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Review by Sarah E. S. Carter

*Bulletproofing the Psyche: Preventing Mental Health Problems in Our Military and Veterans*

David L. Albright and Kate Thomas Hendricks | Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2018. 270 pp.  
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Mental health issues have always plagued military veterans. For years there was very limited access and available means for veterans to do something about the various mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual issues that had an influence on their well-being, because of a lack of government funding and public awareness. In 2008, the RAND Corporation conducted a comprehensive study of the mental health and cognitive needs of returning service members and veterans. [RAND](#) found that one third of returning service members report symptoms of a mental health or cognitive condition and approximately 300,000 veterans are suffering from PTSD (Tanielian T. et al., 2008, p. 2). Over the last decade, many programs and courses have been implemented by not only the Department of Defense (DoD), but also by several social, academic, and political groups, to help reduce the number of service members and veterans who are struggling with coping after stressful and traumatic experiences. It is evident however, that there is still a need to assist active duty and retired service members as they transition through their years in the service and out of the military. Kate Hendricks Thomas and David L. Albright present a possible answer to this ever-growing issue in [their book](#) *Bulletproofing the Psyche: Preventing Mental Health Problems in Our Military and Veterans*.

Published this year, their book provides both quantitative research in the form of scholarly contributions and qualitative research in the form of personal narratives. Thomas and Albright present a strong and well-researched proposal for the inclusion of more resilience training for military personnel while they are still on active duty. They argue resilience training should be integrated not only into military programs across all branches, but mental fitness should be taught to every active duty soldier, marine, airman, sailor, and guardsman, and be ever present in their daily lives and training. Thomas and Albright ultimately intend *Bulletproofing the Psyche*, “to contribute to and extend the prevention, rehabilitation, and training conversation for military personnel navigating that liminal space between service and civilian life and those that support these processes” (p. xiii).

The Hill Crest Foundation Endowed Chair in Mental Health and Associate Professor at University of Alabama, [David L. Albright](#), a veteran himself, specializes in behavioral health, mental health, and the community of military members and veterans. This is his first published book, co-edited and authored alongside [Kate Hendricks Thomas](#). Thomas, also a veteran, is the director of the public health program and assistant professor of health sciences at Charleston Southern University. Thomas specializes in resilient leadership, mental fitness, and spiritual development. She has one previously published book: *Brave, Strong, True: The Modern Warrior's Battle for Balance* (2015), that is a good precursor to *Bulletproofing the Psyche*, as it presents a need for service members to be mentally fit in addition to physically fit. It is clear through the many scholarly contributions, that everyone who took part in the collaboration of the book was working towards the same end goal: continuing the scholarship and advancement of the serious issue of mental health problems plaguing the U.S. military. *Bulletproofing the Psyche*, brings awareness to the struggles active duty service members and veterans experience, and how mental fitness can help them thrive, not only in active duty, but also during the more difficult transition after leaving the service.

The book is organized into three parts with forty-five author contributions. "Framing the Issues," presents five chapters and three narratives, called "points of view" on issues of soldiers transitioning back from deployment and into civilian life. The second part, "Current Mental Fitness Programming for Military and Veteran-Connected Populations," presents five chapters and two narratives that examine resiliency programs already in use with active duty and veterans. The third part, "Collaborating to Provide Mental Fitness Programming for Military-Connected Populations," presents four chapters and one narrative that highlight the possibility of specialized training such as spiritual fitness awareness, and programs such as Individual Placement and Support, AmericaServes, and Mindfulness-based Mind Fitness Training (MMFT), that can help active military and veterans sustain mental well-being.

As a PhD student and military spouse of an enlisted active duty army Infantry non-commissioned officer, and current Senior Drill Sergeant (SDS), I approached this text to gain some insight into the community I know so well, and to assess how scholarship has approached the non-wavering issue of mental health problems among active duty and veteran military. Since the majority of the contributors were researcher/teacher scholars, the main body of the text is written for an academic audience, not a public one. The diction would not appeal widely to a vast majority of military members, due to accessibility and therefore most military personnel would likely put it down after the first two chapters. The third chapter: "Mindfulness: The Neurobehavioral Basis of Resilience," was most definitely written with a scientific academic audience in mind. Five personal narratives are included at the end of five chapters in the book. The narratives are insightful and entertaining, in addition to being complimentary to the attached chapter's focus; I would have liked to see more of these narratives throughout, especially for chapter eight: "Learning from Example: Resilience of Service Members Who Identify as LGBT." This chapter discusses a topic that has come into more acceptable public military discourse in recent years, even though it has been a complicated issue for a great many military personnel for a long time. It would have been incredibly beneficial for all audiences to include a personal narrative from a LGBT service member to help illustrate the chapter's attention to the difficulties LGBT military members endure and overcome through their time in the service.

### **Framing the Issues**

The first part of the book, "Framing the Issues," is a necessary start to the text's objective and argument of the editors/authors, since it lays out the multiple reasons that have contributed to current mental health issues among active duty and veteran troops. While the entire first part includes a great deal of *logos* and *ethos*, since there is a large quantity of quantitative research, the three narratives attached to chapters one, two, and three, present the *pathos* necessary to even things out.

The second chapter, "Warrior Culture: Ancient Roots, New Meaning," is a chapter I connect wholeheartedly with, as the Infantry culture is the epitome of warrior culture. For the purpose of the book, Kyleanne Hunter expresses how the warrior culture encompasses all military service members. Hunter makes clear the exigency, purpose, and argument, the rest of the book sets out to accomplish by writing, "inserting resiliency training into the warrior culture post-initial training, presents more difficulty than it does during initial training" (p. 35). In other words, since the main argument of the book stresses the need for more resiliency training during active duty to help military personnel manage regular stresses, difficulties, and possible traumas; more resiliency training during active duty would help make the transition to veteran and civilian life a little easier for these individuals who are not only leaving the service, but also transitioning into an entirely new culture. Hunter breaks down and examines the "warrior culture," which shows not only a clear divide between military personnel and civilians, but also how the culture itself encompasses a great many varying individuals. Though

there is no way of knowing exactly how many active duty service members and veterans have PTSD, since not all of them will be evaluated, there are [varying percentages of veterans with PTSD](#). Estimates range from 11-20% from Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), 12% after the Gulf War, and 30% from the Vietnam War (Kulka et al., 1990; Kang et al., 2003; Tanielian et al., 2008). These large percentages clearly indicate there is a need for mental fitness programming that starts during active duty training as Albright and Thomas propose.

There are limitations in some of the book's initial chapters in addition to the specific academic audience. Truly, it would be difficult to address this topic to a more general public, as there would be a need for a given amount of finesse on the approach of certain topics and issues. Chapter five, "Moral Injury and Resilience in the Military," would work rather well earlier, as it presents a lot of important definitions to subject matter in earlier chapters not defined. There is a large focus on the theory of mindfulness in the last three chapters of part one, however, the actual term is not defined until chapter five. If the audience is reading about mindfulness as used in therapy, specifically resilience training, for the first time, it would be beneficial and essential to know exactly how that term is being defined and used. Given that this text is written for an academic audience, the reader expects an unambiguous positionality and well-defined jargon.

### **Current Mental Fitness Programming for Military and Veteran-Connected Populations**

The sixth chapter, "Department of Defense Resilience Programming," is the key chapter in the second part of the book on "Current Mental Fitness Programming for Military and Veteran-Connected Populations." This chapter breaks down all of the current programs the DoD has in place for active duty service members and veterans, and since 2008, the DoD has put a lot of resiliency programs in place. What the chapter's authors state very clearly however, is that even though there are a lot of programs in place, "what is less clear is the effectiveness of those efforts" (Florenz and Shields, p. 106). The chapter concludes by identifying issues of resiliency training among branches of the military, and clarifies that most programs rely on the "train the trainer" model (p. 107), and therefore are not going to be as effective as they could be. When I curiously asked SDS Patrick Carter, my husband, about this issue, he agreed that the problem lies not necessarily in what the programming sets out to accomplish, but how the information is taught and relayed during the training process. This chapter lays out necessary groundwork for further research into specific programs the DoD offers, how those programs are being implemented, and whether or not they are being assessed for effectiveness.

The next two chapters in part two focus on women in the military and LGBT in the military. Both chapters are essential in a compilation such as this book offers, but it is the narrative attached to the chapter on women in the military that provides the most engagement for readers. Jessica Wilkes discusses in her narrative, "Fitting in and Finding Me," attached to chapter seven, how hard her transition out of the military was. As a 12-year Air Force veteran, she had difficulty leaving the service due to her miss-diagnosis with PTSD, and her want to be with her fellow airmen. She concludes her narrative with a re-enforcement of the book's argument:

What the military either doesn't know or doesn't tell you is that the transition from the military to civilian life doesn't just take a few months. It can take years, and if you're lacking the tools to keep your mind healthy during the tough times, the experience can be catastrophic. (Wilkes, p. 132)

Chapter nine, in part two, "Resilient Military Families," presents the importance of military families, and the support they provide, but does not delve into current programs that support the families themselves. The chapter presents an overview of the structure and dynamics of military families, and the constant challenges military families face, but does not include any information

about current programs that support military families except for the New Directions for Family and Youth Development that has only provided services to 155 military families over a five-year period (McAdams III, p. 158). Not only was Military One Source not mentioned, which is the primary referral mechanism for the Family Readiness System, but I thought specifically of the [Strong Bonds](#) program, which is “a unit-based, chaplain-led program which assists commanders in building individual resiliency by strengthening the Army Family,” which has provided support and resiliency for countless families since 1999 (Strong Bonds, n.d., n.p.). There are also post programs that support families as they relocate from one post to another and provide essential household goods until their personal belongings arrive. As a military spouse, I felt a pang of frustration as I read this chapter, as there are so many programs that support military families; those programs provide resiliency. Without those programs set in place for families, the support for the service member would change.

Part two concludes with a discussion of “The Promotion of Well-Being in Older Veterans” (the title of the chapter), and uses three case studies to exemplify the differing statuses and lives of older veterans depending on their experiences prior to service, during time in service, and their transitions out of service. The chapter outlines important considerations for the varying degrees of resiliency in older veterans, such as, era, cohort membership, historic events, effects of military service, aging, health, relationships, the importance of storytelling, and complementary and alternative medicine. This chapter sets a foundation for continuing research in this area, and has some limitations as all three case studies focus on (two men and one woman) married, white (non-Latino) subjects. This selective group in no way showcases the wide range of older veterans in today’s society.

### **Collaborating to Provide Mental Fitness Programming for Military-Connected Populations**

The third part, “Collaborating to Provide Mental Fitness Programming for Military-Connected Populations,” offers four strong chapters and one narrative on programs that can help establish more mental fitness for current active duty service members and veterans. These four chapters coincide nicely with the research presented throughout the text, and further re-enforce the goals of the authors about the need for more standardized resiliency training throughout the military.

The eleventh chapter lays out spiritual fitness, arguing that “supporting and encouraging spiritual growth among the military and veteran population require openness, diversity, and flexibility beyond any one chaplain’s ability,” and points out that “many service members and veterans find their source of ultimate meaning in the God of their personal faith” (Shirley, Alders, Crosby Jr., Charters, and Caterson, p. 191, p. 183). Over many years of being entrenched in a military culture and community, I have noticed that spiritual fitness is not a common conversation among actively serving forces, but perhaps, could become one. As it stands, the conversation of spiritual fitness is usually a forced one, but as this chapter points out, it does not need to be that way. There are programs that exist that can help start the conversation for both active military and retired, and as stated, does not necessarily require a chaplain, but if set in motion through programming, the outreach for spiritual fitness could reach a very wide audience.

The next two chapters in part three focus on Individual Placement and Support (IPS) and AmericaServes, both programs established to help soldiers transition out of the military. These chapters highlight the importance of support during the transition from active duty to veteran status and provide the reader with a background of why mental fitness during active service is important, yet also how these programs can help if the veteran needs mental fitness training after active duty. Lori L. Davis and Richard Toscano make two important statements in chapter twelve that sum up this issue: “Meaningful purposeful activity is essential to individual’s identity and sense of vitality”;

“A military veteran’s ability to obtain and maintain gainful employment is essential to successful reintegration into civilian life” (p. 196). In other words, the authors stress that in order to gain and maintain employment and be satisfied with purposeful everyday life, veterans need to be mentally fit.

Part three concludes with a heavy quantitative research chapter on the influence of stress inoculation training (SIT) on active duty service members and how mindfulness-based mind fitness training (MMFT) could be more beneficial. Kelsey Larsen and Elizabeth Stanley present a great deal of support for the integration of MMFT in training, and the challenges that would exist. They determine that in order for “mind-body skills training” to be effective, “leaders must commit to [...] creative integration” and “consistent practice” on a “daily basis” (p. 245).

Even though the limitations on diction and audience do not necessarily allow Albright and Thomas to reach military personnel through public discourse, they do reach academic audiences interested in military writing and mental health promotion. Likewise, they continue the conversation on the prevention, rehabilitation, and consistent resiliency training active duty service members would benefit from. They provide a great deal of evidence and support through the many scholars who contributed to the text. *Bulletproofing the Psyche*, would be a good book to voluntarily distribute to military officers, and non-commissioned officers, currently serving on active duty to reach a more general public regardless of whether military personnel would engage with this text, it should still be made available specifically to that community to encourage dialogue.

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