Narrating Selves:
The Production of Meaning and Value from Military Experience

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the
Prerequisite for Honors
in Anthropology

April 2013

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I would like to express my very great appreciation to Deborah Matzner for her patient guidance and valuable suggestions throughout the planning and development of this research work. I am honored to have you as my mentor. Thank you for pushing me to try harder, your support and encouragement have been invaluable.

I would also like to thank Anastasia Karakasidou for her insights and support not only in regards to this project, but throughout the course of my time at Wellesley.

Thank you to my thesis committee for their time and consideration.

To my mother, Margaret Kenney, the reason I am at Wellesley. Thank you for taking the photos used in this thesis as well as supporting me through my research process. Thank you for always believing in me. I love you and appreciate everything that you have done for me.

I am grateful to my amazing friends for supporting me throughout this process. Our late night dance breaks and intellectual conversations about formatting helped make the library bearable.

To the veterans of Garner, Iowa who so graciously invited me into their homes, without you and your support there would be no project. I am eternally grateful to each and every one of you for not only helping me with my research but also for your military service. Thank you.

To my grandfather, Earl Jaspersen for providing the inspiration for this project, thank you.

And finally, to all of our veterans past and present, your service and sacrifices are greatly appreciated.
Al is a veteran of the Vietnam War. He served in the Navy as a gunner’s mate. He is currently a member of the VFW and the American Legion and has worked in the Veterans Affairs Office helping other veterans prepare claims for the VA. He and his wife live down the street from my family.

Brad is recently returned from a deployment to Afghanistan. Brad joined the Army immediately after high school and has been serving for the last six years. He is currently a student at Iowa State University. We are first cousins.

Bruce served in the Guantanamo Bay for two years as a veterinary technician for the Army. He met his wife, Deb, while in Cuba. Afterwards he and his wife moved to the Seattle area where he worked at the University of Washington in the lab animal division before moving to Iowa, joining the Army National Guard and then the Reserves while attending Iowa State Veterinary School. He is now the veterinarian in Garner where he and his wife live with their three children. Bruce is a member of the Garner Ceremonial Guard.

Daryl joined Army ROTC while attending Purdue in Illinois. He was commissioned by the Army in 1972 after completing his Masters degree at which point he joined the medical service corps. After a short period of time he went to flight school and began flying helicopters. Daryl and his family live on a farm in Garner. Daryl is a member of the Garner Ceremonial Guard.

Dan joined the Navy in 1945. He served below deck on the Dixie. He spent his entire deployment on the ship in the South Pacific.

Deb served in the Navy in Guantanamo Bay. She worked in the hospital. While there she met her husband Bruce. After her commitment to the Navy ended, she and Bruce moved to Washington state before eventually moving to Iowa where she now works in the medical field. She lives in Garner with her husband and three children.

Earl joined the Army in 1955. He served overseas in the Korean War where he acted as Quartermaster. He is a member of both the American Legion and VFW where he served as Commander for fifteen years. He currently lives with his wife, they have very recently moved from Garner to Clear Lake, Iowa, twelve miles away. Earl is my grandfather.

Ivan joined the Navy in 1964. He served three full tours in Vietnam, two on the U.S.S. Coral Sea and one on the U.S.S. Ranger where he worked on the flight deck. Since returning from Vietnam, in addition to his career he served as the mayor of Garner for a substantial period of time. He and his wife Carol live in town. He is a member of the VFW, and volunteers for the VA Hospital in Des Moines.

Joe was drafted in 1969 and entered the Army where he served in the artillery unit. He served for thirteen and a half months in Vietnam. He is a member of the VFW and the American Legion. He lives in town and works as a realtor.
Mark joined the Air Force in 1982 and he served for seven and a half years. He worked as a heavy equipment mechanic. He served for two years in England, two years in Las Vegas, and three years in Missouri. He and his wife live in Garner. They have two children, one of whom is currently serving in the Air Force. Mark is a member of the Ceremonial Guard.

Patricia joined the Army after high school. She was stationed in Arlington, Virginia where she was in charge of training new female recruits. From there she was transferred to Separation Center where she interviewed soldiers as they were discharged from the service during the Korean War. She lives in Garner where she is the primary caregiver for her husband, an Air Force Veteran.

Phil joined the Army ROTC while attending Creighton University. His first day of active duty was in 1968. He was assigned to the artillery unit and served in Yuma, Arizona in the munitions and weapons testing division. After his service he attended law school and now has a law firm in town. He and his wife still live in town and their five children are scattered across the United States. Phil is a member of the American Legion and works with the Veterans Administration.

Tom was drafted in 1966 but knew he wanted to fly helicopters so he joined the Army in order to enter the Rotary Wing. Tom passed flight school but a latent depth perception problem ended up grounding him. He then served fifteen months in Okinawa. He and his wife live in Garner and their children are located across the state of Iowa. Tom is a member of the Garner Ceremonial Guard.
I approached my research with an interest in the personal narratives of veterans. In a conversation with my grandfather, a Korean War veteran, he casually observed that even though we were all aware of his military service, not one of his fifteen grandchildren had ever asked him about it. This prompted a conversation about the importance of collecting and preserving the narratives of veterans as well as simply acknowledging the importance of each veteran’s individual experience. That conversation planted the seed that would eventually become my research. From this broad desire to collect personal narratives I struggled to find a way to narrow my focus. A few of my original ideas involved a focus on one specific time period or military branch but this failed to appeal to me because I was particularly interested in seeing whether or not there were affinities in the narratives that emerged from veterans across time periods and branches. Ultimately, the solution presented itself: geography. Since my grandfather had inspired the project, I wanted to include him as one of my interlocutors which would necessitate a trip to my hometown of Garner, Iowa. Once word of my project circulated around town, I received messages from ten people offering to help with my project by allowing me to interview them. A few days later my grandmother presented me with a list of ten more names of veterans who had offered to participate. This pool of willing participants seemed like an interesting way to narrow my research. This created a base of interviews taken from veterans with military experience from World War II to Operation Enduring Freedom representing almost all branches of the military unified by their residence in a little town of three thousand people in rural northern Iowa. This influx of volunteers drew my attention to the surprising prominence of the military in my small town. For a town of 3000 people there is an astonishing number of veterans. The military presence is also pronounced, there are multiple war memorials (Figures 1-4), the streets and
parks are frequently lined with large scale displays of American flags (Figures 5-6), and even our recreation center doubles as the Veterans Memorial Center (Figure 7).

In December just before Christmas I returned home to Garner and immediately began conducting interviews. I ultimately interviewed twenty-five veterans, two women and twenty-three men with ages ranging from mid-twenties to early nineties. Thirteen of these twenty-five are quoted in this thesis; the others’ voices echoed in many ways the patterns of emphasis and omission that I explore here. Garner has a very homogenous population both in terms of race and socio-economic status. All of my interlocutors were Caucasian, reflecting the lack of racial diversity in the town\(^1\) and all fell within the lower to upper middle class socio-economic brackets. The day after I returned home I drove over to my grandparent’s house with my tape recorder and sat down at their kitchen table with my grandfather. I turned on the tape recorder and began by asking him when he joined the military. We then had a conversation about his military experience with my grandmother in the background baking banana bread and occasionally interrupting to offer me tea and snacks. Midway through, my aunt stopped by to return a cookie sheet and joined the conversation for awhile before leaving again. The interview ended with my grandmother bringing me a piece of her banana bread fresh out of the oven and sitting down to tell me how proud of me she is before sending me home in time to be off of the roads before the blizzard. Most of my interviews were similarly intimate. I knew most of my interlocutors prior to approaching them for an interview and for those with whom I was not familiar, merely mentioning my grandparents’ names was enough to ensure an invitation into their homes. The majority of my interviews occurred at kitchen tables with various interruptions for snacks and the entrance of family members. A few occurred in people’s offices during

\(^1\) In the 2010 Census 97.35% of the town selected “White” as their race and 98.02% chose to list their ethnicity as “Not of Hispanic or Latino Origin”.
business hours including one interview at the veterinary clinic with the sound of exotic birds screeching in the background. Most of my interlocutors live within walking distance of my home so on many occasions I would walk to their homes before nine a.m. and on one unique occasion I drove out to a farm at eleven p.m. to accommodate a farmer’s schedule.

It was very easy to find people willing to participate in my research. Everyone readily agreed and in many cases, before I had a chance to explain my project they were inviting me over to their homes. I would often return from one interview only to discover that the person I had just left had called their friends in an attempt to help secure more interviews for me. Through this process I saw the network of veterans at work. People I had never met would invite me into their homes not knowing anything about me or my project except that their friend had asked them to help me. Each interview would begin with my interlocutor asking me what exactly I was doing and what they needed to do to help me. I would explain that I was interviewing veterans in town to compile their stories and personal narratives for my thesis. I tried to keep my description of what I wanted very broad so as not to artificially guide their narratives and affect the topics each individual chose to address, unfortunately this led to a bit of confusion. I tried to keep my interviews conversational so that my interlocutors would guide me. Unfortunately the Midwestern desire to accommodate others hindered this a bit. Instead of continuing a fluid conversation, many people would stop midway through a story or explanation and say ‘that’s probably not interesting to you, what do you want to hear?’ and try to tailor their stories to fit their perceptions of what I was looking for while my reluctance to ask them closed, specific questions was confusing. In most cases people seemed to think I was looking for sensational stories of combat and action and would try to direct me to the veterans that they thought would provide me with the most exciting stories of war all while apologizing for their ‘boring’ service
stories. A clearer description of what I was looking for could perhaps have been useful but my desire to keep my interviews as organic as possible stopped me from explaining further. I struggled to find a way to describe what I was looking for in a personal narrative that would inform my interlocutors but not artificially force their conversation. The confusion in some of my interviews is evidence that I did not find the perfect mix of guidance and openness but despite the minor confusion I was still able to yield analytically interesting personal narratives.

Despite my struggles to explain the interview structure to my interlocutors in a perfectly satisfactory manner, the choice to conduct my interviews in a free-flowing, conversational format was made to aid in the formation of self-guided personal narratives. The personal narrative or life history is an analytically interesting anthropological method. I was drawn to personal narrative because of its multi-dimensionality. Personal narratives are fascinating in that they perform so many functions. Through personal narrative we create a self-identity, make sense of our past, and establish our relationships with others. We not only make sense or meaning of our past, but make value out of it (Ries 1997); in many cases, symbolic value (Bourdieu 1977). Charlotte Linde (1993) created a guide to understanding the various roles and interpretations of the life story in her book Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence. She emphasizes the importance of the life story stating “in order to exist in the social world with a comfortable sense of being a good, socially proper, stable person, an individual needs to have an acceptable, coherent, and constantly revised life story” (Linde 1993:3). She argues that personal narrative creates an identity of the ‘self’ and the act of narration establishes relationships between self and other. Because our life story is constantly revised and dependent on the audience and situation, narration allows us to create a sense of self that is separate from our
internal selves which allows us to evaluate our own actions reflexively and make sense of our lives.

Life stories express our sense of self – who we are, how we are related to others, and how we became that person. They are also one very important means by which we communicate our sense of self to others and negotiate it with others. Further, we use these stories to claim or negotiate group memberships and to demonstrate that we are worthy members of these groups, properly following (or at least understanding) their moral standards. Finally, life stories involve large-scale systems of social understandings and of knowledge that are grounded in a long history of practice; indeed, these stories rely on presuppositions about what can be taken as expected, what the norms are, and what common or special belief systems are necessary to establish coherence. [Linde 1993:219]

Each telling is a singular event in which we continually perform these processes creating an exchange that is as much dependent on the narrator as the audience.

The situational specificity of personal narratives that originally appealed to me is also what necessitates a deeply self-reflexive analysis of the effects my positionality had on my interviews. There are many aspects of my personality, appearance, and relationship with my interlocutors as well as the conditions of my interviews that most likely had an effect on my interviews. I am a young woman previously known to my interlocutors through our family connection, attendance of the same church, or through my role as a cheerleader for the high school athletics that form a substantial component of the town’s social life. They entered the interviews with pre-conceived notions about me and I them. In the Handbook of Ethnography Barbara Sherman Heyl (2001) discusses the “impact of the interviewer/interviewee relationship on the co-construction of knowledge” (2001:370). She continues stating:

Interviewing involves a complex form of social interaction with interviewees…interview data are co-produced in these interactions…what the interviewees in each study choose to share with the researchers reflects the conditions in their relationship and the interview situation. [Heyl 2001:370]
In addition, the setting of my interviews most likely affected the narratives that emerged. In each case I let my interlocutor choose the location, and in most cases my interviews were conducted in my interlocutor’s homes. The importance of site specificity both in terms of location and temporality is discussed in Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps’ (1996) “Narrating the Self”, “Personal narratives about the past are always told from the temporal perspective of the present. Narrators linguistically shape their telling to accommodate circumstances such as the setting as well as the knowledge, stance, and status of those in their midst” (1996:25). Although the familiar setting of the kitchen table provided a comfortable and convenient place for me to conduct my interviews, the intimacy of the domestic setting may have disinclined people to talk about certain unsavory aspects of their military experience of trauma and/or perpetuation of violence.

My collection and analysis of veteran’s life stories is situated within a long anthropological tradition of collecting life stories. The first from whom I drew inspiration was Barbara Myerhoff and her works Remembered Lives (1992) and Number Our Days (1979). Remembered Lives (1992) is a collection of eleven essays written by Myerhoff between 1968 and 1982 about her work with elderly Yiddish speaking Jews. In it she highlights the importance of storytelling and the role it plays in elderly populations. Number Our Days (1979), arguably her best known work, is a book based on her fieldwork with the Jewish community in Venice, California. Through her fieldwork with this community she explores issues relating to aging and discusses the ways the community uses storytelling as a tool to explore their ideas of themselves as part of a group and how they derive value from that. Although the subject matter was very different, my work draws from Myerhoff’s to highlight the importance of telling life stories and how through telling their stories people make sense of their memories and past experiences to create value. Discussions of masculinity and subversion of the dominant masculine narrative
featured in Nancy Ries’ *Russian Talk* (1997) provide a compelling framework through which to view my interlocutor’s resistance to the dominant narratives of masculinity and heroism that surround the military. Ries’ work also talks about value and the role of the personal narrative in creating value for an individual. The unique characteristics of Midwestern society, a region in which “self-disclosure is not a common form of discourse” (Ginsburg 1997:136) and the techniques for addressing this highlighted in Faye Ginsburg’s ethnography *Contested Lives: The Abortion Debate in an American Community* (1997) have been invaluable. Her work collecting narratives about the sensitive subject of abortion in Fargo, North Dakota resonated with my interviews in that they both involved entering into difficult and personal discussions in communities where those conversations are not common or often welcomed. Finally, to situate my work within the framework of ethnographies of the military, my interviews lacking trauma narratives stand in stark contrast to the interviews collected by Erin Finley for her book *Fields of Combat: Understanding PTSD Among Veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan* (2011) in which trauma is depicted not only as the dominant military narrative, but as the only military narrative. This departure highlights the need for more research, like Edna Lomsky-Feder’s work with male veterans of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, “Life Stories, War, and Veterans: On the Social Distribution of Memories” (2004) that analyzes the ways through which soldiers who subvert the dominant narrative of the trauma story derive value and meaning from their military experience. Lastly, Catherine Lutz’s 2001 book *Homefront* (2001) focuses on fieldwork from Fayetteville, North Carolina and analyzes the military’s effect on American communities. This work provides a lens through which to analyze the military presence in my town and how that affects the individuals who reside within it. Although both towns are strongly affected by the military, Garner and Fayetteville are analytically very different. In her work in *Homefront* Lutz (2001)
analyzes how the presence of Fort Bragg military base in Fayetteville has affected the community dynamics and discovers that within Fayetteville there are “blurred boundaries of the civilian and military world” (2001:8). Garner is by no means a military city; there is no military base anywhere nearby to help explain the town’s military involvement. The line between civilian and military is not blurred, it is unaddressed. In Garner the military is not an everyday presence as it is in Fayetteville, for us it is more the presence of veterans and memorials to past military service reaching all the way back to the Spanish-American War that keep Garner tied to the military.

After collecting, transcribing, and coding my interviews I have created a three part analysis of their content. I began by identifying the key themes and dominant narratives that emerged following the model of Nancy Ries’ work in Russian Talk (1997). Ries draws upon the work of Sherry Ortner in “On Key Symbols” (1973) who argues that key symbols are “objects of cultural interest” (1973:1339) that should be analyzed for their meanings within a culture and that “key symbols may be discovered by virtue of a number of reliable indicators which point to cultural focus of interest” (1973:1344). These ‘reliable indicators’ include but are not limited to when interlocutors “tell us that X is culturally important”, “seem positively or negatively aroused by X, rather than indifferent”, “X comes up in many different contexts”, or “there is greater cultural elaboration surrounding X” (Ortner 1973:1339). My analysis is of key narratives that contain key symbols. This mode of analysis motivates attention to certain tropes and narrative formats that seem to be shared and repeated. The drawback of this type of analysis is that it seems to disregard what is left unsaid. An identification and analysis of these thematic forms is in Chapter I. In this chapter I will analyze these themes and offer some hypotheses as to why these themes emerged as dominant. Through an analysis of the key themes I was struck by the
silences, pauses, and omissions throughout my interviews. I have divided these silences into two categories: hesitations and pauses within the interview and omissions. In Chapter II I examine the situationally specific pauses and hesitations in my interviews with a look at what preceded and succeeded them, examine the omissions and theorize as to what might have instigated these silences, and analyze the ways in which my interlocutors have used the narrative and symbolic function of material culture to address some of these silences. One of the benefits of interviewing veterans in their homes was that it afforded me a view of the ways in which they display material culture relating to their military experience often in prominent ways. In Chapter III I analyze other forums in which veterans create personal narratives and investigate how other veterans articulate their experience in context specific interactions and look at the ways in which genre facilitates or hinders the creation of certain narratives. It is important to note that this chapter is not about my interlocutors. I am analyzing other platforms of expression not to compare and contrast how my interlocutors express themselves in different registers. I am instead looking at if and how different genres produce different types of interactions and themes as a way of further examining the contextual specificity of the creation of personal narratives and to help me self-reflexively investigate how my positionality affected my interviews. In the Conclusion I reflect upon my research and possible ways to expand upon it.
Although I interviewed veterans from different periods of military history, similar themes and dominant narratives emerged. My interlocutors expressed similar motivations behind joining the military, their descriptions of their actual service were complementary, and through their discussions of other veterans they created an internal classification system for the prioritization and value derived from different types of military service. In the introduction to her ethnography Russian Talk, Nancy Ries (1997) combines the theories of Clifford Geertz outlined in The Interpretation of Culture\(^2\) and Pierre Bourdieu’s definition of symbolic capital in Outline of A Theory of Practice (1977) to argue that:

…conversational discourses are a primary mechanism by which ideologies and cultural stances are shaped and maintained…the discursive world does not merely reflect the world of more obvious social action, but also helps to construct it; that in talk, various conceptual patterns and value systems are encapsulated in narrative, even mythic form, comprising models for life as much as models of it. [Ries 1997:3]

In Russian Talk Ries uses narrative to analyze how, for her interlocutors, “logic of power and powerlessness in Russia was reproduced by the very lamentations and narratives that denounced it” (1997:5). In order to do this “an interpretation of cultural texts [must] keep an eye on other things: social structures, power relations…” (Ries 1997:5). Through talking about their lives my interlocutors are able to make sense of their lives and experiences but also produce symbolic value for themselves and their professions within their cultural frameworks.

I chose to collect personal narratives because of their power as a tool through which we make sense of our experiences. In their article “Narrating the Self” Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps describe the characteristics of personal narrative as a social process:

\(^2\) Ries specifically draws on Geertz’s arguments pertaining to the role of symbols in the construction of public meaning and his definition of culture as “a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life”(p.89). According to this theory, through talking about our lives we are able to make sense of them.
Across cultures, narrative emerges early in communicative development and is a fundamental means of making sense of experience. Narrative and self are inseparable in that narrative is simultaneously born out of experience and gives shape to experience...provides tellers with an opportunity to impose order on otherwise disconnected events, and to create continuity between past, present, and imagined worlds. Narrative also interfaces self and society, constituting a crucial resource for socializing emotions, attitudes, and identities, developing interpersonal relationships, and constituting membership in a community. [Ochs 1996:19]

Because of these properties, personal narratives are not static. Each time we tell our stories we re-conceptualize our past experiences and present them in a way that is situationally specific. In this way the narrative is inextricably tied to the circumstances in which it was created. Charlotte Linde agrees. She argues that the life story is as much a collaborative creation as it is a “means by which we communicate our sense of self to others and negotiate it with others” (Linde 1993:219). Each of the narratives I collected is the product of a social interaction in which my interlocutors created a version of their life story through which they communicated a self-identity, in this case funneled through the lens of past experience and profession and in negotiation with me. Because of this, I began by analyzing each interview by itself both in terms of content and through a self-reflexive analysis of the situation in which the narrative was created. Each interview is an individual and highly specific interaction but through the unifying theme of professional identity key themes emerged.

It is essential to note that there are themes and dominant narratives that emerged. Not to say that every interview followed the same narrative arc, there were many individual differences but I was able to identify a number of key themes. The existence of themes and tropes that recur across such a diverse range of interlocutors raises many questions. One platform of analysis hinges upon the character of the military itself as a highly standardized institution. Through their participation in a standardizing institution did they learn to view their experiences through common narrative tropes? A subtly different question, did they learn to articulate their
experiences through common narrative tropes? In these key similarities and differences are we seeing similar experiences conceptualized and channeled through different individuals or a standard discourse into which individuals struggle to fit their different experiences? I will begin with a look at the dominant narratives that emerged and the ways in which these dominant themes and tropes seem to express shared modes of producing and hierarchically assessing the value of military service.

Each interview seemed to follow a narrative arc that began with a discussion of the various motivations behind joining the military and the decision of which specific branch to join. Many of the answers that I received from my interlocutors coincided with the reasons highlighted in Catherine Lutz’s 2001 ethnography *Homefront* which can be seen as evidence reinforcing these motivations as dominant not only regionally but perhaps universally in the context of the United States. Through her work in Fayetteville, North Carolina Lutz identified the reasons people cite for deciding to join the military: economic incentives, as a way out of their current environment, and family history of military service (Lutz 2001). Many of my interlocutors cited economic incentives as their primary motivation for joining. They discussed the military as a means to an end; a few years service in exchange for the money to attend college. Brad, the oldest child in a family of four, cited “*college money benefits*” as his primary reason for deciding to join the military after high school. Bruce joined the military about two decades before Brad but for the same reason, “*I knew I wanted to go to college at one point and it seemed like a good opportunity to get money toward college*”. Patricia explained that she decided to join the military because “*my parents didn’t have the money to send me to college*”. In her recent ethnography, *Fields of Combat: Understanding PTSD Among Veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan*, Erin Finley (2011) interviewed dozens of recent veterans and almost all of them
cited economic reasons and college benefits as their primary reason for joining the military (Finley 2011). Many of her interlocutors explained that they “entered the service as a way of accessing education” and many “described a similar decision-making process, choosing a term and branch of service that would provide them with desired schooling or career training” (Finley 2011:15).

There is a marked difference in the answers of the Vietnam era veterans and those who came after. Where the more recent veterans were more likely to cite economic factors that influenced their decision, every Vietnam era veteran I talked to joined for a reason relating to the draft. Whether they were drafted or joined to avoid being drafted, the draft always figured heavily into their decision making. Joe and Tom were drafted. When I asked Joe when he joined the military he responded saying “maybe joined is not the right word. I was drafted. I never considered joining but I was drafted”. In contrast, Tom, upon being drafted, decided to join a different branch “I was drafted and then I wanted to fly helicopters so I had to join for four years in order to get in that program”.

Even the Vietnam era veterans who joined more-or-less voluntarily described the draft as featuring heavily in their decision making process. Daryl began his military career by participating in the Army ROTC program during his first two years in graduate school. When I questioned him about the decision to join ROTC he responded “Well the draft was going pretty hard then and so we would’ve been drafted right away anyhow and I just thought if I was going to get drafted I might as well get a commission”. Phil, who joined at roughly the same time had very similar reasons for joining ROTC at Creighton. “I didn’t wanna be in the infantry as an enlisted person and back then everybody had been drafted in my county that didn’t go to college and upon graduation from college I’d’ve been drafted immediately…So I would’ve been in one
way or another and have a little selection of what branch I went into.” For them, military service seemed inevitable so they chose a path that allowed for a bit more choice and flexibility.

For the veterans who served prior to the Vietnam era a family history of military service emerged as the dominant factor influencing the decision to join the military and the choice of branch. Dan served in the Navy in World War II. When I asked him why he joined he responded “because my dad was in the Navy in World War I”. Earl fought in Korea and responded in a similar manner, “probably because my father was in the Army and I kinda wanted to follow in his footsteps. And then my brother, my next oldest brother almost got killed over in Korea and I probably wanted to replace him”. In my interviews the expressed motivations behind joining the military broke down in a very uniform pattern: my interlocutors prior to the Vietnam era were influenced by family history, during the Vietnam era the draft is cited as the key determining factor, and after the Vietnam era economic incentives become more important. In Fields of Combat Finley discusses the importance of family history arguing “how profoundly military service may be embedded in social histories, reflecting both an identity as part of a family tradition and a web of valued relations” (Finley 2011:17). Veterans cited family history as the most important driving factor for joining the military prior to the Vietnam era but it was commonly cited by more recent veterans as a secondary influencing factor. In the younger veterans, family history was more likely to help determine which particular branch of the military to join. Mark joined the military in the early eighties as an alternative to college but he discussed how his involvement in the Air Force strongly influenced his son’s decision to join after high school: “seeing pictures of his dad and seeing me come home in a uniform after work, it had a big influence on him”. For Mark, his son’s service is a source of pride not only on behalf of his son but also from the fact that his own service influenced his son’s decision to join.
Although discussions about joining the military differed by time period, descriptions of actual military service followed similar narrative trends regardless of when the veteran served. In all of my interviews I asked my interlocutors to describe what they did during their military service. In response from everyone I was given a very structured and detailed description of routine activities. The person I was talking to would sit up a little straighter, speak a little clearer and deliver a very mechanical description that almost sounded like a script that they had perfected over years of being asked the same question. These portions of the interview took on a more formal tone reinforcing my position as the interviewer and their position as the interviewee. Nowhere is this better highlighted than in my interview with my cousin Brad.

Brad is less than a year older than I am. We grew up in the same town, attended the same school, and share a large pool of mutual friends. Our relationship is not one that would ever be characterized as formal. He came over to my house for an interview early on a Sunday morning. We sat down at my kitchen table and when I started asking questions Brad’s posture, the characteristic slouch of the young American male, instantly straightened. He pulled his shoulders back and carefully rested his hands on his knees. When I asked him what he did in the military he responded:

My primary duties are to maintain the javelin missiles and the two-forty bravos, which is a machine gun. The javelin missile system is, uh, hard to describe, an advanced rocketory [sic] system that is designed to be able to take out large, heavily armed areas like tanks, buildings, and vehicles.

Other interviews followed the same trend. When I asked them to describe their military service most veterans gave a very polished and detailed account of the tasks they performed. Earl, who served as Quartermaster for the whole of Korea during his tenure in the country described the methodical bureaucratic aspects of his job, counting pallets, calculating quantities,
and overseeing deliveries. Mark described the difference between the work that he did as a heavy equipment mechanic and what automotive mechanics do in the Air Force. Patricia described teaching new recruits how to properly make a bed and iron their skirts. Phil gave me a highly technical description of a series of tests he ran on experimental tank treads and a motor locating radar system. Everyone’s descriptions included highly technical jargon delivered in a practiced way. There was never any animation or individualization in their descriptions of their duties.

The only veterans who defied this trend were the pilots. Although their descriptions were also detailed and highly mechanical, they were very different. They described the aircrafts using complex terms and specific vocabulary but their descriptions of their duties moved beyond the basic “I flew helicopters” and were infused with a sense of excitement and loss. Instead of sitting up straighter and becoming more formal when discussing their duties, the three pilots I interviewed leaned forward on the edge of their chairs and their eyes lit up as they described even the most mundane aspects of being a pilot. When they were discussing actually flying I could hear the excitement in their voices. And when each one explained how they were eventually grounded their faces fell and they expressed a great deal of loss at the end of that chapter of their lives. Daryl was probably the most experienced pilot I interviewed. In total he had about thirty years worth of flight experience, all in the United States. I asked him to describe some of the things that he did during his time as a helicopter pilot:

We flew in the clouds so we had instrument tickets and we did a lot of those kinds of things so sometimes the situations get a little tight then. We flew a map of the earth with night vision goggles down at tree level at night without any lights so all of those things bring you into…but I guess all in all we were pretty lucky we didn’t have any major incidences.

One difference between the pilots and the other veterans that I interviewed is that the pilots all actively sought flying positions. They all did everything they could to be pilots. When I
asked Tom why he chose to join the Army specifically he responded “Well without a college education that’s the only place I could’ve flown”. He knew he wanted to fly and that is what drove his decision making process. After completing his training and passing all of his flight tests he was diagnosed with a depth perception problem that ended his flying career. When describing his military career after flight school he said “I did get grounded and never got to fly to get out to that. I had about two hundred hours in the Huey. From there I got shipped to Okinawa for about fifteen months. And I really didn’t have a purpose over there.” And he didn’t discuss his fifteen months of active overseas duty at all. He wanted to discuss the comparatively short time he spent in flight school.

In trying to understand what distinguished pilots and their descriptions from those of other veterans I was drawn towards the role of the plane itself in the narrative. Each pilot described the different types of aircrafts they piloted and the maneuvers that they were able to perform in each specific aircraft. This focus on the plane as almost an equal actor in a relationship could be analyzed using actor-network theory. In a section of Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory, Bruno Latour argues that objects can possess agency and have the ability to function as actors within social networks (2005:63-87). In this case the relationship between the pilot and his/her aircraft creates the pilot’s professional identity. Without a plane, a pilot ceases to be a pilot and without a pilot the plane is simply an object. They can be seen to have a symbiotic relationship in which the plane helps create the social and professional identity of the pilot and the pilot’s relationship with the aircraft supports its identity as an actor. No other veteran’s social and professional identity was so inextricably tied to a specific object or class of objects, which could help explain what differentiated pilots’ descriptions of their duties from those of my other interlocutors. In addition, as my interlocutors
pointed out, the path towards becoming a pilot is difficult. There is a long and detailed vetting process soldiers must go through before they are even considered for pilot training. After they have made it through this process, there is rigorous and expensive training program that they must pass before being allowed to operate an aircraft. Because of the cost of training, each pilot is an investment. Ivan described how every morning during flight school “they would ask if people wanted to resign, they wanted to make sure you were dedicated to the program because it cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to train you”. In the end, these pilots are almost commoditized; they are a substantial financial investment that has created a soldier capable of operating machines which are themselves worth large sums of money. The disproportional economic investment in pilots could be what distinguishes them from foot soldiers and drives them to place themselves higher up in the hierarchy of service. In comparison, the cost of training foot soldiers is miniscule. Pilots are also physically higher than foot soldiers in the sense that they realize the human desire for flight while foot soldiers remain on the ground. This is reinforced by the fact that pilots only discussed the act of flying, never combat or specific duties, for them their time in the military was defined by their time in the air. They seemed to derive value from their identity as a pilot and the act of flying. This can help explain Tom’s belief that his fifteen months in Okinawa after being grounded due to an optic disorder were purposeless. For him, his service quit being valuable after he was taken out of his plane. This distinction highlights the differences in how veterans derive value from their experiences: for pilots their value is tied to the expense of their training and their ability to defy the limitations of their own bodies and achieve flight, these sources of value do not apply to non-pilots.

For the veterans who were not pilots there were other ways in which they seemed to rank and prioritize military service, not in terms of actual military rank but by other categories that
remained relatively universal across my interviews. There seemed to be this widely held belief that overseas service was more valuable or interesting than domestic service. Mark seemed confused as to why I would want to interview him at all. When I asked him if he would like to participate, he warned me that he would not have much to say, that his service was really boring. After our interview he gave me a list of names of other veterans to call for interviews, he specifically highlighted the ones that served in Vietnam telling me that those would be really interesting and probably more like what I was looking for. Although his military service is very important to him and he is proud of the fact that he served his country and that now his son is serving, he was adamant that his service was boring and not worthy of my project. The other veterans who served domestically expressed a similar belief. Daryl, with his decades of flight experience would preface sentences with “I didn’t serve overseas…” After my interview with Phil he gave me a list of veterans from our church for me to call and he specifically highlighted those who he thought had served overseas because they would be “really interesting”. In one case, this overseas service was misidentified. Both Mark and Phil suggested that I talk to Daryl because they thought that he had served overseas and “seen a lot of action”. In this particular case they were incorrect; Daryl had served his entire military career flying helicopters in the United States.

The distinction of “seeing a lot of action” came up time and again. The phrase itself is intriguing. “Action” connotes drama, almost as if one’s military experience were a story waiting to be told. In addition, the verb ‘action’ often connotes sexual activity, in this case drawing to mind the sexualization of military experience and violence often present in discussions of military experiences in other venues but perhaps edited out for an interview with me in the context of the family kitchen table. There seemed to be an implied belief that those who had seen
a lot of action would have more to offer my project and were in general a slightly higher level of veteran. Along the same lines, many of the veterans compared their service to that of others in either the same war or different conflicts, every time subtly implying that the service of others was of a higher caliber. When discussing the Vietnam War Phil stated that it was “not like World War II by any stretch of the imagination”. Daryl told me about his discussions with his family members and neighbors who had served in World War II, he classified their service as interesting and heroic. Ivan told me about his volunteer work driving older veterans to and from the VA hospital in Des Moines:

It’s always fun to listen to some of the stories that these older vets have you know. They’re just finally talking about their really bad times in World War II or in Korea and you listen to them and you’ve just got to wonder, my word how did anybody ever live through some of the things they’ve went through…

Their stories are classified as interesting and worth listening to but he couldn’t understand why I would be interested in his stories, even though he served a long tour of active duty in Vietnam. In Ivan’s description of his service he said “I did boots on the ground in Vietnam and it was...uh, but I didn’t get into any real heavy combat situations like some of these poor guys”. Even though he actively served overseas he downplayed his contribution and service because he didn’t see as much action as other soldiers.

Although silent about many of their own experiences, the veterans that I interviewed expressed a high degree of value for the stories and experiences of other veterans and often actively shared other people’s stories. Daryl told me about the summers he spent talking to the World War II veterans who had farms around his. He also told me a very detailed story about his friend whose whole family served in the military: his father in World War I, brother in World War II, another brother in Korea, and he himself in Vietnam. Daryl talked about the importance
of listening to and preserving these military narratives but still wondered at my desire to hear his personal story.

Many of my interlocutors, although unwilling to discuss their own accomplishments or awards were more than willing to share the exemplary achievements of others. Ivan shared an amazing story about one of the pilots that he cleared for take-off who became the second pilot shot down and captured in Vietnam. He ended up in a POW camp for what amounted to almost the entirety of the war. Ivan readily shared his friends’ stories and experiences but skillfully avoided any discussion of his own service in Vietnam except in relation to clearing this particular pilot for take-off.

When I asked her what it was like to be a woman in the military Patricia said that she had nothing interesting to say but I should talk to her neighbor Joan, Joan was a nurse and had seen a lot so therefore her stories would be really interesting. Tom discussed a flight school buddy who later became the personal pilot for the band the Eagles. And Al mentioned his cousin who was killed jumping in front of a land mine to protect another member of his platoon. Everyone stressed the importance of valuing the stories of these other servicemen and women.

Although they often minimized the perceived value of their military service they were very open in their descriptions of how important that service has been to them. Their descriptions of their duties were rote; the stories of friendship and belonging were open and engaging. When discussing their military career all of the veterans brought up some idea of belonging or entered into a discussion about the relationships that they formed during their service. Many people, particularly the veterans from the Vietnam era, told stories about their “war buddies”. Al told me about his “good buddy [from] the Navy” that he still sees every once in a while even though
he lives in Wisconsin. Ivan talked about his good friend who is now an Admiral who he often visits in Washington D.C. Phil told me about a buddy that he met in basic training. They haven’t seen each other since nineteen seventy but they have kept in correspondence and have planned to meet up on January thirtieth of 2018, the fiftieth anniversary of the Tet Offensive.

Beyond specific friendships, the veterans I interviewed discussed the importance of the feeling of belonging they got from their time in the military and beyond. Phil attended law school after leaving the service. In law school most of his friends were former military. He explained that he did not seek out fellow veterans, they just happened to find each other and, as he described it, “we looked at things different than the class that was two years ahead of us.” They had a shared experience. They felt a sense of belonging to a specific group, in this case veterans. Brad made a very similar point in his interview. Brad returned from deployment a few years ago and went immediately to Iowa State University. He characterized returning as “a really tough adjustment but…it was kinda nice because a lot of my guys in my unit were also going back to Iowa State so we had each other to lean on.” He was lucky enough to have a group that he belonged to that had shared experiences and helped provide support. He fully recognized the importance of that group and its effects on his success. Others weren’t so lucky, “I know that there were some soldiers that really didn’t have that support structure to lean on and unfortunately they kinda dropped out of school or they just couldn’t handle that.”

Since Brad’s experience is so recent he was in the middle of struggling with the effects that homecoming has on wartime relationships. Upon returning home they’ve “realized we had a lot of differences in our lives. We formed friendships because it’s like you have no one else and now you do not want to lose those friendships.” He and his friends are still in the process of maneuvering that situation, trying to maintain friendships formed in the middle of the desert
during a highly stressful period of their lives and trying to keep those relationships alive now that they are back in the United States. This dilemma is currently compounded by the fact that many of them are considering taking a second, or for some, a third deployment to either Afghanistan or Egypt. Despite the challenges, their commitment to maintaining these friendships is a testament to the strength of the bonds formed through their shared military experience.

Brad’s homecoming is quite recent so he is currently in the middle of adjusting to life after military service so our discussions of his post-military experiences centered on the internal struggle of moving from an active combat position to the classroom. The Vietnam era veterans interpreted the same line of enquiry differently; they chose to instead focus on the treatment they and other veterans received upon their homecoming. Regardless of how they characterized their homecoming, they all had strong opinions about the treatment Vietnam veterans received. Throughout our interview Al was quiet, contemplating each question before answering. The one time he became animated and verbose was when I asked him if he remembered anything about coming home after serving in Vietnam.

It was not good. (pause) It was bad. I got to the airport in Minneapolis and you almost had to come home without your uniform on cause once they found out you were [a veteran] then they’d just really get after you. You know, calling you baby killer and spitting at you and all kinds of garbage. It really sucked. So that’s why these Iraq vets and everything, you just have to support’em cause we didn’t, we don’t, us Vietnam guys, we do not want that to happen to them guys…it’s not a very good feeling coming home and everyone’s spitting on you, calling you baby killer.

When I asked Ivan about his homecoming he laughed uncomfortably, looked past me and stared at the wall behind my head for a few minutes before answering:

I remember coming into San Francisco cause that’s where we got discharged and the first thing we did was get rid of our uniforms. Just never traveled in a uniform. It was not a friendly environment for servicemen.
Phil served during the Vietnam War but his service was all domestic. Despite never fighting in Vietnam, he had a lot to say about the treatment he received after his service:

We were called baby killers...nobody ever thanked me for my service, when I would travel people would not talk to me, they’d know I was military. If we’d go, you know we were young and there were two bachelors that I did a lot of running around with and when we would go anyplace together where there were young people they just shunned us because they knew we were military...I remember one time I went up to San Francisco and I was in uniform and I thought I was gonna be kidnapped by this group of people that just had this great resentment towards me because I was military. It was a hostile environment.

A few Vietnam veterans expressed very different memories of coming home. Joe said he felt apprehensive about coming back because of the stories he had heard about treatment of returning veterans but he himself never experienced anything. Tom had a similar experience:

You’d always show these protesters in airports. I think that was really blown out of proportion. The people I knew, would not’ve let people harass ‘em I know that. And I never saw it. We’d come in and obviously we were waiting to get on a plane and people’d offer to buy us drinks. So I think that was just an isolated thing and I never saw it. I never got discriminated against and whether some people did, I do not know but through the four years I was in a lot of civilian airports.

Regardless of their homecoming experience, everyone stressed the importance of supporting our troops, regardless of political affiliation. At the end of each interview I asked “is there anything else that you would like to add?” and invariably, everyone would respond by calling for everyone to support the troops. Each interlocutor stressed the importance of honoring military service, past and present. Everyone placed a great deal of emphasis on the idea of honoring our veterans. This can be seen to highlight the social production of honor. Veterans are able to downplay their own heroism or honor secure in the fact that it is socially produced through groups like the Ceremonial Guard and rituals like the military funeral. Their emphasis
on the heroism of other veterans and the importance of honoring their service reinforces this social framework of honor production.

The majority of my interlocutors have taken the idea of honoring fellow veterans one step farther by joining the Ceremonial Guard (Figure 9). The Ceremonial Guard is a group of veterans from all service branches who form the honor guard at military funerals. The Garner Ceremonial Guard is entirely voluntary, and composed of veterans from World War II through the Operation Desert Storm era who provide military funeral honors for veterans. The Department of Defense (DOD) defines military funeral honors as “the ceremonial paying of respect and the final demonstration of the country’s gratitude to those who, in times of war and peace, have faithfully defended our Nation. Members of the funeral honors detail fold and present the American flag to the veteran’s survivor and Taps is sounded” (Torreon 2011:1). Mark is one of the youngest members of the ceremonial unit. He described his participation in the ceremonial unit as “very rewarding”. His son currently serves on one of the most prestigious Air Force ceremonial units in the country. He spoke of his son’s participation in the group with pride. It is something they can share. Even though they do not belong to the same group, they have that connection that links them not only to each other but to all other veterans.

Tom joined the ceremonial unit at the request of one of his friends, a World War II veteran who wanted to get “some of the younger guys” involved. He too described his participation as “pretty rewarding. I know the families, after we get through, we do taps and we fire the volleys and they really appreciate it. And we always pick up the casings that we shoot and give them to the families as mementos. I didn’t realize how important that was to families”. Daryl also got involved when his neighbor, another World War II veteran, asked him to join back in the seventies.
They each describe the full military funeral and the importance of “honoring veterans”. They highlight the importance of acknowledging military service at every level. Unmentioned is the fact that each of them knows that when they die, they too will be honored with a full military funeral complete with ceremonial guard. Each veteran actively performs a ritual that helps produce and display the heroism of a deceased veteran regardless of the level of their military experience but none of them vocally claim that same heroism or right. They all described their participation in the ceremonial guard as providing an essential service for others, honoring other veterans. They are all fully aware that will receive the same honor but never actively make the claim that they deserve it. There is a sense of deferral of the heroic function. You can produce it for others, and you know that others will produce it for you but there is a reluctance to claim that heroism for yourself.

One way to read this deferral of heroic function is as subversive of the dominant narratives of masculinity and nationalism. In Russian Talk Nancy Ries (1997) presents a similar narrative of gendered subversion. She argues that the tales of drunkenness and sexual exploits told by Russian men during Perestroika are subversive of the Soviet ideal of the hard-working, productive man (Ries 1997:65-82). She points out that in “official Soviet representations (socialist realism) the serious, responsible male image dominated…The effort and investment put into the development and propagation of the sober, serious male model…was extraordinary” (Ries 1997:70). She read the animated tales of men’s drunken exploits as “not so much a typical way for men as it was a symbolic tale of resistance, autonomy, and transcendence of the social order” (Ries 1997:70). For my interlocutors, deferral of the heroic function could be a way of subverting popular depictions and narratives of the heroically masculine military. The military is popularly depicted as an organization of heroism and masculinity. The dominant narratives of the
military involve discussions of violence, strength, power, pride, heroism, and glory. Because of popular depictions, we presume the heroism of veterans whether or not they claim it. By subverting the dominant narrative and not claiming the heroic function conferred onto them through military service they are able to claim humility and through subversion, symbolically reinforce the narrative of the heroism.

Each of my interlocutors discussed the importance that their personal military service held in their lives, stressed the value of honoring the service of past veterans, and ended their interview by expressing the opinion that in the future every American should be required to serve in the military. Reasoning tended to slant towards arguments of how military service provides direction and fosters a greater sense of patriotism and civic engagement. There were a multitude of other reasons given but the basic sentiment was the same: everyone, regardless of gender, should be required to serve in the military. “I wish they made everybody go in the military...I think that would change a lot of kids’ attitudes and that type stuff” Al explained. This sentiment extended beyond those who willingly joined the military and the list of proponents of universally mandatory military service included those, like Joe, who were drafted in Vietnam:

I was, you know, reluctant to go. But I didn’t really feel I had a choice. And now it’s kind of turned around and now I am very proud of my service. So that’s kind of strange to me, I guess, from once not ever wanting to go and then being in it and hating it and now I think everybody should be required to go into the military. I’m sorry but men and women.

A few others, like Joe, apologized to me for expressing this opinion that they assumed I would find unpalatable. Generally they seemed to think I would be offended not on behalf of my generation but on behalf of my gender. This implied distinction caught me off guard. Perhaps because of my four years at an all-women’s institution it seemed logical to me that women would
be included in a proposed plan of universal military service and the suggestion that they be excluded would easily be deemed sexist.

Daryl offered an alternative but complementary viewpoint, “I think it’d be very good if we reinstated the draft and got a cross section serving in the military and serving their country.” He and Phil both argued the benefits of representation from a greater cross section of the population in the military. This is a key theme discussed in Erin Finley’s *Fields of Combat* (2011). After the draft was discontinued in 1973 and the United States moved towards an all-volunteer Army, its make up became much more homogeneous. Finley highlights the economic disparity within the military citing the “disproportionate recruitment of service members from among low- and middle-income communities and the reliance placed upon the less privileged to be willing to sacrifice their lives towards the advancement of national interests” (Finley 2011:15). While discussing veteran’s reasons for joining the military she argues that many of them are economically driven. Individuals seek to use the military as “a way to escape poverty ” or “violent urban environments and “as a way of accessing education” (Finley 2011:14-15). Because of this, our military is composed of a disproportionately large number of men and women from lower economic brackets. Daryl and Phil argued not for universally mandatory military service but for a draft to help create a military that is less uniform and more representative of a true cross section of society.

Most of my interviews followed a similar chronological trajectory, which is partly due to my questioning and partly the natural direction taken by my interlocutors. It stands to reason that when discussing a chapter of a life one would start at the beginning and process chronologically to the end. Because of this, my interview transcripts tended to read like a life story as seen through the lens of military service: this is when and how my military life began, next is the
rising action, the culmination of my active military story, and finally, how the military has impacted my life. This narrative impulse could account for the fact that similar topics (like joining and homecoming) emerged but it does not account for the more specific resonances across interviews. I cannot definitively point to the sole cause behind these resonances but I can propose theories. The similarity behind reasons for joining and their time period specificity seems to mirror the steady shift in demographic make-up of the military and highlight distinct contemporary realities. During the Vietnam War the draft was very active so decision making would necessarily take the draft into account. After the U.S. discontinued the draft in 1973 and moved to an all-volunteer military the primary motivation for joining shifted towards monetary compensations.

Similarities in the very formal and professional language used in each soldier’s descriptions of their specific duties could reflect the standardization of the military. In an institution that regulates duties standardized descriptions become an easy way to quickly communicate highly specific skills. These almost rehearsed descriptions could also be the product of years of explaining their role in the military. One way to view the commonly held belief in mandatory universal conscription is as personal testimony. Each of my interlocutors described military service as ultimately beneficial, they each claim to have gained something that they conceptualized as valuable from their experience. Many received college benefits, others a stronger sense of belonging and purpose, and a multitude of other, often unexpressed benefits. They view their military experience as a positive, enriching experience and are therefore likely to recommend it for others. Perhaps this would be different if their narratives were laden with more traumas. Interestingly, trauma was not a dominant narrative in my interviews. This does not in any way mean that my interlocutors did not experience traumatic episodes in their military
service; they just chose not to discuss that trauma with me in that particular moment. Why? It could be due to my positionality as a young woman who most of them have known many years. It could simply be because trauma is not seen as a fitting topic for normal social interactions. Or it could defy language’s capacity for expression.

One way to view this silence is through an analysis of the way that my interlocutors prioritized the service of others. Through ranking veterans who had “seen more action” and those who had served overseas above themselves there is an implication that more trauma equates to higher standing. My interlocutors were all unwilling to ascribe themselves heroism, so perhaps through not discussing trauma they were further distancing themselves from the heroism that they willingly ascribed to other veterans. In most studies of the military and of soldiers trauma is a, if not the, key theme. Publications like Finley’s *Fields of Combat* (2011), Anna Simon’s *The Company they Keep* (1997), and countless studies in the fields of anthropology, psychology, and neuroscience are dedicated to analyzing the effects of trauma on soldiers. Perhaps because of this, I expected it to feature more heavily in my interviews. This could highlight a gap in research; we need more research into the lives of veterans who have adjusted more easily into life after the military and a look at the ways they gain value from their military experience as a profession. In *Life Stories* Charlotte Linde discusses the importance of profession in the construction of self-identity (1993). In many ways we define others by their professions and professional identities and because of this we derive a great deal of value from our chosen professions. This is supported by Bourdieu’s (1977) theories of symbolic capital and subsequent scholars’ work on its importance for professional expertise (see Caldwell 2008). The military provides its members with specialized training and thus provides them with the symbolic capital of professional expertise in addition to the honor and heroism we associated
with military service. Alternatively, they may have experienced just as much trauma but chose not to express it in this specific setting: a formal interview with a young woman. I cannot be sure that they do not actively discuss and conceptualize trauma in other contexts. Perhaps discussions of trauma are reserved for conversations with fellow veterans, online forums in which they find a sense of community, sessions with therapists, or other situations better suited to encourage and facilitated that specific discussion. It would be interesting to explore why they do not express trauma and see if there are other forums in which they would be willing to enter into that discussion.
In this chapter I will address some of the silences in my interviews. Ochs and Capps provide definition for silencing as “a product of internal and interactional forces in that person may repress and suppress emotions and events, but these processes are linked to external circumstances, including others’ expectations and evaluations” (Ochs 1996:33). The previous chapter took a semiotic interpretative approach to what was said whereas this chapter will move outside to analyze the spaces beyond and between speech. In the Handbook of Ethnography Barbara Sherman Heyl points out the importance of silences arguing that:

…traditionally ethnographic interviewers are taught to ‘keep informants talking’; however, silences may be indicators of complex reactions to the questions and self-censorship. Researchers need to respect respondents’ right to remain silent and to appreciate that, for some respondents, the research interview may not be an appropriate place to ‘tell all’. [Heyl 2001:376]

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, one thing that I think the silences I encounter may either exclude or express is trauma. Many of my interlocutors served in heavy combat units and I know that many of them were “boots on the ground” in Vietnam and many implied that they had experienced trauma. There have been numerous anthropological studies of trauma and silence. In 2005 Alejandro Cuéllar wrote “Unraveling Silence: Violence, Memory and the Limits of Anthropology’s Craft” to discuss the ethical dilemmas involved in conducting anthropological research on trauma victims through the lens of his research in post-1994 South Africa. He reflects on the “nature of silence” (2005:160) and how to best approach an analysis of the silences that are often present in the narratives of those affected by trauma. For his interlocutors one of the most difficult questions posed was “how should the Apartheid period be remembered” (Cuéllar 2005:159). This posed a particular challenge for the communities in which he interviewed where the survivors felt “materially and spiritually ‘forgotten’ by the political elite”
For them, these feelings of abandonment frame “not only how the past is remembered and re-evaluated in the context of today’s hardships, but also has led many survivors to find ways to re-insert their own experience and voice as part of the ‘untold history’ of the struggle” (Cuéllar 2005:59). Through working with these ‘forgotten’ communities he found a way to analyze their silences as taking an active role in the process of remembering and re-evaluating, “I respected their silence and soon understood that it was this silence, and the forms it takes, what constitutes the texture of memory in contemporary South Africa” (Cuéllar 2005:162). Cuéllar frames silence as a form of power and of speech through which his interlocutors were able to control information. Many of these analyses can be applied to my interviews. Through their silences my interlocutors were able to construct their narratives and control the content of our interviews.

In “Breaking the Conspiracy of Silence: Testimony, Traumatic Memory, and Psychotherapy with Survivors of Political Violence” Kelly McKinney performed fieldwork in rehabilitation centers for survivors of political violence and sought to “examine the ways the ‘trauma story’ is elicited and structure” (2007:265) and whether or not this has adverse effects on the agency of clients. She writes that “assumed in clinical practice with trauma survivors is the notion that every client holds some sort of traumatic memory…each person has a unique story, a story of memories that both construct and represent the self at reflected and unreflected levels” (McKinney 2007:270). In many cases the psychotherapists in the clinics she researched make it their mission to extricate this specific traumatic memory at all costs. McKinney argues that this is in some cases not only unethical but also detrimental to the trauma victim’s sense of agency. In some cases:

…clinicians may subordinate social needs of clients to the ethical call to bear witness, neglect to acknowledge the nuanced moral complexity of political violence, and lose
sight of the understanding that traumatic memories are politically and culturally mediated. As a result, an ideology may crystallize that casts clients as innocent victim, paradoxically denying a sense of their full moral and psychological agency rather than restoring it. [McKinney 2007:266-267]

My interlocutors were silent on the subject of the trauma that they undoubtedly experienced. As McKinney points out, these silences are culturally and politically motivated and as such warrant an analysis that remains respectful of their decision to remain silent. Although not as explicitly as in Cuéllar’s (2005) paper, within McKinney’s paper (2007) is the argument that silence is a choice and a form of expression that is just as valid as speech.

There are also numerous studies of the role of silence and memory in military and war narratives. August Carbonella (2009) has written about the ways in which the structure of the military itself has shaped the ways in which Vietnam veterans internally remember the war. He highlights the “tension between practical consciousness (what is actually being lived and experienced) and official consciousness (the already articulate and defined)” (Carbonella 2009:353). In analyzing this distinction he reinforces the idea that our memories and the ways in which we make sense of our lives and experiences are affected by the systems in which they are created, in this case, the military. Whether through compliance or resistance, each veteran’s stories are affected by and in some way reflect the official narrative.

The research that resonates the most with my own is Edna Lomsky-Feder’s “Life Stories, War, and Veterans: On the Social Distribution of Memories” (2004). In this article she draws from 63 life stories narrated by Israeli male veterans of the 1973 Yom Kippur War to understand personal memory of war and its interpretation. According to Lomsky-Feder the personal memory of war is highly individual “some remember the war as a traumatic experience and other as a heroic event; some recall it as an experience that obstructs personal development and others as
an empowering and fortifying one” (2004:82). Despite the fact that all veterans remember the war in different ways “all reminiscences are shaped within a memory field that is socially constructed” (Lomsky-Feder 2004:82). Through her interviews she found many of the same silences that I was faced with in my interviews. Her analysis of trauma and the silences surrounding trauma are invaluable in helping to understand my interlocutor’s silences. She concludes by arguing that “the remembering subject is not liberated to choose any interpretation he wishes. His selections are guided by social-cultural criteria that ‘distribute’ accessibility to different models of memory (traumatic normalizing or heroic) according to social entitlement” (Lomsky-Feder 2004:104). This source of entitlement is derived from the group and in her research correlates perfectly to my interlocutor’s ideas of prioritization. In her interviews those who were entitled to view the war as traumatic were those who were ‘really in the war’ (Lomsky-Feder 2004:100). This expression seems to be similar to my interlocutor’s ideas of “seeing a lot of action”. As with my interlocutors the distinction between ‘really being in the war’ and ‘not really being in the war’ does not fall easily along the divide of combat versus non-combat. In both my interviews and Lomsky-Feder’s our interlocutors deferred the heroic function of the soldier to those who they deemed entitled, which in most cases correlated perfectly to those who had ‘seen the most action’ or ‘were really in the war’. In this way the structure of the military seems to create an environment where suffering is directly correlated with heroism. Through this research Lomsky-Feder provides a system to help aid in the analysis of veteran’s silence in regards to trauma.

In my interviews I have identified two different types of silence that are similar but inherently different. The first is a pause or hesitation in oration. These occur in the midst of conversation and are situationally specific. The second is an omission. I am using this
categorization to classify broader ideas and discussions that my interlocutors chose not to have with me in that particular instant. Lastly I will explore the various ways in which my interlocutors used material objects to express what they did not verbally. This was done through the presence of memorial sculpture, photographic displays, medals, certificates, and in one case, prosthetics. I will look at how this material culture can construct a narrative of heroism and honor while my interlocutors were reticent to claim those characteristics for themselves verbally.

The distinction between the two types of silence is most strikingly exemplified in my interview with Al. Al’s interview was full of internal pauses and breaks. He answered all of my questions but never with much detail. After each question he would pause, tapping his knuckles on the table, before answering with a short few sentences that technically answered each of my questions but felt hollow, like there was more that could have been said. After each of his answers there would be another long pause, sometimes he would add another sentence, sometimes he would sit, tapping his knuckles staring at the pictures on the wall before I would ask another question in an attempt to get him to speak a little more. As an example, when I asked him “do you remember anything about coming back from the military” he responded with a very long, pregnant pause before saying “It was not good”. In this case his silence was prompted by my question. Through his silence it was as though he was funneling all of the potential answers he could give me before deciding on specifically what to say to me in this situation. Ochs and Capps reinforce this interpretation of silence in their article “Narrating the Self”:

Narratives situate narrators, protagonists, and listener/readers at the nexus of morally organized, past, present, and possible experiences. For example, narrators and listener/readers exist in the here-and-now world of the telling/reading as they are drawn into the multiple worlds of emergent, apprehended narratives. [Ochs 1996:22]

In the end Al chose not to share any of his potential answers with me in that moment and instead decided to turn the question into an appeal for support of Iraq veterans.
After that I decided to try a new technique and didn’t ask any questions for a while. I let Al sit and I let the silences fill the room. Every few minutes he would add another sentence about the experience of coming home. A few minutes in, after a particularly long pause, he said in careful slow sentences, “You know, when you’re sent over somewhere, to some foreign country and you’re told to kill that’s—it’s gonna affect you. (pause) Somehow. And there’s a lot of them guys that are here now that are really struggling. Then you got the VA that wants to argue with you and tell you there’s nothing wrong with you and all that garbage.” I nodded in agreement and after what seemed like another eternity of silence he spoke again, this time about his experience in Vietnam “We would load up probably a hundred soldiers that’d been out in the field for two or three months (pause) wilder and crazy (pause) and we’d throw ‘em in the shower and everything else and you know, you do not get to shower when you been fighting in the war”. I find the silence preceding this exchange particularly interesting and difficult to analyze. Again, the silence is a space for him to funnel all of his memories and thoughts and eventually decide what to say, but this time the silence was not prompted by anything that I said. I was struck by the distinction between the wild and crazy experience of fighting in the jungles of Vietnam and the civilizing influence of the shower that the soldiers received once on the boat. In this way it sets up a distinction between nature and civilization. Out of all of the things that he did in the war he chose to highlight the act of bringing fellow soldiers out of the jungle and cleaning them up.

Towards the end of the interview he said that he would definitely do it all over again. I asked if he would still make the choice to be in the Navy and he responded immediately “Yes” and then followed that response with a very long pause before continuing:

I’d just…seen too many guys just you know…get in the war and stuff…and get screwed up…(very long pause) hurt or…I lost a cousin over there. Of course it was probably a good thing he did die because he’d’ve been a vegetable anyway…jumped on a landmine
to protect his buddies and that’s something that anybody would do the same thing…but…no, it’s a good experience.

Immediately afterwards he changed the subject and started asking me questions about school, effectively stopping any further line of enquiry. In his silences he seemed to construct a way to answer my questions and communicate that the war was very detrimental without him having to discuss any of his own experiences.

In my interview with Al there was one very striking omission. I have known Al my entire life and during that time he has always had prosthetic legs. Year-round, even in the depths of the brittle northern Iowa winter he wears shorts so that everyone can see his prosthetic legs that are emblazoned with imagery of waving American flags and soaring bald eagles. In my interview with Deb she suggested that I interview Al because his story was a perfect example of the lasting effects of the Vietnam War, “he lost his legs due to Agent Orange you know”. In my interview with Al he never once mentioned sustaining any injuries during the war, and he never mentioned his legs. This deliberate omission yields various interpretations. He may have omitted all discussion of anything particularly gory or harsh to protect me from that reality. Another possibility is that his omission may also have been a way to cast the war and his military service in a more positive light.

Al’s interview was one of the last that I conducted, because of this, I went in knowing that there would be moments of silence and I had already experimented with different techniques to work with the silences. This was not the case when I interviewed Earl. Although Earl’s interview contained fewer silences than Al’s, the silences that it did contain were profound. Earl is my grandfather. He was very excited to be interviewed and as my grandmother later told me, incredibly proud that I chose to do my research on veterans. For the majority of the interview he
was very open, giving me detailed answers and descriptions of his time in boot camp and the
ship ride over to Korea. There was only one section in the middle of the interview where we sat
enveloped in silence. I asked “when did you go to Korea?” and my grandfather responded “I
went to Korea in um, June of nineteen fifty-six and we spent sixteen months over there...yep... It
was not very nice”. This silence made me physically uncomfortable. I am sure that my
relationship with him was the primary reason that this particular silence bothered me so much. I
felt him remembering in the silence and then I felt guilty for making him relive those memories,
so when I thought I couldn’t take the silence anymore I asked him what part of Korea he was in
at which point he perked right back up and gave me a short lesson in the geography of Korea. In
hindsight that silence is very interesting. He voluntarily told me that Korea was not very nice.
This silence was not prompted by anything that I said. Looking back and analyzing that pause I
imagine that he was reflecting and remembering and deciding what to tell me and how to phrase
it but I interrupted the pause and ended that contemplation prematurely. In retrospect, it would be
very interesting to see what he would eventually choose to say had I given him enough time to
fully contemplate but in that moment I was too uncomfortable to do so.

Discussions of morality and ethics were noticeably absent from my interviews. None of
my interlocutors really opened up a discussion about the ethics or politics behind war and that
was not a line of questioning that I actively pursued. A few came close and in some cases skirted
around the issue a bit but no one addressed it head on. Even Daryl, who was not shy about
talking politics or religion, never applied politics or ethics to discussions of military service.
Upon entering the Greiman house I was greeted by Daryl yelling from the living room “So how
do you feel about the fiscal cliff?” followed shortly by him asking me whether or not I had
bought into the “fancy liberal media” on the east coast. At the end of the interview while discussing my study abroad experience he gave me a small lecture on the perils of socialism:

It’s pretty amazing to see what socialism does versus capitalism when you go from the West Germany into East Germany…So do not allow socialism, do not be hoodwinked by the liberals out east telling you how great progressive socialism is. It does not work. It brings everyone down to mediocrity you know, if you do not allow the capitalistic spirit to reward people for their work there’s not a lot of incentive so everyone just becomes pretty mediocre.

Even though Daryl was not afraid to let his political opinions be known, he never once discussed the politics behind war. I didn’t really know what to make of this omission. Perhaps the fact that he served the entirety of his career in the United States precluded a discussion of the politics and ethics behind war in some way. It was not pertinent to a discussion of his personal experience which, after all, was the purpose of this interview.

Ivan danced around the issues of ethics and politics while discussing the evolution of his ideas in regards to his participation in the Vietnam War. But even though he addressed these issues, he never fully shared his viewpoint and didn’t leave the conversation open to further discussion. Ivan on the other hand, chose to bring it up but then carefully constructed how he wanted to approach the topic. Without me asking any question, in the course of our conversation about his homecoming Ivan said “I was always a real big supporter of what I was doing. As I’ve gotten older and I look back at the Vietnam War, I uh… I just have a lot of different reservations than I did then… I just look at things differently obviously.” After leaving the military Ivan became a politician. He was the mayor of my hometown for the majority of my childhood. He constructed his answer in a way that reflects that background. He says that he views the war differently now but doesn’t go into detail. These pauses felt much more like they were put in place to help him orient his thoughts and phrase each sentence correctly. These pauses felt very
different than those of Earl or Al where they were organizing and shifting through memories, here Ivan seemed to be focusing on specific wording.

Joe, another Vietnam veteran, barely touched on the issue. When I asked him why he joined and he laughingly responded “*maybe joined is not the right word, I was drafted. I never considered joining.*” But even that statement does not really say anything. It could imply that he did not agree with the war or could just mean that he did not want to be in the Army, a perfectly valid desire. Brad never mentioned whether or not he agreed with what he was doing. He never discussed the politics surrounding the decision to go to war. He seemed to accept his deployment as a foregone conclusion. At one point he made a comment about helping the Afghans in his region, implying that our military presence in the Middle East is in the service of the Afghan people. Aside from that one tiny comment, the interview stayed out of the political or ethical spheres. This could have been a conscious decision influenced by the fact that I was performing what he appears to have conceptualized as a formal interview that would end in some form of publication. Not commenting on the ethics or politics of war keeps the interview out of the arena of partisan discourse and roots it firmly in his personal experiences. It becomes less about war and more about his individual story.

The other interviews are devoid of even these small nods to politics and ethics. My descriptions of the purpose of these interviews may have contributed to that. At the beginning of each interview everyone asked me what my project was and I always explained that I was interested in each individual’s military experience and their stories and perceptions. I can see how in some ways that might be interpreted to preclude discussion of the military in a broader context. The idea of the interviews as scholarly and academic may have contributed as well. It is understandable that in an interview that will eventually be disseminated to a broader audience,
specifically a far removed audience, some might shy away from a discussion of the ethics and politics behind a system in which they were heavily involved and in many cases characterize as the best period of their lives.

Many of the broader omissions of anything relating to trauma or ethics can highlight how my positionality and the external audience affect people’s interviews. In many ways my interlocutors tailored their responses based on the intended audience. This is best exemplified through my interview with my cousin Brad. Brad’s interview was not necessarily full of silences, in his case they were more like avoidances. When I would ask a question, he would respond with a question asking me to narrow my scope. For example I asked him if he would mind discussing his deployment and he responded by asking me “What would you like to know?” When he did answer the question he chose to discuss the geography and climate of the region and his positive relationships with his fellow soldiers. At one point he did mention loss “…there’s always that time when you lose soldiers…that happened. A lot of people got sent, some people got sent home. We actually lost two soldiers from our battalion…It’s kinda hard because a lot of those people you do know. (long pause) Cause you’ve seen them, you’ve trained with them. And it’s kinda hard to have that realization that they’re no longer there.” Immediately afterwards he changed the subject to a discussion of the intense boredom most days.

Brad has only been back from his deployment for a few years and from other conversations that we have had in more informal family settings I know that he witnessed a lot of intense events and actively participated in a great deal of active combat but although he has discussed this a little with me in other situations, in this particular setting he chose not to mention any of that. He chose to steer the conversation away from some of the darker realities of active duty and instead focus on the lighter stories: watching the Vampire Diaries with his battalion
during one of their many nights of extreme boredom, the few times that the Afghan security force cooked them a traditional Afghan meal, and the little boy who waved to him every day as he drove past.

I know from other conversations in different venues that Brad was involved in a lot of heavy action while in Afghanistan and that he witnessed traumatic events. His job, manning one of the largest weapons, put him directly in the line of fire on multiple occasions. In other contexts, generally informal, intimate conversations with one or two other cousins the same age as Brad and me, I have heard him mention killing people, seeing dead bodies, and engaging in heavy combat. But he didn’t mention any of that during our interview. Those more intense conversations happened right after he had returned from fighting. In Brad’s case, I think his reticence has more to do with the structured nature of the “interview” and its eventual audience than it has to do with my positionality as his younger female family member. He has, in the past, been willing to discuss some of the darker elements of his military service openly with me. What was different about this occasion was the interview format. I explained to him that this interview was for a school project and would become part of my final paper. When he showed up he was wearing a military t-shirt emblazoned with his platoon’s information and insignia. He sat up ramrod straight and spoke slowly and clearly—very different than his usual slouch and obviously missing the customary string of cuss words that adorn all of his speech. This increased formality led me to hypothesize that my positionality as interviewer was shaping his answers more than my gender or relationship with him.

In contrast, despite my lifelong relationship with Earl I have no previous conversations to draw from. Earl’s long pause while discussing his time in Korea drew to my attention a larger omission: the war. Earl served a substantial amount of time in the Korean War. I have always
known that. In all of our discussion both during this interview and throughout the course of my life he has made it seem as though his job was removed from the actual fighting. As Quartermaster his job was to order, sort, and ship all of the food supplies to every American troop in the whole of Korea. He had always made it sound like an office job consisting primarily of paperwork. I had never even considered the fact that he might have seen fighting. In my mind he was always safely behind a desk looking at spreadsheets and filing papers. His silence and simple comment that “it was not very nice” made me face the realization that I was perhaps wrong in my thinking. As he stared blankly at the wall behind my head with a tortured expression on his face I realized that there was probably a lot more to his military service than he had ever told me. It stands to reason that in his years of travelling up and down the Korean countryside he probably saw a lot of fighting.

His silence on those experiences not only during this interview but over the course of my life is interesting. I called a few of my cousins to see if they had grown up with the same impressions as me and their responses were all very similar. Everyone admitted to knowing almost nothing about my grandfather’s military service. When I asked, one cousin responded “I've never really asked him”. Everyone knew that he had served in Korea but every cousin thought that he had been a cook and all agreed that he definitely hadn’t seen any fighting. His silence felt much more like a protective mechanism. I am his granddaughter and it stands to reason that he would want to protect me from the horrors of war; even when I was sitting there in his kitchen finally asking him about his time in the military he caught himself and remained silent on many of the actual realities of his time in the military. Given that this silence is a trend that has structured our conversations for years I feel safe in assuming that Earl’s silences were
not contingent upon the nature of the interview but were more dependent on my relationship to him as his granddaughter.

The largest omission in all of my interviews was a discussion of personal heroism. Since many of my interlocutors serve on the Ceremonial Guard Unit, military funerals were discussed heavily. In their duties they must attend every veteran’s funeral and provide full military honors, meaning they process in wearing their full military uniform, play taps, and fire three rifle volleys before presenting the family of the deceased with a folded American flag and the casings from the rifle volleys. The ceremony is designed to honor the deceased veteran and their military service. Any veteran who has been honorably discharged is eligible whether they served for two years or twenty, overseas or domestically, joined or were drafted. The men involved in the ceremonial guard discuss the importance of the military funeral in honoring military service and producing the heroism of all who have dedicated any portion of their life to military service.

What I found interesting is the fact that each and every veteran that I talked to knows that one day they too will receive a full military funeral. The colors will be posted, taps will be played, the rifle volleys will be fired and their families will be presented with an American flag. They know that one day their military service will be honored publicly. They all willingly participate in a performance that creates heroism and honor for veterans and they know that one day others will do the same for them but they were all unwilling to ascribe themselves the heroism that they produce for others. This could be seen as an example of stereotypical Midwestern humility. But when viewed in conversation with my interlocutor’s prioritization of certain types of service above others it can be seen to reinforce this hierarchy of soldiers. Those who have “seen more action” or experienced more trauma hold a higher place and by extension, those who have fallen in battle carry the highest. There will always be someone who has
sacrificed more. There seems to be a disconnection between actively believing that all military service is heroic and worthy of large displays of honor and applying that logic to one’s self.

Despite the fact that none of my interlocutors verbally ascribed themselves heroism, the material culture that surrounded them expressed a different reality. As argued in Arjun Appadurai’s anthology *The Social Life of Things*, objects are imbued with numerous culturally constructed meanings and specific biographies that cause them to become more than just pure objects (1986). We use material culture and give it meaning beyond its purely functional purpose and, in some cases, the objects themselves have a sort of agency capable of producing socially understood forms of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1977). In Garner, the town itself can be seen to derive symbolic capital from the comparatively large group of veterans that it has produced. The town quite frequently fills Central Park with rows upon rows of American flags and holds ceremonies. The Veteran’s Memorial Recreation Center lies in the heart of the town and boasts an elaborate display of military uniforms in addition to being one of the town’s most utilized facilities, second only to the public school. In town there are about six veteran’s memorials. Very recently a new memorial was erected in front of the courthouse to honor all of the living and deceased veterans from in Hancock County. Anyone who had served in the military was eligible to be honored and almost everyone interviewed has their name prominently displayed on the monument. Patricia proudly told me that both she and her husband, an Air Force veteran, are listed on the memorial. Patricia also directed me towards the Veteran’s Memorial Recreation Center in town where she and her husband have their uniforms on display; both large-scale displays that call attention to their military service.

The new memorial at the courthouse was brought up again in my interview with Phil. Phil informed me that in order for your name to appear on the memorial you needed to submit it
yourself. While discussing the importance of his military service Phil said “I do not have my name up here at the courthouse on that big wall because I do not feel I did anything. I served two years and as I said it’s the best time of my life so why should I be remembered for that?” Although he fully admits that his military service, during the height of the Vietnam War, was one of the most influential and important parts of his life it is only valuable to him and not worthy of display. This is a little at odds with the décor of his office. Phil is a lawyer and I conducted our interview at his office. Upon entering, he showed me the photos on the wall next to his desk. A few of them were of him in his uniform. One that he pointed out in particular is a composite image with a photo of him in his military uniform overlaid with photos of his family members (father, brother, uncle, grandfather) in their military uniforms.

Many others had material displays that were more along the lines of Phil’s photo collage. After interviewing Ivan he took me into his living room and showed me the large display covering the entirety of the main wall. It included pictures of aircrafts signed by pilots he had worked with, honorary certificates, medals, and his invitation to join the Honor Flight to Washington D.C. Although very humble during his interview, downplaying any role he played in the war, this wall was a testament to his heroism, a visual display of honor. Earl made sure to show me the certificate he had received honoring the 60th anniversary of his service. His home is covered with American flags and although it contains no photos of him in uniform it is full of my cousin’s military portraits. Brad showed up for his interview wearing a t-shirt proclaiming his military service, it’s just one of the many that I know he owns and wears daily.

Al’s material display was probably the most striking. He is very open about the fact that he served in Vietnam but was reticent to give me any details of his military service and although he was very willing to help me with my project it almost seemed as though he was
uncomfortable with me asking him questions about his time in Vietnam. Although he was the least talkative during my interview, his material displays of service are the most visible. Al’s legs that he lost as a result of his time in Vietnam have been replaced with prosthetics covered with American flags, eagles, and the VFW logo. Despite the fact that it was January, there were four feet of snow on the ground, and it was negative twenty degrees outside, Al arrived at his interview wearing his customary denim shorts that left his legs on full display. His quite literally wears his military service like a badge. Anyone who sees his prosthetics with VFW insignia can tell just by looking at him that he served overseas and judging by his age it is a logical step to assume that service was in Vietnam.

Emily Cohen (2012) has done extensive ethnographic research on prosthetics that help in the analysis of Al’s legs. In an article for *Disabilities Studies Quarterly* she takes a look at rehabilitation clinics in Colombia for people adjusting to prosthetic limbs. She provides a quick and informative look at Colombian society, their medical system, and the ways in which patients and doctors conceptualize prosthetics. Colombia has the highest rate of landmine injuries in the world and this often manifests itself in the loss of limbs. Cohen offers an analysis of the ways in which patients and medical staff interact with prosthetics and how prosthetic wearers are viewed in society. Although this particular study focuses on a specific population in Colombia, many of her conclusions can be easily applied to all prosthetic wearers.

She begins with a discussion of the physical boundaries of the body and how prosthetics are medically fitted to an individual.

Prosthetics are manufactured products that are aligned in such a way that they reflect how people create social order, how they imagine their worlds. Prostheses provide a window into understanding how cultural objects become incorporated into the body and the self.
and ultimately how they transform how people understand the body as a political, social, and personal entity. [Cohen 2012:4]

Prosthetics force people to confront the boundaries of the human. The ways in which people choose to wear their prostheses are socially influenced as well as highly personal. Cohen draws from a Colombian neuroscientist, Rodolfo R. Llinas who argues that “the self is a myth and that all humans live in a virtual reality generated through synaptic transmissions” (2012:7). She uses this as her transition to introduce how Colombian physical therapists have started using phantom limb sensations to help patients adjust to their new limbs. As one physical therapist explained “when the patient feels like his foot, rather than the prosthesis, is touching the ground he can more easily make any adjustments needed to perform a natural walk” (Cohen 2012:6). In this way the prosthetic object transcends its materiality and becomes a part of the body. These phantom sensations blur the line between body and machine.

This blurred line fosters the creation of complex emotional relationships with prosthetics and how they transcend their utility which Cohen addresses in detail:

As much as a prosthesis becomes incorporated into the body’s image of itself, it is still widely seen as artifice – an aesthetically pleasing substitute or aid that can help people walk again and feel better about the way they look. [Cohen 2012:24]

She offers examples of the ways individuals conceptualize their prosthetics. Some choose to pad them so that while wearing trousers the prosthesis is not noticeable. Others just to display the prosthetic limb, as one patient explained “the metal bar is beautiful”3. In another interview a patient highlighted the relationship between people and prosthetics stating “I love my prosthesis as if it were my own leg” (Cohen 2012:23). This quote highlights how, for some, the prosthesis becomes not just an object whose utilitarian function is to aid in mobility but a part of the person. Cohen ends her article by illustrating this point:

3 Cohen find page
Incorporating prosthesis into the body is not simply about improving mobility, rather its value also lies in aesthetics and artistry. At times amputees aimed to appear naturally ‘human’, at other times people preferred to call attention to the mechanical nature of their prosthetic limbs. People did not only use their prosthesis to walk, but also to joke, play, and enhance their style of dress. [2012:27]

This passage highlights the complex relationships that people have with their prosthetic limbs beyond their utilitarian function.

Al has chosen to prominently display his prostheses at all times despite the fact that the climate in Iowa would readily allow for him to keep them covered. He has consciously chosen to keep his prosthetic legs visible. Al goes a step further and has customized them so that they are emblazoned with imagery of American flags and soaring eagles so that everyone who sees him is confronted with the strong visual message that he is trying to convey. This blatant visual display is at odds with his verbal silence. The hyper-Americana imagery on his prostheses viewed in context with his age allows all who see him to easily make the assumption that he was a Vietnam veteran. He creates a visual dialogue that professes his service while remaining taciturn. Despite his reluctance to verbally claim the symbolic capital associated with his military service, he silently alludes to it through his prostheses. His personalization of his legs is illustrative of Cohen’s point that people use and value their prostheses for purposes other than their utilitarian function. He has chosen to draw attention to the mechanical nature of his legs while simultaneously using them as a canvas. The images on his prostheses are reminiscent of tattoos. This striking similarity could be seen to highlight the blurry boundary between body and implement. In the absence of skin, the fiberglass of the prosthesis becomes the canvas on which Al has chosen to make his visual statement. Al’s legs provide a vivid example of not only how objects can transcend their utilitarian function but also how people use objects to create a dialogue and project a message.
Other examples of the use of material culture came up in conversation. Ivan told me a beautiful story about a pilot who was shot down in Vietnam. Ivan served on the flight deck of a naval ship. His job was to strap pilots into their airplanes. After securing a pilot, he would remove their flight chip, a physical object to help the flight deck keep track of pilots. During the first mission that they flew he strapped a pilot in and that pilot was the second pilot shot down in the war. Ivan described carrying that chip with him through the rest of his service and hanging onto it even after being discharged. He later tracked down and found the pilot who is now an Admiral in Washington D.C. Through it all he carried that chip as a reminder, a physical reminder of the war and those that had been lost. He gave the chip back to the Admiral after they were reacquainted. Ivan’s story provides a particularly poetic example of how we ascribe meaning to objects. The functional purpose of the chip is to keep track of people, and ultimately, it served its primary purpose, Ivan kept track of and found the pilot he had sent out decades before. In addition to serving its functional purpose, the chip became, for Ivan, a representation of the war. Technically when the pilot was shot down the chip objectively lost its meaning. Ivan transformed it into something else, a reminder, a relic of the war.

Ivan’s chip is an illustrative example of Igor Kopytoff’s theory of the cultural biography of things as outlined in Appadurai’s *Social Life of Things* (Kopytoff 1986:64-91). In his introduction, Appadurai explains:

Even if our own approach to things is conditioned necessarily by the view that things have no meaning apart from those that human transactions, attributions, and motivations endow them with…this does not illuminate the concrete, historical circulation of things. For that we have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions that enliven things. [Appadurai 1986:5]
In order to understand the significance of an object like Ivan’s chip that derives most of its value not from its physicality but from its history, we must first create its biography. Kopytoff argues that a cultural biography would “look at it [the object] as a culturally constructed entity, endowed with culturally specific meanings, and classified and reclassified into culturally constituted categories” (Kopytoff 1986:68). The cultural biography of Ivan’s chip would involve a stage of functionality followed by a transformation as Ivan moved it away from its intended purpose and reclassified its use. Once reclassified, the chip took on a culturally constructed association for Ivan which he then used to help him eventually reconnect with pilot to whom the chip originally belonged. Ivan’s chip, although moving through numerous stages of meaning, has the overarching biography of maintaining the social relationship between Ivan and the pilot.

During my discussions with the members of the Garner Ceremonial Guard Unit two described a military tradition of which I was unaware. During military funerals the Ceremonial Guard fires three rifle volleys and afterwards they collect the casings and present them to the family of the deceased veteran along with a folded American flag. Tom described collecting and presenting the casings to the families as “rewarding”, “I didn’t realize how important that was to the families”. The military funeral is a ceremony that very actively ascribes honor and heroism to the deceased veteran and it culminates in the presentation of physical objects that symbolize that heroism. At the end of the funeral the family is left with a folded American flag and three shell casings as physical representations of honor and heroism. The shell casings themselves serve no functional purpose, they are quite literally cast-offs. It is only through the process of the military funeral that we imbue them with significance.

In Patrick Geary’s contribution to Appadurai’s Social Life of Things, “Sacred Commodities: the Circulation of Medieval Relics”, he proposes a system of legitimization,
certification, and gift-giving that has many parallels with the ceremony associated with the shell casings and flags given to the families of veterans (Geary 1986:169). Much like the shell casings, medieval relics “had no obvious value apart from a very specific set of shared beliefs. Such relics were of no practical use” (Geary 1986:174). In order for relics to attain value “they had to undergo a social and cultural transition from being perceived as ordinary human remains to being venerated as the remains of a saint” (Geary 1986:177). He then applies Kopytoff’s cultural biographic approach (Kopytoff 1986:64-91) to analyzing relics as “they pass from ordinary remains to treasured relics, and then perhaps back again” (Geary 1986:177). To undergo this transformation it was necessary that they be authenticated and undergo a ritual of discovery and authentication in which these objects “passed from the status of mere human remains to that of sacred relics through a public ritual” (Geary 1986:178). In a similar way, the shell casings become valuable only through their involvement in the ritual of the military funeral. It is only through a shared belief in the honor and value of the military and military service as a broad concept that the shell casings are able to become conceptualized as something other than mere cast-offs. Just as the authentication of relics reinforced the power of both the relic itself and the power granting authentication, the ceremony of the military funeral confers honor to the veteran while reinforcing the honor and value of the military itself. The shell casings become symbolic of the honor and heroism created through the military funeral which is itself reinforcing the honor and heroism symbolically embodied by the military itself.

The shell casings themselves are highly gendered artifacts that in can be seen to reinforce the gendered view of the military. Lomsky-Feder argues that war and the heroism associated with it are culturally masculine concepts (2004). The heroism symbolized in the shell casing reinforces the “image of the heroic soldier, according to which war enables the soldier to realize
his masculinity” (Lomsky-Feder 2004:83). Ideas of heroism are “grounded in the model of hegemonic military masculinity that defines the proper man” (2004:104). Prior to the end of mandatory conscription in 1973 the military existed as an almost entirely male institution. As a historically masculine institution it makes sense that ideas of heroism and the symbols that represent that heroism are decidedly gendered. The conceptualization of masculinity within the military as it relates to trauma and heroism is difficult to unpack. Lomsky-Feder (2004) begins to address this complex issue with her argument that trauma, suffering, and sacrifice are tied to ideas of heroism and within the military heroism is masculine but trauma is not so in order for soldiers to be able to conceptualize the war as personally traumatic while still being able to claim the symbolic capital of heroism, their masculinity must be beyond question. This unquestioned masculinity is exemplified in the story Ivan told of the young lieutenant commander who was shot down in Vietnam. After spending years in a POW camp, he was released and has gone on to become an Admiral. Ivan said “the stories he tells about being a POW were just not friendly...They’re just not good stories at all. I just, I admire him. He’s kinda one of my heroes”. It is perfectly acceptable for him to claim the war as a personally traumatic experience. His survival of the POW camp and later success within the masculine institution of the military prove his masculinity.

The exchange of shell casings can be viewed as a gift exchange, a concept carefully studied by generations of anthropologists. Geary writes that “the goal of gift-giving was not the acquisition of commodities but the establishment of bonds between giver and receiver” (Geary 1986:173). In this particular exchange, the material artifacts given to the families of military veterans have been transformed through the ceremony of the material funeral and have become symbolic of the heroism and honor associated with military service. In return, those who receive
these objects perceive that honor and heroism and associate it with the military thereby reaffirming the military as a system that is socially believed to produce honor and heroism. In her 1988 book *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia*, Marilyn Strathern takes a look at gender in Melanesian societies and previous anthropological research, and analyzes a process of gift exchange that reinforces the system that created it. She seeks to apply feminist anthropological theories to highlight some of the inconsistencies and omissions in previous research, particularly research on gender relations in regards to the “gift economy” of the region. She argues that the material objects involved in Melanesian systems of exchange take on a symbolic role and shape social relationships in tangible ways. There has been ample research done on the ways that gift exchange or gift economy shapes the relationships of those involved in it. In this system the objects enable and constrain social relationships. These exchange items, like the material displayed in my interlocutor’s homes, and the artifacts exchanged in a military funeral, are socially imbued with a meaning beyond their physicality or utilitarian function. This meaning is socially constructed and socially controlled, but once constructed has the power to shape social relationships.

In her chapter discussing the famous *kula* trade, Strathern (1988) focuses on an often underrepresented area of inquiry: how the *kula* trade reinforces gender relations. Participation in the *kula* trade is highly regulated by familial relationships and further reinforces these rigid relationships. In this example, the objects being traded take on a much deeper meaning and have the power to drastically affect the social terrain. In this system, work can be claimed back in the form of valuables in a gendered manner. Strathern chooses to focus on the gendered aspects of these exchanges but I am more interested in the meaning and power that is imbued in the objects being traded and what agency that gives them. Value is socially defined and socially regulated.
The value of objects is instantly recognized by all involved in the kula trade because of deeply entrenched socially constructed ideas of value. Although objects circulate, high prestige objects are associated with a specific Trobriand man’s identity. Strathern argues that this personification “enables relations to be seen to produce relations” (1988:199). Through her hundreds of pages describing the complex social and gender relationships created and maintained through the kula trade Strathern continually enforces a basic point: objects have social power beyond their materiality and utilitarian purpose. In the example of the Trobriand Islanders, objects create social relationships and help define identity and gender. Just as the kula trade can be seen to reinforce ideas of gender, identity, and value, the exchange of medals, certificates, and flags reinforces ideas of gender, heroism and honor and their association with the military as an institution.
In the preceding chapters I have looked at the ways in which my interlocutors expressed themselves in my interview setting and the various ways they used material culture to create narratives; in this chapter I will explore other forum veterans use to make sense of their military experience and create value and meaning from it. Analysis of different forums will provide insight into the ways in which genre might affect the key themes and dominant narratives that emerge as well as provide insight into the specific ways social and cultural factors affect the creation of personal narrative and I will look at the narratives that emerge as veterans tell their stories and narrate their experiences in varied contexts including documentary films, journalistic interviews, and participation in projects for political activism, art, poetry, published biography, and blogs. These are by no means the only platforms that veterans use and I am not looking at how my interlocutors use them. I am looking at other forums in which veterans produce their life stories as a way of highlighting how the platform affects the narrative that is created, this helps reinforce how situationally specific my interviews are and reinforces how my positionality affects the narrative that emerges.

The forums that I have chosen to analyze are fundamentally different and these inherent differences affect the narratives that are created. The first-person narratives of blogs, poetry, biography, and diaristic accounts guided solely by the concerns of the veterans themselves can be expected to be noticeably different than the dialogic productions created with the guidance of a director or interview in the form of documentary film or collaborative art projects. The agendas of everyone involved in collaborative projects as well as their relationships and relationship with the intended audience and their affects on how veterans choose to narrate themselves will need to be analyzed for each genre. In addition to the physical constraints of the genres in which these
narratives are produced, temporality needs to be addressed. “Personal narratives about the past are always told from the temporal perspective of the present” (Ochs 1996:25) because of this temporal relationship to the events narrated is very important. Most of the narratives that I have read were created years after the fact. Through these accounts the veterans use the telling of personal stories to make sense of events in their past. The cultural effects on the construction of memory have had longer to work and the narratives that emerge reflect that distance and how it relates to their lives now and how they produce value from these experiences. The personal blogs are slightly different in that they are created on a quotidian basis while the veteran is actually experiencing the war. These veterans are commenting on current events and how they perceive them at the time; this temporal difference has an effect on the things that are portrayed in their narratives. Events that fill the consciousness as they are happening become reinterpreted over time dependent on the present situation. It is important to bear these distinctions in mind when analyzing the narratives that emerge in different genres.

In the Handbook of Ethnography Ken Plummer (2001) describes and defines both the appeal of the life story and their conventional forms as a literary mechanism. He begins by providing a brief introduction to life stories and the various ways they appear in ethnographic works and then immediately launches into a discussion of their form and variety. Plummer breaks the life story down into three overarching types: naturalistic, researched, and reflexive or recursive life stories (Plummer 2001: 396-98). My interviews fit into the second categorization of life story, researched life stories, which Plummer defines as “specifically gathered by researchers with a wider and usually social science goal in mind” (2001:396). These stories are not omnipresent; they do not occur naturally but are instead products of a situation manufactured by the social scientist and understood as a subject for study. With these stories, the role of the
researcher is paramount; their presence guides and shapes the narrative, without them it would fail to exist. With a look into other forums in which veterans create their life story narratives I will be better able to view my role in the creation of my interlocutor’s narratives and how my positionality might have affected these narratives.

The first genre that comes to mind is that of the ‘war story’ common in autobiography or memoir. I am choosing not to focus on this particular register for many reasons. One factor is the commoditization of the ‘war story’ novel. Published memoirs and autobiographies are commercial objects designed and written with the intent of selling copies. This in and of itself is not a problem, and further research on the subject would need to include a more detailed analysis of this genre but for the purposes of this study I have chosen to focus on less moderated and commercially driven projects that come closer to the everyday realities for people like my interlocutors. The ‘war story’ is a powerful mechanism through which editors and publishers seek to sensationalize combat experience in order to sell books and writers call upon their symbolic capital as soldiers to claim legitimacy. This is a genre capable of being analyzed on numerous facets but for this particular project I am choosing to analyze genres through which veterans create their narratives in a less commercialized, arguably more organic way. Other theoreticians have highlighted the inherent differences between published autobiographies and personal narratives. Linde argues that from a theoretical standpoint, autobiographies are not life stories because of “their different conditions of composition and their different purposes” (1993:219), because they do not function as life stories they should not be analyzed as such. For Ochs and Capps the autobiography is a hybrid that “straddle[s] the divide between history and literature” (1996:419) they characterize the interpretation of autobiography as “problematic” (1996:420).
Although it may seem counter-intuitive given the previous argument against published memoirs, the first genre I would like to look at is documentary films that feature interviews and other informal conversations in which veterans narrate their experience of military service and the return home. Documentary film has many of the same drawbacks associated with published novels: they are often made for commercial gain (albeit usually modest), they are heavily edited, and they are driven by a multitude of external competing interests from producers, directors, and editors. Where they differ is in the actual telling of the narratives they produce. Although edited by an external entity, the narratives are similar in essence to those I collected from my interlocutors. The veteran speaking constructs the narrative in the moment. Michael Rabiger confronts this in-the-moment construction in his “The Process of Interviewing” where he directs interviewers to push for “detonations of truth—what Jean Rouch calls ‘privileged moments’—when someone…suddenly confronts something unfamiliar and important to him” (Rabiger 2004:344). Each interview provides a unique space for these moments. Just as my positionality as the interviewer was key in my analysis of the interviews I collected, the role of the interviewer is paramount in documentary and ethnographic film. In this way the narratives are not just constructed by the veteran, they are later shaped to fit the vision of the filmmaker(s). These visions have a profound impact on the narrative that we eventually see as the film. Meg McLagan and Daria Sommers’ 2008 documentary Lioness (Figure 10) is an illustrative example (McLagan 2008). They describe their motivations behind making this documentary on their website:

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4 In their chapter on interviewing in their book Cross-Cultural Filmmaking: A Handbook for Making Documentary and Ethnographic Films and Videos, Barbash and Taylor provide a series of tips and suggestions to guide filmed interviews including a section on creating the interviewer’s “persona” and highlighting the interviewer’s ability to set the tone of the interview in order to suit his or her vision of the finished product. This chapter highlights the profound affects interviewers can have on the narratives produced.
Lioness tells the story of a group of female Army support soldiers who were part of the first program in American history to send women into direct ground combat. Without the same training as their male counterparts but with a commitment to serve as needed, these young women fought in some of the bloodiest counterinsurgency battles of the Iraq war and returned home as part of this country’s first generation of female combat veterans. Lioness makes public, for the first time, their hidden history. [McLagan 2008]

McLagan and Sommers sought specifically to show “the emotional and psychological effects of war from a female point of view” (2008). The filmmakers sought to portray a narrative centered on the effects of trauma and combat on female soldiers in order to make an argument about women serving in the military therefore their film only contained narratives about trauma and gender. They asked questions designed to elicit gendered responses and descriptions of trauma and then through editing constructed the ‘female’ understanding and reaction to combat. Their interlocutors most likely do not conceptualize their narratives as the ‘female’ response to trauma. That is a construct of the filmmakers that highlights the inherent goal of documentary to tell a story and create a specific narrative. The five women profiled in the film present different, but equally moving narratives. The two storylines that stood out the most were those of Shannon and Rebecca. The film follows Shannon as she struggles with signs of post-traumatic stress disorder after returning home to Arkansas. In one particularly moving scene the camera follows her on a hunting trip where we see her crouched in the grass whispering “When you take another person’s life you kind of lose yourself too. I know that God forgives me for everything I do, but you never get over it. You get on with it”. Another storyline follows the life of Rebecca after she returns home to her infant child and has to adjust to single parenting while her husband is still on deployment. She tells of the difficulties in immediately transitioning from active combat duty to parenting and candidly explains that sometimes she cannot handle her child’s crying. Her

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5 James Clifford’s “On Ethnographic Allegory” argues that the moral lessons of an ethnography (or in this case, documentary film) shape its depiction of reality. Lioness is trying to make the moral argument that since women are serving as active combat soldiers we need to change our legislation to reflect that and allow them to receive combat training.
narrations express the complex emotions involved in navigating her multiple identities as soldier, mother, wife, and daughter. These tales present a very compelling and gendered perspective of military service in which the interviews have been shaped to fit the film’s argument. This is in contrast to my interviews in which I was not trying to make any specific argument and my interlocutors each individually drove the narrative instead of me as the interviewer.

A key analytical difference is the documentary focus on trauma as a key theme and dominant narrative in contrast to my interviews in which discussions of trauma were omitted. Numerous documentaries including Lioness (2008), Winter Soldier (1982), Where Soldiers Come From (2011), and The Tillman Story (2010) center on discussions of trauma. The pervasiveness of trauma as a key platform of documentary analysis could be a contributing factor to our perceptions of trauma as the dominant military narrative. Trauma is an alluring theme capable of captivating the public interest. In many examples, like Lioness, documentaries use discussions of trauma as an enticement to draw audience’s attention towards a larger topic; in the case of Lioness, the role of women in the modern military. Veteran’s willingness to discuss these difficult themes might have something to do with their desire to draw attention to these larger themes. In Lioness many of the women involved sought to stress the importance of adequate combat training for female soldiers and draw the government’s attention to the inconsistencies inherent in legislation that bars women from combat and a military reality that places women in active combat situations without any training. This desire for institutional awareness could

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6 Winter Soldier documents the Winter Soldier Investigation organized by the organization Vietnam Veterans Against the War in which “more than 125 veterans spoke of atrocities they had witnessed and committed”.  
7 Heather Courtney’s 2011 documentary Where Soldiers Come From chronicles the four year journey of childhood friends as through their deployment to Afghanistan and their struggles with traumatic brain injuries and post-traumatic stress disorder.  
perhaps help explain why veterans in documentary films seemed much more willing to enter into a discussion of trauma than my interlocutors did in our interviews.

In researching other registers in which veterans create personal narratives I was particularly interested in un-moderated platforms on the internet. The relatively new process of blogging and using social media as a sphere to create a dialogue seemed like an enticing place to start. The internet and changes in social media have created a new space for veterans from across the world to engage in conversations where they have the option of utilizing various levels of anonymity. I was able to find a multitude of blogs dedicated to creating a space for veterans to discuss anything with the option of anonymity. The relatively recent phenomena that is social media sites has created entirely new social spaces that anthropologist have begun to study. In his analysis “An Extreme Reading of Facebook” Daniel Miller argues that “Facebook radically transforms the premise and direction of social science” (Miller 2010: 3). Although he is looking specifically at Facebook, many of his arguments can be applied to other social media and networking sites. He argues that although original research into social networking sites like Facebook believed that the movement towards an online social sphere would cause the atrophy of face-to face social relationships the reverse seems to hold true (Miller 2010: 5). These sites create online communities to support and help each other and from that Miller has seen an “intensification of …social networks” (Miller 2010: 8) as opposed to atrophy. Miller also argues that social networking sites provide a platform where “we can talk as much as we like, with or without responses from others” (2010:12). This creates a unique community for narratives to emerge. In an analysis of YouTube, another social networking site, Alexandra Juhasz has done research into the ways that these newly formed online communities and the documentaries produced through them “disturbs many binaries—public/private, self/other” (2013). These
blurred distinctions form unique platforms that push the boundaries of self-expression in unprecedented ways and facilitate the creation of entirely new narratives.

The sites that I discovered can be divided into two categories: the personal blog and the forum style blog. The personal blog style is much more diaristic in tone. Interestingly, two of the personal blogs that I read from soldiers in Iraq are currently being made into books. The blogs, originally designed as a way to communicate with friends and family or perform the function of a diary, eventually gathered large followings and are now being edited for publication. It will be interesting to see if and how the narrative changes through official publication. As blogs, the narratives were open, and free-flowing. They included everything from descriptions of battle to a look at the minutiae of daily life. Jason Christopher Hartley started keeping his blog, recently taken off-line in preparation for the publication of his book Just Another Soldier: A Year on the Ground in Iraq (Figure 11), when he entered the Army in 2003. The blog chronicled his year of deployment encapsulating everything from intense descriptions of battle to photos of his latrines and dilapidated tents accompanied by pithy comments (http://www.justanothersoldier.com/; Accessed March 12, 2013). According to NPR his commanders forced him to shut down the blog due to the possible security risks it posed (Hartley 2005) but he continued to keep what is essentially an online diary for the entirety of his deployment. The resulting blog and book offer a very personal look into one man’s tour of duty as it happened. His entries mix descriptions of the physical conditions of the day and his emotional response to them. In one entry he describes the cold weather and the low morale of his men:

It’s getting wicked cold and perhaps not coincidentally morale is at an all-time low in my platoon. Fights are starting to blossom up here and there, but have been kept on the down-low so far. The specialists are talking about all going to sick-call on the same day in protest of… whatever it is they’re upset about. In a way, I feel kinda left out. I’m pretty happy if you want to know the truth. I’m where I belong, I’m where I want to be. I feel like I’m at that point now where every day is Groundhog Day. It’s like we’re in
infantry purgatory, damned to live the same day over and over again for eternity. But as far as I’m concerned that’s fine by me, I’m kind of enjoying myself. Or maybe it’s just my generally contrarian personality. The more these poor bastards complain and get pessimistic, the more optimistic I seem to feel. [http://www.justanothersoldier.com/: Accessed March12, 2013]

The majority of his entries are like this, descriptions of the events of the day and how he is feeling in the moment.

These personal blogs seem to function almost as a memory repository. They are inherently different because they were written without prompting from an external force and in some cases with no obvious intended audience. Hartley’s blog, although poignant, is decidedly un-edited. It contains pages of pictures and entries chronicling his life but lacks the narrative arc and polish of an edited work. It even lacks the polish of an interview in the sense that he was not formulating answers to specific questions, he was writing for himself. In these blogs, not much is left unspoken. All of the silences in my interviews were actively addressed. Interestingly, trauma featured into the narrative but was not the dominant theme; equal weight was given to discussions of friendship, boredom, (dis)comfort, and a multitude of other topics. The in-the-moment nature of personal blogging plays a large part in driving the scope of these narratives. In writing a blog entry emotions and perceptions are readily available to draw from, they are fresh and new as opposed to discussions after the fact in which they must be drawn out of memories. Scale is also important to bear in mind when analyzing blogs. Most entries tend to relate to very recent events, one page long entry is dedicated to the events of a day or a few days whereas in my interviews a few hours were dedicated to relating the events of years. This scale could have had an effect on the silences or lack thereof in different registers.

Forum style blogs are slightly different. Most noticeably, they provide a multitude of voices as opposed to just one. Forum blogs allow multiple authors to submit prose and
photographs that are published on the site and can then be viewed by anyone. Although I found many forum style blogs, some open to all, and some much more specialized, I found realcombatlife.com (Image 12) to be the most innovative and influential. The site was started after one veteran returned from active duty and, as he explains in the ‘about’ section of the website, “found it difficult to answer all of the questions of what it was really like over there” (http://www.realcombatlife.com/: Accessed March 15, 2013). The site lists its mission as being to “provide an online forum for our brave veterans to share their experiences and to educate the public on what life is like in combat from a first hand [sic] perspective” (http://www.realcombatlife.com/: Accessed March 15, 2013). The site is still active with entries being sporadically. An interesting feature of forum blogs like realcombatlife.com is that they contain entries about events from different time periods. In realcombatlife.com there are sections dedicated to WWII, Korea, Vietnam, Operation Enduring Freedom, and Operation Iraqi Freedom. Stories are further broken down into themes with tags like “Heroes Talking About Heroes”, “Warrior Stories”, and “Lighter Side” (http://www.realcombatlife.com/: Accessed March 15, 2013). Although realcombatlife.com allows anonymous entries, not many people utilized this feature. This specific site seems to be most frequently used by veterans themselves who post supportive comments on different entries. The decision to not use the anonymity feature could be due to this atmosphere of veterans openly sharing with and supporting other veterans or it could be because of the partial anonymity inherently associated with virtual communication. As with other platforms, trauma narratives feature heavily, but they are by no means the most dominant narrative. The “Warrior Stories” section of the website is full of descriptions of combat and killing. In one undated entry a soldier describes killing a man:

My two tracers zipped right through him. I saw their orange streaks bounce off the hillside behind him. His face melted from a look of surprise to terror. He stopped his slow
creep down the hill and dropped his AK-47 with a hollow sounding clatter. In his last moments on earth, before he fell to the ground 50 meters away from me, he looked down at his chest. When he did, his beard folded and curled up to his mouth, almost like he was trying to eat it. (http://www.realcombatlife.com/: Accessed March 15, 2013)

Vietnam veterans detail carnage and violence. In an entry entitled “Land of the Burning Children” a veteran describes a “woman with both arms burned off by our Napalm and her lids so badly burned she couldn’t close her eyes” (http://www.realcombatlife.com/: Accessed March 15, 2013). Violence is often discussed in this candid, factual manner.

On sites like these, discussions of boredom, friendship, heroism, and homecoming are just as common. One soldier discussed an impromptu water balloon fight he organized to combat boredom while deployed in Afghanistan, “One of the most difficult things to do while deployed is finding ways to fight the boredom. A few months after the deployment began I ordered a water balloon sling sot off of the internet and plenty of balloons” (http://www.realcombatlife.com/: Accessed March 15, 2013). One veteran posted a three entry series chronicling his humorous selective service physical exam. These entries are entertaining and humorous. Entries on realcombatlife.com are open and frank and as opposed to novels or documentaries, the stories told do not appear to have an agenda. The site seems to be used as a platform for veterans to share stories with other people who will more readily be able to understand and empathize. In a way it provides a variation of the support structure Brad discussed in his interview, an open and safe environment for veterans to discuss their lives and tell their stories in an almost therapeutic way.

In my research the most moving platform of expression I encountered was that of poetry. I spent hours reading the entries and comments published on www.combatpoetry.com (Figure 13), a forum in which veterans are encouraged to share their letters or poetry. As with forum
style blogs combatpoetry.com offers the option of anonymity but it is infrequently used. On the site, veterans as well as their family and friends are encouraged to post their original poetry. There are currently over a thousand submissions divided into categories for each war or conflict from 1914 to the present. The motto of combatpoetry.com is “Duty, Honor, Service…Uncensored” (www.combatpoetry.com: Accessed March 23, 2013) and the submissions reflect that. They are moving works of art reflective of soldier’s internal struggles, often involving profanity and graphic descriptions. They boldly address many of the issues that my interlocutors did not. There are dozens of poems dedicated to trauma and combat in which the veteran depicts their internal struggles to mentally and emotionally process violence and their actions. There are impassioned pleas for forgiveness and poems in which the veteran seeks to justify their involvement in conflicts and forgive themselves (Figure 14). Many submissions illustrate the internal struggles upon coming home and readjusting to ‘normal’ life (Figure 15). I struggled to define why I found this platform of self-expression so profoundly moving. One explanation could have to do with the nature of poetry itself. Although generally less detailed and shorter than prose or oration, poetry seems to inherently encompass an intense range of profound emotion perhaps due to the confines of the genre. The ways in which we have culturally constructed poetry as a sphere reserved for deep meditations, introspection, and profound emotion could predispose writers and readers to view the genre in a specific way. It is easy to read the poems as cathartic outpourings of feeling and as a processing platform. The genre itself facilitates candid discussions of topics that are not generally broached in standard interactions.

Many veterans have also used other forms of visual art as a means of expression. There are a number of veterans who have turned towards the visual arts on their own, but in many cases
they are encouraged by recent therapeutic pushes to use visual arts as a form of healing. In
addition there are currently numerous artist/veteran collaborative projects, generally with a
specific goal or message in mind. With the Veterans Book Project, a collaborative project
between dozens of veterans and an artist, Monica Haller seeks to create “a place or ‘container’
that slows down and materializes the great quantity of ephemeral image files that live on
veterans’ hard drives and in their heads” (Haller 2010). These books are highly individualized
and contain different mixtures of poetry, prose, emails, letters, drawings, and photos to create a
digital manuscript. Each project is driven entirely by the veteran allowing them to create their
own mixed-media narrative. The process of making these books, although part of a larger
project, seemed to be more tailored to the individual veteran. The project was designed to
provide veterans with a space in which to compile their memories, photos, and writing and
process their experiences before walking away with a tangible repository. All of the books
created through this collaboration are available for viewing on a website for the project (Figure
16).

Another current collaborative project is Exit Wounds: Life After War-Soldiers’ Stories.
Exit Wounds is “a collaborative photo and oral history project about the trials of homecoming by
Jim Lommasson and returning veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars” (Lommasson
2008). It manifests itself as a book project and traveling exhibition (Figure 17). Lommasson
describes the purpose of the project in his mission statement:

As a society, we need to understand that a consequence of sending soldiers to war is that
the war comes home with every veteran. Exit Wounds: Life After War - Soldiers’
Stories deals with the effects of the United States’ wars in Iraq and Afghanistan by
focusing -- in photographs and interviews -- on returning American soldiers as they
reintegrate into civilian life. It is an ongoing collaborative effort, documenting in images
and words the personal experiences and stories of these veterans. In addition to their own
experiences, they bring home first-hand knowledge of the impact of war on the civilians
caught in the crossfire. The soldiers need to tell their stories, and we need to hear them.
We must know the true consequences of their – of our -- actions. We must take responsibility for the aftermath of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as at home. [Lommasson 2008]

The exhibition includes over 2000 photos taken by soldiers during their deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as photos taken after they have come home, accompanied by quotes taken from interviews about their homecoming experience and readjustments. This project, although similar in media to the Veterans Book Project, has a very different purpose. In this case the finished product takes the submissions from veteran collaborators but fits the vision of the artist. He uses their stories and images to create his narrative which, from his mission statement, has a set political agenda. It is almost a form of ‘activist art’ trading in on the symbolic capital of the witnessing accounts taken from soldiers. All of the ‘oral history’ accompanying the images deals with trauma. Trauma is not just the dominant narrative, it is the only narrative. This could be a product of the artist’s editing, quotes about trauma suit his purpose better so they are the ones he chose to use, or it could be that the veteran collaborators only discussed trauma. The decision to focus on trauma could have been driven by an agreement with the message of the overarching narrative. Perhaps the veterans themselves sought to use their witnessing accounts to further an argument with which they agree. Trauma is compelling. Whether the decision to project trauma as the dominant narrative in homecoming stories was driven by Lommasson or his collaborators, it is arguably the most effective platform on which to base an emotional appeal against war. This project provides an illustrative example of the ways in which the symbolic capital of the warrior can be drawn upon.

McKinney discusses the symbolic capital of the trauma story in her article “Breaking the Conspiracy of Silence”: 
...in larger social domains where survivor identity is culturally valorized and the
demonstration of traumatic injury has become a resource for gaining political, economic,
and symbolic capital on both individual and collective levels, it is commonly believed
that the trauma story has an important function in the formation of what is a particular
kind of identity. [McKinney 2007:271]

She discusses how in our valorization of the trauma story we often reduce the tellers to their
trauma and in this way deprive them of their agency as anything other than someone with a
trauma story. She writes “when trauma takes on a sublime character or becomes sacralized, the
victims who have been traumatized and, thus, embody this sacralization may also become
sanctified” (McKinney 2007:271). My interlocutor’s silence in regards to trauma could be an act
of resistance to producing this kind of trauma story and the notion that those who have been
through trauma are defined by it. Some of the examples I have analyzed seem to draw on the
symbolic capital of the trauma story, Exit Wounds seems to be using the trauma story as an
activist tool to incite political action and Lioness uses it to draw attention to the severe lack of
training women in combat receive in hopes of an institutional change to correct this oversight.
Other examples, like the poetry and prose on forum sites and the books in the Veterans Book
Project, seem to resist the trauma story format. The narratives produced in these forums are
expressions of trauma but by resisting the trauma story format they subvert the ‘sacralization’
McKinney (2007) associated with the trauma story.

There is a marked division separating these various platforms of expression that seems to
fall along the distinction between witnessing and expressing. In documentary films, war story
novels, and activist art the narratives created by veterans are primarily those of witnessing. In the
forum blogs, poetry, and Veterans Book Project the platforms seem more like spaces for
expression. This shift seems to correlate with a change in intended audience. The films, novels,
and activist art are intended for a broader external audience whereas the forums, poetry, and
Veterans Book Project were primarily written either for the individual or a small audience of fellow veterans. Interestingly, all of the silences and omissions present in my interviews were addressed in many of the other registers. These differences across forums highlight how different genres facilitate or impede the creation of dominant themes and how the narratives produced are highly context specific. In the case of my interviews, one way to view the silences is as attributable to my positionality as interviewer and my intended audience. Barbash and Taylor’s (1997) writing on the influence of the persona of the interviewer in documentary film can also be applied to my influence as interviewer. I am a young woman who most of my interlocutors have known for years. My gender, age, and previous relationship with my interlocutors very much affected my interviews. In addition, the fact that my interviews were intended for an external audience, no matter how small, can reasonably be supposed to have influenced the narratives created by my interlocutors. The fact that I was collecting ‘researched life stories’, to use Plummer’s (2001) definition, put certain constraints on the narratives produced.

I am using analysis of other registers in which veterans create narratives as a way to help better understand my positionality and self-reflexively view my interviews. By looking at the divergent dominant themes and silences I can make some hypotheses as to their cause. In a more exhaustive study, it would be informative to see whether or not my specific interlocutors use other forums to express themselves and discuss their experiences and if so, how their narrative changes. Most striking in my mind was the effect that specific genres had on the discussion of trauma. My twenty-plus interviews with active combat soldiers barely touched on the subject of trauma but in many of the other registers I analyzed trauma was a dominant theme. It could be that my interlocutors did not see or experience trauma but from outside conversations and interactions I know that is not the case. They chose not to discuss trauma with me in the specific
moment of my interviews. I am sure that that was partially dependent on my positionality and their relationship to me but it could also be that for them specifically trauma was not the dominant narrative. As shown in the entries on the forum blogs like realcombatlife.com, for many soldiers, although trauma is a part of their military experience, it may not be the most important. On realcombatlife.com the entries dedicated to trauma were equal to the amounts focusing on friendship and boredom. The fact that a discussion of trauma was completely absent from my interviews is most likely due to me personally, but the fact that it is not the most dominant theme might be systemic.

Our perception of trauma as the universally dominant narrative associated with military service could be culturally constructed. In genres like documentary film, war story novels, activist art, and journalistic reports that are intended for larger scale public consumption trauma is often depicted as the only narrative. The affects of trauma on soldiers is the subject of many academic publications, like Erin Finley’s *Fields of Combat* (2011), and continuing research in numerous disciplines from psychology to neuroscience. Although this research is highly valuable and necessary, I would argue that further research looking at veteran’s for whom trauma is not the dominant narrative is also necessary.
The personal narrative is a useful tool both for the teller and the researcher. The life story allows the teller to make sense of the past while creating value and re-investigating themselves. Through each telling he or she has the control to create a self that is situationally specific. For the researcher the life story, regardless of the form it comes in, is a valuable analytical tool. Through people’s life stories we can see how they construct meaning and continually re-evaluate the past in response to the present. The fact that so many forums exist in which veterans construct their life stories and that veterans continue to use them frequently show that they find the process beneficial. As Linde argues, we each have a “desire to understand our life as coherent, as making sense” (1993:16) and through repeated introspection and telling of stories we are able to create the coherence we desire (1993:17). Another function of the personal narrative is its role in the creation of value as well as the formation of communities. Ochs and Capps argue that through personal narrative and the use of certain ‘institutional’ themes we are “constituting membership in a community” (1996). In the case of veterans that community might mean the military, an institution that has played an active role in the construction of their personal and professional identity. In addition their relationship with the military created through narrative allows them to draw upon the symbolic capital associated with the institution. This leads into another benefit of personal narrative: the creation of value. Through the introspection inherent in the creation of a life story veterans are able to continually reevaluate and re-contextualize their experiences in ways that allow them to create value from their past that often expresses itself in the form of symbolic capital associated with military service and sacrifice.
Although my interviews provided a space for my interlocutors to construct a personal narrative, there are various limitations to the interview format. In my interviews the setting most likely had a large affect on the narratives produced. Most of my interviews were conducted in very intimate settings. Many took place at kitchen tables. In some cases my familial relationship with my interlocutors compounded this intimacy placing further strain on the setting. In addition the time constraints proved very limiting. Due to the nature of this project I was not able to conduct any follow-up interviews as I would have done in a long-term ethnographic project. Multiple interviews with the same interlocutors and longer interviews might open the door for different discussions. A continued presence and stronger working relationship with my interlocutors would most likely make them more comfortable discussing their military experiences with me and would perhaps loosen the formal atmosphere interviews. My nineteen years of experience living in Garner and interacting with many of my interlocutors can in some ways be seen as ethnographic research. I am intimately familiar with the town itself, its character, and many of my interlocutors and how they behave in other contexts. I have not, however, always made it a practice to view Garner through an anthropological lens. A long-term ethnographic study would entail closer attention to the social and cultural dynamics of Garner as more than just my hometown. It would necessitate the process of de-familiarization or ‘making the familiar strange’ in order to be able to analyze it. Participant-observation with this project would entail a much longer research period that would involve attending VFW and American Legion meetings, going to military funerals and ceremonies in which the Ceremonial Guard participates, and talking to the family members and co-workers of my interlocutors. Participation in discussions outside of the formalized interview space might elicit different narratives and more detailed discussions.
Another way to further study the importance of military experience in people’s lives differently would be to introduce a new forum for them to express their narratives. As discussed in Chapter III, the genre affects the narratives that are produced. It would be interesting to see what kinds of narratives would emerge were I to undertake a collaborative film or art project with my interlocutors. The format used by Monica Haller (2010) in the Veterans Book Project would perhaps be most viable for Garner. Through the Veterans Book Project website each veteran has access to book-making software that allows them to custom make each page of their book. I think that this would be an evocative way to open up other discussions and allow deeper narratives to emerge. The individualized composition process allows for a great deal of personalization and control over the story created. A multimedia project like the Veterans Book Project allows veterans to personally process their memories in a way that the limited interview space does not allow.

Another valuable feature of a multimedia project is its ability to engage with a wider range of people. A collaborative art or video project would allow a platform through which to engage with the people of Garner as a community. A broader discussion of the military with a larger audience might provide insight into the pronounced presence of the military in the town. As it stands, Garner has multiple memorials dedicated to veterans as a group but nothing that draws attention to individual experiences in the military. One way that other communities have addressed this same issue is through the Veterans History Project (2012). Under the Clinton administration in 2000 started the Veterans History Project (2012) “so that future generations may hear directly from veterans and better understand the realities of war”. Through the Veterans History Project website anyone may request a field kit and guidelines on how to conduct interviews with veterans that will then be returned directly to the Library of Congress.
From this basic framework many communities have created their own variations. The Morse Institute Library in Natick started their version in 1998 called the Natick Veterans Oral History Project (2013). They have collected over 200 video interviews that are available on their website. In other communities libraries have began collecting written accounts of veteran’s experiences as well as correspondence and photographs to create a living archive of military experience. I think that Garner, with its history of military service, would be a wonderful place to begin an archive of this sort. These projects and others like them are addressing the concern that we are losing our military history on the individual level. As important as the dominant narrative of the institution is, it is important to preserve the individual experiences of military service. These stories and their telling are invaluable for both researchers and the individual veterans themselves.

One of the questions I was left with after my interviews was whether or not my interlocutors had any difficulty in translating their success and expertise into successful post-military careers. For the most part, after leaving the military my interlocutors embarked upon completely different career trajectories that did not trade upon the skills they learned while in the military. They became realtors, lawyers, and farmers; all careers that on the surface seem to have very little to do with military training. The only instance in which military training translated directly into a post-military career was in the case of Bruce whose job as a veterinary technician in the Army led directly into a career as a veterinarian. For those whose careers do not directly correlate to their military experience, producing and sharing narratives about their military experience and training would allow them to comprehend their work and help them to perform themselves as competent professionals. In addition to the healing process of making sense of
their military experience this could also provide a venue for the production of symbolic capital for the veterans in the form of professional expertise.

As with any ethnographic project one of the key considerations before undertaking any collaborative project is that of ethics. My relationship with my interlocutors has made me very seriously question how they will feel about my analysis of them particularly since I have chosen not to use pseudonyms. After a great deal of debate I decided to forego the use of pseudonyms for many reasons; the primary reason being the nature of Garner as a very small and intimate community. Garner’s population of three thousand ensures that almost everyone in town is acquainted with everyone else. To compound things, all of my interlocutors come from an even smaller sub-set of the population that frequently interact through organizations like the VFW, the American Legion, and the Ceremonial Guard. Even if I were to use pseudonyms everyone from Garner would instantly be able to recognize their friends and neighbors. In addition each of my interlocutors gave me express permission to use their real names. Nancy Scheper-Hughes discusses the drawbacks on anonymity in “Ire in Ireland” (2000), a piece in which she reflects on critiques of her first book Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics: Mental Illness in Rural Ireland (1979), “anonymity makes us unmindful that we owe our anthropological subjects the same degree of courtesy, empathy and friendship in writing as we generally extend to them face to face in the field” (2000:226). Issues of anonymity and ethics, although very important considerations for the research I have conducted, would be amplified in a larger ethnographic project particularly one dealing with the politically and emotionally complex issues associated with the military. One way to address these issues would be through crafting a more collaborative project with my interlocutors.
As Eric Lassiter points out in his piece “Ethics and Moral Responsibility”, collaborative ethnographic projects present their own ethical challenges. He argues that “promises and agreements are temporal” (Lassiter 2005: 91) and as such are constantly re-negotiated ethical contracts between the ethnographer and their collaborators. The benefit of collaborative ethnography lies in the fact that it represents “an ongoing ethical and moral co-commitment between ethnographers and consultants” (2005:117) in which all parties are a part of decision making processes so that the finished product is not simply the ethnographer’s impressions but instead represents co-created knowledge. This would be a useful methodology to employ in a long-term project with the veterans of Garner because it would allow them greater control and deeper participation in the formation of a project that they find valuable and meaningful.

Collaborative ethnography and mutually constructed value of the finished product address the question of why to study this population further. A long-term collaborative project would be beneficial on many levels. First, for the veterans themselves as a way to not only individually make sense of and explore their past experiences but also as a way of producing value from those experiences in the form of symbolic capital. It would also be beneficial for the town of Garner as a means of exploring its relationship with the military service and preserving the individual experiences of the military as opposed to the impersonal lists of names currently memorialized in sculptural displays. Further research would create a reference to complement these memorials. Finally, research into the ways in which veterans discuss their service, make sense of trauma and violence, and create value from their relationship with and experience in the military is academically valuable. Although considerable research across numerous disciplines has been conducted on the military as an institution, the individuals who make up the larger institution are
often neglected. It is important that we remember that behind the numbers and the statistics are individuals with unique stories and experiences that are worth preserving.
Figure 1: Hancock County Veterans Memorial in front of the Hancock County Courthouse in Garner, IA. Photo Credit Margaret Kenney

Figure 2: Hancock County Memorial in front of the Hancock County Courthouse in Garner, IA. Photo Credit Margaret Kenney
Figure 3: POW-MIA Memorial in front of the Hancock County Courthouse in Garner, IA
Photo Credit Margaret Kenney

Figure 4: Avenue of Flags Memorial in Central Park Garner, IA
Photo Credit Margaret Kenney
Figure 5: Central Park flag display in Garner, IA
Photo Credit Margaret Kenney

Figure 6: Flag display in the front yard of a residence in Garner, IA
Photo Credit Margaret Kenney
Figure 7: Veterans Memorial Recreation Center in Garner, IA
Photo Credit Margaret Kenney

Figure 8: VFW Post in Garner, IA
Photo Credit Margaret Kenney
Figure 9: Ceremonial Guard in Central Park Garner, IA
Photo Credit Margaret Kenney
Figure 10: Lioness Signature Image http://lionessthefilm.com/presskit/

Figure 11: Just Another Soldier blog banner http://www.justanothersoldier.com/
Figure 12: Real Combat Life website http://www.realcombatlife.com/

Figure 13: Combat Poetry website http://www.combatpoetry.com/forum.php
Forgiveness

There was a time so long ago, that seems like yesterday.
The day the children lost their lives, a day for which I’ll pay.

I placed my self behind these walls because of what I’d done.
I prayed some days, in several ways, to be denied the sun.
For the longest time I tried to find answers to ease the pain
Self medicating every day to eliminate the rain

I placed myself behind these bars to lock inside my guilt
And now I find, I’m lost in time, I have begun to wilt
Many years have passed away never to be seen
I hesitate to ask myself is this just a dream

I placed myself inside this void so empty, deep, and cold.
Tortured by the memories wrapped inside my soul
And now I feel the pressure the time is closing in
I pray once more, this life to die, another to begin

These walls I placed myself behind although some years ago,
seem to crumble more each day some light begins to show
The pain that dwelt so deep within will rise and dissipate
The rain that poured will be no more now that I’m awake.

These bars I placed myself behind have now begun to rust
No longer caged by fits of rage a lessen learned in trust
As for the years that came and went unnoticed and unseen
I find myself looking forward, no more the impossible dream

This void I placed myself within it too has begun to fill
My soul refreshed anew a strengthening of my will
As I soar above the clouds no more lost in time
I thank you Lord for now I know I’m alive and doing fine.

-- Mike Pounds
"Savage Grace"
1969

Figure 14: “Forgiveness” http://www.combatpoetry.com/showthread.php?163-Forgiveness
Another ptsd night...

Another night of little sleep
One of endless nights of little sleep
Such is my life
Night, after night, after night

I dream about another place another time
Of taking lives
And losing others
The sounds, the voices, the images so real;
Then I realize that they aren’t happening now

Wish I could leave them in the past
Almost asleep now
Did you see that????
A rat the size of a cat!!!

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Figure 15: “Another ptsd night…” http://www.combatpoetry.com/showthread.php?171-Another-ptsd-night
Figure 16: Veterans Book Project Website http://www.veteransbookproject.com/
Exit Wounds: Life After War - Soldiers’ Stories

A collaborative photo and oral history project about the trials of homecoming by Jim Lommesson and returning veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. Exit Wounds is a traveling exhibition and book project.

Figure 17: Exit Wounds: Life After War-Soldiers’ Stories Webpage
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