face death on a daily basis. Most of them hold value on what I consider inconsequential, and with different values, it is hard to relate to others” (p. 376). Holladay’s article is especially important for two reasons. In posing her research question, Holladay recognizes her lack of knowledge about veterans’ experiences and moves to educate herself by heading straight to the source. In admitting her lack of knowledge, Holladay seeks information from outside her area of expertise. And by offering her survey, Holladay opens space for student veterans to speak to educators about their experiences.
This dialogue—one between educators and student veterans—is essential if we are to successfully support student veterans over the course of their academic careers. But opening and sustaining a dialogue is not the only challenge, and cannot be broached in isolation from an awareness of cultural influence. Several factors contribute to a deep divide between civilians and military personnel, and in 2011, *Time* reporter Mark Thompson analyzed the effects on the American public of having an all-voluntary and professional military:

Never has the U.S. public been so separate, so removed, so isolated from the people it pays to protect it... Over the past generation, the world’s lone superpower has created—and grown accustomed to—a permanent military cast, increasingly disconnected from U.S. society, waging decade-long wars in its name, no longer representative of or drawn from the citizenry as a whole. (Thompson, as cited in Doe & Langstraat, 2014, p. 15)

This great rift results in student veterans’ “concern about entering a potentially liberal college culture that may conflate antiwar sentiment with antimilitary sentiment” (Doe & Langstraat, 2014, p. 19).

Additionally, such disconnection can perpetuate misperceptions of veterans that end up silencing conversations that could work to bridge the gaps between student veterans and their civilian peers. The introduction offers the briefest of outlines for a master narrative surrounding U.S. soldiers and veterans, and it is no secret that media images of soldiers returning home, surprising their children, their partners, even their dogs with their homecoming shape civilians’ impressions of the veteran experience, just as darker portraits of veterans living with PTSD, anxiety, depression, or other physical, cognitive, or emotional impairments do. In their 2011 article “Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and the Returning Veteran: the Rhetorical and Narrative Challenges,” authors Bekah Hawrot Weigel and Lisa Detweiler Miller emphasize the dangers of consciously
or unconsciously perpetuating the stereotypes of veterans as either “Homeric heroes” or “Ticking Time Bombs.” The “Homeric Hero,” one construct of the returning veteran’s identity, is described by Weigel and Miller as an identity that “holds the veteran to a higher standard than a civilian and expects perfection and exemplification of a heroic masculinity” (p. 31). This is an identity that is reinforced through media representation and pop culture. In 2011, for example, a *Time* magazine cover story, “The New Greatest Generation,” featured veterans, some with visible disabilities, who’ve succeeded as professionals in the civilian sector. Doe and Langstraat (2014) believe the article fed into a public’s desire to be relieved of emotional burden or guilt, and stated the magazine’s “optimistic depiction of wounded warriors clearly resonated with readers searching for confirmation that a nation cannot only heal from the losses of war, but can become better precisely *because* of those losses” (p. 3). This speaks to the public’s need to disassociate not only from war but also from the repercussions of war. By accepting the idea that the U.S. is stronger because of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and OEF, there is a dismissal of the severity of long-term effects on military personnel.

The danger for the American public, it seems, of veterans not succeeding grandly as civilians is personified in the other narrative described by Weigel and Miller (2011) as that of the “Ticking Time Bomb,” where the veteran, inflicted with PTSD, becomes one who cannot be trusted, and carries with them the threat of violence. Here, mental health diagnoses or even just the presumption of trauma translate to emotional instability, and those who were once seen as heroes are now assumed to resort to “violence and alcohol as a means of coping with their war experiences” (p. 32). Such
minimalist labels often prevent educators from seeing and responding to student veterans as complex individuals with various identities, which reinforces a veteran identity that is not necessarily applicable to the student (p. 33). Furthermore, such tags dismiss—even, in a sense, deny—the range of veterans’ experiences, and closes down the possibility for conversation between veterans and educators—conversation that is imperative if higher education is to support the academic success of its student veterans.

All too often, and especially without open conversations, support for any marginalized or historically underrepresented group operates on a deficit model of the student group. To find out how faculty were being introduced to student veterans and preparing to work with this population, D. Alexis Hart and Roger Thompson, composition scholars whose research is on veterans’ issues and faculty training, visited higher education institutions across the nation and spoke with student veterans and faculty.

In March 2013, at the Conference of College Composition and Communication, Hart and Thompson presented the following statistics from their CCCC funded project: the 2011 national survey of 450 Writing Program Administrators (WPAs) and writing instructors across 50 academic institutions revealed that 45% of respondents indicated that they had specifically noticed an increase in student veterans in their classes (p. 7). Despite these numbers, 92% of respondents had received no training for understanding veterans’ issues in the writing classroom, and 70% of the respondents’ departments or programs had not formally discussed the effect of veterans in the writing classroom (p. 8). Two years later in 2013, teacher training on student veteran issues had yet to catch
up with the increasing student veteran population. A follow-up survey conducted by the CCCC’s Task Force on Student Veterans showed that 85% of respondents still had received no training on veterans’ issues, despite the continual increase in veteran student enrollment in the nation’s colleges and universities (Hart & Thompson, 2013, March).

Hart and Thompson’s findings also indicated that the training programs that do exist tend to foster an image of the student veteran that does not necessarily coincide with the experiences of the majority of student veterans (2013, June, p. 4). In some teacher training programs, Hart and Thompson noted a focus on transitioning veterans from combat to classroom, despite research findings that the majority of veterans “have not directly experienced combat” (p. 4). While some training may be better than no training at all, pigeon toeing the growing population of student veterans into a narrow one-size-fits-all box does a disservice to the students sitting before us. Operating on a deficit model of student veterans, embodied in Weigel and Miller’s (2011) “Ticking Time Bomb” persona, can actually further stigmatize student veterans by both faculty and civilian students. By considering the complexities of identity and experience in this population, training programs can become more nuanced and thus more effective in preparing faculty for serving the academic needs of student veterans.

Because of the collaborative nature of writing classrooms, writing instructors are in a prime position to foster relationships with student veterans that are mutually educational, particularly in required first-year composition courses where 71% of Hart and Thompson’s respondents affirmed that such courses at their institutions assigned some version of a personal essay (2013, June, p. 9). While it’s important not to assume
“that all [student] veterans will have emotional problems or want to talk or write about their experiences” (Valentino, 2010, p. 368), writing instructors are faced with the additional pedagogical challenge of reading and responding to student veteran writers’ military disclosures when they do appear. And working with veterans in a writing classroom, supporting them through the writing process, and reading and responding to veterans’ work opens up access to learning about the diversity of experience within this student group. Karen Springsteen (2014), who works with Warrior Writers, a nonprofit organization aimed at fostering a creative environment for veterans and civilians, shares that writing, as a material practice in which language is “ever present, personal, visceral, and embodied” (p. 140), can “effect real changes within writers and their worlds” (p. 141). Springsteen finds that writing with veterans makes her aware that “there is less of a disconnection between war and home than most civilians think” (p. 141), especially “if we look to veterans who are already speaking, writing, and publishing and to civilians who are already listening, reading, and standing with veterans of wars past and present” (p. 142). So while writing instructors must directly consider the implications of veterans’ military disclosures on classroom dynamics, writing itself offers student veterans a space to explore, share, and learn from their military histories; and it offers writing instructors an opportunity to learn about the nuances in this diverse group of students.

In the wake of Valentino's (2010) call, Veteran Studies as a subdivision of Composition Studies has grown, collaboration between writing instructors and student veterans has increased, and conversations about how writing teachers can best serve the needs of our growing student veteran populations are becoming more frequent and nuanced. Several new initiatives have popped up over the past few years, including a
yearly professional workshop on student veterans and writing studies at the annual Conference of College Composition and Communication, a special interest group for student veterans also at the CCCC that in 2015 obtained permanent standing status, and a conference involving veteran participants called Veterans in Society held annually at Virginia Tech since 2013. Also in 2015, the first edited collection on student veterans and composition was released (Doe & Langstraat), which includes chapters written collaboratively by student veterans and faculty members, and speaks to the urgency of tending to student veteran matters. All of these efforts have helped create spaces for academics and veterans to engage in conversations that are moving away from flat stereotypes of veterans to richer, more nuanced understandings of veterans’ experience in higher education and how their military involvement comes to play in the classroom. But while recent initiatives and the chapters included in Generation Vet (Doe & Langstraat, 2014) offer insight into logistical and pedagogical approaches to working with veterans, there is still, by the editors’ own admission, much work to be done.

This project contributes to this growing body of literature and is intended to join the conversation by offering insight on student veterans’ experiences in the writing classroom, particularly introductory writing courses. It is based on the knowledge of a civilian/military divide, and rooted in a question of pedagogy: how do writing instructors respond to student veterans’ writing, specifically when they are writing about some aspect of military culture?

Military culture, in the scope of this project, refers to a system and community that is essentially closed to civilians. It includes ways in which the military operates, how it is hierarchically structured, how it trains incoming soldiers, and how it fulfills
missions. Military rhetoric is another aspect of military culture that is often foreign to civilian understanding and is included in military culture. Finally, this term also is used to refer to the potential impacts of serving on an individual’s way of thinking, behaving, and interacting. This term is especially important in that it is used to describe why this study singles out student veterans’ writing from other students’; writing teachers regularly have to respond to students’ written experiences, many of which are foreign to writing instructors and may involve traumatic events such as abuse, rape, and poverty. While students’ experiences will undoubtedly differ from their instructors’, they usually occur within a context the writing instructor is familiar with. Writing that involves some aspect of military culture, however, adds a layer of distance to the civilian reader. In terms of teacher response, I wonder, when that reader is an instructor who must evaluate a piece of writing, how does that disconnect (identified as the civilian/military divide) affect the instructor’s response?

Considering Hart and Thompson’s (2013, June) finding that faculty trainings are largely geared toward working with combat veterans, this research question is broad enough to include any aspect of military culture, including but not limited to boot camp, relationships built within the military, deployment, combat, logistics, skills acquired during service, and the process of retiring from military service and transitioning back to civilian life. Couched in and around this question are several other questions, namely, what motivates student veterans to write about aspects of their military experiences in environments full of civilian students and taught by civilian faculty, especially considering the cultural disconnect between civilians and military personnel? What expectations do student veterans have for teacher and peer response to such work?
How do student veterans see their role in writing classrooms, where students’ individuality often plays an important if not central role? And how do writing instructors, who often perform as the curious reader who asks questions of students’ writing in an effort to teach audience awareness to student writers, navigate the boundary between what veterans are willing to share and what they are not?

Although grounded in questions of pedagogy, this study leans heavily on the theoretical implications of practicing rhetorical listening with student veterans. Reconciling their identities as soldiers with their identities as students (and other identities they reclaim when returning from service) is a process undergone by student veterans that civilians cannot experience. While the goal is not necessarily to understand (if that is even a possibility), it is important to create a space to explore the nuances of the situations, motivations, needs, and expectations of this population. This is all the more necessary in writing classrooms where collaboration is central, and writing instructors are often put into the position of modeling responses to student writing to our student writers and readers. Joe Lamb, a writer and veteran of the Vietnam War, suggests that when it comes to teaching veterans, “compassionate listening will be our ‘charge of the future’” (as cited in Valentino, 2010, p. 368). When working with this population, compassionate listening must take on the active element of Ratcliffe’s theory of rhetorical listening, which allows us to connect through points of difference and draw on student strengths. It is important to consider how writing instructors listen to this student group, what presumptions about veterans and military culture are brought into the classroom and into teaching practices, and how those presumptions might affect teacher/student interactions. To assert that writing teachers
are in a prime position to foster relationships with student veterans and bridge the civilian/military gap, however, does not suggest that we are prepared to do so. It is my intention that this work, alongside the work of others currently immersed in Veteran Studies, will help pave the way to equipping writing instructors with some of the knowledge, sensitivity, and practice that will address the needs of our growing student veteran populations.
CHAPTER 2
Designing the study: Creating a space for student veterans’ voices

This study evolved from an initial inquiry into a specific pedagogical writing practice: that of responding to student veteran writers in a first year writing classroom. My original research question was posed as follows: Considering the military/civilian divide, how do writing instructors respond to student veterans’ writing, specifically when students are writing about some aspect of military culture whose context is foreign to civilian writing instructors? Before attempting to answer this question, however, it seemed important to understand veterans’ motivations for writing about military experiences in a small, peer-work-shopped, primarily if not completely civilian classroom. The research questions that shaped the methodology used for this project then became:

1. What motivates student veterans to write about aspects of their military experiences in environments full of civilian students and taught by civilian faculty, especially considering the cultural disconnect between civilians and military personnel?

2. What expectations do student veterans have for teacher and peer response to such work?

3. What do student veterans consider helpful or unhelpful about the feedback they receive?

These questions seemed necessary to explore as a means of inquiring into my original
research question. At the same time, they pointed me away from focusing on the challenges, concerns, and questions arising from writing instructors and toward the voices of the student veterans who participated in the study. While my original research question is important when considering how we can serve the needs of the growing student veteran population, I recognized in many ways I was putting the cart before the horse. My research question, evolving over the course of this study, has become: *What can we learn from student veterans’ experiences in writing classrooms that will help inform our pedagogy?*

In order to explore these questions, this two-part study, approved by the University of New Hampshire’s (UNH) Institutional Review Board (IRB) in November 2013 (see Appendix A), employs an interpretive methodology that integrates the practice of rhetorical listening, thematic and narrative analysis, and grounded theory with a hybrid research design using quantitative and qualitative research methods.

First I distributed a survey nationally to student veterans to gather information about their motivations for writing about military experiences in first-year writing classrooms, their expectations for teacher response on such writing pieces, and what they found helpful or unhelpful about the feedback they received. After I removed incomplete surveys, the remaining 81 completed surveys comprised the corpus. The closed questions on the surveys were counted, and the open questions were coded and interpreted using a modification of Cheryl Geisler’s (2004) systemic coding method; thematic analysis was used to look at the patterns that emerged.

Second, I conducted semi-structured interviews with nine student veteran participants and transcribed the recordings. I asked interview participants to share the
writing pieces in which they had written about some aspect of their military experiences for a class assignment, and each did; I received most of the writing via email before the scheduled interview, so in most cases we could talk specifically about the student veteran’s writing during the interview. The interview transcriptions combined with the writing samples provide examples that explore in further detail how the patterns that emerged from the survey are revealed in individual cases through narrative analysis.

Drawing on the survey data and the interview transcriptions and writing samples, this study aims to identify trends emerging in student veterans’ experiences in writing classrooms, while also exploring some of the intricacies of student veterans’ experiences with writing about military experience for an assignment; ultimately it is my intention that this study will offer valuable insight from student veterans that will help inform pedagogical decisions made by faculty in composition classrooms. The more opportunities writing instructors have to hear from student veterans, the closer we come to bridging the civilian/military divide.

Part I: The Survey

I designed the survey, “Student Veterans and Writing,” using UNH’s Qualtrics software, and distributed it nationally online. I included a consent form as the first question in the survey, followed by five demographic questions about the participant’s role in the military and status as a student, and then ten questions about the participant’s writing experiences. These ten questions ask student veterans if and what they have written about their military experiences, what motivated them to write or not write about their military experiences, what types of teacher feedback they received and/or hoped to receive on their writing, and what was helpful and/or not helpful about
teacher feedback they received (see Appendix B for the complete survey including the consent form). Before I distributed the survey, a version of the survey was piloted with four student veterans. After taking their feedback into consideration, I revised some of the survey questions, and answer choices were added, deleted, or revised as the pilot participants recommended.

My goal was to recruit 100 survey participants. Criterion for survey participants included being enrolled in a higher education degree program and having veteran or military status. To recruit participants, I reached out to writing instructors who work with veterans through the Allies of Veterans in Academia (AVA) Facebook page and the Writing Program Administrators (WPA) list serve. Writing instructors were asked to distribute the survey link to student veterans in their classes and/or on their campuses (see Appendix C for contact/survey distribution email), and invite student veterans to log into the online survey, read the consent form (included in Appendix B) (UNH’s IRB waived signed consent for this portion of the study), complete the survey, and submit responses online. I set Qualtrics to delete any identifying information upon submitting the survey; IP addresses were not collected, and data was not encrypted, so veteran participants’ anonymity was protected.

**Data collection and analysis.** The survey, with seven single-answer multiple-choice questions, two multiple-answer multiple-choice questions, five open-ended questions, and one drag and drop ordering question—for a total of 15 questions that offer a mix of quantitative and qualitative data—was active from January 2014 until July

---

8 The actual survey contains 16 questions, as the study information and consent form was presented as the first question.
2014. 96 surveys were submitted, but once I omitted incomplete surveys, the final corpus included 81 completed surveys so that \( n \) is equal to 81. For the multiple-choice questions, the answers to the single-answer questions were counted and reported to provide an overview of participants' demographics. Answers to the multiple-answer questions and the drag-and-drop ordering question were also counted and compared. In Chapter 3, I report on the results of this data.

For the open-ended questions included in the survey, I applied a variation of Geisler's (2004) coding process. Geisler's process offers a thorough, systematic approach to analysis, and I chose it for this reason. An overview of Geisler's process consists of the following:

1. breaking down verbal data into measurable units;
2. developing and revising one or more dimensions of a coding scheme based on what is noticed in the data and/or the researcher's intent;
3. providing a sample of at least 10% of the data and the coding scheme(s) to a second coder;
4. working with the second coder to revise the coding scheme(s) for maximum reliability;
5. distributing coding scheme(s) and data to additional coders to test reliability;
6. and finally, coding all data.

While Geisler's approach encourages break down of verbal data into linguistic units (i.e. sentences, phrases, t-units) so the researcher can account for each rhetorical turn made within the language structure, for the purposes of this study, I examined each response as a single unit of datum. For example, I considered one participant's answer
to a single open-ended question as one unit whether it was a single phrase or several sentences long. The choice to consider each response as a single unit was a pragmatic one, considering this study is not examining construction of language or rhetorical turns but common themes emerging in participants’ responses.

For all but one of the open-ended questions, I developed a coding scheme to identify common themes. Although each response was considered as a single unit, they could be coded in more than one way. This is another variation from Geisler’s approach, which insists each unit may only be coded once, but applicable to this study considering each datum may touch on more than one theme. Given that \( n = 81 \), the number of surveys in the corpus, the open-ended questions initially contained 81 units, the number of participant responses for each question. To minimize coercion, I offered participants the option to write “n/p” for any question, indicating they preferred not to answer the question. “N/p” responses were excluded from analysis since including them would falsely increase reliability. Responses containing “n/a” for “not applicable” were also removed. Once the “n/p” and “n/a” responses were deleted, the total corpus \( n \) varied for each open-ended question.

To develop the coding schemes, I first identified the phenomena I wanted to consider for each open-ended question: Information Shared, Desired Feedback, Received Feedback, and Advice for Teachers (open-ended survey questions and corresponding phenomena are listed in table 1).
Table 1
Open-ended Survey Questions and Corresponding Phenomena

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Open-ended Question</th>
<th>Phenomena Identified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If you have written (or would write) about a military experience, please summarize in a sentence or two what you wrote (or what you would consider writing) about?</td>
<td>Information Shared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What type of feedback did you want or would you look for from a teacher when writing about a personal military experience you found traumatic?</td>
<td>Desired Feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What type of feedback did you receive from your teacher?</td>
<td>Received Feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What would you like teachers to know when they read student veteran writing about the student’s military experience?</td>
<td>Advice to Teachers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I then looked at the data set for each question, and using grounded theory to identify trends emerging in each question, I created coding categories for each phenomenon. For example, for the question, “If you have written (or would write) about a military experience, please summarize in a sentence or two what you wrote (or what you would consider writing) about,” responses repeatedly mentioned common military events such as deployment or boot-camp. Others commented on experiencing an emotional or perceptive change resulting from a moment or aspect of their military career. Still others talked about their relationships with other troops or the Afghan people. The categories for the phenomenon Information Shared emerged from what the responses indicated student veterans would or did write about in an academic setting. The resulting coding categories, logistical/general, emotional/psychological, violent, and relational, describe the type of information that participants indicated they would share.
or have shared in an academic setting. To clarify meaning for each category, a
definition and examples borrowed from the data were provided in the coding scheme
(see figures 1-4 for the coding schemes to the phenomena identified in the open-ended
questions).
If you have written (or would write) about a military experience, please summarize in a sentence or two what you wrote (or what you would consider writing) about. (If you haven’t or wouldn’t, please write n/a.) (Please write n/p if you would prefer not to answer this question.)

**Coding Scheme for Information Shared**

### Logistical/General
**Definition:** Code as Logistical/General any response that includes general mention of military duties. 

- Logistical/General may include responses where the speaker:
  1. Mentions detailed or general responsibilities of jobs/positions held;
  2. Makes general mention of military tasks or assignments (i.e. “I would write about [my deployment] [experiences at boot camp] [day-to-day activities]”);
  3. Refers to physical conditions of work space/deployment;
  4. Provides details of, variations in, or an overview of military culture and/or programs (trainings, educational programs).

### Emotional/Psychological
**Definition:** Code as Emotional/Psychological any response that addresses the student veteran’s or another military member’s emotional/psychological state during or post involvement in the military. 

- Emotional/Psychological may include instances where the speaker refers to:
  1. Emotional states of mind during or in relation to service;
  2. Specific emotional or psychological effects of military experiences, including mental health diagnoses;
  3. Fleeting and/or changes in emotional/psychological states during and/or post involvement in the military.

### Violent
**Definition:** Code as Violent any response that directly or indirectly references a physical, mental, or psychological act of violence. 

- Violent may include instances where the speaker mentions:
  1. Receiving or inflicting violence during or as an effect of military service;
  2. Witnessing violence during or as an effect of military service;
  3. The effects of violence (i.e. loss of life).

### Relational
**Definition:** Code as Relational any response that references the speaker’s relationships with others in or out of the military. 

- Relational may include instances where the speaker refers to:
  1. His/her relationship with other military members, Afghans, and/or civilians;
  2. The transition to or from the military;
  3. Self-growth related to involvement with the military, including exposure to foreign cultures.

**Figure 1.** Coding scheme for information shared. Provides key for categorizing responses for the corresponding survey question.
What type of feedback did you want or would you look for from a teacher when writing about a personal military experience you found traumatic? (Please write n/p if you would prefer not to answer this question.)

**Coding Scheme for Desired Feedback**

**Academic**
Definition: Code as *Academic* any response that connects feedback with academic success.

  *Academic* may include references to:
  a) Specific elements of writing (i.e. writing style, craft, grammar, and mechanics);
  b) Feedback that supports student in succeeding academically, reflected in either high grades or increased skill;
  c) Being treated the same as other students in regards to feedback and attention.

**Reader Response**
Definition: Code as *Reader Response* any response that addresses feedback as a genuine response from a reader.

  *Reader Response* may include instances where the speaker refers to:
  a) Reader’s questions;
  b) Reader’s response to the situation or subject of the writing;
  c) Attention to audience.

**Relational**
Definition: Code as *Relational* any response that references relationships affecting or contributing to feedback.

  *Relational* may include instances where the speaker:
  a) Mentions his/her relationship with the professor;
  b) References feedback that conveys honesty, understanding, curiosity, or respect;
  c) Mentions being recognized as different from other students;
  d) References feedback that indicates the professor or others learned something from the writing.

*Figure 2.* Coding scheme for desired feedback. Provides key for categorizing responses for the corresponding survey question.
What type of feedback did you receive from your teacher? (If you didn’t write about your military experience for a class, please put n/a.) (Please write n/p if you would prefer not to answer this question.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coding Scheme for Received Feedback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition: Code as Academic any response that connects feedback with academic success.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Academic</em> may include references to:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) Specific elements of writing (i.e. writing style, craft, grammar, and mechanics);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Feedback described as “normal” or not out of the ordinary;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Feedback that supports student in succeeding academically, reflected in either high grades or increased skill;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) Being treated the same as other students in regards to feedback and attention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reader Response</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition: Code as Reader Response any response that indicates the professor responded as a reader as opposed to an evaluator.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Reader Response</em> may include instances where the speaker mentions:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) The teacher’s experience of the text (i.e. he/she liked the text, he/she found it humorous, moving, powerful, etc., feedback was positive);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Questions asked about the subject matter;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) The teacher’s opinion on the subject matter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relational</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition: Code as Relational any response that references relationships affecting or contributing to feedback.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Relational</em> may include instances where the speaker:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) Mentions his/her relationship to the professor;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) References feedback that conveys understanding, respect, encouragement, support, etc.;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) References feedback that indicates the professor or others learned something from or were appreciative of the writing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 3.* Coding scheme for received feedback. Provides key for categorizing responses for the corresponding survey question.
What would you like teachers to know when they read student veteran writing about the student's military experience? (Please write n/p if you would prefer not to answer this question.)

**Coding Scheme for Advice for Teachers**

**Academic**
Definition: Code as *Academic* any response that suggests teachers should focus solely on objective assessment.
- *Academic* may include suggestions for teachers to:
  a) Be objective, and respond only to the student’s writing skill level, not the paper topic;
  b) Treat student veterans and their writing the same as other students and their writing in regards to feedback and attention;
  c) Withhold sympathy, pity, or undeserved praise or recognition due to the student’s veteran status.

**Personal**
Definition: Code as *Personal* any response that references the speaker or teachers’ personal situation.
- *Personal* may include instances where the speaker:
  a) Suggests teachers refrain from engaging in political discussions and/or put aside their political biases;
  b) Acknowledges the writing process can be challenging and emotional;
  c) Mentions self-identity.

**Relational**
Definition: Code as *Relational* any response that references the teacher/student relationship and/or interactions.
- *Relational* may include instances where the speaker:
  a) Suggests teachers consider the veteran’s situation (i.e. the veteran’s relationship with the military experience being shared, the veteran’s writing process and connected emotions that may emerge, the veteran’s inability to share certain military details);
  b) Encourages teachers to be understanding, empathetic, and withhold judgment of the student writer’s experiences and choices;
  c) Mentions being recognized as different from other students;
  d) Asks teachers to keep student veteran writing private.

*Figure 4.* Coding scheme for advice for teachers. Provides key for categorizing responses for the corresponding survey question.

Moving back and forth between the data and the coding categories, I eventually reached a coding scheme for each question that I felt accounted for each segment of data. For samples of coded data from the other open-ended questions, see Appendix D.
To determine reliability, I provided a second coder with the coding scheme and the segmented data for the corresponding question. The second coder and I coded the first five to seven examples together, and the second coder had an opportunity to clarify and ask questions. Giesler recommends providing 10% of the data to a second coder, but considering the low totals for each question, I opted to provide the second coder with half of the data for each question. After the second coder coded the data provided for each question using the corresponding coding scheme, I tallied the number of coding choices in the second coder’s data that matched my original coded data for each coding category and divided by \( n \), to determine reliability. As reliability was lower than .85 for some categories, Giesler’s recommended minimum number to deem a study reliable, I revised the coding schemes with input from the second coder. The revised coding schemes and segmented data were then provided to a third and fourth coder. After the training process, the third and the fourth coders coded separately at >.85 reliability. I recorded the average of their reliability scores as the overall reliability for each coding scheme. The coding schemes, \( n \) for each data set, and the reliability percentage are provided (see table 2).

### Table 2

**Coding Schemes, \( n \), and Reliability Percentages**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coding Scheme for:</th>
<th>( n ) for each data set</th>
<th>Reliability Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information Shared</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desired Feedback</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received Feedback</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice for Teachers</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For one of the open-ended questions, ““Have you ever felt you received instructor feedback that was insensitive? If yes, what was the feedback and why did it feel insensitive?” the majority of respondents answered no. Since there were so few
open-ended responses to consider, I omitted coding for this question, and looked at the responses on a case-by-case basis.

**Part II: Semi-Structured Interviews and Writing Samples**

The second part of the study, the semi-structured interviews, took place face-to-face in a private interview room at UNH or via Skype, with follow up questions taking place via email as needed. I also asked participants to share the writing pieces in which they had written about an aspect of their military experience for a writing course. Interviews took between 20-60 minutes, and were audio recorded. Interview questions asked student veteran participants about their motivations for and experiences with writing about their military experiences for a first-year writing course, including their expectations for teacher feedback (see Appendix E for a list of sample interview questions). Recordings were transcribed for analysis.

For this portion of the study, I wanted to interview ten student veteran participants. Criteria for participants included having veteran or military status, and having had written about some aspect of their military experience for an assignment in a first-year composition course. Student veterans were recruited via teacher referral. I emailed writing instructors via the WPA list serve and AVA Facebook page to see if they could recommend students who fit the criteria for the study (see Appendix F for sample email sent to writing instructors for student veteran recruitment). I asked writing

---

9 This study initially had a third component: semi-structured interviews with writing instructors who had worked with student veterans who had written about some aspect of their military experience for a class assignment. The recruitment email also asked for writing instructor participants for semi-structured interviews. Ten writing instructors were recruited and interviewed but the interview data collected was omitted based on the scope of this project.
instructors to pass along the information for the study and the consent form (see Appendix G for semi-structured interview consent form) to student veterans who had written or were currently writing about their military experiences for an assignment in a first-year composition course. Writing instructors then provided me with contact information for student veterans who met the criteria and volunteered to participate in the study; I followed up with student veterans via email to schedule an interview. During the scheduling process, student veterans were also asked to provide a copy of the writing piece they would be discussing. At the start of each interview, I provided participants with a hard copy of the consent form with a written description of the study and asked them to sign the consent form (see Appendix G). Participants had the choice of using their first names only or a pseudonym for future reporting of the data.

**Data Collection and Analysis.** Semi-structured interviews were conducted between February 2014 and May 2015 with nine student veteran participants. It was challenging to find willing participants for this portion of the study, given that the institution where the interviews were being conducted does not have a high military or student veteran presence, and recruiting participants at other universities depended solely on faculty recommendation. For this reason, I expanded participant criteria to include any military student or student veteran who had written about his or her military experience for a class assignment in an undergraduate introductory writing course.

Of the nine student veterans interviewed, two were graduate students, both male, one had served in the Marine Corps, one had served in the Army National Guard, and both had been deployed overseas; while both of their interviews spoke to undergraduate writing experiences, both participants were also pursuing MFA degrees.
in writing at the time of the interview, and conversations naturally moved toward their current writing projects as graduate students. For this reason, their interviews have been set aside for this project.

Of the remaining seven participants, all were male, one had served in the Navy, another in the Air Force, four were in the Marine Corps, and one was in the Marine Corps Reserves. Five had deployed to Middle Eastern countries. All of them had written about some aspect of their military experience for an undergraduate introductory writing course.

Transcriptions of the semi-structured interviews offered 176 pages of data. Since the survey data was thematically analyzed using a modification of Giesler’s (2004) coding scheme to identify common themes emerging from survey participants’ responses, the interview data allowed for deeper exploration into student veterans’ individual experiences, including successes and challenges, when writing about their military experience in a writing classroom. I applied narrative analysis to participants’ transcriptions for two main reasons. The first is that interviews allow participants to express, in their words and in their way, their personal experience. While the survey participants also had an opportunity to express themselves via the open-ended questions, interviews invite participants to tell their stories in depth and in detail, stories that compositionists need to hear if we are to learn about our students. The second reason is that the interview transcriptions provide specific examples of student veteran experience that act as a validation check against survey data. For example, one interview participant specifically mentioned his relationship with his instructor as instrumental in the writing of his military narrative. The information shared offers
readers an idea of what the student-teacher relationship looks like to one student veteran, which validates the value survey participants placed on the teacher-student dynamic.

Writing samples were also collected from each of the interview participants. In most cases, participants submitted their writing samples to me via email during the scheduling process, which allowed me to read them prior to the interview and talk specifically about the writing samples during our conversations. Oftentimes, writing samples helped to provide context and exemplify more general statements made by participants. In all cases, I used the writing samples along with the interview data as case studies to illustrate and validate the analyzed survey data.

Limitations

The participant recruitment method used in this study presented several challenges. For the survey portion of the study, distribution of the survey to student veteran populations rested heavily on the shoulders of faculty contacted through online forums. Given the number of individuals on the WPA list serve and the AVA Facebook page, the breadth of institutions represented there, and the anonymity of the survey, it is impossible to report which institutions participated in distributing the survey, or the geographical locations of the original 96 student veteran participants. This could be considered a potential limitation of the survey, since the only participants to respond to the survey were those who were invited to partake by a member of the WPA list serve, and student veterans across the country are not evenly represented. At the same time, student veteran populations vary from institution to institution as well, so schools with higher numbers of student veterans may have elicited more responses than schools
with smaller student veteran populations, a natural consequence of survey distribution. Regardless, even though the anonymity of the survey omits certain demographic information, it is safe to say that the method of distribution resulted in a sample that is not a fair cross-sectional representation of student veterans across the United States.

I also depended on faculty to recruit student veterans to participate in interviews. Faculty proposed the study to student veterans whom they knew or had previously worked with, and if the student agreed, the faculty provided me with the student’s contact information. While both male and female student veterans were recruited by faculty, and although both males and females allowed the faculty member to pass their contact information on to me, in the end, only male veterans participated in the interviews. Female military members and veterans are not represented at all with the interview data, and yet their experiences can and do differ significantly from those of their male counterparts. This study does not intentionally neglect the very important stories female veterans carry with them, yet it is important to acknowledge their absence. Silence, too, can be a story that compositionists need to hear.
CHAPTER 3

When veterans become students: The centrality of academic relationships

Once the survey data was quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed, the story that emerged told a familiar tale—one reminiscent of Doe and Langstraat’s (2014) representation of student veterans as serious, professional students. There were also indications of the Homeric Hero archetype in some open responses that reflected humility and thoughtfulness, and a few responses rang with criticisms against the academy as an establishment or referenced a military trauma, calling to mind variations of the angry, isolated, or rebellious veteran embodied in the Ticking Time Bomb narrative (Weigel & Miller, 2011). But while these personas were present to a degree in some of the datum, the survey data also revealed trends that, once identified, shifted focus away from veteran identity (who is the student veteran) and toward the relationships and motivations that shape student veterans’ academic experiences.

In this chapter, I will present findings from the survey data and identify three main trends that emerged through thematic analysis of the data including the open-ended question responses. The trends are described as follows:

1. If given the opportunity, the majority of student veterans will write about their military experience for a class assignment, which means writing instructors will receive writing about military experiences and would benefit from learning about this unique population of students.

2. Student veterans have a keen sense of rhetorical awareness. Their position as
3. veterans can distance them from their civilian peers, and put them in a natural position to use writing for a real-world rhetorical purpose. When veterans write about their military experiences, stakes in writing, sharing, and responding may be raised, but so are opportunities for writing instructors to support student veterans throughout their writing process and to bridge the military/civilian divide.

4. The student/teacher relationship plays a unique and essential role in shaping student veterans’ relationship to writing in that it doubles as a writer/reader relationship that serves a genuine rhetorical purpose. Student veteran participants indicate that when they feel listened to and understood by their instructor, they are more likely to think critically about the rhetorical situation of the writing and learn to make more effective writing moves. And when such a relationship develops, writing instructors are in a prime position to foster and sustain a space that practices and teaches rhetorical listening.

The chapter is organized as follows: first, I offer the demographics regarding student and veteran status of the survey participants. As I did no cross-tabulation in this study, the demographics are offered merely for the reader to have a sense of the population responding. Second, I present findings on the following:

1. Whether or not student veterans’ would choose to write about their military experiences for a class assignment and what they’d write about if they did;
2. The underlying motivations student veterans may have behind their decision to write about their military experiences for a class assignment;
3. Student veterans’ expectations and experiences regarding feedback on writing about their military experiences for an assignment;
4. Thoughts from student veterans on what they’d like writing instructors to know when working with this population.

Lastly, I return to further describe the trends I see emerging throughout the survey data, which speak to student veterans’ rhetorical awareness and the value they place on the student/teacher relationship. As noted in the previous chapter, the data from 81 survey participants is not enough to draw generalizable conclusions about this population. At the same time, the phenomena noticed in the survey data offers valuable insights as writing instructors consider student veterans as active participants in a shared learning relationship.

**Survey Participant Demographics**

First, some general information about the survey participants: 40% served in the military from 1-4 years. 29% served for 4-8 years, and 24% have served over 8 years. Almost half of the participants (48%) served in the Army, 19% were Marines, 17% served in the Navy, and 12% served in the Air Force. A large majority of participants were active duty (69%), and the National Guard and the Reserves were reported at 13% each. 60% attend four-year institutions; 19% attend two-year institutions; and 12% are enrolled in graduate programs. 1% are enrolled in Professional or Vocational school and another 1% participate in Distance Education/Online programs. Distribution was fairly even across the four years of undergraduate higher education, with 23% and 22% being first-years and seniors respectfully, and 15% and 16% sophomore and junior respectfully (for visual break downs of these demographics, see Appendix H).
Finding #1: When given the opportunity, student veterans will choose to write about their military experience for a class assignment.

The survey asked student veterans, “Have you or would you ever write about your personal military experience for a class assignment?” 75% answered yes with no qualifiers, and 7% responded yes if the writing was only shared with the instructor and/or small groups. 15% responded with no.

Participants were then asked “Have you or would you ever write about an experience in the military you found traumatic for a class assignment?” Twice as many participants responded no to writing about trauma as opposed to writing about any personal military experience (38%), however the majority of participants still responded yes; 47% responded yes with no qualifiers, and 11% responded yes if the writing was only shared with the instructor and/or in small groups.

With the majority of participants admitting that they would draw from their military experience, whether or not it was traumatic, for educational purpose, I was curious what types of experiences student veterans would think to write about. An open-ended question then asked participants “If you have written (or would write) about a military experience, please summarize in a sentence or two what you wrote (or what you would consider writing) about.”

Using the code for the dimension Information Shared, whose development and implementation is described in the previous chapter, I found that 38%, the largest percentage, of responses fell into the logistical/general category. This was not terribly surprising given that, in introductory writing courses, student writers are frequently encouraged to consider their audience (in writing classrooms this is most often the
instructor and classmates), and provide context for readers who may need or ask for clarity. Considering the military/civilian divide, student veterans may feel more compelled to provide informative details to their civilian peers and instructor. Also, given the nature of the survey question, responses may have been coded for this category if they were brief or lacking details. Responses such as “I have written about my experiences in Iraq,” “I have written about my boot camp experience,” and “General military information. I.E. places stationed and general duties” were coded in this category for they mentioned general military experiences but do not include the writer’s perspective, which—presumably—would be part of the writing. Other responses, for example, “I have written about how JROTC and Military Youth Academies are different from the actual military, and how they are related,” indicate student veterans use their military experience not just for personal essays.

The second largest percentage of responses belonged to the relational category. This category included 24% of responses referencing relationships to self, other military members, Afghan civilians and military, and U. S. civilians. Some responses include general mentions of relationships: “I’ve written about my relationship with my soldiers.” Others are more descriptive and address the complexities involved in serving overseas such as the following examples: “I would most definitely share the fact that I did not feel any ill will towards the people living in Afghanistan, and, in fact, that I felt sorry for their condition and sorry that the rest of the world ignores them except for when one of their numbers does something horrific;” and “[I wrote] a condensed story of a six day

\(^{10}\) All survey data is presented as it was submitted. I did not revise for editorial or spelling errors.
Operation Point (OP) and the interaction of our small team of soldiers and our reluctant hosts. Each of these responses indicates awareness on the writer’s behalf of the complicated nature of being a soldier overseas interacting with the Afghan people. While the latter deals with a contained instance of soldiers depending on Afghans who, according to the writer, appeared resistant, the former considers the reality of the living situation in Afghanistan against the political backdrop of a rhetoric of fear and othering.

The category emotional/psychological included responses that referred to shifting emotional states during or post service and/or the psychological effects of serving. 20% of responses were coded as emotional/psychological. One veteran offered: “I would share times that I felt vulnerable, or times that I felt invincible. I would share about the times I was scared to death, and the time I first saw a wounded comrade.” Another shared about the culture shock experienced during deployment: “Wrote about my first experience arriving in Iraq to transition responsibility from the leaving unit to my unit. Described how foreign and unsettling and overwhelming the circumstances were.” Another, a medic, addressed the emotional burden attached to military positions, “I would write about what it is like to feel responsible for a casualty and the emotional conflict that comes with it.” In each of these examples, the writer is sharing about the intrinsic effects of serving and sometimes about the external moral conflict that triggers the emotional response.

Before beginning this project, I had envisioned the combat story as the most prominent piece of writing composition instructors would see coming from student veterans in the classroom. To this end, I imagined that the remaining category, violent, would contain the greatest percentage of responses. After applying the codes,
however, only 13% of responses referenced violence at all, and only 2% of responses fit only in the *violent* category. This suggests that when violence is mentioned, it is in relation to one of the other themes. Rarely, the data shows, do combat stories or other stories of violence alone take center stage. The following examples show how violence is used to expound upon more central themes:

As a lower enlisted female in the military I have been abused and beaten by my superiors. I did not have the resources to come forward about my abuse nor do I feel comfortable talking about it. That's all the information I am comfortable providing. What I will say is that it made me stronger and affirmed my belief that I would become a commissioned officer in the military so that I can help other females cope with the struggles I have faced.

In this example, the veteran indicates the violence she experienced at the hands of her superiors became a motivator to achieve a rank that would allow her to offer other soldiers the support and resources she lacked. The violence in this response acts as a catalyst for the veteran’s upward mobility in the military to achieve a specific purpose. Similarly, in this next example, “I wrote a poem about photographing a shotgun suicide in a barracks on Thanksgiving day and the effects it had on my life afterward,” the writer uses the moment of witnessing a violent act to explore the ways his or her life were effected as a result. Here again, the violent moment is not the purpose so much as it is used to describe the ways the writer’s life was shaped by it.

Ultimately, the data suggests that student veteran participants do not consider their experiences serving in the United States Military as off limits for a classroom assignment, whether or not they found their experiences traumatic. In fact, the majority indicated that they have or would bring their military experience into the classroom, which shifts the question from whether or not student veterans will write about their military experiences—they will—to why.
Finding #2: Student veteran participants are most motivated by the desire to be understood and connect with others.

Considering the military/civilian divide, a first-year or other introductory writing classroom may offer student veterans an audience that is unfamiliar with military culture, military rhetoric, and certainly with the reality of war—an audience, in other words, that may lack a sense of support, and whose disconnection from military experience may impact its ability to empathize with a student veteran writer. What, I wondered, motivates student veterans to bring their military experience into an academic setting, specifically an introductory writing classroom, where the majority of their peers are most likely civilians? Considering the military/civilian divide shown in the Pew Report (2011) and experienced on our campuses, just what do student veterans have to gain from sharing their stories with their civilian teachers and peers?

To explore these questions, participants were asked: “If you have written (or would write) about a military experience, what motivated you (or why would you choose) to write about this experience?” Survey participants could select all responses that applied. Not surprisingly, over half, 59%, indicated that their military experience was relevant to the assignment given, indicating that practicality is a driving force behind topic selection. But after considering logistical motivations, nearly as many participants, 56%, responded with “I wanted to share the experience with others,” and 40% wanted to “explain [their] role (decisions, choices) in the experience.” The emphasis on reaching an audience suggests student veterans are both aware of and creating a rhetorical situation in which the audience plays an essential role in their telling. To a lesser extent, participants indicated a more personal motivation: 27% wanted to “try to
learn from the experience,” and 20% wanted to “get it off [their] chest.” While personal gain or catharsis can be intrinsically motivating, I find it interesting that more veterans are motivated to write about their military experiences because they have an audience.

Survey participants were also asked, “if you haven’t written about a military experience, why haven’t you?” They were invited to select all responses that applied. Nearly half, 49%, said they have or would, and 30% said their military experience wasn’t relevant to the assignment. 21% said they wouldn’t because “it’s private”; 17% have a “fear of being misunderstood” if they bring their military experience into the classroom; and 15% don’t want to share about their military experience with the classroom audience.

I was very interested in the question of motivation in light of the military/civilian divide, and I found even more interesting that the survey results reveal, at first glance, contradictory trends. The data—which shows a majority of student veterans want to share their military experiences with others, and that the majority of those who don’t write about their military experience consider their stories private—could be speaking to the nuances of student veterans’ experience with their service. After closer study, however, it appears that those who choose to keep their military experiences private do so for similar reasons that motivate other student veterans to write about theirs - they sense a disconnection with their audience. The distance between writing and reader, while motivating some to try and bridge that gap, can discourage student veterans from even trying, as is shown in responses that state military experiences are private and/or student veterans are afraid of being misunderstood.
When those who do write about their military experiences share their stories with a predominantly civilian audience, what sort of feedback are they looking for? The next section reports the survey results regarding feedback.

**Finding #3: Student veterans want feedback that reflects a respectful, honest, empathetic relationship between teacher and student.**

In a process based writing classroom—a situation that inherently includes a series of evaluative responses from peers and the instructor—providing feedback is a recursive process. Writing instructors are often faced with the challenge of providing evaluative writing feedback to personal essays that may involve trauma and/or sensitive situations; furthermore, we are responsible for teaching and modeling to our students how to respond constructively and sensitively to others’ writing. When students choose to write about a sensitive or traumatic situation for a class assignment, they are aware their writing will be assessed. What, I wondered, do student veterans expect from their instructors in terms of feedback?

**Desired feedback.** This became the next question asked of survey participants: “What type of feedback did you want or would you look for from a teacher when writing about a personal military experience you found traumatic?”

The largest percentage of responses for this category fell—not surprisingly—in the *academic* category for the phenomena Desired Feedback. 50% of responses favored feedback that addressed specific elements of writing, such as writing style, craft, grammar, and mechanics, resulted in a high grade or increased skill, and was similar to feedback that would be provided to any other student. The data shows that student veterans, as Leonhardy (2009) and Doe and Langstraat (2014) have
acknowledged, are often responsible students, paying serious attention to their academic performance and adherence to academic requirements. Some of the responses addressed specific writing feedback respondents would look for, such as this one: “Perhaps how best to convey the experience, or in what ways to express it, like how to structure the sentences and ordering.” Others indicated that, in addition to wanting feedback specific to writing, they did not want feedback on the content of the writing. One participant wrote, “I would want feedback about the organization, style, and mechanics of my writing not about the content.” Another responded, “Educational feedback regarding grammar, punctuation, and grading. Any other type of feedback would make me feel uncomfortable.” In each of these examples, there seems to be a compartmentalizing taking place in that these student veterans assume writing instructors can separate the mechanics of writing from the content in which it appears. In this next example, the student shares, “If I had written about military experiences, I would have expected straightforward and unbiased feedback. If my military experience were relevant to the assignment, there is no reason it should be looked upon any differently than a civilian student writing about his or her own personal and relevant experience.” “Straightforward and unbiased feedback” also suggests a simplistic and detached approach to providing feedback, and being treated the same as other students suggests some student veterans do not want special attention due to their veteran status.

Only 12% of respondents indicated they looked for reader response feedback. One respondent wrote that, in addition to comments on writing mechanics, “I would also like comments about [readers’] feelings or their perceptions of the events/conditions I
Another shared he/she would want to hear “what [readers’] thought about the situation and how it was handled.” In each of these examples, the student veterans are interested in hearing a genuine reaction from their readers about the story being told—not just about what they perceive as the mechanics of writing. I was surprised that this percentage was so low, as reader engagement is an effective way to assess writing, but the low percentage makes more sense in light of the number of participants who stressed the importance of relationships when considering feedback, which made up the third coding category for this dimension.

38% of survey participant responses were coded as relational. Responses in this category suggested the student veteran writer’s relationship with his/her writing instructor is highly valued when it comes to feedback. They included references to feedback that conveys honesty, understanding, curiosity, or respect. For example, one participant shared, “I would expect the professor to be respectful and understanding of my situation. I would want the professor to keep the information private. However, I wouldn’t want the professor to pity me in any way.” Another wrote, “Understanding. Just the understanding that the complexities of certain situations cause us to act in ways we normally wouldn’t or prevent us from taking actions that we normally would.” In each of these responses, the writer stresses the importance of connection that moves beyond words on a page. In the first, the writer’s expectation of privacy suggests the writer must first trust the instructor before sharing. And the second identifies the complexities involved in military life and depends on the reader’s ability to receive the story with openness and without judgment. I think it’s interesting to note that, in the second example, the wording suggests the writer is aware that some of his or her written
experiences may defy certain societal expectations; yet the writer does not ask for acceptance or affirmation. Both responses consider understanding—awareness on behalf of the reader of the complexities involved in human experience and military choices—valuable as feedback from their teachers and peers.

Other responses were categorized as *relational* if survey participants valued being recognized for their life experiences and acknowledged for differences from traditional students; or if feedback indicates the professor or others learned something from the student veteran’s writing or shared experiences. This last group is especially interesting to me because it suggests a reciprocity that is more overt than educators’ general awareness that we learn from our students just as they learn (we hope) from us. Survey responses seem to suggest that writing instructors are not only *able* to learn from student veterans but that we *have something to learn* from them, such as the following:

Certainly I would like feedback from a standpoint of the technical aspects (did I use the format correctly etc), but I would also like comments about their feelings or their perceptions of the events/conditions I discussed. I have found in general a great deal of disbelief about conditions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Also, I would like to hear an opinion about the picture I present versus the picture portrayed by the media which is often the only contact people have, or the picture portrayed by family/friends from whom the teacher (or other students) have heard stories.

In this example, the respondent is not only looking for a genuine response from the writing instructor (this response was also categorized as reader response), but he or she also demonstrates rhetorical awareness by acknowledging the variations in the way the story of war in the Middle East is told to the general population. Additionally, this writer is positioning him- or herself as a voice contributing to the readers’ perceptions of the situation in the Middle East or military experiences. To me, this indicates the writer
already knows what we try to teach our students: that they are the experts of their lives, that only they can tell about it, and that their stories are worth being told. As does this one, who says he looks for, “Empathy, understanding and I would hope those who have not served in the military or in a combat zone would learn from those of us who have so served.” The reciprocity that can exist in the student veteran/writing instructor relationship is one that can be instrumental in creating a space for educators to learn about the nuances of military experience.

**Received feedback.** When asked, “What type of feedback did you receive from your teacher?” survey participant responses reflected the same three themes: academic, reader response, and relational feedback. As with the dimension Desired Feedback, the greatest number of responses to this question was coded as academic. Nearly half (45%) of participants indicated that feedback they've received on their writing has addressed various aspects of writing, from organization to grammar and syntax; has resulted in increased skills or grades; and/or has been similar to feedback provided to all other students. Some responses simply listed, “Positive – I got a decent grade,” or “feedback on general content, grammar, etc.” But other responses in this category spoke to the participants’ awareness of what wasn’t being said. One participant shared he/she received, “Casual, non-content-specific feedback, almost as if [the teacher] did not want to question the experience to find out more or to offer any critique. It has to be difficult for non-veteran teachers to determine what military experiences are authentic and what is fictional.” I am struck here both by the respondent’s thoughtful curiosity about the teacher’s lack of personal response and the
evident empathy shown for the civilian teacher who must respond to a situation so unfathomable, the respondent thinks it could pass for fiction.

Interestingly, when asked what feedback student veterans *look for*, 38% of responses coded as *relational*, and 12% fell into the *reader response* category. As far as the feedback participants actually *received*, the results were reversed, with 36% of responses falling under *reader response*, and 18% categorized as *relational*. Some responses coded as *reader response* described a professor’s reaction to a piece of writing, such as “They enjoyed the paper I wrote and they said it was very descriptive.” Others referred to displays of genuine curiosity on behalf of the reader. One participant shared, “In past times I have written about non-traumatic experiences [and] the feedback was mostly further questions about my experiences because [the teacher] could not judge the situation having never been in it himself.” This response, too, asserts the writer is an expert of his or her own experiences, and suggests the teacher can learn from the student veteran.

Another response coded as *reader response* commented on the impact of the entire class’ reaction to the writer’s piece. The participant shares:

My essay that week was chosen via the random selection process to be read and discussed in class, we were supposed to go over three essays in that 1.5 hour class, but everyone was so interested in discussing mine that the others did not get mentioned. The support from other students was heartening, and many expressed disbelief that conditions could be as described because they were so foreign to what my classmates had experienced before. (This was in a freshman English class in the fall semester, and I was the only student in the room who was not straight out of high school in a Midwestern primarily rural state.)

The parenthetical tacked onto the end is, I presume, the participant’s attempt to show how very little he or she had in common with those classmates. The class’ response
then—a response that took three times as much class time allotted—offers the writer encouragement, while also positioning the writer as the expert, as one who can educate the class from life experience.

Although there were fewer responses coded as *relational*, the insights they offer are important to consider. One participant shared that the feedback received “was good, opened up conversation.” I found this interesting in light of the story told by the data from an earlier question. As explained earlier, the data points to student veterans’ likeliness to share about their military experience for a class assignment. If this could be taken as an invitation to writing teachers to open up conversation with student veterans, then this participant’s comment that feedback was positive and “opened up conversation” leads me to consider the writing instructor’s role in facilitating dialogue.

Our feedback, it seems, can shut down all communication, or act as a sort of invitation in return for the student veteran to continue sharing, a reassurance that we are indeed listening. If the writing teacher/student relationship is built upon the way feedback is offered and received throughout the writing process, it follows that one will impact the other, as evident in the following response: “[The teacher] was very understanding of my story and our relations between each other were improved. Once he understood me and I understood him, class was easier and he was more effective when he taught me.” This example suggests that, in this participant’s experience, an understanding relationship improves teaching and increases learning. While these correlations aren’t conclusive, it’s interesting to consider the effect of one variable on the other. But, I wondered, what does feedback that promotes an understanding
teacher/student relationship look like? And what type of feedback did student veterans see as being detrimental to that relationship?

**Helpful and insensitive feedback.** The next survey question asked student veterans to rank the following writing feedback from most to least helpful:

“Questions/comments about content,” “Grammar/editing feedback,” “Questions/comments about writing (organization, structure),” and “Suggestions for revision.” In reflecting on the survey design, I find this question to have too much variability, and believe it’s ineffective to draw conclusions from the data for this question. I do, however, think it’s interesting that “Questions/comments about content” was nearly tied for the most helpful feedback (3% behind “Grammar/editing feedback”), while also being ranked as the least helpful feedback. It seems participants either highly valued engaging with their instructor about their writing topics or they tried to compartmentalize the subject of the writing from mechanics (to see the table of data for this question, see Appendix I).

I also wondered if student veterans would share about negative experiences regarding feedback on a writing piece about military experience. The next question asked participants “Have you ever felt you received instructor feedback that was insensitive? If yes, what was the feedback and why did it feel insensitive?” Although an open-ended question, the large majority of survey participants (88%) responded no to this question. The remaining data was so minimal in scale, a coding scheme would not have been able to decipher patterns. Of the responses indicating participants had experienced insensitive feedback, two involved the instructor and the student differing on their political views. It is difficult to determine if such moments were deemed

81
insensitive due to the conflicting viewpoints or the delivery of such, as in this example, “I got called a mercenary once by a professor. I never considered myself as such—I was in the regular Marines. I realize that everyone has different opinions about the war.” I am struck not just by the strong language on behalf of the professor, but also by the veteran’s acceptance of people’s differing opinions about the war considering the grave insult. Another participant, after indicating professors have responded insensitively to his being in the military, then shared, “every U.S. citizen is entitled to their own opinion so long as they express it professionally and in a manner that does not pose a threat to others.” In each of these cases, the delivery seems to be deemed insensitive more so than the differing of opinions.

Another participant who shared his experiences with insensitive feedback indicated the relationship with his professor affected his acceptance of the feedback offered. He wrote, “I can take the insensitive feedback better if it is presented informally. When it feels detached and inhuman, uber formal I guess [it is harder]. I am just a sensitive guy, I like the human contact.” While there may be some conflation with “insensitive feedback” and constructive criticism here, the veteran’s emphasis on the professor’s humanity is another example of how the teacher/student relationship can impact teaching and learning. On the other hand, however, students learn about their relationships with their instructors through the feedback provided, or—as in this next example—the lack of feedback; one participant shared he received “Nothing insensitive. If anything, perceived lack of feedback as a sign that the instructor was uncomfortable commenting on the particular subject.” Regardless of the instructor’s actual intent in responding to the student, the veteran’s association of the professor’s lack of feedback
with perceived discomfort points again to the close connection between the teacher/student relationship and writing feedback; and demonstrates how student veterans are reading not just our feedback, but our silence too.

**Student Veterans Offer Advice to Writing Instructors**

As the last survey question, student veterans were invited to share any information or thoughts they had for writing instructors on working with student veterans. The question was posed as “What would you like teachers to know when they read student veteran writing about the student’s military experience?”

27% of participants’ responses were coded as *academic*. Many of these responses suggested teachers do not let the student’s veteran status influence any teacher/student interactions, including reading the student’s writing. Based on the responses, it seems student veterans interpret extra attention in one of two ways: either they are being pitied or unduly praised. In regards to the first, one student wrote, “As a combat veteran, I do not want the sympathy from the teacher or the sad feelings that people get when you hear about traumatic events in combat. The sympathy only makes matters worse in my mind.” This student correlates sympathy with weakness, as he ends this response with: “My mind has a strong coping behavior that I block out such things in my writing.” “Such things” presumably refer to military experiences that are traumatic or hard to share, which suggests the student is proud of his or her ability to “block” them out. Consequently, pity or sympathy, however well intentioned, can be received as being perceived as weak.

Other responses discouraged instructors from offering too much or unearned praise. One student shared, “I'd want teachers to understand that praise or special
attention is unnecessary; treat the writing like you would treat any other student’s writing.” This example speaks to student veterans’ focus on achieving their educational goals. By asking to be treated the same as other students, this veteran asserts a preference for honesty. He does not need his ego stroked; he needs to improve his writing. And praise, specifically when it is “unnecessary” or unearned, counteracts that goal. In the words of another participant, teachers have an obligation to “Be fair to us by not placing our writing on a pedestal.”

A greater percentage, 36%, of survey participants’ responses were coded as relational. Contrary to the academic coding scheme, which asked teachers to withhold special treatment, some responses coded as relational asked instructors to consider the unique backgrounds and situations of military students, or, in other words, to recognize their differences from traditional students. One participant wrote, “I would like teachers to realize that we are not the average students. That many times we have equal, if not more life experience than the professors and would prefer not to be treated like children.” To this student, the life experience gained in the military distinguishes student veterans from their 18-year-old peers. And this response pushes back against the message to treat all students exactly the same. To do so dismisses individual experience and knowledge, and for many student veterans, who often pursue a college degree after years off from school, their strengths arise from those experiences. While seemingly contradictory pieces of advice, I see the underlying intent as the same: student veterans don’t want to be seen as two dimensional—either as a soldier or as a student.
Part of respecting a veteran’s life experiences, the data shows, involves considering where the veteran is coming from, responding with understanding and empathy, and withholding judgment. One participant shared,

I would like education professionals to attempt to understand military experiences as they attempt to understand any experience that is foreign to their own experiences. Such understanding should be assisted with curiosity, empathy, and an attempt to see the point of view of a person with very different professional and personal experiences.

The difference, it seems to me, between the unwanted sympathy and desired empathy on behalf of student veterans lies in that word “curiosity.” Sympathy is born of presumption—assuming a veteran has seen combat or has suffered leads to two-dimensional stereotyping. Empathy, on the other hand, involves momentary suspension of what we think we know in order to be curious, to be open to receiving the experiences student veterans are willing to share—that many of them want to share.

The teacher/student relationship is clearly highly valued, as is evident in this response:

That it is not about the grammar, the syntax, the organization, or the assignment. It is actually about trust, reaching out for help, sharing a deep hidden shame, validation, connection, empathy, and understanding. It takes as much courage to seek answers and to share experiences as it does to stand toe to toe with the enemy. Veterans are courageous and in deep pain when they finally share.

Of the three coding categories, the highest percentage of responses fell into the category labeled personal. 45% of participant responses addressed an aspect of the student veteran’s or the instructor’s personal, private life. Some student veterans’ approached this final survey question, “What would you like teachers to know when they read student veteran writing about the student’s military experience?” by sharing bits of their inner world. One participant wanted teachers to know, “That we very likely aren’t sharing the story to show off or brag, nor are we likely to be sharing it as a means of
quickly and carelessly completing an assignment. The personal military stories of ours carry with them a connection to us unlike what non-veteran students share.” This response holds echoes of concerns mentioned previously. The participant wants teachers to know the writing comes from a genuine place, and doesn’t want to be perceived as egotistical. The answer also reveals the veteran’s dedication as a student, and a willingness to share the value placed on the student’s military experiences.

Another veteran shared,

   It can be hard for some veterans to disclose certain information regarding their experiences. Some veterans see more combat than others and have different feelings due to the intense fighting. Those of us who saw extensive fighting probably lost a lot of close friends. Friends that you might consider family…

Such glimpses into the thoughts and memories of student veterans offers writing instructors a sense of veterans’ inner worlds—not just with their past military experiences—but with the present writing of them, with us as their readers.

   In addition to wanting to share their personal responses to writing about military experience, student veteran participants ask teachers to withhold their personal political beliefs when discussing a student veteran’s writing. Some responses indicate veterans may feel their experience is being undermined when it becomes a catalyst for a political discussion. One student wrote,

   I would like [teachers] to know that writing about the military experience is hard, being in the military is hard, witnessing the horrific violence is hard, and if they have not been there then they have no right to degrade, ridicule, put down, or try to convince the military member or the students that the instructor’s personal philosophy is more correct then the military member’s.

In this example, instructor’s philosophy is posed against veteran’s experience, but it seems to me that the wording of this response indicates the instructor’s positioning of
his or her philosophy is the issue, not the philosophy itself. The words “degrade, ridicule, put down” all suggest that the professor’s position overshadows the veteran’s experience, and in a classroom full of civilian students, this move can not only shut down conversation between teacher and student veteran, it can negatively impact interactions between students in the classroom. In writing classrooms, where the texts studied are student papers, and the conversations revolve around individual thinking processes and writing choices, it’s challenging if not impossible to withhold aspects of our personalities, our belief systems, our world-outlook. And I’m not arguing that teachers should present as neutral by any means, and neither, I don’t believe, would student veterans. On the contrary, these responses really seem to be asking writing teachers to open rather than shut down; to suspend assumptions and check emotions; to listen. Student veterans’ writing about their military experience will at times present controversial conflicts, approaches, and choices made. As teachers we need to remember that we have only been provided a glimpse into a world from which we are separate. For this, we should, as one survey participant wrote, “Be glad that that person decided to share that part of their life and past with you. It was a whole lifetime away from where they are now.” This last example reads to me like an invitation and a warning: when a student veteran shares a story of military experience, the writing instructor is being invited into a conversation; it is up to us to remember the dynamic situation of the human experience, and not let the student’s veteran status superficially influence our reading or response of the student’s writing.
The Story

15 survey questions answered by 81 participants cannot offer major generalizable conclusions about the entire population of student veterans moving through our curriculums year to year. The data can however offer valuable insight into the ways student veterans are responding to writing teachers and the way the disconnect between civilians and military can play out in the classroom—by pushing back on those two-dimensional portrayals of veterans either as heroes to be praised or as ticking time bombs, dangerous and unpredictable; and by inviting educators into their experiences, student veterans are opening a space for conversation to happen. It’s interesting too that the data shows that those who keep their silence do so for the very reasons others speak out—because it is hard to bridge that military/civilian divide, and building relationships toward empathy and understanding takes work and time.

**Trend 1.** The first trend that emerges from this data: the majority of student veteran participants will write about their military experiences, whether or not the experience was traumatic, if given an opportunity. Student veterans use their military experiences, as traditional students use their first week at college or a grandparent’s passing—to explore internal conflict, change, and growth. While some veterans will write about moments of violence, the violence is often offered as a catalyst to the writer’s evolution as an individual. The majority of student veterans from the survey are simply using what they know to increase self-awareness and consider larger worldviews.

**Trend 2.** The second major trend of note is that student veterans have a keen sense of rhetorical awareness. At first glance, when it comes to feedback, student
veterans appear to be concerned primarily with improvement and assessment – same as other students. They want to know teacher expectations, what specifically is required of them, and how they will be evaluated. For all intents and purposes, student veterans approach assignments and academic transition to college in similar ways as traditional first years.

The concern about academic logistics, however, seems to fade into the background a bit when students become invested in a writing assignment. As student veteran writers consider their audience and engage in the writing process, the rhetorical situation develops a specific purpose. Introductory writing courses often focus on teaching the rhetorical situation and simulating hypothetical scenarios to help students envision the effect of exercising a rhetorical situation (i.e. some assignments may ask students to write a letter to a specific audience so students can more directly consider which appeals will be most effective for their purpose); student veterans, perhaps due to their unique life and professional experiences, may often write about their military experiences with a specific rhetorical purpose already in mind. The majority of student veterans in the study do not appear to be writing only for the grade, or for cathartic purposes, but to share their experiences with those who do not know what military life is like, with those who do not know the realities of war or the responsibilities of soldiers. They use writing as a rhetorical tool to connect with an audience, to dispel stereotypical or media influenced perceptions of the military and military personnel, and to assert that their experiences—and the experiences of their fellow military members—have purpose and meaning. To return to one of the examples shared earlier, the veteran writer expounded on the effect of hearing objections to the wars in the Middle East: “Those of
us who saw extensive fighting probably lost a lot of close friends. Friends that you might consider family, and when someone questions the War, it feels like those lives were lost for nothing.” Writing about military experience allows student veterans to pass on the stories otherwise lost, to honor those who lost their lives, and to recognize that bonds formed during life in the military hold true even when soldiers become veterans. In other words, when student veterans write about their military experience, they are perhaps driven less by personal motivation (to process, to learn from one’s experience), and more so by a specific social purpose. In theory, this is an ideal situation for writing teachers—having students consider the relationships between writer, text, and reader and make purposeful decisions as the writer to effectively reach the audience. In reality, the real-life context can and does raise the stakes for both writing instructors and student veterans, as the data shows. Each time a teacher responds with personal or political beliefs, he or she is responding as a real life audience. And each time student veterans receive constructive criticism, they must parse out what is teacherly advice/questions/confusion from what they may assume is the teacher’s personal or political position regarding the military and its obligations and choices. This leads us to the final major trend that emerges from the data: the high importance placed on the student veteran/writing instructor relationship.

**Trend 3.** Introductory writing courses offer students a unique opportunity to engage with real readers and gauge an audience’s reaction to a writing piece. The writing process requires several drafts, ongoing feedback from a mixture of peers and the instructor, and opportunities to revise. In a hypothetically structured rhetorical situation—for example, when students are asked to write a letter to a specific audience
persuading them to take action—the imagined audience most likely comes secondary to the actual audience: the instructor who ultimately gives the assignment a grade or otherwise assesses the writing. In the case of student veterans, their instructors and classmates may in fact be the student veterans’ intended audience. The student/teacher relationship, then, also doubles as writer/reader relationship in a unique way in that it serves a real rhetorical purpose. The third trend I see emerging from the survey data is that the teacher/student relationship plays an essential role not just in the ways student veterans share about their military experiences, but in fostering and sustaining an open space which prioritizes rhetorical listening practices.

The survey data offers several specific and general examples of how this relationship can be damaged. Several, if not all of them, seem to be connected with two-dimensional stereotypes of veterans. Responses associated with the Homeric Hero archetype include those that bestow what some veterans deem unearned praise onto student veterans or their writing. Since many student veterans approach higher education with professionalism and focus, it is extremely possible that writing instructors receive writing pieces that have truly evolved from first to last drafts, and that are entirely worthy of praise. Some student veterans, however, many of whom have been out of school for four years or longer, may feel like fish out of water in the classroom. It may make more sense to them to attribute the compliments to the content of the writing or their veteran status than to the quality of writing. In his interview, which is shared in depth in Chapter 4, Joshua was steadfast in his belief that the positive feedback he received from his instructor on his essay was solely due to the sensationalism of war.
Despite winning an award even for that essay, Joshua maintained that he was not a "good" writer, but it was the subject matter that won readers over.

Expressing sympathy or pity to a veteran who writes about military experiences also seems connected with the Homeric Hero, since it presumably arises from the story being written, and not from interactions with the student. The student veterans who reject undue praise, reject sympathy for similar reasons: they were simply doing the job they had signed up to do. I understand expressing sympathy as being on par with thanking a veteran for his or her service: perceived as dismissive or, at the very least, exposes the extent to which civilians are detached from a veteran’s experience. Additionally, pity and sympathy are often correlated with weakness, a concept that is unwelcome in military life.

Silence, on the other hand, is a response connected with the Ticking Time Bomb stereotype. A teacher’s lack of engagement with a text, or minimal response on a piece of writing, may suggest to student veterans that the writing instructor doesn’t know what to say about the veteran’s experience, and so says nothing, as some of the survey responses reveal. Silence can also be linked to fear of triggering a veteran, which draws up associations with the effects of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and other mental health issues. Silence, then, can be linked to a perception of veterans as dangerous and unstable: Ticking Time Bombs.

Other survey examples directly warn against letting any presumptions influence interactions with student veterans. While not necessarily connected directly to the stereotypes mentioned previously, acting on assumptions in a class setting can situate a student veteran as a token representative of the military at large. Using a veteran’s
presence in class as a platform for political arguments or debates over controversial issues; assuming a veteran holds a particular political or religious standing; drawing a veteran into a conversation about politics or military issues when he or she hasn’t initiated—these are all examples of how the teacher/student relationship can be weakened when instructors allow a student’s veteran status to shift conversations away from the student and his or her academic needs by positioning veterans as representatives for political positions carried out by the U. S. military.

Although these are all examples of responses that can damage the teacher/student relationship, the survey also offers several encouraging examples showing how writing instructors are connecting with student veterans and strengthening that relationship. While the previous responses seem to be based in either a fear of not knowing what to say, or saying the wrong thing, the responses offered as positive ways teachers engage with student veterans are rooted in curiosity and suspension of personal agendas. Student veterans in the survey are not looking for sympathy or praise; they are looking for competence. For many who write of their military experiences, our classrooms are sometimes the first place they encounter where they’re invited to write about their service. Like other student writers—and frankly, like any writer—student veterans may not know what they want to say until they say it; and they are depending on their writing instructors to lead them to where they need to go. And given that student veterans carry with them experiences often foreign to writing instructors, being curious offers student veterans the space to continue sharing their experiences and exercising the rhetorical situation.
Conclusion

These trends suggest that when student veterans do share their military experiences in a writing classroom, writing instructors are being invited into a conversation with student veterans about what their military experiences were like for them. While any stereotypes or general information can be used as a way to anchor ourselves in unfamiliar situations, practicing rhetorical listening depends on the ability to first recognize and name our presumptions and biases, and then suspend those beliefs in order to listen openly and with curiosity.

In Marilyn Valentino’s 2010 CCCC address, she asserts writing instructors have “an ethical obligation to react responsibly” when responding to students’ writing (p. 369). I argue that part of our ethical obligation includes a responsibility to listen and try to the best of our ability to understand the unique situations of the student veteran population so as to more effectively meet students where they are in addressing their educational needs in the classroom. When student veterans do their part by bringing their military experiences to a writing classroom, how can we accept that invitation and proceed to engage in that conversation in responsible ways? The next chapter offers case studies that further explore these trends, and present nuances in student veterans’ experiences in an attempt to answer Valentino’s call to investigate. By focusing more in depth on student veteran participants’ experiences in composition classrooms, it is my intention that, in providing a space to open a dialogue between student veterans and writing instructors, educators may become more equipped to address the academic needs of student veterans, and bridge the academic cultural gaps student veterans may encounter.
CHAPTER 4
When veterans speak: Are we listening?

This chapter offers three case studies of student veterans at various stages of their academic careers. These three students, among others, volunteered to be interviewed and share their writing with me. I selected to share these three interviews in particular for their breadth of experiences both in the military and in the writing classroom. In the pages that follow, these student veterans describe their experiences with writing about a military experience in an introductory writing classroom, and, in their own voices, they share parts of their academic journeys: from the challenges of transitioning into college after the military to the pride they felt in their final essays. Much of what they say, I find, expounds upon responses from the survey, and offered me an opportunity to understand what, for example, wanting to be recognized for differences looks like to one student veteran; or what collaboration looks like to one student veteran; or what shape fear takes on the first day of class for one student veteran. Instead of organizing this chapter thematically, I’ve chosen to offer individual profiles of three of the men who met with me to talk about their writing, so that readers, too, may have the chance to listen—rhetorically, openly, and with curiosity—to the voices of three student veterans.

Joshua

I ended up getting divorced in the spring of 2013, and then I came here [to school] in the fall … I sold my house, quit my job and said, ya know, we’re gonna do a little life reboot,
and one of my friends he was like—he was my turret gunner actually—he had just at the time finished his masters degree, and was like, hey, GI bill. Use it. And I didn’t really put much thought into it prior to—I would have never come here, there would’ve been no reason for me to come here, if I hadn’t been divorced. I would’ve just continued working, and done the whole house, cat, dog, American dream, two and a half kids, and ya know, that thing, and so I probably wouldn’t have come use it if I hadn’t gotten divorced and quit my job and done a whole life flip over.

Joshua, a 29-year-old former Marine who served two deployments in Iraq between 2004 and 2008, returned to school in the fall of 2013 for a “life reboot.” At the time of our interview, spring of 2015, he was nearing the end of his Associates degree program in Forestry. After graduation, he planned to move onto newly purchased land in a rural mountain region of New Hampshire, begin a full time position with a forestry company for whom he had interned, and pursue a Bachelors degree part time starting in fall 2015.

“It’ll probably be another five years,” he says as we settle in, “but I’m gonna finish the Bachelors.”

Returning to school was not on Joshua’s radar until life as he knew it turned on its head, but—weeks away from graduating, Joshua informs me that pursuing an education was, “the best thing I’d ever done.” After talking with Joshua for over an hour, it became clear to me that he felt this way for a different reason than I had presumed; the lure of a degree and pursuit of a new career was motivating, but returning to college offered something to Joshua that nothing else had. He was using his return to school,
his personal essay for the first-year writing course, and even—he admitted to me—his participation in the interview and my study, to put his military past behind him.

The college experience for Joshua, then, did not only entail learning how to be a student again; it also offered Joshua a way to carve a life for himself that allowed him to lay his past to rest. In the beginning though, when he was just inquiring into the program and weighing his options, Joshua's focus was completely on his transition to college student. His apprehension about his academic abilities was very apparent during our interview, as evident from his perceptions of college life, and the actions he took to prepare himself.

“As you can imagine after being in the infantry in the Marine Corps,” he shares, “it’s not very rigorous as far as academics are concerned. It’s just carrying heavy things and running around, so when I came here, it was like, Ivory Tower… this is gonna be, this is gonna be bad…”

Joshua had made a decision to join the Marine Corps right after high school, and attributed that to his self-described unsuccessful academic past: “In high school, I said I’m joining the Marine Corps; I don’t need any of this… I left high school with zero skills academically. I was carried through, ya know, skin of my teeth: ‘get him out of here; he’s joining the military,’ and that was the end product.”

Consequently, Joshua’s attempt to return to college at age 27 presented some obstacles from his past. He tells me he had been advised by professional foresters to pursue his Associates degree in forestry before applying to a Bachelors program, as one program in the area offered a more hands-on approach, and graduates from that particular program were often hired quickly. But Joshua’s application for entrance into
the forestry program was rejected: “They wouldn’t let me in. They said ‘no, your high school transcripts are horrible,’ which,” he admits, “they were.”

In response to this rejection, Joshua took action. For one, he began taking free online courses from a not-for-profit online learning site in an effort to increase his academic skill level. The site, Joshua told me, offered lessons and quizzes in all subject areas, and for a range of learners.

He tells me: “I… started at zero and worked my way up mathematically and did a little bit of chemistry… you can learn basically anything starting from telling time to advanced calculus, and there’s some English components [too].”

Secondly, he signed up for Continuing Education credits, “11 credits” because “They wouldn’t let me do more than that.” By the end of his first semester, Joshua had a 4.0 and was told, “ok fine, now you have to catch up,” so he proceeded the next semester with 19 credits, then 21 credits, and, in his final semester, 18 credits, which I was surprised to learn included first-year writing.

When I asked Joshua why he didn’t take first-year writing before his final semester, he replied, “I tried… it just didn’t fit into my schedule because I was all out of sequence. My first semester was bunched up, or shortened, and then that bunched everything else up.”

In Joshua’s case, his ten-year-old high school transcript prevented him from moving through his program as is typically advised for new students. First-year writing, a course Joshua found extremely helpful for its introduction to the university’s online library system and resources, and emphasis on the research process, could not fit into his curriculum until he was close to graduation. But it was the work done in first-year
writing during that final semester that brought Joshua closer to putting his military past to rest.

The assignment was to write a personal essay inspired by a piece of art at the university’s on-campus art museum. Instead of attending class one day, Joshua, along with his 18-year-old classmates, met at the art museum and spent the hour observing paintings and sculptures and historical artifacts in silence.

Joshua was not inspired, and he relays the moment: “I remember walking around and thinking this is pointless, because I'm not real into the abstract stuff, my mind is not capable of grasping some of these larger ideas as far as art’s concerned. I’m walking around and none of it’s really… I was leaving; I was just going to. I didn’t know how I was going to incorporate any of it, and then I stopped and saw this picture of this woman… and it pushed me back into Iraq.”

He describes the experience at the beginning of his essay titled, “War Games.” Here is the opening:

I’m walking through the [university] art museum, passing photo after photo, but one catches my eye. The photo is of a dancer, she has a strong resemblance to woman from my time in Iraq. A woman that I will never forget. The photo by Pauline Konner, depicts a women dancing, with three distinct poses. The First pose showing distress and worry, followed by the second showing hope and light. The last image showing feelings of loss and futility. It brings me back to the woman in Iraq. When she ran up to us, her child hung lifeless in her arms. I stood in front of her, soaked with sweat as my rifle hung by my side. On my chest hung fifty pounds of bullets, 40mm grenades and a large knife but despite the arsenal I carried, I was totally disarmed. The expression on her face and the sight her lifeless child stopped me in my tracks. The expressions on this mothers face mimicked the dancers. She was afraid until she found us, then hopeful that we could help her child. When it was clear my medic couldn’t save her baby she wailed, her husband expressionless by her side. Many horrific things have happened in Iraq in recent years, many before I was there, many more after. Out of all of the things I witnessed, this woman and her child had the biggest impact.
This memory makes me think about how absurd war is, how we treat war like a game. The countries as the players, one winning while the other loses. We often don’t think of all the individual pieces in the game, the mother and child, the marine and the insurgent. The photo of the dancer reminds me of my place on the game board.¹¹

Playing with the game metaphor, Joshua goes on to describe himself as a pawn learning to play war games at the Marine Corps recruit depot. During training, he is caught gazing at a single bird resting on the edge of a slate roof, and is called out by his drill instructor who berates him in front of his peers. The drill instructor ends his tirade by yelling: “Good you want to play games, I’m going to let you nothings in on a little secret, I’ve got more games that Milton fucking Bradley.”

Later in the essay, a deployed Joshua is assigned to make a delivery to a group of marines manning an observation post in the middle of Fallujah Iraq. The delivery, as it turns out, was a selection of Milton Bradley board games; this did not sit well with Joshua and his platoon. He writes:

IEDs were the single biggest threat to our platoons existence, and the assholes whose job it was to watch for these things where getting bored. We would avoid delivering these games, in protest really, for what seemed like weeks. They sat in the back of my truck, rolling around on top of roughly five hundred pounds of high explosive ammo for our MK-19 fully automatic grenade launcher. All I could think at the time was horseshoes and hand grenades.

When the time comes to make the delivery, it is night and Joshua’s platoon makes its careful way toward the outpost. Once the trucks are in position, Joshua, who always dismounted first, makes a move to open his door to retrieve the games from the back of the truck and make the delivery. Instead the Gunnery Sergeant (Gunny) in his

---

¹¹ Essay is reproduced as written by the author; editorial and spelling errors have not been corrected. For the essay in its entirety, see Appendix J.
truck speaks up, “I’ve got it,” so Joshua leans his head back, annoyed at the “mission,” and closes his eyes as “sleep was calling my name.”

Joshua recalls the light from the explosion, but sound is lost from his memory. He tells me during the interview he had to call members from his platoon to fill in the details for the writing of that scene. This is what he writes:

From what I’m told, I immediately dismounted and ran over. Case tells me Gunny made a type of sound that no human could possibly make. Moreno says there was a burning palm tree overhead when he ran over. I’m told the smell of burning flesh hung in the air, it left that metallic taste of blood in your mouth. I believe them, I just have no memory of it. Gunny and another marine from the post were both hit, Gunny lost a foot and a hand, and he also took shrapnel to the gut. The marine from the post lost his leg.

The essay concludes with a scene set back on U.S. soil, when the platoon made a trip to Gunny’s home for a visit:

We all walked up the steps of Gunny’s house. Most everyone from the platoon was there. They filed in, everyone lined up to do the meet and greet. I was last in line, it had been many months since I saw Gunny. As I approached him, his wife sat by his side smiling. I’ve had seen these military wives before, my ex-wife was one of them. They put on their best faces and carried on, dealing with us when we come back. They try to cope with the changes, some physical, some mental. I reached out and shook Gunny’s remaining hand. Now this is the one thing I do remember clearly about these events, and I doubt I will ever forget it. As he looked right into my eyes, and without blinking he said, “You know this should be you.”

This line that closes the essay resonates deeply with me, and I am reminded of how precarious life can be, how the seemingly most insignificant moments and choices can determine life paths. I say this to Joshua, and he shakes his head, says, “no, it’s [the essay is] pretty bad.”

I start to protest, and he cuts me off, stares at me, unblinkingly: “That’s just because… [that’s how it] unfolded.”
Despite my efforts at pointing out the strengths in the piece, the realism of the dialogue, descriptive passages, moments of humor, Joshua was adamant that the essay was awful, and the only reason he received a good grade and positive feedback was because the situation was one of drama and suspense.

He leans back in his chair, his eyes steady, never leaving mine.

“Everything I do,” he says, “is through brute force. Like I’m not that good at anything, but I can really just bear into it and just do it. And so as far as, like, my math skills, comp skills, they’re pretty low. Like this story that I wrote for [first-year writing], ya know, [the teacher] was like, ‘wow, this is pretty good,’ and she said easily this was the best in the class, which… I was a little disappointed, because, I said, that tells me that [she’s] getting some horrible stuff because the only thing carrying [my essay] is the weight of the subject; like, I don’t think the writing’s that good. It’s just, that’s what happened…When she told me it was the best paper in the class, I was like this is a mistake.”

Joshua’s words, body language, and tone of voice all resonate with complete rejection of the idea of himself as a writer, which, it seems to me, is closely connected with the poor image he holds of himself as a student. His response goes beyond humility to extreme self-criticism, and despite positive feedback—from me, from his writing instructor, and even later when his essay wins the Richard M. Ford writing award—Joshua maintains the success of the piece is due to the sensational content and the support he received when writing the essay.

He tells me “that is version 10.0… all the credit for that goes to the writing center, I just want to cite them at the end of it and go, all I did was provide the content here.”
Because the first, every first draft is a hot mess, then I have to read it to myself, then I record myself on the computer reading it, then I go, that’s pretty bad, then have to, like, restructure the whole thing.”

“You record yourself reading out loud?” I ask. I cannot recall the number of times I’ve recommended to students to read their work out loud. I can recall the number of them who’ve admitted to doing it on their own: two. Joshua does not pick up on my surprise, however, and explains the benefits he’s found in this technique.

“After my first couple of essays [for the program],” he tells me, “I needed some way to just… cause reading, just reading through it doesn’t… you hear your own thoughts as you’re reading it so you don’t hear the sentence structure and how it’s laid out… Like when you listen to a recording, you go eh that’s pretty bad. You’re like, what is that? It’s like a run on for two minutes of stream of consciousness, you know?”

And as for the writing center, I’m curious to know if Joshua sought that out on his own, or if it was recommended to him by an instructor. He tells me he just went (only two times just for this essay), and when (again) I nod, impressed, he simply shrugs and says, “well, yeah, it’s here, so…”

As I listen to the red bearded man across from me, I am deeply impressed by the range of tools in Joshua’s writing process toolbox. He drafts, he reads aloud, he records his reading, he listens, he revises, he collaborates, he revises again. Version 10.0, he had said, and it did seem from his descriptions that the essay had gone through quite the massive overhaul since its early days. But I am more taken by his intensity—his determination to succeed in the work he was assigned. Even before being accepted to a college level program, Joshua was taking online classes for no
credit to prepare himself for academic work. And now, two years later, and a month from graduation, he is still focused on the goal, making use of every resource available to him, and engaging fully in the task at hand.

As required in many first-year writing courses, Joshua participated in a peer review for his essay, an activity he feels is “not helpful at all” because “everyone in there is equally bad [at writing]” and the student effort put into providing feedback is minimal at best. I’ve heard this position before from students, but what I found most interesting about Joshua’s thoughts on working with his classmates was his concerns about the effect the essay would have on a fellow student, who he refers to as “kid.”

“I knew [peer review] would go poorly,” he says, “cause it’s just the subject matter… I just know if I hand this to some kid… I purposely didn’t pick a girl, not that a girl can’t handle it, but I just didn’t want to have some kind of… so I just picked the most rugged looking bro, and was like yup, he’ll do.”

“What did you think would happen if a girl read it?” I ask.

“I don’t know. I’m not going to say, like, women… ” He pauses, searching for the words. “Like some of the best people I met in the military were women, like, the best pilot I ever saw was a helicopter pilot; Captain Morgan was her name. She could fly circles around a guy rock steady, didn’t matter what was happening. But I just felt like, I didn’t want to just drop a bomb on some girl and her whole life is… the worst things that happened in her life are her dog died, and, ya know… so I just was like who can read this so that I’m not going to have some kind of blowout here.”

Concern for his fellow students’ and their reactions to his written experience carried over from the classroom to the writing center. There, too, Joshua thought
carefully about his tutor selection and chose a male name for his consultant during the online scheduling process.

He tells me, “I ignored most of the female names, said oh, a dude, and picked him.”

During the writing center conference, Joshua was asked to read his essay out loud. He did so but not without reservation.

“I really didn’t want to read it aloud, cause there’s a bunch of people around, and… the subject matter, and ya know there’s some bad language, so it might perk people’s attention, so I didn’t want to read it aloud. I mean it helps to read it aloud and have someone else read it, but, yeah, I was a little, not apprehensive, just a little eh, I don’t want to read this, and then have a whole bunch of people walk by and be like holy what was that?” he says.

Joshua’s investment in the writing of this essay and in the memory that shaped it resonates in his concern for other students. He is careful about who he shares this writing with, considers the privacy of his environment, and pays attention to the age and life experience of his 18-year-old “peers.” It also supports to my mind the survey data suggesting that student veteran participants want to be recognized for their differences from other students.

Joshua displays rhetorical awareness in understanding that his essay may emotionally impact his young, possibly naïve 18-year old classmates, and in so doing, he demonstrates a way he is distinguishing himself from his peers, almost as if he is protecting them by being wary of what he shares and with whom. At the same time, he shares with me the value he places on being treated “the same” as other students. The
way he describes his experiences helps shift my understanding of that phrase, “to be treated the same,” to the more accurately meaning “to be treated fairly.” It is clear from his comments, Joshua is highly suspicious of the praise he receives from his instructor, the idea that he may indeed be a “good” writer or a writer at all, and his essay being anything more than a car crash from which people cannot look away. “Being treated fairly,” it seems to me in Joshua’s case, means being held to the standards of higher education; and yet his perception of himself as a student conflicts with his 4.0 GPA and the feedback he’s received from his instructors.

I ask Joshua if he feels disappointed with his education and he responds immediately, “yes, very disappointed. I have a 4.0 and I should not. Like, everything’s so watered down that doing what you’re supposed to do is incredible, and [grades are] all just based off of [effort]… I should be a C or B student.”

It’s unclear to me if Joshua is disappointed in higher education in general or if he believes his veteran status has unfairly influenced his teachers’ expectations of him, but I do get the distinct impression he believes his veteran status has given him several passes and unearned credit. He shares about a survey he was recently asked to complete from the campus’ veteran services asking how he could have been better served during his time in college.

He says, “I don’t think they can be any better. Some people say we could have a better cohesive group where we could get together and have more of a veteran friendly place, but I think the only thing more they could’ve done for me was carry me around like, like, ya know, like an emperor… like, you could carry me to class. [But] I’m going
here for free, you guys pay for tutors, I’m getting like 1600 bucks a month to live on, you know, what else?”

I mention those are the benefits of the Post 9/11 GI Bill that he earned by serving, but it seems he’s heard this before and has an answer.

“People have no idea what was going on [in Iraq],” he begins. “They want to forget about it. They want to shake your hand, give you benefits, and not hear any of the bad… Everybody’s just, ‘everything’s great!’ And everything the veterans do is great… gotta give them everything, and… that causes people to not question anything… Iraq is forgotten; Iraq is worse. It’s Mad Max and the Thunder Dome right now, like people don’t even understand fully what is happening there. We took this place and it is so broken; the fabric of society is shattered; that place will never be fixed. It ceases, it ceases to exist. It is just like complete chaos and everyone's like, ah well, whoops. And we were there for like 10 years—I only did two deployments there… We were 18, it’s like these students…” Joshua trails off for a moment before finishing his thought: “I felt guilty about it for the longest time, going here for free. I was like we didn’t serve the country; we did not help anyone. If anything, we’re less safe than we were…. Yeah, I'm pretty anti warfare, violence, it’s just like a complete failure of thought, coming to conflict is just admitting that you have no good ideas, so this is what we’re going to do.”

I could understand then part of what was underlying Joshua’s resistance to accepting military benefits, positive feedback, and his 4.0 GPA. He perceives an imbalance between the job he chose to do as a Marine and the flood of “rewards” he’d been receiving in recent years. The military benefits, the high grades, the academic
awards… none of it was really *earned*, in Joshua’s mind, but rather given—because of his veteran status, maybe, or because he thought people didn’t know what to say about his experiences. Whatever the reason, Joshua made the decision to take advantage of his lot to lay his past to rest.

“Writing this [essay],” he says, “It was like a final… I think this is me getting away from the military, like this is it… That’s my contribution to the world as far as the military is concerned, and then I just want to sever the cord and not even think about it anymore.”

“Do you feel like it’s severed?” I ask.

“Pretty close,” he answers. A moment of silence, and then, “There’s a lot of problems in the military. I have two friends who have committed suicide since I’ve got out… I have a friend who won’t go to college, my driver in my gun truck, because he’s just apprehensive. He doesn’t want to come and deal with a bunch of kids. We’re all getting older; 30 years old to come in as a freshmen in college is like… and well I can’t convince him to do it.” He pauses again, perhaps thinking of veterans’ limited options post-military life, given poor high school grades or the challenges of transferring military skills to the language used in the civilian sector, or perhaps feeling gratitude for his choices and lot so far in life. He says, “So, I’m happy to get this off my chest… this is like my, get rid of this, and then I’ll be done with it… I want to be done talking about this. I’m gonna leave, like this is gonna be the end of me… You’re not even going to be able to tell I was a veteran pretty soon, it’s like I’m just gonna be an average Joe, no one’s gonna know, so this is gonna help just initiate that whole process.”
Joshua is adamant about leaving his past to rest and never speaking of it again. He tells me he’s kept his silence about his military experiences from many people over the years. He says, “my family knows nothing, like my mother and my sister, they don’t [have any idea]… I never talked with my ex wife about any of this stuff… I never vented to anyone else who wasn’t in the military.” I ask if he’s trying to protect them, and he responds, “I don’t have to have them look at me… any differently.”

This silence, he tells me, is part of the reason he did write about his military past. Without any one to confide in, Joshua took to writing.

“Most of this… I hadn’t really told anyone,” he says, “so I’d just write it, and it was mostly like stream of consciousness prior to coming [to college].”

“So you’ve written about this before?” I ask.

“Oh yeah,” he nods. “I’ve probably written different versions of this since I got out. I bet you I’ve had this story laid out 50 times.”

Joshua goes on to tell me that it was an assignment that caused him to pause, return to those pages and pages of words, and begin to shape 8 years of writing into an argument against the Iraq War. By the time he got to first-year composition, he was ready to write a snapshot of his own military story. He didn’t remember a lot of the details of the day his fellow soldier went where he meant to go and was caught in an IED explosion—a self-protection mechanism, he tells me—and had to call on other soldiers in his platoon to fill in the gaps. But once written, this story became a culmination for all the times Joshua narrowly escaped danger where another walked right into it.
“This was just one incident of many,” he says quietly. “Cause everybody knows I should’ve been the person there… that happened [often], like people would be hurt where I should be, and I should’ve been where they were. We’d hit IEDs and once, in the front, in the sequence of the trucks turning, someone took a wrong turn, and the way the trucks unfolded, where I would’ve been the truck was blown up, and that happens over and over and over.”

Joshua falls quiet and I wait. When he speaks again, he seems less certain that he can detach completely from those months in the desert. “I think I’m pretty close to being rid of it,” he says, “but there’s so much that brings, like a ton of stuff just comes back to you… there’s a guy right now [on campus] who’s going to leave this year and go back into the army [because] he just feels no connection to anyone around here. Even if you hate the guys next to you, and I hated some of them, you’re going to die for them, where here, you don’t feel that, and so you’re always drawn back to that, like I’m nostalgic about, like there is no way I would go back into the military ever, it’s the best and the worst thing I ever did, but in that sense, like I’m always brought back to that, like…I almost miss being in Iraq. I don’t know why, but I miss it.”

I nodded and we sat in silence for a moment. Looking back, I hope my nod did not come across as if I was saying, “yes, I understand,” but rather, “I hear you. I am listening.”

Less than a month later, Joshua emailed me to tell me his essay, “War Games” had received a writing award. He also informed me he’d decided to share the piece with his mother and sister. However Joshua was thinking of his past, it was clear he’d chosen not to keep silent any more.
Dave

I remember leaving Iraq, and we were in Fallujah, and we were all just standing around just in a circle, waiting to board one of the helicopters to take us back out of there, and … kicking the ground and talking about the experience and what it’d meant to us. And I said, “I know now why nobody talks about this kinda stuff when we get home, not because there’s no stories to tell or not because they don’t want to talk about it but because it’s just too complicated. How can anybody understand what we went through here and what happened to us? How can anybody understand it?”

Dave, a former Navy hospital foreman, had a choice to leave his deployment experiences in war torn Iraq. After retiring from military life in 2005, Dave returned home after his second deployment and took to working for the family business. By 2010 those war stories were years old, and remained—as far as any of Dave’s friends and family could tell—in the dusty deserts of the Middle East. But when Dave’s future wife, a writer and an English teacher, began gently encouraging him to return to those long ago days and start writing, Dave began to wonder about those stories, what they meant to him, how they could change the way people he loved saw him. It was years before he put words about those days to a page; but when he did, he was 10 years away from that dusty landing pad in Fallujah, and sitting in an introductory writing course—an elective he chose to fill a degree requirement for his Bachelor’s in Biological Sciences. The first assignment was to write a memoir essay. Dave thought back to his deployments, to the memories he never thought he’d mention again… and started writing. And when he did, he found he couldn’t stop.
“It was the first writing I’ve ever done,” Dave shares with me, “where I’ve felt really passionate to work. So that kind of opened a lot of doors. Good and bad I guess.”

Dave joined the Navy as a hospital foreman during peacetime, 1999. He specialized in applied medicine—head, ears, eyes, and throat mainly—and prior to 2001, his responsibilities involved search and rescue operations, and mainly treating patients and making sure they adhered to the standards of flight and flight medicine. Between September 11, 2001 and 2005 when he got out of the military, Dave served two and a half years overseas as a medic doing helicopter rescues from combat zones. His service experience included everything from clinical work during peacetime to serving on the front lines during combat operations.

When we meet, we are a month away from Dave’s graduation. He has dark wavy hair and a short, neatly trimmed beard; I learn quickly that he’s finishing his degree a year ahead of schedule, and worked full time all the while he was a student. I raise my eyebrows as he talks and ask if he was on an accelerated path.

“Not really an accelerated path,” he says. “It was just the path I made for myself which was Get It Done.”

Dave, like Joshua, presents as hard working, steady, and focused on the task at hand. Also like Joshua, Dave does not go out of his way to promote his veteran status. He tells me he aims to blend in and tries hard “not to point to my veteran status… or look or appear or speak in anyway that will belie that I’m a veteran.” I wonder why he goes to such lengths to remain anonymous and ask him.
“Most of us just want to be left alone,” he says. “What... I had to go through to get my degree, to earn my spot here on campus... well I would always think to myself, wherever I was, that wherever my ass touches, that’s paid for in blood, sweat, and tears... I’m not gonna waste the time that I have. I’m going to do my work; I’m going to be respectful of the students and whatnot, but at the end of the day, I’m here to do the best job that I can. [We] want to be just given the best chance we can to succeed in our classes which is being left alone and not having people ask us all the time, you know, ‘hey did you kill anyone?’, ‘what was it like?’, ya know, and that’s why a lot of us try to blend in and try to be inconspicuous. Cause we don’t want to talk about it unless we want to talk about it. And I’ll talk about it, if I feel like talking about it. And I don’t want my professors to know I’m a veteran just in case they [think I’m an expert on something] and boom you’re singed out in front of the whole class... At the end of the day, I’m there to get my grades.”

Dave’s comment reminds me of Valentino's (2010) CCCC address, warning writing instructors not to assume all veterans have experienced trauma or need to write about their military experiences. She cautions us to respect the veterans’ silence as much as we respect their voices. Roger Thompson (2014), in his article, “Recognizing Silence: Composition, Writing, and the Ethical Space for War,” makes a case for silence about war as “an embodiment of power and agency in a classroom” (p. 201). Dave’s comment strikes me in light of Thompson’s position, as he clearly indicates he does not want to be placed in a position in which he is forced to talk about his military experiences. This does not mean, however, that writing instructors are let off the hook from engaging with student veterans. As Thompson reminds us, silence is a strategy,
and our responsibility as writing instructors is to “understand how that silence functions
and what it might mean to ask our veterans to speak to or through it” (p. 200).

But Dave is here to talk to me, and offers me three pieces of writing he
completed for assignments in an introductory writing course. The first is a memoir piece
set during one of Dave’s deployments; the second, a journalism piece about a fellow
student veteran and his struggles in maneuvering academic and veteran administration
bureaucracy; and the last, a one-page vignette set overseas during a moment of rest for
a handful of soldiers. Although so many of Dave’s pieces are connected in some way to
the military, Dave tells me no one knew he was a veteran until the day his memoir piece
was workshopped by the class. He shares the story with me.

“I was one of three [students] that volunteered to read our first drafts,” he says,
“and I remember the teacher, she saved mine for last, and I was worried that it was
because it was too long—cause it was only supposed to be six to seven pages and it
turned out to be ten. I know some people were unclear about the… end, what I was
trying to say about how I viewed myself versus how the other marines viewed me, and
so I knew I had to go back and fix that, but overall the responses were all, ya know, how
to put it? They weren’t all saying, ‘Oh wow what a great job you did,’ and ‘I’m sorry you
had to go through it,’ but they were all supportive of the content and respectful of telling
me, giving me their opinions and feedback, so it was a great experience.”

“Do you know,” I ask, “why the teacher waited until the end to share yours?”

“I think so,” Dave replies. “There was one comment that I made… she was
always driving home showing without telling, you know, how you get that detail across,
and there was one line in particular where I talk about, I had to pick up a wounded
marine who had been shot and wondering in the middle of it all how soon I’d be back to pick up every marine that was there, and at the end of the paragraph there’s a line that says, ‘I try not to look at their faces.’ And she went right to that as an example, a good example of showing and not telling, and she asked the class what that means and why, and so it’s pretty deep and a pretty deep topic of course but the class handled it really well and it bolstered my confidence in being able to approach that kind of subject and get critical feedback.”

The class workshop on Dave’s essay provided a positive and supportive experience for Dave in its own right; he came away, he tells me, with lots of helpful ideas on how to revise. But it also seemed to offer Dave something else… a collective acceptance of his subject matter, surely, but the air of respect Dave describes and his emphasis on critical feedback tells me Dave felt taken seriously too as a writer. In sharing his writing, Dave risked being lost in others’ perceptions of his veteran identity; but the constructive criticism he received allowed Dave to be a writer and a student, writing about his military past.

This is especially poignant considering the essay subject Dave shared with his classmates and with me. The essay takes place on a helicopter and in a battlefield and centers around a helicopter rescue of a wounded marine during an intense firefight. Throughout the essay, Dave juxtaposes his external persona, which he refers to as Doc Hollywood, the nickname given to him by his fellow soldiers, with the internal fear and self-doubt Dave felt during the rescue mission at hand, and, by extension, all the others. He describes the contrast:

*I don’t feel like the soldier the other guys think I am. I’ve earned the callsign Doc Hollywood since we arrived here, though the name means*
something different for me now than it used to. “Doc” because I’m a
corpsman and that’s what Marines call us anyhow, and “Hollywood” for a
picture of me that appeared in Newsweek during the Battle of Ramadi a few
months before. The picture shows me running out of the chopper toward four
Marines who are carrying a wounded comrade to me. To my teammates the
picture affirms who they think I am, and I gladly step into and cultivate the
role fully. I decide that hiding behind Doc Hollywood is a much better option
than letting them see the real me.¹²

The day of the rescue, Dave is all Doc. In the helicopter he learns along with his
team of the conditions on the ground: one patient, in need of stretcher or on one, tight
urban landing, two minutes until touchdown. Intermittent with the details of the moment,
Dave as narrator wonders about the contrast between who he knows as his fellow
soldiers and who they know themselves to be behind the persona they’re given.

Sandman, for example, is:

one of Doc Hollywood’s closest friends on this deployment, and I wonder if
he’d like me as much too. His real name is Tony Meza, and not for the first
time I wonder if he’s playing the same game I am. How alike are Tony and
Sandman? Is Tony quiet and shy back home, or is he the outgoing, talented
and unflappable soldier that I call Sandman?

Soon the chopper is ready to land and Sandman asks Doc which of them will
leave for the wounded marine, and who will stay to prepare the medical gear. Doc
offers to run, and again draws attention to what he believes his fellow soldiers perceive
of him and his own internal reasoning for the choices he makes. He writes:

I’m always the one who runs. Sandman asks each mission anyway, but I
always run. He would tell you it’s because I’m tough, or I like the excitement,
the danger, the thrill of saving a Marine’s life or even the devastation of
losing one. Doc might grin and say he’ll take any rush he can get, but I’d be
fine with never going on another mission again.

The truth is that if something happened to him or anyone else on the
team while I stayed in the chopper, I would never forgive myself. It’s not right
to feel that way and I know it. That mindset robs the other men and women

¹² Essay is reproduced as written by the author; editorial and spelling errors have not been
corrected. For the essay in its entirety, see Appendix K.
on the team of their courage – they don’t need to be babied, coddled or protected and least of all by me. But there is another reason: I’m afraid that if I let myself stay inside the cabin – even just once – something will change in me and I’ll never have the courage to leave it again. I tell myself that I’m wrong, and that when there’s a wounded soldier waiting on me to help them I would never lose my courage. I decide to never test that theory.

Once the chopper has landed, Dave is ushered to the wounded soldier by the Marines on the ground, and describes the moment in the paragraph with the line pointed out by Dave’s teacher:

_I see motion to my right and spot four Marines signaling for me from behind concrete Jersey barriers. I see from the way they’re holding their weapons that they’re expecting a fight. I see blood, sweat and dirt on their uniforms. I sense their excitement and rage. I wonder in a detached way how soon I’ll be back to try to save them, or to pick up their bodies. I try not to look at their faces._

Dave reaches the wounded marine, and Doc Hollywood reassures the Marine corpsman that he’s got it from here. With the help of several Marines, the wounded man is delivered to the helicopter, where Sandman immediately injects him with morphine, and Doc Hollywood and his team begin the take off. Within minutes, the helicopter is ambushed. The helicopter’s gunners take position, returning fire with machine guns, and Dave describes the moment and his intense, instinctual response to it:

_I feel the helicopter accelerate and climb as fast as it can and again I am pushed into the deck. I feel the sharp, piercing pain in my ears with each pull if the trigger by the gunners. I glance over at Sandman and the raw fear on his face makes him look like a child, and I wonder if that scared, naked face belongs to Tony. Regardless of his fear he’s laying over the patient’s body to shield him from bullets and shrapnel, and I’m proud of him. I feel helpless in this instant as I take it all in, and then I snap._

Something finally gives and the cold scream hiding in the deepest corner of my being breaks free. It explodes from my heart as I prepare for it to tear out of my mouth and release it for good, like vomiting the poison of my stomach after a night of heavy drinking. Instead it mutates and in an instant I
fell like I’m pushed aside as blind rage overtakes me. I grab the M16, run to the furthest edge of the ramp, kneel down and hope I get to kill someone.

I see movement and ghostly clouds of smoke and debris on a rooftop of a building on the far side of the street from the unit of Marines, to my right and falling behind me. That’s where they are my training tells me. I can’t see a human target but at this point it doesn’t matter. I empty the entire clip onto the rooftop in a desperate need to destroy or kill anything that I can.

After the firefight, the rage drains from Dave, and he feels shame that he let his attention leave his patient. He is also terrified of the way his anger took over. He writes:

I check on Sandman and the patient and focus on my job, embarrassed that I lost control of myself and petrified that I’ll arrive back at base in serious trouble for what I’d done. I know myself well, and I know the persona that I’ve created, but I don’t know the man that appeared during the ambush, and that scares me more than anything ever has.

Back at base, it is clear to Dave that his fellow soldiers do not sense the lack of control, the fear, or the shame Dave feels; they see only Doc Hollywood:

…it’s becoming apparent that what I consider a stupid, reckless act is being taken yet again as a heroic one. I feel relieved, and I feel guilty for feeling relieved. You dodged more than one bullet today, idiot I think as light a cigarette.

Once we land the other team members come to greet and congratulate us on a job well done, having heard everything over the radio. I am all cocky smiles and swagger as I greet the team but in truth I am elated beyond words to be back, and am already afraid of what will happen on the next mission. I walk off to find some water and if I’m lucky, a place to be alone. From somewhere behind me I hear, “Hey Hollywood – heard you put on a helluva show today!” Put on a helluva show, huh? I think as I turn around and say, “Brother, you have no idea.”

It’s not surprising to me that Dave’s teacher used his essay to model effective ways of showing and not telling. Throughout the piece and right to the very last line, I was drawn in to the inner conflict wreaking a different kind of havoc on Dave than the external conflict of war was. It was something I could relate to, that inner critic, the one that is afraid and distrustful and feels like a fraud. As the poet Anne Sexton would say,
“the personal is already a plural condition” (Salvio, 2007), and Dave had made a moment in his past—a moment set in a context personally foreign to his readers—accessible in a way that spoke to me just as it did to a group of 18 and 19 year olds. And Phil Klay reminds us,

It’s a powerful moment, when you discover a vocabulary exists for something you’d thought incommunicably unique. Personally, I felt it reading Joseph Conrad’s ‘Lord Jim.’ I have friends who’ve found themselves described in everything from science fiction to detective novels. This self-recognition through others is not simply a by-product of art — it’s the whole point.

But Dave didn’t start out with an audience in mind. After years of his wife’s encouragement to get some of his memories down on paper, and with an assignment coming due, Dave decided one day to sit down and said, “okay, I’m going to write what I did and how I did it.” But as he wrote the facts, Dave’s understanding of what had happened that day and the actions he had taken became complicated. He tells me, “I didn’t realize how I’d viewed myself during my tour in Fallujah until I was writing the piece. It’s kinda like I had this new view of what I had done over there and how I had done it, and it never occurred to me until [I started writing]… specifically writing that piece was difficult because I was literally coming to terms with it, with my experience, as I was writing it, and I had to really look at myself in a different way. I’m not sure how well, accurately, or how accurately I conveyed in the piece how I was feeling about my time over there, but the fact that I didn’t realize how I was feeling about it until I wrote that piece… which was mind blowing to me! It had been 10 years, almost 10 years, and I had a totally different view of it, once I started writing about it.” He says to me, this was “the first time I felt emotionally involved with what I was writing. And it was a scary, exhilarating sometimes experience, but it was scary too.”
So when Dave’s essay was workshoped in class, he was nervous about how it would be received. When he found his classmates’ responses respectful, insightful, and constructive, his focus shifted from concern about how others would react toward how they were understanding narrator Dave’s inner conflict between who he felt he was, how he believed others saw him, and who took over during those rage filled moments when he and his team were under attack. This matters to Dave, who, when I ask him to explain, provides some insight into where this conflict is rooted.

“Nobody ever tells you…” he begins. “They think you’re a hero and stuff, but nobody ever feels like you are, you never feel like that guy, nobody ever does.”

Weigel and Miller’s (2011) image of the Homeric Hero rises, and I associate Dave’s push back against the idea of “hero” with his separation of Doc Hollywood from the deeper self who carries Dave’s emotional responses. Similarly to the way the Homeric Hero archetype takes away from a veteran’s experiences by placing him in a two-dimensional typecast of combat hero, Dave describes how, despite what people see and hear of his days in the military, he will only ever feel like himself.

“I’m not that guy,” he continues. “It looks like I was, sometimes. Like there’s this poster that the Marine Corps made, there’s a picture of me in Newsweek, there’s a bunch of metals and stuff that I’ve got, but I was never that dude, never even close. And so a lot of people want to tell me I was that dude, and I tell them I never was, and they say stuff like, ‘I could never do what you did,’ and really, I call bullshit. And that’s the killer thing, you know, is that that’s my overall message is that if everybody says they can’t do what you did…? The thing is that I’m that guy who was saying that before I had to go do it. You never know you can survive a car accident until you get through it, you
never know as a mother if you’re gonna be able to protect your kids until you do it.

People go through that kind of stuff all the time. We had to go through it repeatedly and do it that way, but anyone can do what I did, anybody. They just don’t know that they can. And that to me is my overwhelming… that is the message I’d like to get out. If I were to do it, I’d say look it doesn’t take anything special to do what I did. It looks like it does but it doesn’t. I don’t want to take anything away from any soldiers or anything obviously, but by the same token, I feel like, ya know, if they knew the fear, and everything else that is a part of us over there all the time… which is the same fear that they have, there’s not much that separates it. So with people I’m comfortable with I’ll have that conversation, [they’ll say] ‘oh I can’t do what you did over there,’ and it’s like, “no, you’d do what you had to do.’”

Listening to Dave talk about his experiences in responding to people who—out of respect, or awe, or simply not knowing what else to say—call him a hero, reminded me of the complexities in the identities of the students before us. In such a short time period – 16 weeks at the most, writing instructors have the enormous task of building a community of active engagement for multiple students in multiple classes. To get to know each of them on an individual level, to move past the surface details (the equine student, the football player, the veteran) takes time, trust, and give and take from both teacher and student. Many semesters, it may not even be possible. But from Dave I hear that it’s not the status, but the meaning infused into it that’s the problem. This is the message I hear: listen when he tells me who he is, and who he is not.

And it’s a message Dave believes in. He wants to tell people about what it was like: “There is a saying,” he says, “the worst battle ever fought is the one you were in,
and it doesn’t matter where you were or what you saw, one rocket incoming, one mortar incoming is bad enough… having said that, my own experience, I feel like there are stories to tell there about myself and my friends, and if it helps somebody, I think that I should."

He pauses, and shakes his head, then shares with me the story that opened this section, of standing in Fallujah feeling like there are no words to explain what he had just survived. “How can anybody understand what we went through here and what happened to us?” he asks, “How can anybody understand it? They can’t. And that’s why most veterans just stay quiet about it because you can’t convey that. I carry that kinda stuff with me, and if I can’t convey that kind of emotion through words, ya know, spoken? I don’t think I’m confident enough to explain it with the written word either.”

When I point out that he was doing just what he said he couldn’t through his writing and the interview, he grows quiet for a moment and then his eyes meet mine. “Well,” he says, “I think it’s important.”

Andrew

From the age of 17 to 22 or 23, I don’t know, it’s kind of like a fun experience in people’s lives. People go to college, and a lot of people at the age of 19 still live with their parents and they’re still kind of under their parents’ care and under their parents’ wings. But to me, at the age of 17 I was put into it, and at the age of 19 I was leading combat patrols of 11, 12, 13 men, with their lives in my hands, and I was expected to look after them. And I would look around [the classroom] and see people that are 19 and 18 and they just seemed really young to me, ya know? I didn’t compare to them, I didn’t know what to say to them, I didn’t really know how to interact with them, so I kinda wanted to
show them, like, this is what you didn’t do, I guess, not in a mean way, but this is what the other side of your generation is… right before I got out of the military, we got new guys coming in and they were—the group in college? They were their classmates, and to me I just wanted to show this is what your classmates have to look forward to, and I wanted people to realize that there’s another side out there other than getting to school every day. There’s a side where you live in a hellhole. I can’t really think of any other comparison. I mean, it’s not like I’ve ever traveled there [to hell], but I’m pretty sure I’ve come close. So to me I just wanted to share that experience and not to be the depressing or morose one in the classroom, but when people are writing about fishing or partying, I wanted to show like, hey this exists.

Andrew is a 23-year-old former marine with three deployments and one semester at a community college under his belt. He is one of the youngest veterans I’ve met with, and the closest to both his military experience, having finished his service less than a year prior to our interview, and also the beginning of his higher education, being only a few weeks into his second semester. As we talk, I get the impression that he is also—I assume because of his age proximity to his classmates—more aware of the differences in life experiences between him and his classmates than the older student veterans with whom I’ve talked. Where Joshua and Dave acknowledge their nontraditional student status visually sets them apart from other students—with Dave going so far as to remark that his age may garner more respect from his classmates—Andrew returns often during our conversation to his feelings of isolation from his peers and the
disconnection he feels between his military training and experiences and this next phase of his life. The beginning of one of the essays he shares with me says it best:

The most terrifying experience of my life was not my first day arriving in Marine Corps boot camp, nor was it my first day in Afghanistan. Surprisingly the most terrifying experience of my life came when I traded in my rifle for a pencil, my assault pack for a day pack, and my tactical books for a textbook. As I sat in that classroom on my first day of college my heart beat faster than I could ever remember it, my fear of failing at my new endeavor sitting in the back of my mind like a horrible nuisance that would not leave me alone. The idea that somehow I was so removed from society after my experiences that I could not do this, my mind for the first time in the last five years telling me this is something I may not be able to do.13

Andrew joined the military when he was still in high school, at the age of 17. Similarly to Joshua, he felt he was a poor student in high school, and once he decided to join the military, his grades mattered little. But he tells me he always enjoyed writing, has written poetry for years, and kept a journal while on his deployments. Writing, Andrew shares with me, is “a good way for me to express myself.” When I ask him to explain, he says, “I’m not a very emotional person – so… you know how some people cry or some people get angry and throw things? To me, turning an emotion into a word and putting it down on paper was a good way to relieve it.”

Andrew has short black hair and straight posture, and looks me straight in the eyes when he speaks. The longer we talk, the better sense I get of Andrew as an intelligent, introspective, thoughtful student. Given his love for words on top of his serious demeanor, I find the fear he describes in the opening paragraph of his essay shocking. Here is a man who was deployed three times, who had been held responsible for the lives of others younger even than he was, and who has seen and

---

13 Essay is reproduced as written by the author; editorial and spelling errors have not been corrected. For the essay in its entirety, see Appendix L.
experienced moments of humanity that are unfathomable. The contrast Andrew sets up between the fear of going to war and the fear of starting school jars me. But it isn’t as simple as that, as Andrew’s third sentence and the rest of the essay reveal: the fear is not of the unknown, but of not being prepared. After boot camp and intense training prior to his first deployment, Andrew felt prepared to do his job as a soldier. No doubt he was afraid of the unknown then, of the foreign setting to where he was headed, of the work he’d signed up to do, but for nearly a year, he had been preparing, and he felt ready for whatever was to come. On that first day of class, however, Andrew was again faced with the unknown, but that time felt unprepared to successfully complete this next challenge. This is where, I’ve come to understand, the real fear lies. Andrew’s essay opening has helped me hone in on an important distinction I hadn’t been making before between the fear of returning to school and the fear of failure. My mind returns to that word “failure” again and again during our conversation, and I begin to understand where Andrew’s fear has come from and how it has motivated Andrew in the writing classroom.

The beginning of Andrew’s academic journey is similar to Joshua’s, with his old high school transcript working against him and advice to take classes to boost his GPA. He tells me he has his heart set on pursuing a business management degree at a particular large public state university, but is, at the time of our interview, enrolled in a local community college to take his general requirements before transferring. When I ask what jobs or careers interest him, he tells me he works for a local fire department where he “can really put my skills to use in helping other people.”
I’m curious about what, if any, overlap Andrew sees between his military career and his current situation. I ask him, “Do you think that the skills and knowledge that you gained in the military have a place in your civilian life? Or in your college life?”

“Well,” he says, “the biggest issue with that is, all of them are intangible [such as] leadership skills. I grew up really quickly, obviously, being in the military. I gained a lot of knowledge that isn’t on paper that really carries me throughout my life in the civilian world… For example, I took a course called First Year Experience (FYE), which is like a freshman seminar course, and all it was about was about arriving places on time, and it was about, I guess, having a disciplined life style while in college. And I said something to my advisor, I said, ‘this is what I just did for five years, ya know?’ And she said, ‘Well there’s nothing we can do about that.’ So to me, that should have been adaptable that I had these skills, they were already gained, and had already been earned, and it was a little bit degrading that day. They still require me to take this course, and they didn’t really look at me differently, I guess.”

I’m drawn back to the conflicting survey responses in which some student veterans indicated they want to be treated just the same as other students, and others wanted their life experiences and military career to be acknowledged and to count for what it is worth. Andrew’s example of having to take FYE despite the skill sets he’d gained through his military training shows what being treated differently looks like to Andrew. Since military experience simply could not be transferred into academic credits, and so no exceptions were made for his five years of military experience, Andrew felt not only overlooked but also demeaned. If the past five years’ experience
meant nothing in college, it was no wonder to me that Andrew would feel unprepared to start college and have a fear of failing.

But it was not nothing to Andrew, and despite the fact that it could not be substituted for FYE, his military experience made an appearance in another aspect of Andrew’s college life: several of his writing assignments. He shared with me a memoir piece set during his deployment in Afghanistan, a compare and contrast essay about pursuing college or joining the military post high school, a research essay on the evolution of combat photography, and the reflective essay, which opens with the paragraph juxtaposing war with attending class. Andrew, having left the military and enrolled in a community college within a 6-month time span, could not help but use his military experiences as starting points for his writing. He shares, “I didn’t do anything from [age] 17 until [starting school] that wasn’t military oriented so that was what was really in my mind, and I wanted to get that, I felt like I had to write that one big military essay to get that out of my mind, and I can move on, and there are different experiences I can write about.”

Closure. I hear echoes of Joshua’s intentions in Andrew’s. Dave too, returned to a 10 year old experience through writing so that he no longer had to go back. Perhaps that is one thing introductory writing courses can offer student veterans: an opportunity to use writing as a tool to support their transition into academic—and possibly also civilian—life, while acknowledging and honoring their military experiences. In talking with Andrew, it is evident he feels writing allows him to think critically about his past experiences. He shares, “I always felt like, if you can’t understand the experience and you can write about it, you can really gauge more of what you saw, so if you put things
down on paper then it really helps you to get it out of your mind. And you read and can reread and you can really like break down what you've experienced.”

Writing in order to find meaning, to create meaning, is part of what first-year writing courses are all about, and Andrew's history with writing prepared him well for his composition course, despite his fear of failure. He tells me, “I'm able to write a lot of content very quickly, like I can fill pages, no problem but my issue is definitely with grammar, so a lot of what I write makes sense to me as I write it until somebody else rereads it or until I read it out loud to myself and I realize ah that doesn't make sense…”

Throughout our conversation, Andrew makes several comments alluding to the lack of finesse in his writing—he’s got the ideas, he says, but needs “formal training” on how to present them. He uses “grammar” as a stand in for organization, elements of style, and syntax, but I am impressed with the awareness he demonstrates about his writing process. He describes his process to me as: “I'll just fill pages so I'll get everything written down and then I edit from there. I guess I'm pretty methodical as I write… once you have your ideas down you can really expand on them and edit them, and delete them and realize it's completely awful and start over.”

I remark to Andrew that he seems to be very aware of his process, whereas a lot of first-year students might respond to the question of “how do you write?” with, “I don't know, I just write it.”

In response, Andrew says, “Well I get a lot of that from the military because everything in the military is like a formal process I guess, like you never just pick up a gun and walk out somewhere and start shooting and come back. So everything, like training, you have to come up with—you write a five paragraph order which is like five
paragraphs and each one of them represents a different aspect of the mission or the training you’re going on, and from there you’ll draw your map, and make your move in plan, and from there you’ll rehearse it several times and then you’ll actually conduct the training. So I really use that in my writing as well cause I feel like you lay it all out and then you rehearse it in a sense and then you restructure it, and you can always make it better and you can always plan to make it better.”

It’s interesting to me that Andrew not only learned about process from his military experience, but also that he transferred that knowledge to his writing. So many first-year courses and writing intensive courses are structured around drafting and revising, and here is a student veteran who is already aware of his writing process, engaged in it, and reflective about what he deems his strengths and weaknesses. But while writing helped him process his experiences during his deployment, he found that when he returned from Afghanistan, it “became kind of difficult [to write about his military experiences] because I didn’t really want to bring any of it up.” His first-year writing course gave him an opportunity to write “that one big military essay” while exercising his strengths and providing the one element that had been severely lacking from Andrew’s writing process: collaboration with fellow writers.

To Andrew’s credit, he embraced the idea of exchanging feedback wholeheartedly. He has another word for feedback, however: criticism. On collaboration via writing teacher/student writing conferences, Andrew shares: “I really like to be criticized when I do stuff because I know that I don’t know everything, and I know that somebody that’s a trained professional can teach me what they know, so… from my experience writing… my first draft that I think is good, can really be improved
like tenfold, and in the end the final project is much better than what I had.” I am reminded again of Joshua’s impressions of higher education standards, and feel his disappointment reinforces Andrew’s comment—both of them are aware of their academic weaknesses; and both want to be pushed to improve and succeed. Andrew shares, “I really wanted a lot of feedback from [the teacher] because she’s the teacher! She’s the one with the training, and I was really hoping she’d help me with the structuring and really help me get my papers onto a college level. Because I knew that none of them were since I haven’t had any formal training since high school, which was seven, eight years ago at this point… so I was really hoping [to] make [the writing] look more formal, make it look more professional, make it look more like something… [that] when you’d read you’d say, ‘Wow this is a well educated individual,’ not something like, ‘This guy has like a middle school education, and must have stopped there.’”

Accepting feedback from an instructor, however, is different from listening to one’s classmates. Selling peer-review as beneficial collaboration is a tough gig in introductory writing classrooms, especially to folks like Joshua who feel it is a practice in the blind leading the blind. But to Andrew, infusing collaboration into his writing process only served to strengthen his writing abilities and add to the tools in his writing toolbox. Until first-year writing, Andrew tells me, he only ever shared his writing with one other person: a new soldier with a bachelor’s degree in English who was assigned to his unit. He took the pointers he received on his writing from his buddy to heart, he tells me, and the respect Andrew holds for other people’s acquired knowledge and areas of expertise is evident. I wondered if perhaps Andrew’s fear of being unprepared combined with his faith in his instructor’s knowledge of the benefits of peer review fueled his embracement
of collaboration. But then Andrew tells me his understanding of collaboration is also deeply rooted in his military experiences. He says, “Something else I got from the military was if you have a group of people, everyone has a different skill set. And your skill set is important, like for me I was good with the radio and somebody else is good with the machine gun, and someone else is good with the mortars so you put it all together, you know, and you have a formidable force, a formidable fighting force. So I kind of looked at [peer review] like that too. I felt like I was good at filling content and maybe the person next to me was good at phrasing, and I could put that together and I would really improve on my piece.”

Life in the military prepared Andrew for higher education in ways he hadn’t expected. His fear of failure and his open mind in receiving feedback positioned him to utilize the skills he’d gained from his five-year military career and apply them in the new, foreign setting of a classroom. And as far as the differences he felt between himself and his fellow classmates… that motivated him too, to share about his military experiences and inform his classmates of the reality of their peers’ lives. He tells me how hard it is to comprehend the life of a soldier, especially when the media only offers so much information. He shares, “you can turn on the news and you might hear, ‘oh so-and-so passed away’ but that’s it. You don’t see anything else [about the war]. Maybe you did in 2003, 2004 but I don’t see any [stories] recently that warrant Afghanistan. I remember when they killed Osama bin Laden; that was big for about a day, but even then nobody really cared. ‘Oh we killed Osama bin Laden!’ and that was it. They never showed about the twenty some odd individuals, some of my best friends that we lost on our deployment, you don’t ever hear about them. You never hear about some of my
best friends that don’t have legs and arms that graduated the same year I did or some of the young men that in the future won’t. I really wanted to show that to people, that there’s this other side that you don’t know about.”

“Do you think your essay does that?” I ask him.

He shrugs and says, “Even if it didn’t, even if somebody looked at it and went ‘aw cool’ and say tossed it in the garbage, it doesn’t hurt to try. It doesn’t hurt to try to get the story out there. In my eyes I don’t think I really did because what you see on paper is different than what you can really experience, but hoping maybe somebody could look at that and get something out of it, even maybe just one person, ya know?”

Like Dave, Andrew too feels that words will never be able to convey to someone who wasn’t there what his military experiences were like, how they changed him, how they’ve become a part of him. And also like Dave, he believes it is worth a try. And so, with his words, he invites us in.

Conclusion

All three of these case studies illustrate the three major trends that emerged from the survey data; all three wrote about some aspect of their military experience. They each wrote an essay focused around a deployment or combat experience in order to draw personal meaning. Dave also shared a journalism piece about a fellow student veteran and the red tape that prevented him from receiving the support he needed. Andrew also wrote the essay whose opening is shared here about his return to school post-deployment, his struggle in finding work without a college degree, the challenges he faced overcoming years old high school transcripts and five years of experience that amounted to little in the civilian working world.
Interviews with all three also demonstrated the student veterans' rhetorical awareness in regards to their writing about military experience. Dave and Andrew, both initially wrote for themselves, as a way of understanding their military experiences, of thinking in different ways about them, of—in many ways—claiming those stories as a part of their lives. As the writing process progressed, however, they each seemed to use the rhetorical situation that evolves between reader, text, and writer in ways that demonstrate a keen awareness about the purposes of writing and the nuances in the audience of readers. Even Joshua, who wants to rid himself of his association with anything military, used the writing process as a means of wiping that figurative slate clean. He could have, as many veterans do, decided simply to never speak of his military experience again. His choice to use writing as a tool for documenting his past so he no longer has to carry it with him moved him toward the one thing he’d said he’d never do: share war stories with family. But once it was written, Joshua made choices to have it be read—choices that moved beyond requirements of first-year writing, beyond peer review and conferencing. He submitted his work, won an award, and eventually shared his winning essay with his mother and sister. Although Joshua has made it clear he wants to leave his past in the past, his invitation to share his writing with his family suggests he does not want it forgotten.

Above all, these three case studies reveal how essential relationships are for the writing of stories about military experiences. Although Joshua persisted that his work was not worthy of its recognition, and although he insisted that he wanted to put his military past completely behind him and forget it, as the semester wore on, the steps he took belie that intent somewhat. Not only did he submit his essay for three different
contests, he won one of them. Not only did he share his story with his instructor, his classmates, me, and those judging the contests, he brought it to his family. I have no doubt Joshua meant it when he said he wanted to move on, become an “average Joe;” but I can also see how the relationships he forged—conferencing with his instructor, peer reviewing with a classmate, seeking out support from a writing center tutor, even meeting with me, as brief as it was—were used as a means to help him achieve that goal.

Dave too was affected as a writer by the open, honest feedback he was given from his classmates. He felt a surge of confidence when the responses he received helped him consider the way he was telling his story, encouraged him to try different ways of revising. He felt he had a good relationship with his instructor too, who he says led a “a very warm welcoming class, a very open class.” It was clear the moment she identified Dave’s strength at showing and not telling during his group workshop, Dave’s confidence was bolstered. But he also appreciated her approach to revision. He tells me his instructor at one time suggested Dave reorder his essay, moving the ambush scene closer to the end. He took her advice, but the resulting essay was less compelling, and the instructor told him so. Dave says that meant a lot to him, to have her admit her idea fell flat. The respect Dave held for his writing teacher made it easier for him to continue writing at least two more pieces connected to his military experience. Without that class, he says, those stories would never have been told.

And then there’s Andrew—a prolific writer, who acknowledges his writing weaknesses, and engages fully in the collaboration process of his first-year writing classroom. For years, Andrew had written about his experiences, his moments, his
emotions, and writing became a tool he used to make sense of the world around him. He could have gone on that way—writing privately, never sharing a word—but first-year writing gave him real readers. Drawing on knowledge gained in the military, Andrew made a choice to listen to his classmates’ thoughts about his work—accepting that while some put in little effort during peer review, others have strengths that he can learn from.

Karen Springsteen (2014) writes, “So much of war and military culture is glorified, yet so much is also left in the dark, undifferentiated, unfiltered, or forgotten” (p. 147). I have often felt caught between these two extremes, wondering if a point of access exists along that continuum for me to catch a glimpse of the realities of military culture and the experience of war. I have long reveled in the idea that civilians can never know the experiences of our military and veteran students—I’ve said so too many times in this work alone. But the trends revealed in this project’s survey data and illustrated through the voices and experiences of three student veterans have provided me with a new awareness of what “not understanding” means, and specifically what the effect can be on our military students. As Drew Cameron, an Iraq veteran writes,

Have we not all become veterans of war…? It is this very question of responsibility, of openness and honesty that reveals the essence of conflict and how it shapes our collective lives. When someone says: “I cannot know what it was like over there,” we want them to. When someone says: “I can’t imagine how it must have been,” we need them to. When someone says: “I cannot,” they must. (Lewis, 2009, p. vii-viii, as qtd. in Springsteen, 2014, p. 151)

Our mission then, as writing instructors working with military and veteran students, is to acknowledge our responsibility as citizens of the United States includes bearing the burden of military life as it is shared to us by student veterans; it is to suspend what we
think we know, our presumptions about military and veteran students; it is to listen when they speak, with an open mind; it is to respect their silence even while working to create a classroom culture that is receptive to student veterans. It is our mission to learn from our student veterans and accept their invitations to meet them where they are.
CONCLUSION
From help to hear: Moving forward with student veterans

Last year I attended a conference in which I presented a paper arguing that writing instructors can be witnesses for student veterans writing about trauma. It was mostly theoretical, and—in retrospect—more off base than on, but I was looking forward to the question and answer period when I could hear responses from the audience and hopefully open a dialogue. But the first question posed to me brought me down from my hypothetical cloud of ideas and right smack at the front of a hypothetical classroom; it was the one question I had been dreading: “But what do we actually do when we teach?” I sheepishly admitted then that I didn’t have a list of best practices for writing instructors to learn and apply to their work with student veterans. I was embarrassed I didn’t have more to say, and I was disheartened by the question, although I couldn’t pin point why at the time. Of course we want best practices. What is the point of composition research if it doesn’t improve our teaching and support us in reaching diverse groups of students? Still, that question struck a chord with me, and I left the conference room feeling defeated, a fraud—who was I to be presenting papers on student veterans’ trauma narratives? Who was I to tell educators what moves will best meet student veterans’ needs in the classroom?

A few weeks later, I met with Dave for our interview. As we introduced ourselves and settled in, he thanked me for inviting him in to talk, and for doing this project, and I smiled and replied, “I appreciate you coming in.” But I was thrown off balance later, as
we were wrapping up, when he thanked me again, looking me in the eyes and squeezing my hand. Still reeling with insecurities left over from the conference, I tried to deflect the focus away from me, and return the gratitude for his participation. Dave, however, didn’t let me off the hook.

“I appreciate what you’re doing,” he said. “I do. It’s important.”

As I transcribed the interviews with Dave, Joshua, Andrew, and the others, and thought about the question posed to me at the conference, it finally occurred to me why I felt so unsettled, and what my response should have been. The question “what do we do?” was well intentioned, I knew, but it seemed to exist along the same lines as the way many civilians thank military personnel for their service or shut down conversation by suggesting there are no words for their experiences (“I can’t imagine what you’ve been through”). The educator who asked it, no doubt—like I had—wanted to “help” veterans succeed in higher education. But we were both going about our goals in misled ways. What we do, if I’ve learned anything from the student veterans who shared their experiences with me, is listen, not with an intention to help, but with the awareness that we have much to learn from our student veterans.

Such listening is rooted in the recognition that “the dominant scholarly trend in rhetoric and composition studies has been to follow the lead of popular culture and naturalize listening, that is, assume it to be something that everyone does but no one needs study” (Ratcliffe, 2005, p. 18). Rhetorical listening, however, is not passive; just as we teach our students to be active readers by engaging in various ways with a text, we can practice active listening by employing elements of rhetorical listening. Ratcliffe defines rhetorical listening in part as taking “a stance of openness that a person may
choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture” (p. 25). When working with student veterans, this often involves looking closely at the presumptions we hold about military members and the military in general, and how those presumptions are influenced by our political positions or current political climate. If I had a second chance to respond to that educator, I would share with her the following: what we do is learn how to listen and then practice it every chance we get. Rhetorical listening, as Ratcliffe asserts, depends on our active involvement in understanding our positionality and suspending what we think we know in order to be open, active listeners. I offer the following suggestions as ways to do this when working with student veterans.

**Identifying and Deconstructing Perceptions of the Military**

There is a reason stereotypes and generalizations exist—they help our brains quickly classify a mass of information. The problems arise when we come to rely on those stereotypes, allow them to overshadow individual identity and determine our actions. Krista Ratcliffe (2005) talks about this as the difference between identification and identity. She writes:

> …identification is inextricably linked with identity but does not directly correspond to it. In other words, although an identification may inform a person’s identity, a person’s identity cannot be reduced to a single identification. No single identification solely defines a person’s identity; he or she is a compilation of many identifications. (p. 51)

The military as an identification provides some information about military and veteran students, but can never offer the whole picture. The majority we learn from the students sitting in front of us. And in order to practice rhetorical listening, which allows us to open and receive what another shares, it is necessary to separate an identification with the military from the identities of our students.
When it comes to working with student veterans, it is important to consider how we are positioning ourselves in terms of what we think we know about military experiences and the men and women who have served. To what degree do we, without thinking about it, glorify war, as Springsteen (2014) says, by superimposing our version of a hero onto a student veteran? By the same token, how does the stereotype of the veteran with PTSD affect our interactions with student veterans who always sit facing the door, or who have strong opinions during class discussions? When do we feel cautious, uncomfortable, afraid, even? When do we feel genuine curiosity? Understanding the patterns of our emotional and cognitive responses moves us closer toward suspending what we think we know in order to listen.

As part of this project, I interviewed several writing instructors about their experiences working with student veterans. Although I opted to omit that data for this project due to scope, I’d like to offer a story that was shared with me by an instructor at a community college. It is a story I’ve heard variations of over the years, and I believe speaks to the effect our knowledge or lack of knowledge regarding the military can have on our teaching.

This instructor, teaching an introductory writing course, held small group conferences with 3-4 students throughout the semester to collaborate on the students’ drafts. During one of these conferences, a traditionally aged student shared her persuasive essay arguing against the use of racist terms against Middle Eastern people. The instructor told me that the veteran student in the group became quite emotional and said, “well, ya know, there is some truth to some of these stereotypes… I saw kids over there kill people. I saw people with guns… shoot each other in the street.” For a few
moments, he had a moment of intense graphic memories surfacing, and the instructor could tell he was quite emotional. I asked what emotion was there, and she said “anger.”

“I didn’t feel unsafe or anything like that,” she shared. “He wasn’t a super aggressive person, generally. He was very very friendly, always smiling, really respectful in class.”

The instructor told me it was a beautiful moment that writing instructors are privileged to witness… those moments when writing can really impact students. At the same time, she continued, “it made everyone else feel very uncomfortable to continue to share their work and talk about these things.” In response to the student veteran’s emotional comments, the instructor made a decision: “I was kind of like, immediately, okay we’re not going to talk about this right now, and we’re going to move on, you know, this is not something we’re going to engage in further.” The instructor said she didn’t know if that was the right thing to do, but she also shared her discomfort at trying to use the situation as a soapbox moment. For her, at that moment, moving forward made sense. I asked if she ever returned to the topic with the student, and she shook her head, “I never did.”

I share this story not as an example of best or worst practices, but as a genuine teacherly moment of having to quickly respond to a tense, unexpected classroom situation. I have experienced these moments myself, and many times have responded by stopping conversation and diverting the class’ attention. And that is not to say that redirection just may be the best course of action to take during particular moments of classroom conflict. But, over the course of working on this project and talking with
student veterans, I recognize there is another way to shape these moments. It starts long before the moment, and it involves acquiring a bird’s eye view of how the limited knowledge I have of military experience may affect my perceptions of and interactions with veterans. So the first suggestion I offer in regards to bridging the civilian/military divide is to recognize the presumptions we carry with us about military students and to suspend them as best we can while we gather information.

Opening Conversations

Institutional level. Once I began to pay attention, I began to recognize that I was often conflating identification with the military with the identities of my students who were veterans. I realized I knew very little about the student veterans I had taught in the past. One approach I took to remedy this lack of knowledge was to seek out my university’s veteran affairs coordinator to have a chat. I wanted to get a sense of the veteran population on the campus where I worked. She informed me of the number of student veterans currently enrolled on campus and the efforts to establish a community for them via brown bag lunches, outing club events, and a lounge in the student union building that was shared with commuter students. Most veterans were commuters with families and jobs, she told me, so it was hard to get any programs off the ground as student veterans often only came to campus for class. But efforts were being made to support veterans on campus in other ways; within the past year, for example, an online training course for working with student veterans was introduced to all faculty. While the course wasn’t mandatory, I knew several faculty members who took it and told me it gave them some perspective on the student veteran population.
Getting a sense of the veteran community on campus helped me greatly in considering student veterans’ experiences transitioning to college. Dave, who has a wife and was racing to complete his degree in three years as opposed to four, didn’t have time for a brown bag lunch or a hike with other veterans. Joshua informed me that the shared lounge was pointless as no veteran will openly talk to other veterans when civilian students are hanging out on the couch across from them. For a number of reasons, these two men did not feel connected to a community at their school. Getting a sense of the campus culture helped me to familiarize myself with their general academic experience on this campus. My second suggestion is that educators take the initiative to educate themselves on the local military culture at their institutions. Doing so helped situate me as an instructor, and when student veterans signed up for my class, I was aware of what institutional support was available to them.

**In the classroom.** As writing instructors, we have easy access to learning about our students: writing assignments. Also, as instructors of first-year and other introductory writing courses, we have classes small enough to get to know our students, and courses that encourage if not depend on students’ sharing their perspectives so as to critically engage. Creating a safe space to invite thoughtful conversation is, for all intents and purposes, what we do.

There are suggestions out there on how to help create an environment that is comfortable and inviting for all students including student veterans. Making a statement on the first day of class and including information for veterans in the syllabus provide the message that the instructor acknowledges student veterans as part of the class community from day one. Veterans and authors Sean Morrow and Alexis Hart (2014)
assert that the shared context of student veteran experiences can allow instructors an 
opportunity to learn about their student veterans with a few general questions posed at 
the beginning of the semester:

- Why did you join the service?
- Was your military-service experience what you expected?
- What did you learn from your time in the service?
- Why did you choose to come to this college/university?
- What do you want to get out of and/or contribute to this class? (p. 33)

While the authors acknowledge this is not an exhaustive list and will not resonate with 
all veterans, asking such questions provides writing instructors with information about 
the breadth of student veteran experiences, and—perhaps more importantly in a writing 
classroom—student veterans’ level of openness in regards to talking about their military 
experience.

Creating an environment that is aware and inviting of diverse experiences sends 
the message to student veterans that they are not the fish out of water they may 
imagine themselves to be. A third suggestion is to integrate a universal design into 
each course that accounts for the unique situation of student veterans. Doing so may 
assist in establishing a safe space for student veterans, and can act as an invitation to 
bring their military experience into the writing classroom. Without singling student 
veterans out, such gestures from instructors indicate effort on the instructor’s part to 
bridge the military/civilian divide.
Listening

Krista Ratcliffe (2005) argues that developing the practice of rhetorical listening involves recognizing the complexities involved in an individual’s negotiation of identity across discourses. Dave’s moment of presenting his essay to the class comes to mind as an example of what this looks like in the classroom. Dave’s obvious concern that students would get caught up in the content of his piece was eased when the students in the class spoke specifically of the writing and addressed Dave as a writer. They were not oblivious to the nature of the subject, but it did not overshadow the purpose of the discussion, which was to identify what was working in the piece, and what could be improved. Dave’s essay, which explored three sides of his persona, clearly brought Dave’s negotiation of his identity into play. In addition there was Dave the student and Dave the veteran to contend with. Dave himself seemed to be inherently aware of the students’ position as readers of his work as well, and expressed his concern for how students would be affected by reading his essay. Such awareness lays the ground for open communication, as each side is in tune with the fluidity of positionality, and able to temporarily suspend firm beliefs.

Rhetorical listening also depends on our recognition that “we are all tied up in one another’s liberation,” as Jackie Jones Royster had told me. Despite the all-volunteer and professional military force, citizens are not off the hook from maintaining responsibility for the political state of our nation. It is not enough to say “thank you for your service”; it is not enough to stay silent for not knowing what to say; it is not enough to bestow our veterans with benefits, set up a lounge—even if not shared, and say welcome to college. Our responsibility to student veterans is much much greater, and
involves staying open and curious to what they share—in class, in conferences, via writing—by asking real questions and being respectful of the answers. It also involves refraining from stigmatizing military experiences as beyond language or comprehension through comments such as “I can’t imagine.” To do so immediately closes down conversations, which, as evidenced from the survey data, affects the teacher/student relationship and potentially the student’s success in the course.

When student veterans do share about their military experiences, when they are receptive and open to our curiosity, we are offered an opportunity to further rhetorical listening practices in the classroom. Ratcliffe describes this next move as locating identifications across commonalities and differences, which resonates strongly with the survey data showing that the student veteran participants want to be treated both the same as other students and recognized for their differences from the average 18 year old first-year student. As with Andrew, whose five years of experience in the Marine Corps did nothing to excuse him from a required First-Year Experience course teaching students how to be disciplined as college students, disregarding a student’s military experience as having any kind of place in the classroom does a disservice to the student, and, quite frankly, to those of us who work with them. Come to find out Andrew’s writing strengths were deeply rooted in his military experiences. The value he places on hard work, persistence, collaboration, and process are directly connected to his military background. While Andrew is especially insightful and able to identify those strengths, other veterans, like Joshua, may not see a connection between their military past and their academic present. By listening to students’ experiences, writing instructors have the opportunity to support student veterans as they uncover their
strengths and see that they are transferable to the academic world. By the same token, maintaining expectations and challenging student veterans as we do all our students enables student veterans to “earn” their degree, as, as Dave mentioned, they earned their place in school.

Finally, writing classrooms are spaces that encourage conversation, debate, persuasion, and argument. To try to present as neutral or to shut down controversial conversations is to negate what writing classrooms aim to do: develop critical thinking and effective communication. Paying attention to the underlying belief systems that may guide assertions helps us to understand and respect where student veterans are coming from, while being able to negotiate across differences by engaging in open, honest communication.

**Implications**

In reflecting back on the question, “But what do we do?” I am struck by the far-reaching implications this project can offer, not just for student veterans in the writing classroom, but also for their civilian classmates, the development of a military inclusive campus culture at local levels, and a broader understanding and utilization of the strengths student veterans bring to higher education at large.

As writing instructors, we often see students at the start of their college careers; subsequently, we are already in a prime position to engage in conversations with student veterans during their transition into higher education. When student veterans write about their military experiences in a composition classroom, we are being invited to share those students’ experiences in ways we have not been privy to before. While this is true in a lot of cases—with students, for example, who write about various forms
of trauma, or students who are refugees, or students who write about a “coming out” moment that needs to happen before the student can feel comfortable in their own skin—military narratives offer a valuable opportunity for educators to recognize, talk about, and work toward bridging the military/civilian gap that has become such a prevalent part of our nation’s makeup. In other words, the traumas writing instructors may read about are often individualized experiences. Military narratives, on the other hand, are imbedded within the context of a cultural divide between military and civilians. Because of this gap, civilian writing instructors are already positioned on the opposite end of the divide. Subsequently, there are real-world consequences, even if only on a classroom or campus level, when student veterans share their military experiences with a civilian teacher and peers. By educating ourselves on the military culture at our local institutions, we prepare ourselves to engage responsibly in such conversations when they arise—not just as the student’s writing instructor, but also as the student’s audience.

Contextualizing student veterans’ writing against the cultural backdrop of the military/civilian divide has implications beyond the teacher/student veteran relationship. In writing classrooms, where oftentimes the majority of students are traditionally aged with traditional experiences, the conversation we are invited into when students write about their military experience is not one kept behind closed doors. Student writers have a classroom full of readers, all of whom fall on either the military or the civilian side of the divide. As a future area of research, devising ways to establish rhetorical listening practices within a composition classroom comes to mind as a central way of fostering the type of environment conducive to sharing and learning about military
experience. As Dave’s experience sharing his writing in a group setting shows, when students engage responsibly as writers and as curious readers, the student writer gains confidence and investment in his or writing, and the conversation evolves organically, which serves to forge connection among students in the immediate moment, and may perhaps improve understanding and awareness across that divide. A benefit for peer review or debates in general, it would be interesting to explore how rhetorical listening exercises embedded in a writing course over time affects the ways civilian students respond to student veteran writers. Similarly, student veterans, who are often older than their classmates and have difficulty finding common ground, would benefit by challenging that 18-year-old “kid” stereotype.

Ultimately, I see this study as contributing as a grass-roots type movement, moving from teacher/student interactions, to classroom engagement, to local and national conversations about the ways higher education can not only meet the needs of this valuable population, but also draw on the strengths of student veterans to help them succeed professionally. In Doe and Langstraat’s “Introduction” to Generation Vet (2014), the authors offer a historical overview of the ways higher education and military service have overlapped and influenced each other since before World War II. These are not separate domains. They never have been despite the cultural narratives and constrained rhetoric that further and maintain the divide between civilians and military personnel. It is time educators recognize the wisdom Jackie Jones Royster shared with me at the start of this project: “If you’re coming to help, go home. But, if you recognize that your liberation is tied up with mine, take my hand and let’s get started. There is much work to be done.” It is important to remember that the scholarship on student
veterans in higher education is not merely for veterans, or for those who teach veterans. It is for all of us, for we are all implicated in the military/civilian divide. If there is any way to devise a list of best practices when working with student veterans, I believe that rhetorical listening and collaborating with student veterans is the foundation. As Andrew so gracelessly articulated, we are all good at something, and when we work together we have the potential to create a “formidable force.”
APPENDIX A

IRB LETTER OF APPROVAL

University of New Hampshire
Research Integrity Services, Service Building
51 College Road, Durham, NH 03824-3585
Fax: 603-862-3564

22-Nov-2013
Franco, Sarah
English, Hamilton Smith
438 State Street #3
Portsmouth, NH 03801

IRB #: 5856
Study: Teacher-Response and Student Veterans' Military Narratives
Approval Date: 06-Nov-2013

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (IRB) has reviewed and approved the protocol for your study.

Approval is granted to conduct your study as described in your protocol for one year from the approval date above. At the end of the approval period you will be asked to submit a report with regard to the involvement of human subjects in this study. If your study is still active, you may request an extension of IRB approval.

Researchers who conduct studies involving human subjects have responsibilities as outlined in the attached document, Responsibilities of Directors of Research Studies Involving Human Subjects. (This document is also available at http://unh.edu/research/irb-application-resources.) Please read this document carefully before commencing your work involving human subjects.

If you have questions or concerns about your study or this approval, please feel free to contact me at 603-862-2003 or julie.simpson@unh.edu. Please refer to the IRB # above in all correspondence related to this study. The IRB wishes you success with your research.

For the IRB,

Julie F. Simpson
Director

cc: File
    Newkirk, Thomas
APPENDIX B

SURVEY

1. Informed Consent Form for Student Veteran Survey Participants

What is the study?
The researcher is interested in finding out what motivates student veterans to write about their military experiences in the public arena of the classroom, and the types of teacher-feedback student veterans would find most helpful on such writing pieces. The anticipated number of participants is 100. All participants need to be at least 18 years old, enrolled as a student, and have military or veteran status.

Who is the researcher?
Sarah Franco is a doctoral candidate in the Composition Studies program at the University of New Hampshire. Her work with Veterans extends to summer 2011 where she began volunteering at the Manchester VAMC; and for the past two years at CCCC (2012 and 2013), she has participated in workshops and panels on how composition studies can serve veterans. She has also run student veteran writing workshops on the UNH campus.

By participating in this study, participants consent to the following:
Completing the following survey, which will take up to 15 minutes.

What are the possible risks of participating in this study?
Participation in this study is anticipated to present minimal risk to you. Study participants may experience some discomfort in the process of thinking or writing about their military experience. Study participants are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and have the right to refuse to answer any questions. If study participants experience any adverse reactions, they may contact the Veteran Crisis Hotline at 1-800-273-8255.
An account of survey responses may be described in a professional journal or may be part of a conference presentation.

If the participant chooses to participate in this study, will it cost him/her anything?
It will cost participants 15 minutes of their time.

Will the participant receive any compensation for participating in this study?
No.

Can the participant withdraw from this study?
If the participant grants consent to participate in this study, he/she is free to stop participation in the study at any time without prejudice, penalty, or loss of benefits to which he/she would otherwise be entitled. Participants have the right to refuse to answer any questions.

How will the confidentiality of the participants’ records be protected?
The researcher seeks to maintain the confidentiality of all data and records associated with participant participation in this research. The survey software will not collect IP addresses. In the event of a complaint about the study, the IRB and/or UNH administrators may have to review data. The participant should understand that any form of communication over the Internet does carry a minimal risk of loss of confidentiality. After the study, data will be securely kept for future research.

What are the anticipated benefits?
Benefits in the field of composition studies may include raising awareness of the challenges, concerns, and needs associated with responding to student veterans’ military narratives in the composition classroom. Consequently, such research could pave the way toward more effective practices of teacher response associated with a growing population of student veterans’ and the diversity of needs they bring to the composition classroom.

Who should the participant contact if he/she has questions about the study?
If participants have any questions pertaining to the research he/she can contact Sarah Franco: sbl39@wildcats.unh.edu or (603) 862-3455. If the participant has questions about his/her rights as a research subject, he/she can contact Julie Simpson in UNH Research Integrity Services: (603) 862-2003 or julie.simpson@unh.edu.

How can students participate?
In order to participate, complete the following survey.

Statement of Participant Understanding
I have read the Informed Consent form for participation in “Teacher Response and Student Veteran Military Narratives” and understand that participation in this study involves:
· Completing the following survey.
· Allowing researcher to publish and present findings.

If I choose to participate, but then change my mind, I can withdraw from the study at any time. There is no penalty or punishment for withdrawing from the study.

Answer choices:

I would like to continue with the survey.

I am not interested in completing the survey.

2. How long did you serve in the Military?

Answer choices:
1-4 years
4-8 years
over 8 years
I prefer not to answer this question
3. Under what branch did you serve?

Answer choices:
Air Force
Army
Coast Guard
Marine Corps
Navy
I prefer not to answer this question.

4. What component did you fall under?

Answer choices:
Active Duty
National Guard
Reserves
I prefer not to answer this question

5. What type of institution are you enrolled in?

Answer choices:
Two-year
Four-year
Graduate
Professional or Vocational
Distance Education
I prefer not to answer this question.

6. What year are you in school?

Answer choices:
First-year
Sophomore
Junior
Senior
Graduate
Continuing Education
I prefer not to answer this question.

7. Have you or would you ever write about your personal military experience for a class assignment?

Answer choices:
Yes
Yes, but only if it wasn’t shared with other students
Yes, but only if it was read by the instructor and in small peer groups, but not the whole class
No
I prefer not to answer this question.

8. Have you or would you ever write about an experience in the military you found traumatic for a class assignment?

Answer choices:
Yes
Yes, but only if it wasn’t shared with other students
Yes, but only if it was read by the instructor and in small peer groups, but not the whole class
No
I prefer not to answer this question.

9. If you have written (or would write) about a military experience, please summarize in a sentence or two what you wrote (or what you would consider writing) about. (If you haven't or wouldn't, please write n/a.) (Please write n/p if you would prefer not to answer this question.)

Open question.

10. If you have written (or would write) about a military experience, what motivated you (or why would you choose) to write about this experience? (select all that apply)

Answer choices:
I wanted to get it off my chest
I wanted to try to learn from the experience
I wanted to share the experience with others
I wanted to explain my role (decisions, choices) in the experience
It was relevant to the assignment
Other
I haven't or wouldn't
I prefer not to answer this question

11. If you haven't written about a military experience, why haven't you? (select all that apply)

Answer choices:
It's private
I don't want to share it with the instructor
I don't want to share it with students
Fear of being misunderstood
It wasn't relevant to the assignment
Other
I have or would
I prefer not to answer this question

12. What type of feedback did you want or would you look for from a teacher when writing about a personal military experience you found traumatic? (Please write n/p if you would prefer not to answer this question.)

Open question.

13. What type of feedback did you receive from your teacher? (If you didn't write about your military experience for a class, please put n/a.) (Please write n/p if you would prefer not to answer this question.)

Open question.

14. Rank in order of most (1) to least (4) helpful feedback from an instructor on a piece of writing about personal military experience. (Drag and drop)

Answer choices:
Questions/comments about content
Grammar/editing feedback
Questions/comments about writing (organization, structure)
Suggestions for revision

15. Have you ever felt you received instructor feedback that was insensitive? If yes, what was the feedback and why did it feel insensitive? (Please write n/p if you would prefer not to answer this question.)

Open question.

16. What would you like teachers to know when they read student veteran writing about the student's military experience? (Please write n/p if you would prefer not to answer this question.)

Open question.

APPENDIX C

EMAIL TO WRITING INSTRUCTORS TO RECRUIT FOR STUDENT VETERAN SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

Dear Colleague,

I am a doctoral candidate in the English Department at the University of New Hampshire, and I am conducting a survey to gather information on why student veterans choose to write or not to write about their military experiences in the public
arena of a classroom. I would like to learn what motivates student veterans to write about their military experiences; additionally I am interested in finding out what types of teacher-feedback student veterans would find most helpful on such writing pieces.

Since our student veterans receive countless online surveys, I am requesting your help in inviting student veterans to participate. My goal is to spread the survey as wildly across the nation as possible, and I would like to have at least 100 participants for this survey. If there are IRB requirements for subject participation at your institution, please let me know.

Please reach out to student veterans in your institutions and invite them to complete this survey. They may access the survey via the link below. It will take up to 15 minutes of their time. They may contact me via email with any questions or concerns.

I greatly appreciate your support and encouragement through the implementation of this study. I believe the findings will help teacher-scholars become more familiar with the needs and motivations of student veterans and pave the way for more effective practices of teacher response for growing populations of student veterans and their needs.

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Sarah Franco

Survey link – (a link to Qualtrics)

APPENDIX D

CODING SAMPLES FOR DESIRED FEEDBACK, RECEIVED FEEDBACK, AND ADVICE FOR TEACHERS

Samples of my coded data are below: a “1” indicates the response is being coded in the corresponding category.

**Information Shared**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If you have written (or would write) about a military experience, / please summarize in a sentence or two what you wrote (or what you / would consider writing) about.</th>
<th>Logistical/ General</th>
<th>Emotional/ Psychological</th>
<th>Violent</th>
<th>Relational</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have written about my daily experiences while on deployment to Iraq (i.e. how life differed from my life as a civilian). I’ve also written about my relationship with my soldiers and</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
also about the torture and eventual death of several of them.

I would share times that I felt vulnerable, or times that I felt invincible. I would share about the times I was scared to death, and the time I first saw a wounded comrade. I would most definitely share the fact that I did not feel any ill will towards the people living in Afghanistan, and, in fact, that I felt sorry for their condition and sorry that the rest of the world ignores them except for when one of their numbers does something horrific.

Shared some experiences I had in Afghanistan.

I would talk about a bombing I was in and MST that I endured.

My experience in fire fights and dealing with casualties and the treatment of the casualties.

Wrote about my first experience arriving in Iraq to transition responsibility from the leaving unit to my unit. Described how foreign and unsettling and overwhelming the circumstances were.

**Desired Feedback**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What type of feedback did you want or would you look for from a / teacher when writing about a personal military experience you found / traumatic? (Please write n/p if you would prefer not to answer the question.)</th>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Reader Response</th>
<th>Relational</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I just want feedback that can benefit academically.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It would depend on our relationship. Serving was a very personal matter and the experience overseas is something that I wouldn't be comfortable sharing because I don't think my instructor would be able to relate. The best feedback would be judgmental support. A bad grade or criticism would be really painful.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The typical writing feedback that would be given to any writing assignment. I'm particularly uninterested in being treated as somehow different from my classmates. I</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
recognize that, while my particular experiences are shared by few in our society, many of my classmates have had similarly difficult experiences in life.

Perhaps how best to convey the experience, or in what ways to express it, like how to structure the sentences and ordering.

Writing style, use of writing techniques.

what they thought about the situation and how it was handled

Received Feedback

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What type of feedback did you receive from your teacher? (If you didn’t write about your military experience for a class, please put n/a.) (Please write n/p if you would prefer not to answer this question.)</th>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Relational</th>
<th>Reader Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comments on form (i.e. grammar feedback), style (i.e. coherence, cohesion, and concision), and content. Comments were generally straightforward about what was clear and what wasn’t. Comments were all meant to improve my writing.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casual, non-content-specific feedback, almost as if they did not want to question the experience to find out more or to offer any critique. It has to be difficult for non-veteran teachers to determine what military experiences are authentic and what is fictional.</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing Style</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy, understanding, cooperation, and concern.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They enjoyed the paper I wrote and they said it was very descriptive.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar and that it was &quot;Powerful&quot;</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Advice for Teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What would you like teachers to know when they read student veteran / writing about the student's military experience? (Please write n/p if you would prefer not to answer this question.)</th>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Relational</th>
<th>Personal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I would like teachers to realize that we are not the average students. That many time we have equal, if not more life experience than the professors and would prefer not to be treated like children.</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just to try and consider why or where the</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
vet is coming from. Put aside your own biases and look for the reasons the vet is writing in the first place.

Treat a student veteran and their righting with the same respect (and no more) that you would afford another student writer.

Context is everything; I could sound like a war hero for just digging a trench, it's what is going on around you that makes an experience memorable. In fact, something like 95% of my experiences were routine, mind-numbing, and repetitive, and make up the source for much cynicism toward the military in general.

Not all soldiers are victims, some soldiers have learned a lot from their experience and come out better, stronger people.

That it is not about the grammar, the syntax, the organization, or the assignment. It is actually about trust, reaching out for help, sharing a deep hidden shame, validation, connection, empathy, and understanding. It takes as much courage to seek answers and to share experiences as it does to stand toe to toe with the enemy. Veterans are courageous and in deep pain when the finally share.

APPENDIX E

SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR STUDENT VETERAN PARTICIPANTS

1. What was your writing piece about?
2. Why did you choose to draw on your military experience?
3. Have you ever written anything before on your military experience?
4. Have you ever shared writing about your military experience with anyone before?
5. What was easy about fulfilling this assignment?
6. What was challenging about fulfilling this assignment?
7. Did you write all you wanted to? What more would you write in this essay if you had more time?
8. What are your concerns about the quality of your essay?
9. What type of feedback did you receive from your writing instructor?
10. What type of feedback were you hoping for from your writing instructor?
11. Describe your ideal teacher-student conference for this essay.
12. How did the final draft match or break from your initial expectations when you began writing?
13. What type of teacher feedback did you receive during the drafting process?
14. What feedback was most helpful? Why?
15. What feedback was least helpful? Why?
16. How did the feedback influence your later drafts, especially the final?
17. Was there anything you would have liked your instructor to comment on that he/she didn’t?
18. What was the most challenging part of writing this piece?
19. Do you think your final draft is successful? Why or why not?

APPENDIX F

SAMPLE EMAIL SENT TO COLLEAGUES VIA EMAIL, ALLIES OF VETERANS IN ACADEMIA FACEBOOK PAGE, AND THE WRITING PROGRAM ADMINISTRATORS LISTSERVE

Dear Colleagues,

Have you had student veterans in your First-Year Composition class who have written about their military experience?

Do you know student veterans who have written about their military experiences for a class assignment (yours or a colleague’s)?

I am a doctoral candidate in the English Department at the University of New Hampshire, and I am conducting a series of case studies to learn about the needs of student veterans in the writing classroom and the challenges, concerns, and questions that arise for writing instructors during the writing and grading process. If you answered YES to the first question, I’d like to interview you about your experience responding to student veterans’ writing.

I am also interested in what motivates student veterans to write about their military experience for a class assignment and what kind of teacher-feedback student veterans find most helpful on such pieces. If you answered YES to the second, I would greatly appreciate if you extend my invitation to student veterans who may be interested in sharing about their writing experience with me.

Consent forms for writing instructors and student veterans with a more detailed description of the study are attached, and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have. If there are IRB requirements for subject participation at your institution, please let me know.

Thank you very much for your time and support.

Sincerely,

Sarah Franco
APPENDIX G

INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR SEMI STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS
WITH STUDENT VETERANS

What is the study?
The researcher is interested in finding out what motivates student veterans to write about their military experiences in the public arena of the classroom, and the types of teacher-feedback student veterans would find most helpful on such writing pieces. The anticipated number of participants is 3-5. All participants need to be at least 18 years old, be enrolled as a student, have written or be currently writing about their military experiences for a first year composition course, and have military or veteran status.

Who is the researcher?
Sarah Franco is a doctoral candidate in the Composition Studies program at UNH. Her work with Veterans extends to summer 2011 where she began volunteering at the Manchester VAMC; and for the past two years at CCCC (2012 and 2013), she has participated in workshops and panels on how composition studies can serve veterans. She has also run student veteran writing workshops on the UNH campus.

By participating in this study, participants consent to the following:
· Participating in one to two 30-60 minute interviews, which will be audio recorded;
· Allowing researcher to collect writing samples of participant’s written military experience submitted for a class assignment (if available).

What are the possible risks of participating in this study?
Participation in this study is anticipated to present minimal risk to you. Study participants may experience some discomfort in the process of thinking or writing about their military experience. Study participants are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and have the right to refuse to answer any questions. If study participants experience any adverse reactions, they may contact the Veteran Crisis Hotline at 1-800-273-8255.

An account of this process may be described in a professional journal or may be part of a conference presentation, but participants have the option of requesting a pseudonym.

If the participant chooses to participate in this study, will it cost him/her anything?
It will cost participants up to 2 hours of their time.

Will the participant receive any compensation for participating in this study?
No.

Can the participant withdraw from this study?
If the participant grants consent to participate in this study, he/she is free to stop participation in the study at any time without prejudice, penalty, or loss of benefits to
which he/she would otherwise be entitled. Participants have the right to refuse to answer any questions.

**How will the confidentially of the participants' records be protected?**
The researcher seeks to maintain the confidentiality of all data and records associated with participant participation in this research. In the event of a complaint about the study, the IRB and/or UNH administrators may have to review data. The participant should understand that any form of communication over the Internet does carry a minimal risk of loss of confidentiality. After the study, data will be securely kept for future research.

The participant should also understand that the researcher is required by law to report certain information to government and/or law enforcement officials (e.g. child abuse, sexual abuse, threatened violence against self or others, communicable diseases).

**What are the anticipated benefits?**
Benefits in the field of composition studies may include raising awareness of the challenges, concerns, and needs associated with responding to student veterans’ military narratives in the composition classroom. Consequently, such research could pave the way toward more effective practices of teacher response associated with a growing population of student veterans’ and the diversity of needs they bring to the composition classroom.

**Who should the participant contact if he/she has questions about the study?**
If participants have any questions pertaining to the research he/she can contact Sarah Franco: sbl39@wildcats.unh.edu or (603) 862-3455. If the participant has questions about his/her rights as a research subject, he/she can contact Julie Simpson in the UNH Research Integrity Services: (603) 862-2003 or julie.simpson@unh.edu.

**How can students participate?**
The participant’s signature or verbal email consent is needed for participation. If you choose to participate, please sign your name below and return to Sarah Franco or send an email giving verbal consent to sbl39@wildcats.unh.edu.

**Statement of Participant Understanding**
I have read the Informed Consent form for participation in “Teacher Response and Student Veteran Military Narratives” and understand that participation in this study involves:
- Participating in one to two 30-60 minute interviews, which will be audio recorded;
- Allowing researcher to collect writing samples of participant’s written military experience submitted for a class assignment (if available);
- Allowing researcher to publish and present findings.

If I choose to participate, but then change my mind, I can withdraw from the study at any time. There is no penalty or punishment for withdrawing from the study.
Sign Here____________________________

Date____________________________

Please indicate by checking the appropriate line or indicating via email if you would like your first name or a pseudonym to be used in any presentation and/or document concerning the study.

_____I would like my first name to be used in the study.

_____I would like a pseudonym to be used in the study.

APPENDIX H

VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS OF SURVEY PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How long did you serve in the Military?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Under what branch did you serve?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### What component did you fall under?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Active Duty</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>National Guard</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Reserves</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>I prefer not to answer this question</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>81</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### What type of institution are you enrolled in?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Two-year</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Four-year</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Professional or Vocational</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Distance Education/Online</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>I prefer not to answer this question</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>81</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### What year are you in school?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>First-year</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Continuing Education</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>I prefer not to answer this question</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>81</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX I

RANKING OF FEEDBACK FROM MOST TO LEAST HELPFUL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>Total Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Questions/comments about content</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Grammar/editing feedback</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Questions/comments about writing (organization, structure)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Suggestions for revision</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

APPENDIX J

JOSHUA’S WRITING SAMPLE

War Games

I’m walking through the UNH art museum, passing photo after photo, but one catches my eye. The photo is of a dancer, she has a strong resemblance to woman from my time in Iraq. A woman that I will never forget. The photo by Pauline Konner, depicts a women dancing, with three distinct poses. The First pose showing distress and worry, followed by the second showing hope and light. The last image showing feelings of loss and futility. It brings me back to the woman in Iraq. When she ran up to us, her child hung lifeless in her arms. I stood in front of her, soaked with sweat as my rifle hung by my side. On my chest hung fifty pounds of bullets, 40mm grenades and a large knife but despite the arsenal I carried, I was totally disarmed. The expression on her face and the sight her lifeless child stopped me in my tracks. The expressions on this mothers face mimicked the dancers. She was afraid until she found us, then hopeful that we could help her child. When it was clear my medic couldn’t save her baby she wailed, her husband expressionless by her side. Many horrific things have happened in Iraq in recent years, many before I was there, many more after. Out of all of the things I witnessed, this woman and her child had the biggest impact.

This memory makes me think about how absurd war is, how we treat war like a game. The countries as the players, one winning while the other loses. We often don’t think of all the individual pieces in the game, the mother and child, the marine and the insurgent. The photo of the dancer reminds me of my place on the game board.

I trained as a pawn for the war in Iraq at the Marine Corps recruit depot Paris Island. As a recruit I remember glancing up one day, I noticed a bird, it was small and
The bird hopped about on the slate roof, free to go wherever he desired. Now I didn’t know much about birds then, but for some reason this little guy caught my attention and every other recruit’s on that cold November day. A large group of men stood at the ready, eagerly awaiting chow. Now recruits are told what to do and when to do it, and at no point was bird watching on the curriculum at Marine Corps recruit depot Paris Island.

“Williams, what in the fuck are you looking at?” Our drill instructor barks, as he notices our new affinity for wildlife. He singles out recruit Williams, probably due to his height. His name was Sergeant Brown, his title was the “Kill Hat”, referring to his large campaign cover. Almost at a whisper, he continues his assault on recruit Williams. “Bitch I know you were looking at that bird…. Do you know what kind of bird that is Williams?”

“Sir, No Sir” Williams fired back. Brown lashed out. “Neither do I Williams, but I know what kind of bird you are, you’re a fucking shit bird!” At this platoon 1013 lost its bearing, several giggles and laughs slipped out. “OHH, now you bitches think this is funny!” Brown boomed, “Good you want to play games, I’m going to let you nothings in on a little secret, I’ve got more games that Milton fucking Bradley”.

Now Milton Bradley is one of many sayings that run throughout the Marine Corps. Most anyone who has trained at Paris Island knows, and probably hates this phrase. Boot camp is all about games, head games mostly. These are meant to break recruits down, then build them up, to mold them into the individual pieces for the war games to come.

It’s 2006, I was waiting in line for an hour for the satellite phone. I hated the phone calls home sometimes, they were barely worth the effort. People back home always asked the same questions, “How’s it going?” “Is it hot?” We would always reply with the same answers. You could hear the same conversation going on over and over as you waited in line. “What?” “OH it’s one billions degrees here, no just kidding, it’s just hot as hell” The connection was shit, it predictably went in and out. I gave the same answers to my beautiful, soon to be ex-wife when she asked all the typical questions. “Oh Great, things are going great,” they weren’t of course, it’s just the shit you said.

I was at the beginning of my second deployment. The setting was the city of Fallujah Iraq, the legendary city of battles, of certified bad asses. Fallujah sits within the Sunni triangle, a desert waste ringed with several major cities just teaming with insurgents. The temps there got close to 120, Iraq is a much different place than most people can begin to understand over the phone.

My platoon was typical, kids mostly, nineteen and twenty. We were cocky, loud, looked at porn. We knew everything, we believed our own personal brand of bullshit bravado. When we were told how invincible we are, we believed it. We were told our mission was good, that these people were backwards, that they needed our help. Mobile assault platoon 4 was six gun trucks, armored HUMVEES loaded for bear. The trucks had names like “the short bus” in the back and “forty inches of steel” in the front. My truck was bestowed the name “Sex-panther by Odion”, the crew manning the Sex-
panther went as follows: McGrath the driver, a slightly deranged Irishman, but probably the most motivated marine I have ever known. He was intelligent, and his sarcasm was unmatched. There was Case on the gun turret, an ultra-suburban white boy from Houston Texas. He had no filter, he would say whatever came to mind, whenever the thought arrived. He was genuine, someone you could trust. Moreno rode in the back of the truck, he was our Navy Corpsman or medic. He was a philosopher, a thinker, he acted like our nurse mother at times. Then there was Gunnery Sergeant Heck, second section leader and quasi vehicle commander. Now, no one liked Gunny, including myself. I rode behind him, next to Moreno. Gunny was from an artillery unit, he had never deployed before, and it showed. His inexperience would annoy us to no end. There was always a tense feeling in the truck; Gunny outranked me, but I was in charge. Things went on like this for weeks, tense patrols in a hostile city.

One day orders came down from on high; apparently we needed to make a delivery stop on one of our patrols. The stop was an observation post, which was located near the center of the city. This post was manned by marines from another company. They had seized control of a large house, and their sole purpose in life was to watch, to keep an eye over a section of the main road in the city. The road’s name was Fran, all of the roads had either a male or female names from the phonetic alphabet. Fran had been a hotbed of activity at the time. Many improvised explosive devices had been placed within this observation post’s area of responsibility, and the post was attacked several times. The fact that these guys weren’t doing their job, combined with the cargo we had to deliver to them, made this mission more ironic than many of us could handle.

We were issued orders by our battalion Sergeant Major to deliver actual Milton Bradley board games to the post. This was too much, I personally thought it was a joke. All I could picture was drill instructor Sergeant Browns face and his one gold tooth. I could hear it all again “I’ve got more games than Milton fucking Bradley!” It goes without saying, this did not go over well. IEDs were the single biggest threat to our platoons existence, and the assholes whose job it was to watch for these things where getting bored. We would avoid delivering these games, in protest really, for what seemed like weeks. They sat in the back of my truck, rolling around on top of roughly five hundred pounds of high explosive ammo for our MK-19 fully automatic grenade launcher. All I could think at the time was horseshoes and hand grenades.

One night out on patrol, several of the trucks had flat tires from jumping over a highway median. As they attempted to change the tires, a jack buckled under the weight of the armor and weapons. The radio crackled, “We need a jack up here, and these jacks are shit”. I started digging through the back of our truck, searching in vain for a jack. I remember standing behind our truck, looking at the games, thinking how ridiculous this was. I had moved these games in and out 50 times, the thought that ran through my mind was Frisbee. The vision of the games flying into the night through the green glow of my night vision were tempting. I didn’t toss them, I would have had my ass chewed if I had left them in the sand. I wish I had though, hind-sight is 20/20 like that.

The delivery date would arrive-Jenga, Battleship, Operation, they were all dying for a home. Gunny said tonight was the night, we were going to swing by the post and make the drop at the post. I remember the suggestion that the back entrance was our
best bet, the lieutenant and gunny thought the front was fine. The platoon formed up into its normal security position, my truck was dead center on the compound. The gun truck turrets bristled outwards. I was in the back seat, dozing off a bit, listening to the radio traffic. Constant round-the-clock patrols and a reversed sleep schedule to avoid the midday heat caused complacency to set in.

The other trucks radioed that they were in position. I reached out for the combat lock on my door. I was always the first person to dismount, and tonight would be no different. I remember my glove was soaked with sweat and grime, it slipped a bit on the black knob which opened my door. I leaned into the five hundred pounds of steel to dismount and grab the games. Just as my door groans open, I heard Gunny Heck chime in:

“I’ve got it, I’ll make the delivery”.

Apparently he was feeling frisky, “fine, let him deliver candy land” I thought, hell we all wanted to go in the back entrance anyway. He jumped out, slammed his door and grabbed the precious cargo out of the truck. I leaned the weight of my Kevlar helmet back and closed my eyes, sleep was calling my name.

Now came the flash, no sound, just light. I imagine there was sound, I just don’t remember it. Try to picture a welding arc, the blue light and spark. Now multiply that by 10 or maybe 100. Here, at the blast is where my memory fails me. Luckily the truck was angled away, I didn’t see the impact of the rocket propelled grenades. From what I’m told, I immediately dismounted and ran over. Case tells me Gunny made a type of sound that no human could possibly make. Moreno says there was a burning palm tree overhead when he ran over. I’m told the smell of burning flesh hung in the air, it left that metallic taste of blood in your mouth. I believe them, I just have no memory of it. Gunny and another marine from the post were both hit, Gunny lost a foot and a hand, and he also took shrapnel to the gut. The marine from the post lost his leg.

Now all I really remember is getting back into the front seat, the door slamming closed. The other details are from what my friends tell me. We had only been there a couple of weeks. I thought, it’s weird riding up front, I’ve never sat up here. I guess this is my gun truck now. McGrath was on the radio, he was calm. Case yelled at me for details. “It’s bad” I said. We were headed for Fallujah surgical.

We joke about that night now, it’s what the Marine Corps does to you. I’m told Gunny asked one question before the blood loss and shock set in, “is my dick still there?” That’s all he wanted to know. This is the real fog of war, days and weeks of boredom followed by moments of intensity. In the confusion of the medivac one of our turret gunners opened fire on an approaching vehicle. The tracer’s bounced off, the bullets glancing up into the night. Come to find out in all of the excitement a tank platoon had come up to assist. They neglected to tell our rear security they were coming, and somehow we opened fire on them. When we go out to the bar now we tell these stories and more like them. Stories about the games, the good and the bad. They laugh at how little I remember, at the mistakes made, the games played. I find it strange that I have no memory of the blasts, something many would consider a major event, but the memory of the mother and her child is as clear as ever.

After we returned from the deployment the platoon made a trip to visit Gunny. We all walked up the steps of Gunny’s house. Most everyone from the platoon was there. They filed in, everyone lined up to do the meet and greet. I was last in line, it had been
many months since I saw Gunny. As I approached him, his wife sat by his side smiling. I've had seen these military wives before, my ex-wife was one of them. They put on their best faces and carried on, dealing with us when we come back. They try to cope with the changes, some physical, some mental. I reached out and shook Gunny's remaining hand. Now this is the one thing I do remember clearly about these events, and I doubt I will ever forget it. As he looked right into my eyes, and without blinking he said, "You know this should be you."

APPENDIX K

DAVE’S WRITING SAMPLE

I’m on one knee on the ramp in the back of the helicopter as we fly recklessly fast and insanely low over the outskirts of an Iraqi city. From where I’m kneeling on the ramp it looks like the landscape is being pulled away from me at 140 miles an hour through a lens of hot exhaust that ripples the air. I watch the heat waves distort my view and it reminds me of my father’s charcoal grill at our camp in Maine. The Cobra attack helicopter providing cover for us darts in and out of my vision as it trails us and moves aggressively from side to side. Again I’m reminded of summers in Maine and the angry mosquitos they harbor.

We’re flying over mostly hard packed desert but low, nondescript buildings have started to appear along with the occasional grove of date trees. Everything looks dead or dying to me. The ground is bare and desolate, the low houses are so lifeless they could easily pass as house-shaped rocks protruding from the ground. Even the date trees look forlorn and desperate, knowing their dirty green fronds are fighting a losing battle with a landscape that seems to want to rip the life and color from everything it contacts.

I don’t feel like the soldier the other guys think I am. I’ve earned the callsign Doc Hollywood since we arrived here, though the name means something different for me now than it used to. “Doc” because I’m a corpsman and that’s what Marines call us anyhow, and “Hollywood” for a picture of me that appeared in Newsweek during the Battle of Ramadi a few months before. The picture shows me running out of the chopper toward four Marines who are carrying a wounded comrade to me. To my teammates the picture affirms who they think I am, and I gladly step into and cultivate the role fully. I decide that hiding behind Doc Hollywood is a much better option than letting them see the real me.

Our team is getting a good reputation with the guys on the ground for being willing to go the extra mile for a wounded soldier in a firefight, and I am told it has a little to do with me. I laugh and say, “Hey, they don’t call me Hollywood for nuthin’! Just sit back and enjoy the show!” They laugh, clap me on the back and say things like, “Man, you’re crazy.” I just smile and keep on going, but I’m scared to death almost every minute of every day. I can feel my fear wrestling with my anger for dominance somewhere deep inside me, and it makes me want to scream.

Sandman gets my attention and points to the front of the chopper. Hoffie is the starboard gunner is in radio contact with the rest of the world. He’s trying to relay
information about the mission to me but in a helicopter it's all done by hand signals. Movies that show passengers having an easy, leisurely conversation on a chopper still piss me off. Hoffie is a young sergeant with a baby face and a blazing smile. I don’t know where he’s from, but all of us know about his dog back home, a chocolate lab named Laben. Short, stocky with dark hair and a pale complexion he is unrecognizable in the desert tan flight suit, bright white flight helmet and forest green flak jacket that we are all wearing. Hoffie flashes his smile briefly when I look at him, raises his right fist and extends his pointer finger, then shakes his fist firmly for emphasis. Doc, I hear in my mind, one patient. The gunner then flattens his hand as if he was going to pet the dog he misses so much back home. Patient is on a stretcher or needs one. Next is an extended index finger plugged into a tight fist. Tight spot, urban landing, take the shotgun instead of the assault rifle. Last, he holds two fingers up, like a peace sign, then inverts it and extends a third finger to make a crude “m”. 2 minutes to touchdown. Get ready.

I look at Sandman to make sure he ‘heard’ everything too, and he gives me a raised thumb in response. Sandman is one of Doc Hollywood’s closest friends on this deployment, and I wonder if he’d like me as much too. His real name is Tony Meza, and not for the first time I wonder if he’s playing the same game I am. How alike are Tony and Sandman? Is Tony quiet and shy back home, or is he the outgoing, talented and unflappable soldier that I call Sandman?

Sandman is little younger than I am and comes from the coast of Oregon, where he says they grow the best weed in the world. He looks to me like a Mexican superman. He’s smart, funny and way too handsome, though he can be lazy at times. He earned the callsign “Sandman“ for his ability to sleep through anything, even incoming rounds, though there is nobody else I’d rather have at my back. Luck of the draw put us on our first few missions together and we fly with each other every chance we get. We can anticipate each other’s moves and have learned to treat patients effectively in the deaf mute cabin of the helicopter.

Sandman asks which of us is staying in the helicopter to prepare the medical gear, and which of us would be running out to find and make contact with the Marines on the ground. I tell him I’ll run. I’m always the one who runs. Sandman asks each mission anyway, but I always run. He would tell you it’s because I’m tough, or I like the excitement, the danger, the thrill of saving a Marine’s life or even the devastation of losing one. Doc might grin and say he’ll take any rush he can get, but I’d be fine with never going on another mission again.

The truth is that if something happened to him or anyone else on the team while I stayed in the chopper, I would never forgive myself. It’s not right to feel that way and I know it. That mindset robs the other men and women on the team of their courage – they don’t need to be babied, coddled or protected and least of all by me. But there is another reason: I’m afraid that if I let myself stay inside the cabin – even just once – something will change in me and I’ll never have the courage to leave it again. I tell myself that I’m wrong, and that when there’s a wounded soldier waiting on me to help them I would never lose my courage. I decide to never test that theory.

Rounds from an Ak-47 ping off the side of the chopper, just behind where I’m kneeling. The bullets were born from their casings with violent bangs, smoke and fire, yet ended their journey reminding me of the sound of pebbles kicked feebly at a tin can.
Sandman and I lock eyes and I smile. I’m not sure what the smile says to him, but I’m hoping it reassures him that we’ll be okay. He rewards me with a too-handsome smile as I hear the engines start to whine to an unbelievable high pitch. I see the ramp turn towards the ground as the nose of the aircraft pitches up. I feel the rough, gravelly material of the deck push hard into my knee as I’m shoved down by the g forces. Part of me is enjoying this, but I’m happy to discover that most of me isn’t.

The next moments come fast and hard. I’m being pushed and pulled. Dirt, dust and smoke is being kicked up by the rotors and blows past me into the cabin. The engines are whining at a pitch just under what I can bear. The rotors thunk and slap the air with increasing speed as the engines are given even more power and their whining evolves to a maddening shriek. I’m encapsulated in a prison of white hot dust, bone-jarring pressure and ear-splitting noise. I know that my mouth is full of dirt because I’m grinding my teeth and I can feel every individual grain as it crunches between them. Suddenly, the cloud recedes, the cacophony quiets and the poltergeist shoving me around is exorcised. This is the calm before the storm. We have leveled out, are descending rapidly, and I have about 3 seconds before my boots hit dirt.

We land softly and I’m grateful for the brief moment of delicacy. I don’t know what city or town I’m in. I don’t know which direction the helicopter is facing. I don’t know where my wounded Marine is, or if he’s dead by now or has multiplied into more wounded Marines. I don’t know that I won’t take a sniper’s bullet to my head the second I run down the ramp. I don’t really know anything except that I am putting my life in the hands of the Marines on the ground. Deftly I trade the M16 I’m holding for a Mossberg shotgun, strapped against the wall. I chamber a round as I turn towards the lowered ramp and start down it. As I turn, I notice Hoffie and the port gunner are off their seats, strafing their machine guns back and forth as they look for threats. Though I can’t see it or hear it, I know the attack chopper is making tight circles above us. I can’t see the Marines I’m here for either, but I don’t worry about that, I trust them with my life as they trust me with theirs.

I tuck my chin to my chest as I run down the ramp to avoid the exhaust, and I see pavement between my boots. Once I’m clear I raise my head and try to get my bearings. We’ve landed in the middle of a road lined on both sides with buildings. I barely have time to register this before I see motion to my right and spot four Marines signaling for me from behind concrete Jersey barriers. I see from the way they’re holding their weapons that they’re expecting a fight. I see blood, sweat and dirt on their uniforms. I sense their excitement and rage. I wonder in a detached way how soon I’ll be back to try to save them, or to pick up their bodies. I try not to look at their faces.

They wave me into an alley and one of them points behind a series of sand-filled barricades where more Marines are loading clips and adjusting their gear. They look exhausted. “Doc! Over here!” Someone yells. I move forward towards the voice, turn sharply to my left around a barricade and see my patient. He’s in his late 20’s or early 30’s. He’s in enough pain that he can’t sit still, the heels of his boots scraping the pavement as he kicks his legs in awkward, jerky motion. Two Marines are holding his arms down and talking to him softly. One of them is close to tears, speaking fast, low and panicked as I hear him try to comfort his friend. The man I am here to help is naked from the waist up, and he is covered in blood. His eyes are wild, first crushed shut as tight as he can get them, then in the next instant open surprised-wide but
unfocused, unseeing. Strangled, guttural sounds escape from his mouth between sharp intakes of breath. Earlier in my life those sounds would have haunted me, now I am just happy he has an airway.

Mixed in with the blood on his torso are dark red clumps of red flesh where his body has been ripped open and torn apart by the explosion. He’s trying to touch his stomach. There is a corpsman, like me, assigned with these Marines and he grabs my arm and says, “There’s not much I can do at this point. He’s stable but I don’t have any morphine and he needs surgery.” Doc Hollywood turns to look at him, meet his eyes for a moment and tell him not to worry, he’s got it. Doc is fantastic as he exudes medical confidence and military efficiency. Still I want to scream, but Doc and I both have bigger things to worry about. Our focus is on the wounded man and getting him to safety.

Somebody has produced a litter and in a moment my patient is being carried by four men to the waiting helicopter. We pass the Marines at the concrete barriers and they cover us as we bring the wounded man up the ramp and place the litter reverently on the deck. The Marines exit the chopper and I see them join a security perimeter that has formed around us. I hear the engines start to engage and I hear that familiar whine, the sound of my coming and going. Sandman already has some morphine ready, anticipating the need for it. He looks at me with his too-beautiful eyebrows raised and I nod and grab the Marine’s arms as Sandman injects him.

We begin to lift off. We have been on the ground for no more than 2 minutes. At twenty feet we begin to accelerate forward and that’s when they ambush us. We’re used to it; let us land, get the patients on board and try to knock us out of the sky when we’re high enough so they kill us all. I don’t blame them for trying – it’s a smart move tactically and we would do the same thing.

The bullets ping off the fuselage in amazing numbers, creating a sound that reminds me of an old rotary telephone with a constant ring. Flares start exploding from the sides of the helicopter in response to the smoke trails detected by the RPG’s being shot at us. Hoffie and the left gunner open up with their machine guns and begin returning fire. I can’t see them firing the weapons and I’m not sure that I can even hear it. The only reason I know that two machine guns are being fired less than ten feet from me is from the troll who has taken residence in my skull and is beating my eardrums mercilessly with each shell fired. I gladly suffer the pain in return for my safety.

I feel the helicopter accelerate and climb as fast as it can and again I am pushed into the deck. I feel the sharp, piercing pain in my ears with each pull if the trigger by the gunners. I glance over at Sandman and the raw fear on his face makes him look like a child, and I wonder if that scared, naked face belongs to Tony. Regardless of his fear he’s laying over the patient’s body to shield him from bullets and shrapnel, and I’m proud of him. I feel helpless in this instant as I take it all in, and then I snap.

Something finally gives and the cold scream hiding in the deepest corner of my being breaks free. It explodes from my heart as I prepare for it to tear out of my mouth and release it for good, like vomiting the poison of my stomach after a night of heavy drinking. Instead it mutates and in an instant I feel like I’m pushed aside as blind rage overtakes me. I grab the M16, run to the furthest edge of the ramp, kneel down and hope I get to kill someone.

I see movement and ghostly clouds of smoke and debris on a rooftop of a building on the far side of the street from the unit of Marines, to my right and falling
behind me. *That's where they are* my training tells me. I can’t see a human target but at this point it doesn’t matter. I empty the entire clip onto the rooftop in a desperate need to destroy or kill anything that I can.

The firefight lasts literally five seconds and is probably over before I get my first round down range, but I either don’t know or I don’t care. I turn back towards the cabin and in doing so catch some the guys on the ground staring at me; one with a slack jaw, another grabbing his friend’s shoulder and pointing excitedly at me. I don’t know what they thought of seeing a corpsman appear at the end of the ramp and start shooting, but as soon as it comes the anger is gone and replaced by shame. How could I abandon my patient like that?

I check on Sandman and the patient and focus on my job, embarrassed that I lost control of myself and petrified that I’ll arrive back at base in serious trouble for what I’d done. I know myself well, and I know the persona that I’ve created, but I don’t know the man that appeared during the ambush, and that scares me more than anything ever has.

On the flight back to our base, once we are safely in open desert, Sandman and Hoffie trade thumbs-up and hi-fives with me. They pat me on the back and shake their heads in amazement. I’m still embarrassed, but it’s becoming apparent that what I consider a stupid, reckless act is being taken yet again as a heroic one. I feel relieved, and I feel guilty for feeling relieved. *You dodged more than one bullet today, idiot* I think as light a cigarette.

Once we land the other team members come to greet and congratulate us on a job well done, having heard everything over the radio. I am all cocky smiles and swagger as I greet the team but in truth I am elated beyond words to be back, and am already afraid of what will happen on the next mission. I walk off to find some water and if I’m lucky, a place to be alone. From somewhere behind me I hear, “Hey Hollywood – heard you put on a helluva show today!” *Put on a helluva show, huh?* I think as I turn around and say, “Brother, you have no idea."

**APPENDIX L**

**ANDREW’S WRITING SAMPLE**

**The Next Chapter**

The most terrifying experience of my life was not my first day arriving in Marine Corps boot camp, nor was it my first day in Afghanistan. Surprisingly the most terrifying experience of my life came when I traded in my rifle for a pencil, my assault pack for a day pack, and my tactical books for a textbook. As I sat in that classroom on my first day of college my heart beat faster than I could ever remember it, my fear of failing at my new endeavor sitting in the back of my mind like a horrible nuisance that would not leave me alone. The idea that somehow I was so removed from society after my experiences that I could not do this, my mind for the first time in the last five years telling me this is something I may not be able to do.

As a child my parents had always taught me that going to college was just a rite of passage every young person went through as an adult. College degrees were commodities in my family; with everyone I knew having one. I was not in the situation
where I was taught college was out of my reach, but for some reason it was always the furthest thing from my mind. I remember sitting on the couch with my father as a child and staring in awe at John Wayne assaulting the “Sands of Iwo Jima” or Audie Murphy playing the hero in “To Hell and back”. As a boy scout while partaking in Veterans Day parades I would stare awestruck at all the veterans from the wars past, eye there medals and feel envious at all of their accomplishments. They were my superheroes and I knew someday I would be one. My mom would tell me years later that she would in her words:

“Watch me wear my dad’s old army uniform for Halloween, and play army outside for hours all while knowing in her heart what I was destined for”

As I continued to grow older her heart would prove to be right. As other kids in school began planning their paths to college, I was too busy reading books about the military and planning a much different path. By the time I got to high school, and both wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were in full swing my mind was one hundred percent made up. When my classmates were meeting with colleges and stressing about the S.A.T’s I was in a world all of my own. My days were spent with trips to the gym to prepare myself for boot camp, and meetings with my recruiter to ensure that all my paperwork was in order. So when graduation day came and everyone was preparing for the summers, and subsequent college move in days I was prepared for another route. On September 8th 2008, when everyone was beginning their first semester of college and preparing for their futures I left for Marine Corps boot camp.

Because I had prepared myself physically for so long, boot camp proved to be mostly mentally tough; and in no time I had earned the title Marine. In a few more months I had completed infantry school and I was placed in my unit to begin preparing for deployment to Afghanistan. Throughout my deployment preparations I would follow my friends on Facebook, and over the phone as they moved toward their college degrees. I would read on Facebook about how they were taking exams, and stressing from studying. About parties they attended or football games they cheered at. I could relate to none of it. The thought of my inability to relate really bothered me, and made me feel in fact, removed from every one of my classmates. My fellow Marines and I leaned on each other because we all understood our unique situations of being so far removed from our past lives and friendships. We were eighteen and nineteen, risking our lives and growing up quickly. Day in and day out we were faced with our decisions and although we were proud of what we had done, we realized we would one day have to leave it all behind and face what we had left back home. So When I turned 23 and my contract ended after five long years facing me with the reality of becoming a civilian once again, I had to face the harshness of my situation.

Fish out of water is a term that doesn’t even begin to describe my feeling of making my transition back into the civilia world. The world I had known for the last five years was suddenly over, and everything I had learned no longer applied. The fact I could run a three mile in 17 minutes flat, or I could shoot my rifle perfectly at the 500 yard line on the range mattered to nobody. Potential employers were not interested in my war stories, or that my skill set included being able to lead a patrol through combat. They all said the same thing:

“Thank you for your service son, but we really require a degree”
I got to watch the kid that graduated high school with me be more qualified for a job because I had forgone college. It was at that moment that I decided I had to enroll in school and although five years behind my classmates, attempt to earn my degree.

When I first decided to enroll in college is when I first started to get really nervous about it. I was 23 years old and had lived a lifetime between graduating high school and now. I had memory dumped everything from high school, and had filled my brain with weapons capabilities, infantry tactics, and the art of being a United States Marine. I couldn’t remember what a trinomial was, or how to even write an essay that didn’t involve explaining a mission to my squad. I was coming from a group where being a combat vet put me in charge of a large group of 18 and 19 year olds, to train them to be ready for combat. Now I was entering a situation where I was grouped with 18 and 19 year olds. And to top it off they were better set up for school than me, high school still fresh in their minds they could do all the stuff academically that I could not remember how to do. I was a fish not only out of water, but a fish who was about to be fed to the sharks.

I began the enrollment process with Great Bay Community College and I began to feel better as I moved along in the process. Unlike high school I was able to choose my own classes, and found myself really excited for the upcoming semester. I found myself thumbing through my books before class started and trying to imagine what it would be like. Would I feel lost? Or would what I learned in high school somehow come rushing back to me in one moment of recollection? Only time could tell. That first day of class proved to be one of the most nervous days I have ever experienced.

On that first day I woke up hours early due to my inability to sleep, and after I ate breakfast I packed and re-packed my bag in an attempt to pass the time and get my mind off my impending day. When the moment came to head to class I felt a sense of pride and nervousness. Pride because I was a college kid, and I could finally tell people I was “Headed to class” but nervousness because I had no idea what to expect. As I took my seat and arranged my supplies perfectly on my desk I tried to slide into a comfort zone. I thought if I could relate this experience to various military schooling I had received than I could make it easier. I began to arrange everything in perfect order, and made sure everything was in alignment. This little exercise failed to assuage my nervousness and I instead sat there with my eyes glued to the clock waiting for the hour at which my time as a college student would begin. The hour that my old life would leave me and a new chapter would begin in my life.

Now in my second semester and looking back at that first day I realize that my fears helped to drive me, and my nervousness was a vessel for my success. As I began to make friends I realized that I was not the only one there who had forgone college, in fact there were many people in the same situation that I was. That for some reason or another; had not attended college right after high school and were beginning late just as I had. It made me realize that my success in the military could carry me and make me a successful student. Each day I am in school I use that first day to remind me that no matter what my fears are, I can always conquer them. I will always remind myself that my fears from that first day will forever be tools with which to drive me.
REFERENCES


Palumbo, G. (2012). Load, kick, fire: Fighting with the 756th tank battalion, B Company, on the front lines during WWII. Gene Palumbo.


