
VETERANS VOICE

A Personal Reckoning with Veteran Identity

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As a former career Army officer and a veteran of 25 years, I explore the evolution of my own veteran identity and its inherent assumptions, and examine how veteran identity is shaped and transformed by a variety of factors. Through my engagement with younger, Post-9/11 veterans I have come to a fuller and more generous explanation of what veteran identity is and how it evolves, and make a case for the importance of understanding these complexities so that an inter-generational alliance of veterans can be realized.

Keywords: veteran identity; veteran population; military experience; military transition; residence time

Veterans are as susceptible to identity stereotype as any other discernible demographic group. Because veterans are defined singularly by their act of military service, they are often misunderstood by the rest of American society, a society in which fewer and fewer have direct or family connections with the military. While more than 12% of US society served in the draft military during the WWII era, it is well established that the 21st century is about the “less than 1% who serve and fight our wars,” which drives home the point that the burden of voluntary military service and sacrifice has been relegated to a diminishing number of individuals and their families (Wright, 2012; Hicks et al., 2017, Vol 1) Much has been written about the emerging military-civilian divide in our country that has resulted from this disparity (Pew, 2011; Pew, 2019). This divide is exacerbated by a veteran population that has been rapidly declining due to a volunteer force and a smaller military. Today there are approximately 20 million veterans in the US or 6% of the US population. The veteran population has declined at a rate of 18% since 2005 (USDVA, 2019). Of this population, approximately 8 million served during the Vietnam War Era or earlier, and thus are rapidly aging. By 2040 it is estimated the veteran population will be below 14 million, or less than 4% of the overall population (USDVA, 2020).

Societal isolation is further complicated by the fact that many veterans do not place their veteran identity as their dominant identity. Some veterans may shun or disclaim their veteran heritage due to the moral injuries of war, sexual trauma, toxic command experiences, harassment, etc. Too often these conditions lead to veteran suicide, a tragedy that has become known for the slogan of “22 veteran suicides a day.”¹ Along with their veteran status, veterans may

share other identity struggles ongoing in our society, including those of the LGBTQ community, the unemployed, and the homeless. For example, there are current veterans who served in the military during the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy era of the early 2000’s who needed to keep their sexual orientation private, lest they face discharge from the service. As veterans they are now able to express their identity but may still face discrimination within society and their own ranks. In the period of 2010–2015, the proportion of unemployed veterans often substantially exceeded that of the national population. While government and non-profit programs, as well as a better economy, have to some extent resolved this issue, the latent effects of unemployment on veteran well-being remain from the earlier period.

Even within their own ranks, veterans are misunderstood for a variety of reasons. Veterans hold disparate perspectives about their time and experiences in military service which shapes their subsequent veteran identity. These perspectives depend upon a number of factors including age, gender, race, family legacy, time and period of service, rank and branch of service, military occupational specialty (MOS), combat experiences, and others.

As a career military officer and a veteran for 23 years, I have come to understand through working and associating closely with veterans of all ages in a variety of workplace and social settings, that many of my assumptions “about being a veteran” do not reflect what other veterans feel and think. I realize that my assumptions are based upon my own personal story as a military brat and my own trajectory through my officer career in the Army. My military experience offered my family and me many opportunities, including advanced education, which were for the most part extremely positive,

fulfilling, and privileged. It also allowed me to have many career and financial opportunities when transitioning to a civilian livelihood.

This is not the case for many other veterans, both of my Vietnam Era and Cold War Era generation and others that followed. Certainly, for those veterans that entered the military through the obligatory Selective Service Draft prior to 1972 (e.g., Vietnam War), it was not a chosen direction and interrupted their life's trajectory. The particular tragedy of the Vietnam Conflict, including 58,000 Americans killed in action, and the nation's growing discontent over this engagement, cast a dark shadow over those who served. Their poor treatment by society upon their return shaped many of their identities and continues to be evidenced in the rates of homelessness, mental illness, and suicide amongst this aging generation of veterans (USDVA, 2019). My own father served as an officer in the Vietnam War, and upon his military retirement he assisted many of his Vietnam-era peers in governmental career counseling programs. I recall his stories of how many of these veterans were struggling with addictions and other maladies. I was draft eligible myself at the age of 18 in 1970 and would most likely have been drafted had I not chosen to pursue my childhood dream of attending West Point. Meanwhile, some of my high school peers were drafted. The Vietnam War draft officially ended in 1972, and the All-Volunteer Military Service, which continues today, began in 1973, a year before my commissioning from West Point. It is significant that no draft-era soldiers remain on active duty today and that for the past 45 years everyone entering into military service has done so as a volunteer.

During my 4 years as a cadet at West Point (1970–1974), the majority of my faculty were career officers, most of whom had served multiple tours in combat in Vietnam, including a Medal of Honor recipient, several Silver Star recipients, and an eventual US Presidential Candidate.² While the Vietnam War continued to rage during my cadet years, it was waning by the time we were commissioned, and in fact ended in early 1975 as I was completing my Officer Basic Course (OBC) in my selected Engineer Branch of the Army. With the exception of several of my classmates who had served as enlisted soldiers in Vietnam prior to attending West Point, none of my graduating class of 833 officers served in Vietnam. No doubt, this “luck and timing” afforded me a different beginning to my military service than many of my drafted peers. As a junior officer I did work with many Vietnam War veterans, mainly career non-commissioned officers (NCOs) as a Platoon Leader and Company Commander. As we were focused in the mid-1970s on the Cold War mission in Europe, their Vietnam War service was not often discussed, and I had limited contact with them after we served together. I was honored to be contacted just a few years ago by one of my junior soldiers from that first assignment because he wanted to express his thanks for the assistance I had given him as his commander, and to let me know he had spent a full

and successful career in the Army as a non-commissioned officer. But over time I have often reflected about the many soldiers I led during that time and wonder what they had thought of me (as a non-combat officer), and what debt I owed them for the mentorship and allegiance they showed me as a young officer.

Over the years I have come to know primarily career officers of the Vietnam War, many of whom I served under in my own career. Generally, they have indicated pride in their service and combat experiences, but I have often wondered how they viewed non-combat officers like myself. In general, I believe they understood the simple timing of wars and service dates, and have held veterans, like myself, with respect for our own service. In contrast, my limited encounters with drafted Vietnam War veterans has suggested a different and less generous perspective, no doubt influenced by the fact that they were drafted and did not view their military service as a positive part of their life for a variety of reasons, much less their identity. For example, my brother-in-law, a Vietnam Era Army enlistee in 1969 summarized his time in the military as, “Some will, some won't...so what!”

My Own Veteran Identity

I am an inter-generational veteran—the son of a career Air Force officer (who served during the eras of WWII, the Korean War and the Vietnam War, the latter in a combat zone). My family is full of military veterans—my grandfather served on the front lines in WWI in an Army Signal unit, my father-in-law served in WWII in Europe in an Engineer unit, and my brother-in-law served in the Army in Europe in the late 1960s and early 1970s. I subsequently graduated from a number of Army training schools, including Airborne and Ranger Schools, before my first assignment in 1975. I served as an active duty Army officer for 22 years, from the concluding months of the Vietnam War (1974–1975) and the beginning of the post-Draft Army (1974), through the latter decades of the Cold War (1974–1991), retiring from active duty as a Lieutenant Colonel (O-5 in military parlance) in 1996. My first active duty assignment was to an engineer unit (a Divisional Combat Engineer Battalion) in Germany as a Platoon Leader at the height of the Cold War. After 4 years of duty overseas I returned state-side, attended graduate school while on active duty, and completed other engineering assignments in the US, including Civil Works and Research and Development. I also taught geography and environmental studies/science as a military faculty member at West Point, thus bringing my military career full circle. Because my graduating West Point Class of 1974 was the second Class to enter into a Volunteer Force, we were part of the Army's leadership that shaped the post-Vietnam Army, through operations in Grenada, Somalia, and the Middle East (Operation Desert Storm). While many of us remained on active duty for 20 years or so and did not face combat, some classmates served in combat in Grenada and Somalia, and others served for another decade or more beyond that, leading the Army into operations in Iraq and Afghanistan after 9/11.³

Many of the cadets I taught while on the Academy faculty went on to fight as junior officers in the nation's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Some of them, 25 years later, are now ascending to senior ranks (Colonel and General Officer) within the Army. Others left the military after their obligatory service period for a variety of reasons, to include dissatisfaction or moral injury, to pursue civilian careers, and most have been successful in those pursuits. I have continued to stay in contact with them as veterans and friends.

In sum, I spent the first 45 years of my life—my entire childhood as an Air Force “brat,”⁴ my young adult college life as a West Point cadet, and my young to middle adult life as an Army officer surrounded and defined by the military. Although not a combat veteran, when I became a “civilian” at age 44 I naturally placed my new veteran identity at the “front and center” of who I was, because in fact, it was really all I knew. Having earned a PhD while on active duty and given my faculty assignment at West Point, I made a smoother transition into civilianhood and my first post-military job than most veterans. In most cases I was positively accepted into the workplace with my veteran identity.

For over 25 years, since leaving military service, I have strongly held my veteran identity in variety of places, institutions, including higher education and the non-profit sector, and professional occupations. I have intentionally worked within these environments to support veterans and student-veterans, even leading a veterans' non-profit organization that placed veterans to work in the green economy. Many of my friends and associates are veterans and share my positive identity as a veteran. Nevertheless, as I have transitioned through these workplace and social-cultural environments I have learned, initially to my dismay and now to deepening understanding and gratitude, that many other veterans I encounter do not share my same level of veteran identity.

Engaging Younger Veterans and Their Identities

Over time I have come to better understand and appreciate why differences exist in veteran identity. Veteran identities are both complex and conflicted, and I recognize that in assessing the trajectory of my own military and veteran experiences, I have developed inherent biases about veterans. Much of what I have learned has come from meeting, talking with, and working with younger, Post-9/11 veterans who were deployed to combat theaters in Iraq and Afghanistan in the War on Terrorism. I have worked with these veterans as colleagues in a non-profit organization, advised them as student-veterans in their academic pursuits in higher education, and assisted them with transitions into civilian careers. Their insights are shaped by their own intense experiences as junior enlisted soldiers and officers, the particular nature of these conflicts, and the roles that our government and our military have had in perpetrating these long wars over the 20 years, while most of society remains largely unaware and indifferent about these conflicts. I have become increasingly grateful for their patience with me and

for their willingness to recognize our common veteran connections, while tolerating my limited understanding of their experiences and contexts.

My conversations with these younger veterans have revealed some useful insights about how they view their time in military service and their veteran identity. All of these veterans are highly functional adults who by all accounts have been successful in civilian life and are raising their own families. I consider these veterans to be colleagues and friends. Although my encounters with them do not constitute a systematic study of Post-9/11 veterans, the sum of their experiences and perspectives provide the start for more thorough research on veteran identity in the 21st century.

G. is a Kosovo Campaign and an Iraq War (Operation Iraqi Freedom – OIF) enlisted combat veteran, the son of a career Vietnam War veteran, and was a cavalry scout and sniper. He is currently a leader in the peace movement and in the natural resources/national parks conservation movement and the CEO of a national non-profit (Glantz, 2008). G. is a highly respected leader amongst his peer veterans and a well-connected veteran who has used his veteran status to promote national level causes through non-profit organizations. Admittedly, he still struggles to understand his own deceased father and how the Vietnam War shaped his father's post-War behaviors (Wood 2006). G. experienced moral injury from his role as a sniper and from the observations he made regarding the way Iraqi citizens were treated. G. has a high degree of emotional intelligence and uses that to the benefit of those he serves. While his veteran identity is strong it is shaped towards using the negative experiences he had in the military and in combat to inform larger socio-cultural issues.

T. is an Iraq War (OIF) junior officer combat veteran, ROTC graduate, and son of a career Vietnam War officer. After serving his post-ROTC commitment, T. earned an MBA under the GI Bill and is currently a successful businessman in a large corporation. T. does not place his veteran identity at the center, but recognizes the military afforded him excellent training and skills, particularly in leadership and mentorship, which he has translated into his civilian career. He is conflicted about the military's role in Iraq and believes the government could have responded in many other ways without excessive and extended military force. He believes his own father, a distinguished combat veteran, felt the same way about the Vietnam War, but did not discuss it much. T.'s engagement with other fellow veterans is usually around the camaraderie of the difficulties and sometimes humorous experiences of military service. T. prefers to use his veteran status cautiously, and primarily to individually mentor other veterans in his organization. While his veteran identity is strong, he is determined to prove his organizational worth without leaning on his veteran identity.

M. is an Afghanistan War (Operation Enduring Freedom – OEF) junior/mid-grade enlisted combat veteran, who served multiple tours in Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Upon completion of his military service, he earned undergraduate

and graduate degrees under the GI Bill and is currently a federal employee working in natural resources conservation, raising a young family. M. is highly intelligent and he is both introspective and critical of his experiences as a veteran. Despite his education, he believes he is not valued for who he is and for his contributions to the workplace. Rather, he feels his veteran status has been devalued and that he has been discriminated against because of being a veteran. Although many federal agencies were mandated to hire veterans in 2010 and beyond when unemployment rates were high, the “veteran hire” mandate was sometimes viewed negatively by civilian career employees without military experience. In M.’s case he has personally felt this sleight and has not been given responsibilities and positions consistent with his education, but rather has been treated as “just another veteran” looking to gain an advantage in hiring. Although his veteran identity is strong and he highly values his personal relationships with fellow and older veterans, he has sought to suppress his veteran identity in the workplace.

R. is an Afghanistan War enlisted combat veteran, who earned an undergraduate degree through the GI Bill and is currently pursuing a PhD while teaching at the college level. R. does not feel his combat experience compares with peer veterans because he served in intelligence, not front-line units. But R. has become active in the veterans’ writing community which allowed him to support other veterans with different experiences than his own (Doe & Langstraat, 2014; Hart & Thompson, 2020). Over time he has gradually begun to assume a stronger veteran identity as an important component of who he is. He also is greatly appreciative of the veterans’ benefits he has received, including the GI Bill and the Veterans Administration (VA) home loan.

C. is an Afghanistan War enlisted combat veteran who earned a master’s degree in social work/counseling and is currently serving as a therapist/counselor to other veterans. C. is conflicted about his military service in combat and has suffered from post-traumatic stress and moral injury. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, he has used his experiences in a positive way to assist and encourage other veterans, although he does not often lead with his veteran identity. Interestingly, he has experienced that other men, who are not veterans, are more likely to value him when he informs them of his military experiences. C.’s veteran identity is complex and conflicted, but remains strong, as he continues to navigate through his military experiences in the hopes of reconciling them and using them for a positive purpose.

While each of these veterans is unique in their perspectives, a few common notions from my extended conversations with them have emerged. These include:

1. Their veteran identity has been dynamic and evolved over time as a function of their interactions with other veterans and various workplaces. Most have placed their veteran identity as secondary although they recognize that in certain places and circumstances it has value and has benefitted them.

2. They have suffered from early, and perhaps continuing, post-traumatic stress and moral injury from their combat experiences.
3. They are not “proud” of the wars they served in. Most believe the nature of America’s responses to 9/11 through the extended conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have been ill-conceived and have not brought any measurable benefit to those countries and their indigenous populations. In some cases, they have become active anti-war and peace advocates. This is contrasted with the generally overwhelming positive outcomes of WWII and the widespread appreciation of its veterans, referred to commonly as the “Greatest Generation,” and storied in movies such as *Saving Private Ryan*.

The insights of these younger veterans have caused me to look back at my own military career, and in particular, have given me space to reflect on an early tragedy in my Army experience which still impacts me today.

Luck and Timing—My River-Crossing Story

In an old Army footlocker in the basement, I keep a well-worn manila folder marked in my own handwriting as *River Crossing*. In it are copies of the official documents, sworn testimonies, and letters associated with a river-crossing training accident that occurred in the mid-1970s in Germany, while I was serving as a junior Army officer, early in my career. On several occasions, usually precipitated by learning of an Army training accident or upon giving a talk to an audience about the Army, I have extracted the folder and re-read the details of that tragic day.

It was an early fall morning on the Danube River in Germany when as an Engineer Platoon Leader, only 6 months into my first assignment, my soldiers and I prepared for a river crossing by an infantry unit we were supporting for a large tactical exercise. My unit was to provide the rubber rafts, life preservers, and lead raft handlers for the infantry soldiers who would be crossing in the rafts with their weapons and full combat gear. It is well known that river crossings of this type are inherently dangerous, and the river was moving swiftly, perhaps too swiftly. As the infantry arrived, loaded the first boats, and proceeded across the river, one of the rafts suddenly began to take on water, and within seconds, flipped, spilling the 10 soldiers and their equipment into the fast-moving river. I was standing on the near shore as this tragedy unfolded and ran downstream along the bank to assist but was unable to do anything to save the soldiers. As they tried to swim ashore those of us along the banks urgently attempted a rescue, but several soldiers were swept downstream and under the river’s surface. Three of them drowned.

Months later, I and my fellow platoon mates, along with the leadership of my engineer company and the infantry unit, were brought before a General Officer investigation of the accident to determine the causes and responsibilities. Several of the infantry officers were found negligent and administratively punished. While I and my soldiers were

exonerated, I have never entirely forgiven myself or forgotten this experience and its consequences. Today, a memorial stone marker stands along the Danube River where the accident occurred. Almost 45 years to the date of this accident I was able to visit the gravesite in Arlington National Cemetery (Washington, DC) of one of the soldiers who died. He was only in his early 30s, which aligns with the current age of my two sons. I believe that part of why I continue to hold my veteran identity so strongly is to pay back, in some small way, those 3 Army soldiers who died too young, and their grieving families. These soldiers were denied, through no fault of their own, to fulfill their promise of becoming a veteran and joining the ranks of veterans at home.

Twenty-five years later, in reckoning with my own sense of veteran identity, I have recognized how differently military service and post-service experiences shape one's veteran identity and how that may change over time. This examination begins with telling our own stories and acknowledging both the value and the hardships of military service and recognizing how much the luck and timing of military experiences impact one's veteran identity. In particular, we must acknowledge the very personal moral injury and loss that one can experience in this most dangerous of occupations.

Let me be clear—I am not a combat veteran and I cannot personally speak to what war does to an individual and how that shapes one's veteranhood (see Marlantes, 2011). But few who have served have escaped the reality of military training and its inherent dangers. In that respect, I, too, have witnessed the loss of life in military training, and have had to wrestle with the sense of responsibility that comes with being a leader in the military, and how that reality, to this day, impacts my veteran identity.

Understanding Veteranhood

My personal evolution as a veteran and my exploration of other veterans' lives and stories has led me to conceptualize 3 major stages of military experience which shape veteranhood, and which can begin to explain the varieties and differences amongst veterans. While these differences are indeed many and complex, the common military experiences and bonds transcend generations of veterans. These 3 stages are: Induction/Commissioning, Specialized Training and Unit Experiences, and Discharge/Transition into civilian life.

Entry into military service is a life-changing event. The personal commitment of taking an oath "to protect and defend the Constitution, against all enemies, foreign and domestic," is a powerful commitment by young men and women. All veterans share the common military experience of enlistment/commissioning, initial and specialized training, and assignment to a unit(s) with a specific military mission. The initial induction processes and ceremonies, as well as the subsequent military training (physical, emotional, and technical) form a specialized literacy learning experience that leaves a lasting imprint, often becoming central to the identity of the people who experience them.

At Basic Training, from the moment new enlistees step off the bus, they are immersed in a world that explicitly signals who is who by virtue of military rank, drill instructor hats, and leadership badges associated with military uniforms. Recruits quickly learn about the organizational structure and hierarchy of the military service via organizational charts, written rules and regulations, standard operating procedures, and unit signage. They are taught the ceremonial protocols of the culture such as how to respond verbally to superiors, when and how to salute, when to come to "attention," and other formalities. They are taught the tasks and practices of the profession of arms—how to handle, disassemble and fire weapons; how to operate personal and tactical equipment; how to use radio protocols and the phonetic alphabet; and how to work in teams, squads, and other units of various size and composition. (Doe & Doe, 2013, p. 7)

By the time the enlistee/officer has completed the first phase of their military experiences – Induction/Commissioning, they have learned the common skills of rifle/weapons marksmanship, tactics, field communications, first aid, and military protocols and courtesies (e.g., saluting, military rank, marching and formations, etc.). They have also been intensely transformed from their civilian lives into a military culture that demands compliance, respect for authority, timeliness, and responsiveness and teamwork. These are traits that will often remain with the individuals long after they leave military service, and in many cases, become outward manifestations of who they are and how they act as veterans.

Once basic training is over, service members usually attend one or more specialized training schools associated with their specific Military Occupational Specialty (MOS). Depending upon their MOS or rank they may also undergo rigorous physical and small unit leadership schools, such as Airborne, Ranger, Special Forces Qualification, or Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL (e.g., BUDS training to become a Navy SEAL). These schools are often associated with more elite units and will often dictate the units they serve in and how the service member views their experiences. Upon completion of these schools, service members are then assigned to a specific unit, force, or ship for a period of years with an assigned military mission. These units may be stationed stateside, overseas, or deployed to a combat theater of operations. It is most often within these initial and follow-on units that service members develop their strongest affiliations. Units have specific military histories, cultures, and missions that define them. Wearing the patch or badges of a particular unit, ship or aircraft, particularly in combat, often conveys a sense of pride and accomplishment.

The transition from military service back to civilian life, which ultimately every service member must complete, is also an important time and construct that impacts veteran identity. Most veterans receive an Honorable Discharge

which then affords them certain benefits towards health care and federal employment. However, receiving less than an Honorable Discharge (General or Dishonorable), may present major obstacles to veteran reintegration.

One theory I have explored elsewhere called “residence time,” explains the time which transpires between one’s discharge from service and reintegration into a stable civilian lifestyle, including a job (Doe & Doe, 2013). The residence time can vary widely from months to even years, depending upon the particular veteran’s personal and social situation and identity. The intensity of one’s individual military experience (e.g., combat experience) and culture, and departing from it, can often extend this residence time. But I strongly believe that interacting with other veterans, of all generations, may help to smooth this critical transition. Interestingly, it has been shown that a young person’s propensity to join military service is primarily influenced by their encounters with veterans in their lives, be it in family, school, or the workplace. Conversely, veterans may choose a wide range of paths after military service (Hicks et al., 2017, Vol 1).

I believe that similar engagement with veterans on the other side of the military experience is equally critical and valuable to them being successful on their chosen path.

These 3 stages of military experience help to define veteranhood beyond the general classifications. It may be obvious to those who have served, but one’s initial veteran identity is largely shaped by these experiences. Veteran identity may evolve over time as veterans’ transition and reengage with other veterans and society and develop a new persona outside of their military one. Developing a more detailed taxonomy of veteran identity using this framework would be a worthy research undertaking.

An Evolving Veteran Identity

My personal journey as a veteran continues. Now in my late 60’s, there are many lessons learned, both from my military and civilian careers, that strike me as worthy of reflection and consideration in talking to, and learning from, younger military service members and veterans. For example, the luck (good and bad) and timing of events in one’s professional life; the responsibilities and potential pitfalls of leadership and command; the need to be prepared for the unseen, and the importance of recognizing the personal sacrifices of those with whom one serves. An important component of this journey is redemption from the losses and injuries that a veteran may have experienced during military service. I find new meaning and resolve daily as I meet other veterans and learn their stories.

I believe one of the most important obligations of being a veteran in today’s society is to gain an inter-generational appreciation for veterans and the perspectives they hold. We are in many respects a “band of brothers and sisters,” and in a society where the veteran population is rapidly declining, those bonds must become stronger. This understanding can also translate to the larger society within which veterans reside.

My engagement with both older and younger veterans has allowed me to untangle my own veteran identity and expand it to a larger audience. Yes, I am a veteran and I value that personal identity, but I strive to be more than just that. I want to be a veteran ally—an inter-generational veteran who can clarify, for both our veteran community and our society at large, who veterans really are and why they matter. I have attempted to do this by working with and assisting veterans in educational and employment settings, and through contributing to veterans’ events and causes. But I believe there are many more things we, particularly my own older generation of veterans, can do to lead this effort and make these bonds stronger. We must continue to engage each other on a personal level and listen to their stories and their perspectives about veteran identity, adapting our own identities as necessary. We must read and study about veterans and their stories, particularly the emerging and brilliantly written genre of Post-9/11 fiction and non-fiction written by veterans. And we must act—it is in these acts of engagement and good faith as inter-generational veterans that we ultimately demonstrate our military ethos and common identity for the benefit of all veterans and their families.

Notes

¹ This statistic is actually incorrect since it includes active-duty personnel. The most recent data is 17 veterans per day. The highest number of suicides are in the 55–74-year-old category, who are the Vietnam Era and Cold War Era veterans (USDVA, 2019).

² The Medal of Honor is the highest military award for valor. My Tactical Officer at West Point was then Major Robert F. Foley, later Lieutenant General Foley, awarded the MOH for combat actions in 1966 in Vietnam. The Silver Star is the third highest military award (after the MOH and the Distinguished Service Cross) for valor. One of my Academy professors was Major Wesley K. Clark, later General Clark, and a Democratic Party Presidential Candidate in 2004.

³ My West Point classmates (1974) include General Martin Dempsey, who served as Army Chief of Staff and Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff (the highest military position), and General David Petraeus, who commanded a Division in Iraq and led joint forces in Afghanistan.

⁴ “Brat” is a term used for military kids – see *The Great Santini* by Pat Conroy, 1976; and *Military Brats: Legacy of Childhood Inside the Fortress* by Mary Edwards Wertsch 1991, for more details.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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