



# Existing in Higher Education as a Post-9/11 United States Veteran: Challenges and Opportunities

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## ABSTRACT

The journey to Iraq and beyond is not as straightforward as one might think. The author of this piece was an older recruit when he joined the military, as a surprising number of medics in his unit were. Moral Foundations Theory guides this article, as it is the learned beliefs the author has from a child that influenced many of the decisions he made, which are discussed herein. The goals of this article are to first supply a background that helps situate the author's lived experiences, second to share some of those lived experiences to provide greater context, and third to illustrate how the author's military service shaped his experiences in the academy as an undergraduate student, graduate student, and faculty member. The author hopes this article helps those unfamiliar with the military understand what their students and colleagues, especially those who have served since September 11, 2001, experience and gain a new perspective. The author also hopes this article helps other military veterans who may have had similar experiences realize that they are not alone.

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Every day's like a gamble here  
 This is no joke  
 This is live from Iraq  
 Where were praying we make it home  
 True gutter for you f\*ckers  
 Think its gutter where you from  
 Here its life by the second  
 This is everything wrong  
 This is not your beef on the block  
 No it's not that simple  
 Here its more than gunfire  
 They shooting rockets and missiles  
 This is up armor kits  
 And bulletproof windows  
 We sleep with body armor blankets  
 And Kevlar pillows

In a country  
 Where when anybody talkin' they lying  
 And wherever there is a soldier  
 There is shrapnel flying  
 59 of us April 4th  
 8 of us dying  
 This is your thug turnt punk  
 This is grown men crying  
 This is bombs in the street  
 Blowin' up when I drive by 'em  
 Or its rpgs launched at me  
 This is nothing problems  
 The true definition of goin' hard  
 No games  
 This is hundreds of bodies  
 In the streets when we bang

Cause this is live from Iraq  
 Home of too many soldiers graves  
 Where for our country  
 We gamble with our lives every day  
 And there are no blue skies here  
 Every colors gray  
 This is the blood of soldiers of which the streets are  
 now paved  
 And there is no reimbursement for the price that we  
 pay  
 While y'all home sleep were here constantly getting  
 weighed  
 And every convoy that rides out  
 Constantly getting sprayed  
 But we don't fold hands  
 The cards we are dealt get played. (4th 25, 2010,  
 0:20–1:31)

My headphones blast music in my ears as I work on a severely burned child. I am a combat medic assigned to a forward operating base (FOB) in Iraq. This FOB is important because it serves as a pit stop for the countless convoys carrying supplies from Kuwait to Baghdad. Most convoys stop overnight to sleep and get a day's rest before continuing on, but I work here every day. My current responsibility is to work in a burn clinic for severely burned Iraqi women and children. This burn clinic is located just outside the outer walls of our compound making us a prime target for snipers, mortars, or rockets; yet for some reason we have not been attacked since we landed. The last unit told us that once they established the burn clinic attacks stopped. Perhaps my duties are doing more than providing a service to the local residents; perhaps I am providing a shield for our base. But that does not make the job any easier. We are not allowed to use any United States (US) supplies on the injured but must rely on donations from US citizens. This means we must perform one of the most painful procedures imaginable, debriding the burns of women and children, with little to no pain medicine. On the lucky days, we have Tylenol to give them, as we spend hours ripping out the dead flesh from the burns; on the bad days, we have nothing. Yet the patients are grateful, as we are the only burn clinic for hundreds of miles. But this does nothing to stifle their screams of pain, terror, and fear. The words of my combat medic platoon sergeant ring in my ears, "pain is the patient's problem," but it is so hard to push down the human empathy for those writhing in pain. One day we receive welcome news: We are being reassigned to another mission. We leave the FOB behind and the unit that takes it over decides to close the burn clinic. Within weeks they are rocketed and their morale, welfare, and recreation (MWR) building is hit causing multiple deaths. I guess we were a sort of shield.

The journey to Iraq and beyond is not as straightforward as one might think. I was an older recruit when I joined the military, as a surprising number of medics in my unit were. Therefore, to best understand my experiences in Iraq and how this affected both my performance as a student and as a faculty member in higher education, it is important to go backwards to go forwards. Moral Foundations Theory is my guide in this article, as it is the learned beliefs I have from a child that influenced many of the decisions I made (Graham et al., 2013; 2018). The goals of this article are to first supply a background that helps situate my lived experiences, second to share some of those lived experiences to provide greater context, and third illustrate how my military service shaped my experiences in the academy as an undergraduate student, graduate student, and faculty member (Belbase et al.,

2008; Boylorn & Orbe 2016; Chang, 2016). I hope this article helps those unfamiliar with the military understand what their students and colleagues experienced, especially those who have served since September 11, 2001, and gain a new perspective. I also hope this article helps other military veterans who may have had similar experiences as I, realize that they are not alone.

## MY LIFE AS A CIVILIAN

I think it is important to know a little of my background and the identity layers that have shaped my life to contextualize the stories I am about to tell. I grew up in Texas and I was raised by my parents to believe in God, the Bible, and my country, in that order. My father was a Baptist pastor and at a young age I thought I would be the same. I even went to bible college following high school to begin my life as a missionary. I still remember being called out of class one day to watch the television footage as the towers came down. I felt a strong pull to leave my biblical training behind to join the military, but my parents convinced me that I was needed for the spiritual battle against the devil more than the physical battle against terrorists, so I stayed. I began working at a mortgage company as a way to earn money while I worked part time as a youth pastor for the church. Then, through a series of events I lost my faith and decided to put my full efforts into the mortgage business. This worked for a while until the mortgage upheaval in the mid-2000s (see Adelino et al., 2016; Demyanyk & Van Hemert, 2011). I found my income dropping from six figures to barely enough to support my wife and 2-year-old child. I had no official education, as the bible college was not accredited; my only skill was in selling mortgages and that was tanking so I had little idea as to what to do. This financial difficulty combined with the desire to earn a degree and have a better life for my child led me to join the military. I passed my Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) and scored high enough to choose any job (see Beatty et al., 2020). The Army was paying \$40,000 as a bonus if I would join as a medic and deploy rapidly. So I chose this option and within a week was shipped off to Fort Leonardwood for basic training.

## MY LIFE AS A SOLDIER

Basic training came and went (for more about basic training see Knight, 1990; Shpeer & Howe, 2020), and I was shipped off to Fort Sam Houston for medic training. About 6 months after joining the Army, I found myself at Fort Hood assigned to the First Cavalry Division and preparing to deploy to Iraq.

A few months later I arrived in Scania, in under a year the US Army had molded me from an average civilian into a combat medic ready to fight on behalf of the country. As mentioned in the opening paragraph of this article, my first stop in Iraq was at the burn clinic of a FOB where I worked on women and children who were severely burned. But this assignment was only a few months long and then we were challenged with a new assignment. Go to an area of Iraq where no Americans had ever been and build a FOB from nothing, in August, in the desert, so we did.

The stories I have to tell about this time of my deployment would overflow the pages for which I am allotted. We were sent in the middle of summer to the middle of the desert to build our new FOB from nothing. During the night we worked on building the FOB and during the days we slept under our trucks or anywhere we could find some shade. This new FOB was near the Iraq/Iran border and our mission was to stand up a FOB and then begin to stop the smuggling of rockets and mortars from Iran to Baghdad. In a sense we were a shield again, except we were shielding those in Baghdad so they could establish the Green Zone while we ate up the rockets and mortars. I remember the first time we were hit while I was on base. I heard the mortars go off and nearly soiled myself as I ran for cover. I remember after the attack was over, looking at two other soldiers who had been working on the FOB about a month longer than I had and they said, “don’t worry you will get used to it.” Surprisingly, I did.

I do not know if it was the heat or the constant bombardment, but there came a point where I just gave into the fact that I could die at any time. I still felt a jump inside when I heard the booms, but I internalized it and accepted my fate. After the walls were up and the FOB became operational as FOB Hunter, we began running combat missions. I was assigned to a combat platoon and served as the combat medic for about 25 troopers, the technical term for a cavalry soldier. We ran missions 6 days a week and the one day we had off we used to service our vehicles. During this time, we ran across anything and everything you would expect in Iraq, from small arms fire to rockets and mortars. At one point a good friend of mine and the executive officer (XO) of our unit was shot through both of his legs, and it was up to me to provide aid to him and keep him stable until the medevac could come to pick him up, which I did. On another mission one of my good friends and I were tasked with covering a farm plot of land in case any individuals tried to run from a target house we were tracking. By luck or miracle, I saw a machine gun nest before the individual inside could get a shot off on me (see Howe, 2020a for more details). Turns out this was the high-value target we were looking for. These gritty, unyielding tormenting missions wreaked havoc on my mind, body, and soul.

I returned home from Iraq racked with physical, mental, and emotional pain, but the suffering was not over (see Jamieson et al., 2021; Ragsdale et al., 2021; Sheriff et al., 2020). Soon after I returned to Fort Hood, the Fort Hood shooting occurred and while I was not present, the mere fact that we had been attacked in a land that I thought was safe brought up feelings of wariness and hypervigilance in me. On Halloween I was walking my wife and daughter for trick-or-treating when someone shot off bottle rockets. Immediately I hit the ground and my wife asked me, somewhat in shock, what I was doing. “Sorry” I replied, “I guess I thought we were under attack again.” My transition back to a stateside garrison was not easy and I volunteered to go back over, but the Army had different plans and medically retired me in April 2010, less than 3 years after I had joined up, but now what to do?

The first thing I did when that plane finally landed  
was kiss the ground  
The next thing I did was to go find my friends down  
at the old hangout  
Drank some beer and talked a lot about old times  
But when the booze finally hit Billy Joe Grimes  
He said, ‘I don’t know what it is, but you seem  
different to me.’  
I said, ‘I just came back from a place where they  
hated me  
And everything I stand for  
A land where our brothers are dying for others who  
don’t even care anymore  
If I’m not exactly the same good old boy that you  
ran around with before  
I just came back from a war.’ (Worley, 2006,  
0:21–1:30)

## MY LIFE AS AN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT

I remember getting out like it was yesterday. On one hand I felt tremendous freedom: I could sleep in past 04:00 or I could grow a beard; the possibilities seemed endless. Yet, in the face of a surprising number of opportunities was the conundrum of having so many choices. I had no idea what to do so I found myself doing nothing. It was hard to go and work a normal job after the experiences I have had, and like many other veterans I felt civilians could just not work on a jobsite like we can (Howe, 2020b; Howe & Shpeer, 2019). One day I was at my local vet center, and they told me I could get paid basic allowance for housing (BAH) for simply taking college classes. “Heck yeah!” I thought I can sit through hearing stuffed-shirt professors drone on and

on for a few hundred dollars a month, plus I was living with my parents, so this was all money in the bank. I applied to one undergraduate program and was accepted. In August of 2010, just 4 short months after separating from the military, I began my time at Texas Christian University.

I was never offered an advising session, though, and subsequently advised myself. I thought that since I had been a medic in the military it was only logical for me to pursue a nursing degree. That was a mistake. I quickly learned that I was going to have to memorize a ton of terms and be able to identify microscopic bodies that, in my mind, had little to nothing to do with practicing trauma medicine. So about 4 weeks into the semester I went to the advising office to find out what I could take to get a degree in something that interested me. The advising office had me take a battery of tests and told me something I already know—I like to talk. They therefore advised that I begin taking courses in the communication studies department, as they thought that is where I would fit in. The only downside was there was a bunch of red tape to switch into a communication studies major. Thankfully I found a faculty member who was willing to take time out of her day to help me get waivers and enrolled into the courses I needed to finish the degree. She saved my life, and I will always be indebted to Dr. Debi Iba.

During this time of transition, I had been struggling with anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. I had tried to seek help from the Department of Veterans Affairs, but this was the period of time when they were backed up and waiting lists were long. Thankfully I was able to find classes I enjoyed in the communication studies department and I began to find academia as a way to calm my mind. When negative thoughts came I read or wrote. When the anxiety or depression felt too much to bear, I tried to think through complex theories and connect them with what I was going through. The demons never left, but I was able to keep them at bay. Studying became my therapy.

The personal side of being an undergraduate student was an entirely different ballgame (Bagby et al., 2019; Bodrog et al., 2018). I remember talking to another student during one of the first weeks of class. “What do your parents do?” I asked, “Work for my grandfather” she replied. “Well what does your grandfather do?” I responded. “He owns the [National Football League Team].” I was shocked. I did not know where I was (Smith & True, 2014). I knew that going to a private school would mean some people were well off, but I did not realize just how well off until I opened my eyes (Sahlstein Parcell & Maguire, 2014) and looked around. The parking lot was full of luxury cars; 18-year-olds were driving cars my parents could not afford. I felt the separation between myself and these students begin to grow as I experienced what some researchers refer

to as reverse culture shock (Pedlar et al., 2019; Wilson & Chernichky, 2016).

This reverse culture shock was not the only issue that caused a gap between me and these students, however (Howe, 2022; Howe & Shpeer, 2019). I quickly learned that our life experiences made us see the world in very different ways (Howe & Bisel, 2020; Howe & Hinderaker, 2018). I remember walking to class one day and seeing a young female student crying, the medic side of me kicked in and I went and asked her what was wrong: “My favorite contestant was voted off American Idol,” she replied. Again, I was shocked. If this was the type of issue these students were concerned about, I had no idea how my struggles with my former unit getting ready to redeploy to Iraq and my fears of more friends being killed would go over with them. So, I kept my mouth shut, kept my head down, and did my work. Although my instructors did not seem to appreciate this.

I received some accommodations from the university due to my posttraumatic stress (PTS), anxiety, and depression (Mobbs & Bonanno 2018). Please note I refer to posttraumatic stress here rather than posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as they are conceptually different terms, and to label all combat veterans as having PTSD is overly stigmatizing, although most combat veterans probably did experience PTS during or after combat (for more details see Bender, 2018). Anyways, I took my accommodation letter to one of my instructors at the beginning of the semester and they looked me up and down before stating, “Are you REALLY sure you need these accommodations?” I guess I looked too healthy, I guess they saw a six-foot-four male who appeared able-bodied, and they just assumed I was trying to game the system. Whatever the case might be, it challenged my sense of fairness and “get it done” attitude that I had learned from a child through my military service. “I guess not,” I replied before walking back to my seat. I never asked for an accommodation again, even though I desperately needed them at times (see Wilson et al., 2019). I graduated in 4 years with a decent record and was accepted by Texas Christian University to pursue my master’s degree.

We’re coming for you!  
 Won’t back down!  
 Can’t stop us!  
 We unleash  
 This hell but don’t worry,  
 Won’t back down, so get ready,  
 I still believe and I can see it, wave!  
 Proud she flies,  
 Call the dogs! Call out the Dogs!  
 We shout so loud so

That everyone can hear it,  
 Coming on hard like a head-on collision.  
 Machine like something  
 Won’t stop don’t care.  
 Keep it all down,  
 Hundred Mile Stare. (Queensrÿche, 2010, 2:12–3:22)

## MY LIFE AS A GRADUATE STUDENT

Because my master’s program was at the same university where I had completed my undergraduate degree, I thought I knew what to expect from the coursework. Boy was I wrong. It turns out graduate education was much different in that every course was held in a conference room with all of the students gathered around a table sharing their own unique stories and experiences. At this time I began to tailor my academic pursuits from communication studies in a broad sense to organizational communication. Naturally many of the courses I took were focused on issues of organizational communication. Thankfully there was another veteran in my cohort, although he was a Marine, we still managed to get along. It was very interesting, though, when we would talk as a class about organizational experiences how he and I differed from the rest of the class. For example, a professor might ask us to share a story of how a particular theory was relevant to our past work experiences. The table would usually have sorority story, sorority story, sorority story, and then us. We tended to use stories from our past that answered the question but perhaps had the most shock value. This did not endear us to other students. I am not sure if it was the stories we told or the way we told them, but only one other student really seemed to welcome our points of view and she is still friends with us to this day. The professors also seemed unsure of what to do with our stories and I often felt we were discounted and not valued in the classroom (for more information see Howe, 2020c; Howe & Bisel, 2020).

Regardless of the personal experiences, I, and my Marine friend, graduated on time and then I went to the University of Oklahoma where I pursued my doctoral degree in organizational communication. I joined the program in 2016, and that just so happened to be the year that Donald Trump was elected President of the US. I remember the classes the days after he was elected other graduate students asking me to my face, in front of the class, how I could vote for him. I did not vote for Trump, as I am a Libertarian, but because I served in the military and perhaps because many perpetuate a false narrative of all servicemembers being conservative (Howe, 2020c; Howe & Meeks 2019), it was assumed I had voted this way. Not

only did this make the class uncomfortable in the moment, but it set up my graduate experience in a way that people viewed me as this ultra-conservative military veteran and not as a scholar. I worked hard and I was able to graduate on time, despite COVID, and landed a good job at a good school.

## MY LIFE AS AN ASSISTANT PROFESSOR

I am currently an assistant professor of organizational communication at Texas Tech University, although directly out of my PhD program I worked at the University of Kentucky. In these roles I have had my military veteran status tested by both students and administration. Some students view me as too demanding, cynical, and uncaring. I am sure that part of that may be true, but I believe another part of it is the high standards I set for my class. I understand students are not joining the military, but I still expect them to be able to turn in assignments on time and to follow instructions. Perhaps I am expecting too much. Some of my students appreciate this approach because they know that if they take my class the grading is fairly straightforward. Do what is asked in the syllabus and you will probably pass, and it will likely be with a fairly good grade. Administration on the other hand can be a bit tricky.

In the military I learned how to be honest, open, and direct. I do not think these skills are valued in the academy. In fact, I think that these qualities have gotten me in trouble on more than one occasion where I should have just kept my mouth shut and gone with the flow, but it is difficult to do this when you have been taught to speak up. I have been told I am too confrontational and argumentative, but I feel that if I have strong statistics or other support for my position that I should use these in a strong way. Perhaps I am naïve, and the academy simply seems to stay the same and not change, but I still find myself challenging the status quo and using the intestinal fortitude that I learned in the military to speak up for myself and my students.

He said “Son, have you seen the world?  
Well, what would you say if I said that you could?  
“Just carry this gun, you’ll even get paid”  
I said “That sounds pretty good”  
Black leather boots  
Spit-shined so bright  
They cut off my hair, but it looked alright  
We marched and we sang  
We all became friends  
As we learned how to fight  
A hero of war  
Yeah, that’s what I’ll be

And when I come home  
They’ll be damn proud of me  
I’ll carry this flag  
To the grave if I must  
‘Cause it’s a flag that I love  
And a flag that I trust. (*Rise Against*, 2009, 0:08–1:19).

## ACKNOWLEDGING MY POSITIONALITY

I understand that not everyone will have been through what I went through in the military. When I was in, women were not allowed to serve in combat roles and the majority of those who did see combat were from the Army and Marines. Individuals whose ethnicity, race, sex, gender, sexual orientation, and military experience are different from mine may have an easier or a more challenging time adjusting to the academy after the post 9/11 wars. But hopefully this piece can be a good starting point for those conversations (see *Hunniecutt*, 2020; *Lester et al.*, 2013; *van Gilder*, 2019).

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I hope that through this piece I have provided a glimpse into the background, military experience, and educational experiences this trooper has been through. I write this piece not for myself, although I must admit it has been somewhat cathartic to put these experiences on paper, but I write it for those veterans who, like me, are struggling with anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (*Cerel et al.*, 2019; *Fox*, 2021; *Howe*, 2020a). Years after these conflicts have started, we still see a suicide epidemic that is claiming the lives of veterans at a staggering rate. If this piece can help one veteran, then it has done its job. ;IGY6 (a symbol of camaraderie among military veterans, for more information see *Alpha Outpost*, 2016).

She walked through bullets and haze  
I asked her to stop  
I begged her to stay  
But she pressed on  
So I lifted my gun  
And I fired away  
And the shells jumped through the smoke  
And into the sand  
That the blood now had soaked  
She collapsed with a flag in her hand  
A flag white as snow  
A hero of war

Is that what they see  
 Just medals and scars  
 So damn proud of me  
 And I brought home that flag  
 Now it gathers dust  
 But it's a flag that I love  
 It's the only flag I trust. (*Rise Against*, 2009, 2:42–3:56)

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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