

Running head: WOMEN WARRIORS

WOMEN WARRIORS: EXPLORING THE VARIOUS DIMENSIONS OF FEMALE  
SERVICE-MEMBERS' ROLE IDENTITIES

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# WOMEN WARRIORS

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## Abstract

This qualitative study provides an in-depth exploration into the experiences of female service members who served in various branches of the United States military after 9/11/2001. Aiming to address the limited research on female service member experiences, this investigation sought to understand how lived experiences of being a female military service member may contribute to the development and shifts of multiple dimensions of role identities. Six female service members, ages 26-56, participated in semi-structured interviews that offered them the platform to openly discuss various facets of their life experiences prior to, during, and following (if applicable) their military service, and how those experiences may have influenced their identity and sense of self over time. Through a grounded theory analysis of the data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), a number of major thematic areas emerged that highlighted the confusion around expectations of women and their roles both in civilian society as well as in the military. There are various tensions and binds that delineate each culture's perceptions and expectations of women. Similarly, the women received conflicting messages about femininity vs. warrior and leadership norms, and these messages subsequently impacted the women, their relationships with others, and how they viewed their sense of self. Findings suggest female service members experience significant shifts in their identities upon entering the military and throughout their service in response to events in their environment. Additionally, the women who experienced role conflict or had difficulty negotiating the intersectionality of their identities tended to experience feelings of isolation, alienation, guilt, and shame. The discussion section is largely driven by the data and includes the investigator's ideas for directions for future research as well as recommendations for interventions that have broader implications for working with female service members.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

### **Identity**

Identity is theorized as being composed of both the internal self and the roles that one fills in society (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Identities help individuals construct narratives that help them to organize and to make meaning of events that occur throughout their lives. One's understanding of who he or she is, is linked to external social categories and groups. Since individuals are typically embedded in multiple social contexts, they can hold multiple roles in multiple groups and therefore have multiple identities that intersect (i.e. gender, culture, developmental stage, etc.). An individual's multiple identity roles can present competing or conflicting expectations for their behavior. Stryker (1980) suggests that an individual's level of commitment to an identity, as well as the hierarchical salience of an identity (the relative importance of an identity), influences the way one behaves. Identity theory therefore focuses on these hierarchical roles and expectations to offer predictions about behavior. In any situation, an individual may enact any role identity that she holds, but the ordering of the identities in the hierarchy determines which she is most likely to enact in any given situation (Stryker, 1980). There is a reciprocal relationship between the frequency with which a role is enacted, and the level of commitment one has to an identity. Stryker (1980) further asserts that when a particular role identity is more salient, and the individual is more committed to it, the individual will be more motivated to maintain congruence between her behavior and role expectations by becoming further involved in activities that confirm the identity. It is of particular importance to understand the meaning and salience of identities as well as any disruptions in those identities because discrepancies in identity have been associated with self-esteem, stress, and general well-being (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Marcussen, Ritter, & Safron, 2004).

Burke and Stets (2009) furthered identity theory in their suggestion that people have an internal mechanism that explains how they maintain congruity between their role identities and behavior. This line of thinking was drawn from Powers' (2005) perceptual control theory, which asserts that when external input enters a system, it is compared to the system's standard. Any discrepancies between the input and standard result in an error message, which subsequently motivates the system to correct for the discrepancy. Identity can be viewed as a similar dynamic process. When applied to identity, this theory suggests that when individuals experience feedback from the environment, they reflexively compare that feedback to their perception of themselves. Any discrepancy between the environment and the self, results in distress, which subsequently initiates an adjustment process in which the person is motivated to change their behavior to re-establish equilibrium. If the individual repeatedly receives environmental feedback that is discrepant from her role identity standard, she will likely either adjust her identity or exit the role or environment. For example, research on individuals who identify as multiracial found that receiving discrepant appraisals from others regarding their beliefs about their racial identity induced stress and motivated behavior and identity change (Campbell & Troyer, 2007).

The area of military role identity development and its impact on psychological functioning is an emerging topic that has not received much scholarly attention to date. Less research has explored the intersectionality of role-expectations associated with being both a U.S. Military service member and being a woman. Though research on female service members has been growing, much of the research is problem-based and quantitative. The purpose of this study is to explore how lived experiences of being a female military service member may contribute to

the development and shifts of multiple dimensions of role identities, and how these dimensions may subsequently impact mental health outcomes and general well-being.

### **Women in the U.S. Military**

Given that the number of women serving in the military has been increasing and is expected to continually increase in the coming years, it is important to understand whether there are gender-specific factors related to military identity development and deployment related stressors. According to the Department of Defense (2017), female service members make up approximately 16% of the military. The number of female officers has been steadily increasing as well, and as of March 2017, they made up approximately 17% of all officers. Per Mankowski et al. (2015), the number of women in service is projected to increase to 20% by 2020. Over time, it is expected that more women will also serve in higher rank positions in the military, given that the percentage of women in military academies is also increasing, and is currently around 24% (Department of Defense, 2017).

The military has historically been an organization dominated by males and tended to exclude women from certain specialties. Women have served in the military in many capacities other than as nurses dating back to the Women's Army Corps of WWII. Following the Gulf War (1991), changes in legislation and the Department of Defense policy allowed women to enter combat-related support positions, including military police, medics, and eventually cultural support teams, but women were still barred from serving in infantry, armor, special forces, and other combat roles (Donegan, 1996). However, in reality, many service-women already faced combat and served under fire. With the initiation of the Global War on Terror (October 2001 - present), women's roles in conflict expanded even further (Street, Vogt, & Dutra, 2009). In 2016,

additional changes in policy lifted the ban on women in combat, and all occupational specialties were opened to women (Pellerin, 2015).

Women's increasing presence in the U.S. Military has challenged the structure of military culture, and society's perceptions of what it means to be a soldier. The military has developed a unique culture that is isolated from that of the larger U.S. society, and is bound by its own values, norms, structure, and rules (Redmond et al., 2015). Although each of the five branches of the military has its own set of unique values, the entire military values the collective, training and self-improvement, engagement in the community, personal responsibility, discipline, sacrifice, trust, and courage, among other things. In times of war, military culture also emphasizes cohesiveness, strength, and collectiveness. The "warrior ethos" is another unifying value of military culture that emphasizes mission over all else, never accepting defeat or quitting, and never leaving behind a brother (Redmond et al., 2015). It became a codified statement within the military in 2003, and as a norm, sets the expectation of what it means to identify as a warrior. In many societies, the image of a warrior has typically been portrayed as a muscular, brave man. Female service-members' gender and socialized behaviors may therefore represent the antithesis of the belief of what it means to be the ideal warrior, or soldier. Female service-members are then in the position of not only leaving their civilian identity upon entering the military, but also having to navigate defining what it means to be both a woman and a service member, a traditionally male role, at the same time. In the literature, this has been described as the "Female Soldier Paradox" (Prividera & Howard, 2012).

To fully integrate individuals in military culture, the military uses certain methods, including boot camp or basic training, to minimize individual differences and initiate trainees into the larger collective. Basic training separates the civilian from their civilian life, friends and

family, and places them into an exhaustive training process. While in basic training, the individual is stripped of his or her civilian identity and is then indoctrinated and adopts military cultural norms.

Pawelczyk (2014) identified the military as not only a gendered organization, but as an organization that is also “gendering, gender-granting, or gender-defining,” meaning that it defines and re-defines the established societal gender order. Now, with all roles open to women in the military, the stereotypical image of a warrior is being challenged. Therefore, while male and female service members face many of the same stressors during service, and upon returning home, female veterans may face unique challenges related to being a gender minority within the military.

Research has suggested that some of these challenges may include identity blending, perceived unit cohesion, social support, and sexual violence, among others (Demers, 2013). Women actively re-define what it means to have the identity of a soldier and learn to “manage their femaleness by blending” any feminine qualities (Howard & Prividera, 2004). Blending is the process by which an individual simultaneously emphasizes and minimizes her femininity to be both masculine enough to fit in with the men in her unit, but not so masculine as to be perceived as threatening. One study that reviewed taped interviews of female soldiers for themes of gender identity within the military found that gender was both “distanced from and relied upon by the female war veterans to build their professional identity, further testifying to the existence of structural ambiguity for women soldiers,” (Prividera & Howard, 2012). Suter et al. (2006) studied the experiences of women veterans of the volunteer emergency services in the Navy, most of whom were from WWII, and found that many of their participants described that their sense of self and identity began to change through their military experiences. Participants



also indicated that this shift in identity was associated with difficulties transitioning back into the civilian world, particularly in fulfilling traditional female roles. This often resulted in a sense of loneliness and isolation, and some of the women had to re-identify with their pre-service identity. Other women veterans describe mourning who they were before serving, expressed feeling a loss of their sense of self, and a need to re-compose a new identity (Demers, 2013). Additionally, it may be the case that the warrior ethos has contributed to some of society's perception that women are not in fact "real veterans," and are unsure of how to integrate the Veteran woman identity, which results in veterans feeling unsupported and invalidated for their service (Street et al., 2009).

### **Sexual Violence and Gender Harassment**

Sexual violence and gender harassment are among the challenges that women face while serving in the military that contribute to persistent difficulties both during and after service (Demers, 2013). Military sexual trauma (MST) contributes to a variety of health and mental health difficulties including PTSD, substance use disorders, depressive disorders, etc. (Katz et al., 2007). Research on MST reports varied prevalence rates on sexual violence. This may be due to several factors, including varied definitions of MST, as well as underreporting due to fear of retaliation, denial, fear of stigma, and shame (Department of Defense, SAPR, 2017; Katz et al., 2012). According to the Department of Defense Sexual Assault Prevention and Responses (SAPR) report on sexual assault in the military (Department of Defense, SAPR, 2017), 4.3 percent of active duty women and .6 percent of active duty men indicated experiencing sexual assault within the past year (approximately 14,900 service members). Though these numbers appear to reflect a decrease in the rates of sexual violence, its continued occurrence and high

prevalence warrants attention due to the significant impact it has on service members' mental health and well-being.

Military culture requires unit cohesion, and a sense of trust and reliance on other service members. Women in the military who have been sexually assaulted, or victims of gender harassment often describe feeling unsafe in their unit, as they are forced to interact with the perpetrator daily (Kimmerling et al., 2007). Particularly in times of war, women who have been assaulted may also feel trapped and forced to “rely on their perpetrators or friends of their perpetrators in combat for healthcare, promotions, or simply to do their jobs” (Katz et al., 2012). Additionally, both within and outside of the military, individuals who are sexually assaulted may be perceived by others as weak, or may be blamed for the trauma, concepts that are in contrast with the warrior ethos identity. It is important to explore how military sexual trauma and gender harassment impact women service members' sense of self and identity.

### **Identity and Reintegration Difficulties**

Many veterans also experience difficulties upon reintegrating into civilian society after a deployment. Research estimates that between 19 and 42% of returning veterans from the Global War on Terror (GWOT) experience alienation, medical, and mental health difficulties upon returning home (Kimerling et al., 2010). In narratives of women veterans of the GWOT, some described themselves as “ticking time bombs” upon returning home, suppressing feelings like anxiety and anger that emerged at unexpected times, and were extremely difficult to cope with (Demers, 2013). Many veterans share this experience, and there is no clear-cut way to identify who will experience difficulties post-deployment. It is similarly difficult to facilitate a successful readjustment because oftentimes symptoms do not appear until several months after returning home (Katz et al., 2010).

Few studies have looked at veterans' perspectives on factors that may be contributing to this difficulty with readjustment, however, Demers (2011) noted that veterans often described feeling caught between two cultures, and had difficulty reconciling their military and civilian identities. Similarly, Main (1995) stated: "It is often the case that individuals find themselves living between two social contexts that offer incompatible cultural narratives," and this may be what contributes to poorer mental health outcomes. When veterans return to civilian culture, they are straddled between their military identity (warrior ethos) values of commitment to your unit and nation, sacrifice, discipline, obedience, duty, and honor (among others), and the values of the more individualistic civilian society (Redmond et al., 2015). This civilian-military cultural gap, evidenced by these conflicting values, likely contributes to the difficulty that veterans experience upon returning home (Collins, 1998).

### **Benefits of the Current Study**

Orazem et al. (2016) describes that a major limitation of prior research on military identity's role in readjustment is that it includes very few women's responses, which is an important limitation because of the unprecedented increase in the number of women enlisting in the military. It is likely that there are additional factors related to female service members' experience of the military and their identities that have yet to be uncovered, since this is the first time in our history that there have been so many women in service, and that there have been any women serving in combat roles. To further identify factors that may contribute to readjustment and subsequent mental health, researchers may look to qualitative research to use the narratives that our female service members share to find meaning and understand their unique experiences. It is important to do so because negotiating these challenges may have a substantial impact on individuals' mental health and well-being (Street et al., 2009). Once these factors have been

identified, researchers can then explore their relationship to mental health outcomes. This study aims to explore some of the factors that differentially impact the military identity development of female service members.

It is therefore important to evaluate how the complex and multidimensional nature of identity impacts this understudied population. The unique needs of women veterans are complex and span all areas of life, including health care, sexual assault, employment, finance, housing, and social/interpersonal issues. Additionally, military and veterans' culture are not necessarily perceived as welcoming to women and does not afford them equal consideration, as evidenced by their limited participation in veterans' organizations and rates of accessing healthcare (Street et al., 2009). Given that the number of women in the military is increasing and will continue to increase dramatically over the next several decades, beginning to understand their experience of identity and its impact on their functioning through qualitative research can help in the development of policy and practice to improve services for our female veterans when they return home.

## Chapter II: Methods

This study employed a combination of qualitative research methodology as well as self-report measures to understand the experiences of female service-members who served in the U.S. military after September 11, 2001. This chapter will outline the use of qualitative methodology and its appropriateness for exploring the multitude of experiences and intersectionality of female service-members' role identities. Data analysis procedures, questions utilized in the semi-structured interview, self-report measures, criteria for recruitment, and participant composition will also be discussed.

### **Qualitative Methods**

Qualitative methodology was selected for this research study for several key reasons. First, qualitative methods are often used in research when little is known about an area, or when many concepts related to an area have yet to be identified or developed (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Qualitative studies are therefore particularly relevant when the goal of a study is to explore and expand one's understanding of a topic. Understanding lived experiences is one broad area of study that is well suited for qualitative research methods (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Qualitative methodology has also proven to be useful when a researcher does not have a specific hypothesis. Through qualitative processes, researchers are often able to generate relevant themes that may then be used to inform future research questions and hypotheses. For studies with small sample sizes, employing qualitative methodology is similarly appropriate and feasible because it is exploratory and flexible in nature. Another important aspect of qualitative research methods is that they support researchers who hope that their work will have implications for nonacademic audiences.

This study aims to expand understanding of female service members' lived experiences of their military service and perceived shifts in their identities. To date, there have been few studies that have explored this area. Therefore, the purpose of this study is well suited for qualitative methods. Similarly, qualitative methods were chosen because the researcher did not have specific hypotheses about what would be found within the data. Rather, the researcher aimed to conduct an exploratory study that would generate common themes regarding female service-members' lived experiences to broaden academic and nonacademic understanding of this population.

### **Grounded Theory**

For this study, qualitative data analysis consisted of the use of the grounded theory approach, which was developed by Corbin and Strauss (1990). Grounded theory allows for a flexible and evolving analysis of qualitative data, with aims to construct theory. Researchers employing grounded theory methodology engage in an analytic process that involves inductions, or generating and verifying concepts. Some grounded theory studies aim to develop new theories that are "grounded" in the data. In such studies, the researcher must also make deductions, in which the researcher formulates hypotheses about relationships between concepts. However, the aim of the current study was to elicit narrative data about the lived experiences of female service-members to understand themes that emerged from interviewing rather than to build a generalizable theory about this population. Therefore, its methodology is guided by the principles of grounded theory, and findings reflect the essence of what participants conveyed during their interviews. These procedures are outlined in greater detail below.

## **Data Analysis**

Analyses of the participants' narratives were based on their responses to a semi-structured interview that involved open-ended questions. The grounded theory approach was chosen for this study because it allowed for a deeper understanding of female service members' experiences across their lives before, during, and after their military service. It involves constant comparative analyses of the data as it is collected, as well as theoretical sampling methods (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Theoretical sampling is a data collection method that requires the researcher to analyze the data as it is gathered, derive concepts from the data, and use questions that arise to guide later data collection. To sample theoretically, the investigator of this study took notes and wrote analytic memos following each interview. The investigator flexibly followed important theoretical leads during subsequent interviews, rather than strictly adhering to an interview protocol (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Throughout data analysis, a coding manual was developed in conjunction with research questions. All interviews were coded using open and axial coding to describe concepts that are indicated within the data. The investigator read through each interview once, and then re-read the interview to begin coding. Open coding refers to the process of identifying concepts, their properties, and dimensions in the data. Axial coding refers to identifying relationships between two or more concepts. The investigator continuously evaluated coding patterns as data was collected to guard against bias. As data was collected and analyzed, themes that appeared repeatedly in different interviews were marked as relevant and were added to the evolving coding manual. Grounded theory also suggests that researchers continue to collect and analyze data until the point of saturation, when the data stops generating new concepts and themes to

code. However, due to the scope of this project, the researcher was restricted to a timeframe, and was unable to recruit enough participants to reach data saturation.

Coding themes were derived from empirical research based on identity development and female service-members' experiences in the military, as well as from participants' direct accounts; specifically, the primary coder sought out themes from interviews with female service-members about a) military culture, b) perceptions of one's sense of self / dimensions of identity, and c) experience of transitions. Although the specific stories told by each woman were different, the themes in the stories were common. The purpose of this grounded theory study was to discover categories and processes grounded in the experience of female service-members who transitioned into, through and (some of whom also transitioned) out of the military. This study was approved by the University Institutional Review Board to ensure the protection of human rights.

### **Semi-Structured Interview (Appendix C)**

After a review of the literature, an interview protocol was developed that consisted of open-ended questions and statements to elicit responses among participants about their military experiences, and the ways in which their experiences may have affected their identity. These questions were reviewed by dissertation committee members, a psychologist who works with military members and their families, and a veteran service officer to ensure clarity. The principal investigator conducted all interviews, and though this interview protocol was followed, questions arose throughout the course of the interviews that were more specific and directed data collection. All interviews took place in private rooms or by telephone. Only the principal investigator and the subject were present in the room.



Female service members were asked to describe how they viewed their identity prior to entering the military and how that view changed during and after their service. They were asked to discuss their boot camp/basic training experiences, their day-to-day experiences within their military unit either while deployed or wherever they were stationed, as well as experiences transitioning out of the military (if relevant). They were also asked to particularly discuss any experiences that may have been specific to being a woman, and whether their experiences had any impact on their view of who they are / their identities.

### **Self-Report Measures**

#### **Demographics Questionnaire (Appendix B)**

Participants completed a demographic questionnaire that was created by the principal investigator and dissertation chair for this study. Participants were asked to disclose their age, ethnicity, marital status, number of children, education level, employment status, military history, involvement with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), etc.

#### **Deployment Risk and Resilience Inventory – 2 (DRRI-2) (see Appendix E)**

Participants were also asked to complete four brief self-report questionnaires that are subscales of the DRRI-2 (Vogt et al., 2013). The DRRI-2 is comprised of 17 scales that measure deployment-related factors that are associated with the post-deployment health and well-being of military veterans. The scales are distinct, but address related factors and demonstrate high internal consistency reliability. Internal consistency reliability ratings averaged at .93. The measure was untitled when distributed to participants, and the subscales were labeled according to titles recommended by the scale developers to reduce response bias. The following scales from the DRRI-2 were administered to participants:

**Combat experiences.** This scale measures exposure to combat-related situations including firing a weapon, being fired on, being attacked or witnessing an attack (e.g., encountering an explosive device), encountering friendly fire, and going on special missions and patrols that involve such experiences. Participants indicate the frequency with which they experienced these objective events and circumstances on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 6 (Almost Daily). Internal consistency reliability ratings were high at .91.

**Aftermath of battle experiences.** This scale measures exposure to the consequences of combat, such as observing or handling human remains, interacting with detainees or prisoners of war (POWs), and observing other consequences of battle or being in a war zone. Participants indicate the frequency with which they experienced these objective events and circumstances on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 6 (Daily or Almost Daily). Internal consistency reliability ratings were high at .92.

**Unit social support.** This scale measures individual's perceptions of receiving assistance and encouragement in the war zone from fellow unit members (i.e., felt a sense of closeness and camaraderie with peers in the unit) and leaders (i.e., felt appreciated by superiors and believed that they were interested in one's personal welfare). Participants respond based on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Internal consistency reliability ratings were high at .96.

**Post-deployment social support.** This scale measures the extent to which family, friends, and individuals within the community provide emotional support and instrumental assistance. Participants respond based on a 5-point Likert scale from

1(Strongly Disagree) to 5(Strongly Agree). Internal consistency reliability ratings were high at .90.

## **Participants**

### **Selection and Recruitment**

The six subjects met the selection criteria for the study. All six participants identified as females who served in the United States military post-9/11/2001. Exclusion criteria included identifying as a male, and/or having discharged from the military prior to 9/11/2001. Study participants were recruited through a recruitment flyer, which was disseminated to various military service organizations (i.e. Veterans Service Offices). Flyers were also posted at the Anxiety Disorders Clinic (ADC), which is a specialty clinic within the Center for Applied Psychology at Rutgers University, where the principal investigator worked as a psychology extern for two years. Participants were also recruited through snowball sampling via word of mouth primarily through other participants. Snowball sampling identified participants living in various states. For these participants, questionnaires were either mailed or emailed by the principal investigator, and telephone interviews were conducted. Six female service members from various branches of the U.S. military were interviewed at a single point in time for approximately two to four hours.

The study did not reach its anticipated sample of 10-15 participants, largely due to difficulty finding participants. Due to a small sample size, the findings of the study are not generalizable to the entire population of female service members of the U.S. military. However, interviewing participants allowed the investigator to generate common themes in participant responses that warrant further investigation in future research.

## **Demographics**

To protect the confidentiality of participants, demographic information will be presented here in aggregate form, and has also been de-identified.

Participants ranged in age from 26 to 56, with a mean age of 35.67 years old. Two participants (33%) identified themselves as Hispanic/Latin(x), specifically of Cuban and Puerto Rican descent. Five participants identified their race as White, and one identified her race as Chinese. Four participants identified as veterans, while two are current service members. Three participants identified themselves as single, one participant is currently married, and two are divorced. Half of the participants have one or more children.

During their interviews, all participants described entering the military at a “young, impressionable age.” At the start of service, they ranged in age from 17 to 21 years old, with a mean age of 18. Three participants enlisted following their high school graduation, two enlisted through a Delayed Entry Program while in high school, and one participated in ROTC prior to becoming an active duty officer following her college graduation.

Among participants, the mean length of military service was 10.83 years with a range of 4 to 35 years. Two participants served in the Active Duty Component of the Air Force, one served in the Active Duty Component of the Army, one served in the National Guard Component of the Army, and two served in multiple branches. The two participants who served in multiple branches both served in the Active Duty Component of the Navy followed by the National Guard Component of the Army. The Marines and Coast Guard were not represented in this sample. Several of the participants were highly decorated and elite service-members who received various awards and recognitions throughout their service. Their current ranks and ranks at

discharge include: Corporal (E4), Sergeant (E5), Staff Sergeant (E5), Sergeant First Class (E7), and Captain (O3).

All participants endorsed being on at least one tour or deployment outside of the continental United States. Four (66%) have been on more than one tour or deployment, and five of the six women (83%) have deployed to combat zones. Participants identified deployments and tours to various locations of operation including Kuwait, Iraq, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the Philippines, and the United Arab Emirates.

Participants were also asked about their involvement with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and services for veterans. One participant reported current involvement with a veteran center. One participant reported that she is registered with the VA. None of the women reported seeking healthcare services from the VA, and instead seek healthcare from outside providers. One participant reported having a service-connected disability, and a second participant reported that she expects to apply for one within the next year.

### **Procedures**

Interested participants were instructed to contact the principal investigator to ensure they met inclusion criteria and to receive information about the purpose of the research and what participation entailed. For individuals who were interested and eligible to participate, the principal investigator scheduled a meeting to conduct the interview. At the meeting, participants were presented with an informed consent page (see Appendix A) for research prior to beginning any questionnaires or interview. The form described the aim of the study, highlighted the voluntary nature of the questions, and provided participants with contact information for the principal investigator and faculty advisor should they have questions or concerns. The form was also reviewed verbally with participants and instructed participants that they may refuse to

answer any questions and stop the interview at any time. This research was confidential. Though research records include some information about the participants, any identifying information was separated from their responses.

Participants who lived outside of the state of New Jersey were offered to engage in a telephone interview. Under those circumstances, participants were mailed an informed consent form, as well as the self-report measures in a pre-stamped envelope. Once the principal investigator received the participant's signed informed consent and completed self-report forms, the participant was contacted to schedule an interview, and the interview was conducted over the phone. Each interview lasted approximately two to four hours. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Participants were told that should they experience psychological distress during or following the interview, the co-investigator, Dr. Thomas J. Morgan, was available for supervision and consultation of the principal investigator. Upon completion of the interview, all participants were debriefed and thanked. Debriefing consisted of a page that includes an overview of the purpose of the study, and suggestions for further reading (see Appendix D). Participants also received contact information for a crisis line, the researcher and the supervising investigator, as well as options for psychological treatment if they experienced distress.

### **Treatment of Data**

Each participant chose a pseudonym that was linked to all data instruments pertaining to the research study. The principal investigator kept a master copy of subject-code assignments in a locked filing cabinet. No persons except for the principal investigator, dissertation committee members, and Rutgers Institutional Review Board (IRB) could connect the participant with her

assigned code. The principal investigator was the only individual who had access to the data, and computer files were password-protected on a password-protected computer.

On all forms filled out by subjects, their code or pseudonym was written at the top, rather than their name. All paper data was kept in a securely locked filing cabinet. The individuals who could request access to this cabinet were the dissertation committee, and Rutgers' IRB.

Following each interview, audio recordings were saved to a password-protected laptop in a password-protected file, and the recording was erased from the recording device. Any identifying information was removed or changed upon transcription, and all documents were password-protected on a password-protected laptop. Transcriptions were verified by listening to the audiotapes to ensure data accuracy. After three years, all documents with identifying information and all audio records will be destroyed by the principal investigator.

### Chapter III: Results

This chapter presents the results of this qualitative study. The purpose of this study was to better understand the lived experiences and identities of female service members and veterans of the GWOT through uncovering dominant themes across narratives in participant's responses. Participants spoke at length about their lived experiences and sense of self prior to entering the military, the decision to enter the military, experiences of basic training and how that impacted their senses of self, experiences during their military service, experiences of transitioning home from deployments, and out of the military into civilian life. Throughout analyses of the interviews, themes were created from statements that were shared by multiple participants and could be abstracted and labeled by the investigator. The following themes emerged consistently across participants' narratives: 1) Pre-military identity, 2) Choosing the military, 3) Military experiences, 4) Gender-related adversity and relationships, 5) "Woman Warrior" identity, 6) Experiences of military separation and readjustment, and 7) Navigating readjustment and hopes for the future. Within each theme, various subthemes emerged that will be identified below.

The chapter will begin with a brief summary of each participant. Their demographic information that was collected from the demographics questionnaire is listed in the methodology and can be found in Tables 1 and 2 in Appendix E. Direct quotations of participant responses are provided within each theme and subtheme to ground the data. A large percentage of the results relied on these direct quotations from participants. The symbols [ ] are used within quotes to indicate words that have been substituted for participants' original phrases. Substitutions were made to provide context for the quote, or when the participant's original phrases included content that might identify the participant or another individual. In addition, ellipses (...) were



used to indicate pauses in speech. Findings and implications from results will be detailed in the subsequent discussion chapter.

### **Participant Profiles**

To provide the reader with an introduction to the women who participated in this study, a brief overview of each participant is provided. Each profile contains only brief glimpses into the rich, personal history of each participant. All names have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

#### **Angela**

Angela is a 28-year-old veteran who served in the National Guard component of the Army for six years during Operation Iraqi Freedom. She has one child, works several part-time jobs, and is attending school to become a Nurse. Her rank at discharge was Corporal (E4) and her military occupational specialty (MOS) was Intelligence Analyst within an aviation unit. She said: "...for each shift, we would get all of this incoming intelligence and we would have to go through it, and we would like to see where our pilots were going on each of the different missions and then pick out what they would need to know, what's relevant to their mission like where they're going, what they're flying over..."

#### **Athena**

Athena is a 34-year-old veteran who enlisted in the Active Duty component of the Army for four years during Operation Iraqi Freedom. She was formerly married to her high school sweetheart, an Army veteran, with whom she has two children. Athena has completed two master's degrees and currently works full-time. Her rank at discharge was Corporal (E4) and her MOS was 92A, Automated Logistical Specialist. Primary responsibilities of 92A include

supervising and performing management or warehouse functions to maintain equipment records and parts.

### **Kate**

Kate is a 31-year-old veteran who enlisted for three years in the Active Duty component of the Navy, as well as six years in the National Guard component of the Army during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Kate knew she wanted to join the military from the time she was a young girl after she watched *GI Jane* (1997), a film featuring a woman in the military. After separating from the Navy, she longed to return to military life and re-enlisted in the Army National Guard. She is now working full-time and is also a full-time student. She described her rate in the Navy as an Avionics Electronics Technician. Kate had a similar MOS in the Army, 15T, and was a technical inspector responsible for the maintenance of UH-60 Helicopters, also known as Black Hawks. Her rank at discharge from the Army was Sergeant (E5).

### **Nelly**

Nelly is a 39-year-old veteran who enlisted for six years in the Active Duty component of the Air Force during Operation Enduring Freedom. Nelly's fighting spirit and grit were recognized as she was often the first woman in her field to join certain task forces and competitions in the military. She is one of the two participants whose service spanned pre-and-post 9/11/2001. Though she has separated from the military, Nelly is passionate about helping other veterans and hopes to co-found a non-profit in the coming months. Her rank at discharge was Staff Sergeant (E5) and her MOS was 3POX1, Security Forces (military police).

### **Helen**

Helen is a 56-year-old service member who first enlisted in the Active Duty component of the Navy. She is married to a veteran, whom she met while serving in the Navy, and they have

two children. Helen separated from the Navy to care for her young daughter, but approximately four years later, re-enlisted in the National Guard component of the Army and has continued to serve for the past 25 years. From the moment she joined the military, she knew it was a career decision. Helen is the second participant whose service spanned pre-and-post 9/11/2001, and she is the one participant who experienced deployment as a mother. Her current rank is Sergeant First Class (E7) and she described her MOS as the following:

The pilots, they had those birds up in the air immediately. When I tell you immediately, immediately they were up in the air and they depended on us for that. That communications from the pilot to you know the TOC (Tactical Operations Center), they depended on it went through us it went through signal. So, we had to constantly make sure that our communications were at a 5 level so that they could hear us loud and clear. That was a huge responsibility that we had because if they couldn't talk, they were grounded and that was our only defense because once the Chinooks went up they would take out whatever the insurgency attack was wherever it was out on that FOB (Forward Operating Base)...And I'm already a victim's advocate and a casualty notification officer for the state. So, I have a lot of experience dealing with sticky situations you know having a level mind under very trying circumstances.

### **Jennifer**

Jennifer is a 26-year-old officer in the Active Duty component of the Air Force. She joined the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) in her first year of college and became an Active Duty service member after graduating with her bachelor's degree. She plans to separate from the military within the next few years and hopes to pursue a master's degree. Her current rank is Captain (O3) and her MOS is Air Battle Manager.

### **Theme I: Pre-Military Identity**

Though percentages differ by branch, over 40% of enlisted recruits across branches are between the ages of 17-24 (Department of Defense, Pop Rep, 2017), and are therefore entering the military in their late adolescence, a key developmental period, when adolescents are in the processing of identity development. This was the case for the women interviewed in this study, as they described entering the military at a “young, impressionable age.” At the start of service, they ranged in age from 17 to 21 years old, with a mean age of 18. The period of late adolescence in the United States is a transitional period often marked by young adults leaving home to foster independence and an exploration of one’s sense of self. As is common during this period, many of the women in this study described feeling unsure of who they were and who they wanted to become and saw the military as a means of discovering themselves. They also commonly described their pre-military selves as rebelling against the norm, as having a desire to assume a non-traditional female adult role, and as highly driven with desires to excel.

#### **Subtheme I: Adolescence and Looking for a Sense of Self**

When asked how they viewed their sense of self prior to entering the military, Kate, Nelly, Helen, and Jennifer expressed that they hadn’t yet conceptualized or identified a concrete sense of self and were searching for an identity and sense of purpose.

**Jennifer:** I felt pretty lost, but I don’t know if that’s unusual for a freshman in college. I definitely didn’t know what I was doing...all of my roommates had majors already declared, and they felt...they looked like they knew what their plan was. And I was intimidated by my lack of plan, I guess...I honestly, I didn’t really have any really...realization. Like I didn’t have a female identity. I wasn’t sexually active. I was just still a kid in my mind, honestly, like I didn’t have a lot of experiences.

**Nelly:** My sense of self was...I didn’t know who I was because I was just trying to be what everybody else wanted me to be in order to survive [where I grew up].

**Helen:** I had no help there. I mean, I was pioneering this on my own...you know, my sense of worth.

**Kate:** I didn't really think about my ethnicity at all. I didn't think about me being a woman entering into the military. I didn't really think about any of that at that point.

### **Subtheme II: "Swimming Against the Stream"**

When considering their identities prior to entering the military, all six of the women described various ways in which they "swam against the stream," or "went against the grain."

**Athena:** We had to take out our piercings [when we joined the military]. I had a lot of piercings at the time.

**Nelly:** I had some trouble adjusting and fitting in. So, I got into a little bit of trouble when I was a teenager, so I had a few bad years.

**Angela:** I was...sort of a loner.

**Helen:** I grew up in an environment where I had to be strong because I couldn't lean on anyone...But I didn't feel like a strong person. That came after the fact. I didn't feel strong. I just felt like...like a rebel without a cause. You know, I just felt like the salmon that was swimming against the stream because I wanted to do the kinds of things that nobody else wanted to do. I just felt like a rebel.

**Jennifer:** I wore like neon colors, had a lip piercing. I was really like a loud character in terms of how I would appear.

**Desire to have a non-traditional female role.** Athena, Kate, Nelly, and Jennifer further described strong desires to swim against the stream by defying traditional or stereotypical female role identities as adults. They tended to describe a stereotypical female role as a primary caregiver in the home who perhaps also works, and as someone who is subordinate to her spouse. Though they did not necessarily have a clear vision of their intended female role, they all envisioned themselves as embodying an alternative to societal norms, which was part of the reason why joining the military appealed to them.

**Nelly:** Growing up, women were supposed to be homemakers. The husband is the main breadwinner, and you'd just stay home and cook and clean and have babies. But, like I said, I've always had a little rebel spirit. I've always kind of been like, I'm going to do what I wanna do. I'm not going to fit into this mold. Like for some reason, as a child, I knew what was expected of me. But at the same time, I never really saw kids and like that

perfect family in my future, like a husband and children and me being a stay at home Suzy homemaker. I never really...that wasn't my ultimate goal as a kid. I didn't know what my goal was, but I didn't see that...like it was never my number one priority.

**Kate:** I assumed that as a woman in the military, we would just be doing everything, not just you know 'stay at home, take care of the kids...' the kinds of things that my grandmother did, or the 'have a full-time job and support a family' like my mother did. I just felt like I was kind of making my own definition of the whole female role. You know what I mean?

Jennifer and Athena similarly described wanting to embody non-traditional female roles and looked to their mothers as role models of independent women who defied gender norms.

**Jennifer:** Where I grew up, the topic of a female was more of the southern style female where they're the ones that have babies and kind of just do the home kind of self, so I was trying to not be that female...My mom is extremely independent, so she raised me that way, and I was never really comfortable with the mentality that the woman is the one at home and generally the one doing kind of...the more 'womanly' duties. I didn't want anything to do with that.

**Athena:** My mom wasn't with anyone when I was growing up. She didn't have a boyfriend. She wasn't with our father...so, a lot of what she did was on her own. So, I mean, I think I kind of resembled her in a way, you know, like independent.

### **Subtheme III: Achievement Oriented and Desires to Excel**

Four of the women described themselves as achievement oriented and as having a strong desire to excel, an aspect of identity that aligns with the warrior ethos.

**Athena:** I mean, I knew I was a little bit different from people, maybe, and that I was going to eventually be someone in my life. You know, someone important... I think I was always trying to be better in one way or another. I always had a hidden drive. I just didn't know what it was or how to channel it.

**Nelly:** I wanted to excel.

**Kate:** We're Puerto Rican and Chinese. I was raised primarily Chinese. So, my family...their idea of the American Dream was to go to school, get a good job, or go to school, go to college, get a good job. And their idea was that like a desk job or something in an office was a good job to them. I already knew I wasn't going to do that.

**Helen:** When I went into the Navy at 19, I mean, I went in barrels blazing. I was going to knock that out. That was going to be a homerun for me.

**Subtheme IV: Caregiver and Confidante**

Only two of the participants described themselves as caregivers prior to entering the military. However, their statements are noted here because it was anticipated that this theme would appear throughout participants' narratives, given that caregiving is often thought of as a stereotypically feminine quality. Of note, taking care of others and/or serving as a confidante appeared in Nelly and Helen's narratives as roles that they held throughout their service as well.

**Athena:** I just helped support my mom whenever possible. You know, tried to hold down the family, and I cooked for them. I was the middle child and the only capable female of actually helping out and raising them.

**Nelly:** "I've always been a nurturer. Like I would take care of people and try to help them with whatever...for some reason, people have just divulged shit to me... I guess people feel like they can tell me stuff."

**Theme 2: Choosing the military**

All six participants joined the military in late adolescence. Their paths to entering the military shared some commonalities, however, there were also differences in the ways they became recruits. While Angela, Helen, and Nelly enlisted following high school, Jennifer joined the military through the ROTC program at her university and became an officer upon graduating from college.

Athena and Kate decided to join the military when they were in high school and enlisted through the Delayed Entry Program (also known as the Delayed Enlistment Program). The DEP allowed Athena and Kate to enlist while they were still in high school into the inactive reserves, with an agreement that once they graduated, they would leave for basic training as active duty service members. While in this program, Athena and Kate often met with their recruiter and engaged in various physical trainings, meetings and classes.

**Athena:** We signed the contract to go into the Delayed Entry Program, and that was after 9/11 happened. So, we knew what we were getting into, if it was to come down to it...We became really close with the recruiter. I think we just fell into the traditional, you know,

go out there and recruit kids from high school, you know, pamper them. Buy them breakfast. We were all in. So that's what kind of got us on the hook, and then we realized...we're going to the Army now.

**Kate:** I enlisted when I was 16, but you can't really enlist until you're 18...you can't ship out until you're 18. So, from the point I enlisted to the point I shipped out, I was in the Delayed Entry Program. It's just basically, you meet up with the recruiters, they explain to you all those things that you should know for basic training like you know they get you to do PT (physical training) a lot. They teach you General Orders...everything. Because I was in the Navy, they taught you about the ships and the Navy history. So basically, all this stuff you start to learn because basic training's not just about like the physical aspect of the military like you had to learn about the history...the rank structure.

### **Subtheme I: Young, Impressionable, and Uncertain of the Future**

As mentioned in subtheme I of theme I (adolescence and looking for a sense of self), all participants joined the military in their late adolescence, and many described not having a concrete sense of self. When reflecting upon the reasons they chose to enter the military, five of the women described additionally feeling uncertain of their plans for their future. They saw the military as a transition or placeholder until they could decide.

**Angela:** I didn't really know what I wanted to go to college for yet, so it was just, sort of like a rash decision.

**Athena:** I didn't really have any plans to attend college. You know, I didn't really know what I was interested in during that time, so I was just going with the flow until the recruiter came to our school.

**Kate:** I was a senior in high school...I know everyone was applying to college. And I wasn't.

**Nelly:** My Dad's job moved us down to New Jersey...I had some trouble adjusting and fitting in, so I got into a little bit of trouble when I was a kid, a teenager, so I had a few bad years. But after probably around 18 or 19, I started to get my act together and I was like, I need to start figuring out what I'm going to do with my life.

**Jennifer:** About halfway through my first semester [of college] I signed up for ROTC, and within three months, I was contracted in. At that point, I became a reserve military member...I guess I really didn't have a plan for why I was in college, or any idea of what I wanted to do after, and I was also having some financial issues. So, I went to the ROTC office one day just to talk to them, and they told me about the scholarships they have available and how they can help obviously provide you with a plan for your life. I just went in on a Tuesday and signed up on Wednesday, so it was pretty quick.



**Subtheme II: Choosing a Branch**

In describing their reasons for choosing the military, and more specifically choosing what branch they would enter, two of the women described making informed decisions regarding their choice of branch, while the other women indicated that these decisions were often made impulsively, or passively (“going with the flow,” “it just happened”).

**Informed decisions.** Jennifer and Nelly were the two participants who described choosing the Air Force with intention because they believed it would offer them the path to a career or higher education that they were looking for.

**Jennifer:** It was always Air Force. There was never...I never talked to another branch, it was Air Force or bust, I guess. In high school, I spent some time talking to an enlisted army recruiter and I thought for a long time that maybe I would do the enlisted side of the army, but just the social stigma with the Air Force are much better. Like the Air Force treats people better, and got to be a little bit more of a branch for the higher educated, I guess.

Unlike the other participants, Nelly knew that she wanted to become a nurse after graduating from high school. She considered joining the military after a coworker told her he received his nursing degree through the military. She ended up enlisting with the Air Force because the recruiter told her that she could be a medical technician, but misled her into signing up to be placed wherever she was needed. She said:

I went around to explore my options. You know I looked at the Army, I looked at the Marines... The Navy I didn't... I was like no to the whole being on a boat for a year. So, the Navy wasn't really anything I was interested in. And then I went to the Air Force. As I spoke with each recruiter, I was like alright, how would I get the job that I want – I wanted to go in as a medical tech and then get to get my nursing degree through the military all while serving, but this was prior to you know September 11th. So, you know there was tensions, but it was nothing like you know what it is today or after 2000 and September 11. So, I ended up with the Air Force because my recruiter told me he's like listen if you go in 'open general'... which means that they can put you in any job that they are lacking personnel... and he's like 'If you go in open general, you know, you'll be a medical tech I promise. Just bring letters of recommendation, bring transcripts from your school. And you'll be a med-tech. No problem.' 'Good, sign on the dotted line.' And

me being an idiot. I was like Oh OK. I listened to him. Well open general means they'll plop you wherever.

**Impulsive or passive.** When asked about their decision to join the military, and how they chose their service branch, Angela, Athena and Kate described their decisions to enter the military and choice of branch as either impulsive or passive.

**Angela:** [The National Guard] was what the advertisement was for. It was that, I mean, it was mostly just like that's what was being advertised. Like if it was active duty, I probably would've done active duty.... It was sort of a rash decision, you know, because it just came up. It really was, just it happened really fast...I think I got something in the mail, and I was like oh, I should look into that. Then I talked to a recruiter, and next thing I know, he's at my house, convincing my parents because I wasn't 18 yet, so they had to sign. It just kind of happened all of a sudden, you know, and I didn't stop it.

**Kate:** You know what, it just happened that way. The high school I went to had recruiters right around the block, and they were all together like on the same street. The Army recruiter wasn't there. The Air Force recruiter wouldn't talk to me because I was so young. And then eventually I had to decide between the Navy and the Marine Corps, and I talked to both recruiters. Then when I went home, I saw a commercial for the Navy that I really liked. So, I decided to join the Navy then. I mean it was, I was a victim of circumstance, it wasn't any real decision...I'll be honest, I really didn't research much, and I just kind of went with the flow, and that's kind of where the flow went.

**Athena:** The announcement came over the loud speakers that they were having the ASFAB (Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery) test in the library. Something in me just kind of decided to go to the library and take the test. I don't know, maybe just to see how well I would do, or just to see what the test was about... I don't think I necessarily wanted to join the Army. Like I said, I go for challenges, I probably would have wanted to be a Marine to tell you the truth (laughs). And I think that my boyfriend didn't want to go for the Marines. He felt better going for the army. He actually...he probably even wanted to go for the Navy if I'm not mistaken. But the Navy to me.... and I know that sounds crazy, but the Navy to me didn't sound like a challenge. It sounded like a cop out. And I didn't really feel that urge to be in the Navy. You know I think that's probably why we went with a happy medium. I wanted to go harder and he wanted to go softer, so...

### **Subtheme III: Benefits**

Several of the women described feeling drawn to the military because of the many benefits it offers, including improvement of social, financial, or educational status, adventure,

and escape from difficulties at home. These benefits were significant in their decisions to join the military.

### **Improving social, financial, and educational status.**

**Athena:** I didn't want to be in the position of being raised in the projects. I wanted out. I wanted a better life. I never had a house. Things like that came into play. And like I said, we didn't have money.

**Kate:** We didn't have a lot of money. I didn't think my parents were going to pay for college. I don't think they really thought of that either. So, they were...I know my father was very excited that the military was going to pay for college, so they weren't opposed to it. They supported me very much.

**Nelly:** I wanted to go in as a medical tech and then get to get my nursing degree through the military all while serving. I've always been patriotic, so I know that is also a part of it. But I went for the college, and you know, to see the world.

### **Adventure.**

**Angela:** I joined in the first place because I didn't want to have a boring life.

**Helen:** I was 18 when I graduated. I was 18. I enlisted when I was 19 because it was almost a year later, but all through 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> grade I wanted to go into the Army. I wanted to travel.

## **Subtheme IV: Escape**

Three participants viewed military service as a means of escaping their current situation. They described home lives that included struggling family members and/or abuse, and cited these situations as one factor in their decision to join the military.

### **Struggling family members.**

**Angela:** I mean like home life, I got along with my parents fine. I think my brothers were both pretty deep into drugs at that point, I don't think I got along with my sister terribly well either.

**Athena:** I would go to school, and afterwards I would go to work. I would take the shift after 12 until about 8:00 or 9:00 at night. That was almost every day. I lived at home with my mom and helped take care of my sister, who has Down Syndrome. I have three brothers,

but I rarely ever saw them during that time because they were at school, and if they were home, they were locked away in their rooms doing their own thing.

**Abuse.** Helen described a history of abuse, its impact on her sense of self, and how her home life contributed to her desire to escape to the military. She said:

I wanted to get out from under the umbrella of my family...My sister had taken sexual liberties on me my whole life. My sister told me that you know I was fat, I was ugly and stupid, I was this and I was that, so by the time I got to the 10th grade, I just...I had had enough. I just wanted to prove myself and wanted to be my own person. I wanted to move forward. And I met a guy who was gung ho Army and he liked me. He actually asked me to marry him and join the Army with him, and I was like no, I'll join the Army, but I'm not getting married at 18...I bought into that I wasn't smart. I bought into that that you know I wasn't going to amount to anything, that I was ugly, that nobody cared about me...I just internalized that I wasn't good enough, I wasn't good enough, I wasn't good enough. And you know, after I had that break up with my very first serious boyfriend, that just was the icing on the cake for me... I was like not no hell no. And I enlisted.

**Other.** Of note, Kate reported aspirations to join the military since childhood, and Nelly and Helen identified joining because of a sense of patriotism. Though these categories are not included as primary subthemes, they are included because they are commonly identified in the literature as reasons individuals choose to join the military.

### **Theme III: Military Experiences**

This theme details participants' experiences in basic training and throughout their military service that were common across their narratives and appeared to influence the development of their identities.

#### **Subtheme I: Basic Training and Introduction to Military Culture**

To begin the transition from civilian adolescent to military service-member, all participants, apart from Jennifer (officer), entered basic training or boot camp. They described this as a period of learning and development, where they experienced culture shock and many physical and mental challenges. Athena described how the challenges that she faced throughout basic training contributed to the development of her service-member identity. She said:

Your body is going through so many transformations because now you're starting to run miles when you didn't even run 500 feet, never mind like 3, 5, 6, 8, 10 miles at a time. You learn a lot about yourself. Going through those stages, you know, you constantly have to talk your mind out of things, and you know that your body can endure a lot more. It broke us down little by little, but then it does set standards and you know change your way of thinking through the entire basic training.

**Shocked or trapped.** Though they expected military life to be different from home life, Angela, Athena, and Nelly were shocked by the physical and emotional intensity of basic training, and as a result, initially questioned their decision to enter the military.

**Angela:** For the first I think like week or two I remember being like 'What did I do! I can't get out of this. Like you signed the contract. Can't get out of it.'

**Athena:** That summer right after graduation, as soon as we got back from the shore, we were thrown right into basic training. I mean, it was a shock to the system, only because we've come from New Jersey and we're teenagers. We weren't used to being athletic, or working out, or being disciplined, you know, we just did whatever we wanted because that's what being a civilian is all about. Once we got into basic training, I mean, obviously, the first thing they do to you is break you down so they can start building you back up.

**Nelly:** So here I am like this little wild child you know from New Jersey. And I think the first day of basic training I was like 'what did I...' As soon as we pulled up on the bus to the base our instructors came on the bus they're screaming at us. And I'm like (whispers) 'what did I sign up for...no! Like how long do we have to do this? Three months of this crap'... You just go from having all this freedom in your life, to down to the most minuscule thing is controlled. And demanded of you. And the rigorous activities throughout training that you put your body through that you've never been put through before especially a young kid you know. It's just...it is a total shock.

**Civilian identity breakdown.** Angela, Nelly, Athena, Helen, and Kate described some of the training tactics that were utilized to break down their civilian identities, and re-build a military identity of discipline, obedience, duty, collectivism, etc.

**Angela:** We had just all gotten out of the showers. [The drill sergeants] decided to get pissed off... So, then we were all in the sand wet. It's like, you know... smoked means like you're rolling around in the dirt, doing push-ups and this and that, stupid, stupid things. I mean it's kind of like... people think you just do push-ups like if you mess up. It was that, but it's not just push-ups, you know. Whatever they can make you do. It's always something sort of... I mean it gets funny after a while but at first you feel really stupid. Anytime someone messes up, all of you [get smoked].

**Nelly:** The first day of basic training was just insane. We grabbed all our stuff, get up into the barracks and they have all the beds aligned perfectly like inches apart. They're all measured. Everything's perfect. And I grab my bags and I'm like walking down the aisle banging the beds out of alignment. And I'm laughing like oh my god. All of a sudden... \*Boom, boom, boom\* someone comes running at me. I hear it behind me. Grabs me and slams me against the locker. And it was a woman. It was the woman training instructor and she is in my face and she's scary and was like 'WHAT'S SO FUNNY!' Starts going crazy on me and I'm just like... it was a reality check. I was like alright, Nelly get your shit together like these people ain't playin'. This is not any time for laughter anymore. And I just felt my face just like get so red and my ears were burning and I was like OK. And that's when I like snapped into 'All right. This is your reality. Now time to start playing along.'

**Athena:** There was no walking. Walking didn't exist. You were either marching or you were running. There is no other way... They would play like this really loud heavy metal music when you're trying to sleep just to stress you out... The first day was the first time I actually got in trouble... I didn't know what bay I was in because I knew I wasn't in the other platoons when they had us lined up outside, so when I was coming out with my duffel bags, I ran right into the drill sergeant. And he's like 'Private, what room are you assigned to!' And I was like 'I don't know drill sergeant.' 'Oh you don't know.' Then [the drill sergeant] took me around with my duffel bags that I'm holding now while everybody else is unpacking their stuff. After you're holding it for like an hour trip to the barracks and you know being thrown around. At this point, my body is just tired and now he's taking me around to all the war rooms and asking if I was theirs to all the drill sergeants, and they would look at me as soon as I'm standing in the doorway and he's like, 'Is she yours? 'No? She's just going to have to wait.' So, he's sitting there calling off other names slowly going down the list, and I had to wait for everyone... He even had his soldiers in the front, leaning rest like in a push-up position and they were staying there the entire time until their name was called.

**Helen:** It was very different than what it is now. I mean they were allowed to hit you. They were allowed to throw shit at you. They... I got in trouble with my squad leader... I got in trouble because she hit me on the head. She wanted to be an ass but she was because she was playing the company commander because they allow the recruits to have positions of responsibility. She was supposed to be the commander and she hit me with the knuckle on top of my head and I just smacked her. I mean I just let her have it. I was... I was punching her. Well needless to say, it got back to the company commander, and I wound up doing a whole week of intensive training with the rifle they called it mo2. And it was after dinner you'd go out for four hours of nonstop drilling where you would come back, and you were saturated and soaked in your own sweat. And after a week of that, I remember the company commander saying to me 'was it worth it?' I was like yes it was. And if she ever touches me again, I'll do it again. She was like 'you're crazy.'

**Kate:** The hardest part for me during basic training was that transitioning of actually going from being a civilian to actually being like in the military, to being a service-member. You know, there's like a certain way that people talk to you. There's a certain way you have to talk to people. A certain way you have to act. And it just took me longer

to acclimate myself. So that was the hardest part... You know I just feel like the person obviously the person that I came in was not this person that came out.

### **Subtheme II: Day-to-Day Operations**

Once the women had completed basic training as well as job training, they either went to a base and/or were quickly deployed to a combat zone or overseas base. They described being exposed to new values and adapting to the military culture in these initial stages. The women had also varied experiences of deployment, with different levels of exposure to combat, poverty, and other danger. They described how they experienced these critical periods during their service. Even though many of them were exposed to various stressors and life-threatening experiences on deployment, several viewed their deployments as “easy” or “lucky” relative to other service-members. Several of the women were also recognized or awarded for their performance on deployments, either with medals or promotions. Their experiences of day-to-day military operations will be described within this subtheme.

**Military culture and values.** Throughout the interview, the women described various ways that they adapted to military culture and lived according to military values beginning in basic training and throughout their service. Athena, Nelly, and Jennifer, for example, describe how they adapted to the rules and values of the military including excellence in all you do, discipline, accountability, responsibility, and respect.

**Athena:** [In Advanced Individual Training] we're still getting treated like you don't exist and you're like the worst person in the world. You'd have to sit through hours of class you know with other soldiers and you saw people falling asleep and you know the drill sergeants they still treated you the same way they treated you at basic training you know slap the table you'd have to stand at parade rest in the back of the class and so you just started to focus. You know and to learn at faster speeds because you didn't want to get left behind.

**Nelly:** Being part of PRP which is the Personnel Reliability Program when you're in charge of nuclear weapons, they hold you to an absolute higher standard of conduct. There are continual inspections... always learning, always tests. You can't take aspirin. You can't take any type of... if you were sick like you had to go to the hospital get

cleared before you went back to work with the nukes, oh yeah it was no joke. So plus, there was a more heightened awareness because you were in Europe... They basically don't tell us anything. You just go over there, do your job. Don't ask questions, just shut the hell up. All right, that leaves a lot of freaking questions, lot of questions. But I have a mission. I have a job to do. And I know there is like other stuff that goes on in this world like beyond our country and there's agendas everywhere. But you know I'm going to do what I'm told and that's it.

**Jennifer:** In the first couple of years, you're you know, you have a mission to get trained you're doing what you... You're doing everything they tell you to do and it's a very busy time when there's just so many steps you have to take. And there's goals, and there's reasons you're doing them. So, once I completed training and started my job I'm doing now there's kind of and it ties in with the things that we're doing abroad and the wars we're involved in. ... I mean there's grander meaning behind everything that they tell us et cetera.

Helen, Kate, and Nelly also spoke at length about having a duty and purpose as a military service-member as a critical member of a team. They also discussed adopting primary military values of duty, purpose, selfless service, courage, integrity, loyalty, and honor.

**Kate:** You know your worth in the military. You know what you signed up for. You know what you're trained to do. You know what your job is.

**Helen:** You have to believe in what you're doing. You know, and that is defending the Constitution defending your rights protecting your family protecting your homeland. If your focus is not that, then you're playing dress up and you're playing a game. I went because I believed that I was going for a reason... The military is not a select few people that were born into the military. The military is composed of people that came from all walks of life that were raised all kinds of different ways. It's a melting pot that people were picked out of. You're not born into the military. So, you have to look at that as that, and push forward your own agenda in a positive way... I serve because something inside me compelled me to do it. I serve because I believe in it. I serve because it's part of who I am. It's how I'm made. I can only speak to that for me. And I'm very proud of the uniform that I wear and all the uniforms that I've wore. And I'll take that to the grave.

**Nelly:** I really think [the military has] helped me set like higher standards for myself whether it be physical... It teaches you integrity too... Taking responsibility for your actions. I have... Excuse my French, I have fucked up in life. Like I have done some dumb shit. I've had bad things happen to me, you know, terrible, bad decisions but the one thing is that I always took responsibility and I was like no matter what the outcome is going to be, like if I'm wrong, I'll admit that I'm wrong and I'm just going to deal with the consequences. And it's really cool. The military teaches that like they will teach you ...Responsibility, accountability, um integrity. Um service before self. These are the Air



Force core values...um excellence in all you do, service before self and integrity. And I really, really think that those have been core values that I've taken with me to the outside which is cool.

**Groundhog's day or an "easy" deployment.** When Angela, Kate, and Jennifer deployed, or were stationed abroad, they had routines that did not vary significantly day to day. Jennifer used the term "groundhog's day," to describe this experience, referring to the film *Groundhog Day* (1993) in which the main character relives the same day over, and over again. Though Kate and Angela experienced indirect fire, other trauma, and had critical jobs on their bases, they similarly referred to their deployments as "easy" or "not real" as compared to "other peoples'" deployments.

**Jennifer:** Honestly those experiences are 'Groundhog Day,' like... you don't have a social life, and don't leave your base and you live and work and you operate there. So, it just kind of becomes a monotonous time where you're just working, going home, working out, probably hanging out in a social room for an hour, going to bed, and doing it again for several months at a time. So, [those deployments] really kind of blur in terms of what happened there.

**Kate:** You know, our deployments were like... compared to other MOS's, my deployment was very easy. You know I never left the base at all. I worked on the aircraft. They trained us, like they made it seem you know the enemy insurgents will be able to see onto our base and everything, so we weren't allowed to salute anybody. Because when you salute somebody, obviously, they're higher ranking than you, and they didn't want Officers or whatever being attacked or whatnot. So, we couldn't do that. The first deployment was very, very easy. It was just like going to work you know we woke up, I worked 12-hour shifts and I was on the day shift, so I worked from...I think I worked from midnight 'til like 11 o'clock so I worked the whole day into some of the night that was the day shift. And it was very easy. You know we went, we woke up, we went to chow, we went to work, you know somebody...There was always somebody on duty. The duty driver that would drive us to the hangar because the bases were so big. We had to always wear our vests, our helmet. I had a pistol at the time like a 9 millimeter. I didn't have a rifle. And that was like the extent of the deployment.

**Angela:** We went to Al Kut, Iraq. And we were on this little forward operating base, FOB Delta. It was a small little base and I mostly didn't leave. I only left like twice on some flights that we did. So, I was mostly just on the base and I think it was you know 2009, so it wasn't that intense or something where it had been a few years earlier. So, it's not like anyone in my unit died. They fired at people a couple of times but that was that was usually it, really uneventful. And, like the most action we ever got was getting

indirect fire. And missing every time. So, it was pretty, I mean for the most part like I would describe the deployment as fun like more so than like any other... because I mean it's like you go out there and do your job. I mean there was nothing to do at the base. Except go to the gym and hang out with people and so it was a very easy the deployment compared to stories people have from deployments. Nothing traumatic or anything as far as...I mean like yes personal stuff but like not other....

### **Subtheme III: Experiences of War**

The women had very diverse experiences of deployment, however, their responses confirm that even prior to the lifting of the ban on women in combat, our female service-members have been serving in combat zones for many years. According to their responses on the *DRRI-2* subscale related to combat experiences during deployment, all five of the women who responded were exposed to hostile incoming fire; One reported experiencing it once or twice, two said several times, one said a few times each week, and one said almost daily (Table 3).

While Kate experienced indirect fire from time to time, Helen described experiencing hostile incoming fire “all the freakin’ time.”

**Kate:** If I remember correctly I think my deployments were maybe three or four years in between each other. So, the first deployment was still kind of when the war was not exactly new, but you know people were still trying to figure things out...um, by the time I deployed with the Army, things were pretty established. You know so we kind of knew like we were in Iraq but we weren't specifically in a danger zone. Our FOB was much smaller. And you know we didn't have to walk around with our vest and our Capon on. We still had to walk around with like a rifle and our flight-line was on the edge of the base. So, we had to at some point set up like not so much as a perimeter and we had to set up points where we can like put weapons on you know and then towards the middle of the deployment, we had like a mini armory in our hangar where we had all of our cruisers weapons and our ammo just in case anything happened. We'd be ready. We got a lot of indirect fire which is just people trying... I don't know what they're trying to do. We got the alarm a lot for like indirect fire. Maybe once every two weeks... It was like during all times of the day you know like sometimes night sometimes during the day. We never really knew when... The first time it was scary because we had no idea what was going on. We really thought that people infiltrated the base but after a while it's just like no big deal... Like I said before my job was also aviation maintenance in the Army so I never left the base. It was just a standard you know, go to work, come back.

**Helen:** I remember you know when we first deployed there was no sirens... they came almost at the end of our deployment and the sirens would go off after the fact, but at least

they would go off to tell us we were under attack. You know up until then all you could hear was people banging on your door and you knew or you would hear it was close enough that you would hear it and you would feel the vibrations and you knew because you slept but you never really slept. You know you just kind of always were awake or attuned to what was going on around you. You never slept soundly. I never did. I sincerely doubt anybody else did and if they could, more power to you. I know I couldn't. I couldn't do it. [We were under attack] all the time. All the time and you never knew when it was coming or in what part of the FOB would hit. But it was constant. The FOB was really... we had a lot of real estate it was very, very big. Because like I said we had all the Chinooks were there, all the Black Hawks were there, all the military flights came in and then from there people were rerouted to different FOBs whether they were going to Mosul, they were going to Baghdad, or they were going to Samarra, or wherever they were going, they all came into the same location because that's where the planes flew into that's where the air boys were, your pilots. I just lucked out that I was there and I stayed there. I didn't have to venture off. You know and really subject myself to more direct fire you know from smaller targets, from actual insurgents. You know we got a lot of RPGs (Rocket Propelled Grenades), we got a lot of shit flown at us or thrown at us. But other people didn't. I said I just happened to be on my FOB. I lucked out there completely, lucked out there but there was you know back to the original question. It's just it depends on where you wind up what your outcome is. But we were constantly under attack all the freakin' time.

Athena was deployed as the only female in an all-male cavalry unit to a combat zone in

Iraq:

We landed in Kuwait, we took the convoy to Iraq. It's took us about, close to maybe 3 months to get into Iraq, which should only take about seven hours maybe. Because of all the fires, all the attacks. Having to stop and camp, stop and camp, I mean ... it took forever. I remember. So that was pretty much the majority of my time over there stopping, setting up camp, tearing down your cot. Gas attacks, and you're dawning your masks and you are putting on your outfits and putting on gloves and your boots and you're just waiting to be disintegrated because you don't know what gas attack is actually like, you know, except for like what they do at the training where they just throw stuff out at you, and you're tearing and you're crying and you're getting all the stuff out of your face. And just trying to breathe. But this could have been anything. You know this could have been like a bomb that just like killed everyone or you just didn't know what to expect whenever we heard the alarms.

Nelly deployed several times, and described her various deployment experiences, including what it was like to be on her way home from a deployment on 9/11/2001, and how the military changed following the attacks:

We're all stoked, happy like we're finally going home and I wake up in the morning and I'm packing my shit like getting ready to go. Ready to leave to get on a plane again. And I turned on the TV and I see both the World Trade Centers. Yeah. And I see one with a plane in it and they keep showing over and over and over again... [A few days later] we flew back home, and that is when shit changed. Remember that dork in her dress blues at the front gate just being one person that is... Oh my god every freaking... we had about 20 troops up there. We were augmenting troops from other squadrons. So, you had medical troops up there, you had people who like barely knew how to shoot a weapon. We had all types of troops up there from the base probably 12 to 16. Every day, every freaking car that came onto that base got searched and we didn't care who the eff you were. Every truck, shit was backed up for miles and miles and miles and I was just like, oh my god like here we go, this is crazy. And that's when, like I said everything, everything changed... Our security was still very, very high. It was all right like you adjusted, you adapted. This is how things are going to be run now.

On her deployment following 9/11, Nelly also witnessed enemy combatants being wounded and killed. Nelly's account of this deployment illustrated her selfless service, and the honor and purpose that she felt while fulfilling her duties this mission.

So, it was like OK we we're doing shit and we killed their main leader who was Abu Sabbayyaf um... So, we actually witnessed that real time of us killing this mother fucker who was like holding Americans hostage...they bring like all these soldiers with like, ugh faces shot off, like some nasty shit and I was just like oof. I was right there. Yeah... I was like oh God, like wow this is like pretty intense shit. It was very... And I realize it was like very, it was historical as well you know because it's like here you're looking at direct...um the war on terror the fight on terror. You're looking at like the direct result of it you know... So that was that. And that was a really fulfilling deployment because at least one of the [hostages] lived. It was a really cool thing to be a part of that.

Helen was the one participant who deployed as a mother. Though she experienced combat trauma on deployment, including constant hostile incoming fire, she repeatedly stated throughout the interview that the most difficult part of her experience of war and deployment was being separated from her family:

I remember they pulled the curtains on the buses so that you couldn't see out and they couldn't see in because they were afraid that you know that we were on the roads going to our FOBs. And you know, we were a target because of the all the IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices) and whatever they had the curtains drawn and we just kind of arrived. Just kind of arrived at Kuwait and they got to the airport then flew from Kuwait to Iraq and we got to Iraq, it was at night time and there was not a single light to be found. It was completely pitch black, and from there, it just started, you know the constant attacks, the

constant everything. You knew you were under attack when shit started blowing up around you, you could feel the vibration of stuff blowing up around you. That's when you knew you were under attack and then you hear the helicopters...It was the hardest thing I've ever done to leave [my family].

#### **Subtheme IV: Betrayals**

There were various ways in which the women in this study felt betrayed or misled by the military, and these betrayals tended to impact their sense of self. Betrayal refers to when a person or institution that one depends on for survival violates her or “what’s right,” and can include institutional, interpersonal, intrapersonal, cultural, or spiritual betrayal (Bobek, 2008). All six participants mentioned at least one example of feeling betrayed throughout their military service. Of note, military sexual trauma, associated topics, their intersection with betrayal, and its influence on identity will be discussed under a different theme, as sexual assault and harassment appeared to be one of the largest ways women in this study felt betrayed by the institution, leadership, themselves, and their fellow service members.

**Marginalization due to ethnicity or race.** While all of the women experienced marginalization due to their gender (which will be discussed in a later theme), Helen and Athena also experienced and/or witnessed race and ethnicity marginalization. Helen, a Cuban American, faced discrimination throughout her life for her ethnicity and her parents’ immigrant status. She describes her first encounter with this type of discrimination in the military, which can be classified as an interpersonal leadership betrayal:

**Helen:** I mean when I was in communications, you needed a top-secret clearance... being Cuban American, that went over like what? OK. And I remember the chief in charge of security telling me that he didn't want me at his command, that I was never going to get clearance, that I was communist. Now that is wrong on so many levels. I mean he was an officer, I was an enlisted. He was senior to me, I wasn't. You know, you set a tone. I mean that was disrespectful, that was racist. It was biased, it was everything I could think of, but it just infuriated me to the point where I was like not only am I not a communist, but you're gonna kiss my butt because I'm so going to stay here and survive and thrive. I wound up extending my enlistment there for another four years.

Athena's two closest friends during her military service were two black men. She described her bond with them, and identifies that all three of them were "at the bottom of the barrel" within their unit. Though she does not go into significant detail about the ways she and her brothers were discriminated against, it is possible that their marginalization from the rest of the unit due to gender and race was what bonded them together.

**Athena:** ...My battles. They were higher ranking than me but they were treated really, really, really bad. Most of the higher ranking, like the first sergeants and you know the E7s (Sergeant First Class), E8s (Master Sergeant/First Sergeant). Older white males. The two people, the two guys that I worked with, one was an E5 (Sergeant). Well at the time he was a specialist and the other one was a specialist or a PFC (Private First Class), and I was a PFC. I came in a PFC because I passed the test before I came in. So they were able to promote me before I came into the Army. Not that it made any difference in basic or AIT. You know I just got an extra chevron when I got at my original duty station... So I don't know if it's because they were both African-American and maybe they did things like at their own pace, I'm not sure. But, the higher rankings definitely treated them like they were the bottom of the barrel, you know and I was in the bottom of the barrel with them. So everything that we did, we did together and you know, it was still not good enough or we were just in a bad place but they got it worse than I did. You know they were treated really, really bad. They couldn't drink their coffee. They... the only food that we ate when we were out there were like the MREs. You know we were like last invited to go eat when they had like the t-rats come out.

**Unpreparedness.** Athena also described feeling completely unprepared for deployment. She was barely out of basic training when she was sent to Iraq, could not say goodbye to her boyfriend or family, and deployed without all the gear that she needed, for which she was punished.

**Athena:** When we got to the quarantine facility like I said we couldn't make calls, so my mom didn't know I left. My boyfriend got wind that [we were] being quarantined at the airport and he came by. I tried to get out of there like I tried to go near the front and see if I can use a phone, and the lady said 'Oh you're Athena? 'Your boyfriend was outside. You know he wants to see you, he's crying.' And I'm like you know like that's when I started crying because I knew he was upset. And then she's like 'I'm sorry I can't let you out there.' And I was like oh god, no. So, we couldn't see each other he was just like alright tell her I love her you know be safe, and I think at that moment I was like God I hate this. I couldn't see anybody I couldn't talk to anybody, I couldn't call my mom, you

know nothing. So just like I do, I put my head down, my cap on, a cap on my face low, and I cried, you know just hide away from the world...

I was the only female there. I was sent out and just became more hands on with my job when I got to Ft. Stewart. I was on the air field but it didn't last long. I was only there for less than a month before they shipped us out. Like I got there and they were already putting their bags on the trucks to set up for deployment. So, they told me: 'Don't even unpack your stuff. You've already got everything from basic training. We're going to issue your ray-bans you know for the desert, for the sand, for your eyes. Your MOPP (Mission Oriented Protective Posture) gear, you know your gas mask, and your gloves, and your boots, your whole uniform. You know when you go into MOPP four or five.' And then you know aside from that you know I got a new weapon before we left, but they never gave me a list of everything that I needed. They just said oh no you don't even unpack, you have everything you need. So little did I know I was supposed to bring sneakers. I was supposed to bring my PT pants which I'm thinking aright, I'm going to the desert, I'm not gonna need sneakers I'm not going to need black PT pants, this is why we have our uniforms. So...I was completely incorrect. And when we got there, we got in line for chow which was like this little tent and now I'm in flip flops and shorts like my shower shorts because I didn't have my PT uniform to go to chow. That's what the uniform was. So, of course, now I'm standing out in shorts and flip flops, walking through the line trying to just be invisible to everyone get my food and go... If I wasn't hungry. I wouldn't have been in that line. But they saw me and then I was put on night guard every night that week.

Jennifer and Nelly were both placed in roles that were unexpected, and that they were unprepared for. Specifically, when Nelly entered the military, a recruiter told her that if she signed up for an "open general" position, she would be able to be placed in a medical MOS so that she could achieve her goal of becoming a Nurse while in the military. However, at the end of basic training, she found out that the recruiter misled her, and that open general meant that she would be placed wherever the military needed her:

**Nelly:** So, you know how I was supposed to be a medical technician. Well they sit us down towards the, I think it's like two weeks before we're done with basic. They bring us all in a room and they give us a piece of paper and it shows what our MOS is which is our job after we get out. And so, everyone's opening their paper ... Yay I'm going to you know med tech school. I open mine thinking that I'm going to be a medical technician, yay I'm going to be a nurse....3POX1. 3POX1 is the code for security forces, which is military police. Like are you fucking kidding me. I'm like nooo, I don't want to be military police, like I have this whole plan! That was a... that right there was a real life changer when I saw that. My life was not going anywhere as I had planned. It was crazy. I was so pissed. I started saying to the instructors I'm like this isn't the job that I was

promised. And he's like 'shut the fuck up. This is the job that you're going to do 3POX1, he's like did you get your job...Did you come in open general or did you get it guaranteed.' I was like 'well I came in open general because my recruiter told me to.' And he's like 'well your recruiter's a fucking liar and that's all recruiters do is lie to fill you know the quotas and get the people in that they need. And welcome you're going to be security forces.'

Jennifer was placed in a leadership position where she was asked to help the members of her unit with various things, including life stressors and mental health difficulties. Though she is extremely intelligent and learned quickly on the job, a lot of pressure was placed on her to help in situations that she was not prepared for.

**Jennifer:** [My assistant flight commander position] was a huge learning curve because I think most people don't have experience leading people maybe like in a peer group or in a project you know you lead a small group. But this is the first time I've been in a position where people have like legitimate, legitimate life issues not just like a bad grade like there were divorces happening, there was mental health issues. I mean not everything was bad. There were good days there were babies being born and houses being bought. But it was stuff I really didn't have any knowledge on, so, a lot of my time was spent learning and then talking to people who had already been doing it for a while and trying to learn from them so that I can make sure I was actually being helpful and not hurting anyone or hindering them in what they needed. There is no formal training for us in terms of being a leader until we've been in five years and then we go to a squadron officer school which is when officers like another educational opportunity basically for us to talk to fellow officers and kind of talk about you know leadership styles and techniques and the difference between leadership and management. But until that point you know we don't really get much training on it. So, it's really just learning from your peers and kind of being... Relying on the senior enlisted leaders that are out there to try to have you try to have them help you because they've been in much longer... So, we have training on how to... if you see mental health issues like how to handle them or what processes you can take to make sure that person's being helped but we had a few... well we had one instance where a member just... he did not do well and he actually wound up, not committing suicide but being suicidal. And that was just a very hard time and you didn't know how to help but you're supposed to know how to help. So, it was a really weird situation to be in.

**Limited emotional and social support.** Jennifer was not the only participant who referenced working to help fellow servicemembers with mental health difficulties. Nelly, Athena, Helen, and Angela also discussed either witnessing or experiencing mental health difficulties



during or following their military service that were either swept under the rug, or they were told that they were “faking it.”

**Helen:** The first person I talked to over there at the [VA clinic], him and I didn't mesh. We didn't mesh and then they sent me to a psychiatrist who thought that I was faking it who told me to my face... You're faking it since you didn't murder someone out there. It doesn't count. OK it doesn't count. And I called him a fucking asshole and I walked out of his office and said What the hell do you know about being under live fire or having to be accountable for other people's lives. I said you're a dick and walked out and never went back to the V.A.

**Nelly:** So, basic training was a lot of people wanted to kill themselves. I mean there were suicide attempts where people would try to run into traffic and you know it's just it... it's a crazy experience it really, really is because you just go from having all this freedom in your life to down to the most minuscule thing is controlled.

Athena was on night guard with a man who had significant mental health difficulties while on deployment. His children died immediately prior to his deployment, but he was required to go anyway.

**Athena:** There's a lot of problems in the desert. Like this one guy I was on night guard with him... He kind of you know grabbed my shoulder. Actually, I think he had grabbed my arm. And I turn around and you know it's holding on to me tight. And he starts crying really, really, really bad. So, you know I just let him cry and I told him, I was just like 'it's alright. We'll make it through it together like we'll get through this.' And he's like 'it's not that.' And that's when he started telling me about you know that [before he left for deployment, his house caught fire while his twin babies were inside the house]. He said all he saw was flames as he was trying to get in. He finally had to drive the car into the door to get inside the house to get the babies.

Athena described feelings of disbelief and was very disturbed by this occurrence, particularly by the fact that she believed this person should have been able to stay home rather than having to deploy to mourn the loss of his children, but he was unable to do so because of established, inflexible military rules. She then said:

I'm like, did you guys know that his babies were just killed in a fire? And I'm like, and he's here? And they were like 'yea, first sergeant said either he gets out of the army or he comes.' No. Are you kidding? So, I swear, I think it was that week. Same exact. Maybe the next day. But I was in my tent, and all of a sudden everyone was on lockdown. And there was screaming and shouting and he had a black list, that was the first time I ever

heard about a black list. In his notebook, he had names of people that he was gonna kill while he was over here. So, he was standing over the first sergeant when everyone was sleeping. So, the first sergeant and the higher ranking were in the other tent. Right next to us. And he was standing over first sergeant with his weapon while everyone was sleeping. The guys said he was still awake, he was watching were something like his portable DVD under his rucksack. So, he heard him cock the weapon. Then he looked up and he saw him standing there in his PT pants and his grey shirt with the weapon just pointing it at the first sergeant. And he is somehow able to get to him and the round went off and it went into the floor or something like that. They tackled him. They hog tied him. They hog tied his feet to his hands and they had him lying there for hours. There wasn't any MPs, military police out there. So, I don't think anybody really knew what to do and the first sergeant had to call back to the command and they had him shipped back.

#### **Theme IV: Relationships and Gender-Related Adversity**

Throughout the interviews, there was significant discussion of relationships with others both within and outside of the military, and how those relationships influenced participants' sense of self and well-being. These relationships were impacted by military rules and culture, as well as experiences identified as specific to their gender. As their relationships with others changed, there appeared to be a subsequent impact on sense of self and emotional well-being.

##### **Subtheme I: Leaving Civilian Relationships Behind and Experiencing Alienation**

To begin stripping away one's civilian identity, basic training isolates its recruits from the civilian world. Houppert (2005) highlights that basic training is not designed to shift an adolescent into independence as other experiences (like college or working) might, but rather is designed to shift one's dependence on her family to dependence on her fellow service-members. Athena, Nelly, Angela, and Helen described various points at which they felt isolated or alienated from civilian relationships during basic training, and were taught to rely on their "new [military] family" instead.

**Isolation.** At the beginning of basic training, Nelly and Athena described feeling broken down and alone because they were separated from their loved ones and had not yet formed relationships with any of the other recruits.

**Nelly:** I mean we were pretty much so broken down, like all of us. And basically, at a robotic point you know there wasn't really a lot of... You don't really get that camaraderie yet because you guys all know that each one of us are going to be leaving. In a couple of months when we're all done and you like had your one or two little people that you confided in but everyone knew like this is probably it, we'll never see each other again. Just get through it. And you know nice knowing you.

**Athena:** I felt like maybe me and [my boyfriend] were the only ones really going through it because everyone else seemed fine like they've been [in basic training] before. It was a breeze for them... I was so torn from my family, I couldn't talk to them. They didn't know what was going on and you couldn't call home unless you passed your PT test like with an outstanding. So, if you didn't get more than like say 60 pushups in two minutes or you didn't run like a lower score and get your PT patch, if I didn't earn my PT patch. Which remember I never worked out before I went in, but I wanted to talk to my Mom so bad that I ran that extra mile. You know I pushed myself and I became better and I got my PT patch and I could finally call home after about like four weeks. So, it's you know mentally being broken down, your eating habits change, so you know that affects your hormones. And with everything, I finally picked up the phone, you know the payphone, and I was able to dial home you know... and I got the answering machine. And I'm like ugh this is not happening and I don't remember what I said. I probably just said I'm OK. I did because I was crying the whole time. You couldn't really hear one word come out of my mouth. So, I think my mom said that when she heard the message she just like broke down because she couldn't really understand.

**Relying on new family and building camaraderie.** Angela and Athena identified points when their drill sergeants would highlight the need to develop relationships with fellow recruits, while distancing oneself from relying on civilian family.

**Angela:** We did have like this one female drill sergeant who... there is no appreciating her. She was just a miserable human being like she would always say stuff along the lines of like... You know, I mean she was trying to say like you gotta lean on your battle buddies, but it was basically like oh fuck your families, more or less, that's what she was saying. Like you gotta just like forget about 'em. I'm just like...what? You know but when you're 18 you're very impressionable and stuff like that. It's not like I was just like oh ok, but it was... That's just that kind of like environment and I remember being like god this is really intense.

**Athena:** There was actually a brother and sister together. And they were almost discharged because you know they would kind of start leaning on each other, and you can't do that. You have to be independent. I don't know why they have those rules.

**Limited communication with significant other.** Helen and Athena were involved in romantic relationships early in their military service. Both women cited having to separate and

minimize contact with their significant others as one of their primary stressors. However, both women demonstrated resilience and strength as they compartmentalized the difficulties associated with military policies of no fraternization.

**Helen:** It sucked for about five, six months. They finally they saw that you know they could work together. They're not stupid they're not bringing their fighting into radio. They're not you know they're not going to somehow let the personal lives spew into their military lives. So they allowed us to be on the same shift at that point and then we were able to at least you know get off the ship together you know. But up until then, they made it a point to separate us.

**Athena:** We didn't talk to each other the entire time because it would be considered fraternization, and then we can get kicked out of the Army. So we didn't speak to each other the whole time, we didn't even look at each other. I mean, I heard the girls talk, you know like ooh look at him. I'm going to be his partner today. So, you kind of had to deal with that. They didn't know. Not until the end where we were able to get our belongings back and our pictures.

Just prior to her basic training graduation, Athena's drill sergeant asked her to write a note about her experiences during basic training. In her note, she included how difficult it was for her to not be able to speak with her boyfriend throughout basic training, though they were in the same training camp. She described his reaction to her letter:

He said, 'I can't believe that you were going through all that and you wouldn't have been able to tell.' He was like 'your face never changed, your mannerisms never changed.' And I was like 'you can ask my battle buddy. You know I was so stressed out because I would find myself crying because of that situation.' I think it probably would've been better if I just had gone in by myself.

**Strained relationships with civilians throughout service.** Throughout their service, it became increasingly difficult to connect with civilian friends and family. Helen, Athena, and Jennifer noted ways in which their relationships were strained due to the nature of military life. Helen deployed as a mother and had limited contact with her family because her base was under attack almost daily. When she could call home, she could tell that her family was hiding how difficult things were at home.

**Helen:** When I had the chance, I would call home. You know being signal, I was able to do that because I provided communications for the whole theater, for the whole network so I was able to call home call home more often than other people but when we were under attack...we were under attack all the time. I had to cut the lines immediately because you couldn't have any communications go out until they notified the family of the fallen...I had a bad feeling because when I would call home my youngest one would talk to me, my oldest would not come to the phone, my mother would say things to me like, 'I keep praying for you to come home. I can't wait for you to come you can't come home soon enough.' They wouldn't tell me straight up what was going on. They kind of let me know with the urgency in their voice if things weren't right that things weren't right.

Athena also had limited communication with her mom because mail and phone systems had not yet been set up where she deployed. Her mother was the only person in her life who she felt connected to while on deployment, and Athena became visibly pained and teary when she recalled how her boyfriend and friends from home did not contact her. To her, this appeared to represent another instance of interpersonal betrayal.

**Athena:** That would just like kill me you know because I couldn't talk to [my mom]. I was able to finally write back because we didn't have mail set up when we went. There was no line of communication, we couldn't call back, we couldn't send letters ourselves. So eventually when we did settle down and I was able to start writing letters back...that's when I started to get the letters from her. I never got any letters from my boyfriend. It's like he didn't even try he didn't try to reach out at all. I got a couple from a couple friends back home. Maybe one or two. But the only care packages ever came from my mom. I mean it's just crazy that like in a position like that, I think we take certain people in our life for granted, so you know like with her, she's always there, like even to this day (crying). And I know there was certain times that she couldn't, but, sorry, I think when you are in that position and you are alone, you realize that regardless at the end of the day, that's when you find out who really loves you. And I think that plays out over the course of your life.

As a military service-member, it can also be difficult to develop and maintain civilian friendships due to the nature of the service, which includes frequent traveling. Jennifer said:

Honestly, I don't have very many civilian friends. I have the people... So, I have the people I knew in college who weren't military. But since becoming active duty and traveling for work and the way that...so I spend about 200 days a year gone from my wherever I'm located. So, the ability to create new civilian friends hasn't happened. I work very hard to maintain my old civilian friendships so people from college people I

worked with before I was in the military like those people I actively seek out and try to keep relationships with them.

### **Subtheme II: Being in the Minority**

All six of the women described themselves as being a gender minority at any given time. Though Jennifer, Angela, and Kate (during her Navy service) seemed to have a larger percentage of women in their units relative to the other participants, they were still the minority gender. When Athena deployed, she was the one female in a cavalry unit, and at a point, Nelly was the only female in her squad.

**Athena:** They sent me to an all-male unit. Cavalry. I was in Fox. And we were the Air Cav. Remember, females weren't allowed in the ground troops but I was in the cavalry unit which means that Alpha, Bravo, Charlie would go out first. And then we would follow behind them with the inventory with the birds you know scouting the areas. But I was the only female in my troop. So, there was probably 490 or so males in the ground troops. And you know obviously more in Delta, Echo, and Fox. But yes, definitely, I was the only female there.

**Nelly:** Well luckily you know all the girls are in the barracks and the Air Force has more women in it than you know the other services. I was the only woman in my squad. So, the guys you know they didn't like it too much but they watched you know and I was cool whatever but then they watched you know and they were like alright they had respect because they saw that I could be kind of equal with them you know. And I tried. I didn't stand back, like I put myself through the same rigorous crap that they went through. I didn't expect any extra... Standards to be lowered or any extra attention because I was a girl like no I'm... I'm in it with you guys man someday we're going out to be out there together and I want to be able to support and hold my weight and be seen as equal... It's just a male... It's a male dominated field and You gotta play along man or else you ain't gonna survive.

Kate and Helen also described how many women were in their units. Kate said that though there were a few other women in her shop in the Army, their ranks differed from her own, and they did not necessarily interact. Helen highlighted that being one woman among many men can overwhelm you, make you feel inferior, and interfere with your success, however, you can choose to work to overcome those challenges associated with being a minority.

**Kate:** In my Army unit, there weren't as many women in the unit, so I worked as an aircraft mechanic. So, there's different shops like avionics, electrician, hydraulics. And different MOS's. But those guys are all shops...they're all clumped together called shops and out of all the shops people, there weren't any junior enlisted female soldiers, but there was like a handful of NCOs (Non-Commissioned Officers). Then in my shop which was maintenance, there were two other females there. So, three of us all together in our whole unit, and in our own company, I think about... Maybe less than 10 per cent were women. Probably less, I feel like 5 might be a little less but it sounds about right like 5 percent of women in my unit were women in my company.

**Helen:** You have a choice, you can let it consume you and continue to buy into the fact that you're a woman in the military and that you're outnumbered dramatically because you are, even in my command and it's you know it's the Joint Forces Headquarters which is predominantly female. Still outnumbered dramatically men to women. In signal, I was one of five. I was one of ten the most at any given moment. Now when you look at 300, 400 people, 10 women is nothing ...it's nothing but that's the thing you have to make that choice. What's important to you.

### **Subtheme III: Negative Perceptions of Females**

Several of the women mentioned that they encountered, and even themselves held negative beliefs and perceptions about women in the military. These perceptions impacted their relationships, the way that they behaved, and viewed their sense of self.

**Women are flirts or trouble-makers.** Angela, Athena, and Helen said that they had heard others say that women in the military are flirts and are only there to cause trouble or distract the men.

**Angela:** A lot of people disagree that women should even be in for different reasons...the good reason I would say... I mean, if you're gonna have a good reason, I'm not saying it's true but I'm saying like well like the least annoying thing I heard was that women are distracting the guys.

**Helen:** The concept was that women were in the military to find a man or because they were gay. You couldn't just be a career minded individual or say you know or you had a get out of jail free card if you happened to be like a military family. It was like OK well that's expected because your father was military and your brother's military. OK fine we'll let you go. But when I enlisted in '81, those were your options. There were plenty of women that were using that to their advantage and sleeping around to move up in ranks and do whatever they needed to do. But not all women were like that. There was a consensus among the women in the military that that was not acceptable. And if we found out that you were behaving that way, we were going to call you to task...All of us weren't

there for the same reason, plenty of us were there for the career, for the for the travel, for the benefit of being in the military, right. I did it because I embrace this country as my own.

**Athena:** Anybody that I speak to...I get the respect from people you know for the most part. But then you have your others that think that females in the military are there you know especially during deployments you know and they're flirtatious and they just want to be out there or be amongst all the male soldiers, just to kind of ruin their relationships or their marriage.

Athena further highlighted that because of these negative perceptions of females, she was unable to form close relationships with the other people in her unit (as the only female), and felt isolated and alone.

**Athena:** You know they still wouldn't get so close to me. I was a female, I was young. And I got the oh, she's a flirt. So, you know she's going to flirt with you or something like that where they didn't know who I was, number one, none of them ever spoke to me. So, they automatically assume you know because of the way I look, and with me being young, you know that by talking to me they were getting in trouble. So, I was pretty much alone the entire time...Like I said you're out there, and you're kind of fending for yourself.

**Women are weak and expect standards to be lowered.** Another stereotype or negative perception that the women were subjected to was that women are weak and/or expect standards to be lowered for them. Within the military, a hyper-masculinized culture that emphasizes and rewards “toughness,” the view of women as weak appears to be even more salient than in civilian societies. Angela and Nelly described the perception of women as weak, as well as times that they heard others say that a female could not perform a task, or only made a mistake because she was a female.

**Angela:** ...Or they say women are too weak to be in you know, that was the other one. There was a lot of stuff like that where people were like if a girl couldn't do something, it was like ‘oh it's because she's a girl. And she shouldn't be in,’ and this and that, and that sort of thing. So, there's a lot of pressure to perform just as well as guys do. Which was like, impossible in a lot of cases.



The potential consequences of this, including working twice as hard to be recognized, and leadership styles will be discussed in a later theme.

Throughout their service, many of the participants felt as though they were targeted or challenged more because of their sex and gender. A few of them were directly told that this was the case. The women who participated in this study rose to the occasion and repeatedly proved nay-sayers wrong. Nelly, for example, was so resilient and tough that she was jokingly called a “pain freak,” because she was not beaten down by any challenge. Interestingly, in her quote below, she talked about women who she viewed as “sandbaggers,” who were weaker, emotional, sick, or appeared to want standards to be lowered, and her belief that those women should “man up.” She identified the women with more stereotypically warrior-like traits as the “badass chicks” who had proven themselves, tended to be more successful, and earned their place in the military.

**Nelly:** Our instructors were really hard, and they were really hard on females because they always saw females as like sandbaggers... we weren't equal with the men we couldn't do the things that the men did especially the smaller ones, I'm 5'2". So, I did experience a lot of extra attention. Until... I kind of had to prove myself and I would surprise them. They would be like you're a freak. There's something wrong with you because you enjoy the smoke sessions like way too much... They ended up calling me 'Papa Foxtrot,' like that was my nickname Papa Foxtrot which is the phonetic alphabet p-pain. And then the f-foxtrot, freak... It was just like the constant smoking and you know they would try to... Like any little thing, they would pick it and other people were doing things they would let it slide. But it was like if I did something I don't know, if my boots weren't polished correctly... they would just like pick on me and I know it's because of the woman thing. And I was smaller and I'm trying to think like it was just like any little thing and then they'd be like 'Everyone has to do this because Anderson you effed up,' blah, blah, blah. So now everyone in the squad has to do flutter kicks for an hour or whatever.

You know I'm just like ugh like this is annoying but at the same time I learned to prove them wrong and it's helped me now throughout my whole life you know. So, it was just all ... I think it was because they were making me better like I've had instructors say hey being a girl you're going to get doubted. You're going to have more attention placed on you because people aren't going to think that you can do the job. And a lot of girls proved that theory correct.

There was a lot of girls they had no... No place being where they were... And honestly being a female in male dominated career fields... a lot of women will take advantage of being a woman and expect certain standards to be lowered because they're a woman and they're... They're not as strong and that's just the genetic makeup... If you cannot hack it and you're going to be sick and hurt all the time and holding everyone back. I don't believe that they should have been there. Like choose a different occupation because some day you are going to put... If you continue this you're going to put people's lives in danger to include yourself. If you don't get... if you don't man up you know.

I think that is one reason why they were so hard on the females as well. And there were some bad ass chicks that I was with. You know we had like a little crew that were really well respected you know people were like wow you guys are bad ass. Wow. You proved yourselves. But then there were some where it was just like... umm... you should probably like work in administration or something like that and that probably sounds bitchy but um the job that we were in not only being military police but also security forces you are tasked with guarding billions and billions of dollars' worth of you know assets to include nuclear weapons. You know all the bases military bases, personnel security you know so here you're going to need to be proficient and weapons and tactics and training and you know you don't have to be the strongest person whatever but you better be able to at least fight and give it your all if you know a threat does come... You can't be afraid to shoot somebody you can't run away and turn your back like you stay in a fight you know and there was some people and I want to include guys too.

#### **Subtheme IV: Experiences of Harassment and Military Sexual Trauma**

Though the rates of sexual violence in the military appear to be decreasing, open-ended questions about harassment and sexual assault in the military were included in the interview due to persistently high prevalence rates and significant impact on service-members sense of self and well-being following military service. Prior to asking participants about experiences of gender or sexual harassment and sexual assault, the principal investigator read the following disclaimer to participants: "In 2016, 1 in 4 women and 1 in 15 men faced sexual harassment or gender discrimination within the military, and at least 14,900 members of the military (~8,600 women and 6,300 men) experienced sexual assault within the past year" (Department of Defense, SAPR, 2017).

According to the VA's definition, military sexual trauma (MST) refers to "experiences of sexual assault or repeated, threatening sexual harassment that a veteran experienced during his or her military service," and includes "any sexual activity where a service-member is involved against his or her will." The VA defines sexual harassment as "repeated, unsolicited verbal or physical contact of a sexual nature which is threatening in character." Four of the six women endorsed directly experiencing MST. The other two women endorsed knowing other men and women who experienced MST.

This study also asked participants about experiences of gender harassment, which refers to when a person is harassed for his or her gender, but the act is not sexual or does not take place in a sexual context. Gender harassment can include physical assault; inappropriate displays of gender-degrading material; sexist jokes, anecdotes, slurs (including gender-derogatory nicknames); comments; insulting, demeaning conduct toward a person because of their gender and, remarks that are offensive, or continue after the speaker is informed that the comments are unwarranted or have caused offense.

Five of the women endorsed experiencing various types of harassment. One participant was hesitant to describe her experiences as such, and instead stated that everyone joked inappropriately with each other.

Harassment and assault also signify betrayals by the institution, leadership, and fellow service-members, and these betrayals and their impact are detailed below. Though the study's primary focus was not on MST, its high prevalence rate, especially in this study's sample warranted further examination to understand its role within participants' narratives and their views of themselves.

**Harassment and objectification.** Helen, Angela, Kate, and Jennifer described ways that they either experienced or witnessed harassment and objectification of females in the military. One of Helen's first experiences while serving aboard a U.S. Navy ship involved her superiors showing her degrading photographs of women. She felt horrified and expressed disbelief that a high-ranked official was putting her in such an uncomfortable position. This demarcated an interpersonal leadership betrayal as her commander exhibited extremely inappropriate behavior after which she felt trapped, and unable to react.

**Helen:** When I went down to radio, which was the space that I worked at as a communications person, the first thing that those bastards did is they show me a book of the kinds of activities that Filipino women do at peso shows. Peso shows are the most degrading most disgusting thing that a woman can possibly engage in. They were showing me this. They showed me, the chief showed me, the commander, which is the highest ranking military person, eating out this woman on the stage. This is my welcome aboard. When I tell you I was mortified...I didn't know what to think. I just slammed the book shut and walked away. I didn't know what to think. Yeah cause I mean I had never been on a ship before. I didn't know what to think. I mean I had heard stories, but I figured it's just stories. [I think they did this] to get a reaction. To see what I would do in that situation you know to see if I would tell someone about it or make a scene somehow. I have no idea. Because that's the most degrading, most disgusting thing I've ever seen in my life.

I didn't tell anybody because I didn't I... They were they weren't going to believe me. And years later, you know people surface making complaints about different things, and all that happened was they were victimized even further and truly told that they were sluts and they were whores and they liked it and women can't say no. It was just... it was a completely different mindset completely different mindset you know. And I had had enough of that bullshit. I had had enough of that negativity. I just wanted to move forward. You know I was too afraid to say anything and I know I sound like a coward. But you know what I was afraid to say anything.

Angela, Kate, and Jennifer also described witnessing and experiencing a culture in which women were regularly objectified. Angela and Kate described men objectifying women as something that was to be expected, or just something that men do. Additionally, Angela realized that this culture of objectification significantly influenced the way that she viewed herself and other women, as well as her relationships with men.

**Angela:** I mean when you're in the military, you're outnumbered like crazy. It's also hard especially since you're always around each other, and guys just talk like as if you know, you're not a girl. So, it's like, you hear how guys talk to each other about women and it's not the greatest. It's sort of...it's not even like at the time I would get really upset about it, it was just kind of like... that's just how it is, and that's how you think. So, it makes you, I don't know... Well it made me... Of course, you're going to feel inadequate... It's kind of a weird thing to kind of like come into the whole sexuality thing in that environment you know because...right from the start it was like...I don't think I really thought of women as like...like I started to really objectify women and myself...I mean like sort of like 'Oh look at the legs on that one, like this one over here... her body's good but her face is ugly, like this one over here... It's just constantly like that sort of stuff...I don't know... But then people are like flirting with you and you're kind of like 'Oh this makes me...'you know, you're trying to like prove to yourself that like you're pretty, that you're good. You know what I mean? It's like a whole, I don't know like there's a whole lot of...I've had a whole lot of sex just trying to prove to myself that like I'm alright, and a lot of that was in the military. But I mean part of it was me like just you know even when I had someone who really liked me and wanted to be with me I was like...no, like it started then you know and like I'm still like that now where it's just like yeah but you're just gonna move on, so no like we're not even gonna start that...I don't know.

**Kate:** You know guys talk, guys do this thing where you know, they always say that you know what when women start a deployment they're like a 3 but by the end of the deployment they are like a 10 you know meaning like you're not cute at the beginning but you know I've been here long enough that anybody's cute now and that's kind of how people talk to you when you're over there. This didn't happen in my unit, though because we were pretty close. We were like brothers and sisters.

Jennifer appeared to have been in a different position (both literally and figuratively) than the other women. As an officer in a leadership position, she has addressed fellow service-members when they made inappropriate, gender-based jokes or "crossed the line," in a degrading manner.

**Jennifer:** ...Some of our German co-workers would say stuff like 'oh they're going to be late because they're busy doing their nails' kind of along those lines, like a little bit of a light joke. It's still not an appropriate thing to say. So those cases, I would just kind of in front of everyone because I always want to make sure everyone knew my position on those kind of comments I would just say, 'You really think that's what I'm doing all day?' And basically kind of call them out and make them look a little bad kind of like public shaming and it makes me... I think it gets the point across faster in a group. If it was more severe like if they did something a little more I can't think of a good example if they cross the line. Not in terms of touching or physicality or something that, but if they crossed the line that wasn't just joking, and if I could tell there was actually like legitimate belief behind something they said...then I would talk to them personally and try to see you

know why do they think that, is there a way that we can kind of not change what they think, but kind of address the fact that maybe that's not the end all be all. So, it was it was a pretty constant thing in our lives for especially for the females there to kind of just be checking the things the guy said and kind of correcting them or kind of just getting them like I said hey knock it off and you know that's not funny.

**Military sexual trauma.** In military culture, much of an individual's survival is dependent on her ability to rely on and trust her unit, as well as maintain unit cohesion at all costs. However, when an individual is assaulted by a comrade in her own uniform, that trust is completely disrupted and she is trapped. Often, the women did not report their assaults for various reasons (which will be described in further detail below), including self-blame, fears of disrupting unit cohesion, fears of not being believed, and fears of being retaliated against.

Several of the women who described pervasive, threatening sexual harassment, and sexual assault were targeted by leadership. Nelly was assaulted by her squad leader while she was sleeping on a plane on route to their deployment base. She described feeling terrified when she woke up, as she asked him to leave her alone (without reporting him or telling anyone else what he had done). He then retaliated against her throughout the entire deployment by smoking her and embarrassing her in front of the entire unit.

**Nelly:** ...while I was asleep on the plane, I'm by the window, and all of a sudden I feel this hand and like this hot breath, ugh, hand in between my legs. Hot breath all up on my neck. He's [the squad leader] kissing my neck rubbing between my legs and like fondling and I'm like half asleep and I'm like frozen like what the fuck. WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON. And I was terrified of him. Terrified. And like here I am, like this little. I mean I was an E4, but I'm like one of his troops you know...it is a terrifying thing because you know that this guy has like so much power over you. He has the power to make or break you like he can write up your evaluation however he wants. And when I'm such a psycho with like holding myself to a higher standard of proving myself because I know that like I'm a woman and I'm not seen as you know being able or whatever because it's still something that is... no matter how hard you try men will always look at you like that until you prove otherwise, so no matter what unit you go into no matter what duty station you go into, you know they're going to see... All right...like All right well let's see what she can do. So you know I'm so terrified of like what he can do to me if I rejected his advances...I ended up I was just like please (crying). Like I was frozen, I let him for probably like a minute and then I opened my eyes. Because I pretended I was

asleep and I was like I can't, you have to stop, please, you're my sergeant. I feel so gross. Like what are you doing to me. So, he stopped and he looked at me with the black eyes like dead in my eyes. And he's like 'You're going to be sorry for this.' And that was it.

No one else saw it. I wasn't going to... There was no one for me to talk to about it. I wasn't going to go to my mates and say oh hey you know .... Like you can't. There was no other higher ups or you know ranking, like it was just us, it was our crew. And here we are like dumped off in the middle of \_\_\_\_\_. You know at this training base whatever and you carry on. Well like he said 'you'll be sorry.' Guess who got smoked. Guess who got picked on nonstop like for the whole entire... My grade for my test. He lied that I got answers wrong. So, I did bad on my test. He's like you're one of my fire-team leaders and he would like call me out in front of all the troops you know like 'oh your fire-team leader, she...she failed her own test what kind of leader is this.' And I'm like there's nothing I can say. You know like I know that I got those answers right. And he goes no they're not I graded your test. FUCK like holy shit where do I go? Who do I talk to? Like do I tell my other... I don't want to break down my team. I don't want to cause dissension. He's our leader. You don't want to break like the group up, your fire-team, your squad, you still like want to remain that team and you want them to be able to function and you don't want to cause like any type of riff raff or you know like... would people trust me? Would people think I'm lying you know? And I was young. I was 22?

On another deployment where she was one of four women in the operation, Nelly had another sergeant continuously harass her in front of everyone. She recalled that since the other men would laugh at his comments, she felt like "nobody gave a shit," and she was trapped once again, with no one to turn to for help or support.

Now I had another frigging sergeant who was a creep like would say the most weird... He would always just be like 'yeah mmm my thick girl, you're my thick girl.' And like grab me. He never went to the point of you know, touching. Like you know forcing himself on me, but it was just like nasty shit and it would always make me feel really uncomfortable that he'd like say it in front of other people and I'll...(ugh) Oh yeah. And just in front of the guys, but I was the only girl. So once again like do I go 'eww stop,' you know like I was one of maybe four girls in this operation. Nobody gave a shit. Yeah they'd just be like hahaha. And I would just like play it off but I just remember like being so skeeved out by it like BLEH. But you know that's just like the shit that you dealt with all the time.

Athena was also harassed by an NCO who she had to see daily, though she did not work directly under him. She also described feeling trapped and as though she could not report his behavior due to fears of retaliation, and instead did everything she could to alter her routine to

avoid coming into contact with him. Athena was “fending for [herself]” and was isolated, without support.

**Athena:** They saw me and they're like oh a female and you know of course they're going to try to gravitate towards me or get my attention somehow. And you would have thought that it would have come from the lower grades you know the E3s, the E4s, the E5s, but the sexual harassment honestly came from all the higher ups. The first sergeants thought that they were invincible. So, you know they would try to like to buy your love or you know try to get you to go places with them... There was a one of the NCOs in the fueler section. You know he had his fuelers and some fuelers were females but he was a different unit than us. And he always kept the female around him like he was God or something. And I just always found this super weird. I wouldn't say anything about it. I would stay you know in my own lane but I just felt it really unnecessary and inappropriate... And everywhere we went, if he knew that there wasn't anyone within like five feet of us, he would always say 'Athena I want your underwear.' And you know and I'm like no... and he's like 'give it to me or I'll cut it off of you' and I was like... I didn't know... First like why the hell do you want my underwear, and he's like, he would every time he'd pass by me, you know 'I wanna smell them.' He would always make a comment. Every single time. And it was always something different. 'Leave them by my pillow.' Or you know do this sort of do that. And you know It just got so bad like if I was to see him anywhere. I mean I don't care if sent me six miles to come across... I don't care. I'm gonna go six miles just to not to be next to him in his area. You know he was just creepy and weird and the worst part about it was he was high ranking. So, you know even if I was to say anything about it, I would probably be the one to get in trouble. Not him. You know. Not at the time anyway. Maybe if I said something after. I don't think I was more scared of him you know than thinking about trying to retaliate or you know tell someone. I just didn't trust people like that... Like you don't know what's gonna happen. Especially like I said, you're out there and you're kind of fending for yourself. So, if I didn't feel directly like at harm, bodily harm or anything like that then I was still in the clear. Now for me, that was still in the safe zone. I dealt with it. As for other females... Like I said, they probably were dealing with the same thing just like that. I'm sure maybe even worse now because he was their direct line supervisor whereas me, he wasn't. He just wanted me.

In her 35 years of service, Helen has experienced various instances of harassment and attempted assault. During the interview, she described several of these occurrences. Similar to the other women, Helen was afraid to report when her chief tried to rape her because she thought that no one would believe her.

**Helen:** [At my first command] I actually had a chief that I worked for as a bosun- mate try to rape me. And I mean, I was 20, I didn't know what to do about it. I didn't tell anybody because I was afraid to tell anyone because nobody was going to believe me.



The only reason why he wasn't able to get away with it was because somebody heard me screaming. One of the guys that was on the boat with me heard me screaming and he knocked at the door on the door and the chief had climbed into the window, so he climbed back out the window. But I told him the next day, 'You ever touch me again. Trust me. Everybody's gonna know what you did and I will have your anchors.' Then he left me alone.

On her deployment, Angela was drugged and raped by a man in her unit. She went to a doctor for medical difficulties that she experienced as a consequence of the rape, and sought social support from a female leader in her unit. Though she was not officially reporting the rape, the female leader proceeded to betray her and blamed her for the assault. Angela experienced further betrayal as the rest of the unit found out about what happened (from an unknown source – either the doctor or the leader), and she was further ostracized for a period of time.

I had a female sergeant in charge of me and she was friends with these guys, like she hung out with them whole time. And I told her about it, and then she ended up turning it around on me and making it my fault. She told me she's like: 'How would you not... Of course, you knew that was going to happen,' and this and that... I was like well I didn't, but ok... Like you know. And that's what I got from her. It's not even like I went to her all upset or something I was just kind of like you know they invited me to this party and this happened you know. I wasn't trying to get him in trouble or something. Hey, your friends raped me, you know. She's like lecturing me on how I have to be careful because I'm gonna end up with STDs. I'm like ok... So there's also no secrets in the military... somehow.... I know the doctor didn't say anything... Of course it's not like I would just [talk about the sexual assault with] anybody... so I mean I guess somebody... I don't remember who I told though... I mean I know that one guy didn't say anything but so there was like all these people that knew about it. So that was really... I think that definitely changed how I... Because then I was just like oh my God that's really embarrassing and these people know...

Angela also described not wanting to report the rape because she did not want to disrupt unit cohesion, or "ruin [the assailant's] life" by reporting him to leadership. She mentioned that though at the time she did not think that the MST impacted her, she has had continued difficulty developing intimate relationships with men since the assault.

I was like, I don't want to fuck up his life completely. You know I don't even know him. I barely knew him at all. He just like invited me to the party, you know, but I wouldn't tell them stuff like that. I didn't tell anyone else there... but like over the years like it's like

come up a few times and like, people are always kind of angry and it's ...if it happened to me again, then I guess I would be pissed and I would say something, but it's hard to get upset about that...I know that now... Like the slightest hint of somebody thinking that I have to have sex with them or something. I just get really like... fuck you.

Many of the women described a belief that assault and harassment are “just what men do.” Several of them subsequently blamed themselves for their assault and consequently disavowed (and continue to disavow) experiencing anger toward their assailant and the institution that failed to protect them. Angela’s particularly striking description of her assault stated: “I managed to get myself raped,” and she noted how she felt confused when other people in her life expressed anger/rage after hearing about her rape.

**Angela:** On my deployment, I mean like while I was there I went to this Halloween party where I ended up being the only girl. And uh managed to get myself raped again so like that's just like at the time like... Looking back like I can see that my thinking about it was really messed up because I was just sort of like... I knew I had gotten drugged because I didn't even drink anything. But I still was like...I wasn't even like upset. It was just kind of like... Like oh of course, you know what I mean? I mean I don't know...just like that's...guys do that, it's all right it's fine...My Mom was like livid...and she was like about to come to Iraq and fuck somebody up. I was like chill, why are you so mad? ...Because in my mind, that was just kind of like...it's hard to explain... I don't know. It's like I mean you know guys literally are always talking as if like no girls are there so it's just sort of like.. I wasn't surprised when it happened. It was like an expectation kind of...even though I know most... most guys aren't going to do that.”

**Nelly:** You have to have thick skin. You know men are men are men. They should be raised better, but they're freaking savages and they're predators. And it's true. They have a predatorial nature. It's just in their makeup. Now they should learn to control it. Yes. Because this kind of shit that's going on now. What women are subjected to like yeah. Now this is all coming back to bite you in the butt, like control your shit people seriously...It's to be expected. You're gonna get looks. You know, have people flirt with you, you know. It's not like, like I said it's not like I really minded like a hot Navy SEAL smiling at me. That's OK. He's not in my chain of command and he's not the one that I have to go to if there's a problem, so I don't mind that. But you know when it's in your direct chain of command... Makes it a lot different.

Though Kate and Jennifer were not sexually assaulted during their military service, they knew of other women in their units who were.

**Kate:** “When I went to AIT which was in the Navy there was an incident when there was like a sexual assault. All the people that were prior service were in a specific barracks. All the women were on the first floor in a specific wing and there was like this woman she was very friendly, not very friendly, but you know when you're in... All the people that are going for the same MOS obviously always hung out together. And there was this one guy that hung out with... There were this group of people that always hung out together. They were the Apache people. And there was always there was one girl that was there. She was kind of pretty attractive and she was always hanging out with this one guy. At one point I forget when it was like a Saturday night. I noticed that he was standing outside her room which was very unusual. You know men were not allowed unless they have some formal business. They were not allowed in our area. And they always had to announce themselves like male on the floor. And I always heard it because my room was closest to the end of the corridor where you have to come in to get on the floor. And I didn't hear him and I saw him outside her room. And then I found out the next morning that she said she was sexually assaulted.

**Jennifer:** I have known women that have experienced sexual assault within.

**Fear of reporting.** As many of the quotes above state, all four of the women who experienced harassment and/or assault described fear of reporting for various reasons, including fear of disrupting the unit's cohesion, fear of getting the assailant into trouble, self-blame, fear of retaliation, and having no one to report it to because the assailant was higher in the chain of command. Many of them described feeling powerless and helpless, and continued to feel that way as they did not have anyone to turn to for support.

Nelly's description of her assault suggests that she felt being assaulted was not congruent with her warrior identity, which resulted in experiencing tremendous shame. She felt powerless and helpless, but described having to find strength to keep the sexual assault a secret because she was protecting the unit's cohesion by not reporting it. She also described a fear that people wouldn't believe her, or would blame her “female-ness” by thinking she's just “being too sensitive” or trying to start trouble.

Sometimes a lot of people will question like why didn't you say anything at the time? Why weren't you stronger? And trust me like, yeah, I felt like I was being strong by holding it in. And not acting on it you know because I'm like alright this is something you just swallow it because you have a mission to do, and you have to complete it like...this

is what's expected of you. You can't cause waves, you can't cause dissension like suck it up, drink water and press on. That's what they used to tell us. Drink water, and oh well drink water and press on. This is the kind of stuff that you really did put up with a lot... you do want so bad to have that respect, so you don't want to be looked at as one of those people that they just say...she's a troublemaker... You can't, she's too sensitive. Watch what you say around her. You can't trust her. That's how women are made to look.

Helen detailed another experience where she was harassed by one of her instructors in A School, and was subsequently targeted and punished by the instructor's wife, who was of the same rank (E3) as Helen, presumably because she blamed Helen for her husband's inappropriate behavior. The instructor's wife then tried to further retaliate against Helen and reported Helen to the base commander when she did not comply with her demands.

I went through Radar-man A school. I was 21... I was 21 at the time. I actually had one of my instructors tell me that he wouldn't mind finding my boots under his rack, OK. And I'm listening to this guy. What the hell? Come to find out that he had a wandering eye anyhow and his wife took me to a captain's mast, and tried to get me busted down and punished you know because she didn't like me.

You know the seamen that was pushing us around in A school just so happened to be a black chick and she did not like me and this E7's wife did not like me. They were both instructors and you know she was really dogging me and I said 'No I'm not doing it.' I forget what the hell it was. She had me doing bathrooms and taking out garbage and doing other shit like nobody else was doing it. At that point it was just me. Everybody else got dismissed and I was still doing shit you know. So, there was clearly something wrong and I said no. I said to the commander of the base as an E3, 'I have never seen an E7 sergeant first class give so much authority to an E3 like me, where she can just go off and try and push people around and touch people and do whatever she's doing and it's ok and I have to justify saying no. You know in the meantime the person that she's reporting to is allowing it because her husband said this to me... And I've never had another instructor, someone that you look up to, an E7 say to me, I wouldn't mind finding your boots under my cot.'

Though the commander of the base allowed Helen to describe the chain of events from her perspective, she was punished for defying military rules and refusing to obey an order.

I got my hands slapped and I got you know I got reprimanded and they withheld a good conduct medal. Because I refused to obey an order. Yeah but he got a hell of a lot worse. And in front of that whole audience of people, His wife heard what he had said to me. And he had to deal with that shit.

Kate and Jennifer detailed what they believed occurred after the assaults of the women in their units were reported. Though steps were taken to address both the victim and assailant by military leadership, it appeared as though there was some degree of secrecy and/or burying of the misconduct. Kate stated that she was unsure of what happened to the woman who had been assaulted, but that she left and never returned to the unit after the Investigator General was called.

**Kate:** [Referring to the woman she knew who had been assaulted] What happened was they called... They called I forget who you called those people. IG? Investigator General. It is basically the people that investigate stuff. It was reported that she was sexually assaulted. People had to make statements and I was like the only person that really saw anything. So, I don't know what happened to her. She... I don't know where she went after. But I feel like this happened towards the end of my schooling because she was gone for a little while. A short while and then after that I finished school... I didn't see her again until... I actually never saw her again after that.

Jennifer similarly described that though measures were taken by military leadership to address a harassment incident, it did not seem as though their actions adequately rectified the damage done to ensure the safety of the woman who had been targeted.

**Jennifer:** For that instance, the person who was making those comments was... I think all that came of it was there were discussions with the leadership so the commanders spoke to each other and then the person who made the comment you know he was addressed and it was discussed. That one, that's inappropriate to do in any situation and two that's your co-worker. You know you shouldn't be looking or thinking of a co-worker in that capacity and he should be respecting her position as a peer. And then with the female that had the issue with it, they talked with her. I don't think from her reaction that she felt very... I don't want to say vindicated but I don't think it made her feel better. The actions that were taken. I don't think it's eased mind to know that he was talked to. She avoided him for the rest of their time.

Of note, Jennifer, who is currently an active duty service-member said that she has received some trainings on harassment and assault, which may reflect the military's increase in efforts to increase education and reduce the prevalence of harassment and assault. She said:

In the Air Force, yea we have a lot of a lot of training on how to deal with sexual harassment in the workplace how to deal with... like retaliation or retribution. So, what

happens if you if you think you speak up and you think you're being retaliated against for speaking out. So, like in the U.S. Air Force we have training on it pretty often in the form of briefings and like group discussions.

### **Subtheme V: Relationships with Others in the Military**

Thus far, this theme has detailed the various experiences that impacted the quality of women's relationships with others, and their subsequent senses of self and well-being. Though military culture stresses camaraderie and collectivism, the following experiences influenced the degree to which the women felt excluded from that culture: feeling isolated and alienated from civilians, negative perceptions of females, being targeted for being female, and experiences of extreme betrayal in the form of harassment and assault.

**DRRI-2: unit social support sub-scale (Table 5).** Four of the six women responded to this sub-scale. Responses to the items related to closeness to ones' unit skewed more positively. One respondent "somewhat agreed" and three "strongly agreed" that their unit was like family. However, a respondent "somewhat disagreed" with each of the following "people in my unit were trustworthy," "my fellow unit members appreciated my efforts," "I felt valued by my fellow unit members," and "strongly disagreed" with "my fellow unit members were interested in what I thought and how I felt about things." Additionally, items that asked about the individual's relationship with unit leaders tended to skew more negatively. Of note, it appeared that some of the responses on this DRRI-2 sub-scale related to relationships with members of their unit were rated more positively than verbal descriptions of these relationships during the interview.

**"Close, but not too close."** All six participants described their relationships with others in their unit as "close, but not too close," indicating that though they generally felt a sense of camaraderie and identified these relationships as positive, they felt distance within these

relationships. For some of the women, this resulted in feeling increasingly isolated, as they felt isolated or alienated from their civilian relationships, but had not formed true close relationships with their fellow service-members either for a variety of reasons. The women also identified some of the different factors that interfered with relationships becoming closer. Angela and Athena, for example, both stated that though they tended to have better rapport with the males in their unit, close relationships did not develop because the men tended to perceive them as flirtatious.

**Athena:** So, our relationships I mean over the course of time became closer. You know even with the other men in my unit. They were protective. You know they still wouldn't get so close to me. I was a female, I was young. And I got the oh, she's a flirt. So, you know she's going to flirt with you or something like that when they didn't know who I was. Number one, none of them ever spoke to me. So, they automatically assume you know because of the way I look, and with me being young, you know that by talking to me they were getting in trouble. So, I was pretty much alone the entire time.

**Angela:** [Relationships with other women in the unit] Friendly with most, not really close to anyone. There was like a couple that I was decently close to but I've always gotten along better with guys in general, but then I feel like that kind of... I think a lot of them thought I was like flirtatious or something like that. So, you know even if I wasn't being... Like you know just cause I'm always with them and stuff more than with girls. There was like a small group of [girls] who just didn't like me...

Even though Kate identified her relationships with females in her unit as much closer in the Army than the Navy, she still sensed that there was a “wall” that interfered with closeness.

**Kate:** [In the Army, my relationships were] much closer... So in my Army unit there weren't as many women in the unit, so I worked as an aircraft mechanic... In the whole battalion, I wasn't very close with a lot of the higher enlisted or the officers, but in terms of like the girls in my shop, I was a little close to them but not much. One of them you could say was...well one of them was my battle buddy because we were on the same shift. The other woman was on a different shift. I was you know...you're close, but not exactly close like so people they don't share as much with other people and there's still that wall in between you guys. I guess that's the kind of relationship we had. You know, we were close not incredibly close. I mean we were in a war zone. So, I mean we had to be close but she wasn't like my best friend or anything. After we came home we kind of lost touch a little bit.

Though Jennifer and Kate (during her Navy service) described having positive relationships with others, it appeared that they also kept these friends at a distance, as they identified them as “co-workers” whom they did not see outside of work. Jennifer also stated that the crew changed frequently. It is possible that this interfered with the development of close relationships.

**Jennifer:** [In ROTC] I formed what I guess you would call working friendships that you have with any co-workers just because of the amount of time you spend together we were together quite a bit. I wouldn't see them out on the weekends, but you know I looked forward to seeing them during the day when we had class and when we had our training events... I have often felt that I had at least one person because our crews changed over time like we never flew with the same group of people every day. But like even though it was always changing, it always felt like within like the 20-person crew, at least one or two of them I would have a pretty strong connection with, so that helps the time pass way better too when you obviously can enjoy hanging out with people.

**Kate:** [Referring to her Navy service] I was a lot younger at the time. I can't remember how old I was. I think I was 19-20. I was fairly close to them. Not as...not extremely close not as close as I was to the people in my Army unit. I didn't have like a best friend or anything at that point... I did have somebody that I was with the majority of the time, it was just somebody that I shared my CHU that's a combat housing unit... It's just like a small trailer that they turned into like a livable space. It's just really small. And I shared that with somebody. So, other than that I just... there wasn't anybody that I was particularly close with. You know we worked together. We did a few things and that was it.

Nelly expressed a similar sentiment, and noted that she, as well as other service-members, likely engage in depersonalization, and distance themselves from others to protect from the painful reality that the other person will eventually leave (either having completed their duty, or being killed).

**Nelly:** [Referring to the one other woman with her] She was a good troop, but she annoyed me. It was weird because I tried not to get too close with people. You know like there was a great camaraderie while you were at your duty station while you're on deployments. You know I guess because at any given moment, that person could be gone, you know or taken from you, or you know hauled off when our time's done here at the station you're going to be going, never gonna see ya again. So, I tried to protect. It was like a protective thing for me to not get too close with a lot of people.



Helen added that competition, rank, and military component (whether active duty or reserve) can interfere with the development of relationships because of perceptions, judgments, and fraternization policies (in the case of differing ranks).

**Helen:** My relationships with women of the same rank or rank below me... It's a different mindset. Most of them are pretty good. I run into the problem with the National Guard active guard versus traditional drilling Guard member which is what I am. People who are HR (Human Resources Specialists) have a chip on their shoulder they think are better than other soldiers. So again, it's up to me to rise to the occasion and not allow you to plow me over or by bypass me somehow. It's up to me to be persistent and do the right thing and make myself noticed...

It's a funny thing the military, there's a lot of competition for things. There's a lot of aggression within the ranks. Especially with the National Guard because you compete with other people of the same pay grade for the same position. And there's such few E8 positions for example and E9 positions for example that you know, you have to have that edge. It's almost built into the system, you have to have that edge. You know the top will rise the cream will rise to the top kind of mentality. It's the way you go about it that makes you different from other people. Some of it is who you know, I'm not going to lie. The military is very political and national guard is extremely politically driven.

**Joining the “boys’ club.”** As previously mentioned, Angela and Jennifer described feeling better able to connect with males in their unit than females. Nelly and Kate similarly discussed how they adapted to and participated in a “boys’ club” culture as a way to develop relationships and survive. Here, the “boys’ club” culture refers to informal social networks of predominantly male friendships that include a degree of sexist humor and objectification, while also providing camaraderie and solidarity.

**Jennifer:** I had quite a bit of female support within my group but that was also not who I'm very good at interacting with cause I'm more, I guess I'm a little bit more masculine in a way. So, I had a harder time with my female coworkers than I did with my male ones... I won't say, I'm not like yeah some sort of dominant like need to be in charge person but I don't usually talk about I guess what's consider girly things. So, I mean I never wear makeup, I don't know much about things that most, I don't want to say most girls that makes me sound too generalized but the things that girls generally talk about kind of things like relationships and stuff I don't talk about those.

Survival, as Nelly noted in her statement below, was dependent on adapting to the boy club culture's humor and developing "thick skin."

**Nelly:** There was a lot of good. They were all together good guys, but they're... when you get a bunch of guys together. And you're like the only woman around they're gonna be guys, you know, but I really have a lot of respect for them. It's just the stuff that they are subjected to. And the mental fortitude that they have you know to deal with this kind of stuff. I mean their brain programming.

... Sometimes my mind is just as bad as theirs. Like sometimes I might you know chime in and say something off the wall because that's just me anyway because I don't get like offended over really... Some shit's funny to me; maybe inappropriate, but like you know I have a sick sense of humor sometimes. You know, you have to, to survive in that type of environment. You have to have that sense of humor and sometimes you know... But like I said, if it does cross the line to the point where you feel like you're in danger you know totally justified whatever. Everybody has their points. But you do kind of have to be a little bit like prepared for some shit before you go in because they're animals. Like ugh. They're funny, but annoying.

**Kate:** I mean everybody did it to be honest. Like everybody did it, people in the military people amongst ourselves we're kind of known for having like, not a sick sense of humor, but we laugh a lot about things that are inappropriate and things that are sexual in nature are definitely on that list. There was a lot of inappropriate-ness amongst everybody. Like we were junior enlisted soldiers you know we just... yeah. We are all inappropriate about all kinds of stuff. Yeah.

### **Theme V: Woman Warrior**

With this study's qualitative methodology, it is not possible to state that the women's varied experiences mentioned thus far caused specific shifts in identity. Participants were asked for their subjective opinions, and further research is needed to determine which shifts and developments in identity were due to their military experiences versus individual differences. The questions were stated in this way, "How did X experiences influence your sense of self?" All six participants indicated that there were effects on their sense of self that they believed were related to the military experiences they described earlier in the interview. Thus far, common themes identified above have detailed the women's experiences that they identified as contributing to shifts in their identity including basic training, gender-specific and war

experiences, as well as betrayals. When asked to describe their senses of self throughout the course of the interview and how they viewed that sense of self shifting over time, common themes related to their identities began to emerge, and are listed under the umbrella concept of “Woman Warrior.”

### **Subtheme I: End of Civilian Adolescent Identity**

The six women described an initial shift away from young civilian adolescent identities of being dependent on ones’ family, without a concrete sense of self, and swimming against the stream. They identified a connection between their experiences in basic training and the development of a new self.

**Angela:** It was my first time away from home.

The other five women identified beginning to adopt specific aspects of military culture and identity including uniformity, hard work, and stoicism to adapt effectively and survive in their new environment.

**Athena:** You know look, at that time you're a teenager in your senior year in high school, and you're kind of undeniably competing with other females there about who has the better purse, the cleanest timberlands out there, you know, and like you get sucked into that. And you really don't realize that you're living in a completely materialistic world. And that's who I was. In one way or another, I knew by making this change, I was putting myself in an uncomfortable position. And I don't know if that's the crazy side of me or the driven side of me...They obviously made us change some things about ourselves, beginning, you know we couldn't hang out as often because we'd have to be at the recruiter's office the next day...We had to take out our piercings. I had a lot of piercings at the time...I think in basic training, there is a lot, like I said aside from you know, your new routine, your new schedule...you don't know anyone. You kind of just have to fit in, you know, and survive.

**Kate:** You know I just feel like the person obviously the person that I came in was not this person that came out...I mean obviously there's like a certain level of respect that you have to talk to people that outrank you with, that comes standard. At the same time, like everything is so desensitized when you're in basic training, I mean that's where it starts. Everything is so desensitized. Nobody coddles you. You're kind of just like thrown to the wolves.

**Nelly:** Since starting in the military I've realized OK, this is the next six years of my life. So, I have to do what I have to do you know to make it through and I wanted to excel. You know I wanted to make rank. I was immature as hell. Like take a 19-year-old from New Jersey. You know I didn't...I wasn't that perfect kid. You know but once I made it through there I was like alright, like it's time you become an adult... I think I think we just were just trying to make it through [basic training]. Like get the hell out of there and survive. So yeah. Mentally I was shot. And I was just like I just need to get through this and get on with my career I can't stand this anymore. So that was my mindset...But as the weeks went on you start seeing the reasoning for the programming, and you know why they're so harsh on you. And the discipline that starts to get instilled and you know...And by the end of it like I was a pretty squared away little troop...My dad came to watch me at our graduation and he's like 'oh my god to see you Marching. You know and standing at attention you know all this military bearing.' He was like 'I couldn't even believe I was looking in the same person.'

**Jennifer:** I would say the transition was pretty fast because... or at least the transition in my personal life and my appearance and everything was very sudden. I was kind of like the...I Wore like neon colors, I had a lip piercing, I was really like a loud character in terms of how I would appear and then like overnight You know all the piercings came out. I kind of locked up my clothing and didn't become more professional...cause I don't even consider myself professional right now but definitely changed, um kind of grew up overnight in terms of my appearance. Not too much changed in terms of my social life...It was kind of a slow transition just because ROTC is a four-year program so you don't really change too quickly in terms of you know your personality. It's kind of like a slow transformation.

**Helen:** “[My ex-boyfriend] couldn't believe that I had gone into the military and that I was there in uniform. He could not get over this because I was very prissy when I was in high school and I know it doesn't look like it now but I was. I had the long nails. I was into punk rock and had the hairdo you know, and I had the clothing and the safety pins in my ears for earrings. I mean the whole .... The whole nine yards because that's how I grew... I grew up in the 80s. Well I grew up in the 70s, but the 80s I was a teenager. And here he's seeing me in this in this uniform and he's like 'No way because you're so prissy, there's no way you're going to get down and do push-ups and sit ups' and I was like you're such a douche bag and you're such an a-hole you know.

## **Subtheme II: Warrior**

Beginning in basic training, the women were introduced to and taught to embody the military's values. Though each branch's core values differ, their overall purposes involve establishing a standard of high expectations, conduct, and governance over the service member's life. The military's culture and values distinguish its service-members from civilian society, and delineate how service members live their lives, make decisions, and address any problems that

arise. The women described the various ways in which the military warrior ethos promoted strength and became a part of their sense of self. They developed a stronger collective identity and became members of a tribe who identified themselves as disciplined, hardened, and high achieving. Throughout their interviews, the principal investigator was struck by the women's tremendous perseverance, resilience, determination, and grit, which they attributed to their training and military identity.

**A member of the tribe.** Throughout their service, the women developed a collective military identity. Military ethos and creeds emphasize being a member of a team who will never leave another service-member behind, and who will place the needs of the team ahead of her own. It became very clear throughout all six interviews that these women warriors felt as though they were members of tribe, serving with a larger purpose. Angela and Athena specifically recalled being paired with a battle buddy in the Army's basic training to develop this sense of camaraderie and team work.

**Athena:** [My battle buddy] always did what she had to do. I always did what I had to do. We just made it work at the end of the day. I remember one time she did something in formation and she got in trouble. And the drill sergeant made her lay down. We had to carry her back to the room well because... well me being her battle buddy, I had to carry her. But there was no way I was carrying a woman who was bigger than me by myself, you know, I tried. And drill sergeant saw me you know struggling to get her into the barracks up to third floor into our room, and he assigned you know one of the other soldiers to come and grab her feet. So I had her hands and the other one had her feet and we were just pulling her up the stairs one step at a time. I felt so bad for her because every step she hit and she hit. Yeah, I mean it was good times. I mean at that time it definitely wasn't funny. But like we made it work. We just stuck together as much as possible.

**Angela:** Over some of the time, you become friends with people like you have your battle buddy... It's like they pair you up and you are kind of responsible for each other.

**Kate:** There wasn't a point where you guys were alone... I don't remember a point where there was less than 20 people together. Like I was always in some of some sort of formation or some sort in a classroom setting, but we were never off by ourselves like I think that's an army thing you know. I know, specifically when I was in the Army I had a

battle buddy. You know we were always together versus when I was in the Navy, it was just a group of us. It's definitely different training, different mindset. So [in the Navy] I had somebody like... I had a bunk mate. We shared the same bunk but other than that I really didn't have like a specific person that was my shipmate. We were... we were just all together. You know what is it that they say, that you're only as strong as your weakest link. If our weakest is really weak, we can't we can't get rid of it. You have to make it stronger. You know that definitely did happen a lot.

**Jennifer:** We went through a lot of phases where you called the storming phase where you everyone's fighting with each other but then you get along in a quote unquote your norming with each other. And then at the end they consider it performing when we're able to accomplish all the tasks. They give us I would say the storming days are pretty long probably like two of the four weeks but I guess that was because of just all the different personality types. And being surrounded by people you're not used to because you never meet these people until they show up. And then in a month you have to learn to totally depend on each other. So it's kind of a challenging experience in terms of trust and things like that.

Like the other participants, Helen entered the military at the end of adolescence and developed her military identity. She has continued to serve in the military for over 30 years, and served and deployed as a mother to two children. Relative to the other participants, Helen has navigated unique challenges related to negotiating her various role identities as a military service-member, a wife, a mother, a civilian, etc.

**Helen:** [The military has] always been who I am, yes, you're absolutely right it's always been who...I've always been Helen and I've always been in the military since I'm 19. I'm in my 50s, it's a lifetime. You know? And in between there, I got married. I married my husband when I was 26...So my whole adult life I've been Helen, in the military, and Bob's wife. I don't know how not to compartmentalize my life. I don't know how not to do that because I have always done it..[When I entered], there was no turning back for me and I knew from the moment I put on my uniform it was going to be a career decision for me. I knew that because I felt bigger than who was I was part of a group that was part of the team I had a purpose. I had a direction. You know it was a different world... we weren't at war with Afghanistan and Iraq, 9/11 hadn't occurred yet. And there was other shit going on. You know. But not to the extent that it affected us after 9/11 and like I said I've never turned back, never turned back. It's just... I don't know. It's just who I am. I've always been the military my whole life. I'll be so lost when I retire.

Upon re-reading the transcripts, it was noted that Helen described herself *as* the military, rather than as an individual *in* the military. She did not distinguish herself from the service.

Athena similarly described herself *as* Army, rather than as an individual in the Army, perhaps indicating how strongly they identify with the collective.

**Disciplined.** Many of the military's core values emphasize excellence in all one does, as well as fulfilling your obligations, following orders, and respecting the chain of command.

Several of the women described how these values influenced their sense of self and subsequently their behavior.

**Nelly:** I just didn't realize the importance of 'locking it up, keeping it tight,' like until I actually started going through it. Because down to like the very, very every day operations. It's so important to be able to adhere to operating procedures because if you don't, lives are on the line, you know national security is on the line. You know, international incidents are on the line. So, you've really, really...I'm like why are they making me fold my frigging underwear and in like four by four squares. This is ridiculous. But it's to make you be able to take the tiniest detail because there's a reason for it.

**Athena:** So now they're going to start molding you into a soldier now you've learned the skills required to handle a weapon, to be disciplined, to understand what team work is, and you know you know you never leave a battle buddy. I think that's pretty much what basic training is about... I think I pretty much you know became harder, smarter, faster, stronger because I had to, and I don't think since then I've known how to stop. I'm not perfect, I'm not a goody two shoes, you know. I just do what I gotta do, and people just don't understand that. People are like how do you do what you do? How do you find time in the day? How are you so disciplined? I don't think I would've ever been that person if I didn't get pushed to those limits.

**Angela:** I know the messages you get and they stick with you. The ones related to women and stuff. Also like good things like I would say that probably, the work ethic. Self-discipline, this and that. Attention to detail is a big one because like every five seconds ATD, ATD, attention to detail (laughs). You know. Like so, there was a lot of good that came from it too.

**Hardened.** The women described becoming "hardened," or developing stoicism to survive in the military. Emotionality was perceived as negative in the context of the military because it is viewed as a stereotypically feminine trait, insinuating that it is a sign of weakness. It is also written within the Air Force core values, for example, that part of fulfilling ones' duties of

discipline and self-control is to withhold ones' anger because displaying anger may discredit you. Additionally, being able to shut off or distance oneself from emotional experiencing helped the women "prepare for war," and survive difficult and traumatic situations while deployed.

**Athena:** So [after graduation], we had to go back that night back to the barracks, but it was a different experience like I said I think...I think that's when I became hard, you know and focused because I had to be, you know? You definitely go through a lot, you know? I think more than anything else, you just learn to survive. And try to block things out as much as possible. Anything that makes you feel weak in any sense or form, emotional or anything like that. You just can't deal with it.

**Kate:** It's like mass confusion. You have no idea what's going on but throughout the whole training, not that people talk down to you, it's just that people...there's no...they don't sugarcoat anything. You know everything is very straightforward. There's a lot of cursing. You have to have a thick skin. If you don't you just don't make it. And that's kind of how I am right now, but it wasn't how I was before. I do definitely notice like a change in person. Almost robotic in a sense you know like there's no... there's no emotion when it comes to any of that stuff because just... you're in an environment where you can't have any. You know the whole point of being a soldier or being a service member is they're supposed to prepare for war... I mean I don't think anyone's ever ready for war. But I mean I was definitely hardened, a lot stronger.

Angela similarly reflected on how she not only experienced a shift in her own level of emotionality, but also began to judge other females negatively who demonstrated emotionality:

I remember when we finally arrived at like my company, they were screaming at us and all of this stuff and all of these girls were crying and I was like, you know, like really? ...Like judging them for being... You know crying about it, and I was like really, like did you not expect this?

When asked about how she felt her military service impacted her sense of self upon separation, she also said:

I definitely got a lot more cold and mean after...I know that since [the military], I've been sort of uncomfortable with emotion or talking about emotion or like anything. That's like pulling teeth. So that's the biggest change that's continued over the years, and I still think of women as too emotional, just kind of negatively.

**High standards and self-critical.** As noted in an earlier theme, during basic training, group consequences for an individual's mistakes are a daily occurrence. Punishment and



humiliation are tactics that are typically used to encourage high performance, compliance, and to build camaraderie as the whole group is punished for the individual's failure. Athena and Angela both stressed that you are more frequently recognized by leadership for doing something incorrectly. Throughout their service, Athena, Angela, and Nelly pushed themselves to be as perfect as possible to avoid punishment, and these high standards have become a part of who they are. They are also highly self-critical when they make mistakes. Nelly additionally appears to have internalized the voices of her drill sergeants, as she often curses at herself to motivate herself to work harder.

**Angela:** I mean it's stressful, and I was in a position where like I usually was way better than a lot of the other females at stuff so like I wasn't noticed or something for like not being able to as much as like ones who were failing...but I guess when it comes to myself it's mostly just like picking apart, like picking myself apart. And like you know what I mean anything I deem to be negative, like hyper focusing on that because that's what like people always like point out... Now I have a really, really difficult time like if I struggle with something like it's automatically like you're stupid or you're like that sort of thing. Or like I shouldn't like in my mind I should just be like perfect at everything and I know that's not realistic you know. But yeah, I'm probably not reasonable with myself or if I'm not like I don't know I think I was kind of like this before. If I'm not the best or something like or the highest in the class...I don't know how much of that is that's just how I am, you know where it's just like oh you mess up at all as a woman in the military and it's like oh it's because you're this, and you have to...you always have to prove to...not even to everyone else or prove to everyone else things... It's like everything is like to myself you know.

**Athena:** I had to try to be perfect because otherwise you don't know what's going to happen to you. You know you don't want to stand out at all...Once you get into AIT, now you're starting to learn your job, so you've already learned the first part of being a soldier, which you can't stop... you still have to shine your boots. You still have to iron your uniform, you still have to be responsible for all of your duties and then going forward now you're studying to pass tests... and they didn't give you two or three tries. It was the first try you passed or...you didn't want to be that person to come through basic training, go to AIT, fail a test, and then go home because you can't pass your MOS certifications.

**Nelly:** You just have to continually tell yourself over and over and over again, and you have to believe it, you have to believe it. Like I will curse at myself a lot like motivation. I'm crazy. Like I would always be like come on bitch, you can do it...I'd be like come on you little bitch, come on pussy you can do this, just like get through this. Don't you dare quit.

**Pride.** Many of the women expressed feeling proud of their military service and/or identity at some point throughout the interview, and included statements like the following:

**Athena:** I love the Army. I'm Army through and through.

**Jennifer:** I would say I guess the biggest change would be the fact that that was the first time I actually 100 percent recognized that not many people do what I was doing in terms of I guess only 1 percent of the population serves. That was the first time I was extremely aware that I was unique in what I was doing and it didn't give me a sense of entitlement or anything but it just made me feel kind of kind of proud. I would say so I carried a little bit of pride with the fact that I had completed this and that I hadn't failed out and that I was able to continue in my job. So yeah, I guess it made it real.

### **Subtheme III: Femininity**

As the gender minority in a male-dominated, hyper-masculinized military culture, women in service are actively re-defining what it means to be a warrior. The women in this study not only adopted the collective military identity and values as described above, but also developed various strategies and qualities to combat the ambiguity associated with the role of being a woman in service to develop a unique woman warrior identity.

**Blending/negating/masking femininity.** First, many of the women received messages from fellow service-members and leadership that insinuated that demonstration of feminine qualities was negative and unwanted.

While Angela was in basic training and throughout the rest of her service, she received mixed and conflicting messages about whether femininity was valued. After a transgender soldier in her unit had their hair cut very short, the drill sergeant became enraged, and punished the whole group of women. She recalled that one drill sergeant told them that they must maintain their femininity, and cannot cut their hair short. This appears to indicate that the military and its culture not only have difficulty integrating female gender identity, but may have even more difficulty integrating gender identities that do not ascribe to the gender binary.

**Angela:** It was a lot of weird messages like being thrown at you, you know it's like... you're supposed to, well you have to stay feminine, but you have to be just as strong as the guys and you have to ... You have to prove that you should even be there and all this... As far as like female stuff, we were all together, but then like they were kind of... they wanted you to be feminine but not act it, that sort of thing because I remember we had this one... person, she was like... She, you know, she identifies as a guy but she's a female. She had gotten like a haircut, like really short and it... fucking raised hell like with... actually it was a male drill sergeant, one of the male drill sergeants. He was really mad about it. And then the female drill sergeant comes by, and she said 'you must maintain your femininity,' even though she... Like her own hair was like nonexistent.

On the other hand, many of the women were also frequently told to “man up,” or to eliminate qualities that were deemed as feminine and therefore points of weakness. Athena, for example, said that she “wasn't allowed to be female.” Women were not allowed to publicly discuss menstruation, or to ask one another for tampons. Instead, they had to use militarized terms (i.e. TNT and bombs) that neutralized any concept of gender.

**Athena:** They kept us separate for the most part like the females, most of us stuck together. So say if we were going restrooms and one of us didn't have like a tampon or a pad or something like that if we got our period and you know we would throw one over the stall. They called it... we weren't allowed to call it a tampon or pad, we'd call it TNT or Bombs. So 'do you have a TNT on you, do you have a bomb on you,' something like that. We weren't allowed to be females... I remember I had this one little African-American drill sergeant and she loved me. Loved me. Love I mean like extremely hated me. She was always in my face. 'Oh you do your eyebrows. Why do you smell good. Are you using something with scents because your soaps and your lotions can't be scented, nothing.' You know, you can't have any nail Polish on. Not even clear. You cannot tweeze your eyebrows.

Kate, Angela, and Helen described having to blend their femininity both in the way they interacted with others, and in the ways they physically presented themselves (make-up, hairstyle, etc.). Kate and Helen both described having to project themselves as “the bitch,” which also involved appearing uninterested in interacting with others.

**Kate:** It's funny. When I think about it. You know when you're a woman on deployment. I never experienced this in the Navy, but in the Army it's definitely different. You know... For me I felt like if you're a woman on deployment you're either like a slut or a bitch you know... If you... If you are really flirty with a lot of the men. Or hang out with a lot of the men, then you're like a slut. And if you don't do that, you're the bitch. So for

me, on the deployment, I was the bitch.... you could tell when people like when a lot of the men would talk to me. Like they were trying to figure out if I was the slut or the bitch. And when I wasn't having it, I wasn't having any of their conversation or anything like that, they just knew I was the bitch and they just let it go. That happens a lot. It happened a lot to me and I'm pretty confident to say that it happens a lot.

**Helen:** I was all about business. I didn't wear any makeup. I didn't dress to call any attention to myself at all. It was all you know sergeant this, colonel that, major this...it was never Bob, Billy, or Joe, never. You know I reported to my place of duty. I did what I had to do and I went home. I did not associate with anyone. I didn't do you know they had some um like activities set up for people so that they wouldn't be so bored or whatever you know whether it was going to the church services and then maybe hanging out afterwards or to the MWR (Morale, Welfare, and Recreation) and maybe having a get like a card game going or something. I didn't do any of that.

There's actual predators and if you don't project this just business type individual it almost opens up the door for something else even if you don't intend it to. I mean like I never wore my hair down. I made it a point to never wear my hair down. You know I made it a point. I didn't even put on nail polish. I just did not want to call any attention, and even like that, I had people try you know and get to know me on a different level. I did everything humanly possible, everything humanly possible that I could do to not draw attention to myself as a female.

Nelly navigated this double bind by adopting more stereotypically masculine traits. She entered the boy's club through her hard work and sense of humor, but at times has also received negative feedback for this identity shift.

**Nelly:** Sometimes I've been told that I'm a little too much or a little bit of a tool-bag or which to me I take that as a compliment...A tool-bag means just like a bro, you know like you know guys when they like now it's hard to explain. You know how we make fun of bros, guys that lift weights and like yeah that's kind of me. They're like you're so like almost like too much like a guy. And I'm like, well maybe you're just not man enough to handle me. So, you know but I love it. Like I like my mindset. When people tell me I'm too much I'm like well, don't hang out with me then. I've been through more shit and craziness and experiences in my life than half you people that want to say I'm 'too much,' like there's a reason why I'm this way. Like these are survival skills you know and they've come in handy in many, many situations in my life and I'm thankful that I have this.

**Compartmentalization (of female or mother identity).** Several of the women developed a strategy in which they compartmentalized the aspects of their identities that did not fit with the warrior identity. Kate and Jennifer, for example, both expressed that they did not

consider their female military identity, but instead only thought of their military identity when reflecting on their service.

**Kate:** I never really felt like I was a woman in basic training. I just felt like I was in basic training. Aside from like the different hygiene aspects of being a woman I never remember that I was a woman... It was just me. A sailor being in basic training or a soldier training in basic training. I never thought about being a woman. Which is kind of strange, but I just never thought about it. You know our uniforms are a little bit different so I had to remember that, but you know what they taught us how to wear uniforms. We had to learn how to wear certain things. But other than that, it was just standard. All like no woman, man, nothing. It was all just standard for everybody.

Though Kate has re-integrated her feminine identity following her separation from the military, she said that when her military identity is salient in her mind, she reverts to a mentality that does not include her femininity.

I feel like I'm more resilient. I Don't feel like I know it's kind of hard to explain but when I do think of my time in the military I don't feel like a very "womanly" so to speak. I know like the obvious hygiene and logistical things like I just never felt very like a woman you know and sometimes even now sometimes I don't feel like it either. When I do remember certain things because deep down I am a soldier also and all that stuff is still in there. You know you still you were trained for certain things and you know like that stuff is always with you. So even when that stuff is always with you and even then I still don't feel very womanly either. Yeah I feel it now but not when I start thinking about like my military stuff or if I'm ever in a situation where I have to put my training to use then I wouldn't feel very womanly either. I don't know, like I said I just feel like a soldier. I don't feel like a female soldier, I just feel like a soldier. I don't feel like a female sailor either. It just felt like a sailor. That's just that's just how they trained you to be to.

Jennifer expressed a similar sentiment, as well as frustration that she was at times identified as different from her fellow service-members because of her gender, when she did not see this as a significant difference.

**Jennifer:** In the office, in context of being female done it is highlighted as if it should be something more separating than it is. Like for instance on work trips that I take they could be two to three weeks long and it occurs to me that I'm the only female and I don't notice and I really have no idea until an outsider says like 'Are you cool with being the only female' and then to me... I'm like why would that ever be an issue what do you mean am I cool with this totally normal thing? I'm at work with my co-workers so I would say that a lot of times now, I feel like people put more emphasis on it than I do. Not to say that there shouldn't be emphasis on the differences between the male and female roles in

the military but a lot of attention was paid to the fact that I was female when I didn't think it needed to be...It felt like it was a divider that other people noticed that I didn't notice. I mean, there's obvious things like pregnancies and cramps and if I have to go to the female doctors like there's all these things that make me different, but how I do my job is not what makes me different.

As mentioned earlier, Helen was the only participant who has served in the military for over thirty years, and had children while she deployed. She talked at length about compartmentalizing her various role identities depending on her environment as a means of coping and survival. While she deployed (and when she is engaged in military activities as a reserve member) she fully immersed herself in her military identity as a sergeant first class in the Army.

My family is a hot mess when I'm not around. Oh, no you don't understand that they are a mess when I'm not around and that makes me kind of anxious you know, when I'm in uniform I'm a different person. I'm going by the book. What has to happen, happens. I'll give it 150 percent. You know, I'm Sergeant First Class that's who I am 24/7. But when you're home, you can't be that way, when you're home. You know, I'm a mom, I'm a wife, I'm a grandmother. You know, it is so different because I can't deal with my family like that. I wish I could sometimes but I can't. So that's why it becomes stressful for me when I'm away from them because when I left the last time I mean all hell broke loose I kid you not it was...it was horrific...

It's very different. But it has to be because you can't...the only way to stay sane in the military, whether you're active duty, I was active duty for nine years, or reserve. You have to be able to compartmentalize who you are, you have to. You have to be able to separate yourself from the situation as a person because in that uniform, you have to do the right thing, and you have to always keep in mind everyone's safety, it's not your safety, it's everyone's safety.

Whereas when I'm home, it's all about my children. It's all about my husband. You know my mother, my sister, you know I can't... I can be emotional with them. I could be...I could let my guard down with them.

With my soldiers, I can't do that because they look at me for leadership. They look at me as a mentor they look at me to be the problem solver. My family does too, but not it's not a critical situation. You know their lives are not going to be lost as a result of me having a fight with my sister, for example, she'll be annoyed for a day and that'll be the end of that. I can't have it with my soldiers because I have to be able to depend on them to do what I tell them to do regardless of where their head is that at the time you know. And by that, I mean not that they're not paying attention, simply that they might have their own you

know civilian personal issues going on that they need to set aside as well to get that mission accomplished because again if you don't rise to the occasion you can lose lives. You know whereas in other situations it's not so much so.

#### **Subtheme IV: Working Twice as Hard to Be Recognized**

Perhaps due to the previously mentioned perception that women are weaker than men, the women in this study repeatedly discussed how they felt as though they had to work at least twice as hard as their male counterparts to be recognized, and even harder to earn respect. However, this is not just their perception, as it is also engrained in the system that women have to work harder to prove that they are capable of performing their duties in the service. Kate highlighted how this presents itself through PT tests.

**Kate:** You know men are stronger than women you know so it takes us... Our PT tests are different, and our PT standards are different. I don't know if you know that. So a lot of times those guys are always stronger even though their PT standards are different, you know it's easier for them to pass the PT test versus women to pass a PT test.

Time and time again, Nelly proved herself to be just as competent as the males in her squad. She became squad leader early in her service by out-performing the males in her squad, and rose to many leadership positions by working extremely hard. Each time she began a new position or prepared for a new assignment, she had to start over and bust her ass to gain the respect of those around her.

**Nelly:** You know time and time again when I would continually prove that I could do this, it did help my self-worth, it did make me realize wow like I have this in me that I never knew really existed. And I mean it's been like a rise and fall you know like I would make it to this level then be cut back down because I don't know because I don't think that like men like seeing women ultimately in a role or leadership role over them... I think it was because I was always doubted you know. Once I was in my squadron, once I was in with people and they knew me and my commanders knew me and everything I umm... I did get respect and they did really embrace me and they...my commanders would get a kick out of it. Like 'you're crazy but you know we love you.' Hey. You know so I didn't think that I always wanted to be the first girl. I just felt like because I was a girl that I had to prove myself that much harder. Yeah, you know and I did. And I wanted to prove myself beyond like just being equal. I wanted to be like hey, I'm the best, and not just the best for a girl... Because to...be a girl and to like make it through

that training [for a joint task force]... Once again, it's just another thing that like I accomplished even when being doubted because of my gender and because of my size and because of my looks you know people talk about discrimination. I've been discriminated against for a loooong, long time because of how I look and my size you know like people will automatically make assumptions and so I kind of understand how it is like you do have to fight harder to break those molds and like how people look at you and stuff and it gets tiresome. But it's also rewarding because you know you like...you've proved people wrong.

**Helen:** I think it's very different the way women wear that uniform versus how men wear their uniform...[Women] have to give them 100 percent to be marginalized. I feel that it is a man's world. And they don't face the challenges that we face. We have to be bigger and better than life to be marginalized because we're not equal... When the military told me you're a woman you don't belong I told them to kiss my ass. When the Army told me I don't want you in my army, I got kicked out of better places than this, you can kiss my ass. And I'm still there... My current First sergeant tells me I'm a rock-star because whenever she needs something I'm there. You know whenever they need somebody to stand up and rise to the occasion, she's like Helen will do it and she'll tell me you know why I pick you, because I know you give me 150 percent and I'm two on the list for promotion I'm going to have a sit down with her and said Why am I number two. Why am I not number one? What can I do differently? Tell me first sergeant what can I do? So that's the way I deal with it. If you're going to give me a mediocre evaluation because I know that you don't like me then it's up to me to prove to you that no I don't deserve that mediocre evaluation. I deserve a better one and these are the reasons why. So, you have to be actively promoting your career. Because if you don't actively promote your career nobody else is going to.

Angela and Jennifer both described a pervasive fear that if you make a mistake, or express too much emotion, those will be attributed to your gender, and all of your hard work will be forgotten.

**Jennifer:** I guess the only thing that I've had maybe that sometimes I feel embarrassed for some of the reactions that I have that maybe would be considered to be more feminine. So, if I have an outburst then I am embarrassed by my outburst because I think they're going to blame it on me being a female and me having hormones and I don't know maybe it being my time of the month or something instead of like and like maybe it's just because I'm mad and like if a man got mad it would just be you know they wouldn't look to see what are the hormonal or emotional reasons behind why and why they're mad... I would be ashamed to have an outburst because I think it would make them take what I was saying less seriously like if I said it in an emotional way then suddenly whatever I was saying was invalidated because it was too emotional.

**Angela:** There was a lot of stuff like that where people were like... if a girl couldn't do something you know. It was like oh it's because she's a girl. And she shouldn't be in and



this and that, and that sort of thing. So there's a lot of pressure to perform just as well as guys do... I mean it's the same thing when a woman gets rank or something, like I said all of a sudden they turn into a giant bitch. You know what I mean because it's like ... they feel like they're trying to, they have to prove something. Like they can do the job just as well. So I mean it's kind of like that with everything. I mean it's stressful.

**Recognition and awards for performance.** Though all six participants worked tremendously hard, served with honor, and demonstrated resilience throughout their service, Athena, Helen, and Nelly described particular occurrences when they were recognized or promoted for outstanding performance. They also described this recognition as unexpected since much of the time, their hard work went unnoticed and without praise. The participants reported feeling an immense sense of pride for having been recognized for all of their efforts.

**Athena:** I sent [my mom] a picture because the Sergeant Major of the Army came. And you know people were getting coins from him for doing certain things for being a part of certain missions. And you know Command Sergeant Major of the Army and a coin from him is like you're important, you know like you're a star. So, my first sergeant came up to me because they ask the first sergeants to send the one person from their unit to get a coin. And he came up to me and he was like, 'you go up there Athena.' And I was like, 'first sergeant.' And he's like, 'no, go up there.' And I was like oh my God this is not happening. So, I went up there you know. Ugly, I look like a little boy you know like no makeup, bloated with the sodium because we're eating like 3 MREs (Meals Ready to Eat) a day. And they're so bad for you. Puts the coin in my hand and they took a picture. That's the picture I got that I was able to send back to my mom.

**Nelly:** We ended up getting two medals out of it, and we got home from it and like people are like wow, you don't know how cool that is...like you're the first girl and then they came up...for each year, they would have Airman of the year. And like Airman of the squadron stuff, so my commander put me in for that. And yeah, I was really skyrocketing. It felt good because I'm like all this hard work and bullshit I've been dealing with being a girl and stuff is kind of paying off and I'm feeling like, wow like I can do this umm...So I end up winning Airman of the year and then this is when I signed up for JTF which is a joint task force. Which, that, that's when I ended up being with the Special Forces guys...But being a woman on that...yes, you get your extra attention because you're a girl. But I did get respect. You know and I think you know them knowing that if you're part of the operation, like people that were... You're picked to be in the operation for a reason.

**Helen:** That chief loved me and she was trying to get me as her personal assistant in recruiting. She's trying to pull every string she can to get me on orders because she knows I will give her 150 percent no matter what the task is I'm assigned. She made me walk on

water in my command as a casualty notification officer because she would hand pick me for missions. That spoke volumes for me where the majors and lieutenant colonels were like shit Helen's got her shit together, OK because it only takes one person to give you a bad evaluation for you to sink quickly in quicksand just like it takes one person to boost who you are for people to realize that you know what, this is a high-speed soldier. My current first sergeant tells me I'm a rock-star because whenever she needs something, I'm there. You know whenever they need somebody to stand up and rise to the occasion, she's like Helen will do it and she'll tell me you know why I pick you, because I know you give me 150 percent and I'm up on the list for promotion.

### **Subtheme V: Leadership**

Though a few of the women verbally identified leaders within their units who they admired and felt supported by, on the *DRRI-2 Unit Social Support* sub-scale (Table 5), the women tended to rate their views of unit leaders as more globally negative. The women who participated in this study experienced a host of betrayals by the leadership, (including inappropriate behaviors, discrimination, devaluing and isolating, etc.) that are detailed throughout the other themes. This sub-theme will discuss additional experiences with and as female leadership, as well as the double bind that several of the women faced as leaders.

When women find themselves in leadership positions, they experience yet another double bind. Though they may want to serve as a positive role model and support their lower-ranked service-members, their capabilities are still constantly being questioned because of their gender. Thus, they still described feeling pressure engage in tactics to prove that they are capable and worthy of holding their position. This may explain why five of the women endorsed that during basic training, the female drill sergeants demanded the highest standards from them and often implemented the more punitive consequences.

On one side of the bind, as higher-ranking service-members, Nelly, Helen, and Jennifer stated that as female leaders, they wanted to set a positive example and mentor other women. Their leadership styles, which they describe as more nurturing and supportive (more

stereotypically female traits) are distinct from the typical militaristic and masculine leadership style action through fear. At one point in time, Nelly was a senior air-man and was in charge of sixteen troops. She described her leadership identity as nurturing, motivating, and humble.

Being a leader, like in a leadership position... if you saw somebody that needed help or extra or training or extra motivation, like I wasn't a jerk I wouldn't be like 'Oh you do push-ups' or you know... how the guys were. I'd be like, 'hey is there something that you need to work on or you know what do you feel weak in. Let's see what we can do to you know get you up to par,' and you know I would try to help out, and try to be as motivating as possible without being a jerk like the men were. Like I wanted to encourage and be alongside them you know not be looking down on them because they were weaker than me. So yeah that's a big difference too with being a woman in that capacity. I'm a nurturer. Like I would take care of people and try to help them and with whatever you know. And I was humble enough to know hey if there's something that you see a weakness in me or something that I need to work on please come to me let me know like I'm all ears. I have like an open door policy and I don't I don't have that ego where oh you're not going to tell me how to do this... just because I was a squad leader didn't mean that like I was too good to do what you know other... like I said we're all a team. Like I wouldn't make people do something that I wouldn't get right back next to them and do.

Helen is a platoon sergeant who makes herself available to support her soldiers at any hour of the day. She passionately described feeling motivated to use her leadership position to empower her female soldiers and leave a positive legacy by modeling resilience and perseverance.

The legacy that I'd like leave especially [for and of] women is you are as capable as you want to be... You have to do the right thing and be consistent with the right thing to get the respect that you should get because if you don't respect yourself nobody else is going to respect you. The number one quality that I want to leave as a leader is a positive outlook. It's the idea that you can control your destiny. You can control your career and your future. You know ugly things happen, bad things happen, but you are the one that can define what that thing is and how it's viewed. You can turn it into a positive. You can mentor and bring women in the military forward in a positive light by not dwelling on the negative by being a good example, you know by being a positive force. That's what I like to leave, especially for women because I've seen a lot in 30 years. I have seen a lot. I've seen women do really stupid shit and I've seen women do very heroic things. And I've seen women wear that uniform in a shameful way and I've seen them wear that uniform in a very positive way. And I like to be that positive. You know I like for women to say you know what, if Helen can do it, I can do it. That's what I'd like to leave. That's the kind of legacy I'd like to leave a positive one an empowering one for women... I'm a platoon sergeant my phone goes off all the time. They respect me. They see the kind of

leader that I am and they want to be mentored and that makes it all worth it to me that at least I can give them a positive direction out of something that's negative... My soldiers can call me at any time of the day or night as a platoon sergeant and know that I will get a hold of the first sergeant and I will push their agenda. I will fight for them. They know that because I've proven it to them over and over and over again.

Jennifer also described her leadership identity as a supportive mentor:

I moved into the assistant flight commander position... And our flights usually had around 20 to 25 people in them. So, I would usually most of my time was spent handling different life issues that they have and trying to make sure that everything for them is going as soon as possible and if they need support, arranging support whether that be medical for their families or I don't know if they wanted vacation suggestions, like there was a lot more like of a mentorship role in that time.

Several of the women identified benefitting from having positive experiences supportive female leadership. Athena, for example, developed a friendship with a female non-commissioned officer (NCO) on deployment. They were not supposed to become friends due to the military's fraternization policy, which discourages friendships (among other personal relationships) between individuals of different ranks to avoid comprising the chain of command. However, after the female NCO protected Athena from an uncomfortable and potentially dangerous situation with the males in their unit, Athena looked to her as a role model throughout the deployment.

**Athena:** You know I saw her mannerisms and I picked up on that from her and learned from her and she was quick you know. She'd fire her weapon, she'd go in there, grab food sit down and only sit there for like two seconds. She didn't even taste the food it was just in her mouth and she was out and I kind of like had to keep up with that pace. You know and we would go. Same thing with showers and it was like she was born into the military. Like she was made for it. I kind of like I picked up on her mannerisms and I did learn from her. And I knew why she made rank so quick because she kept her mouth shut. She didn't make excuses. She didn't make waves and she did what she had to do. And I just knew that I had to be like that.

Nelly went on to describe feeling caught in the other side of the double bind, and identified a situation where she felt her image as a leader was being threatened by someone who was not taking her seriously. Perhaps without awareness, she may have felt that if she did not

return to the militaristic/more masculine leadership style of action through fear, she may have been perceived as too weak and ineffective to be a leader due to her gender. She described a shift in her leadership role identity in which she noticed increased anger and aggression.

**Nelly:** This is kind of where there was something sparked in me. I liked being a leader. But the pressure that I was put under and I would hold myself to a very high standard. And I did not like to look bad and I did not like any of my troops making me look bad. I kind of turned into an asshole a little bit because people were not adhering to the standards of what we were supposed to be as elite guard. And yeah like I changed a little bit and I didn't like, I lost my temper a few times. Like I heard that one of my troops which I didn't make the selection of him coming over to elite guard. I didn't want him there. But like the head guy because we were like short and nobody wanted to come over because it was like too high stress you know... I didn't like him at all, and he would continually do things behind my back like that made us look shitty and I was told about it. So, one day he was like disrespectful to someone at the gate. And I was told about it. So I took my van up there. I grabbed this kid and I slammed him into a wall and I got in his face. I was like if you ever make us look bad like that again you're done, I'm writing you up. I'll give you one more chance but I ain't fucking around, we're not fucking around with this shit. And when I stopped like a couple of other troops saw me and they're like you can't do that. And I'm like well I just did so... and I still remember I do not like how I lost my bearing. And like I was so unprofessional doing that and I lost my temper and I started to see that like there were certain stressors like things that were about meeting standards I was being such a psycho about.

### **Subtheme VI: Identity Shift Between Branches**

Of note, Kate and Helen both served in two branches of the military, beginning with the Navy and transitioning into the Army. Though there is an overarching military culture, each branch has its own culture, including language, norms, and values. Consequently, Kate and Helen identified shifts in their military branch identities following the transition.

**Kate:** [After joining the Army] I definitely feel harder you know like not more callous, but I feel like I feel a lot stronger and a lot harder. I feel like I'm more capable. Then again, you know I didn't...I stayed a lot longer in the Army but I feel like I'm more capable of leadership positions. My job was different in the Army you know I was a technical inspector, so now I feel like I have that NCO mindset versus when I was just 20 years old in the Navy you know, yeah I definitely, if I had to choose, I definitely feel like I identify as a soldier more than a sailor.

**Helen:** Coming from the Navy going into the Army, it was a completely different language. Leadership is leadership is leadership but the way they went about it was very

different. And I had my first sergeant tell me pretty much the same thing. 'I don't like you. You're a squid. You're holding up a slot for somebody who's capable that should be in my army. I'm stuck with you but since I'm stuck with you I guess I have no alternative but to deal with you. Go stand in the corner over there,' is basically what he said to me... They didn't like me because I was Navy. So, they tried to hold me back. They would not push forward my packets they would not allow me to go to leadership courses so that I could move forward. They kept telling me I was grandfathered and I keep fighting with them over it. And it wasn't till we deployed and we deployed with two Air Force people and my unit that they finally sent all three of us through PLDC (Primary Leadership Development Course) so that we could move forward. So that's what I did... The language was different. The rank structure is so different you know between the Army and the Navy that it would have really benefitted me a lot [to do the training in the beginning] because they would say things... the army would say things to me, and I had no idea what the hell they were talking about because they use acronyms for everything! For everything. There's no such thing as a normal form, it's a 28-26 or 51-89 or whatever... It's like, just tell me what it is! Oh, it's the same thing. I can deal with that. But don't tell me that 28-26 because I don't know what that is. So that was more difficult. But again, it became the battle of the wills for me.

### **Subtheme VII: Coping**

Many of the identity shifts noted above may be viewed as methods of coping with or adapting oneself to fit in a changing and challenging environment.

**Religious identity.** Athena, Helen, and Nelly also appeared to consider the role of personal spirituality and religiosity throughout their service. Throughout the interview, Athena frequently utilized phrases the referenced religion including "thank god," and "god willing," but also appeared to utilize religion and god as a way to place an external attribution for traumatic events and other challenges she experienced during her military service. For example, she said: "god just tested me over, and over, and over again."

Nelly grew up in a religious home, and though her current level of religiosity was not discussed in the interview, she also frequently referenced god and thanked god, particularly for increasing her resilience:

I thank god for you know him giving me that like fighting spirit you know and determination and grit and you know pain tolerance to get through certain circumstances that I've been in... You know it's just like you learn to appreciate little things and I do like

even today when I put my head on my pillow in my comfortable bed every night. I thank god and flashbacks go through my head all over seeing these people [from deployments].

Religion has also played an especially significant role in Helen's military service and sense of self. Throughout the interview, it was undeniable that Helen embodied service before self in every sense across her identities. I was struck by her selflessness, particularly in those moments where both her military and civilian families seemed to be depending on her for all comfort and safety. I asked her who she leaned on, and she replied that she leaned on god.

**Interviewer:** Have you been religious your whole life?

**Helen:** I found religion in Iraq.

This development of a religious identity was significant for Helen's survival. When she deployed, she relied heavily on prayer and faith to cope with the uncertainty of what would happen both at home and to her on deployment:

When I got activated to go, I had to really, really, really, really do some soul searching and really, really pray hard because I had to come to the realization that whether or not I trusted my husband's judgment or whether or not I agree with his parenting style I had to be OK with it because there was nothing I could do from overseas about it. So, I just started praying as hard as I could. And I started visualizing God's hands. You know one inside the other. And my children inside that hand. And every night I would put them in God's care and I would say 'God I know shit's gonna hit the fan. I know something's going to happen but please don't let that something be so terrible while I'm out here. If something terrible is going to happen at least let me be home. Because if something happens and I'm out here I'm going to lose my mind. I'm going to lose my mind and I can't do that... I was the NCOIC (NCO In Charge) of my site. People worked for me. I was responsible for their safety and their well-being. I had to be available 24/7 and I had to keep pushing forward. You couldn't take off, couldn't call in sick, you had to keep pushing forward. So, when I tell you that I relied on church heavily, I relied on church heavily. Church was a place where if you needed to cry you could cry and it was OK. And I never knew I had so much faith till I found myself only having that as a resource to keep my sanity and to keep moving forward. That's when I realized how much faith I had.

**Dissociation.** Helen and Athena also found themselves forgetting different aspects of their service that were particularly painful for them, and may have dissociated as a coping

mechanism. If dissociation persists, it may indicate that assessment of posttraumatic stress disorder is warranted. Athena said that she had forgotten much of what she experienced until she began to write it down, and then memories would return to her in chunks. Helen, described “blacking out” for several days after separating from her family, which she identified as the most difficult part of her deployment. She stated:

As I got to where like TSA would be [in the airport], I just started bawling. I just started bawling. And I remember that the one TSA agent said to me, she was trying to talk to me are you are you ok. Is everything all right. I couldn't even talk to this woman. I couldn't tell this woman what was wrong with me. She thought somebody had done something to me. She thought that something terrible had happened to me at the airport. Through sobbing I finally said to her, ‘No I'm a soldier, I'm deploying and I just said goodbye to my family.’ It was a blur from that point till I got on that seat. Whatever the hell it was to fly into Iraq. I don't remember. I don't remember anything that happened after that. My best friend said I called her from the bar at the airport. I don't remember talking to anybody. I don't remember landing. I just remember walking the tarmac carrying all my shit my rifle and my pockets were full of magazines of ammo and I had more than 300 pounds on me of cargo and gear or whatever. I remember walking the tarmac with it getting on the plane. And I remember when we landed... it's like my life completely stopped for all that time. We're talking I don't know days. I have no idea.

### **Theme VI: Experiences of Military Separation and Readjustment**

This chapter thus far has focused on participants' experiences prior to and during their military service, and how they identified those experiences as impacting their sense of self. The sixth and seventh themes will shift to examining common themes related to participants' experiences of readjustment to civilian life, separation from the military (when applicable), and how those experiences impacted participants' senses of self.

#### **Subtheme I: Emotions Related to Readjustment to Civilian Life**

When Helen returned home from deployment, she struggled to reintegrate herself into her family life and experienced role conflicts between her military and civilian identities. She felt tremendous guilt and shame for surviving her deployment, and for leaving her soldiers and her role as a military leader. At the same time, she felt guilt and shame for having left her family and



returning to struggling family members. Helen also described feeling angry, and as though she didn't belong. This contributed to increased alienation from her family and those around her. She stated that her family didn't know who she was anymore, but after all she had experienced, having to compartmentalize her emotions and civilian self to survive, she could not return to who she was before her deployment. In the following statement, Helen truly articulates her pain, guilt, shame, anger, and feelings of isolation and alienation that intensified as she transitioned home.

**Helen:** I was so angry... I was so angry. I every time I got in my car and wanted to drive my car into a brick wall and it felt calming it was it was it was a calming sensation it was it was a freeing sensation. It was it was a warm...I felt really warm and comfortable inside with the idea of just driving my car off a bridge. I didn't want to be home. I was so angry the things that came out of my mouth don't even make sense I mean I just cursed all the time I didn't want to be touched. All I kept thinking about was you know, why am I here? What the hell am I doing here? I should be over there. Where I'm needed. I'm not needed here. I mean people are dying. Why. Why didn't I die. All these people died all around me. OK. Why am I here. What makes me so, so incredibly awesome that I can be home and these people are frickin' dying around me and all my husband could say is you're home, you gotta be home. But I didn't wanna be home. I didn't belong home. I don't know if that makes sense.

It wasn't that I didn't love my family. I was so, so emotionally separate from them. All I could think about was the people that were dying all around me and that I was supposed to be there with them. I can't tell you my husband was begging me not to make a phone call not to leave not to try to redeploy but it took me a long time to get over that...[My children] didn't know what to make of me. They were afraid of me. Legit straight up. They were afraid of me. Like I told you I was very, very angry. Yeah you know. I had no patience no patience at all. None. Didn't want to be there. I was not affectionate to them. I was very distant. They didn't know who I was... When I came home I didn't know how to interact with my family because I had separated myself emotionally from them because I had to separate myself emotionally from them so that I could do what I had to do because I couldn't do it any other way. I mean I didn't know how to revert it back. I didn't know how to get back to who I was prior to having gone. Because that person was no longer.

Angela also described feeling frustration and anger upon returning to civilian life after her deployment. She commented that despite her perception that she “didn't even have big problems” on deployment, she still experienced significant transition stress, and was overwhelmed by the lack of structure in civilian life. She also felt isolated as she was no longer

in contact with her military friends, and felt alienated from the civilian people she had previously had relationships with because they did not maintain contact throughout her service.

**Angela:** The most challenging aspects of returning to civilian life were, I think just adjusting to the increase in freedom. That's what comes to mind immediately and just like the not... Like you know you were always around these people, and now you don't live anywhere near each other. You know the people you feel closer to. Not the ones that you left in your town. Now you're with them. They don't really have the same experiences you know so it's like I don't know, then you kind of drift from them too.... So, it's like you know that was probably... Because you made zero effort to see each other before... and I remember having like very, very, very, very little patience. Like I felt like everyone took too long to do everything like it's not even like I had big problems... I wasn't like on these convoys, there wasn't even anything like I saw. But it was still like... People complaining about stupid little things I would get really just like upset, I remember being... I had this thing where I had... I didn't believe in having any tact at all. Just like I said exactly what I was you know thinking and um... I guess I really wasn't...I wasn't that pleasant. I remember it took... It was weird.

I feel like it took me a while to be like...it seems like a positive thing like all of a sudden you are free to you know to go to a store, you are free to...you have an outlet in the wall, oh you don't have to put your hat on...all that stuff, but it was kind of like...wait a minute I can go wherever I want? But like it was...I don't know I guess I experienced it as a little bit overwhelming or something. I mean it's like no, somebody is supposed to tell me everything... I got over it like relatively quickly you know but I remember that being really weird in a bad way and it took me a while to not be a giant bitch to people like you know because I remember like and it wasn't like everybody you know like just like the people closest to me like I just like was irritable like real quick like and I mean I was just like I don't know, it's a little shocking to your system.

Kate also described feeling overwhelmed by the lack of structure and support in civilian life. When she separated from the Navy, she accepted a job in an office, but was so unhappy that she decided to re-enlist in the Army National Guard. She described the transition out of the Army as “smoother,” likely because she was already partially integrated into civilian culture, and had an established civilian career and identity.

**Kate:** If I had to think about it, I felt like my transition was more a little smoother for the Army only because there was just so much time in between my deployment and getting out. I had things a little more set up. Obviously, I was a reserve component. So, I was home a lot more but I felt like I had things set up more when I was in the Army versus when I was in the Navy. When I was in the Navy, I got out and I came home and I had no idea what to do with myself. I had no plan. I didn't have anybody...the only thing I had set

up was like I was I knew I was moving back home. I just didn't have a plan at all. And I took whatever fell in my lap. You know the job that I got it just fell in my lap and I just started and it was just very mundane like I went to work, I came home and I just hated it... Sometimes I feel like it's harder, civilian life... You have to really fend for yourself. All these things aren't already given to you just so you can do your mission.

Athena had felt alone throughout her deployment, and alienated from her friends and boyfriend because they did not contact her while she was away. When she returned to base after her deployment, she continued feeling sad, angry, and disconnected from those who were in her life. As she struggles to make sense of her homecoming and the associated emotional experience, she poignantly questions “we’re human, right?”

**Athena:** It was very difficult. Well number one because remember when I came home nobody was waiting for me. So that same day you know like I said after watching everyone hug their families, and they're crying, and you know I kind of... I felt alone you know. And I was sad but I kind of didn't let anybody see it. When I got on the bus I kind of you know just put my hat down over my eyes and it went back to my barracks room. I mean I broke down a little bit, but I was strong though... Mind you [my boyfriend] never sent me a care package, no letters, no nothing. Not, I'm thinking about you, just completely separated. So, I carried that hurt with me to the barracks room and I didn't have anything to come back to, I didn't have a cell phone, I didn't have any type of you know communications, so I had to go to a pay phone and call him... I was kind of at the point where it was just like alright you know whatever. I guess I don't know I was hurt... We talked through everything. I hated him, you know. You know I didn't want to talk to my family for a long time because of that. And I think a lot of that aggression kind of like stayed with me maybe... But at the same time, you know like thinking about it now I kind of think it might have been a little bit selfish you know because you know they I guess they really didn't know that I was coming back and you know, so I can't take things so personal. At the same time, we're human right?

### **Subtheme II: Military vs. Civilian Cultural Gap**

All of the participants discussed struggling to navigate the military-civilian cultural gap, regardless of the circumstances of their return from deployment or separation from the military.

Though Athena was fully engaged in the military for two years following her deployment to Iraq, her transition from military life to civilian life was difficult. By the end of her military service, Athena had completed her Associate's degree and became pregnant with her first child.

While working on completing her Bachelor's degree, Athena began an internship at a global investment banking company, and immediately recognized how starkly different the individualistic culture at the company was from her collectivistic military background.

**Athena:** For me, I could not adapt to... That lifestyle that corporate stale environment and money, I just you know I don't judge people or situations. But for me in my opinion like a very stale money hungry environment. And I wasn't used to that. I was used to working together and getting the mission accomplished and reaching our goals and not tying a dollar value to it. So that was that was my problem. I knew I wasn't going to last at Goldman Sachs. I just couldn't adapt back to you know being around people who you know were just out to make that next dollar. And that wasn't a mission for me. You know I didn't I want to be a part of that. And you know they were kind of like hurt each other, not in the physical way but cut throat. It's a very you know cut throat world out there. And you know they wouldn't speak to each other in the elevator you know go in to their offices, throughout the day everything was about the meetings and charts you know and percentages and how much money they brought in.

She also noted some of the reasons why she believed that this gap existed:

[Civilians] really didn't experience anything outside of you know here being amongst everyone else who's free. But they don't have to... worry about fires and bombs and you know carrying a weapon in a third world country. And you know hoping that you're going to come back alive. And that's the only thing honestly I've prayed for was just to make it back home and even today I feel like sometimes it's just a dream that I made it back and that this is all fake... [The military] made civilian life look like a cake walk. You know like I can do this for the rest of my life and never have any problems because you wake up you go into the office and you do paperwork like there's really nothing that's putting you in a position where you're fighting for your life.

Angela also discussed how it was difficult to return to her pre-military civilian life after everything she had experienced throughout her service:

**Angela:** I mean I got dropped back like where I was before I went, but you see everything kind of differently. So, it's like it's like not comfortable to be back like you know. It just takes adjusting time.

Nelly had the most difficulty re-adjusting to the social culture at work and interacting with co-workers.

**Nelly:** When I got out, it was like I could not grasp the notion that people actually could fight back or talk a certain way to me. So, transitioning and you know I would get put into internal affairs a lot as a cop because you know just I would be nice to people and

then they would just like start calling me like names and I'm like oh hell no. And I would talk shit back and guys once again would give me... I got a lot of shit from dudes like civilian guys they just were not having a woman tell them what to do... So I've really had a hard time learning kind of how to speak to people in the beginning and to quell situations with words and realizing okay just a whole new ballgame now like being... Being a military cop is not the same as being on the outside. Civilians don't have to go through training. They aren't like taught the certain way to have respect. A lot of people don't, you know they don't give a shit. You know there's like everyone in the military at least you know there's a code of conduct that you have to adhere to. On the outside, people do whatever the hell they want. Over time I learned, OK, you're not in the military now. New rules. A way that you have to live that you know enables you to be successful in this job so. It was... It wasn't too bad. It's just as with anything. You know if you're so used to something and living a certain way and are told to act a certain way for six years, then it's just little habits. I know some people do have a really hard time adjusting and it's... And understandably so.

Similarly to Nelly, Kate had difficulty adjusting to civilian employment. She recognized the disparity between military and civilian cultures in this area because in the civilian sector, people's jobs are often just seen as what they do. In the military, Kate's job had purpose and was representative of her identity within her unit. She also brought many skills and strengths from her military service, and felt frustrated and unsatisfied with the lack of shared mission in the civilian sector.

**Kate:** When I got out of the Navy, I worked a really crappy job you know like I said I did a lot of bitch work in the Navy too, but it was still important, you know? Like we did daily maintenance on the aircraft. Somebody has to wash them, somebody has to fuel them, and somebody has to move them and that was like my job, it was important to the mission. And then when I got out, and I worked, I'll never forget... I had this job where I did paperwork. I answered phones at some point, I did a lot of scanning, a lot of typing. And when I was interviewing for the job, the guy asked me if I was used to pressure. I talked to him about being in the military and I told him about my job, and he's just like well you know I didn't mean that kind of pressure but you know can you come to work on time and can you meet the deadlines. I'm like yeah! It was really funny. And then after a while I was just like you know I can't do this. This job sucks I just can't be here anymore and you know I like I've lived at home with my mom still and I was just like I do want to do this anymore. I wanted to go back.

Helen experienced discrimination in her place of employment due to her military status as a reserve member. She said that when she left for deployments or for trainings, her co-workers

did not understand that she wasn't just leaving to go on a vacation, and found her absence to be burdensome.

**Helen:** I know that I lost my job because I was a military person. Nobody would take me because I was in the military and they didn't want me to deploy. They didn't want to have to do without me if I deployed. They didn't care that I did an outstanding job. They just didn't want to deal with me if I deployed. And even though that's illegal and they're not supposed to be that way, and they're not supposed to tell you that they are that way, one day I just cornered the president of our union, I said 'What is the problem. Just friggin' be honest with me. I'm not going to tell anybody I don't care. It is what it is and I get it. But I'm tired of people lying to my face tell me the truth.' He said, 'Yeah Helen that the reason why nobody wants you because they're afraid you're going to deploy. And they are gonna be shorthanded.'

**Missing the tribe.** All six of the women also discussed how meaningful it has been for them to be connected to part of the tribe. Those who are now veterans expressed a profound sense of loss, while those who are currently serving expressed anticipation of this same sense of loss. Athena and Nelly described experiencing the loss of having a shared purpose and mission.

**Athena:** You know, I know a lot of people when they go away to the military they have that specific purpose in life where they're out there they're doing something, they're defending the country. When you come back from serving that purpose, and you try to jump back into a life of normalcy, it is very difficult because unless you [have something] that replaces what your mission was and you start focusing on that... I'm not sure but for me I didn't have that so coming back I had to kind of figure that out you know like as far as a civilian, and adapting to like you know the culture again and pretty much having like everything at your disposal.

**Nelly:** The thing that I've learned is that I've always had like a servant's heart. So right now the job that I'm in... I make decent money. I'm able to be independent, live on my own and everything like that. I thank God for it. But there is no fulfillment and there is this longing in my heart.

Angela, Kate, and Helen described isolation, and missing the sense of community and unspoken shared understanding with other military service-members.

**Angela:** I'm really bad at keeping in contact with people. Probably if I had kept more in contact than I did, that might've helped [with my readjustment] some... because it's kind of like you know that was your life. So, you're just kind of like, that's what you're gonna be talking about ...so, you can tell [civilians] about it and it's like... I know but you didn't

meet that guy. And so...it's kind of nice to talk to somebody and like they know exactly what you're talking about, this place like this you know...or like some situation.

**Nelly:** That's another thing with the military like it's a very diversified group of people. So you get your squadron. It consists of people from all over the country, all walks of life all races creeds colors and the cool thing that I really liked about it was that camaraderie when you were in there. There wasn't racial shit. There wasn't... I don't know how it is now but everyone was cool with each other... When you go on deployments together like you're on your teams... So that's one thing that I wish that I could go back to because it's hard to not be like sucked up in this hype and the division you know and I try to always revert back to that like remember all you guys served a mission together. Guys and girls you know genders colors creeds race. Like you all work together as a team to make things better for each other and for your country.

**Kate:** It's way different. You know like you go home... like I lived in the barracks all the time and there are always people there and you knew all of them, you know you work with all of them you live with all of them. And if you got bored you go like I used to do stupid things when I got bored... There would always be somebody there that I knew and I'd just sit there and I'd chill and talk. You know then I'd walk to my barracks and back to my room and I bumped into somebody like ... But no matter where I was there was always somebody there. Now it's just like I go to work I come home. On the way for me going home, I don't bump into anybody, I don't talk to anybody. I say hi to my doorman, and that's it, and then I come home and I live by myself. I don't talk to my neighbors. I don't talk to anybody... It's just a feeling that just like I am so used to the life that I had before that I miss it. And I just don't want to function in the civilian sector. It's definitely it's a different mindset it's a different world... You know your worth in the military. You know what you signed up for. You know what you're trained to do. You know what your job is. And that's kind of what people miss about it aside from the camaraderie you know they miss the family they miss the people. Just the lifestyle that they miss. That's why they just go back. That's why I went back too.

**Helen:** We all have different experiences but somehow, we all have that same common ground the same commonality that keeps repeating itself.

**Jennifer (on anticipating her separation from the military):** Honestly, I think it'll be not having the support structure of the people I work with and that I am friends with... It's not like they'll disappear from my life but they won't be in my day to day like at my workplace so those support structures disappearing... We have a lot of organized activities that we don't necessarily want to do and we feel like it's taking time away from our family if we have to go do these organized events. But in the end, it's where we kind of get to know each other more and we can share experiences. So, having those is good because in the civilian world, I know a lot of those kind of organized events don't occur. There's a lot of isolation of individuals. Honestly, I don't have very many civilian friends. I have the people I knew in college who weren't military. But since becoming active duty and traveling for work and the way that...so I spend about 200 days a year gone from my wherever I'm located yeah. So, the ability to create new civilian friends hasn't happened.

**Seeking connection to the military.** Athena, Angela, Nelly, Kate, and Helen have sought connection to the military following their separation to mitigate the difficulties of readjustment through employment, social services, or relationships with other veterans. As previously mentioned, Kate and Helen both re-enlisted in a different branch following their first separations from the Navy because of difficulties with civilian life. Athena maintains friendships with two men she served with, and described feeling very lucky and relieved when she was offered a job to work with the government, as she was able to return to the structure and culture that she more strongly identified with, rather than continuing to work in a corporation.

**Athena:** The [government] agency contacted me and they wanted to bring me in, and it honestly probably saved my life because now you know I'm working with the military, I'm working with the army, with the Marines, with the Navy, so I was able to kind of still be a part of that. But if that didn't happen, I mean, I probably would've been like very, very, very depressed.

Nelly has maintained contact with some of the individuals she served with, and similarly described not feeling fulfilled by her civilian sector job. At the time of the interview, she was working on becoming involved with a non-profit organization that provides services for homeless veterans. Though Angela has not maintained contact with anyone she served with, she has met several veterans in her courses at school and described feeling connected to them based on their shared history.

**Angela:** I'm currently friends with people who went on separate deployments... we will talk a little bit about military stuff sometimes or you'll use like jargon where nobody else knows what it means, and not like everybody is talking in jargon but I mean it's like I mean is kind of like nice sometimes you just say it and don't have to explain it... That sort of thing.

### **Subtheme III: Decision to End Military Career**

Kate, Nelly, and Jennifer discussed their reasons for separating [and planning to separate] from the military. All three described hopes of finding a new identity, purpose and path. Kate



and Jennifer had both joined the military unsure of their future life paths, and looking for direction. Their choice to separate from the military arose when they felt that they had found that direction, their purpose in the military had been served and/or lost.

**Kate:** When I came back after my second deployment I still had time on my contract. So. I was actually in about two more years before I got out. And in that time-frame you know I was promoted. I went from being maintenance to being 2A and I just...everything was going smoothly. Then eventually towards the end of my enlistment I just had to make that decision to come to get out or to stay in, and I decided I wanted to get out. It felt like the job that I had in the military I couldn't do...I felt like I gave it everything like there was nothing more I could give, and not that there's nothing more I can get out of it. Obviously, I could make rank or leadership positions. But I felt like what I was doing in my civilian life was more conducive with what I ultimately wanted to do, and it was something completely different than what I was doing in the military. So, I just decided I wanted to concentrate on that. That's why I ultimately got out.

Although serving in the military often creates a sense of purpose for its service-members, it appears as though for Jennifer, it was difficult for her to define what that purpose was and therefore difficulty to identify how successful she has been in serving that purpose.

**Jennifer:** I would say the sense of self I had when I joined I don't have anymore. It was kind of like creating an undoing of my identity because right now I'm on my... in two years I'm separating and now I'm not really sure who I am basically. Am I a soldier, am I a civilian... Where do I fit in, in this picture? So, the reasons I joined are the...the reasons I'm now leaving because I've lost my sense of identity again. There's grander meaning behind everything that they tell us et cetera but it's just really hard to measure day to day month to month if you've had an impact. If what you're putting your life's work into is resulting in anything I know like that's a common thing that most people go through like what are they doing and why. I mean there's like if you're a teacher you know your students are your measures, if you're a doctor, your patients... Like we don't have a measure of what is good for us. You don't know why you're doing it a lot of times and you just have to keep motivating yourself. But that motivation expires. Like you run out of it eventually.

#### **Subtheme IV: Positive Impact of Military Service**

Despite the adversity that these women faced throughout their military service, all of them spoke of their military experience with pride, and identified many aspects of their service that they viewed positively and with gratitude. Some had enlisted for the benefits of the military,

including financial, education, and adventure, while others had been seeking a sense of self, purpose, and community. It appeared that many of those hopes had been realized, and that all of the women identified ways in which their experiences increased their (likely already existing) resilience and strength, and prepared them for whatever future difficulties they may face.

**Athena:** I have two master's degrees. I got one MBA and I got one in national security. I was blessed to go and attend you know night classes on base that they offered and you know also here to finish up my schooling.

**Angela:** I feel like it was positive in that it's allowed me to get two degrees and have no debt which is like yay. Overall, it's positive like I felt like the deployment was an experience to have. I mean like I don't really know that I would always wonder what it's like to go like if I hadn't done it, but I like knowing what a deployment is like. While I don't really see like my veteran friends differently than my non-veteran friends...it kind of... like you're part of something where it's like if you meet another veteran you automatically can talk to them...that sort of thing....and like it kind of helped me be more comfortable with people a lot older than me. Because I mean there were plenty of people my age, but I gravitated towards the older ones, and I feel like that helps me even now...in my work. Like carry those sorts of things along.

**Nelly:** We started on our trips around the Pacific which I loved. I'm going to start crying. I'm so thankful for this part of my time in the military because it was like, it's like a crescendo. It's like...it's the end. Pretty much... The things that I saw and the countries and the experiences and the culture. Oh my God. My last major mission was to China, the Great Wall of China. We got to go and it was epic like I was like thank you God that I was able to experience all of this because you know what, it made me appreciate my country that much more...It's just being thankful. I am thankful that I did make that decision to serve. And even though there were hard experiences, hard circumstances, bad things, I had good things happen. Ultimately, they have molded me into the person that I am today. And then just like I said I have bad traits, I have good traits. But even the extra abuse and the extra torture and stuff like that, it's really helped me get through some bad, bad times in my life. So yes. Like if before I went into the military like I couldn't even imagine where I would be right now. You know or if I had to deal with any of my experiences without having that military background who knows as well like where I would be...

**Kate:** I'm very glad I did it. Not just that I'm very proud of it but I feel like it shaped me into being the person that I am today. And I just I definitely am happy that I did it... I feel like my developing years, I was in the military so. It's shaped me to be a lot more resilient than I feel like people can be. You know and that's just something you can't get from anywhere else.

**Jennifer:** I'm happy for sure 100% that I did it. I think it was extremely important in making me the individual that I am. I don't think I would've gotten so much experience so fast in any other job. So, I think it's been pretty instrumental in developing me as a person. I mean it's made me stronger not only as an individual but also as a female in the moments where I've had to defend myself for being female and being able to not only defend myself but be strong enough that I don't even need to prove anything. I felt like a lot of times...now I feel like I don't have... I'm not looked at as a female but I'm just looked as just another co-worker which is the ideal situation.

**Helen:** You know I'm very passionate about the military. Very, very passionate about the military and it's had its dark sides too in my life, it has, but it's had a lot more positive... you know, a lot more positive than negative. And I focus on the positive. I don't give a shit about the negative that's always going to be there. It's what you make of it that makes all the difference.

### **Theme VII: Navigating Readjustment and Hopes for the Future**

The women had varied experiences of social support following their deployments according to the DRRI-2 Post-Deployment Social Supports sub-scale (Table 6). Though three or more participants tended to agree with the last several items that asked whether they felt as though family or friends would provide tangible help and support with money or completing tasks should they need it, when asked about whether they felt their families and friends understood their service experiences and could provide emotional support, they tended to disagree. Two of the five women responded, “strongly disagree” and two “neither agree nor disagree” with the item “The American people made me feel at home.” All five responded differently to “People made me feel proud to have served my country in the Armed Forces.” Three of the five “strongly disagree” with the item “There are family and/or friends with whom I can talk about my deployment experiences.” Two “strongly disagree,” one “somewhat disagrees,” one “neither agrees nor disagrees,” and one “somewhat agrees” with “My family and friends understand what I have been through in the Armed Forces.” Their responses reflect the military-civilian cultural gap.

The women also discussed the various supports that helped them readjust to civilian life, as well as various changes they hoped to see implemented to support veterans in bridging the gap between the two cultures that they straddle. Interestingly, though on the demographics questionnaire, two of the women reported being registered with the VA, all six of the women seek healthcare and structural supports from outside of the VA system, and five of them reported no involvement with Vet Centers. Though they were not directly asked about their reasons for utilizing non-VA services, several stated that they had not looked into any VA services, and two shared experiences where they felt unwelcome at the VA. This may indicate that although the VA has been making strides towards inclusiveness, many female veterans are still not seeking services at the VA, and if they do, they may not feel as though their needs are being met in a comfortable environment. Therefore, although it is a common trajectory for many veterans to delay accessing services at the VA for mental health until a number of years after discharge, further examination is warranted to determine whether there are additional reasons that interfere with health and mental healthcare access for female veterans within the VA system.

Additionally, the women discussed how perceptions of veterans and perceptions of female veterans as “not real veterans” contribute to alienation. Proposed changes coupled with additional education and understanding in the civilian population may reduce the gap, help veterans reintegrate into civilian society, and receive services that are designed to support women veterans.

### **Subtheme I: Supports**

Several of the women expressed that serving in the reserves for a period of time was helpful because they learned to navigate the duality of being a civilian and a military service-member while still having the support of the military.

Additionally, community-based programs, military programs, and finding structure in civilian society may facilitate a smoother transition for service-members returning to civilian life. Athena, Kate, and Angela all stressed that working, being aware of their benefits to go back to school, and having a set routine helped them transition into civilian life.

Before Nelly separated from the Air Force, she went to a Transition Assistance Program, and found this program critical to the success of her transition to civilian employment.

**Nelly:** They had a thing called Transition Assistance Program in which they teach you how to handle transition from military to civilian. They'll teach you resume writing, stuff which I've become very good at. That was a really good thing that I brought out with me. I mean it might just be the Air Force [who has this program]. But I feel like it was really important getting a resume together. They kind of tell you what to expect like tell you and teach you how to interview for a job, you know which is important because you don't really when you're in the military, they don't really interview for jobs too much like you interviewed for a rank you know and it's all performance based.

Several of the women also felt that social support and maintaining a connection with other veterans helped them feel more comfortable. However, they have only maintained connections with a few veterans. Nelly said that it has been helpful for her to have veteran friends to relate to. She also expressed that she thought it would be helpful for veterans to have relationships or services offered where they can reflect on their experiences.

**Nelly:** You're in such a hardcore, challenging environment like you have to keep going. Drink water and press on. You know you can't deal with [emotions] really at that time. But now that you're out and you don't have to really drink water and press on like you can take a moment to decompress and reflect on some highs and lows you know. But you know what, people, god I don't know if it could be a good thing or a bad thing [to talk about your experiences] because you know people that have learned to compartmentalize and they put that there. It's not healthy you know. But they are still living and they're still carrying on. But it's not... I don't think it's fair to them, to people who've gone through traumatic things for them not to be able to at least be given an option to address important things.

When asked about her contact with other veterans, Athena described maintaining a close friendship with female NCO she deployed with. She said that though she would consider

attending a reunion with her unit, she would not go alone, and noted that her identity has once again shifted to a civilian.

**Athena:** I stayed friends with the [female] NCO, you know we're still connected and she's doing great and I get to see her kids grow up. It's amazing because her kids' actually the same age as mine and you know like I said my brothers, I call them my brothers... my battles from being out there, the two black ones. We still meet up, we go to dinner every once in a while. Maybe every like five years or so you know because it's hard... I mean I've changed so much since then. I was a baby. I was 17 years old now I'm going back as 34 maybe everyone changed and everybody has their own families their own kids. Most of us aren't soldiers anymore. You know we came out and we're civilians. It would just be nice to kind of like see you know where people are in their lives how they've adapted, who they are now who they turned out to be and I mean I don't hold grudges you know you kind of have to let the past be the past, to a certain extent.

### **Subtheme II: Perceptions and Treatment of Veterans**

Several of the women indicated that they mostly felt respected by civilians whenever they shared their veteran status. They also discussed false negative stereotypes of all veterans, particularly related to female veterans, including that service-members are less intelligent than the general population, female service members only hold office jobs, females in the military are cold/flirts/abandoning their families. Helen also expressed a wish that society would become more educated about women in the military and what they are doing in service of their country.

**Athena:** I think how people view maybe females in the military, I think that's kind of like 50/50 for me. You know you I have people that you know respect females, especially the situations that they go through. I get more respect from the older people you know like in the 50s 60s that Lived through the era of war. And they know what it looks like and how it feels for men and women to come home and not get that respect because obviously that happened with our soldiers before. But anybody that I speak to know that I get I get the respect from people you know for the most part. But then you have your others that think that you know females in the military are there you know especially during deployments you know and they're flirtatious and you know they just want to be out there or be amongst all the male soldiers, just to kind of ruin their relationships or their marriage. I [also] think, and this is only because of what I've heard. I think that people view like soldiers in the military, they wouldn't be veterans - soldiers in the military, like they're not the most intelligent people and the reason why I say that because when I came back from leave I remember one year and I met up with my old friend from high school and you know they were going to college. They were starting their lives. You know one of my girlfriends actually told me she's like you know what I'm surprised that you went into

the military and I was like why? And she says because normally it's for people who can't pass an SAT or you know can't pass the test to go to college or you know they're not intelligent, they get bad grades. Yeah basically like for dumb people. And you know I was so upset that she said that you know that it kinda put a strain on our relationship. And I know I felt like maybe she felt that way about me. And that wasn't the case at all. Because I know a lot of very intelligent people in the military.

**Angela:** I mean I feel like some people may judge females in the military if they have kids like you're gonna leave your kids for a year. Or like along those lines...it's fine if you have a dad leave like you're the mom and you're just going to leave your kid you know. Yeah, and I feel a lot of people had undeserved reputations for being whores, who weren't. I don't know if people outside of the military think like that, but within. I think people think of females as like these like strong, cold, just like not emotional. Not that they're total... but like almost as not real people.

**Helen:** I'm hoping that people get more educated to what women are capable of doing. You know we're not all just scurrying our way to the top. You know we're not all just functional to you know 50 percent because that's all that's required of us, no. We're giving everything to what we do whether we're in the private sector in business or in the military, it's the same scenario. You know we have to give them 100 percent to be marginalized. So I don't know. You tell me ...hopefully it is changing. I don't see it. I don't see it. And it's funny because my leadership right now is all female. My commander is female. My first sergeant is a female. I'm a platoon sergeant, just two of the platoons that are male and I think that's a first time we've had a commander as a female and first sergeant as female in a long time because usually it's not that way. You know usually it's not that way. It's very hard to even get a female to be a first sergeant because there's so... The percentage of women in the military so much less than male. Right. It's almost impossible.

### **Subtheme III: Veteran Identity**

Images of the stereotypical warrior and lack of knowledge of women's roles in the military contribute to a perception that women are not "real veterans." Many of the women described experiences where others were surprised that they are a veteran because of their gender.

**Angela:** Last week this guy I worked with said, 'I don't know I'm like really surprised, you don't look like you were in the military.' So, what, I have to look like a beast or something? I think that's what people think like...like women in the military are a bunch of Ogres. It's like ok not really.

**Kate:** I don't know. Sometimes men ask me what my job was and when I tell them they're just like wow that's really cool. Or maybe they just didn't think that women could

have those kinds of jobs. But I wouldn't be surprised if they all thought that women have like desk jobs. I mean I guess now women can be in the infantry and special forces and stuff like that but I don't think that's what they think we do.

**Jennifer:** I guess there is the whole well you probably wouldn't know a female's a veteran unless they told you because I mean you can kind of see when men, like some men just look the part with the hair and what they wear and stuff, like I had many times where essentially... this is just an example that happened in the airport yesterday. The cashier offered the two men in front of me military discounts. Neither of them were in the military. I came up and he didn't ask me if I wanted a military discount and just to prove a point I said I was in the military just like ok you don't know who's you don't know who's actually done this thing that you honor so much so don't discriminate based on gender and things like that or don't count someone out just for their gender. I think usually people don't think of veterans as female.

Most of the women said that they are usually hesitant to tell others that they are veterans because of stereotypes and a lack of understanding of veterans (and female veterans).

**Kate:** I mean I definitely think there is that level like people appreciate what we do. I feel like some of it's obligatory, but I definitely don't feel discriminated against. Sometimes I do feel like people just don't know how to talk to people that were in the military. You know.

Awareness of others' perceptions of female veterans appears to have also influenced how some of the women view their own veterans status and identity.

**Nelly:** Now I don't go around telling everybody, you know a lot of people are surprised, 'oh you're in the military. You know that's crazy.' So, I don't go around saying anything, you know really, if it's brought up, I guess I'll bring it up.

**Angela:** They had me when I was extremely vulnerable right out of high school. And it's not like it's not like I identify as like...like when I think about my deployment and stuff like that, it's like it might as well be another person you know ...it's not like I identify as a veteran. I don't think of it like that. It's just kind of...I don't know. Because I feel very far removed from it you know in some ways but then it's like... I know the messages you get and they stick with you.

In considering her identity, Jennifer described feeling caught between the two cultures, and has had difficulty figuring out where she belongs. Jennifer does not believe that she will strongly identify as a veterans or share that she is a veterans with others because she does not



identify with the traits that are stereotypically associated with having a veterans status, including serving in a combat zone, and perhaps also being a male.

**Jennifer:** I guess because there's so much weight put on people that are in the military and you know it's always so much, and it's good, there's so much honor I guess bestowed upon military people and there's pride for the military. But, I can't really relate...even though I am in the military and I will be a veteran, I don't feel like those things define me. And I don't think those are my identity. But then, it's kind of the same as when I was in college. If I tell people now that I'm in the military then they put a whole different kind of connotation on me like oh you must have done great things you must have fought the good fight. You know. Good for you. You're so you know you're one of America's proud...when you know, if you don't... I don't feel like I've done those things. So it's hard to hear those kind of praises or kind of people thinking those things of you when you don't feel like you've done those things. But then it's hard for me to be a civilian too cause also I've been trained in a military way. So when things aren't going a certain way I react with a very militarized fashion so it's kind of hard to blend in between the two.

Angela also hesitates to tell others that she is a veterans because of stereotypes associated with veterans.

**Angela:** I feel weird. My mom's always like oh like you know like she wants me... She said you should mention like you're a veteran...Mom I'm not gonna just come out with it, like say that like that. I feel like people think that we feel entitled. So that makes me feel weird you know because it's like it's not that I feel entitled...if you're offering benefits like I guess it's silly not to take them but... so I'm a little weird about people thinking I'm... or people who are really against war, and think we're evil or something. You know I feel like they're I don't know, especially [where I live], I feel like that like I feel there's a bunch of protestors and it's not even that I like I don't know I always have that in the back of my mind. Like people who think you're a bad person.

## Chapter IV: Discussion

### **Introduction**

This chapter will discuss the primary themes that emerged from interviews with six female military service members. With the initiation of the Global War on Terror (October 2001 - present), and changes in policy that opened all occupational specialties to women, women's roles in conflict have expanded significantly in recent years. (Street et al., 2009). Women's increasing presence in the U.S. Military has also challenged the structure of military culture, and society's perceptions of what it means to be a service member.

Though research on female service members has been growing, much of the research is problem-based and quantitative. Similarly, the area of military identity development and its impact on functioning is an emerging topic that has not received much scholarly attention to date. Further, little research has explored the intersectionality of role-expectations associated with being both a U.S. Military service member and being a woman. The purpose of this study was therefore to explore how lived experiences of being a female military service member may influence the development of and shifts in role identity dimensions, and how these dimensions may subsequently impact general well-being.

This chapter will include a discussion of participants' life experiences prior to, during, and after their military service. It will also discuss participants' perspectives on how these experiences influenced how they viewed their sense of self.

Limitations of the study's methodology as well as possible directions for future research are also presented in this chapter. Additionally, some thoughts regarding potential implications of this study are included for mental health professionals to consider in their work with female service members and veterans. Prior to discussing the results, it is important to note that due to

the small sample size of this study, it is not advisable that these results be generalized to the entire population of female service-members, and should rather be viewed as exploratory and areas for future research.

### **Review of the Study**

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to understand female service-members' lived experiences. Specifically, the study aimed to explore how military experiences contribute to shifts and developments in female service members' senses of self. Their interviews were analyzed for dominant themes, which were compared with current research.

A qualitative research methodology was chosen because of the exploratory nature of the study. This methodology allowed the principal investigator to gather rich narrative data from the participants. Six participants were recruited for participation. All six participants were females who serve(d) in the United States military after 9/11/2001. Four participants identified as veterans, while two are current service members. The women represented different branches and components of the military, however, the Marine Corps and Coast Guard were not represented in this sample. Participants completed a demographics questionnaire, four sub-scales from the DRRI-2, and an interview (in-person or via telephone) with the principal investigator.

Results indicated that female service-members do experience significant shifts in their identities upon entering the military and throughout their service. These shifts appeared to occur in response to events in their environment, and often included adverse experiences. This finding was consistent with identity theories that suggest that individuals reflexively compare environmental feedback to their perception of themselves, and experience distress when there are existing discrepancies (Burke & Stets, 2009). Discrepancies between feedback and self-perception, and associated distress then initiates an adjustment process in which the person is

motivated to change their behavior to re-establish equilibrium. If the individual repeatedly receives environmental feedback that is discrepant from her role identity standard, she will likely either adjust her identity or exit the role or environment to reduce distress.

It is often outside of the service-member's control to determine when they can exit their military environment. Though causality cannot be inferred from a qualitative study, the women stated believing that certain environmental experiences throughout their military service changed their behavior and how they viewed their sense of self. Additionally, the women who experienced persistent discrepancies, role conflicts, or difficulties negotiating the intersectionality of their identities tended to experience feelings of isolation, alienation, guilt, and shame. Common experiences that appeared to influence participants' identities were organized into the following broad themes: choosing the military, military experiences, gender related adversity and relationships, experiences of readjustment and perceptions of veterans. Effects of these experiences were discussed in terms of a change in one's view of the self. Common experiences related to identity are organized under pre-military identity, woman warrior identity, and veteran identity. Most participants agreed that their military experiences had a significant impact on how they view their sense of self.

### **Unanticipated Events**

Most research studies experience events or occurrences that were unanticipated at the start of the study. This study had an unanticipated technological difficulty. In the middle of one interview, the audio recording device shut off unexpectedly. The researcher noticed this after approximately eight minutes had passed, so there is a gap in that participants' transcript. Though data is missing, it is not believed that this gap significantly altered the results of the study.

## **Interpretation of Results**

### **Reasons for Joining the Military and Pre-Military Identity**

All six of the women in this study entered the military in their late adolescence. Though percentages differ by branch, over 40% of enlisted recruits across branches are between the ages of 17-24 (Department of Defense, Pop Rep, 2017), and are therefore entering the military in their late adolescence, a key developmental period when adolescents are in the processing of identity development. Though Jennifer was the one participant whose entry into the military differed from the other women (as she joined ROTC in college and became an officer following her graduation), there were common themes across all six narratives related to their pre-military adolescent identities and why they chose the military.

The women commonly described their pre-military selves as rebelling against the norm, as having a desire to assume a non-traditional female adult role, and as highly driven with desires to excel. As is common during this period, many of the women in this study also described feeling unsure of who they were and who they wanted to become, and saw the military as a means of discovering themselves. Given that they had not yet fully realized their own personal or cultural identity, they entered into the military at a critical point in development, when they were looking to their environment to further the formation of their identity (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001).

Results of this study showed that when considering their identities prior to entering the military, all six of the women described various ways in which they “swam against the stream,” or “went against the grain.” Some of them described rebelling through their appearance, or behaviorally “acting out” and getting into trouble. Another way that several of the women described swimming against the stream was through defying traditional or stereotypical female

role identities. They tended to describe a stereotypical female role as a primary caregiver in the home who perhaps also works, and as someone who is subordinate to her spouse. Though they did not necessarily have a clear vision of their intended female role, they all envisioned themselves as embodying an alternative to those ascribed roles. Joining the military is an alternative to the typical path of most American adolescents who either begin working or attend college. Additionally, military culture and its warrior ethos allowed the women to develop and commit to an identity distinct from that of the stereotypical or traditional female. It is hypothesized that this may be one of the reasons why joining the military appealed to them.

The transitional period of late adolescence in the United States is frequently marked by young adults leaving home, often for the first time, to foster independence and an exploration of ones' sense of self. According to Sher-Censor and Oppenheim (2010), a key developmental task for adolescents is individuation which involves developing individuality and learning to balance that individuality with connectedness to others. Initial entry and adjustment to military service typically involves physical separation from family and friends, adapting to a new emotionally and physically demanding environment, and developing relationships with new peers in basic training. In a study examining Israeli adolescents' transition into conscripted military service, Sher-Censor and Oppenheim (2010) suggested that leaving home to enter the military is different than the transition from home to college not only because the military is more physically and emotionally demanding, but also because in many respects, military culture contradicts an adolescents' need to individuate. For example, the military requires uniformity, obeying orders, and an interdependence with one's unit. The women in this study chose to enter the military as a means of leaving home, and expected the military to serve as their vehicle to become more independent and responsible. However, it appeared they did not initially realize that the military

does not allow adolescents the ability to individuate, and instead shapes their identity into that of a military servicemember.

Participants' reasons for choosing the military were also examined. In this study, common themes that emerged are consistent with previous literature that discuss reasons why young people choose to join the military, including leaving home and seeking opportunities, benefits, identification with the warrior mentality, and escape or seeking safety (Burkhart & Hogan, 2015; Wertsch, 1991). Interestingly, none of the women cited family tradition as a reason for entering the military, which has been identified in the literature as a common reason for joining.

As previously mentioned, many of the women in this study joined the military because they were uncertain of their future plans, and saw the military as a transition or placeholder until they could decide. Similarly, when asked how they viewed their sense of self prior to entering the military, four of the women expressed that they hadn't yet conceptualized or identified a concrete sense of self, and were searching for an identity and sense of purpose. Four participants also described themselves as achievement oriented and as having a desire to excel. These two findings may be consistent with Wertsch's (1991) suggestion that many young people who join the military are looking to merge their identity with that of a warrior. A warrior identity likely provides adolescents with security, a stable identity, and a sense of purpose, at a time in their development when they are unsure of themselves.

Participants also described feeling drawn to the military because of the many benefits it offers, including improvement of either social, financial, or educational status; adventure; and/or escape from difficulties at home. These benefits were significant in their decisions to join the military.

Three participants viewed military service as a means of escaping their home lives. They described home lives that included struggling family members and/or abuse, and cited these situations as one factor in their decision to join the military. This is not surprising given that Lang et al. (2008) asserted that many women enter the military with a history of adult sexual abuse (33%) and child physical or emotional abuse (35%). Hall (2016) highlighted that for those who join the military to escape painful life experiences or troubled family members, the military may also serve as a family or sense of community that the individual did not necessarily experience growing up. Gaining a new family was a common experience for participants of this study, as many of them described the process of learning that their comrades were their new family above everyone else during basic training.

### **Entering Basic Training and Initial Shifts in Identity**

To begin the transition from civilian adolescent to military service member, all participants, apart from Jennifer (officer), entered basic training or boot camp after they enlisted in the military. They described basic training as a period of learning and development, where they experienced many physical and mental challenges. This transition appeared to have a significant influence on identity development, as these adolescents moved into a new context (basic training), and had to focus on adapting and coping with those changes to maintain identity congruity (Burke & Stets, 2009).

Echoing Burkhart and Hogan's (2015) research findings, the women in this study described an initial sense of culture shock upon entering basic training, and subsequently questioned their decision to enlist in the military. As basic training aims to accomplish with all incoming service members, the women were stripped of their civilian identities and identified points when drill sergeants and other leadership would highlight the need to develop



relationships with fellow recruits, while distancing oneself from relying on civilian family. Throughout basic training, the women received almost constant feedback from drill instructors and other recruits about their behavior and its (in)consistency with the expected norms of a new recruit and/or service member. They quickly adapted and changed their behavior, and began to embody military language, norms, and values to survive, correct for any discrepancies with role identity, and prepare for war (Burke & Stets, 2009). Though each branch's core values differ, their values all involve establishing a standard of high expectations and conduct in the service member's life. The women described the various ways in which the military warrior ethos further promoted these values and became a part of their sense of self.

They developed a strong collective identity and became members of a tribe who identified themselves as disciplined, hardened, and high achieving. Throughout their interviews, I was struck by the women's tremendous perseverance, resilience, determination, and grit, which they attributed to their training and military identity. It also became very clear throughout all six interviews that these women warriors felt as though they were members of tribe, serving with a larger purpose.

Perhaps demonstrating how strongly the women identify with the collective military identity, Helen tended to describe herself "*as the military,*" rather than as an individual *in the military*. For example, she said: "It's just who I am. I have always been the military, my whole life." She did not distinguish herself from the service. Athena similarly described herself *as Army*, rather than as an individual in the Army.

### **Gender Related Adversity and Impact on Identity**

Unsurprisingly, in theater, all six of the women were in a position where they were always the minority in a male dominated environment, and consequently experienced various

forms of marginalization. As was noted in the previous chapter, when Athena deployed, she was the one female in a cavalry unit in a combat zone in Iraq, and at a point, Nelly was the only female in her squad.

Participant narratives suggest that as the gender minority, their experiences were distinct from male service members in that they almost immediately began receiving mixed feedback about expectations associated with as well as the acceptability of their gender in the military, which reflexively resulted in various shifts and questioning of identity. For example, after a transgender soldier in one participant's unit cut their hair very short, the drill sergeant became enraged, and punished the whole group of women. The participant recalled that drill sergeant's orders that they must maintain their femininity. On the other hand, many of the women were frequently told to "man up," or to eliminate qualities that were deemed as feminine and therefore points of weakness. Another participant, for example, said that she "wasn't allowed to be female," as women were not allowed to publicly discuss menstruation, or to ask one another for tampons. Instead, they had to use militarized terms (i.e. TNT and bombs). Several of the women mentioned that they encountered similar negative beliefs and perceptions about women in the military including that women in the military are trouble or are only there to flirt, or that women are weak and expect standards to be lowered for them. These perceptions significantly impacted participants' ability to develop relationships, the way that they behaved, and how they viewed their sense of self.

Many of the participants also reported being targeted for punishment or challenged more because of their gender throughout their service. A few of them were directly told that this was the case. Women who were viewed as "sandbaggers," were viewed as weak, emotional, sick, or appeared to want standards to be lowered. In describing female sandbaggers, one participant

described the necessity for these women to “man up.” So as not to be perceived as weak or a sandbagger, the women described becoming “hardened,” or developing stoicism. The ability to shut off or distance themselves from emotional experiencing also helped the women prepare for war, and survive difficult and traumatic situations while deployed. The women further reported having to work twice as hard as their male comrades to be taken seriously and respected. This was challenging for the women, as they were deployed abroad, as well as to combat zones, experiencing many of the same stressors as their male counterparts. In their minds, they had adopted a warrior identity, worked hard, earned their place, and were equal to the men in their squads, and yet they were still treated as inferior. Working twice as hard to be viewed as equal may be viewed as a response to a discrepancy between their environment’s perception of them and their views of themselves (Burke & Stets, 2009). This discrepancy created stress and confusion, and subsequently motivated the women to adjust and engage in restorative behavior to try to convince those in their environment that they are in fact capable warriors (Burke & Stets, 2009).

As the gender minority in a male-dominated, hyper-masculinized military culture, these women actively re-defined what it meant to be a warrior. The women in this study not only adopted the collective military identity and values as described above, but also developed various strategies and qualities to combat the aforementioned discrepancies and ambiguity associated with the role of being a woman in service to develop a unique woman warrior identity. It appears that the women who were more successful in negotiating their environments tended to develop more stereotypically warrior-like traits as described above. Another way that women navigated the warrior identity was by blending their femininity. This finding was consistent with the extant literature that suggests female service members blend their femininity so as to be seen

as capable of performing their duties, without becoming too masculine so as to be perceived as threatening to the males in their unit (Demers, 2013; Howard & Prividera, 2004).

All six of the women found themselves in similar double binds, in which they had to demonstrate enough warrior qualities to be viewed as capable, without becoming too warrior-like to then be perceived as too masculine, threatening, or a “freak,” as one participant was nicknamed. Nelly, for example, described adopting more stereotypically masculine traits. She entered the boy’s club through her hard work and sense of humor, but at times described receiving negative feedback for this identity shift, as she noted that some people called her a “tool-bag” for being “too much like one of the guys.”

This bind was particularly significant for women who held leadership positions. They described wanting to serve as positive, empowering role models who supported their lower-ranked service-members. Several of the participants’ leadership styles, which they described as more nurturing and supportive (more stereotypically female traits) are distinct from the typical militaristic and masculine leadership style of action through fear. However, their capabilities were still persistently questioned because of their gender. Thus, they described feeling pressure to engage in tactics to prove that they were capable and worthy of holding their position. This may explain why five of the women reported that during basic training, the female drill sergeants demanded the highest standards from them and often implemented the more punitive consequences. The double bind lies in that on one hand, they described wanting to support lower-ranked service-members, and on the other hand, they still had to work two times as hard to prove that they are capable of holding their position and commanding respect. Nelly had been in various situations as a leader where she described feeling caught in this bind, and reflexively adjusted her behavior by becoming uncharacteristically angry and aggressive because her image

as a leader was being threatened by a male ranked below her who did not take her leadership seriously. Perhaps without awareness, she may have returned to the behavior that is consistent with the militaristic/more masculine leadership style of action through fear, as a result of this role conflict to avoid being perceived as too weak and ineffective due to her gender.

The results of study also allowed for novel and nuanced findings, particularly in that several of the participants in this study described blending their femininity for an alternative reason. They reported having to navigate their identities by projecting a military stereotype of themselves as “the bitch,” which involved defeminizing one’s appearance, as well as appearing uninterested in interacting with others so as not to be perceived as “a slut” or a target for assault by the other service members in their unit.

In addition to blending, several of the women developed a strategy in which they compartmentalized the aspects of their identities that did not fit with the warrior identity, which is consistent with identity theory’s assertion that one way to escape distress associated with discrepancies between one’s environment and sense of self is to exit the role (Burke & Stets, 2009). Helen described compartmentalizing her various role identities depending on her environment as a means of coping and survival. When she deploys, or is engaged in military activities as a reserve member, she fully immerses herself in her military identity because many people are depending on her. If she does not compartmentalize her other identities (as a mother, wife, civilian, etc.), it is more difficult to maintain and behave in accordance with her collectivistic warrior identity, and “stay sane in the military.” She stated: “I don’t know how not to compartmentalize my life... It’s very hard as a reservist to be able to turn it on and turn it off to be able to you know put a hat on and become a different person.”

Kate and Jennifer also expressed having to compartmentalize aspects of their identity. They both reported that over time, they did not consider their female military identity, but instead only thought of their military identity when reflecting on their service. It appeared that they had to exit their feminine role identities (however they viewed them) because they were interfering with maintaining congruity with their warrior identity. Kate repeated the phrase, “I wasn’t a female soldier, I was just a soldier.” She described having continued difficulty negotiating existing within both identities at the same time. Though she has since reintegrated her female identity now that she has returned to civilian life, when her military identity is more salient in certain contexts, she loses the feminine identity. Jennifer expressed a similar sentiment.

Additionally, many of the women described having extremely high standards, striving for perfectionism, and being highly self-critical as a result of their military service, not only because of military culture’s emphasis on performance and standards, but also because of a fear that any mistake made would set them back after working so hard to earn any level of status. Several also described a fear that any mistake made would be attributed to their gender, and confirm others’ beliefs that women should not be in the military. For most of the women, navigating these expectations and binds was an additional stressor throughout their military service. It appeared that though Jennifer did experience many of these challenges, as an officer, she did not face these types of stressors to the same extent and severity that the other participants did, and also had more authority to challenge those who tried to marginalize her. Further research should compare differences in identity shifts between enlisted and officer military service members.

### **Relationships, Perceived Unit Cohesion, and Impact on Identity**

Relationships with others also consistently appeared in narratives as an influence on the women's sense of self. Chodorow (as cited in Tyron & Winograd, 2003) hypothesized that women define their identities in relation to others more than men do. Though military culture stresses camaraderie and collectivism, all six participants described their relationships with others in their unit as "close, but not too close," indicating that though they generally felt a sense of camaraderie and identified these relationships as positive, they felt distance within these relationships. For some of the women, this resulted in feeling increasingly isolated, as they felt isolated or alienated from their civilian relationships, but had not formed true close relationships with their fellow service-members either for a variety of reasons. Of note, Nelly noted that she, as well as other service-members, likely engage in depersonalization, distancing themselves from others to protect from the painful reality that others in their unit will eventually leave (either having completed their duty, or being killed). This may be a factor that interferes with closeness in relationships for all of the participants, given that this is a common strategy that many service-members (male and female) utilize to protect themselves. Several other themes were identified as factors that may have interfered with relationships becoming very close.

First, it appeared that competition, rank, and military component (whether active duty or reserve) likely interfered with the development of close relationships because of perceptions, judgments, and fraternization policies (in the case of differing ranks). Additionally, the following experiences appeared to have influenced the general degree to which the women felt excluded by the collectivist culture and alienated from relationships: the negative perceptions of females, being targeted more for being female, feeling isolated and alienated from civilians, and experiences of extreme betrayal in the form of sexual harassment and assault.

Several participants described that though they tended to have better rapport with the males in their unit, close relationships often did not develop. Many of them described adapting to the boy club culture's humor and developing "thick skin," to build the sense of camaraderie. This finding was not surprising given reports of perceptions of women in the military, and experiences of marginalization, harassment and assault. However, participant narratives suggested that the women did not tend to form close relationships with females in their unit either. It is possible that for some of the women, these relationships did not develop because there were so few women, and they just did not connect well with the women in their unit. Additionally, several of them described having adopted negative perceptions of females as a mechanism of survival in the culture, and it is possible that these perceptions interfered with relationship development. For example, one participant described viewing a group of a few women as flirtatious, and chose to not associate with them because she did not want to be perceived as "the slut."

Additionally, research has found that effective leadership has a significant effect upon unit performance, morale, and combat stress levels (Bass & Riggio, 2006). The Mental Health Advisory Team IV (2007) found that 20% of high combat soldiers who rated their leaders as high quality screened positive for a psychological disorder, as compared to 40% of soldiers who rated their leaders as low quality.

Results from interviews highlighted that the women held mixed perceptions of leadership. For Athena, her female NCO saved her from several potentially dangerous situations, and served as an important role model for the type of woman warrior Athena wanted to be. Though almost all of the women could identify at least one superior who they viewed as a high-quality leader, all six of the women described leaders whom they viewed as poor quality, some



of whom harassed or assaulted them or broke rules in a way that contributed to increased feelings of betrayal and alienation. This finding has particularly significant implications for the development and maintenance of role identity, and well-being of service members. Leaders are the primary source of providing feedback about behaviors that are either consistent or discrepant from role identity, and when the leader is unhappy, lower ranking service members are often forced to change their behavior. Further, other members of the unit look to leadership for modeling and feedback regarding the acceptability of various behaviors. Therefore, in aligning themselves with the leader's beliefs, other members of the unit subsequently serve as a secondary source providing feedback to the individual.

**Sexual assault and harassment.** Though the rates of sexual violence in the military appear to have significantly decreased in the last decade (Department of Defense, SAPR, 2018), it was striking that all six of the women who participated in this study either experienced or knew someone who experienced some form of sexual harassment or assault while in the military. Participants described significant exposure to harassment and assault, and a resulting fear of people in their own uniform. Burkhart and Hogan (2015) similarly found that women who served in non-healthcare positions were treated as inferior, demeaned, sexually assaulted, betrayed, and subsequently became hardened. They suggested that the military culture of female inferiority coupled with extensive training in dehumanizing/objectifying (in order to kill the enemy) is the context of violence that contributes to high rates of MST and gender harassment.

Four of the six women in this study endorsed directly experiencing MST. The other two women endorsed knowing other women and men who experienced MST. Five of the women endorsed experiencing various types of harassment. One participant was hesitant to label any experience as harassment, and stated that everyone joked inappropriately with each other.

Harassment and assault signify betrayals by the institution, leadership, and fellow service-members, and these betrayals and their impact are detailed below.

Experiencing a sexual assault challenged the women's sense of warrior identity. Dunn (2005) suggests that women who have been raped are often stigmatized, blamed for their assault, and if they are labeled as victims, are then portrayed as having little to no personal responsibility, agency, or power. These environmental responses are all discrepant from warrior identity standards. This is demonstrated below with an exchange from Nelly's interview:

**Nelly:** Because you sit here and you think that you're so strong and you can do anything. You got to this position. And like no one is allowed to hurt you or you know do anything bad to you whatever... I don't know it's like really hard to explain because I ...

**Interviewer:** Well you have this whole warrior identity.

**Nelly:** Yes. And you...yeah, but like deep down, you're like wow this just happened to you and you did nothing about it. Because you're scared. But then again that's like something that you compartmentalize. Put it back here and you're just like eff it. It's like drink water and press on like... And that's what you do. You just keep going, adapt, improvise and overcome. Sometimes it's... I mean really? You're supposed to adapt to that, you know, overcome... How do you overcome it...by keeping it locked up in your head. You know, you don't overcome something like that, you need to do something about that. So yeah that affected me. It never...like I never forgot about it.

She had developed a warrior identity, where she felt strong and capable, and felt as though she had finally earned her position and the respect of her comrades in her unit. Being sexually assaulted by the leadership in her unit called all of that into question, as she was left feeling powerlessness, helplessness, and shame. Other participants described similar experiences, and several reported that the consequences of the assault have persisted today, continuing to impact their intimate relationships as well as their sense of self.

Many of the women also described a belief that assault and harassment are “just what men do,” insinuating that then women should be expected to tolerate these behaviors. Angela

described a realization that this culture significantly influenced the way that she viewed herself and other women, as well as her relationships with men.

**Angela:** So, it makes you, I don't know... Well it made me... Of course, you're going to feel inadequate... I started to really objectify women and myself.

Several of the participants blamed themselves for their assault and consequently disavowed (and continue to disavow) experiencing anger toward their assailant and the institution that failed to protect them. This is consistent with previous theories that women seldom expected male peers to be held accountable or viewed as responsible for behaving in the same ways they found unacceptable in female peers (Stevens, 1997). Angela's particularly striking description of her assault stated: "I managed to get myself raped," and she noted how she felt confused when other people in her life expressed anger/rage after hearing about her rape. Several also suggested that they just had to develop "thicker skin," or had to "drink water and press on," as methods of coping with being assaulted or harassed because they did not have anyone to turn to for support.

Further, in military culture, much of an individual's survival is dependent on her ability to rely on and trust her unit, as well as maintain unit cohesion at all costs. When participants were assaulted by someone in their unit, that trust was completely disrupted and contributed to feeling trapped and confused. Most of the women did not report their assaults due to self-blame, fears of disrupting unit cohesion, fears of not being believed, fears of being retaliated against, fear of getting the assailant into trouble, and having no one to report it to because the assailant was higher in the chain of command. Further, reporting an assault may not feel congruent with the warrior identity value of loyalty. Trust was further disrupted in one participant's case when she told another female in confidence that she was assaulted, and then rumors were spread throughout the base about her and her "promiscuity." These betrayals also resulted in confusion

and insecurity in a warrior identity as it was no longer safe to be fully interdependent with your tribe, as the warrior identity requires.

Of note, according to the most recent Department of Defense SAPR annual report on sexual assault (2018), reporting of sexual assault incidents among active duty service members has increased by approximately 10 percent in the past year. Though this statistic is a hopeful indicator that more service members are coming forward and trusting the military to provide them with care, and hold perpetrators accountable, more work can be done in this area to prevent sexual harassment and assault, as well as protect service members from social and occupational consequences of reporting (i.e. retaliation, unit gossip, etc.). Similarly, there are procedures and policies that address sexual harassment and assault throughout all branches, components, and service academies in the military. To enact meaningful and lasting change, however, authorities in the military will have to provide consistent and strong feedback to individuals who sexually assault or harass others to demonstrate that those behaviors will not be tolerated as part of the military and are inconsistent with the true warrior identity.

### **Readjustment and Identity**

A significant and increasing percentage of military service members from the GWOT era experience transition stress when readjusting following a deployment regardless of whether they have PTSD or other diagnosable mental health disorders (Mobbs & Bonnano, 2018). The women in this study who identified as veterans, and one service member in her description of returning from deployment endorsed experiencing transition stress. Echoing Demers' (2011; 2013) findings, the women in this study noted that a significant part of what contributed to their transition stress was feeling caught between military and civilian cultures and identities.

According to Mobbs and Bonanno (2018), 44-72% of service members appear to experience significant transition stress that warrants further attention. Upon returning to civilian life either after a deployment or after separating from the military completely, many of the women reported experiencing significant transition stress. During this period, they noticed how different civilian life was from their military lives, and as they navigated this gap, the women experienced emotions that ranged from frustration, anger, guilt, shame, sadness, overwhelm, confusion, isolation, alienation, to motivated. Two of the six participants reported that they additionally received mental health diagnoses following deployments, including posttraumatic stress disorder and body dysmorphic disorder. Literature suggests that the prevalence of PTSD in OEF/OIF veterans is between 4.7-19.9%, yet many of the treatment options available for veterans are focused on PTSD, and few resources are allocated to addressing the many impacts of transition stress (Magruder & Yeager, 2009; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018). Mobbs and Bonanno (2018) also suggest that due to this narrow focus of services, those who are experiencing transition stress may not seek help for reasons including stigma surrounding mental health diagnoses, or the services offered don't meet their needs (i.e. they are experiencing transition stress but don't meet criteria for a diagnosis).

Five of the women reported an identity shift after they had returned from deployment or separated from the military. Like Demers' findings (2013), though several of the participants tried to return to who they once were prior to their service, they found that they could not. It appears that part of the struggle of transition and readjustment is having difficulty adapting ones' military values to civilian society. For example, it was difficult for several of the participants to reintegrate into the civilian workforce due to differences in values. Civilian employment was found to be very individualistic, self-serving, and without meaning, and it was difficult for

Athena, Kate, and Nelly to adapt when they had previously held positions that were in service of the collective mission. Another challenge for all of the women rested in social interactions with civilians. Angela described “having to get used to the people again” as a major challenge and stressor, and it seemed that this difficulty could similarly be attributed to the cultural gap. Many described feeling isolated as they were no longer in contact with her military friends, and felt alienated from the civilian people they had previously had relationships with because they did not maintain contact throughout their service, or felt disconnected because civilians did not understand what they’d experienced and therefore could not accommodate new information into their expected behaviors and role identities.

Many of the women also have had continued difficulty experiencing and expressing emotions. Though suppressing emotions was adaptive throughout their service, now that they have returned to civilian life, continuing to “feel hardened” and distanced from others has interfered with adaptive experiencing of emotions, interpersonal relationships, and has likely contributed to mental health difficulties for some of the women.

A lot of them also described their deployments or military service as “easy” because they did not perceive themselves as experiencing as much combat or trauma as other service members may have (regardless of how much they had experienced). Similarly, several of the participants reported that they do not (and likely will not, for one who has not yet separated) view themselves as veterans deserving of accolades. They described hiding their veteran identity or not typically sharing their veteran status with others. Awareness of others’ perceptions of female veterans appears to have influenced how some of the women view their own veteran status and identity.

Images of the stereotypical warrior and lack of knowledge of women’s roles in the military contribute to an inaccurate perception that women are not “real veterans,” or do not

necessarily deserve the honor that male veterans who served in significant combat do. Many of the women described experiences where others were surprised that they are a veteran because of their gender. It is hypothesized that many women hide their veteran status due to a variety of factors including that women are not perceived as real veterans, and that sharing veteran status invites a host of judgments from civilian and military personnel that may invalidate their service and cause further identity confusion.

In some ways, serving in the reserves and/or national guard prior to separating appeared to facilitate a “smoother” transition by allowing the participants the opportunity to learn to navigate the duality of being a civilian and a military service-member, as well as additional time to transition (i.e. gain employment, enroll in school, find housing) while still having the support of the military. However, service in these components appeared to present an additional challenge of having to learn strategies (like compartmentalization) to quickly switch back and forth between their military and civilian identities.

**Need for more culturally-competent structural and emotional supports.** Several of the women expressed wishes that more supports, both formal and informal, were in place to assist with service member reintegration into civilian society. One participant asserted that allowing more returning service members an opportunity to construct their military narrative in a room with another person, in a non-judgmental environment, would be helpful following their discharge from the military as a chance to validate their experiences.

All six of the women also discussed how meaningful it has been for them to be connected to part of the tribe. Those who are now veterans expressed a profound sense of loss, while those who are currently serving expressed anticipation of this same sense of loss. Further, it appeared that though most of the women have supportive family and friends in their lives who would

provide them with structural supports (money, housing, help) should they need it, on the DRRI-2 subscale related to post-deployment social support, the women indicated doubts that their family and friends understand what they have experienced in the military. As a result, they do not feel comfortable sharing their stories or difficulties from deployment. This deficit in others' understanding and participants' inability to reach out for emotional support may contribute to increased transition stress.

Additionally, participants' low (or no) utilization of veteran services may indicate that although the VA has been making strides towards inclusiveness, many female veterans are still not seeking services at the VA, and if they do, they may not feel as though their needs are being met in a comfortable environment. Possible reasons for this may include: not feeling as though they are "real" veterans deserving of services, and the VA predominantly serves and is geared toward male veterans which may contribute to feelings of distrust (due to past experiences) or fear of unwanted attention.

### **Other Noteworthy Findings**

**Officers.** Given that five participants were enlisted service members, Jennifer was the outlier as the one officer participant. Though a number of the themes common to other participants appeared in Jennifer's narrative, it was clear her military experience was distinct from the other participants. Further research should examine whether there are differences in military experiences and identity development between enlisted service members vs. officers.

**Mothers in the military.** Helen's narrative was also distinct in that she was the one participant who deployed as a mother, served in multiple branches, and has had the longest military career. Helen also appeared to experience the most significant role conflict and consequences of those conflicts upon returning home to civilian life. Though she experienced



combat trauma on deployment, including constant hostile incoming fire, she repeatedly stated throughout the interview that the most difficult part of her experience of war and deployment was being separated from her family. She described having significant difficulty negotiating her identities as a mother and wife, and as a military service member. Helen coped by compartmentalizing each identity depending on the context. Particularly in Helen's narrative, whenever she experienced such a role conflict (i.e. warrior role identity vs. mother role identity), she experienced intense shame, guilt and regret. It seemed it would be tremendously difficult for anyone to reconcile those varied identities because entirely adopting one would mean sacrificing the other. For example, when Helen was deployed she completely compartmentalized her mother identity and described "shutting [herself] off emotionally," to survive in her warrior role. When she returned home, however, she had tremendous difficulty reintegrating that mother identity and because "who [she] was before was totally lost." She talked a lot about what her family might have been like if she had not deployed, and particularly considered her children. She described feeling as though she failed them in some ways by going on deployment / acting on her role as a warrior / career. Upon returning home, Helen also experienced significant guilt both about leaving her military family, and surviving the deployment. Separating from her role as a military mother-figure and leader contributed to excruciating guilt and sadness, and she believed she had abandoned them. Perhaps because those roles existed within a life or death context, her roles as a wife and mother may not have seemed as significant. She said about returning home: "All I kept thinking about was you know, why am I here? What the hell am I doing here? I should be over there. Where I'm needed. I'm not needed here. I mean people are dying." Given that Helen was the only participant who was a mother throughout her service, further research is warranted to explore the narratives of parents in the military to understand how they negotiate their

environments and various identities, and their role conflicts' impact on emotional well-being and readjustment to civilian life.

**Religion as resilience and identity.** For some participants, religion as a coping mechanism and/or facet of participants' identities was an unanticipated sub-theme in this study. Some of the participants in this study noted finding stability through personal spirituality, though this may not be a helpful strategy for everyone. When prompted about her identification with religion, Helen, for example, stated that she "found God in Iraq." This development of a religious identity was significant for Helen's survival. When she deployed, she relied heavily on prayer and faith to cope with the uncertainty of what would happen both at home and to her on deployment. Prior research on adolescent women growing up in multiple cultures similarly found that some participants described faith as giving them a stable identity in an unpredictable environment (Walters & Auton-Cuff, 2009). King (2003) also suggests that religion offers ideologies, relationships and spirituality that may be helpful in identity formation, as it can give individuals meaning, order, and purpose, as well as opportunities for relationship and connection with God and others who share faith. Other findings indicate the importance of studying the role of religion and faith in service members' lives, as religious practices may mitigate the effects of stress and trauma in various ways (Hassner, 2016).

### **Strengths of the Present Study**

This study and its methodology demonstrated several strengths. First, the qualitative methodology and use of open-ended interviewing questions allowed participants to share their narratives, which provided the researcher with a broader understanding of unique experiences that would not be possible through a quantitative study design.

### **Limitations of the Present Study**

Although the qualitative methodology was valuable to gather rich data and insight, the study also has limitations that warrant consideration. Given that this study utilized qualitative methodology, causality cannot be inferred, and the impact of specific variables on outcomes cannot be determined as a result of this study. Further, the results can only draw parallels with other findings regarding female service-members rather than confirm or deny other research. It is also possible that the researcher may have influenced participants' responses through observer bias, and/or the way that follow-up questions were presented.

Additionally, grounded theory methodology encourages researchers to engage in theoretical sampling, however, most of the sample was recruited through convenience and snowball sampling. Though it was not possible to adhere to theoretical sampling in terms of which participants were recruited to the study, questions in the interview were altered to follow up on concepts and themes. Additionally, grounded theory suggests that researchers continue to collect and analyze data until the point of saturation, when the data stops generating new concepts and themes to code. Due to the scope of this project, the researcher was restricted to a timeframe, and was unable to recruit enough participants to reach data saturation.

The study did not reach its anticipated sample of 10-15 participants, largely due to difficulty finding participants. Due to a small sample size, the study has low external validity. Therefore, findings of the study are not generalizable to the entire population of female service members of the U.S. Military. However, interviewing participants allowed the investigator to generate common themes in participant responses that warrant further investigation in future research.

Finally, I, the principal investigator conducted all six interviews and coding, and had a vested interest in providing a platform for this understudied and underserved population to share their stories. It is possible that the results of this study may be affected by researcher bias.

### **Reflections**

This section will review my emotional reactions to interviewing and data analysis to highlight the role of reflexivity in qualitative research. According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), reflexivity is an important consideration in qualitative research because the researcher experiences and conveys emotions through interviews that the participant then responds to. Much of this process occurs outside of awareness. Since the researcher also brings themselves into the data, it is important to attend to such potential researcher effects throughout the entirety of the research process.

This study presented a parallel personal challenge in navigating my own role as a clinician versus my role as a researcher. As a clinician, I felt comfortable and at ease in my interviews with the women, specifically when establishing rapport at the beginning of each contact. The relationships we developed throughout the process of the study allowed me to better understand and capture the emotional breadth, depth, and detail of their narratives. However, there were multiple occasions within each interview where I was unsure of to what extent I should utilize my clinical skills, and was frequently self-monitoring to ensure I was adhering to my role as a researcher rather than as a clinician or even as a friend. I found this balance particularly difficult when participants demonstrated heightened emotionality, or were engaging in self-blame for sexual assault.

Throughout my interviews with these women, and again as I reviewed the transcripts, I was in awe. Some of them provided accounts of significant adversity prior to, throughout, and

following their military experiences, and yet they continued to push themselves past any limit or barrier that was placed before them, and defied expectations repeatedly. Participants in this study also truly began to define what it means to be a woman warrior. As women warriors, they were constantly adapting to mixed messages, persistence, and self-reliance. Though many of the participants emphasized their experience of the collective military tribe, it truly appeared as though many of them largely operated on their own. I was particularly struck by the profound nature of the double binds that our female service-members must navigate, and the strength that they demonstrated to survive in an environment that constantly insinuates that they are not good enough or that they are less than. I was also able to bear witness to accounts of the pain of being caught between military and civilian worlds. Helen, for one, repeatedly said the hardest thing about her deployment was leaving her family. Yet when she returned home to them, she didn't quite feel as though she belonged there either, an experience anecdotally common to many of the veterans I've worked with. The guilt and pain with which she described her deployment and return home was palpable, and her story, as well as many of the others brought tears to my eyes.

Many of the participants also described gratitude that I was conducting this study to help the military and society better serve our veterans. They also expressed an appreciation for the opportunity to discuss their experiences, given that some of them had never told their stories to anyone before. The fact that I, as a random, civilian clinician was entrusted to hear their life stories was a tremendous honor. As we sat in the rooms together, they allowed me the opportunity to share in their emotional experiencing as they recalled their stories. Their stories carried tremendous weight and moved me to my very core both in hearing their joyful and painful moments. This research experience had a profound impact on my life. I will carry their

stories with me always and will not forget how powerful, courageous, funny, kind, and resilient these women warriors are.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Research on women in the military is an area that is sparse but growing. This study provided valuable insight into the experiences of six women who have served in the US military following 9/11/2001, and raised important themes that would benefit from additional investigation.

First, given the importance of relationships and unit social support in service-members' general well-being, further investigation would be worthwhile to explore the factors that interfere with the development of close relationships between women in military units.

Significant thematic differences appeared between the narratives of the enlisted participants and the one officer participant. Given that this study was unable to recruit additional officer participants through theoretical sampling to gather additional data about these differences, further research may seek to compare differences in identity shifts between enlisted and officer military service members.

Of note, two of the women in this study re-enlisted in a different branch and attributed this at least in part to difficulties in civilian society, and missing the positive aspects of their military service. Further research may aim to recruit more individuals who have dual service and explore factors that contribute to re-enlisting and how this impacts subsequent readjustment upon final separation.

Additionally, future research is warranted to explore the narratives of parents in the military to understand how they negotiate their various identities, and role conflicts' impact on emotional well-being and readjustment to civilian life.

Another area for further investigation may be to explore and better understand the unique experiences related to the intersectionality of LGBTQI and military identities. This study did not directly ask participants about their sexuality. Further, though this study's enrollment was open to any individual who identified their gender as female, the sample did not include any transgender individuals who identify as female.

Further, identity theories coupled with participant narratives were utilized in this study to better understand the development and changes in role identity that occur before, during, and after military service for 6 female service members (Burke & Stets, 2009; Stryker & Burkes, 2000). Future research may seek to apply similar identity theories and concepts of role identity to a larger sample of female service members, and to a sample of male service members and then compare results. This would be helpful in determining which aspects of role identity shifts are common among military service members and which are distinct.

It is the hope that research will continue to better understand the experiences of our female service members to better serve them when they come home. The results of this study will guide my own clinical work and it is my hope that the themes found and questions raised by this study will also be helpful for those working with returning service members, and particularly our growing population of women warriors.

### **Implications for Professional Practice**

Understanding the themes found in this study may be helpful for clinicians in providing culturally competent services to this underserved population. First, as with all clients and especially service members, it is important to establish a trusting rapport. As a civilian clinician, I do this by openly discussing my background and qualifications, as well as any concerns that the service member may have about treatment. It is recommended that clinicians understand the key

differences between military and civilian culture and to be aware of the ways that the veteran may be impacted by the military-civilian cultural gap. However, it is similarly helpful and of the utmost important to not make any assumptions about the service member's experiences or identity, but ask questions about the individual to familiarize oneself with the client's unique experience and worldview to help her feel understood and validated. It is therefore also important to understand details about her service including the branch(es) that she served in, when she served, her rank, number and location of deployments, and discharge status.

There are other important questions to address and assess for in treatment with a service member or veteran. First, this study highlighted the importance of understanding an individual's decision to join the military and how they entered. This information may help the clinician understand the service member's pre-military identity, the circumstances of their upbringing, as well as whether their military service ended up being congruent with their goals.

Clinicians may also ask female service members about their relationships with others in their unit, if they served with other women in their unit, what the ranks of those women were, and what their relationships were like with those women. It would also be helpful to understand how the veteran relates to civilians, and whether they have maintained contact with any other veterans.

Further, it is important to become aware of any role conflicts the individuals may experience when navigating who they are in the civilian world vs who they are in the military world, as well as related emotional experiencing including guilt, shame, and anger. Given that a number of participants stated that they do not identify as a veteran and often hide that status for various reasons, it is important to ask whether she views herself as a veteran, how she would



define her identity (or what aspects of herself are most salient to her), and in what ways that definition is similar to or different from when she was serving.

To facilitate a smoother readjustment, clinicians may ask the veteran about what her transition was like and what were the most difficult parts. As previously mentioned, an important factor to consider is relationships with others, and particularly if the veteran feels that she can lean on others for emotional support, rather than just structural support. If not, one point of intervention may be to help the veteran feel more connected to those in her environment, whether that be with other veterans or with civilians in her life to reduce feelings of isolation and alienation.

Female veterans also continue to underutilize veteran's services. Though the VA has been making strides towards inclusion, it is important to further this initiative by creating more accessible services that are targeted specifically towards women's health, away from the general VA, which continues to be a male-dominated environment and may therefore be perceived as uncomfortable or hostile.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how lived experiences of being a female military service member may contribute to the development and shifts of multiple dimensions of role identities, and how these dimensions may subsequently impact well-being. All six participants entered the military during late adolescence and early adulthood, a key developmental period. Results indicated that female service-members do experience significant shifts in their identities upon entering the military and throughout their service. These shifts appeared to occur in response to events in their environment, and often included adverse experiences. This finding was consistent with identity theories that suggest that individuals

reflexively compare environmental feedback to their perception of themselves, and experience distress when there are existing discrepancies (Burke & Stets, 2009). Discrepancies between feedback and self-perception, and associated distress then initiates an adjustment process in which the person is motivated to change their behavior to re-establish equilibrium. If the individual repeatedly receives environmental feedback that is discrepant from her role identity standard, she will likely either adjust her identity or exit the role or environment to reduce distress. Though causality cannot be inferred from a qualitative study, the women stated believing that their military experiences changed their behavior and how they viewed their sense of self. Additionally, the women who experienced role conflict or had difficulty negotiating the intersectionality of their identities tended to experience feelings of isolation, alienation, guilt, and shame. Most participants agreed that their military experiences had a significant impact on how they view their sense of self.

Beliefs and observations reflected in this study further revealed the confusion around expectations of women and their roles both in civilian society as well as in the military. There are various tensions and binds that delineate each culture's perceptions and expectations of women. Similarly, the women received conflicting messages about femininity vs. warrior and leadership norms, and these messages subsequently impacted the women, their relationships with others, and how they viewed their sense of self.

Despite the adversity that these women faced throughout their military service, all of them spoke of their military experience with pride, and identified many aspects of their service that they viewed positively and with gratitude. Some had enlisted for the benefits of the military, including financial, education, and adventure, while others had been seeking a sense of self, purpose, and community. It appeared that many of those hopes had been realized, and that all of

the women identified ways in which their experiences increased their resilience and strength, and prepared them for whatever future difficulties they may face.

The results of this study demonstrated the need for additional exploration and study of our veterans as the demographic is constantly changing. Female veterans continue to experience transition stress, at least in part due to difficulty navigating the military-civilian cultural gap, which is further complicated by messages about their gender role identities. Understanding the themes found in this study may be helpful for clinicians in providing culturally competent services to this underserved population of female veterans, however, much work remains to be done.

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## Appendix A

## Informed Consent Form

I am a doctoral student in the department of clinical psychology at Rutgers University, and I am conducting interviews for my dissertation. I am studying how female service members view their identities while serving in the military and after discharge.

During this study, you will be asked to fill out a demographic questionnaire, self-report surveys, and to answer some questions about your experiences before and during your military service. This interview was designed to be approximately two hours in length. However, please feel free to expand on the topic or talk about related ideas. Also, if there are any questions you would rather not answer or that you do not feel comfortable answering, please say so and we will stop the interview or move on to the next question, whichever you prefer.

This research is confidential. Confidential means that the research records will include some information about you, however, any identifying information will be separated from your responses.

Some of the information collected about you includes identifying information about you and general information about your military service. Please note that we will keep this information confidential by assigning you an ID code. That master list that links any identifying information to your code will be kept separately in a locked cabinet. The data gathered in this study are confidential with respect to your personal identity unless you specify otherwise.

All interviews will be audio recorded and agreeing to the recordings is a condition of agreeing to participate. The recording(s) will be used for analysis by the research team to answer the research question.

The recording(s) will include your name. All names will be deleted in the transcript, as well as written dissertation, and pseudonyms will be given. If you say anything that you believe at a later point may be hurtful and/or damage your reputation, then you can ask the interviewer to rewind the recording and record over such information OR you can ask that certain text be removed from the dataset/transcripts.

The recording(s) will be stored in a password-protected file on a password-protected laptop. The recordings will be kept for 3 years, and will then be destroyed.

The research team and the Institutional Review Board at Rutgers University are the only parties that will be allowed to see the data, except as may be required by law. If a report of this study is published, or the results are presented at a professional conference, only group results will be stated. All study data will be destroyed three years after completion of the study.

**Risks:**

The interview asks you to describe your experiences before, during, and after your military service. The types of questions asked are consistent with those that you may face when discussing your

military history with anyone. However, recalling some experiences may be unpleasant for you and you may experience some discomfort when answering questions. If you experience emotional distress related to the study, please contact the researcher and discuss this with her, so that she can assist you and help provide you with referrals as necessary.

You may additionally contact the New Jersey Veterans Helpline for confidential, 24/7 support, information and referral services at 1-866-VETS-NJ-4 (1-866-838-7654).

**Benefits:**

The benefits of taking part in this study may include an increased understanding of female service-members' experience of identity and its impact on functioning to help in the development of policy and practice to improve services for female veterans. However, you may receive no direct benefit from taking part in this study. You will receive refreshments for participating in the study on the date of your interview.

You are aware that **your participation in this interview is voluntary**. You understand the intent and purpose of this research. If, for any reason, at any time, you wish to stop the interview, you may do so without having to give an explanation.

If you have any questions about the study or study procedures, you may contact myself at:

Nicole L. Eskenasi, Psy.M.  
Principal Investigator  
Rutgers University, GSAPP  
152 Frelinghuysen Road  
Piscataway, NJ 08854-8085  
Telephone: (516) 578-1305  
Email: neskenasi@gmail.com

You can also contact my faculty advisor:

Thomas J. Morgan, Psy.D.  
Faculty Advisor  
Anxiety Disorders Clinic  
797 Hoes Lane West  
Piscataway, NJ 08854-8085  
Telephone: (732) 445-5384  
Email: tjmorgan@scarletmail.rutgers.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you can contact the Institutional Review Board at Rutgers (which is a committee that reviews research studies to protect research participants).

Institutional Review Board  
Rutgers University, the State University of New Jersey  
Liberty Plaza / Suite 3200

335 George Street, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor  
New Brunswick, NJ 08901  
Phone: 732-235-2866  
Email: humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu

You will be offered a copy of this consent form that you may keep for your own reference.

Once you have read the above form and, with the understanding that you can withdraw at any time and for whatever reason, you need to let me know your decision to participate in today's interview.

Your signature on this form grants the investigator named above permission to record you as described above during participation in the above-referenced study. The investigator will not use the recording(s) for any other reason than that/those stated in the consent form without your written permission.

Subject (Print) \_\_\_\_\_

Subject Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Principal Investigator Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records. By participating in the above stated procedures, then you agree to participation in this study.



- Associate's degree
- Master's degree

- Bachelor's degree
- Doctorate, or professional degree

**What year did you graduate from high school or receive your GED?** \_\_\_\_\_

**Are you currently enrolled in college?**

- No
- Enrolled part-time
- Enrolled full-time

**Which best describes your CURRENT employment situation?**

- Full-time work or military (35 hours a week or more)
- Part-time (regular hours)
- Part-time (not regular hours)
- Full-time student
- Homemaker
- Retired
- Not working, disabled
- Unemployed: Actively looking for work
- Unemployed: Not looking for work
- Unemployed: Actively looking for work
- Unemployed: Volunteer work

**If currently employed:**

**Job Title:** \_\_\_\_\_

**How long have you held this position?**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Where did you grow up?** \_\_\_\_\_

**In what state do you currently live?**

\_\_\_\_\_

**MILITARY SERVICE**

<b>Service Branch</b>	<b>Component</b>	<b>Rank at Discharge</b>
<input type="radio"/> Air Force	<input type="radio"/> Active Duty	<input type="radio"/> E1 <input type="radio"/> O1 <input type="radio"/> W1
<input type="radio"/> Army	<input type="radio"/> National Guard	<input type="radio"/> E2 <input type="radio"/> O2 <input type="radio"/> W2
<input type="radio"/> Coast Guard	<input type="radio"/> Reserves	<input type="radio"/> E3 <input type="radio"/> O3 <input type="radio"/> W3
<input type="radio"/> Marine Corps		<input type="radio"/> E4 <input type="radio"/> O4 <input type="radio"/> W4
<input type="radio"/> Navy		<input type="radio"/> E5 <input type="radio"/> O5 <input type="radio"/> W5
<input type="radio"/> Other _____		<input type="radio"/> E6 <input type="radio"/> O6
		<input type="radio"/> E7 <input type="radio"/> O7
		<input type="radio"/> E8 <input type="radio"/> O8
		<input type="radio"/> E9 <input type="radio"/> O9
		<input type="radio"/> O10 Other _____

Dates of service: \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_

Primary Military Occupational Specialty (MOS):  
\_\_\_\_\_

Secondary MOS: \_\_\_\_\_

Unit: \_\_\_\_\_

**Total Tours/Deployments**

<i>Dates of service</i>	<i>Combat Zone</i>
<i>Location</i>	
____/____/____ to ____/____/____	<input type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/> Yes
____/____/____ to ____/____/____	<input type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/> Yes
____/____/____ to ____/____/____	<input type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/> Yes
____/____/____ to ____/____/____	<input type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/> Yes
____/____/____ to ____/____/____	<input type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/> Yes
____/____/____ to ____/____/____	<input type="radio"/> No <input type="radio"/> Yes

Operation Enduring Freedom	__1	__2	__3	__4	__5 or more
Operation Iraqi Freedom	__1	__2	__3	__4	__5 or more
Operation New Dawn	__1	__2	__3	__4	__5 or more
Other	__1	__2	__3	__4	__5 or more

**Location(s) of Operation: Circle all that apply to any deployment.**

Afghanistan      Iraq      Kuwait      Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Are you currently involved with a vet center?**     No                       Yes

*If yes, which one and who is the Veteran Service Officer?*



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**Are you registered with the VA healthcare system?**       No       Yes

**Do you see healthcare providers outside of the VA?**       No       Yes

**Approximately what % of your healthcare is provided by:**

VA: \_\_\_\_\_      Outside of VA: \_\_\_\_\_

**Do you have a service-connected disability?**       No       Yes

*If yes, please provide the reason?*

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## Appendix C

## Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

**Introductory Statement:** Hello and thank you again for participating in this study. Today I am going to be asking you some questions about your experiences prior to entering the military, throughout your service, (and if applicable, after discharge). You may choose not to respond to any question. If at any moment you feel that you need a break, let me know and I can pause the audio recording. Again, all identifying information will be kept confidential and changed on all written materials.

**I'd like to talk about your life before you entered the military**

- Describe a typical day in your life before you entered the military.
- How did you view your identity (as a female) before you entered the military?

**Now I'd like to talk about your experiences entering the military**

- What led you to choose to enter the military, and XX branch of the military?
- Where did you go to boot camp or basic training?
- Can you describe how you experienced it?
- Can you tell me more about what it was like to be a woman in basic training/boot camp?
- How did those experiences during boot camp change your identity/sense of who you are?

**Now I'd like to talk about your experiences during your service**

- What is/was your primary MOS?
- Tell me about your experience while deployed/where you were stationed/on your base.
- How close were/are you to the members of your unit?
- Describe what it was/is like to be a woman in your unit (*while you were deployed*).
  - (if not already discussed) How many other women served in your unit?
    - What positions did they have?
  - (if not already discussed) What were your relationships like with the other women in your unit?
- Did you feel like you had experiences in the military that were specific to the fact that you were a woman?
- Do you know of other women who did?

**In 2016, 1 in 4 women and 1 in 15 men faced sexual harassment or gender discrimination within the military, and at least 14,900 members of the military (~8,600 women and 6,300 men) experienced sexual assault within the past year (Department of Defense, SAPR, 2017).**

- Did you know of any women who experienced gender harassment or sexual assault while in the military?
- Have you experienced gender harassment or sexual assault while in the military?
  - How do you think the MST or harassment impacted the way you look at yourself?
- How have your experiences in the military changed how you view your identity / sense of self / who you are?

*(If veteran)* **Now I'd like to talk about experiences transitioning home from a deployment or transitioning out of the military**

- *(ONLY If one deployment)* Describe your experience transitioning back from deployment

- *(ONLY If multiple deployments)* Describe your experience transitioning back and forth between deployment and returning to either base or civilian life.
- *(All)* Tell me your story about when you finished your military service and returned to civilian life.
- What were the most challenging aspects of returning to civilian life?
- What helped you when returning to civilian life?
- What would have helped you during this transition?
- Are you in contact with any other service members / veterans?

***Other***

- How do you think others view veterans and the military?
- Overall, how do you feel about your military service?

Probes (e.g., “Can you say more about that?”) and follow-up questions may be used to encourage participants to elaborate on their responses

## Appendix D

## Debriefing Statement

Thank you for participating in our study. Our interview assessed various aspects of your military service to learn more about your experiences and how they may have influenced the way you view your identity and sense of who you are. Many veterans experience difficulties upon reintegrating into civilian society after a deployment. Few studies have looked at veterans' perspectives on factors that may be contributing to this difficulty, however, several that have, found that veterans often described feeling caught between two cultures, and had difficulty reconciling their military and civilian identities (Demers, 2011; Smith and True, 2014).

A major limitation of prior qualitative research on military identity is that they include very few women's responses, which is an important limitation because of the unprecedented increase in the number of women enlisting in the military (Orazem et al., 2016). It is important to evaluate how the complex and multidimensional nature of identity impacts female service-members as an understudied population.

Women serving in increasingly important roles in the U.S. Military has challenged the structure of military culture, and society's perceptions of what it means to be a soldier. Pawelczyk (2014) identified the military as not only a gendered organization, but as an organization that is also "gendering, gender-granting, or gender-defining," meaning that it defines and re-defines the established societal gender order. Traditionally, to be a soldier was to be male and masculine, however, with all roles open to women, this stereotypical image of a warrior is being challenged. Therefore, while male and female service members face many of the same stressors during service, and upon returning home, female veterans may face unique challenges related to being a gender minority within the military. Research has suggested that some of these challenges may include identity blending, perceived unit cohesion, social support, sexual violence, among others (Demers, 2013). Women who enter the military are in the position of not only leaving their civilian identity, but also having to navigate gendered behaviors to define what it means to be both a woman and a soldier, a traditionally male role, at the same time. Negotiating these challenges may have a substantial impact on female service-members' mental health and well-being (Street et al., 2009).

It is likely that there are many factors related to female service-members' experience of the military and their identities that have yet to be uncovered, since this is the first time in our history that there have been so many women in service, and that there have been women serving in combat roles. Once these factors have been identified, researchers can then explore their relationship to mental health outcomes. The goal of this study is to explore some of the factors that differentially impact the military identity development of female service members.

**If your participation in this study has caused you distress, please feel free to contact the researcher,**

**Nicole L. Eskenasi, Psy.M., at (516) 578-1305, or the faculty advisor, Thomas J. Morgan, Psy.D., at (732) 445-5384.**

- You may additionally contact:
  - The **Anxiety Disorders Clinic** at Rutgers University at **(732) 445-5384**
  - **New Jersey Veterans Helpline** for veteran peer support, clinical assessment, referrals, and other information at **1-866-VETS-NJ-4 (1-866-838-7654)**

- **Veterans Crisis Line** for confidential, toll-free support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at **1-800-273-8255** and **Press 1**
  - Or **chat** confidentially online at **<https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/>**,
  - Or **send a text** message to **838255**
- Go to **<https://maketheconnection.net/>** for additional information about mental and physical health, as well as services you may be eligible to receive specific to your branch of service
- If you have experienced **military sexual trauma**, you can receive free, confidential treatment for related mental and physical health conditions at your nearest VA. To receive these services, you do not need a VA service-connected disability rating, and you don't need to have reported the incident when it happened nor to have other documentation that it occurred.
  - **Every VA healthcare facility has an MST coordinator** who can answer questions about services that are offered.
  - **If you need assistance locating your nearest VA or MST coordinator, please contact the researcher or the faculty advisor.**

**If you have any questions about this study or study procedures, you may contact myself at Nicole L. Eskenasi, Psy.M., (516) 578-1305, [neskenasi@gmail.com](mailto:neskenasi@gmail.com).** You may also contact my faculty advisor, Thomas J. Morgan, Psy.D., (732) 445-5384, [tjmorgan@scarletmail.rutgers.edu](mailto:tjmorgan@scarletmail.rutgers.edu).

If you have any questions about your **rights as a research subject**, please contact an IRB Administrator at the Arts and Sciences Institutional Review Board, Rutgers University by phone: 732-235-9806 or by email: [humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu](mailto:humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu).

### **Further Reading:**

The Lonely Solider: The Private War of Women Serving in Iraq by Helen Benedict

Band of Sisters: American Women at War in Iraq by Kirsten Holmstedt

Ashley's War: The Untold Story of a Team of Women Soldiers on the Special Ops Battlefield by Gayle Tzemach Lemmon

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## Appendix E

## Tables

Table 1  
*Participant Characteristics*

Characteristic	<i>N</i>	<i>Range</i>
Current age:		
Mean years	35.67	6-56
Spanish/Hispanic/Latin(x):		
No	4	
Yes, Puerto Rican	1	
Yes, Cuban	1	
Race:		
White	5	
Chinese	1	
Marital Status		
Single	3	
Married	1	
Divorced	2	
Children:		
Yes	3	
No	3	
Highest Level of Education:		
Some college, no degree	1	
Associate's	1	
Bachelor's	2	
Master's	2	
Current Employment Status:		
Unemployed: Actively looking for work	1	
Part-time (not regular hours)	1	
Full-time work or military (35+ hours per week)	4	

Table 2  
*Participant Military Characteristics*

Characteristic	<i>N</i>	<i>Range</i>
Age when entered service:		
Mean years, (Range)	18.83	17-21
Years Served:		
Mean years, (Range)	10.83	4-35
Service Branch:		
Air Force	2	
Army	2	
Multiple service branches: Navy & Army	2	
Service Component:		
Active Duty	3	
National Guard	1	
Multiple	2	
Rank:		
Enlisted	5	
Officer	1	
Total Tours/Deployments:		
1	2	
2	4	
Served in Combat Zone:		
Yes	5	
No	1	
Currently Involved with Vet Center:		
Yes	1	
No	5	
Registered with VA:		
Yes	2	
No	4	
Percentage of Healthcare Provided Outside of VA:		
100%	6	
Service-Connected Disability:		
Yes	1	
No	5	



Table 3  
*Participant Responses to DRRI-2: Combat Experiences*

<b>During Deployment...</b>	<i>Never</i> N (%)	<i>Once or twice</i> N (%)	<i>Several times</i> N (%)	<i>A few times each week</i> N (%)	<i>Daily or almost daily</i> N (%)
1. I went on combat patrols or missions.	3 (60%)	1 (20%)	-	-	1 (20%)
2. I took part in an assault on entrenched or fortified positions that involved naval and/or land forces.	4 (80%)	-	1 (20%)	-	-
3. I personally witnessed someone from my unit or an ally unit being seriously wounded or killed.	3 (60%)	1 (20%)	1 (20%)	-	-
4. I encountered land or water mines, booby traps, or roadside bombs (for example, IEDs).	4 (80%)	-	1 (20%)	-	-
5. I was exposed to hostile incoming fire.	-	1 (20%)	2 (40%)	1 (20%)	1 (20%)
6. I was exposed to “friendly” fire.	4 (80%)	1 (20%)	-	-	-
7. I was in a vehicle (for example, a “Humvee,” helicopter, or boat) or part of a convoy that was attacked.	4 (80%)	-	1 (20%)	-	-
8. I was part of a land or naval artillery unit that fired on enemy combatants.	4 (80%)	-	1 (20%)	-	-
9. I personally witnessed enemy combatants being seriously wounded or killed.	3 (60%)	-	2 (40%)	-	-
10. I personally witnessed civilians (for example, women and children) being seriously wounded or killed.	4 (80%)	1 (20%)	-	-	-
11. I was injured in a combat-related incident.	5 (100%)	-	-	-	-
12. I fired my weapon at enemy combatants.	4 (80%)	1 (20%)	-	-	-
13. I think I wounded or killed someone during combat operations.	4 (80%)	1 (20%)	-	-	-
14. I was involved in locating or disarming explosive devices.	4 (80%)	-	1 (20%)	-	-

15. I was involved in searching or clearing homes, buildings, or other locations.	3 (60%)	1 (20%)	1 (20%)	-	-
16. I participated in hand-to-hand combat.	5 (100%)	-	-	-	-
17. I was involved in searching and/or disarming potential enemy combatants.	4 (80%)	1 (20%)	-	-	-

*Note.* One participant declined to complete the DRRI-2 Scales due to not deploying to war zones. She was excluded from these results.

Table 4  
*Participant Responses to DRRI-2: Aftermath of Battle Experiences*

<b>During Deployment...</b>	<i>Never</i> N (%)	<i>Once or twice</i> N (%)	<i>Several times</i> N (%)	<i>A few times each week</i> N (%)	<i>Daily or almost daily</i> N (%)
1. I saw people begging for food.	3 (60%)	-	1 (20%)	-	1 (20%)
2. I saw refugees who had lost their homes or belongings.	4 (80%)	-	-	-	1 (20%)
3. I observed homes or communities that had been destroyed.	3 (60%)	1 (20%)	-	-	1(20%)
4. I took care of injured or dying people.	3 (60%)	1 (20%)	1 (20%)	-	-
5. I saw civilians after they had been severely wounded or disfigured.	4 (80%)	-	1 (20%)	-	-
6. I saw enemy combatants after they had been severely wounded or disfigured.	4 (80%)	-	1 (20%)	-	-
7. I saw Americans or allies after they had been severely wounded or disfigured.	3 (60%)	1 (20%)	1 (20%)	-	-
8. I saw the bodies of dead enemy combatants.	4 (80%)	-	-	-	1 (20%)
9. I saw the bodies of dead Americans or allies.	4 (80%)	1 (20%)	-	-	-
10. I saw the bodies of dead civilians.	4 (80%)	1 (20%)	-	-	-
11. I interacted with detainees or prisoners of war.	4 (80%)	1 (20%)	-	-	-
12. I was exposed to the sight, sound, or smell of dead or dying animals.	4 (80%)	-	1 (20%)	-	-
13. I was involved in handling human remains.	4 (80%)	-	1 (20%)	-	-

*Note.* One participant declined to complete the DRRI-2 Scales due to not deploying to war zones. She was excluded from these results.

Table 5  
*Participant Responses to DRRI-2: Unit Social Support*

<b>During Deployment...</b>	<i>Strongly disagree</i> N (%)	<i>Somewhat disagree</i> N (%)	<i>Neither agree nor disagree</i> N (%)	<i>Somewhat agree</i> N (%)	<i>Strongly agree</i> N (%)
1. My unit was like family to me.	-	-	-	1 (25%)	3 (75%)
2. People in my unit were trustworthy.	-	1 (25%)	-	2 (50%)	1 (25%)
3. My fellow unit members appreciated my efforts.	-	1 (25%)	-	1 (25%)	2 (50%)
4. I felt valued by my fellow unit members.	-	1 (25%)	-	1 (25%)	2 (50%)
5. Members of my unit were interested in my well-being.	-	-	1 (25%)	2 (50%)	1 (25%)
6. My fellow unit members were interested in what I thought and how I felt about things.	1 (25%)	-	1 (25%)	2 (50%)	-
7. My unit leader(s) were interested in what I thought and how I felt about things.	1 (25%)	1 (25%)	2 (50%)	-	-
8. I felt like my efforts really counted to the leaders in my unit	1 (25%)	2 (50%)	-	1 (25%)	-
9. My service was appreciated by the leaders in my unit.	-	2 (50%)	1 (25%)	1 (25%)	-
10. I could go to unit leaders for help if I had a problem or concern.	1 (25%)	1 (25%)	1 (25%)	1 (25%)	-
11. The leaders of my unit were interested in my personal welfare.	-	2 (50%)	1 (25%)	1 (25%)	-
12. I felt valued by the leaders of my unit.	1 (25%)	1 (25%)	-	2 (50%)	-

*Note.* Only 4 participants completed this subscale. One participant declined to complete this scale for previously mentioned reasons. One forgot to complete the scale at the interview, and was unable to be reached following participation. They were excluded from these results.

Table 6  
*Participant Responses to DRRI-2: Post-Deployment Social Supports*

<b>Since returning...</b>	<i>Strongly disagree</i> N (%)	<i>Somewhat disagree</i> N (%)	<i>Neither agree nor disagree</i> N (%)	<i>Somewhat agree</i> N (%)	<i>Strongly agree</i> N (%)
1. The American people made me feel at home.	2 (40%)	-	2 (40%)	-	1 (20%)
2. People made me feel proud to have served my country in the Armed Forces.	1 (20%)	1 (20%)	1 (20%)	1 (20%)	1 (20%)
3. My family members and/or friends make me feel better when I am down.	1 (20%)	-	1 (20%)	2 (40%)	1 (20%)
4. I can go to family members or friends when I need good advice.	1 (20%)	-	1 (20%)	2 (40%)	1 (20%)
5. My family and friends understand what I have been through in the Armed Forces.	2 (40%)	1 (20%)	1 (20%)	1 (20%)	-
6. There are family and/or friends with whom I can talk about my deployment experiences.	3 (60%)	-	-	2 (40%)	-
7. My family members or friends would lend me money if I needed it.	1 (20%)	-	1 (20%)	1 (20%)	2 (40%)
8. My family members or friends would help me move my belongings if I needed help.	1 (20%)	-	-	1 (20%)	3 (60%)
9. If I were unable to attend to daily chores, there is someone who would help me with these tasks.	1 (20%)	-	1 (20%)	2 (40%)	1 (20%)
10. When I am ill, family members or friends will help out until I am well.	1 (20%)	-	-	3 (60%)	1 (20%)

*Note.* One participant declined to complete the DRRI-2 Scales due to not deploying to war zones. She was excluded from these results.