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A Woman Veteran Student's Perspective

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A Woman Veteran Student's Perspective

This essay describes my life experiences as a woman veteran who is currently a student at The College at Brockport. My experiences and perspectives although specific to me, are also in general terms, the same for other women veterans. I reviewed the references studying women military service members both past and present, and I have noted the lack of information available. Therefore, I have decided to tell my story with the hope that my story will assist civilian students, staff, and faculty to better understand women veteran students on the college campus.

Introduction

This essay describes my life experiences as a woman veteran who is currently a student at The College at Brockport. My experiences and perspectives, although specific to me, are also in general terms the same for other women veterans. I reviewed the references studying women military service members both past and present, and I have noted the lack of information available. Therefore, I have decided to tell my story with the hope that my story will assist civilian students, staff, and faculty gain a better understanding of the women veteran students on the college campus. I am a woman veteran who is completing my four-year degree some forty-two years after I started college here at Brockport. The information contained here is representative of women veteran voices on campus. Giving women veteran students a voice regarding their experiences in the military and at a four-year college institution expands our knowledge of and relationship

with this body of students. In a special issue of the ASHE Higher Education Report (2011), the collected veterans' stories featured showed differences and commonalities regarding the issues these veterans and I faced. These articles highlighted the positive attitude for seeking mental health care, seeking help from tutors for class work, writing, and privacy concerns around personal records that women veterans share on college campuses.

College is a transitioning experience that shapes the perceptions of life. My college experience has helped me acknowledge and then embrace the need for education to change the current culture regarding the abuse of women in all aspects of our culture, not just the military. This essay is to inform and relate my perception of college through the lens of my military experience by asking the question, how do I as a woman veteran student describe my experience at The College at Brockport and what challenges do I experience due to my military experiences?

Books and Articles Regarding Veteran Students

Since the end of the military draft in 1973, women have entered military service in greater numbers: Women currently account for 16 percent of active-duty service personnel; by 2035, they will account for 15 percent of the

total veteran population (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2015). The increase of women in the military and their contributions to the military culture continue to shape how men perceive and treat women in the military. More men are speaking up about abuse as they see it occurring (Kapinski, 2005).

Today the military is slowly changing the way it addresses the complaints of sexual harassment, sexual abuse, and rape. The testimonies of military women willing to speak out about their experiences, show that the military has a long way to go to reeducate and change how male cohorts perceive the diverse population of military women. Cohen (2018) highlights how the military's patriarchal culture addresses the issue of sexual harassment, sexual assault, and rape in the military. The Army now considers sexual harassment as detrimental to "good order and discipline", and that it does not promote unit cohesion (DeGroot & Peniston-Bird, 2000). One in four to one in three military women have experienced sexual assault and/or sexual harassment while in the military. The lack of supportive officers, chain-of-command, and comrades results in women distrusting the legal and administrative avenues of reporting these issues (Weitz, 2015). Seeking help becomes a major concern, especially if women plan to continue in

the military, and this carries over upon their transition to college where they are less likely to acknowledge their need for help (Weitz, 2015).

Fear of sexual violence is a constant for women veterans. In basic training, they are directed to be aware of their surroundings, go everywhere in pairs, do not drink in excess, and to remain alert while doing their job. Many women veterans report concern about both sexual assault and their attempts to prevent it, especially during deployments (Weitz, 2015). Unfortunately, for most women veterans, it is by someone in the barracks, or area they are temporarily calling home, that they experience abuse (DiRamio, Jarvis, Iverson, Seher, & Anderson, 2015). The perpetrator is someone they know and often times someone who has direct power over them. It is most typically a male, but not always; sometimes, a woman is also involved with the male oppressor (Weitz, 2015). The U.S. military treats women who accuse someone of abuse with a culture of silence. The person accused remains in the military. The accuser often has their personnel file flagged and although re-assigned, finds they experience a bias of being a problem for the unit. Several recent books written by women military officers who have nearly completed their career, and do not fear losing their promotions or pensions, speak out

about this culture (DeGroot & Peniston-Bird, 2000; Hicks-Stiehm, 1996; Holm, 1992; Karpinski, 2005).

Research and evaluation of the challenges veterans experience on college campuses have only just begun (Weitz, 2015). The difficulty in studying women veterans is their ability to hide in plain sight at college because they do not self-identify as veterans. As early as 1977, Schlossberg (1997) advocated for an understanding of the decision-making processes of adult learners. The role transitions of adulthood, she asserted, “often involve crisis, conflict, and confusion” (Schlossberg 1997, p. 77). Schlossberg (1977) conceptualized the decisions of adults in the context of transition and described her model as a way to analyze “human adaptation to transition” (p. 2). Heitzman, and Somer (2015) analyzed college choices made by women veterans based on Schlossberg’s (1977) theory and how the college choice influenced their education. By using Schlossberg’s (1977) theory in understanding veterans’ experiences, influences on the college choice female student veterans made, and women veteran’s influences around persistence, Heitzman and Somer (2015) were able to determine how women veterans made their decision on which college to attend.

Adducchio (2014) wrote regarding the multifaceted identity women veterans experience upon returning to civilian life

as another challenge. These identities can include mother, veteran, daughter, wife, world traveler, and disabled. Campus professionals need to be aware of how issues pertaining to mental health, sexual assault, and gender identity may influence how effectively women veterans make transitions to higher education. Women veterans are less likely to acknowledge their need for help because in the military they teach self-reliance (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Blaauw-Hara (2016) emphasized the current modality used is:

the deficit mindset: the focus is on remediating what student veterans lack rather than building on their unique strengths and is an alternative way of addressing veteran student education. Training programs, courses, and college interventions that acknowledge and build on the strengths student veterans bring from the military to the college will likely be more effective than those that focus solely on lack or difference (p. 818).

A number of authors, such as DiRamio and Jarvis (2011), Elliott and Naphan (2015), Heineman (2017), Sander (2012), and Semer (2015) address equipping the higher education professional with a fundamental understanding of the issues student veteran populations face such as identity, disability, childcare, and life experience.

The Start of My Military Experience

My dad had a blue-collar job at Kodak Park and we had a small farm. I was always required to help with the hay baling and wheat combining. Lifting fifty to sixty pound bales of hay kept me fit. When I was growing up my family watched World War II movies. My Dad (Image 1) served in the Navy in both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. He endured enemy fire and lost people he knew when enemy planes attacked his ship. He did not talk about this at home and I only found out when he talked to my current husband. He was very proud of his service to his country.

When I was nineteen years-old, I met my first husband at a history re-enactment event. He was in the Army Reserve, and I went to several of the evening meetings (called Drills) with him to learn more about it. He suggested I join the Reserves. I found out about a special Army program for women with two years of college, but not necessarily a degree. As a graduate from Monroe Community College, I qualified to be a secretary in the Army Reserve unit. The program had two weeks of basic training in Ft. McClellan, Alabama (the home of the Women's Army Corps), followed by six months of individual training with my reserve unit back home (the 98th Division Headquarters Company). This sounded good. I figured I could survive two weeks of anything the Army chose to dish out.



Image 1. William Wilcox, my Dad.

I did survive; in fact, I actually enjoyed the training. There are some memorable moments. We ate canned rations (C-rats is the affectionate Army name) and I was able to keep the P38 (can opener) and have it to this day. There was the gas chamber experience, where we had to take off our protective mask, recite our name, rank, ID number, and take a breath before we could leave. I survived that okay. Then there was the bivouac in the woods. It was not a big deal there until we went to fire the rifles. I scored sharpshooter, and the drill sergeant called the captain of the company over

to view my target. Shooting woodchucks in the hayfield with my brothers paid off.

The next day we went on a “forced” march with a pack. No problem. I was a young, healthy, energetic twenty-year-old. I had Cracker Jacks in one of my pockets. Do you know how noisy Cracker Jacks can be when they rattle in your pocket? The drill sergeant made me throw them out or eat them. He said, “The enemy can hear you coming and they are waiting for the prize.” Then we were marched behind the firing range bunker. My squad was the last one in

line. I saw the drill sergeant hit the dirt. Word came down that the range was live fire. A tracer round had just gone in front of his nose. He was a Vietnam veteran, so we all took it seriously and low-crawled (belly in the dirt and head and butt down) to a safe area. It was exciting! Baechtold and DeSawal (2009) observed, “An individual’s introduction to military life occurs during basic training, in which the mental and physical demands are significantly different from those placed on first-year students in college” (p.39). These experiences are reflective of the commonalities I share with other women veterans. We have all experienced basic training.

I was a private first class (PFC) when I went home and a specialist fourth class (SP4), Spec4 for short, six months after joining my unit, the 98th Division Headquarters Company. Our mission at that time was to instruct new recruits on infantry and combat engineering at Fort Leonard Wood, MO. In 1978, I was sad to learn that the Women’s Army Corp was no more, and I would change my collar insignia to whatever job category I held. Pallas Athena (Image 2), the symbol the Women’s Army Corp used to identify women soldiers, was no more.

The Acknowledgement of Bias

When I was twenty-one, I married my first husband. My assignment was



Image 2. Pallas Athene, official insignia of the U.S. Women's Army Corps.

secretary to a one star general. During this time, I had one issue come up that related to my being a woman and not getting my field jacket. One day I deliberately wore my bright light blue jacket into the general’s office. I was sick and tired of listening to the supply section (S4) stating they could not acquire a woman’s field jacket for me. When I walked in to the general’s office, he asked me why I was not wearing my field jacket. I told him the S4 was not able to acquire one for me. He said, “You really need a field jacket. I wear mine to shovel snow in my driveway in the winter and to go hunting two stars and all.” Apparently, he mentioned in the staff meeting that night I did not have a field jacket. I received notice while in formation to report to the S4 section immediately. They gave me a man’s field jacket that was too big, but I

had one. I made sure to wear it until I was issued one that fit.

I did not experience any bias or sexual harassment in the 98th Division Headquarters Company, and this may have been due to my husband being in the unit. After three years, I trained two weeks to be a chaplain assistant (I was a gopher and bodyguard). I was a specialist fifth class, equivalent to a sergeant. I transferred to an instructor position in a different unit after completing four weeks of active duty schooling. In my new unit, I was mildly harassed with overheard jokes ('oh, I didn't see you there'). However, the "good order and discipline" clause in the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) was set up as a means to curtail sexual harassment reporting according to DeGroot and Peniston-Bird (2000). As women soldiers, we feared bringing complaints of sexual harassment to the Command because they could also use this clause against the person complaining, as the complaints could be detrimental to unit cohesion.

The idea of sexual harassment had not yet really hit the military in the early 1980s. The women I met in the military during those years were used to dealing with the "good-old-boy-club" and we just did our job. Most of the men we worked with held civilian jobs, had families, and presented an attitude towards women that we were strong and

self-confident. The men acknowledged that women veterans were smart and knew how to do their job. We also knew how to move within the system to get things done. As Miriam Cooke (1996) wrote in the book, *It's Our Military, Too!*:

Feminist praxis gave one the courage to be an active witness whose words may serve to subvert the dominant paradigm. These witnesses are elaborating survival strategies that include the forging of alternative visions and stories. They are voicing dissension from the status quo, making visible the linguistic tactics and ideologies of patriotism, nationalism, and patriarchy, and they are examining the role of consciousness and constructing a memory responsible to the future (p. 266).

This is what I did to reconstruct the vision of a woman's role in the military. There was very little privilege associated with our military experience. By blending in and completing our work, we maintained the illusion of equality. We stayed in separate quarters during our two-week summer training. Otherwise, our uniforms were the same, the equipment we used was the same, and our training was the same.

I became a sergeant first class (SFC) in 1985. The last time the Ready Reserves responded to a call to active duty was the WWII era, and we had no expectations this would change. Our equipment was old, and we did not have current training in our military occupational specialties (MOS) due to a lack of funding. I

remember learning to drive a two and a half ton truck that was as old as I was. Our rifles were from the Vietnam era, and the only current equipment were the typewriters. I did enjoy several opportunities that only the military could give me. I flew in helicopters, once over New York City. I experienced the sense of community living and working with women who had common goals. I lived and worked beside amazing first responders, and I saw quite a bit of the continental United States.

I was appreciated as an instructor at the NCO Academy. I was instrumental in giving several women the opportunities they were looking for in the U.S. Army Reserves, and I facilitated the retirement documentation for at least twenty Vietnam veterans. Those were fun times and I enjoyed myself.

Army Recruiter

In 1991, I had the chance to go full-time Army as an Army Reservist Recruiter. I spent four weeks, seven days a week, in training for recruiting. There were manuals to absorb, practical exercises to do, and I had to maintain my military basic skills (map reading, weapons identification, basic first aid, marksmanship, vehicle maintenance, and several more I cannot recall). Everyone in the Army had to show competency in these tasks every year. Only chaplains and conscientious

objectors were exempt only from the weapons training portion. I then completed another four weeks of special personnel training.

The first sergeant (1SGT) of the company I reported to when I completed training was one of my abusers. He displayed his belief that women are for sex, and women in the army think they are so privileged they do not have to do the same work as the rest of the group. They must be using sex to receive a promotion or to move ahead in their field. He stated these views more than once to the soldiers at the recruiting station.

The men in my office were married; kind, strong men who were not out to prove that they were men. They were younger than I was by about ten years except for the other Army Reserve Recruiter. He had been a recruiter for ten years by then, and he stated to me that he had never had a first sergeant (1SGT) as bad as this one. The office did not like the harassment I was getting and they told me they had heard through the recruiting grapevine that this 1SGT had been harassing other females in the unit and was not going away for at least another two years. I did not last that long. The 1SGT accused me of having sex with the sergeant-in-charge (SIC) of our station/office. The SIC was a happily married man ten years my junior. I wrote a letter of complaint to the

command sergeant major (CSM), the highest ranking enlisted and the 1SGT's boss. A letter came down from the colonel of the Command stating that the U.S. Army does not tolerate sexual harassment and there would be consequences if there were complaints. This letter resulted in the 1SGT no longer interacting with me. The Command put a master sergeant (MSG) as our office manager (SIC). The MSG's role was to train me to be a recruiter, or more to the point, get me to fail so the Command could put me out of the service for the good of the Army, thus restoring 'good order and discipline' to the unit. Cohen (2018) describes the nature of sexual harassment in the military as defined by UCMJ and this was similar to my own experience. DeGroot and Peniston-Bird (2000) identify and explain the UCMJ specific sections and codes that cover this behavior.

A second abusive event happened to me during a recruitment visit at a military service member's home. I went to interview a soldier just back from active duty as part of Desert Storm (the big sand box). The soldier was in the Individual Ready Reserve (IRR) and I planned to encourage him to join the Ready Reserves. He physically tried to manipulate me into having sex. I escaped and went back to the Recruiting Station. I told my SIC and others at the office. They just said things like, "What did you

expect?" I told them my neck, upper back, and arms ached as a result of the incident. They said there was no way the 1SGT was going to let me drive three hours one-way to see a military doctor. "Just suck-it-up." I sat at my desk making phone calls, trying not to cry on the phone. I had headaches every day for months, along with pain in my neck and arms, which I ignored at work despite the pain.

My military evaluation records clearly show that I was not doing well as a recruiter. I continued to do the job; however, I lacked the ability to close the interview with a positive outcome. The 1SGT raised my recruiting goals to twice as much as any other recruiter in the company, and of course, I failed to meet mission every month but one. I asked that someone go with me when I did house calls. My request was denied. I could not sleep. My husband suggested I go back to that veteran's house and have sex with the soldier so he would sign up. Then I could keep my job. Six months of this and the Command finally had enough evidence that I was not going to be a recruiter that could do her job so they released me from recruiting duty and began the process of cancelling my active contract. I was feeling depressed, hopeless, and physically tired. I went to see a counselor who was not part of the military system, but had been an officer in the military. Due to the need for

maintaining privacy of their records, women veterans feel more comfortable seeking counseling services outside of the military institution. I did not want the military to have access to my counseling records. This is consistent with the findings of DiRamio et al. (2015) and Baechtold and DeSawal (2009). The counselor noted that I was suicidal, dissociative (checking out of the conversation and losing focus), had headaches, emotional outbursts of tears, felt hopeless, lost, and worthless. He noted that my marriage was emotionally, financially, and physically abusive. He encouraged me to seek an answer for myself that I could live with for the rest of my life because this was not working. I started divorce proceedings and threatened to call the cops if my husband ever touched me again. That got his attention! I discovered my old unit had openings for instructors and wanted me back. I had five years until I could retire, and I was not going to lose my retirement over some asshole 1SGT.

My Fight for MY Dignity

At the end of my active duty service, I insisted on an exit physical because I was still suicidal, had headaches most days, suffered neck pain, and my arms still had numbness and tingling. The physician wrote that I insisted on the exit physical due to non-retention (code for 'being kicked out') and that I had previously

injured my shoulder at a civilian job. When this army physician spoke with me, he focused on my not making mission and being "kicked off" active duty. We did not discuss my mental health. He sent me to an orthopedic specialist who found my physical symptoms consistent with carpal and cubital tunnel (nerve damage at the elbow and wrist) on one side. Upon my release from active duty in May 1992, I felt devastated because I was 'fired' from active duty. When I received my discharge paperwork, I saw that my exit physical stated, "Injury not service-connected." My discharge record (Form DD214) reflected a "General Discharge" (in the best interests of the Army). I was not entitled to any VA benefits because my injury was not service-connected and I did not have an honorable discharge. I was still in the Reserves (Individual Ready Reserves IRR) and could return to active reserve status. The clock was still ticking towards retirement. I had until April of the following year to find and receive assignment to a unit.

I was so pissed off at the decision around my discharge that I totally feared any institutional organization. This is consistent with the findings of DiRamo et al. (2015) regarding the tolerance and stigma for seeking help and fear of institution interactions. I also had started divorce proceedings, moved in

with my parents and applied for unemployment. Being at home in a safe environment helped me to stabilize emotionally and get angry enough to start doing something for myself. It was all about getting my dignity back and moving beyond the assholes who tried to break me. I went to a congresswoman who referred me to a senator who sent a letter of inquiry to the Army Personnel Section. The Personnel Section could not justify my general discharge and changed it to honorable. They also said there were no jobs available on active duty in my military occupational specialty (MOS). I went to the VA, but they denied my request for a disability evaluation due to service-connected injury because of what was on my exit physical. I also learned that I was not eligible for VA benefits because I had not been on active duty for twenty-four consecutive months; a little known fact that is still in effect today. I enjoyed my military service for the most part and I am proud to have served my country. I encourage the readers of this essay to acknowledge the military does have abusers, but it also consists primarily of wonderful, kind and compassionate men and men who are professionals.

It may take years to get our due but we persist. A case in point is the Air Force lesbian, Airman 2nd Class Helen Grace James, discharged in 1955 with less than honorable on her paperwork, who finally

received her honorable discharge in 2018 at the age of 90 (Bauke, 2018). I too know the pain of fighting to receive an honorable discharge. The benefits due a veteran with an honorable discharge are significant. Without it, most of the benefits -- including health care -- are not covered.

I went for my unemployment interview. The interviewer was a very supportive veteran. He listened to my story and suggested I go back to school and learn a different type of job. He said that unemployment would pay for it. I went for two years to a community college and received two Arts and Applied Science (AAS) degrees, one a Liberal Arts degree after only one class after all my old credits from twenty years ago were added. The second AAS degree was as a medical records technician. I graduated from the community college and went to work as a medical secretary. Between 1994 and 2014, I had ten jobs. All but two fired me. I did not get along with the supervisors. I did not know it at the time but this related to my PTSD and fear of the institutional organization. I also found an instructor position in a reserve unit in South Carolina. They agreed to let me do my weekend training drills as an instructor at the local Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) academy, which was a one-hour drive from my house. I would go on my two-week summer training with them. I retired five

and a half years later as a SFC as a Gray Area Reservist. I was in the IRR until my

60th birthday when I started receiving my military retirement.



Image 3. My military medals.

PTSD Treatment

In 2014, I had a meltdown. I was suicidal, depressed, and emotionally out of control. I had remarried and had a loving husband. We had paid off the house, bills were low, and I had a job so I was doing okay. I could not understand

why my emotions were so out of control. I found out from a female veteran that the rules had changed regarding PTSD and military sexual trauma. A woman no longer had to have documentation to prove she was a survivor of sexual assault or harassment thanks to five very

brave women who testified before congress in 1990. I spoke to a veteran service officer and he suggested that I look through my paperwork to see if I had any information regarding the issue. When I went through my paperwork, it all came back to me. Everything I had stuffed down for all those years escaped like a balloon with a hole in it. I showed him the evaluations and letters from when I was on active duty. He immediately started the paperwork for a PTSD claim. I was an emotional wreck and had to sit in his office for two hours before I could drive to the VA clinic thirty minutes away to see a counselor.

My previous VA counselor called me when she heard of my emotional state. We started my treatment and her diagnosis was PTSD from military sexual trauma (MST). My paperwork claim was lost the first time it went to the VA benefit's office. The loss of my claim confirmed my distrust of institutions. The VA did not consider the claim because I had not been in treatment at least six months. I again felt betrayed and disconnected. I went to an outside therapist and received a second opinion regarding the PTSD diagnosis. It was clear I did have PTSD and that I needed clinical treatment. I was working during this time and my emotional state was not good even though my employer and supervisors liked me a lot and appreciated the great job I was doing.

Eleven months after my meltdown, I requested family medical leave. I had a plan for committing suicide and shared this in an interview with a VA counselor. He followed protocol and called my husband to transport me to a VA hospital. This moved my date of entry into the PTSD residential program to within two months instead of waiting eight months for an opening. The PTSD program filled me with knowledge and assisted me in finding modalities to deal with my anxiety, depression, dissociation, and physical symptoms. I met one of the woman veterans who had testified at one of the senate hearings about her experience with rape while in the service, and I feel privileged to call her a friend. She still has PTSD that is nearly uncontrolled which means she is hyper-vigilant about her surroundings and still disassociates, (blank stare) while having a conversation. She has severe depression and her body is continually in flight mode. She had to change her name to protect herself from the media. She is moving on with her life and slowly finding peace.

I loved the program and had many terrific experiences in a short nine weeks. The Veteran Administration outlines their recommended treatment on their webpage. This treatment includes cognitive behavior therapy and exposure therapy (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2007). Several articles referenced

on the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs website recommend further research on examining other aspects of post trauma emotions and proactive coping methods. A very positive coping mechanism, according to Vernon, Dillon and Steiner (2009), is gratitude. I began using the gratitude model to improve my emotional well-being.

I did eventually get my PTSD claim accepted and became classified as 100 percent disabled. The VA considered my claim regarding my arms, but once again, some of the paperwork was lost. Luckily, I had a box full of all my records as well as a representative at the hearing who was a veteran and an advocate. The VA accepted me as a patient with full medical benefits. My VA medical provider recommended an MRI for my neck and arms. The MRI showed that my cervical spine had shifted so severely that I was at risk for permanent paralysis. I had two displaced vertebrae in my cervical spine most likely from the original incident. I had surgery by a specialist outside of the VA and the VA paid for it. Finally, I no longer feel the numbness, tingling, and weakness that I had lived with for twenty-five years.

At this point in my life, I was actually feeling confident and relieved. I was also very grateful for the experiences in my life. I was retired with nothing special to do each day until my husband finished college and took a job at a veteran

service center. He called me one day and asked if I would come down and help with a veteran who had a problem with Social Security. I went to his office and met with the veteran. I realized that he was a great talker but he could not comprehend any of the official letters he had received from Social Security. I figured out what needed to happen. After the veteran and I made several visits to the Social Security office and attended a video hearing, the veteran started receiving his benefits again. That was when I realized what I wanted to do with the next phase of my life. I wanted to be a volunteer veteran advocate.

Transition to College Student

I decided to go back to college. I chose The College at Brockport because it is where I started my college journey and where I wanted to finish it. The college is only seven miles from my home and in a rural setting, which is important because of my PTSD triggers. Finances were a factor, and I looked forward to studying as a productive use of my time. Distance, setting, cost, and academics were all factors that influenced my decision to go back to college and to choose Brockport. "Participants ranked location of college the primary factor influencing their choice," observed Heitzman and Somers (2015, p. 22). They also noted reputation and productive use of time as additional

factors (Heitzman & Somers, 2015). Thankfully, my husband supported my decision 100 percent because I would have to pay for the schooling with very little help from any grants. Any VA educational benefits that I had were long since expired.

I registered at Brockport as a returning student from forty-two years ago, a transfer student from a community college, and someone with a military educational transcript as well. I received degree credit from my military education after doing my own research and advocating for myself. My faculty advisor is also an outstanding advocate who encouraged me through my studies. DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) affirmed that having an advocate is an important factor for completion of degree programs by women veterans.

I am a military veteran and so much more that sometimes I am not sure who I am. I am a feminist, retired, heterosexual, cisgender, married, and looking to finish a degree that I started more than forty years ago. "When the structured military community is removed, the individual is forced to again redefine who she is as a civilian, a veteran, a female, and a student" (Baechtold & DeSawal, 2009, p. 40.) This is consistent with my experiences and consistent with other veterans I have spoken with here on campus. If you look at someone, you cannot tell what

identities they hold. It is easy for me to hide my veteran identity, and I have a choice about revealing it. When I use reflexivity to analyze my thoughts, I acknowledge the bias I feel towards women civilians who ask about my service (Doucet, 2008). I seek to recognize the bias, accept that I am judging how that person is reacting or will react and then I need to open my heart to the possibilities and insights that person has to share. Thus I am maneuvering through the three veils of reflexivity that Doucet (2008) references.

I acknowledge that there is not another woman veteran student like me on campus due to my age, military dates of service, and my job in the Army. However, I have encountered women veterans who I can relate to because of our similar experiences during military service. I have been where they are and felt what they feel. You might ask; how can this be? Military women attend basic training and this is a shared experience. "An individual's introduction to military life occurs during basic training, in which the mental and physical demands are significantly different from those placed on first-year students in college" (Baechtold & DeSawal, 2009, p. 39). We remember drill sergeants getting in our faces, having our belongings just so, firing the rifle, experiencing the gas chamber, and bivouacking outside. We all know about marching in formations

and the special way our bodies do the parade movements. We know about keeping physically fit, the running, sit-ups, and push-ups. We have also shared the experience of some kind of sexual harassment/trauma and most of us acknowledge it.

Recruits are mostly teenagers who need a very loud and controlled environment to keep them focused on the mission. They are isolationists, out for themselves' who must now learn team building. Movies like *Private Benjamin* (Meyers, Shyer, and Miller, 1980) show some of what a new recruit experiences, such as days with minimal sleep to get a crucial mission accomplished, and service members doing so under the threat of death. It is no wonder basic training is so rigorous and demands that we fully focus on the present task. Other movies such as *Megan Leavey* (Liddelli, Shilaimon, & Monroe, 2017), which is based on a true story, and *The Hunt for Red October* (Neufeld, 1990), while fictionalized, show some of the long periods of inactivity with 20 minutes of life or death action and then the return to inactivity common in the military. It somewhat equates to individual sport activities. The television series, *JAG: Judge Advocate General* (Bellisaro, 1995), also shows some of the day-to-day activities of military life. This particular series also shows how young adults are in charge of

million dollar equipment, ships, aircraft, tanks, computers, and medical areas.

Many of the enlisted are discharged and do not retire. When they return home, they are surprised at how their childhood world has changed. They feel lost and incomplete when separated from the military. They are seeking the connections that are similar to what they had in the military. This is consistent with research published by Heitzman and Somers (2015) and DiRamio et al. (2015). These authors reference the need for women veterans to connect with other women veterans on campus to do well in their studies. As woman veterans, we have many people willing to help us, but we do not know which ones have the knowledge to do the helping and are reluctant to tell our story repeatedly until we find the person who can help. Every time I tell my story, it can be triggering, and the response from the listener has the potential to be negative and judgmental. I automatically feel less-than and have thoughts of the people around me either not believing or misunderstanding me.

The military is patriarchal and the culture of the military industrial complex reflects this mindset. Fred Borch III (2000) explains the methods used by the military to change military culture and the challenges they continue to experience. Mandatory education regarding sexual harassment and

changes made to basic training guidelines has had very little effect. Criminalization and the use of UCMJ law continue to have problems with implementation due to the right of the military commander to influence the reporting structure for sexual harassment and the personnel who deal with this issue.

The military experience also separates me from other students and professors. The military taught me by using visual and hands-on training with repetition being a significant part of this learning process. This is common among veterans, state Heitzman and Somers (2015), because of the method of instruction utilized in the military. At college, I have to learn how to find the meaning in long treatises and readings. Professors expect me to use critical thinking to evaluate history and other people's work for validity. In the military, we used critical thinking to plan field training exercises (FTX), maneuver tanks, pilot airplanes, keep records, make split second decisions on firing our weapon (or not), and perform life and death medicine on a friend or civilian.

It is important that I build on my strengths such as my worldview. Working with diverse people in the military and experiencing their cultures affords me a valuable counterpoint to the views of traditional students. Heitzman and Somers (2015) noted

other women veterans also valued their experience of varying cultures. The ability to live and work in a culture that is different from the one a woman soldier grew up in, broadens their world perspective and the diversity of the cultural experience. I define my success more broadly than traditional students do, for I know the grade point average (GPA) is only part of the picture and that social interaction with peers, students, and faculty is just as important. My service in the military included being an instructor in the classroom so I know about leadership and motivation. I use reflexivity (Doucet, 2008) when evaluating my instructors and acknowledge my limitations; I have a high sense of initiative; I maintain a professional attitude and draw on my leadership skills. Some of the 167 women veterans DiRamio et al. (2015) interviewed echo these attributes. I am also goal-oriented and mission-driven; however, my PTSD sometimes can result in a lack of focus and critical review. I need time to adjust and be with people like me who understand and appreciate where I am coming from. Some people here on campus find my way of communicating a challenge and push against it. My military style of communication is straightforward, direct, and I say what I mean.

The challenges I face as a veteran student on campus are many. I need to

feel safe and have peacefulness around me. Chaos and crowds no longer appeal to me. I have the Veteran's Resource Area for a peaceful environment in which to study. I know how important it is for me to sit in a classroom where I feel safe. I have panic attacks with physical symptoms like tears, heart palpitations and hyper-vigilance. My body aches and my blood sugar runs high after an anxiety attack. As I walk on campus, I talk aloud to myself as I try to refocus on the here and now. I lose focus and cannot retain information for more than a day. I used to be able to remember pertinent information regarding my previous jobs, but now I have to take notes and write down everything. If you talk too fast, I cannot follow the conversation. If I am writing notes regarding a professor's suggestions, I get lost in the words and lose focus. I have discovered tools such as the various writing templates for writing college papers. I still struggle even with the help of the Student Learning Center tutors. I know of other veterans who have attended this college campus and had similar issues. Those who help veterans do not have to be veterans; they just have to know how we think.

As I move through the civilian world, I acknowledge the stereotypes civilians still have are drawn from movies, documentaries, and the media. Frankly, you can never comprehend the scope of

military culture unless you have lived it. Looking into a culture does not make me understand that culture. For example, I can never know what it is like to be an intersectional black woman because I am a white woman and have the privileges that are part of being white and living in the United States. Even living and studying with women of color does not help me to understand their culture to any deep degree. They have experienced life that is foreign to what I have experienced in my white Euro-American culture. My culture is about isolationism, competition, and selfishness. The women of color I meet teach me a better way of being in this world. We make our own family as we move through life and military culture is one of these families. Through shared experiences, the military unit becomes our extended family.

Conclusion

I have had many different experiences in my life and these experiences have shaped my perceptions about what is around me. By employing reflexivity (Doucet, 2008) and relational knowing, I acknowledge my bias toward the military as a great institution while also acknowledge the dichotomy that women face in the military. I have specific experiences that are common to women in the military. Like my sisters, I have a positive view of college life overall, but miss the interactions of a military unit

and the mentoring process used in the military. My objective towards improving the systems that affect veterans is moving forward even while there remains a need for more research regarding the similarities, differences, and needs of women veterans.

My current goal is to focus my college work on improving the services available to the student who is or was a military service member. I have written my story in an effort to advocate for myself and other military veterans on campus. My research clearly shows how my experiences on campus are not unique. My challenges as a woman veteran completing a college degree are very much the same as other women veteran students. My journey continues as I find

ways to assist veterans here at the College and in my community. I am an activist for the rights of veterans in whatever community I live.



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