EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF COMBAT VETERANS’ DEGREE ATTAINMENT IN ONLINE HIGHER EDUCATION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Ester Warren

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment Of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the essence of the experiences of combat veterans with significant combat exposure who successfully completed their bachelor’s degree through a private online program despite the presence of challenges related and unrelated to their combat exposure. For the purpose of this study, combat veteran was generally defined as a veteran of the United States Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, or National Guard who served in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), or Operation New Dawn (OND). In addition, significant combat exposure was indicated by a score of “light-moderate” to “heavy” on the Combat Exposure Scale (CES). Educational resilience cycle and posttraumatic growth (PTG) were the two theories that guided this study. Data was collected through in-depth interviews, focus-groups, and document analysis. This study sought to answer four research questions: (1) How do combat veterans with significant combat exposure describe the experience of attaining their bachelor’s degree through an online program? (2) What challenges, if any, do participants describe they encountered as they pursued their online bachelor’s degree? (3) How do participants describe the experience of overcoming the challenges they identify to subsequently attain their online bachelor’s degree? (4) How do participants describe the impact of their combat experience(s) on their degree attainment? Transcendental phenomenological analysis was utilized to reveal two major themes that emerged from the data: It was (1) A Challenging Journey, and (2) A Fulfilling Journey. In addition to study findings and limitations, implications for stakeholders and recommendations for future research are presented.

Keywords: combat veterans, degree attainment, online higher education, educational resilience, posttraumatic growth
Dedication

I dedicate this work to past, present, and future military service members. Thank you for your service and sacrifice! Mere words cannot express my appreciation for you. “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13, NIV).

I would also like to dedicate this work to my family, who have been a tremendous source of encouragement throughout my dissertation journey. To my husband, Kenny, you believed in me and never doubted my ability to finish this work. In my darkest moments of fear and doubt, your words of encouragement, prayers, hugs, and kisses motivated me to press on. I thank God for you every day!

To my son, Bailey, and daughter, Molly, you were my biggest cheerleaders and I would not have made it without you by my side. Thank you for always reminding me how proud you are of me. Thank you for understanding when we couldn’t hang out or go to the movies because I had to “dissertate.” Now that it’s over, we can get back to having some fun together!

To my parents, thank you for the incredible sacrifices you made for our family. You taught me the importance of family, and the value of hard work and discipline. Dad, your lived experience inspired me to pursue this work; you are an incredible example of resilience. Mom, your lived experience inspired me to persist even when things got tough; your grit and determination is unmatched. To my grandmother, there is no other grandmother who loves her granddaughter more than you have loved me…thank you. To my brothers, Daniel and James, growing up with you as my big brothers helped shape me
into the person I am today. I thank God that he made us family. I love you. To my grandfather in heaven, I miss you so much.

Finally, I dedicate this work to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. You have changed my life, and without You I am nothing. Your love knows no bounds, and your mercy and grace are never ending.

Jesus, Lover of my soul,

Jesus, I will never let you go

You’ve taken me from the miry clay

You’ve set my feet upon the Rock, and now I know

I love you, I need you,

Though my world may fail, I’ll never let you go

My Savior, my closest friend

I will worship you until the very end (Hillsong Music Publishing, 1992).
Acknowledgments

This work was truly a team effort. First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge the 10 participants of this study. I will always remember how you were so generous with your time, and your willingness to be so transparent about your experiences, including ones that were quite painful for you to recall. You took time out of your busy schedules to help me, a complete stranger. I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to each of you. Meeting you has been an honor, and I am a better person for it. May the Lord bless your kindness and generosity a hundred times over!

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List of Abbreviations

Air Force Specialty Code (AFSC)
Brief Traumatic Brain Injury Screen (BTBIS)
Combat Exposure Scale (CES)
Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC)
Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center (DVBIC)
Department of Defense (DOD)
Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)
Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)
Global War on Terror (GWOT)
Grade point average (GPA)
Improvised explosive device (IED)
Institute of Medicine (IOM)
Institutional Review Board (IRB)
Military Occupational Specialty (MOS)
National Survey of Veterans (NSV)
Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)
Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)
Operation New Dawn (OND)
Posttraumatic Growth (PTG)
Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
Tuition Assistance (TA)
Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)
Veterans Affairs (VA)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of Chapter One was to provide a framework for a qualitative research study describing the essence of the experiences of combat veterans with significant combat exposure who successfully completed their bachelor’s degree through a private online program despite the presence of challenges related and unrelated to their combat exposure. A brief background of the problem is presented, and the purpose and significance of the study is identified. Furthermore, the situation to self is addressed in addition to limitations and delimitations of the study. Finally, research questions are introduced along with the research plan that was used to study the phenomenon of combat veterans’ successful degree attainment in online education.

Background

The psychological and emotional effects of combat exposure, which include post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and depression (Afari et al., 2015; Angkaw et al., 2013; Barnard-Brak, Bagby, Jones, & Sulak, 2011), can make it difficult for combat veterans to make a smooth transition from the combat zone to civilian life (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011), as well as the college campus (Elliott, Gonzalez, & Larsen, 2011; Starr-Glass, 2015). A wealth of information has been published identifying the negative health effects experienced by U.S. service members exposed to combat (Afari et al., 2015; Angkaw et al., 2013; Barnard-Brak et al., 2011) and how these challenges can negatively impact their educational pursuits (Afari et al., 2015; Barnard-Brak et al., 2011; Barry, Whiteman, & Wadsworth, 2012; Elliott et al., 2011).

Social Context

It is estimated that over 2.1 million U.S. troops have served in Operation Enduring
Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) since 2001 (Areppim, 2015; Defense Manpower Data Center [DMDC], 2013; Institute of Medicine [IOM], 2014). The prevalence rates of PTSD in OEF/OIF veterans is estimated to be 14% for veterans seeking treatment and 6% to 21% for returning service members that meet the criteria for PTSD (Angkaw et al., 2013). Symptoms of depression can be seen in a significant number of OEF/OIF service members; estimates from a study of returning U.S. Army soldiers with symptoms of depression indicated rates as high as 13% to 15% and up to 24% with comorbid symptoms of PTSD and depression (Angkaw et al., 2013). Moreover, it is estimated that 26% of OEF/OIF veterans may suffer from symptoms of TBI (RAND, 2008).

A significant number of these combat veterans are enrolling in higher education upon their return from the war zone, and the number is anticipated to increase as troops continue to be drawn down from the Middle East (Griffin & Gilbert, 2012; Kelley, Smith, Fox, & Wheeler, 2013). According to Griffin and Gilbert (2012) and Kelly et al. (2013), a record number of OEF/OIF veterans enroll in college largely due to the financial support offered by the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill. In 2011 alone, 555,000 veterans or their dependents received benefits from the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill to fund their education (Griffin & Gilbert, 2012). However, for many veterans, the return to higher education is accompanied by a myriad of challenges related to unhealed physical and mental wounds of war which can impede degree attainment (Church, 2009; Kelley et al., 2013); according to Cate (2013), an estimated 30% to 40% of student veterans drop out of their degree programs. While the population of veterans in higher education continues to grow, degree attainment is not growing proportionately.

**Theoretical Context**

Prior research has frequently employed a deficit-based approach, focusing primarily on
the challenges and academic failure encountered by military students in higher education (Afari et al., 2015; Barnard-Brak et al., 2011; Barry et al., 2012). There is a paucity of research in the existing literature on the subset of combat veterans in online higher education that examines their academic success despite the presence of challenges associated with significant combat exposure (Ford & Vignare, 2015). Exploring the experiences of combat veterans in online education may provide valuable insight into how they are able to overcome challenges associated with significant combat exposure to successfully complete an online bachelor’s degree. This study sought to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by exploring the essence of the experiences of combat veterans with significant combat exposure who successfully completed their bachelor’s degree through a private online program; hence, uncovering new information that may assist the population of combat veterans struggling to complete their bachelor’s degree.

**Situation to Self**

Several factors have influenced my interest in the experiences of combat veterans in online higher education and their academic success. First, through my experience as an administrative faculty member of a military-friendly, private university offering online programs to a large population of military veterans, I developed a great interest in the academic success of these students. The university serves a large subset of military students, and I have a vested interest in seeing these students achieve their academic goals. Moreover, the concepts of educational resilience and posttraumatic growth and how they are manifested in the lives of this special population fascinates me. Despite the presence of combat-related injuries such as PTSD, TBI, and depression, many combat veterans have found a way to overcome these incredible challenges to achieve academic success. The concepts of resilience and posttraumatic growth are relevant topics that originated in the field of psychology, and I believe this study has equipped
me to make a valuable contribution to the university and military students which I serve.

Furthermore, the deep respect and gratitude I have for military service members who willingly risked their lives to protect the freedoms I enjoy compels me to study combat veterans’ experiences in online higher education with the hope of helping other combat veterans struggling to complete their bachelor’s degree. The number of combat veterans in higher education is projected to grow. While there are some who successfully attain a bachelor’s degree, there remains a disproportionate number that drop out. As an administrative faculty member, this information is deeply troubling, and I feel a sense of responsibility to contribute to finding a solution to this problem.

My personal experience with a combat veteran also compels me to study the experiences of combat veterans. My father is a combat veteran who courageously fought alongside the U.S. Army infantry in the Korean War. My father was born in North Korea and lived there until the Korean War broke out. At the age of 17, my father witnessed his two uncles jailed by Japanese soldiers because of their Christian faith. During this time, he lived with a farming family in Hwanghaedo, North Korea, and delivered food to his jailed uncles regularly. When my father was 18 years old, he and his uncles fled to Pyongyang, North Korea, where they were forced to have their names changed and were eventually employed at a local factory. The Korean War broke out a year later, and at the age of 19 my father escaped Pyongyang by disguising himself as an injured person with a broken arm cast and made his way back to Hwanghaedo.

As the war continued to escalate, my father joined the U.S. Army infantry as paid help. As the troops were making their way across a field, they encountered large metal drums that were rigged with explosives. As these drums were exploding all around them, my father stopped one of the rolling drums with his foot, preventing the drum from reaching the other soldiers. As
a result, he sustained a serious leg wound and almost lost his leg. Fortunately, American medical personnel were able to save his leg with metal screws and plates. Despite the traumatic experience of fighting against his own countrymen and suffering a significant physical injury, my father was able to achieve his personal, educational, and professional goals. He is a remarkable role model for his three children, and I firmly believe that his combat experience had a part in shaping him into the man he is today. The grit, determination, discipline, deep faith, and work ethic he demonstrates despite having experienced an extremely traumatic experience is inspiring.

The ontological assumption that I brought to the research is characterized by the idea of multiple realities (Creswell, 2013). In considering the nature of reality and its characteristics, I believe that multiple realities exist in all studies; the researcher, participants, and readers each bring their own reality to the study. In practice, my intent in studying the participants of this study was to report on these multiple realities (Creswell, 2013). People’s experiences are subjective, and it is important to understand the multiple perspectives that participants bring to the study. Combat veterans bring a unique set of experiences to their pursuit of an online bachelor’s degree, and it is important to understand what the experience is like for them. This phenomenological study focused on how the participants in the study view their experiences differently (Moustakas, 1994).

Epistemologically, I believe that knowledge is gained by studying the subjective experiences of individuals (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, my goal was to get as close as possible to each participant through in-depth interviews and focus groups to uncover patterns that may help describe the phenomenon of combat veterans with significant combat exposure who successfully completed their bachelor’s degree through a private online program despite the
presence of challenges related and unrelated to their combat exposure. According to Patton (2015), “the only way for us to really know what another person experiences is to experience the phenomenon as directly as possible for ourselves” (p. 116). Hence, rather than learning about the participants, my approach was to learn with the participants. The axiological assumption that I brought to the research required that I position myself in the study by disclosing my values and biases in relation to the study participants and the data collected from the study (Creswell, 2013). In addition, I also recognized “the value-laden nature of information gathered from the field” (Creswell, 2013, p. 20). The purpose of this research was closely tied to my personal values, which allowed me to passionately pursue this study.

A modified social constructivist worldview guided my intent to study participants’ views of the phenomenon and how they were “formed through interaction with others” (Creswell, 2013, p. 25). Social constructivism views our interaction with others as the source of how all knowledge is constructed. In other words, knowledge is constructed as we interact with others; therefore, objective truth does not exist. While I believe that much of our knowledge is constructed by our social interactions with others, the conflict I have with social constructivism is the denial of objective truth. My modified social constructivist worldview is based on the assertion that God is the creator and very essence of objective truth, and fallen, sinful human beings are not. God sees everything with perfect clarity, but what people see is “partial and incomplete” (1 Corinthians 13:12, NLT) until the glorious day when we will see Jesus face to face and our knowledge will be made complete. Until then, human partial and incomplete knowledge, combined with different perspectives and experiences, accounts for the differences in constructed realities. Despite the fact that human knowledge is partial and incomplete, I continue to pursue knowledge not only through my interactions with others, but also as I interact
with God through reading and meditating on Scripture and spending time in prayer.

**Problem Statement**

The problem is that there is a paucity of research in the existing literature on OEF/OIF/OND combat veterans’ experiences in online higher education examining how combat veterans with significant combat exposure successfully attain their bachelor’s degree through an online program despite the presence of challenges related and unrelated to their combat exposure. Prior research has primarily focused on the difficulties encountered by military students in residential degree programs (Demers, 2011; Elliott et al., 2011; Livingston, Havice, Cawthon, & Fleming, 2011; Rumann, Rivera, & Hernandez, 2011; Smith-Osborne, 2012; Whiteman, Barry, Mroczek, & Wadsworth, 2013), but very little attention has been paid to the successful degree attainment of OEF/OIF/OND combat veterans in online bachelor’s degree programs (Ford & Vignare, 2015; National Survey of Student Engagement [NSSE], 2010; Radford, 2011). Online learning in general has become a popular option for military students (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Ford & Vignare, 2015) in the attainment of their bachelor’s degree despite contending with certain challenges associated with significant combat exposure. With the growing population of military students enrolled in online bachelor’s degree programs, further research is needed about OEF/OIF/OND combat veterans’ online degree attainment despite the presence of certain challenges associated with significant combat exposure in order to address a gap in the literature. Specifically, there is a need for educational research that gives a voice to combat veterans in online education and what they attribute to their successful degree attainment despite the presence of certain challenges associated with significant combat exposure.
Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the essence of the experiences of combat veterans with significant combat exposure who successfully completed their bachelor’s degree through a private online program despite the presence of challenges related and unrelated to their combat exposure. For the purpose of this study, a combat veteran was generally defined as a veteran of the United States Army, Navy, Air Force, or Marines who served in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), or Operation New Dawn (OND) and experienced significant exposure to combat as indicated by a score of “light-moderate” to “heavy” on the Combat Exposure Scale (CES) (Keane et al., 1989). Challenges encountered throughout their educational journey were explored through participants’ narratives collected from in-depth interviews and focus group forums. The theories that guided this study were educational resilience cycle (Morales, 2000) and posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi, 2011).

Significance of the Study

The population of OEF/OIF/OND combat veterans enrolling in online degree programs continues to rise as steady numbers of service members are drawn down from the Middle East (Griffin & Gilbert, 2012). Over 2.1 million service members have served in OEF/OIF/OND since 2001, and recent studies suggested that over 600,000 will return with some level of combat trauma that may lead to PTSD, TBI, depression, or any combination of the three (Areppim, 2015; DMDC, 2013; IOM, 2014; RAND, 2008). Studies also suggested that the presence of these combat-related injuries may impede combat veterans’ positive educational experiences and ultimately, their degree attainment (Demers, 2011; Elliott et al., 2011; Livingston et al., 2011; Rumann et al., 2011; Smith-Osborne, 2012; Whiteman et al., 2013). The prevalence of combat-
related injuries among veterans in higher education is well-documented (Church, 2009; Demers, 2011; Herrmann, Hopkins, Wilson, & Allen, 2009; Kelley et al., 2013; Rudd, Goulding, & Bryan, 2011), and the negative impact on combat veterans’ educational experiences is empirically supported (Afari et al., 2015; Barnard-Brak et al., 2011; Barry et al., 2012; Cate, 2013; Elliott et al., 2011). However, qualitative inquiries into the academic success of combat veterans in online higher education is lacking. Student veterans’ post-secondary degree attainment is an understudied outcome (Green & Hayden, 2013; Ness, Rocke, Harrist, & Vroman, 2014), and there is even less research, if any, on combat veterans’ degree attainment in online programs within the theoretical framework of educational resilience and posttraumatic growth. This lack of research can make it difficult for institutions of higher education to improve practices and may increase the likelihood of student veterans dropping out of college.

This proposed study is significant for several reasons. By seeking to describe what was experienced by combat veterans with significant combat exposure who successfully attained their online bachelor’s degree despite the presence of certain challenges related and unrelated to significant combat exposure and how it was experienced, the information gleaned from this study may be helpful to post-secondary institutions that serve combat veterans, in addition to combat veterans currently enrolled in or considering higher education. Moreover, this study added to the body of literature by yielding significant insights related to combat veterans, educational resilience, posttraumatic growth, and online education; these are relevant topics as one considers the large population of combat veterans returning from deployment and entering online, undergraduate degree programs. In particular, this study explored how the educational resilience cycle (Morales, 2000) and PTG in combat veterans (Tedeschi, 2011) could be applied to various resilient student populations such as combat veterans.
Earning a college degree can provide individuals with a number of lifelong benefits; however, the sad reality is that far too many student veterans struggle to attain their degrees. Novotny (2011) suggested that by examining disadvantaged students’ success, a better understanding may be gained of how they are able to overcome challenges and achieve academic success. Therefore, rather than adding to the abundant literature pertaining to the academic failure of combat veterans in higher education, this study explored the experiences of combat veterans with significant combat exposure who successfully completed their bachelor’s degree through a private online program despite the presence of challenges related and unrelated to their combat exposure. It was my hope that this study would make a contribution to the knowledge base by providing much-needed insight into the educational resilience and posttraumatic growth of combat veterans in online higher education, which in turn might be used to develop and implement effective interventions for combat veterans who are considering enrollment or are currently enrolled.

Stakeholders impacted by this study include study participants, online higher education institutions, program administrators, faculty and support staff, and the at-risk student population of OEF/OIF/OND combat veterans. This study allowed the study participants’ voices to be heard (Moustakas, 1994) as they participated in in-depth interviews and focus groups and were able to “describe their experience of the phenomenon being investigated” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 22). In addition to describing their experience with the phenomenon, study participants were also able to explore the meanings behind their experiences and make sense of them.

According to Ness et al. (2014), “the impact of service related trauma on educational attainment is an important issue for healthcare providers, policy makers, and educators” (p. 157). The current research has the potential to better inform college and university administrators of
the factors that can contribute to the successful degree attainment and improved success of combat veterans in online education. By understanding the experiences of those who have overcome certain challenges related and unrelated to significant combat exposure to successfully attain their online degree, program administrators may be able to develop and implement effective interventions and supports that will improve degree completion rates for current and future student veterans.

The motivation for highlighting the academic success of combat veterans was to elicit and encourage: to elicit an increasing awareness of the factors that can help combat veterans overcome challenges associated with significant combat exposure and to encourage struggling combat veterans to persist. Combat veterans who experience symptoms associated with PTSD, TBI, and depression are considered an at-risk student population in higher education. According to Branker (2009), “combat experiences often create an undeserving imbalance for them as they trade ammunition for education” (p. 59). Combat is a life-changing event that has profound effects on combat veterans entering college classrooms (Branker, 2009). However, increasing combat veterans’ awareness of the educational resilience cycle (Morales, 2000) and PTG in combat veterans (Tedeschi, 2011) may change a potentially negative outcome into a positive one for those who are struggling.

**Research Questions**

In light of the purpose of this study, the following questions framed this research:

1. *How do combat veterans with significant combat exposure describe the experience of attaining their bachelor’s degree through an online program?* The increasing number of combat veterans enrolled in online education is well documented (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Ford & Vignare, 2015; Griffin & Gilbert, 2012). It is also
well-documented that combat veterans are susceptible to increased challenges associated with significant exposure to combat (Demers, 2011; Elliott et al., 2011; Livingston et al., 2011; RAND, 2008; Rumann et al., 2011; Smith-Osborne, 2012; Whiteman et al., 2013). Morales (2008) stated, “By exploring those who have been successful, a deeper understanding of achievement processes can be attained” (p. 245). Hence, it was important to focus on combat veterans with significant combat exposure who successfully attained their bachelor’s degree through a private online program despite the presence of challenges related and unrelated to their combat exposure.

2. **What challenges, if any, do participants describe they encountered as they pursued their online bachelor’s degree?** Research supports the assumption that significant exposure to combat can lead to negative emotional and psychological effects (Afari et al., 2015; Angkaw et al., 2013; Barnard-Brak et al., 2011). This question sought to identify these challenges not only to increase awareness of these issues, but to help educators develop interventions and supports to reduce the negative impact on combat veterans’ degree attainment.

3. **How do participants describe the experience of overcoming the challenges they identify to subsequently attain their online bachelor’s degree?** This question sought to increase understanding of protective factors within the context of educational resilience in order to help combat veterans in online higher education achieve greater academic achievement (Cavazos et al., 2010; Williams & Bryan, 2013).

4. **How do participants describe the impact of their combat experience(s) on their degree attainment?** PTG in combat veterans (Tedeschi, 2011) provided a theoretical
framework to examine the protective factors that combat veterans relied on to mitigate certain risk factors. This framework provided me with the opportunity to explore the essence of participants’ educational journey through the lens of their combat experience.

**Definitions**

1. *Academic/educational resilience* - For the purpose of this study, academic/educational resilience was defined as “the process and results that are part of the life story of an individual who has been academically successful, despite obstacles that prevent the majority of others with the same background from succeeding” (Morales & Trotman, 2004, p. 8).

2. *Academic success* - For the purpose of this study, academic success was defined as the effective teaching and graduating of at-risk students in postsecondary education (Morales, 2014).


4. *Combat veteran* - A combat veteran is a veteran of the United States Army, Navy, Air Force, or Marines who served in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), or Operation New Dawn (OND) and experienced significant exposure to combat as indicated by a score of “light-moderate” to “heavy” on the Combat Exposure Scale (CES) (Keane et al., 1989).

5. *Online higher education* - Online higher education is education that uses asynchronous internet-based technology (Ford & Vignare, 2015).
6. **Posttraumatic growth (PTG)** - Posttraumatic growth is “positive personal changes that result from the struggle to deal with trauma and its psychological consequences” (Tedeschi, 2011, p. 137).

7. **Resilience** - For the purpose of this study, resilience was defined as “the ability to adapt successfully to acute stress and trauma, or more chronic forms of adversity” (Bonanno, Galea, Bucciarelli, & Vlahov, 2005; Larson, Highfill-McRoy, & Booth-Kewley, 2008; Lepore & Revenson, 2006; Masten, 2001).

**Summary**

Online programs have experienced a dramatic increase in the enrollment of military veterans in recent years. Research on the experiences of veteran students on college campuses has primarily focused on challenges and academic failure related to the transition from the combat zone to the college campus and the negative effects of combat exposure. However, there is a gap in the literature in relation to how combat veterans with significant combat exposure overcome challenges related and unrelated to combat exposure to successfully attain a bachelor’s degree from an online program. This transcendental phenomenological study described the essence of the experiences of 10 combat veterans with significant combat exposure who successfully attained a bachelor’s degree through a private online degree program despite the presence of challenges related and unrelated to their combat exposure. By gaining a deeper understanding of the essence of participants’ experiences within the framework of educational resilience and posttraumatic growth, educators may begin to develop and implement effective interventions and supports to help a greater number of service members learn how to overcome challenges and reach their educational goals.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Chapter Two provides context and background for this study on combat veterans with significant combat exposure who successfully completed their bachelor’s degree through a private online program despite the presence of challenges related and unrelated to their combat exposure. A review of existing literature provides a representation of the phenomenon and reveals a gap in the literature that can be filled with new knowledge from this study. Chapter Two is comprised of four sections: (a) the Overview, (b) a Theoretical (or Conceptual) Framework section, (c) a Related Literature section, and (d) a Summary.

Theoretical Framework

This section provides the reader with a direct connection to the conceptual or theoretical framework that effectively guided the study and allows the findings to be situated within a greater context. According to Maxwell (2012),

The point is not to summarize what has already been done in the field. Instead, it is to ground your proposed study in the relevant previous work, and to give the reader a clear sense of your theoretical approach to the phenomena that you propose to study. (p. 123)

The theoretical framework for this study was based upon two theories: educational resilience cycle (Morales, 2000) and PTG in combat veterans (Tedeschi, 2011). These theories guided the study of combat veterans with significant combat exposure who successfully completed their bachelor’s degree through a private online program despite the presence of challenges related and unrelated to their combat exposure. The educational resilience cycle (Morales, 2000) provided a framework for understanding how protective factors worked in concert to mitigate risk factors throughout participants’ journeys. PTG in combat veterans (Tedeschi, 2011)
provided a theoretical lens to view the impact of combat trauma on participants’ lives and educational journeys.

**Educational Resilience Cycle**

The educational resilience cycle (Morales, 2000) provided a theoretical basis for understanding the protective factors that contributed to students’ academic achievement despite the presence of significant risk factors that would otherwise lead to failure for most students facing similar circumstances (Morales, 2000, 2014). Gaining a deeper understanding of how at-risk students succeed may reveal information than can be used to help other at-risk students achieve academic success. By seeking to understand how individuals overcome challenges and recover from trauma, processes of adaptation may be revealed, contributing to the development of effective interventions for others at risk (Morales, 2000).

**Resilience.** The application of the resilience paradigm originated in the mental health field in an attempt to understand how positive mental health outcomes could be achieved despite the presence of psychological stressors (Garmenzy, 1991; Morales, 2014; Rutter, 1979; Werner & Smith, 1982). There have been numerous attempts to define resilience, but a universal definition has not yet been adopted. Sinclair and Britt (2013) defined resilience as “the demonstration of positive adaptation after exposure to significant adversity” (p. 4). Novotny (2011) described resilience as one’s “ability to develop in terms of normal/healthy development, despite the presence of significant risk and adversity” (p. 91). Resilience is often referred to as a process of positive adaptation when faced with significant adversity (Bonanno et al., 2005; Larson et al., 2008; Lepore & Revenson, 2006; Luthar, Cicchette, & Becker, 2000; Masten, 2001). According to Luthar et al. (2000), two conditions are implied in the resilience construct. First, an individual is exposed to significant threat or severe adversity. Second, the individual
achieves positive adaptation despite encountering major assaults on their developmental process (Luthar et al., 2000).

**Educational/academic resilience.** More recently, the resilience concept has been applied to educational outcomes, providing a unique perspective with which to view the unlikely academic success of students facing significant risk factors (Morales, 2014; Wang & Gordan, 1994). Novotny (2011) described academic resilience as “educational achievement outcome anomalies that occur in certain groups of students after an individual has been exposed to statistical risk factors” (p. 91). Much of the research on resilience in the academic setting is based on the premise that gaining a deeper understanding of success may be an effective approach in addressing the achievement gap of at-risk students and facilitating the attainment of their educational goals (Condly, 2006; Gardynik & McDonald, 2005; Milstein & Henry, 2000).

With this in mind, some researchers have focused their attention on various at-risk groups such as those from ethnic minorities (Crosnoe & Elder, 2004; Gibson, 1987; Gordon, 1995; Morales, 2008), low socio-economic status (Gandara, 1995), or students with physical or mental disabilities. However, studies on student failure continue to eclipse the number of studies on student success (Morales & Trotman, 2011), particularly as it relates to combat veterans in online higher education.

**Concepts.** There are four concepts that are frequently utilized as theoretical frameworks for resilience studies: risk factors, protective factors, vulnerability areas, and compensatory strategies (Garmenzy, 1991; Kitano & Lewis, 2005; Morales, 2008). Risk factors can be described as existing constructs in a student’s life that could potentially hinder or impede the achievement of educational goals (Morales, 2010). Protective factors have the potential to offset risk factors. Vulnerability areas are areas in a student’s life where the risk factors are
manifested, and compensatory strategies are how the student responds to vulnerability areas in his or her life (Morales, 2010). Resilience studies have traditionally focused on isolated protective factors (Bogenschneider, 1996; Gardynik & McDonald, 2005; Garmenzy, 1991; Gordon, 1995; Von Secker, 2004; Werner & Smith, 1982) rather than the actual interaction between factors (Morales, 2010). However, there have been a few resilience researchers that have focused their attention on examining how protective factors work in concert to facilitate resilience (Luthar, Doernberger, & Ziglar, 1993; Morales & Trotman, 2004; Ungar, 2004).

**The resilience cycle.** In a study of academically resilient Dominican American college students at a selective private university, Morales (2000) identified an educational resilience cycle to describe how protective factors were manifested in resilient students and how these protective factors interacted with risk factors to foster resilience. The resilience cycle consists of five steps:

1. Student identifies/recognizes major risk factors.
2. Student is able to manifest and/or seek out protective factors.
3. Protective factors work in concert to propel the student toward high academic achievement.
4. Student recognizes value of protective factors and continues to refine and implement.
5. Continuous refinement and implementation sustains student’s academic achievement (Morales, 2000).

The first two steps acknowledge the importance of the student’s awareness of their own risk factors and subsequent development of protective factors. Morales (2000) asserted that this high level of self-awareness was crucial to the resilient student’s successful outcomes. The third step
highlights the importance of various factors working in concert to produce academic resilience. Although it was common for a single protective factor to initially emerge, Morales (2000) found that this single factor served as a catalyst for additional protective factors to emerge. Moreover, it was determined that a variety of protective factors must work simultaneously in order for academic resilience to be achieved. The final two steps highlight the resilient student’s ability to recognize and continually refine identified protective factors (Morales, 2000).

**Posttraumatic Growth (PTG) in Combat Veterans**

The second theory that provided a theoretical framework for this study is posttraumatic growth (PTG) in combat veterans (Tedeschi, 2011). PTG is described as “positive personal changes that result from the struggle to deal with trauma and its psychological consequences” (Mitchell, Gallaway, & Millikan, 2013, p. 383). Individuals who experience traumatic events such as military combat often face significant challenges related to their ability to cope (Tedeschi, 2011). Specifically, the damaging effects of combat exposure in OEF-OIF veterans is well documented in existing literature (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996, 2004). While many combat veterans struggle with symptoms of PTSD, TBI, and depression, some combat veterans have actually reported PTG (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995, 1996). For example, the majority of respondents in a study conducted by Pietrzak et al. (2010) reported significant PTG following their deployment; this was the first known study that examined the potential for positive psychological impact related to combat-exposed veterans.

Mitchell et al. (2013) found a positive association between increased combat exposure and PTG. They also found greater unit cohesion to be positively associated with PTG, a finding that was also supported in a study conducted by Pietrzak et al. (2010). Mitchell et al. (2013) found certain demographic variables were significantly associated with PTG; White soldiers
were less likely to experience PTG compared to soldiers from different races and ethnic backgrounds, an area that needs further research. Finally, there was more PTG in junior enlisted soldiers compared to senior enlisted soldiers and officers. This difference may be attributed to senior enlisted officers and soldiers initially having more resilience than junior enlisted soldiers. As such, senior enlisted officers and soldiers have less room for PTG.

Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995, 1996) suggested that positive personal changes are a result of the process of struggling to deal with the trauma as well as its psychological consequences. Furthermore, it was suggested that understanding how these positive outcomes are achieved may be beneficial for new service members entering the military or those who are just returning from combat (Tedeschi, 2011). According to Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004), the study of PTG examines “the natural processes people use as they struggle with the aftermath of trauma to derive meaning, feel wiser, and face uncertain futures with more confidence” (p. 469).

**PTG processes.** According to Janoff-Bulman (2006), there are three kinds of PTG processes: strength through suffering, existential reevaluation, and psychological preparedness. Strength through suffering develops confidence and prepares individuals to face future difficulties. Existential reevaluation fosters “a sense of wisdom, life satisfaction, and purpose in life” (Janoff-Bulman, 2006, p. 137). Psychological preparedness, according to Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006), involves the rebuilding of an assumptive world to counter potential shocks to the system in the future. In addition to the three kinds of PTG mentioned, there are a number of variables that may contribute to psychological growth after a traumatic experience (Calhoun, Cann, & Tedeschi, 2010). Of these variables, Tedeschi (2011) asserted that cognitive processing, engagement, or rumination is most essential. Personal disposition and degree of resiliency can impact the amount of processing that may be necessary; for example, relatively
resilient individuals may not be as deeply affected by the trauma, which results in less time required to process (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

**Manifestations of PTG.** Based on the theory of PTG, five resulting manifestations have been identified:

- Greater sense of personal strength;
- new appreciation of life;
- recognition of new possibilities or opportunities in the aftermath of trauma;
- improved interpersonal relationships marked by more compassion and emotional connection; and
- spiritual development (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

These manifestations of PTG have been studied and reported in a broad range of people, covering a wide array of life crises (Joseph, Linely, & Harris, 2005) including difficult life transitions, serious health issues, abuse, and combat-related trauma (Pietrzak et al., 2010; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

**Related Literature**

The first section of this literature review examined the educational resilience cycle (Morales, 2000) and PTG in combat veterans (Tedeschi, 2011) as the theories that provided a theoretical framework for the current study. The second section explores the existing body of literature related to combat veterans and the risk factors associated with significant combat exposure in relation to their experiences in higher education. There is an abundance of research literature on combat veterans focused on the challenges and risk factors associated with significant combat exposure (Brenner, Vanderploeg, & Terrio, 2009; Elder & Cristian, 2009; Hoge et al., 2004, 2008; Milliken, Auchterlonie, & Hogie, 2007; Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). For
example, Cornum, Matthews, and Seligman (2011) conducted a literature review and found 1,186 articles on PTSD written between 2006 and 2011 but only 20 on PTG and military; these results underscore the shortage of literature on PTG and the potential for positive outcomes from combat experience (Mitchell et al., 2013). Much has been written about combat veterans’ negative experiences in higher education, but comparatively little has been written about their academic success despite the significant number of combat veterans in higher education, and even less has been written about combat veterans in online higher education. Therefore, this study sought to address the gap in the literature as it relates to combat veterans with significant combat exposure who successfully completed their bachelor’s degree through a private online program despite the presence of challenges related and unrelated to their combat exposure.

**Combat Veterans**

As previously stated, for the purpose of this current study, a combat veteran was generally defined as a veteran of the United States Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, or National Guard who served in OEF, OIF, or OND and experienced significant exposure to combat as indicated by a score of “light-moderate” to “heavy” on the CES (Keane et al., 1989) (see Appendix A). Combat veterans are a special group of people who have experienced war in a way that is difficult for the general population to understand.

**Numbers.** It is difficult to determine the exact figure; however, reports have suggested that over 2.1 million men and women have been deployed into combat since the events of 9/11 (Areppim, 2015; DMDC, 2013; IOM, 2014). Prior to 9/11, it had been over 20 years since military service members engaged in combat on such a large scale (Clark, 2014). Of the estimated 2.1 million military individuals deployed, 1.6 million U.S. veterans are now separated
from military service (Veterans Benefits Administration, 2012) and have entered or are in the process of entering civilian life.

**Characteristics.** Combat veterans are a diverse group of people who possess distinct characteristics. According to the IOM (2014) and the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics (2014), the overall population of post-9/11 veterans with known race are 65.4% to 77% White, 16.3% to 17% Black, 0.7% Native American or Alaska Native, 2.6% to 4% Asian, and 2.8% other. Through 2010, 88% of those serving in OEF/OIF were men and 12% were women (IOM, 2014). The overall average age is 33.4 years, with approximately 72% of those deployed between the ages of 25-44 years old at the end of 2010 (IOM, 2014).

**Branch of service.** Of the approximately 2.1 million service members that have been deployed to OEF/OIF/OND which include the regular, National Guard, and Reserves components, over 50% were in the Army. Nineteen percent were in the Air Force, 18% were in the Navy, 12% were in the Marine Corps, and 0.2% were in the Coast Guard (IOM, 2014).

**Deployments.** Deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan “have varied in duration, frequency, combat intensity, geography, service branch, and service component” (IOM, 2014, p. 38). It is estimated that 2.1 million service members have deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan over 3.6 million times by the end of 2010, averaging 1.72 times each and ranging from one to 47 deployments. Fifty-seven percent of service members were deployed once and 43% were deployed multiple times. Of the 43% who deployed more than once, approximately 60% were deployed twice, 25% were deployed three times, and about 15% were deployed four or more times (IOM, 2014). Among the Coast Guard, Army, and Marine Corps, the number of deployments ranged from 1.3 to 1.6 and in the Air Force, the number of deployments was 2.1.
Duration of deployments were seen in varying degrees across service branches and components. The average duration across all branches and components was 7.7 months, with longer deployments for single deployers at 8.3 months and shorter deployments for multiple deployers at 6.8 months (IOM, 2014). Across service branches, duration of deployment ranged from “4.5 months in the Air Force to 9.4 months in the Army” (IOM, 2014, p. 40). Based on branch and component, the numbers ranged from “3.5 months in the Air Force National Guard to 11.9 months in the Marine Corps reserves” (IOM, 2014, p. 40). Air Force and Navy service members served the shortest length deployments; Army and Marine Corps members served the longest length deployments.

**Education.** From an educational standpoint, combat veterans have varying degrees of education. Those with less than a high-school education make up less than 1% of OEF/OIF service members, and over 30% have at least some college education. College and advanced degrees are primarily held by junior and senior officers; 88% of junior officers have at least a college degree, and 70% of senior officers have advanced degrees (IOM, 2014). Interestingly, junior and senior enlisted are most likely to have high school degrees or GEDs, while senior enlisted members make up over 75% of those with some college education but have not completed a degree.

**Marriage and family.** Marital status appears to vary based on branch of service and rank. Approximately 53% of service members in the Marine Corps and about 65% of Air Force members are married. According to the IOM (2014), approximately 40% of junior enlisted service members are married compared to 85% of senior officers. In addition to marital status, a significant percentage of service members have dependent children. When all service branches and components were considered, 69% of married and 11% of never married members had
dependent children (IOM, 2014). Marine Corps and Coast Guard members had the lowest percentage, ranging from 28% to 35%, respectively; Army and Air Force members had the highest percentage of 53%. The average number of dependent children was just under two, with the number of children ranging from one to 14 (IOM, 2014).

**Combat exposure.** Stallard (2014) defined combat as “the violence of war by military force” (p. 15). Service members exposed to combat come face-to-face with an extensive range of traumatic events that could lead to significant health issues and even death. More specifically, combat veterans have a higher risk of various mental and behavioral health issues resulting from extended periods of combat exposure (Green et al., 2015; Gwin, Selber, Chavkin, & Williams, 2012; Wisner et al., 2015).

Hoge et al. (2008) conducted a study examining the combat experiences of Army and Marine participants after their deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan. Participants reported the following combat experiences: being attacked or ambushed; receiving incoming artillery, rocket, or mortar fire; shooting or directing fire at the enemy; being responsible for the death of an enemy combatant; being responsible for the death of a noncombatant; seeing dead bodies or human remains; handling or uncovering human remains; seeing dead or seriously injured Americans; knowing someone seriously injured or killed; participating in demining operations; seeing ill or injured women or children and were unable to help; being wounded or injured; had a close call, was shot or hit but saved by protective gear; had a buddy shot or hit who was nearby; clearing or searching homes or buildings; engaging in hand-to-hand combat; or saved the life of a soldier or civilian (Hoge et al., 2008). According to the RAND (2008) study, over 45% of participants reported having a friend who was seriously wounded or killed, seeing dead or seriously injured noncombatants, and witnessing an accident resulting in serious injury or death.
The numbers are staggering, and it is no wonder that studies continue to find correlations between combat experiences and PTSD, TBI, or depression in combat veterans (Barry et al., 2012; Cate, 2013; Church, 2009; Hoge et al., 2004; Ness et al., 2014; Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008; Vance & Miller, 2009).

Very few combat veterans return from deployment completely unaffected by their combat experience. According to Shea and Fishback (2012), “Many return home with problems that include PTSD, depression, anxiety, aggressive behavior, insomnia, and reduced memory and concentration skills” (p. 53). These service-related injuries, both physical and psychological, can severely hinder combat veterans’ academic achievement. Service-related injuries are difficult enough to manage singularly, but it becomes increasingly problematic with the addition of the demands of meeting academic expectations (Ford & Vignare, 2015; Sinski, 2012; Steele, Salcedo, & Coley, 2010). According to Wisner et al. (2015), student veterans can get overwhelmed with the drastic change of transitioning from the incredibly intense, fast-paced military life to the academic environment, which is much slower-paced. As student veterans struggle to adjust to their new academic environment, the potential for academic failure is great. In addition to being overwhelmed with the transition, student veterans may also struggle with learning new information. Sinski (2012) suggested that memory, visual, or auditory problems may hinder student veterans’ learning.

**History of injuries.** Physical wounds of war have been the primary type of injury in centuries past. However, the percentage of psychological wounds in OEF/OIF/OND combat veterans have increased while fatality rates have declined; As Kelley et al. (2013) stated, “soldiers who would have died in previous wars are now surviving” (p. 43) and returning home with severe physical and psychological injuries. According to the IOM (2014), the wars in Iraq
and Afghanistan have resulted in over 6,600 fatalities and 48,000 injuries. A contributing factor may be the type of warfare that OEF/OIF/OND veterans were engaged in compared to their predecessors. For instance, OEF/OIF/OND soldiers were fighting against an enemy that was not clearly identified. The tactics used by the enemy often employed sophisticated and highly accurate explosives, suicide bombers “hiding among civilians, ambushes, and booby traps” (Green et al., 2015, p. 2).

Being under constant threat meant that soldiers were on high physical and mental alert with no opportunities for rest and very few safe zones available (Kelley et al., 2013). In contrast, enemies of previous wars were clearly detectable. Another factor may include advances in medicine, engineering, and technology. Technological and engineering advances have contributed to body armor that is more effective in preventing serious injuries. In addition, medical technology has been more effective in treating physical wounds and shortening healing time. Finally, multiple deployments were common in OEF/OIF/OND; it was not unusual for a soldier to have been deployed three to four times (Shea & Fishback, 2012).

Many veterans return from Iraq and Afghanistan with physical injuries that are treated and eventually healed, but they also return with injuries that are not visible. The signature wounds of the Global War on Terror (GWOT) are well documented; PTSD, TBI, emotional and psychological issues plague veterans of the GWOT upon their return home (Barry et al., 2012; Church 2009; Elliott et al., 2011; Rudd et al., 2011; Widome et al., 2011). If left untreated, these invisible wounds can negatively impact personal, professional, and academic pursuits (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). In fact, Ness et al. (2014) found that “neurobehavioral symptoms resulting from combat trauma may complicate the post-secondary transition and are associated with poor psychosocial functioning among college-enrolled service members” (p. 148). These invisible
wounds have adverse effects on combat veterans’ academic progress. According to Durdella and Kim (2012), student veterans tend to have lower grade point averages (GPA) compared to their civilian counterparts. It can be incredibly difficult for student veterans to recover from a low GPA, and as a result, some may decide to end their educational pursuits. Although student veteran dropout rates are not tracked by the government, they have been reported to be anywhere from 30% to 80% (Cate, 2013).

**Invisible wounds.** Compared to non-combat-exposed veterans, veterans with significant combat exposure are at a greater risk of PTSD, TBI, and depression; in fact, it is estimated that one out of every three OEF and OIF veterans will experience symptoms from one or more of these physical and mental health related injuries (Barry, 2015). Kelley et al. (2013) estimated that “as many as 744,000 veterans returning from OEF and OIF may have one or more of these three disabilities” (p. 44). Studies have suggested a number of contributing factors: repeated lengthy deployments, long periods of combat exposure, repeated exposure to improvised explosive devices, challenging weather conditions, and extremely rugged terrain conditions (Gwin et al., 2012; Rubin, Weiss, & Coll, 2013; Tanielian, 2011; Watkins, 2011; Wisner et al., 2015). As a result, many combat veterans struggle to make a smooth transition back to their homes, families, jobs, and schools. Moreover, the majority of public and private institutions are ill-equipped to offer adequate services needed to assist combat veterans with the transition (Selber, Chavkin, & Williams, 2012; Wisner et al., 2015).

Although there were historically lower casualty rates in the Global War on Terror (GWOT), a different type of casualty has emerged. Mental health challenges and cognitive impairments have plagued a significant number of combat exposed veterans (Aikins, Golub, & Bennett, 2015; RAND, 2008). Compared to the general population, military service members...
and veterans have been found to have higher rates of medical and mental health issues (Bryan, Bryan, Hinkson, Bichrest, & Ahern, 2014; Kessler et al., 2014). These invisible wounds impact every area of combat veterans’ lives, including their ability to achieve academic goals (Herrmann et al., 2009). PTSD, TBI, and depression have become signature injuries of the GWOT. Combat veterans have seen and experienced things that set them apart from any other student group. Many combat veterans have service-related injuries such as PTSD or depression (Vance & Miller, 2009) that impact their behavior and ability to function in an academic setting (Barry et al., 2012). For example, after surveying 628 student veterans, Rudd et al. (2011) found approximately 46% of participants experienced symptoms of PTSD, about 35% had severe anxiety, and 24% experienced severe depression. Research has suggested a close relationship between combat exposure and serious mental health challenges among military service members, including student veterans (Bryan et al., 2014; Rudd et al., 2011; Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008).

**Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).** PTSD is a psychological disorder that has touched the lives of thousands of OEF/OIF/OND combat veterans. PTSD “can develop after exposure to one or more traumatic events” (Parks & Walker, 2014, p. 53). OEF/OIF/OND combat veterans may be exposed to multiple traumatic events throughout the course of their deployment(s). It is estimated that 31% of OEF veterans and up to 86% of OIF veterans have engaged in firefights with the enemy (Hoge et al., 2008; Parks & Walker, 2014). When engaged in firefights, soldiers rely on basic survival instincts in the heat of battle and are constantly in a state of hyperawareness. The problem occurs when they return home to a non-threatening environment but their survival instincts persist, resulting in the development of PTSD.

The amygdala is a part of the brain that is closely connected with emotions. When the amygdala is activated, other areas of the brain such as memory processing are triggered (Parks &
Walker, 2014). For individuals with PTSD, threatening stimuli causes the amygdala to be activated excessively, which prevents the medial prefrontal cortex from carrying out the inhibitory and mediatory processes for which it was designed (Herrmann, Shiner, & Friedman, 2012). When the amygdala is not regulated properly, it can cause the individual to experience a perpetual state of fear or fear reactions at improper times.

**Prevalence.** Although many OEF/OIF veterans return home with no or very few physical or psychological injuries, the number of reported cases of PTSD in combat veterans is still alarming (Barnard-Brak et al., 2011; Hoge et al., 2004; Hoge et al., 2008; RAND, 2008), and even more troubling is the number of cases that go unreported. PTSD frequently ranks as one of the top conditions in OEF and OIF combat veterans; the rates of PTSD among OEF/OIF veterans receiving care through Veterans Affairs (VA) are estimated at 22% to 26% (Burnett-Zeigler, Zivin, Ilgen, & Bohnert, 2011; McDevitt-Murphy et al., 2010; Possemato, Pratt, Barrie, & Ouimette, 2015; Seal et al., 2009, 2011). Studies of OIF veterans suggest that up to 22% may struggle with PTSD (Green et al, 2015; Seal et al., 2009; Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). The RAND (2008) study suggested that up to 300,000 OEF/OIF veterans may suffer from PTSD or related symptoms. Likewise, over half of the participants in Hammond’s (2016) study self-identified as experiencing symptoms of PTSD since returning from combat.

**Onset.** Studies have suggested combat exposure to be a significant predictor of PTSD (Barnard-Brak et al., 2011, Helmer et al., 2007; Hoge et al., 2004; Milliken et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2009; Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008); the longer the deployment, the greater the risk of suffering from PTSD and other psychological problems (Groves, 2015). The National Center for PTSD (2014) stated that “PTSD can occur after someone goes through a traumatic event like combat, assault or disaster” (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014b). According to the American
Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), PTSD is triggered by “exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury or sexual violation” (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013, p. 1). The onset of PTSD can vary across exposed populations, ranging from early onset to late or delayed onset within one year of trauma exposure (Santiago et al., 2013). PTSD is now classified as a trauma- and stressor-related disorder rather than an anxiety disorder as it was classified in the DSM-IV (APA, 2013). This new classification identifies direct exposure to trauma as a vital cause of PTSD (Jones & Cureton, 2014; Santiago et al., 2013). Soldiers with multiple combat deployments are especially at risk of developing delayed onset PTSD, as this condition is often acquired as a result of lengthy military careers (Andrews, Brewin, Philpott, & Steward, 2007; Groves, 2015). Being in a constant state of hyper-vigilance for an extended period of time can make it difficult for soldiers to disengage. In many cases, the unfortunate result is the development of PTSD or other psychological disorders in soldiers who cannot escape the “constant anxiety and attempts to protect themselves from threats that are no longer present” (Parks & Walker, 2014, p. 56).

Symptoms. The symptoms of PTSD can create major disruptions in people’s lives. According to the National Center for PTSD (2014), there are four types of PTSD symptoms: reliving the event (re-experiencing symptoms), avoiding situations that are reminiscent of the event, negative changes in beliefs and feelings, and feeling keyed up (hyperarousal). These symptoms may not be experienced exactly the same way for everyone. Reliving the event or having a flashback may include having nightmares, flashbacks, and seeing, hearing, or smelling something that causes the individual to relive the traumatic event. These memories can return at any time and are often triggered by a sight or sound (National Center for PTSD, 2014). Combat
veterans may experience flashbacks of gunfire and war when they hear the sound of a car backfiring or fireworks being set off.

Individuals with PTSD may try to avoid crowds, driving, or watching certain types of movies in order to avoid talking or thinking about the traumatic event. Combat veterans with PTSD may avoid going to places with large crowds such as concerts, sporting events, and shopping malls because having so many people around feels dangerous to them (National Center for PTSD, 2014). Negative changes in beliefs and feelings may cause individuals with PTSD to stay away from relationships, forget details of the event, view the world as dangerous, and be distrusting of people. The Elliott et al. (2011) study of PTSD in military veterans suggested that symptoms of PTSD can lead to social alienation, strained relationships, alcohol abuse, and a decrease in social support. Hyperarousal is a symptom of PTSD that causes individuals to feel “keyed up,” in a constant state of alertness and looking out for danger (National Center for PTSD, 2014). Individuals with PTSD may also be jittery and/or get easily upset. Moreover, hyperarousal can cause difficulty sleeping and concentrating.

*Impact on academic performance.* In combat veterans, PTSD tends to have a higher lifetime prevalence, and the onset is typically delayed (VA National Center for PTSD, 2013). According to the VA National Center for PTSD (2013), “PTSD usually occurs within the first few months after a trauma and the vast majority occur within the first two years” (p. 7). However, once the PTSD is triggered, it can wreak havoc in the individual’s life. For example, combat veterans with PTSD struggle with maintaining a steady job, holding their marriage together, physical and mental health conditions, substance abuse, aggression, and academic failure (Barnard-Brak et al., 2011; VA National Center for PTSD, 2013).
Ackerman, DiRamio, and Mitchell (2009) suggested that PTSD is a major factor contributing to military veterans’ adjustment issues in higher education. Cate (2013) also supported the assumption that symptoms consistent with PTSD can negatively influence academic performance; military veterans suffering from PTSD symptoms reported having more difficulty focusing and taking notes during classroom lectures compared to their peers without PTSD symptoms (Ford & Vignare, 2015; Petska & McLennan, 2009). Bryan et al. (2014) found that students with PTSD generally earn a lower GPA compared to students without PTSD in their first year of college. Conversely, Elliott (2014) found that students “who were further along in college tended to have lower levels of PTSD” (p. 14). In addition, symptoms of PTSD can interfere with everyday life and hinder the learning process. Parks and Walker (2014) suggested that examining how PTSD impacts the lives of student veterans and hearing their personal stories “can help shed light on their struggles” (p. 59).

**Traumatic brain injury (TBI).** The Department of Defense (DOD) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) have defined TBI as:

A traumatically induced structural injury and/or physiological disruption of brain function as a result of an external force that is indicated by new onset or worsening of at least one of the following clinical signs, immediately following the event:

- Any period of loss of or a decreased level of consciousness;
- Any loss of memory for events immediately before or after the injury;
- Any alteration in mental state at the time of the injury (confusion, disorientation, slowed thinking, etc.);
- Neurological deficits (weakness, loss of balance, change in vision, praxis, paresis/plegia, sensory loss, aphasia, etc.) that may or may not be transient;
- Intracranial lesion. (Department of Defense [DOD], 2008, p. 2)

Although exposure to an external physical force is a major cause, TBI does not necessarily develop in every individual that has been exposed to an external physical force. TBI impairs social, cognitive, and emotional/behavioral functioning in individuals. Moreover, TBI significantly impacts academic performance.

Prevalence. TBI is often referred to as the signature injury of the OEF/OIF/OND wars because it is so prevalent among service members (Aikins et al., 2015; U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014a). The widespread use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in OEF and OIF is often cited as a major factor in the increased prevalence of TBI diagnoses among OEF/OIF service members (French & Nikolic-Novakovic, 2012; Parks & Walker, 2014). According to the RAND (2008) report, up to 320,000 OEF/OIF veterans may suffer symptoms from some magnitude of a TBI. Among service members deployed in OEF, it is estimated that 15% to 23% are affected by TBI (Aikins et al., 2015) and an estimated 20% of OIF and OEF veterans (Carlson et al., 2010; Elliott, 2014; Terrio et al., 2009). However, reports have also suggested that there may be a large number of combat veterans with undiagnosed TBI who are reluctant to seek mental health services (RAND, 2008).

Severity. According to the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center (DVBIC) (2013), there are varying types of TBI: concussion/mild TBI, moderate TBI, severe TBI, and penetrating TBI, or open head injury. Results of structural brain imaging yields normal results in individuals with concussion/mild TBI; however, the outcomes become progressively worse with moderate and severe TBI yielding normal to abnormal results and penetrating TBI yielding the worst results (DVBIC, 2013). Penetrating TBI’s can result from high-velocity projectiles or lower velocity items that are driven into the brain (DVBIC, 2013).
Symptoms. With the exception of penetrating TBI, primary symptoms of TBI include confusion or disorientation lasting more than 24 hours, loss of consciousness anywhere from 30 minutes to 24 hours, and loss of memory from one to seven days (DVBIC, 2013). In addition to the actual injury to the brain, TBIs often result in long-lasting, functional impairment based upon the type and severity of the injury (RAND, 2008). Common symptoms of mild TBI include headaches, difficulty sleeping, memory problems, and mood issues, as well as depression, anxiety, irritability, and anger issues (Brenner et al., 2009; French & Nikolic-Novakovic, 2012; Hoge et al., 2008; Parks & Walker, 2014). Musculoskeletal pain issues, balance, dizziness, vertigo, and visual problems have also been reported (Scurfield & Platoni, 2013).

Comorbidity. TBI from combat exposure can lead to the development of PTSD and other emotional or mental health issues (Stein & McAllister, 2009; Vasterling, Verfaellie, & Sullivan, 2009); the traumatic nature of head injuries resulting in TBI gives rise to the development of co-existing disorders, particularly PTSD (Barlow-Ogden & Poynter, 2012; Hoge et al., 2008; Parks & Walker, 2014). Numerous studies of OIF and OEF veterans with mild TBI estimated up to 44% met criteria for PTSD and up to 62% met criteria for depression (Hoge et al., 2008; Schell & Marshall, 2008). The overlapping symptoms of TBI, PTSD, and depression make it difficult for practitioners to diagnose (Maguen, Lau, Madden, & Seal, 2012). Moreover, it is difficult to determine the prevalence of one disorder over the other because they share many of the same symptoms (Barlow-Ogden & Poynter, 2012; Hoge et al., 2008; Parks & Walker, 2014).

Impact on academic performance. The negative impact of TBI on academic performance is irrefutable. Not only does TBI increase the odds of PTSD and depression in combat veterans, it has also been reported to impede concentration during class lectures and time spent on homework and studying (Elliott, 2014; Maguen et al., 2012). Veterans with TBI are able to
concentrate on schoolwork, but not for extended periods of time as it depletes their mental energy do to so. In addition, it can take several hours to recover from such an exhausting effort (Smee et al., 2013). Smee et al. (2013) found that “high intensity academic cognitive demands may result in “cognitive fatigue” and an obstacle to college success” (p. 25). It requires a significant amount of mental energy to achieve college success, which many veterans with TBI simply do not have the capacity to maintain long-term. The inability to focus can make the acquisition and storage of information in long-term memory challenging for veterans’ with TBI (Parks & Walker, 2014), hindering them from reaching their academic goals.

Physical challenges can also hinder veterans’ ability to succeed in the classroom. Vision, hearing, and coordination loss are encountered by many individuals with TBI. These physical difficulties can hinder veterans’ learning within the classroom setting (Sinski, 2012). Hence, student veterans find themselves struggling to persist, dropping out of college because of difficulties associated with TBI that “impaired their ability to complete college courses” (Smee et al., 2013, p. 29). Elliott (2014) reported that student veterans often cite mental health issues as a major reason for dropping out of school.

**Depression.** Depression does not discriminate; it can affect all individuals regardless of age, sex, and race. Combat veterans who have experienced the trauma of war are especially susceptible to depression, particularly if they suffer from PTSD or TBI (Hoge et al., 2008). Depression can make it difficult for individuals to attend to daily activities, including schoolwork.

**Predictors.** The RAND (2008) study identified lengthy deployments and extensive exposure to trauma as strong predictors of PTSD and major depression in OEF and OIF service members. Elliott (2014) also found a positive association between combat exposure and
depression. Multiple deployments increase the probability of exposure to combat, which contributes to higher rates of depression in combat veterans. According to Church (2009), “the rate of anxiety and depression increases from 12% to 27% from the first to the third deployment” (p. 45). In addition, a study of 2,797 OIF veterans conducted by Maguen et al. (2012) revealed that being directly involved in killing contributed to symptoms of PTSD, depression, and other negative behaviors.

**Prevalence.** According to Angkaw et al. (2013), symptoms of depression was seen in an estimated 13% to 15% of returning U.S. Army soldiers. The RAND (2008) study found that compared to service members deployed to Afghanistan, the service members deployed to Iraq were at higher risk for depression. Rudd et al. (2011) conducted a study with 628 military-affiliated students and found that participants exhibited moderately-severe depression.

**Comorbidity.** In a study of returning U.S. Army soldiers, up to 24% were estimated to have comorbid symptoms of PTSD and depression (Angkaw et al., 2013). Other reports indicated that of the military personnel deployed to OEF/OIF, one in three service members will experience TBI, PTSD, or depression (Barry et al., 2012; Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). As previously mentioned, up to 62% of OIF and OEF veterans with mild TBI also meet criteria for depression (Hoge et al., 2008; Schell & Marshall, 2008).

**Impact on academic performance.** Student veterans suffering from symptoms of depression are more likely to experience academic difficulties in postsecondary education compared to their civilian counterparts (Bryan et al., 2014). Studies have suggested that depression can significantly impact combat veterans’ participation in classroom activities and assignments and impede educational attainment (RAND, 2008). For example, Bryan et al. (2014) found that depression was associated with frequent late assignment submissions, grades
that were lower than expected, failed exams, and skipped classes. Low GPA increases the likelihood of dropping out of school, which places student service members and veterans in a high-risk group. According to Aikins et al. (2015), depression may be the most significant preventative barrier to the academic achievement of veterans in higher education, more so than TBI and PTSD.

**Combat Veterans in Higher Education**

The number of combat veterans on college campuses across the United States is expected to grow as troops continue to return from deployment. According to Eric Shinseki, former secretary of Veteran Affairs, there were over 500,000 student veterans enrolled in postsecondary institutions in 2011 (Parks & Walker, 2014; Shea & Fishback, 2012). The educational benefits offered by the military is one of the primary reasons individuals decide to join the military. The Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act is a major factor in the growing number of veterans enrolling in postsecondary education, particularly among African American and Hispanic veterans (Aikins et al., 2015). According to Aikins et al. (2015), enrollment of African American veterans is projected to increase by 4.5% and by 2.8% for Hispanic veterans, and enrollment of White veterans is projected to increase by 2.2%. As such, OEF/OIF veterans have the potential to reach greater educational goals than they would have without the educational benefits offered through the GI Bill (IOM, 2014). Interestingly, researchers have suggested that those who enlisted for military service were more likely to pursue associate’s degrees after their military service compared to those who did not enlist (IOM, 2014). In addition, it has been suggested that military service members are more likely to attain associate’s degrees rather than four-year bachelor’s degrees (Wang, Glen Elder, & Spence, 2012). Compared with civilian counterparts in 2005-2010, it was more likely for veterans to be enrolled in college (IOM, 2014).
Among males between the ages of 18 and 40 enrolled in college, 31.4% were veterans compared to 22.8% nonveterans (IOM, 2014).

Student service members enrolled in undergraduate degree programs would most likely have served, or are serving, as active-duty military personnel. These service members arrive on campus with unique needs as a result of their military service. According to the National Survey of Student Engagement (2010), twice as many combat veterans in college reported having at least one disability compared to their nonveteran peers. For many of these students, the presence of risk factors such as combat-related PTSD, TBI, depression, or a combination of these and other challenges, put them at risk for academic difficulty (DiRamio, Ackerman, & Mitchell, 2008; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; DiRamio & Spires, 2009; Driscoll & Strauss, 2010; Herrmann et al., 2009; Herrmann, Hopkins, Wilson, & Allen, 2011; Ness et al., 2014; Slone & Freedman, 2008). Despite these challenges, combat veterans continue to enroll in record numbers. However, it is reported that a significant portion of these students do not complete their undergraduate degrees (Cate, 2013). Ginder-Vogel (2012) suggested that an estimated 88% of student veterans do not complete their first year of college and only 3% actually graduate.

**Residential enrollment.** Combat veterans’ transition to residential college campuses has been studied extensively (Barnhart, 2011; Elliott et al., 2011; Whiteman et al., 2013). Elliott et al. (2011) examined “the effects of stressors and resources on student veteran mental health and social integration on campus” (p. 280), whereas Barnhart (2011) highlighted the distinct differences in the life experiences between student veterans and non-veterans that seem to be magnified on college campuses. These studies uncovered a number of implications specifically targeting the role of student affairs professionals in providing student veterans with programs and services to meet identified needs. Peterson, Park, and Castro (2011) suggested that most
service members return home from war and do well with the transition. For others, the reintegration back into civilian life is filled with unexpected challenges associated with combat exposure, making the transition much more difficult than they had imagined (Parks & Walker, 2014).

The number of veterans on college campuses has doubled and tripled in recent years, and enrollment is projected to increase as service members leave the military due to the initiation of troop reductions (Kirchner, 2015; Selber et al., 2012; Wisner et al., 2015). While student veterans bring a wealth of experience and leadership skills to the college campus, some require additional support throughout their educational journey. Hence, “universities must be prepared to assist these veterans in their transitions beyond accessing their educational benefits” (Wisner et al., 2015, p. 129).

**Online enrollment.** Student veterans’ enrollment in online higher education programs has not been studied as extensively in comparison to residential enrollment. Recent studies, however, indicate a significant increase in military service members selecting online learning environments to meet their educational goals (Allen & Seaman, 2011, 2013; Ford & Vignare, 2015; Starr-Glass, 2015). Flexibility, feeling out of place on traditional campuses, and openness to nontraditional students are just a few reasons that student veterans cite in their decision to pursue online education (Golden, 2010). According to Kelley et al. (2013), “combat veterans who are first-year students are five times more likely to be transfer students and eight times more likely to enroll in distance-learning courses than nonveteran first-year students” (p. 7).

**Challenges to academic achievement.** Combat veterans face significant challenges to their academic achievement, both online and residentially. Physical and psychological wounds of war are ongoing struggles that can hinder combat veterans’ learning in online and residential
settings (Moore & Penk, 2011). On residential campuses, classroom layout (Sinski, 2012), transition difficulties (Aikins et al., 2015; DiRamio et al., 2008; Wisner et al., 2015), and institutional and relational hurdles (Parks & Walker, 2014) are particularly challenging. Challenges in the online setting include social isolation (Elliott et al., 2011; Golden, 2010; Ness et al., 2014; Whiteman et al., 2013) and questionable practices of for-profit institutions (Griffin & Gilbert, 2012).

**Residential concerns.** In addition to the key frustrations and challenges that have already been discussed in relation to combat veterans’ experiences on college campuses, there are some additional concerns that should be noted. For combat veterans with PTSD and TBI, the physical layout of the classroom may potentially trigger an extreme physiological reaction related to their injury (Sinski, 2012). According to Sinski (2012), a “sensitized hyper arousal response” can be triggered in an individual with PTSD and TBI by merely being reminded of their traumatic experience. The resulting response in the student’s body is to act in a fight or flight mode, both of which are significant impediments to students’ ability to learn (Sinski, 2012). Therefore, professors must be mindful of how the physical layout of their classroom might affect student veterans with PTSD, TBI, or other combat-related injuries.

**Transition difficulties.** The transition from the combat zone to the university environment is challenging even for the most experienced and mature service members and veterans (Wisner et al., 2015). According to Aikins et al. (2015), student service members and veterans experience a number of challenges as they readjust socially, cognitively, physically, and psychologically during their transition to college. DiRamio et al. (2008) examined the experiences of 25 combat veterans who made the transition to college as full-time students. Study participants indicated that the transition to the college campus was the most difficult of all.
Livingston et al. (2011) and Rumann and Hamrick (2010) also studied the transitional experiences of combat veterans as they enrolled in college and as a result of these and other related studies, several themes describing veterans’ transition experiences emerged. Many veterans found it difficult to transition from military to civilian life, primarily missing the camaraderie they experienced serving beside fellow soldiers (DiRamilio et al., 2008; Ness et al., 2014). They also expressed a reluctance to acknowledge their status as a veteran on campus (Livingston et al., 2011).

A negative attitude toward war from professors and other students adds to the difficulty of transitioning from the combat zone to the college campus for many veterans, inhibiting the development of positive relationships in the academic environment. Without supportive relationships with professors and peers, student veterans can become isolated and eventually walk away from their educational dreams. Another relational component that can make the transition extremely difficult is the perceived immaturity of younger, traditional students (Parks & Walker, 2014). The vast difference between veterans and traditional students is a great source of frustration for many student veterans. In a study conducted by Wheeler (2012), student veterans disclosed three things that they found most frustrating about their interactions with traditional college students: “classroom behavior, lack of knowledge about the war, and asking inappropriate questions” (p. 784).

Another source of frustration that contributes to a difficult transition from combat zone to college campus for many veterans is the painstaking process of applying for and securing educational benefits. Making the right choices concerning these benefits can be complicated, and many veterans are uncertain about whether their decisions will suit their needs (Wheeler, 2012). Moreover, many veterans are not aware of the full scope of benefits that are available to
them, some have difficulty accessing the benefits, and others find that it takes too long for the benefits to be applied.

Making the transition from combat zone to the college campus can be particularly difficult for veterans returning home with visible and invisible injuries such as PTSD, TBI, or depression (Moore & Penk, 2011). According to Kelley et al. (2013), “The challenges associated with this transition are heightened when a student has a disability, for these students may need additional resources to succeed” (p. 5). Although there is a significant amount of research on the transition experiences of combat veterans, more research must be conducted in order to deepen our understanding of this select group of students (Rumann et al., 2011).

Institutional and relational challenges. Combat veterans are faced with a variety of unique challenges in their pursuit of a postsecondary degree. Most colleges and universities lack adequate support services to meet the unique needs of student veterans on campus (Griffin & Gilbert, 2012). According to Shea and Fishback (2012), “even on campuses with large numbers of veterans, many institutions have just begun to create programs and may not have the resources required for a large influx of veterans” (p. 60). In addition, difficulty navigating campus resources, negative reactions from the campus community, and difficulty establishing relations with classmates and faculty have been reported to present significant challenges for student veterans (Cook & Kim, 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2012). Studies have indicated that student veterans who have difficulty connecting with other students in the classroom are also less likely to participate during class (DiRamio et al., 2008; Livingston et al., 2011; Olsen, Badger, & McCuddy, 2014; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010). Moreover, increased feelings of isolation from peers, faculty, and staff are common among veterans on campus (Hammond, 2016; Kelley et al.,
2013), negatively impacting their engagement with faculty and their desire to seek support from the institution (Hammond, 2016).

Vacchi (2012) asserted that going to college after military service may be one of the most difficult things a veteran may face, due in large part to the lack of the “highly structured, team-based environment” (p. 18) that they experienced during their time in the military. According to Ness et al. (2014), several participants in their study “mentioned feeling lonely, especially in contrast to the camaraderie they experienced during their military service” (p. 154). Although college graduation or job placement rates of combat veterans are not officially tracked, many institutions report dropout rates as high as 50% (Griffin & Gilbert, 2012). Sadly, studies have suggested that student veterans often “leave college with lower levels of GPA and sense of belonging” (Durdella & Kim, 2012, p. 123).

Relationally, combat veterans in higher education struggle to connect with younger students for several reasons. The most common barrier seems to be the perceived immaturity of younger students which makes them appear to have less experience, discipline, and a lack of an appreciation for the opportunity to earn a college education (Hammond, 2016). In contrast, combat veterans believe that they have greater maturity, discipline, and experience than their younger peers. This struggle to connect with younger peers often creates frustration for combat veterans, which can become a major distraction and disruption to their learning. According to Hammond (2016), “this type of disruption may contribute to poor performance in the classroom, breaks in attendance, and ultimately, withdrawal from the institution” (pp. 155-156).

**Online Concerns.** What is known about student veterans in online education raises a number of concerns. Online, for-profit schools in particular have garnered a reputation for employing aggressive recruitment tactics while at the same time failing to provide student
veterans with optimal learning environments that support their achievement and success (Griffin & Gilbert, 2012). It has also been suggested that participating in online courses may delay the adjustment process for OEF and OIF veterans suffering from PTSD and increase feelings of social isolation (Golden, 2010). Finally, the flexibility and convenience of online education may negatively impact students who struggle with self-motivation and procrastination (Diemann & Bastiaens, 2010; Platt, Raile, & Yu, 2014). However, despite the challenges of online education, student veterans continue to enroll in record numbers.

**Social isolation.** Social isolation has been reported in a number of studies as a common theme related to combat veterans’ post-secondary experience (Ness et al., 2014; Whiteman et al., 2013). Elliott et al. (2011) found that combat veterans with significant combat exposure were more likely to have symptoms of PTSD and experience more alienation on campus. According to Whiteman et al. (2013), student veterans who have difficulty connecting with classmates and faculty are at risk for social isolation. Moreover, student veterans struggling with symptoms of PTSD, TBI, and/or depression due to significant combat exposure are at an even greater risk. Thus, one of the major concerns of online education is the lack of face-to-face interaction with classmates and professors. Kemp and Grieve (2014) found that while most undergraduate online students appreciated the flexibility of online learning, they also valued “the greater engagement provided by discussions that take place face-to-face” (p. 10).

A major concern related to combat veterans experiencing social isolation is the potential for negative academic progress and low student persistence (Whiteman et al., 2013). One way to lower the risk of social isolation is to facilitate peer-group interactions and ensure that combat veterans have a strong support system. In fact, a number of studies have supported the importance of developing and maintaining peer-group interactions and social support from peers
as safeguards against social isolation (Elliott et al., 2011; Whiteman et al., 2013). Moreover, social support from peers who have shared experiences or injuries can be especially helpful in protecting student veterans’ mental health and easing the transition to the college environment (Stalides, 2008; Whiteman et al., 2013). According to Parks and Walker (2014), the “practical information and emotional support” (p. 70) from peers who have shared experiences can be instrumental in providing a strong support system for student veterans who are at risk for social isolation. Kemp and Grieve (2014) suggested that those responsible for online course creation “consider carefully the nature and type of activities they allocate” (p.10) to online technology, focusing on student engagement.

General concerns.

**Diminished academic skills.** Diminished academic skills present another challenge for combat veterans in postsecondary education. Years of military service increases the length of time between high school or prior college and current enrollment. As a result, veterans often find themselves having to relearn study skills while trying to keep up with classmates (Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008). According to DiRamio et al. (2008), mathematics and study skills are particularly challenging for student veterans returning home from deployment. Moreover, it has been reported that relearning critical thinking skills and adjusting to the expectations of academic work are especially difficult for student veterans (Durdella & Kim, 2012; Rumann et al., 2011; Steele et al., 2010).

**Non-disclosure.** As previously mentioned, combat veterans are reluctant to disclose their veteran status within the academic setting. However, Bryan et al. (2014) asserted that “student service members and veterans may be more willing to report emotional distress on surveys conducted external to the military” (p. 1036). Regardless, non-disclosure is a major issue for
student veterans suffering from any combat-related injuries, as many believe there is a stigma attached to the disclosure of limitations (Church, 2009; Hammond, 2016). Burnett and Segoria (2009) suggested that veterans “do not want to be labeled as disabled with the same potential for disability stigmatization in society” (p. 54). Unfortunately, this perpetuates the problem; veterans do not receive the support they need if they are not willing to disclose their limitations. Furthermore, when student veterans choose not to secure proper accommodations, there is an increased risk of academic failure (Hammond, 2016).

Church (2009) estimated that only 53% of GWOT veterans who experience problems will see a physical or mental health professional for treatment. Without adequate support, academic progress is hindered. Hence, veterans suffering from symptoms of PTSD are often associated with lower academic performance and subsequently, lower levels of degree attainment (Barry et al., 2012; Durdella & Kim, 2012; Teachman, 2005). Colleges and universities face an uphill battle in changing student veterans’ perceptions related to the disclosure of combat-related injuries; “the fear of judgment, the drive to be independent, and the perception that only other veterans can understand their experience creates a barrier that is difficult to penetrate” (Parks & Walker, 2014, p. 64).

Incompletion. A number of factors have already been discussed in relation to the challenges to degree completion for combat veterans in higher education. It is estimated that veterans are 21.2% less successful than nonveterans in attaining a bachelor’s degree and 4.1% more likely not to complete a degree at all (Hammond, 2016; Kelley et al., 2013; Radford, 2011). Additionally, postsecondary dropout rates for first-year student veterans are as high as 88% (Briggs, 2012; Wood, 2012).
Positive impact of military experience. Despite the documented challenges associated with military experience, veterans may enter college with some advantages over their nonveteran peers. Many veterans come away from their military service with increased self-efficacy, strong identity, purpose, pride, and camaraderie with those they served with (Kelley et al., 2013; Litz & Orsillo, 2004). Veterans may also draw upon the professional training and development they received throughout their military experience to enhance their college experience; they bring maturity, significant life experience, and a cross-cultural awareness that many traditional-age college students lack (Kelley et al., 2013). Because veterans place a high value on education, they make it a priority despite the difficulties and demands of everyday life.

Lack of data. There is no shortage of literature on the challenges related to military experience in postsecondary education. There are far less studies that focus on the positive impact of military experience on academic achievement. Unfortunately, it is difficult to find national data on the academic outcomes of student veterans (Cate, 2013). The primary reason, according to Cate (2013), is simply because “no federal department has been tasked with the collection and analysis” (p. 1) of this type of data. Hence, media outlets have reported student veteran dropout rates as high as 88% with no data to dispute this claim. Despite the lack of reliable data, or perhaps in response to it, a growing number of researchers have focused their attention on the positive academic outcomes of student veterans in postsecondary education. The lack of reliable data on student veterans’ completion rates warrants more studies that explore the experiences of student veterans’ in higher education (Hammond, 2016). The 2010 National Survey of Veterans (NSV) (Westat, 2012) and the U.S. Census Bureau (2015) provided estimates of student veteran completion rates which are significantly higher than media reports (Cate,
2013). Sadly, graduation rates for student veterans remain dismal as they continue to adjust to life outside of the combat zone (NSSE, 2010; Sinski, 2012).

**Maturity.** DiRamio and Jarvis (2011) found that students with military experience possess a higher level of maturity compared to traditional college students. Although this disparity may result in difficulties connecting with younger, inexperienced students, it can also produce positive outcomes for student veterans. For example, student veterans often acknowledge that their military training and experience contributed to greater maturity (Ness et al., 2014; Parks & Walker, 2014; Steele et al., 2010). Some older studies suggested that combat experience is associated with higher levels of emotional maturity (Aldwin & Levenson, 2005; Aldwin, Levenson, & Spiro, 1994; Casella & Motta, 1990; Elder & Clipp, 1988). More recent studies also provide additional support for this assertion (Ness et al., 2014; Spiro, Settersten, & Aldwin, 2016).

**Skills and abilities.** Student veterans arrive on campus already having developed a specific set of skills and abilities that can be helpful in the classroom; many have gained some sense of global awareness and are culturally adept (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011). Many veterans also recognize that they have greater self-discipline, stronger leadership and teamwork abilities, and better time-management skills as a result of their time in the military (Ford & Vignare, 2015; Olsen et al., 2014; Steele et al., 2010). According to Shea and Fishback (2012), “throughout their career, soldiers will attend a number of schools as part of their professional development” (p. 54); hence, the academic setting is not completely foreign to them.

**Focus.** In general, veterans are more academically focused and disciplined compared to their civilian counterparts (Durdella & Kim, 2012; Livingston, 2009), which they often attribute to their military service (Wheeler, 2012). The intense military training and life-changing combat
experiences undoubtedly created soldiers who had to be mission-focused as a matter of life or death. This mission focus can serve student veterans very well in the academic setting and help them to overcome potential difficulties (Ford & Vignare, 2015).

**Connection with other veterans.** Combat veterans share a deep bond and connection with each other that is difficult for non-combat veterans to understand. This bond is forged out of their “lived experiences during and after their time in the military” (Hammond, 2016, p. 154). Just as they watched out for each other in the combat zone, they tend to look out for one another on campus. Hammond (2016) suggested that the bond shared among combat veterans is so strong that they have “a heightened sense of awareness of other veterans and their well-being on campus” (Hammond, 2016, p. 154).

**Summary**

This study sought to address a gap in the literature on the experiences of combat veterans with significant combat exposure who successfully completed their bachelor’s degree through a private online program despite the presence of challenges related and unrelated to their combat exposure. What is currently known about combat veterans’ experiences in higher education primarily focuses on traditional, brick and mortar colleges and universities and addresses the negative impact of combat exposure. Previous research has examined the difficult transition from the combat zone to the college campus, as well as the impact of PTSD, TBI, and depression on OEF/OIF/OND veterans. Moreover, research has explored college funding for service members and their families, college enrollment, combat veterans with disabilities, and making the transition from the combat zone to the classroom (DiRamio et al., 2008; DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; DiRamio & Spires, 2009; Driscoll & Strauss, 2010; Herrmann et al., 2009, 2011; Slone & Freedman, 2008).
Very few studies have examined combat veterans’ successful degree attainment in higher education, and no studies have examined their degree attainment in private online higher education within the context of the educational resilience cycle (Morales, 2000) and PTG in combat veterans (Tedeschi, 2011). This gap in the literature warrants the study of combat veterans’ successful degree attainment in an online educational setting. Elliott (2014) highlighted the need to collect data from student veterans via one-on-one in-depth interviews in order to hear students’ stories in their own words. By documenting the processes of successful at-risk students over time, effective interventions and support services may be identified and developed to help a greater number of combat veterans achieve academic success.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the essence of the experiences of combat veterans with significant combat exposure who successfully completed their bachelor’s degree through a private online program despite the presence of challenges related and unrelated to their combat exposure. This chapter provides a detailed description of the research design used in this study and the methods that were used to select participants and setting. In addition, this chapter outlines the procedures that were followed throughout data collection and analysis and discusses my role as the researcher. This chapter concludes with a description of how trustworthiness of the study was established and a discussion of ethical considerations.

Design

A qualitative study was conducted using the transcendental phenomenological approach to gain a deeper understanding of the lived-experience of combat veterans with significant combat exposure who successfully completed their bachelor’s degree attainment through a private online program despite the presence of challenges related and unrelated to their combat exposure. The study of this phenomenon in terms of the meaning that participants ascribed to their experiences was best suited for a qualitative study. According to Creswell (2013), “qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 44).

Creswell (2013) identified several reasons for conducting qualitative studies, but two were particularly meaningful for this study. First, the phenomenon of academically successful
combat veterans in online higher education despite the presence of challenges related and unrelated to significant combat exposure needed to be explored. As previously stated, the risk factors that contribute to combat veterans’ academic failure in higher education has been studied extensively (Afari et al., 2015; Barnard-Brak et al., 2011; Barry et al., 2012; Elliot et al., 2011; Starr-Glass, 2015). However, there is a paucity of research on the academic success of combat veterans in higher education, particularly in the online setting (Ford & Vignare, 2015). Second, I needed to gain “a complex, detailed understanding of the issue” (Creswell, 2013, p. 47). Related to the first reason, there is simply not enough research on this phenomenon, resulting in a lack of understanding of how combat veterans with significant combat exposure overcome challenges to successfully attain their bachelor’s degree.

**Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is one of a number of qualitative approaches to inquiry. As a research method, a primary focus of phenomenology is to describe “what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76) with the purpose of grasping “the very nature” (van Manen, 1990, p. 177) of it. It is important to note, however, that phenomenology is more than just a qualitative research method. Milacci (2003) asserted that phenomenology “is first and foremost a philosophy” (p. 50) and stressed the importance of phenomenological researchers developing a good understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology.

Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger are perhaps the two most influential and cited philosophers as it pertains to phenomenological research (Milacci, 2003). Husserl developed the eidetic, or descriptive, approach to phenomenology in the early 20th century. According to Husserl, transcendental phenomenology provides the proper foundation for the acquisition of
knowledge by seeking to describe “the ideal meaning of various types of experience” (Smith, 2013, p. 12) while setting aside questions related to the natural world (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2013).

Heidegger initially studied under Husserl but eventually changed his approach to phenomenology as a result of key philosophical differences with his mentor. While Husserl focused on describing the essence of lived experiences, Heidegger placed a stronger emphasis on the interpretation of lived experiences. According to Heidegger (1962), “the meaning of phenomenological description as a method lies in interpretation” (p. 37). Hence, by studying the “interpretive structures of lived experience” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2013, The Histories and Varieties of Phenomenology section, para. 2), one can better “understand and engage things around us in our human world, including ourselves and others” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2013, The Histories and Varieties of Phenomenology section, para. 2).

These key philosophical differences led each philosopher to develop his own distinct method: transcendental phenomenology from Husserl, which emphasizes description, and hermeneutic phenomenology from Heidegger, which emphasizes interpretation. A key foundational difference between the two methods is found in the use of bracketing; transcendental/Husserlian phenomenology strictly adheres to the process of bracketing, also known as epoche, whereas hermeneutic/Heideggerian phenomenology rejects the concept of bracketing. A third phenomenological method known as Dutch phenomenology combines transcendental and hermeneutic approaches. Milacci (2003) employed this method in his study of spirituality in adult education practice.
Transcendental Phenomenology

Transcendental phenomenology logically and systematically analyzes and reports on the lived experience until an essential description of the essence of the experience or phenomenon is reached (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004; Moustakas, 1994). A major focus of transcendental phenomenology is to describe experiences rather than explain or interpret them. Hence, transcendental phenomenology was applicable to this study since my intent was to describe the experiences of OEF/OIF/OND combat veterans with significant combat exposure who successfully completed their bachelor’s degree through a private online program despite the presence of challenges related and unrelated to their combat exposure. This approach allowed me to explore the whole experiences of the participants and search for the textural (noematic) and structural (noetic) essences of the experiences. According to Ihde (1977), “noema is that which is experienced, the what of experience, the object-correlate. Noesis is the way in which the what is experienced, the experiencing or act of experiencing, the subject-correlate” (p. 43). Moustakas’ (1994) phenomenological research method includes three core processes based upon key concepts from Husserl’s methodology: “Epoche, Transcendental-Phenomenological Reduction, and Imaginative Variation” (p. 33). By following Moustakas’ (1994) phenomenological research method, I was able to see the phenomenon “freshly, as for the first time” (p. 34).

Epoche. Moustakas (1994) stated, “epoche is a Greek word meaning to refrain from judgment, to abstain from or stay away from the everyday, ordinary way of perceiving things” (p. 33). Epoche is the first step of phenomenology that was laid out in Husserl’s Ideas I (1913/2012). For me as the researcher, epoche required a shift from the natural attitude to a transcendental attitude. In the natural attitude, individuals “hold knowledge judgmentally”
(Moustakas, 1994, p. 33); the natural attitude asserts that what is perceived in nature “is actually there and remains there” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33) as it is perceived. While the natural attitude accepts “prejudices, viewpoints, or assumptions regarding the phenomenon under investigation” (Patton, 2015, p. 575), the goal of epoche is to become aware of areas of personal bias and set them aside in order for the phenomenon to be seen in new and different ways. As the natural attitude was set aside, epoche prepared me to describe the essence of the phenomenon I was studying.

**Bracketing and transcendental-phenomenological reduction.** Husserl developed the concept of bracketing by drawing upon his experience as a mathematician. In symbolic mathematics, a mathematical expression enclosed “in brackets indicates its operational precedence over the expressions surrounding it” (Hopkins, 2010, p.110). Likewise, the concept of bracketing within the context of phenomenological research required me to bracket out my “prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas about things” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85) in order to “identify the data in pure form” (Patton, 2015, p. 575). Acknowledging any prejudgments and noting them in a reflexive journal (see Appendix B) facilitated my bracketing and reflexivity. Reflective memoing provided opportunities for me to examine and reflect upon my interaction with the data (Tufford & Newman, 2010). I made entries in the reflexive journal which documented personal insights related to any preconceptions that came to light during data collection and analysis. Reflective memos were recorded electronically in a Word document as often as I interacted with the research data.

The goal of transcendental-phenomenological reduction was first to set aside everything else in order to focus on the research topic and questions (Moustakas, 1994). Next, all statements were horizontalized, placing equal value on each statement. Deleting repetitive or
overlapping statements through horizontalization revealed “the textural meanings and invariant constituents of the phenomenon” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97). Finally, the horizons were clustered into themes, and the horizons and themes were organized into a “coherent textural description” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97).

**Imaginative variation.** Following epoche, bracketing, and transcendental-phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation was the next step whereby my primary goal was to describe the essential structures of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Through imaginative variation, I was able to develop “enhanced or expanded versions of the invariant themes” (Patton, 2015, p. 576). Imaginative variation drove me toward “meanings and essences” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 98) in order to “derive structural themes from the textural descriptions that had been obtained through Phenomenological Reduction” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 99). The resulting “Composite Structural Description” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 142) provided an understanding of how participants experienced what they experienced. The final step of Moustakas’ (1994) phenomenological model was the construction of a textural-structural “synthesis of the meanings and essences of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 144).

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework guiding this study consisted of two theories: educational resilience cycle (Morales, 2000) and PTG in combat veterans (Tedeschi, 2011). The educational resilience cycle (Morales, 2000) posits that resilient students manifest various protective factors despite the presence of major risk factors (challenges) that have the potential to negatively impact academic achievement. Participants in the current study had already demonstrated an incredible amount of resilience. What remained to be seen was how, if at all, the five steps of the educational resilience cycle (Morales, 2000) were manifested in combat veterans’ lives despite
the presence of certain risk factors (challenges related and unrelated to combat exposure) throughout their educational journey. PTG in combat veterans (Tedeschi, 2011) suggested that combat experiences may yield positive outcomes for some veterans, citing several studies that associated combat experience with “lower levels of PTSD, and higher levels of emotional maturity (Aldwin & Levenson, 2005; Aldwin et al., 1994; Casella & Motta, 1990; Elder & Clipp, 1988)” (p. 138). Thus, participants in the current study were bounded by light-moderate to heavy combat exposure as measured by the CES (Keane et al., 1989) to ensure that all participants had experienced a significant amount of combat exposure.

**Research Questions**

The following four research questions were used to guide this study of combat veterans with significant combat exposure who successfully completed their bachelor’s degree through a private online institution despite the presence of challenges related and unrelated to their combat exposure:

**RQ1:** How do combat veterans with significant combat exposure describe the experience of attaining their bachelor’s degree through a private online program?

**RQ2:** What risk factors, if any, do combat veterans describe they encountered as they pursued their online bachelor’s degree?

**RQ3:** How do participants describe the experience of overcoming the challenges they identify to subsequently attain their online bachelor’s degree?

**RQ4:** How do participants describe the impact of their combat experience(s) on their degree attainment?

**Setting**

The setting for this study was Integrity University (pseudonym), a large, private
university located in the southeastern United States, with over 13,000 residential and over 85,000 online students enrolled. Integrity University offers residential and online programs in the associate, undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral levels. There are over 31,500 military-affiliated students enrolled in Integrity University, including 404 attending residentially, and 31,212 attending online. Of the 404 military-affiliated students attending residentially, 307 are enrolled in undergraduate programs, and of the 31,212 attending online, 15,898 are enrolled in undergraduate programs (E. Foutz, personal communication, July 5, 2016). The size of the online program and significant number of online, military-affiliated undergraduate students attending Integrity University made it an appealing setting for this study. In addition, Integrity University has a very diverse population with students from all over the United States and the world.

**Participants**

In a phenomenological study, participants must “have all experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 149) and be able to “articulate their lived experiences” (Creswell, 2013, p. 149). Hence, the participants for this study were selected using a combination of purposeful sampling techniques (and some convenience sampling) in order to identify combat veterans with significant combat exposure who successfully completed their bachelor’s degree through a private online program despite the presence of challenges related and unrelated to their combat exposure. Convenience sampling was employed to select participants “based on their case of availability” (Saumure & Given, 2008, p. 124). I accepted all participants that qualified after criterion sampling requirements were met. Although the recommended number of participants for a qualitative study is between three and 10 (Creswell, 2013), the target number of final participants for this study was 10-15 or until data saturation was reached (Moustakas, 1994).
The process of identifying data saturation point was challenging. However, after careful review of the data, it became clear to me that data saturation was reached at 10 participants (see Table 1) for this study.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Years of Service</th>
<th>Branch of Service</th>
<th>Level of Combat Exposure*</th>
<th>Combat-Related Injury(ies)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>Moderate-Heavy</td>
<td>None disclosed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benjamin</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Air Force</td>
<td>Light-Moderate</td>
<td>None disclosed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caleb</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>Moderate-Heavy</td>
<td>TBI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Marines</td>
<td>Light-Moderate</td>
<td>None disclosed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elijah</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>PTSD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finn</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>Light-Moderate</td>
<td>PTSD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabe</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Air Force</td>
<td>Moderate-Heavy</td>
<td>None disclosed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Marines</td>
<td>Light-Moderate</td>
<td>PTSD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaac</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Navy</td>
<td>Heavy</td>
<td>PTSD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Marines, Army</td>
<td>Heavy</td>
<td>PTSD, TBI</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*As per the Combat Exposure Scale (Keane et al., 1989)

Maximum variation sampling is a popular method used in qualitative studies. It was employed to ensure the greatest amount of heterogeneity among participants for this study. Although some consider a high degree of heterogeneity to be problematic for small samples, Patton (2015) asserted that maximum variation sampling may actually be a strength; “any common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared dimensions of a setting or phenomenon” (p. 283). For the purpose of this study, I utilized maximum variation sampling with the intent to select a participant group that included the greatest variety of race, gender, military branch, deployment location(s), number of deployments, age, and marital status.

Criterion sampling provided me with an opportunity “to review and study all cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance” (Patton, 2015, p. 281). In phenomenological studies, criterion sampling is an effective method to identify a group of individuals that provide a
good representation of “people who have experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 155). Criterion used for the current study was light-moderate to heavy combat exposure as measured by the CES (Keane et al., 1989) (see Appendix A). Selecting participants with light-moderate to heavy combat exposure ensured that all participants had experienced significant combat exposure, which increased the likelihood of the presence of PTSD, TBI, depression, or a combination of the three. The self-report CES (Keane et al., 1989) was embedded in the participant questionnaire (see Appendix A), and potential participants were required to submit a completed informed consent (see Appendix C) and participant questionnaire (see Appendix A) in order to be eligible to participate in the study.

The participant group was also bounded by online military students who conferred their bachelor’s degree in 2011 or later. By setting the year to 2011 or later, my intent was to ensure that the maximum number of potential participants were identified. In addition, the online program of Integrity University was established in 2007, hence 2011 would be the first graduating class. Once IRB approval (see Appendix D) was secured, I submitted a request to the Alumni Relations Department to request a report identifying potential study participants by delimiting students according to graduation date, military student status, and degree level earned (bachelor’s). The completed participant questionnaire (see Appendix A) provided additional information that aided in the sampling process.

**Procedures**

I first submitted the proposal for research and secured the approval of Liberty University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). Upon receiving approval from the IRB, I contacted the Director of Alumni Relations of Liberty University with a request to send a study recruitment email (see Appendix E) to all online alumni who were identified in the system as a
“military” student who graduated with a bachelor’s degree between 2011 and 2016. The recruitment email was sent to just under 8,000 alumni who met the criteria. This email informed potential participants of the purpose of the study and included a link to the informed consent form (see Appendix C), contact information form (see Appendix F), and participant questionnaire (see Appendix A). In addition, the informed consent form indicated that participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences. The initial email only yielded 26 responses, but after an email reminder was sent, I received an additional 160 responses. Ultimately, 38 potential participants completed the online informed consent form, contact information form, and participant questionnaire. After reviewing the 38 informed consent forms, contact information forms, and participant questionnaires, I identified and contacted 13 potential participants to schedule one-on-one interviews.

Maximum variation and criterion sampling was conducted based upon the participants’ responses in the participant questionnaire (see Appendix A). The participant questionnaire was used to collect demographic information in addition to details related to military service, level of combat exposure, and service-related injuries. I attempted to use maximum variation sampling to delimit potential participants based upon race, gender, military branch, deployments, age, dependents, and marital status. However, I was unable to secure participants that represented more than one race (white) and gender (male). Therefore, I was limited to selecting a participant group that represented the greatest amount of heterogeneity related to military branch, number of deployments, and combat exposure.

Criterion sampling identified participants with light-moderate, moderate, moderate-heavy, and heavy combat exposure as measured by the CES (Keane et al., 1989) that was
embedded in the participant questionnaire (see Appendix A). Participant responses to the seven-question CES (Keane et al., 1989) was calculated using the CES Scoring Sheet (Keane et al., 1989) (see Appendix G). The seven questions addressed the following combat situations: (1) being on dangerous duty, (2) being under enemy fire, (3) being surrounded by the enemy, (4) percentage of soldiers in unit killed, wounded, or missing in action, (5) firing rounds at the enemy, (6) seeing someone hit by incoming or outgoing rounds, and (7) in danger of being killed (Keane et al., 1989). Upon receipt of the completed responses, I utilized the CES Scoring Sheet to calculate a sum of weighted scores in order to determine participants’ level of combat exposure. The scores were classified into one of five categories of combat exposure: 0-8 (light), 9-16 (light-moderate), 17-24 (moderate), 25-32 (moderate-heavy), or 33-41 (heavy). Participants that scored in the light-moderate to heavy range were selected for the study based upon final calculated scores in order to ensure that they met the criteria for significant combat exposure. Respondents with light combat exposure scores were omitted from this study since the focus was on participants with significant combat exposure.

Once the final group of potential participants were identified and agreed to participate in the study, they received an email containing a link to a Qualtrics survey that housed the informed consent form (see Appendix C), contact information form (see Appendix F), and participant questionnaire (see Appendix A) with a request to return the completed form by a target deadline. I then emailed participants to schedule in-depth interviews. In-depth interviews were video recorded via WebEx and transcribed by professional transcription services. Focus group forums were conducted in an asynchronous, online discussion forum using a Blackboard course shell, and since the communication was in written form, transcription was not necessary.

Forrest (2013) utilized an online focus group to collect data for his study citing Remler
and Van Ryzin (2011), who suggested the use of an online focus group when the distance between participants was not conducive to a traditional focus group. However, instead of utilizing a video- or chat-based online focus group, Forrest (2013) conducted an asynchronous online discussion forum using a Blackboard course shell. Since the participants in the current study resided at a long distance, some even out of the country, I utilized the asynchronous online discussion forum in order to provide a focus group-type setting for participants. The discussion forums consisted of five focus group prompts (see Appendix H) related to the research questions. In addition to the five focus group prompts, follow-up questions were asked as needed. Reminders and updates were emailed to participants to encourage participation in the discussion forums by established deadlines. All data was securely locked in an office or password-protected computer file.

**The Researcher's Role**

In qualitative research, the researcher becomes the human instrument in the collection of data, making observations, taking field notes, asking interview questions, and interpreting responses (Patton, 2015). As such, the researcher must “carefully reflect on, deal with, and report potential sources of bias and error” (Patton, 2015, p. 58). My role as the human instrument in this transcendental phenomenological study required me to acknowledge any experiences or bias that had the potential to influence the data analysis. I was employed by Integrity University as an administrative faculty member for the undergraduate online psychology program until I was appointed as Dean of the College of General Studies just a few weeks prior to completing this dissertation. I have also taught online courses since 2012; however, I did not have any relationship with the participants prior to this study.
Integrity University is a private, faith-based institution whose mission is “Training Champions for Christ.” The spiritual component cannot be separated from the education that students receive from Integrity University. Students are encouraged to develop mastery in their chosen field of study, but they are also encouraged in their spiritual development as they learn to integrate their faith with course content. As such, I recognize that I brought a bias regarding private, faith-based online education and online students based upon my past experience as an administrative faculty member of Integrity University, and now in my current role as Dean.

I have a vested interest in the academic success and spiritual growth of online students, particularly those who are combat veterans. Thus, I brought to this study a desire to see a greater percentage of combat veterans achieve their academic goals while developing a deep faith in Jesus Christ. Through this study, I gained a new appreciation for combat veterans in higher education, and it deepened my resolve in serving this special population. As I interacted with the participants and heard their incredible stories of resilience, they became more than just a set of numbers on an enrollment or retention report. Rather, I was able to see them as individuals with powerful experiences who beat the odds by overcoming seemingly insurmountable challenges to achieve their educational goals. In addition to my administrative role, I have also taught undergraduate online courses since 2012, so I was careful to identify and omit any potential participants with whom I may have had a prior teaching relationship.

Additionally, the deep respect and gratitude that I have for military service men and women had the potential to influence data analysis. My previous interactions with combat veterans in higher education have likely contributed to the preconceived notions I brought to this study. To the best of my recollection, I cannot remember a single time that a military student in any of my classes did not do well. In fact, military students often performed at the top of the
class, submitting assignments by or before deadlines and actively engaging with their peers in online discussion board forums. These past interactions served to deepen my interest in the academic success of combat veterans in private online higher education despite the potential presence of challenges related and unrelated to significant combat exposure.

Personally, I have a close family member who is a combat veteran. As I was growing up with a father who fought in the Korean War, I observed a man who was successful on many levels. Aside from some minor physical limitations as a result of his combat-related injury, I do not recall ever seeing my father exhibit any negative consequences from his combat experience. I had the great fortune of observing someone who did not suffer from the invisible wounds of war that so many OEF/OIF/OND combat veterans struggle with today. I believe that my personal experience of growing up with a father who served in combat has contributed in some way to my concern for OEF/OIF/OND combat veterans, particularly those who are under “my watch care” at the university, and I was compelled to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences.

In contrast to the positive personal and professional interactions I have had with combat veterans, it has been difficult not to be impacted by the portrayals of combat veterans in recent Hollywood movies such as *American Sniper* (2014), *The Hurt Locker* (2009), *Lone Survivor* (2013), and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012). While I recognize that the people and events in these movies are sensationalized with the sole purpose of selling box office tickets, I still find myself deeply moved whenever I see a war movie. The freedom we enjoy in the United States comes at a high cost to those who serve in the military. I am filled with a deep sense of gratitude as I consider what combat veterans must have experienced on the battlefield and the countless acts of selflessness and courage they demonstrated each time they put themselves in harm’s way.
Finally, my personal relationship with Jesus Christ impacts every area of my life. Throughout this study, I was compelled by my firm belief in the biblical principles of exhortation and helping others in need. Hence, I was highly motivated to learn from study participants who achieved academic success despite the difficult challenges they encountered throughout their educational journey in order to find ways to help other combat veterans succeed in their educational pursuits; I consider it an honor to serve those who have willingly risked their lives for my well-being. It was crucial for me to bracket out these experiences and deeply held beliefs by recording reflective memos throughout the research process (Moustakas, 1994) (see Appendix B).

**Data Collection**

This study used a transcendental phenomenological approach to qualitative research. Qualitative research utilizes data that is collected from multiple sources. For the current study, data was collected from participants through the participant questionnaire (see Appendix A), in-depth interviews, and focus group forums. As the human research instrument, I sought to describe the experience of OEF/OIF/OND combat veterans with significant combat exposure who successfully completed their bachelor’s degree despite the presence of challenges related and unrelated to their combat exposure.

**Participant Questionnaire**

The participant questionnaire (see Appendix A) was accessed through a Qualtrics survey and consisted of questions that helped me identify potential participants for this study. The participant questionnaire (see Appendix A) included open- and closed-ended questions in addition to the seven Likert-type questions from the CES (Keane et al., 1989) and four questions from the Brief Traumatic Brain Injury Screen (BTBIS) (Schwab et al., 2007) and
neurobehavioral symptom checklist (Ness et al., 2014). The CES (Keane et al., 1989) questions that were embedded in the participant questionnaire (see Appendix A) helped me to identify potential participants with light-moderate to heavy exposure to combat in order to ensure a significant level of combat exposure in all participants, and the BTBIS (Schwab et al., 2007) and neurobehavioral symptom checklist (Ness et al., 2014) questions helped me to identify potential participants who likely experienced symptoms of TBI. An informed consent form (see Appendix C) was accessible through the Qualtrics survey along with the participant questionnaire (see Appendix A) and contact information form (see Appendix F); interested participants were instructed to complete the participant questionnaire along with the informed consent form and contact information form.

**Interviews**

In-depth interviews are the primary method of data collection in phenomenological studies, focusing on describing “the meaning of the phenomenon for a small number of individuals who have experienced it” (Creswell, 2013, p. 161). The interview questions (see Appendix I) for this study were reviewed by two experts in the field and then pilot tested with two combat veterans with significant combat exposure prior to scheduling interviews with study participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via WebEx videoconferencing and digitally recorded. Participants were able to choose the most natural setting that allowed for the WebEx technology to be set up. The in-depth interview questions were designed with the intent to address the four research questions of this study.

Each interview lasted between 45 minutes to one hour. The interviews were video recorded and transcribed by a professional transcription service. An interview protocol (see Appendix I) was implemented for each interview. Interview questions were organized into four...
sections: background, military experience, educational experience, and resilience. Main questions were used to focus on a main component of the research problem, and the semi-structured format allowed me to ask follow-up questions to extract “further depth and detail” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 117), as examples, concepts, and themes were clarified.

The following open-ended questions were used for the interviews:

**Background**

1. Thank you for participating in this study. Have you ever been interviewed about your combat experiences before today?

2. What was that interview experience like for you?

**Military Experience**

3. What led you to join the military?

4. What expectations did you have when you joined?

5. How did your military experience compare to your expectations?

6. What did you like most about your military experience?

7. What can you tell me about your combat experience?

8. What was the experience of combat like for you?

9. Looking back on your combat experience, how would you describe the impact it has had on your life? How have you changed as a person?

**Educational Experience**

10. What led you to get your degree from Integrity University?

11. How, if at all, did the faith-based component of Integrity University influence your decision to enroll?
12. How did you make the decision between an online program versus a residential program?

13. What challenges, if any, did you face as you worked on your degree?

14. How, if at all, were those challenges related to your military service?

**Resilience**

15. How did you overcome those challenges?

16. How, if at all, did your combat experience contribute to your academic success?

17. How, if at all, did your faith contribute to your academic success?

18. How do you see those factors manifested in your life today?

19. What advice would you give combat veterans who are pursuing their online degree?

20. What plans do you have for your future? Where do you see yourself in five or ten years?

21. Is there anything you would like to add that I have not asked you about your experience of earning a bachelor’s degree after being in the military?

22. Is there anything you wish you would have shared during the interview but did not?

23. Do you have any questions for me?

The purpose of the first two questions was to build rapport with the participant and gather background information related to prior interview experiences. The questions pertaining to military experience was to gain an understanding of the events that led up to and included participants’ combat experience. Questions three through nine were designed to extract a rich, detailed description of participants’ military experience as they lived it (Adams & Van Manen, 2008). Elliott (2014) suggested that data needs to be collected from student veterans via one-on-one in-depth interviews in order for their stories to be heard in their own words.
There is growing interest in the educational experiences of military students on college campuses. Current literature has suggested that colleges are seeing dramatic growth in the military student population on their campuses (Griffin & Gilbert, 2012; Parks & Walker, 2014; Shea & Fishback, 2012). The purpose of the questions pertaining to educational experience was to have participants describe what it was like for them to enter college after returning from combat. Questions 10 through 14 were designed to gain insight into any challenges participants encountered throughout their educational journey.

The resilience cycle (Morales, 2000) involves how protective factors are manifested in resilient students and how these protective factors interact with risk factors to foster resilience. Morales (2000), in the resilience cycle, acknowledged a number of key factors such as students’ self-awareness, key protective factors working in concert simultaneously, and students’ ability to recognize and continually refine protective factors. Questions 15 through 20 were designed to gain insight into the presence of key resilience factors in the lives of the participants.

Focus Groups

A focus group can provide clarification and validation to the individual interviews (Patton, 2015). Focus groups can also bring people with shared experiences together to discuss a major topic or “major issues that affect them” (Patton, 2015, p. 283) and be exposed to others’ views. Moreover, conducting an online focus group is supported in the literature as an acceptable method when the distance between participants is too great of a burden to overcome (Remler & Van Ryzin, 2011).

In his dissertation, Forrest (2013) created and implemented an asynchronous, online discussion forum using a Blackboard course shell offered through coursesites.com. I replicated this data collection method in the current study. Once the in-depth interviews were completed, I
created the focus group forum in Blackboard using the CourseSites website. Password-protected access to this Blackboard course shell was granted to participants in order to create a secure platform for the focus group forum, and detailed instructions (see Appendix J) were emailed to participants. Participants were asked to answer five prompts (see Appendix H) related to the four research questions and respond to other participants. The prompts allowed participants to further clarify their own combat and educational experiences and hear from other participants. Participation in the focus group forum started strong with nine participants engaging with Prompt #1 but steadily declined with each subsequent prompt. Despite the lack of participation in subsequent prompts, I was able to glean deeper insight into participants’ experiences through their posts.

Data Analysis

Coding Software

Qualitative coding software can help manage the rigorous task of coding qualitative data through the use of “different tools and formats for coding” (Patton, 2015, p. 553). In-depth interviews were transcribed by a professional transcription service. It was not necessary to have responses to open-ended questions from the participant questionnaire and focus group forum posts transcribed because they were already in written form. All transcripts and written data from the participant questionnaires and focus group forum prompts were imported into ATLAS.ti coding software for initial coding. After the initial round of coding (horizontalization), I transferred the invariant constituents into Microsoft Excel and used this software for the remainder of the data analysis.

Transcendental Phenomenological Analysis
Moustakas’ (1994) modification of the Van Kaam method of analysis of phenomenological data was used to analyze the data for this study. However, while Moustakas (1994) identified the first step as listing and preliminary grouping, I began the data analysis by first bracketing the topic through reflective memoing (see Appendix B). As I collected and analyzed the data, I frequently wrote reflective memos in order to capture my thoughts, feelings, and perceptions throughout the research process. By intentionally and continuously bracketing past experiences and biases related to combat veterans in online higher education, I made an intentional effort to focus on the experiences of the participants to gain new insight and information throughout the process. In addition to reflective memoing, a researcher’s journal allowed me to record my thoughts about the research material throughout the entire process. The researcher’s journal included my personal thoughts related to the research topic, data collection and analysis, and the decisions made throughout the process. My notes were recorded electronically in a Word document which was saved on a password-protected computer in addition to being uploaded to DropBox, a password-protected web-based storage account.

The first step in Moustakas’ modified version of Van Kaam’s transcendental phenomenological data analysis is *horizontalization* (Moustakas, 1994). I engaged in this first step as I received transcript interviews rather than waiting for all transcripts to be completed. In this first step, I examined each transcript using ATLAS.ti coding software, “listing every expression relevant to the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 120) and assigning each expression with a code. Each expression, or horizon, was “treated with equal value” (Patton, 2015, p. 576) in its ability to provide a description of the experience, and unrelated statements were removed. The horizons were then exported to a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet.
Next, *invariant constituents* were determined through the process of reduction and elimination by testing each expression for two requirements: (a) Does it contain a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it? and (b) Is it possible to abstract and label it? (Moustakas, 1994). Horizons that met these requirements were clustered into core themes, and those that did not meet the requirements were eliminated. The next step was to check the invariant constituents and accompanying themes against the complete participant transcript (Moustakas, 1994); if they were not explicitly expressed or incompatible, they were deleted.

Once the themes were validated against each participant’s transcript, *individual textural descriptions* were constructed for each participant by using the relevant, validated invariant constituents and themes (Moustakas, 1994). At this juncture, the goal was to uncover *what* was experienced as part of the experience (*noema*). Participants’ own words from the transcribed interviews were used to support the individual textural descriptions. *Individual structural descriptions* were constructed based on the individual textural description and *imaginative variation*. I approached this step of the analysis by engaging my imagination and being open to different perspectives as I looked for possible meanings (Moustakas, 1994). At this point in the data analysis, my goal was to uncover *how* the experience was experienced (*noesis*) in order to provide “a vivid account of the underlying dynamics of the experiences, the themes and qualities” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 135) connected with combat veterans’ successful degree attainment in online education. Next, I constructed a *textural-structural description* of meanings and essences of the experience for each participant. Finally, a *composite description* of the meanings and essences of the experience was developed from the *individual textural-structural descriptions*. As a result of the thorough examination of the invariant meanings and themes of
every participant, I was able to uncover “a composite description of the meanings and essences of the experience, representing the group as a whole” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121).

**Trustworthiness**

Qualitative researchers who establish trustworthiness can be confident in the credibility of their findings and interpretations (Patton, 2015). Patton (2015) stressed the importance of reflexivity in strengthening the trustworthiness of qualitative research. Reflexivity refers to epoche and bracketing, whereby the researcher suspends judgment and is continually alert and aware of personal bias and subjectivity (Patton, 2015). Trustworthiness in qualitative research can be addressed in a number of ways. Lincoln and Guba (1996) identified four aspects of trustworthiness for qualitative research: credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability.

**Credibility**

Often compared to what internal validity is to quantitative research, credibility in qualitative research is increased when various data collection and verification methods are employed. In addition, “time is a major factor in the acquisition of trustworthy data” (Patton, 2015, p. 685). Prolonged engagement increases the credibility of qualitative research as the researcher invests lengthy time in gathering and analyzing the data. In addition to time spent with each participant in the in-depth interview, I was able to spend countless hours listening to interview recordings and reviewing transcribed data from interviews, focus group forums, and information from the participant questionnaires. Triangulation is another method of increasing credibility. Participant questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and focus groups forums were used to establish credibility through the triangulation of data. Finally, peer debriefing and expert review were employed as I interacted with members of my dissertation committee and other
experts in the field. I conducted member checks with study participants by providing them with the opportunity to review Chapter Four prior to final draft submission. Participants were given an opportunity to comment on anything I may have missed or misinterpreted by reviewing the results of this study.

**Dependability and Confirmability**

Dependability in qualitative research is analogous to reliability in quantitative research and is concerned with the consistency of the researcher throughout the process. Dependability focuses on “the process of the inquiry and the inquirer’s responsibility for ensuring that the process was logical, traceable, and documented” (Patton, 2015, p. 685). Auditing has been highlighted as an effective procedure to establish dependability and confirmability in qualitative studies (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015). In order to increase the dependability of this study, I maintained a researcher’s journal (audit trail) (see Appendix K) to record the choices I made throughout the research process. I also kept a reflective memo as I engaged in bracketing throughout the study. By keeping a sequential, written record of the choices I made throughout this study and documenting the bracketing process, I believe I was able to establish dependability and confirmability.

Confirmability in qualitative research is analogous to objectivity in quantitative research. Confirmability is “concerned with establishing the fact that the data and interpretations of an inquiry were not merely figments of the inquirer’s imagination” (Patton, 2015, p. 685). As the researcher, I was careful to clearly articulate the decision-making processes that I employed throughout the course of this study. Audit or decision trails are considered most useful for establishing confirmability (Patton, 2015) and as previously discussed, I employed an audit trail in the current study.
Transferability

Transferability in qualitative research is analogous to external validity in quantitative research (Patton, 2015). Transferability was addressed through the use of rich, thick description. Participants and setting were described in detail, “using strong action verbs, and quotes” (Creswell, 2013, p. 252). Rich, thick description has allowed readers to determine the transferability of the information being presented. This type of detailed description has facilitated the transfer of information from one setting to another and allowed readers to decide “whether the findings can be transferred” (Creswell, 2013, p. 252).

Ethical Considerations

According to Creswell (2013), ethical issues can arise at any time during the research process. Therefore, researchers must be aware of and prepared for potential ethical issues. Prior to collecting data, informed consent forms (see Appendix C), which included the stated purpose of the study, were distributed to potential participants indicating that their participation in the study was voluntary and they would not be placed at undue risk or suffer negative consequences for opting out of the study. A major ethical consideration for this study was protecting the anonymity of participants. Therefore, all participants were given a pseudonym. The security of data was addressed by keeping data securely locked in an office or password protected computer file.

Power imbalance was another ethical consideration for this study. According to Patton (2015), a power imbalance can be created during the interview process due to “the hierarchical relationship often established between the researcher and the participant” (p. 42). I attempted to remove any issues with power imbalance by “building trust and avoiding leading questions” (Patton, 2015) throughout the interview process.
Finally, combat veterans with significant combat exposure may be considered an at-risk population. Sensitivity of information and boundary blurring was a major consideration. Some interview questions had the potential to elicit strong, emotional responses from participants. In the event that a strong emotional response was triggered, I realized that participants might need to be referred to a professional counselor. Hence, a list of contact information for counselors and support services for veterans was provided for all participants in the study (see Appendix L).

**Summary**

The transcendental phenomenological approach provided the foundation for describing the essence of the experiences of combat veterans with significant combat exposure who successfully completed their bachelor’s degree through a private online program despite the presence of challenges related and unrelated to their combat exposure. This chapter provided a detailed description of the transcendental phenomenological research design that was used for this study. Research questions were presented, setting and participant selection methods identified, and procedures outlined. Furthermore, data collection and analysis procedures, establishing trustworthiness, and ethical considerations were addressed.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the essence of the experiences of combat veterans with significant combat exposure who successfully completed their bachelor’s degree through a private online program. This study was guided by four research questions:

RQ1: How do combat veterans with significant combat exposure describe the experience of attaining their bachelor’s degree through an online program?

RQ2: What challenges, if any, do participants describe they encountered as they pursued their online bachelor’s degree?

RQ3: How do participants describe the experience of overcoming the challenges they identify to subsequently attain their online bachelor’s degree?

RQ4: How do participants describe the impact of their combat experience(s) on their degree attainment?

A transcendental phenomenological design was employed to explore the phenomenon of combat veterans’ degree attainment in online higher education. Due to the nature of the phenomenon being studied, transcendental phenomenology was used because of its focus on the description of the essences of the experience or phenomenon (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004; Moustakas, 1994) rather than the interpretation of the experience. Focusing on the description of the essence of the experience for each participant and the group as a whole allowed me to identify the structural and textural essences that emerged from the phenomenological data analysis, ultimately resulting in the construction of a textural-structural synthesis of the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). This chapter presents the results of the phenomenological
data analysis within the context of the theoretical framework and research questions. Group and individual portraits are provided for the purpose of establishing “some degree of familiarity or acquaintance” (Milacci, 2003, p. 75) with the participants of the study. Finally, a description of the themes generated and a synthesis of the essence of participants’ experiences are presented.

**Participants**

Combat veterans with significant combat exposure who completed a bachelor’s degree through a private online program were recruited for this study through purposeful sampling methods. Convenience sampling identified participants based upon their availability (Creswell, 2013; Saumure & Given, 2008). Criterion sampling ensured that participants met the criteria for the study (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015). Maximum variation sampling ensured the greatest amount of heterogeneity among study participants (Patton, 2015). Ten combat veterans were selected to participate in this research project (pseudonyms Aaron, Benjamin, Caleb, Dan, Elijah, Finn, Gabe, Henry, Isaac, and Jacob). These participants provided detailed narratives of their experiences by engaging in in-depth interviews and focus group forums and completing participant questionnaires. What follows is my best representation of their experiences based upon my interactions with the study participants and the collected data.

**Group Portrait**

As a group, these 10 individuals have the shared experience of attaining a bachelor’s degree through an online program after having obtained significant combat exposure as a result of their military service. It is interesting to note that they also share some commonalities that were not included in the criteria for this study. For example, nine out of 10 participants have completed or are in the process of completing a master’s degree. Furthermore, although the setting for the study was a large, private, faith-based university, a spiritual component was not
included in the criteria for participation. Hence, another interesting commonality is how every participant made mention of their relationship with God and how their faith developed during their educational journey. Other commonalities to note are marital status, dependents, race, and sex. Nine participants were married when they began their educational journey. Two participants divorced, and one remarried prior to earning his bachelor’s degree. Eight out of 10 participants had children during their educational journey. The average age of participants was 36.5 years, with nine out of 10 participants in their thirties. Caleb, who was 53, was the only participant not in his thirties. Finally, all 10 participants were white males.

The combat veterans interviewed in this study represented four branches of the military; four served and one was currently serving in the Army, two were serving in the Air Force, two were serving in the Marines, and one was serving in the Navy. Six participants were active duty at the time of the interview, three were discharged, and one was retired. All participants served in at least one military operation; five served in OEF and OIF, three served in OIF, one served in OEF, and one served in OIF and OND. Combined, this group of combat veterans served a total of 27 deployments. Individually, the number of deployments ranged from one to six. All 10 participants experienced significant combat exposure; combat exposure levels (see Table 1) ranged from light-moderate to heavy exposure as measured by the Combat Exposure Scale (CES), which was embedded in the participant questionnaire (see Appendix A). Total years of military service (see Table 1) ranged from four to 29 years, for a combined total of 135 years of service.

As the participants reflected on their military combat experience, all 10 described at least one major traumatic event in which they or others were in danger of being injured or killed; the fact that they experienced a major traumatic event is undeniable. Although they all experienced
significant combat exposure, the experiences described are unique to each individual, and despite the distinct nature of each participant’s combat experience, all 10 participants acknowledged being changed by combat. For example, Gabe stated, “…you just change. And a lot of times you do not notice it until other people point it out to you.” Moreover, in describing how he was changed by combat, Jacob stated, “Well, in a lot of different areas I’m different.” The individual portraits will provide a more detailed description about how each participant has been changed by their combat experience.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Years of Service</th>
<th>Branch of Service</th>
<th>Level of Combat Exposure*</th>
<th>Combat-Related Injury(ies)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>Moderate-Heavy</td>
<td>None disclosed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benjamin</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Air Force</td>
<td>Light-Moderate</td>
<td>None disclosed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caleb</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>Moderate-Heavy</td>
<td>TBI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Marines</td>
<td>Light-Moderate</td>
<td>None disclosed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elijah</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>PTSD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finn</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Army</td>
<td>Light-Moderate</td>
<td>PTSD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabe</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Air Force</td>
<td>Moderate-Heavy</td>
<td>None disclosed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Marines</td>
<td>Light-Moderate</td>
<td>PTSD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaac</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Navy</td>
<td>Heavy</td>
<td>PTSD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Marines, Army</td>
<td>Heavy</td>
<td>PTSD, TBI</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*As per the Combat Exposure Scale (Keane et al., 1989)

In describing the experience of earning their bachelor’s degree from an online program, all 10 participants indicated that it was a challenging yet fulfilling journey. Five participants earned a bachelor’s degree in interdisciplinary studies, and one each in business, criminal justice, religion, business administration communication, and psychology. The flexibility and convenience of Integrity University’s online program was a major factor that all 10 participants identified as contributing to their initial decision to enroll, as well as their subsequent degree attainment. Nine out of 10 participants applied their GI Bill or other military benefits for their
education; seven out of nine participants specifically mentioned how much they appreciated receiving generous institutional and/or military benefits. Six out of ten participants selected Integrity University because it accepted the most transfer credits for previous courses and/or life experience. In addition to receiving generous financial and academic support, eight out of 10 participants described the incredible support they received from their spouses. For example, Benjamin stated, “My wife really pushed me. I would not be where I am today without her. She really pushed me to go and do it.” Moreover, Elijah stated, “My wife. She really stayed by me and supported me.”

All 10 participants indicated that work demands, which were primarily military-related, made their educational experience quite challenging. For example, Gabe stated, “The military encourages all of its members to go to school, but there is no concern about how much of your time they decide to obligate and how you will schedule that schooling.” Another challenge that was commonly described by participants was balancing work, family, and education. Aaron described trying to balance family and school as one of the greatest struggles he faced throughout his educational journey. He stated,

So, I started going to school in 2013. So, from 2013 until 2015 I was a student full-time, which means I missed out on soccer games, I missed out on Friday nights and weekends that I should have had. My days off I was spending in front of the computer the entire time. So, things like that – bonding with my family, doing activities with my family. Unless I wanted to put off school and catch up later it was not going to happen. That was probably the biggest struggle was being able to balance those. Being able to explain to my kids who were pretty young back then, they were, I think five- and six-years-old at that time. “Dad, let’s play.” “Hey, I cannot go outside and play football with you right
now because I have to do this [school].” That is something Dad is supposed to do. So yes, definitely having kids while doing it [school] and putting off time with them, time with the family that was a struggle – that was the biggest.

Participants also described challenges related to time management, online format, lack of motivation, and diminished skills.

Whether explicitly acknowledged by participants or implied in their narratives, manifestations of PTG were woven throughout each participant’s story. Often triggered by a traumatic experience such as combat trauma, PTG is typically manifested in five general areas which have already been discussed in Chapter Two. All 10 participants demonstrated a greater sense of personal strength, recognition of new possibilities, improved personal relationships, and spiritual development (see Table 2). As an example, a greater sense of personal strength is implied in Gabe’s statement: “…when it gets hard it was just again reminding yourself this [school] is not the hardest thing you have ever done. It is just a difficult thing.” In addition, Finn stated, “I started to realize my potential.” Recognition of new possibilities was evidenced in Gabe’s confession, “I thought I was just lucky to get my bachelor’s and now I have got aspirations that go all the way up to the doctorate level.” Of the participants that demonstrated growth in the area of improved personal relationships, six described the deep relationships and sense of camaraderie that formed with friends they fought beside in combat. Aaron went so far as to call it a “brotherhood.” In describing his spiritual development, Benjamin stated,

I started to study more, and develop more, and progress more. I think it kind of went hand in hand, I think both grew at the same time, my academic experiences and abilities as well as my faith. And it took a lot of time for me to understand that faith was really important to me.
There was one area of PTG that was not experienced by all participants; Benjamin and Finn were the only two participants that clearly described a new appreciation for life. For example, Finn stated, “I take every day as a blessing, I really do,” and Benjamin stated, “the one thing that Afghanistan taught me was that you don’t know when that is going to be, so you best work as hard as you possibly can.” The fact that only two out of 10 participants demonstrated new appreciation of life was an interesting finding. Both Benjamin and Finn had light-moderate combat exposure and served a six-month deployment. In addition to Benjamin and Finn, two other participants experienced light-moderate combat exposure. Hence, this finding was not correlated to the level of combat exposure. However, the one similarity that Benjamin and Finn shared exclusively was the number of deployments; they each served one deployment while the other eight participants served anywhere from two to six, which may explain the result.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Greater Sense of Personal Strength</th>
<th>New Appreciation of Life</th>
<th>Recognition of New Possibilities</th>
<th>Improved Personal Relationships</th>
<th>Spiritual Development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benjamin</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caleb</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elijah</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finn</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabe</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaac</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants demonstrated PTG in at least four out of five general areas. Aaron, Caleb, Dan, Elijah, Gabe, Henry, Isaac, and Jacob demonstrated PTG in four areas. Benjamin and Finn demonstrated PTG in all five areas. The individual portraits will provide a more detailed...
description of each specific area of PTG that was manifested throughout each participant’s educational journey to degree attainment.

Aaron

Aaron is a 32-year-old white male, married with seven children, who earned his bachelor’s degree in criminal justice from Integrity University in 2014 after having served in the U.S. Army for eight years prior to being discharged. He is currently working on a master’s degree in public policy. Aaron was deployed to Afghanistan during OEF for 12 months and Iraq during OIF for 18 months, and his Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) was military police. Aaron’s responses to the CES indicated that he experienced moderate-heavy combat exposure. Of the two deployments served, his deployment to Iraq had the most profound impact on him. He stated, “I was in Afghanistan for an entire year, I did not see a quarter of what I saw day one in Iraq…Iraq really is what changed me more than anything.” Aaron was changed in both positive and negative ways. His ability to handle stress and perform well under pressure is a strength that was sharpened through his military combat experience and subsequently contributed to his degree attainment. On the other hand, Aaron’s combat experience not only changed his outlook on life, it created some communication and relational issues with his wife and children upon his return from deployment. In addition, reintegration into society eight years after returning from Iraq continues to be a struggle. While he did not sustain any injuries from his deployments, he did indicate experiencing headaches, ringing in ears, irritability, fatigue, mood swings, heart pounding or racing, and intrusive memories.

Being able to use the Post-9/11 GI Bill for his schooling contributed to Aaron’s positive educational journey. In addition to this military benefit, the university accepted a significant number of transfer credits. Aaron worked as a police officer while enrolled at Integrity
University. The online format worked well with his work schedule, providing the flexibility needed to accommodate working different shifts as a police officer. Although the faith-based mission of Integrity University was not a major consideration initially, his experience at the university actually reaffirmed his worldview. At the same time, his spiritual life may have suffered because he would often work on school assignments instead of going to church. In addition, Aaron struggled with missing out on family activities and often thought about quitting school. However, he persisted because he knew his kids were looking up to him and he wanted to set an example for them. Moreover, the support he received from his wife was quite meaningful. His wife encouraged him during the times he wanted to quit by telling him, “I will support you. Whatever you want to do I will support it. But remember you can do it. You have kids watching you. They do not want to see you quitting.”

There are four areas of PTG that are exhibited in Aaron’s experience. His combat experience provided a greater sense of personal strength; he realized that if he can survive combat, he can get through school. He knew that he was going to overcome regardless of any challenges he encountered. Furthermore, Aaron’s ability to work well under pressure enabled him to meet looming assignment deadlines. The military helped Aaron develop a global perspective that enhanced his reading and discussion board assignments. Aaron recognized that new possibilities are in his future, and even though he may not know exactly what they are, he is intent on putting in the effort to make it happen. He stated, “I just saw that with hard work it really does pay off because I got this – I have this degree I am not using right this second, but I am working on it.” Aaron also exhibited improved personal relationships, particularly with his Army buddies. For example,
I have friends I have not talked to in years that we went – we basically went to war together – and you get a bond with these individuals that it does not matter how long you do not talk to them. I can call them up right now and they would do anything for me. I would do the same for them.

In relation to *spiritual development*, Aaron would often turn to prayer during difficult times throughout his educational journey.

**Benjamin**

Benjamin is a 33-year-old white male, married with one child, who earned his bachelor’s degree in interdisciplinary studies from Integrity University in 2013. He also has a master’s degree in public policy. At the time of the interview, Benjamin had served 16 years in the U.S. Air Force and had just been deployed again in support of OEF. He was deployed to Afghanistan in 2009 during OEF for six months, and his Air Force Specialty Code (AFSC) was paralegal. Benjamin’s responses to the CES indicated that he experienced light-moderate combat exposure. In reflecting upon his combat experience, Benjamin recalled that within the first 24 hours of his arrival in Afghanistan, the base was attacked and eight people lost their lives that night. He was fortunate not to have sustained any injuries during his deployment despite coming under enemy attack. Benjamin’s combat experience grounded him and provided a sense of purpose, which motivated him to use that experience to help others.

Benjamin encountered a few challenges throughout his educational journey. Two weeks after Benjamin returned from Afghanistan, his son was born with developmental issues and eventually diagnosed on the autism spectrum. Having a child with developmental issues and balancing being a husband and employee service member took its toll; Benjamin threatened to drop out of almost every class he took. His greatest struggle was staying motivated. In addition,
he encountered some financial issues due to restrictions related to his military tuition assistance (TA).

Despite the challenges Benjamin faced, there were some positive aspects to his educational journey. Although he experienced some financial hardships, Benjamin was able to use military TA and other institutional benefits to offset some of his educational expenses; he did not utilize the Post-9/11 GI Bill. In addition to his TA, Benjamin received tuition discounts and Integrity University accepted substantial transfer credits. The online format of his degree program allowed Benjamin the flexibility to earn a bachelor’s degree without sacrificing his career. Benjamin could not have overcome the challenges he encountered without his wife, who provided motivation, encouragement, and reminders that he was investing in their future. He stated, “My wife really pushed me. I would not be where I am today without her. She really pushed me to go and do it.” The desire to prove his father wrong provided Benjamin with additional motivation to finish his bachelor’s degree. As a teen, Benjamin struggled in school and in his relationship with his father. However, when Benjamin finished his master’s degree, he dedicated it to his father. Finally, Benjamin’s experience at Integrity University provided him with the opportunity to reconnect with his faith and come to the realization that his faith was really important to him.

Benjamin exhibited PTG in five areas. He recognized a greater sense of personal strength: “I realized that I was smarter than I had ever given myself credit for.” In acknowledging “you don’t know what the future brings,” Benjamin demonstrated a new appreciation of life. The recognition of new possibilities propelled Benjamin to pursue his bachelor’s degree. He stated, “One of the things that I realized was at some point I’m not going to be in the service anymore. No matter how much I fight and claw and push I’m going to have
to get out.” Benjamin exhibited *compassion and emotional connection* that motivated him to encourage fellow service members. He stated,

> But it’s a motivating factor for me because when folks are at their worst I can kind of relate to that and I can sit down and explain to them my experiences. Like I’ve had a few folks that you know that were deploying…younger guys that were deploying…and they were nervous and I could sit them down and go, “There’s really nothing that you won’t ever be able to get through.”

As has already been mentioned, Benjamin not only developed academically, he also *developed spiritually*. Benjamin’s military experience provided motivation, clarity, and perspective for his educational journey. He stated, “You don’t know what the future brings. The one thing that Afghanistan taught me was that you don’t know when that [end of life] is going to be, so you best work as hard as you possibly can.”

**Caleb**

Caleb is a 53-year-old white male, married with three children, who earned his bachelor’s degree in interdisciplinary studies in 2013 during his last month of active duty. He is retired from the U.S. Army after 29 years of service as a Special Forces Senior Sergeant, and currently serves on the pastoral staff of a large, multi-site church. Caleb served in six combat deployments, each ranging from two to 10 months each, on various military operations which included OEF and OIF. Based upon his responses to the CES, Caleb experienced moderate-heavy combat exposure. Throughout the course of his combat deployments, Caleb experienced significant exposure to trauma and sustained a TBI from an IED attack. He and his team came under numerous attacks which resulted in many of his soldiers being wounded and a few soldiers losing their lives. Caleb described his combat and military experience as having both a negative
and positive impact on his life. He described having his confidence shaken as a leader and speaker, becoming filled with anxiety when tasked with public speaking. On the other hand, Caleb described becoming a better leader and connector as a result of his military experience, being able to “meet people in their grief pretty easily.” In relation to his degree attainment, Caleb did not recognize any positive impact from his combat experience.

Caleb’s educational experience was more challenging in a way than combat, in large part due to TBI-related challenges that created much frustration. His frustration stemmed from diminished skills that were noticeable in the classroom setting but not on the battlefield. For example, Caleb stated,

Why does it work here [in battle], but it doesn’t work here [schoolwork]? Then, rationally, in a guy’s mind, I should be able to fix this because I fixed it to work over here, but why doesn’t it? So, it’s been, and it still is, a perpetual frustration.

The challenges Caleb encountered throughout his educational journey were related to memory loss, getting stuck on assignments, and time management. It was very frustrating for Caleb to deal with memory issues because he could not remember the things he read in his textbooks. Another frustration was just getting “stuck looking at a screen…looking at that cursor that’s blinking and just can’t get it moving.” The online format seemed to create some time management issues for Caleb. Although the online format provided flexibility and convenience, the challenge was “taking this perfect setting and taking advantage of that, in a way that’s ordered and maybe not so chaotic.” Finally, balancing school, work, and family contributed to the time management frustration. As an example, Caleb stated, “I just didn’t have time or the focus or what I felt to be the ability to manage my day, to manage my routine, to invest in my kids, to enjoy my wife.”
Positive aspects of Caleb’s educational journey were the flexibility and convenience of the online program. He stated,

I wanted the flexibility. Like I said, I didn’t want to sit in a classroom. I didn’t want to have to go someplace to do something else. Because a lot of times in the military, when you’re going and you’re going and you’re going, the last thing you want to do in your off-time is go again and do something else.

In addition, Caleb appreciated the generous benefits and acceptance of transfer credits offered by Integrity University. Finally, Caleb appreciated the faith component of the university.

Caleb’s individual focus and sense of purpose, prayer, and his wife’s support were the primary factors that helped him overcome significant challenges and ultimately complete his degree. He also implemented practical strategies such as using 3x5 cards to help with memory.

Caleb’s individual focus and sense of purpose was a motivating factor throughout his educational journey. He stated, “I wanted something out of the studies. I didn’t want to just check the blocks so I’d have a certificate when I ran off to the civilian world.” During times of frustration Caleb would turn to prayer, calling out to God for help. Furthermore, Caleb knew that his wife was praying for him which was an encouragement. In addition to prayer support, Caleb’s wife would help by creating a quiet study environment, offering words of encouragement and prompting him to take breaks when he would get “stuck.” She would encourage him to “just sling something out…get your fingers moving on that keyboard about anything.”

Caleb exhibited PTG in four out of five general areas: greater sense of personal strength, recognition of new possibilities, improved personal relationships, and spiritual development.

For example, Caleb exhibited a greater sense of personal strength in relation to his current ministry position when he stated, “I know that time [combat] has helped prepare me for this
position that I’m in.” In recognizing new possibilities for his future, Caleb is hopeful that he can “get his voice back” for public speaking and continue to serve the Lord, specifically in the area of discipleship. Improved personal relationships marked by compassion and greater emotional connection is evident in his relationship with his wife and children. In addition, Caleb and his wife demonstrate great compassion for and emotional connection with people who are going through the grieving process. From a spiritual perspective, although it was not a major factor in enrolling at the university, looking back on his undergraduate experience, he appreciated the faith component of Integrity University.

Dan

Dan is a 34-year-old white male, married with two children, who earned his bachelor’s degree in interdisciplinary studies from Integrity University in 2013 and is currently working on a master’s degree in Cyber Security. At the time of the interview, Dan had served in the U.S. Marine Corps for 10 years. Dan served in two combat deployments: OIF in 2008 and OEF in 2010, for nine months each. His MOS for OIF was motor transport wrecker operator and for OEF was cyber security. Dan’s responses to the CES indicated that he experienced light-moderate combat exposure. Dan did not sustain any injuries, nor did he experience any symptoms related to TBI. Throughout his deployment in Iraq, Dan’s unit was under constant threat of IED attacks. In reflecting upon his combat experience, Dan recalled an overwhelming sense of hopelessness among the Iraqi people which took a toll on him. For example, he stated,

You’d start to get angry all the time, and you’d start to deal with slight depression. There were times where you just didn’t want to deal with it anymore, and it was just the overall depression of the country would just suck it right out of you.
In contrast, Dan’s deployment to Afghanistan presented a different type of challenge; he now had a newborn son whom he missed terribly. Afghanistan “was an easier deployment in terms of not worrying about getting blown up and all that kind of stuff.” However, “I was missing my family. It hit me real hard.” Fortunately, Dan found encouragement through a fellow Christian soldier who provided accountability and spiritual support.

Dan’s educational journey at Integrity University was shorter than the other participants because most of his degree hours were transfer credits from courses he took residitionally at another university. By the time he enrolled at Integrity University, Dan only needed 30 credit hours to graduate. In addition to the significant amount of transfer credits awarded, as well as institutional incentives, the flexibility of the online format offered by Integrity University was a major benefit. Dan stated, “It was just easier to do the online courses for me.”

Although there were a number of positive aspects of his educational journey, Dan also encountered significant challenges. Financial aid processing was a source of major frustration prior to the beginning of each term. Work demands as an active duty service member were incredibly draining and at times prevented him from doing schoolwork. Dan recalled,

I mean there were times where I was working 16-hour days because I dealt with the issues so I had to stay there. You never know when those are going to hit so I try to read as much as I could, but then you get that phone call and you’re on the phone for five hours. Okay well, not getting any homework done tonight.

Finally, balancing school, work, and family was a major challenge throughout Dan’s educational journey at Integrity University. Dan recalled many late nights and early mornings, particularly when the children were younger. Moreover, it was difficult to miss out on the kids’ activities due to schoolwork.
Dan attributed his successful degree attainment to a number of factors that helped him to overcome the challenges he encountered. Dan was motivated to complete his degree for professional reasons; he realized that “if you want to work for any of the three letter branches, you have to have a degree.” Dan was also motivated by a sense of responsibility to provide for his family. External support was another factor that contributed to Dan’s successful degree attainment. Dan’s wife was a great source of support. He stated, “her being supportive was a big thing.” In addition to his wife’s support, the support he received from his military superiors was meaningful. Moreover, Dan appreciated the support he received from Integrity University. He had very supportive professors who would work with him on assignments, and he described the university’s military department as “spun up” and “very, very helpful.” From a practical perspective, Dan was very careful with time management and working ahead. He recalled turning in assignments two and three weeks in advance, and planning ahead for major assignments such as research papers.

Dan exhibited PTG in four general areas: greater sense of personal strength, recognition of new possibilities, improved personal relationships, and spiritual development. Dan described a greater sense of personal strength as he reflected upon what it meant to him to be a Marine, “We’re driven to succeed. We’re driven to be the best.” Dan recognized the potential for new possibilities because of his degree. He stated, “having a degree always helps. If you can get out with that 10-year [military] experience and a degree, you are one step above the people who only have the military experience.” Dan also experienced improved personal relationships and deeper connection not only with his accountability partner, but also with his wife. In relation to spiritual development, Dan acknowledged that the faith-based mission of Integrity University
was not a major factor in his enrollment. However, he appreciated not having “to deal with super liberal teachers.”

Elijah

Elijah is a 33-year-old white, married male who earned his bachelor’s degree in business administration communications from Integrity University in 2016 and is currently working on a master’s degree in sport management. Elijah served in the U.S. Army for seven years, which included three combat deployments: 15 months in Iraq from 2006-2008, 12 months in Iraq from 2009-2010, and three months in Afghanistan in 2011. His MOS was motor transport operator. Elijah’s responses to the CES indicated that he experienced moderate combat exposure. He disclosed being diagnosed with PTSD and reported experiencing the following symptoms: headache, impaired balance or coordination, sleep disturbance, irritability, concentration problems, sensitivity to light or sound, and mood swings. Elijah was exposed to trauma on an ongoing basis; one of the events he recalled from his first deployment was a mortar attack on his base where a fuel operator and a sergeant lost their lives. In addition to experiencing incoming mortar attacks, Elijah spent a significant amount of time being exposed to death and trauma because of his responsibility to cover the trauma clinic and mortuary. Besides being changed by the visible and invisible wounds of war, Elijah’s perspective of others changed as well. He described having less patience and more bitterness toward people who complain about trivial things and are unable to “suck it up.” In addition, he was more on edge and harder on himself for mistakes, which contributed to a challenging educational journey. For example, he stated, “If I miss details, let's say in a paper... I'm really hard on myself all because I missed a small detail, and it's five minutes I won't get back. So, I'm always watching for things.”
Elijah enrolled in Integrity University after having earned an associate’s degree prior to joining the U.S. Army. In reflecting upon his academic journey at Integrity University, the only positive aspect that Elijah mentioned was the convenience of the online format. One of the major factors that contributed to Elijah’s academic challenges was the combination of a heavy course load while deployed to a combat zone. Military operations often interrupted study and assignments (exams) which led to failure in all but one course during his deployment, and ultimately academic suspension. As an example, Elijah stated, “So it was six or seven in the morning and I’m sitting there doing a test and then I’m getting called to the trauma room at the same time.” Other challenges included frustration with online instructors and students, lack of advising support, lack of motivation, and lack of face-to-face interaction.

Although the challenges were many, Elijah regrouped and subsequently graduated with his bachelor’s degree. Timing was a key factor: “I just waited to get out of the Army and go back at it again.” Without the demands associated with being deployed, Elijah drew upon his own determination and sense of purpose to complete his degree. Elijah’s wife provided a great deal of support; he stated that she “stayed by me and supported me.” Finally, Elijah drew strength from the Lord through seasons of prayer, believing that “if God wanted me to keep after it, then I’m just gonna keep pursuing it.”

Elijah exhibited PTG in four general areas: greater sense of personal strength, recognition of new possibilities, improved personal relationships, and spiritual development. Having a greater sense of personal strength, Elijah recognized that despite getting knocked down, he will never quit. For example, “My friends knew me as a person who quit on different things or didn’t follow through on things, but eventually it all comes back and then I just say, ‘Okay, I’m gonna keep going after it.’” Elijah was hopeful about new possibilities for the future,
“just to have an opportunity to change the world and be involved in kind of a director level of different things.” A deep sense of *compassion and emotional connection* was evident as Elijah described his desire to make a positive impact on the students that he works with:

I came from a similar background. I was in foster care and all of that growing up as well.
And I was in special education and so I felt I have opportunities to engage in and relate
with them and share my story. And then some opportunities for them to see a different way out than what they have.

In relation to *spiritual development*, Elijah acknowledged that he relied on prayer to get him through some difficult times. In addition, He recognized “God’s watching out for us some days.”

**Finn**

Finn is a 35-year-old white male, married with three children, who earned his bachelor’s degree in education from Integrity University in 2013. Finn served in the U.S. Army for four years prior to being discharged and served a six-month deployment to Iraq in 2003 during OIF. His MOS was all-wheel mechanic. Finn’s responses to the CES indicated that he experienced light-moderate combat exposure. Although he did not sustain any physical injuries, Finn was diagnosed with PTSD and indicated experiencing memory problems, ringing in the ears, fatigue, and concentration problems.

Finn recalled his first dangerous encounter when he came under attack as the enemy opened fire on his area and they took on some causalities during that fight. As Finn reflected upon how his combat experience changed his life, he described how this one particular firefight put life into perspective for him and gave him a greater appreciation for life:
During that particular firefight, I was in an elevated position, and in the position that I was in, we had some concrete pillars behind us. And after everything was said and done at the base of those concrete pillars there were actually bullets that smashed into those pillars. It was a matter of two or three feet from me being shot, and it really kind of put life into perspective at that point. I mean, it was that close. If I had really been standing up, I would have caught the bullets. At that point in time, I mean I realized how lucky, how blessed I really was to have survived something like that and it changed me from that point on.

This new perspective instilled in him a desire to succeed and be the best he could be.

Finn enrolled in Integrity University about 10 years after his deployment. Prior to Integrity University, Finn earned an associate’s degree in IT from the University of Phoenix. Eventually, a work supervisor encouraged Finn to pursue a bachelor’s degree, which the company would pay for. Although he could not remember why he chose Integrity University, he appreciated the values/faith-based mission, and the education program. The online format of his degree program provided Finn with the flexibility he needed with having two children and a third one on the way. Finn’s experience at Integrity University strengthened his faith and brought him back to where he needed to be. For example, he stated, “I did start to go back to church regularly and I started to pray more.” For Finn, the experience was gratifying yet challenging; “it didn’t come easy in any way, shape, or form.”

The challenges Finn encountered during his educational journey were primarily related to balancing work, school, and family responsibilities, and maintaining concentration. “Life was hectic” for Finn, and trying to concentrate on schoolwork was a major challenge. Finn described this period of time as “having three full time jobs at once: work, school, husband/dad.” All three
jobs were time consuming, and Finn remembered “the days being long. It wasn’t uncommon to put in 18 hours a day.” Finn overcame these challenges through the support of family, particularly his wife and father. Finn also implemented practical strategies to reduce distractions and increase focus. For example, when he would get distracted, Finn stated, “I would just stop, close my eyes, try to focus and block out everything else that was going on.” In addition, having a finished basement in his house provided an isolated space for him to concentrate on schoolwork. Finally, Finn realized that working on his assignments early in the morning was more productive than attempting to work on them late in the evening.

Throughout his educational journey, Finn demonstrated PTG in a number of areas that seemed to contribute to his academic achievement. Finn not only realized a greater sense of personal strength, he also recognized that there were new possibilities after his military experience. He stated, “I started to realize my potential…wanting to succeed. Wanting to better myself and be the best I could be.” Finn also demonstrated a new appreciation of life and spiritual development, which was already been mentioned. In relation to improved personal relationships and emotional connection, Finn described how the people he worked with – his fellow soldiers – made a lasting impression on him. For example, “…the experience is in the people. That was the good part about the military for me.”

Gabe

Gabe is a 36-year-old white male, married with seven children and one on the way. He earned his bachelor’s degree in religion from Integrity University in 2015 and is currently working on a master’s degree in Divinity. At the time of the interview, Gabe was active duty in the U.S. Air Force with 15 years of military service. He was deployed four times over two operations (OEF and OIF) with each deployment lasting 180-210 days, and his AFSC was
explosive ordnance disposal team leader. Gabe’s responses to the CES indicated that he experienced moderate-heavy combat exposure. Despite having participated in very dangerous missions in which he and his team were shot at and hit with IED’s, Gabe did not sustain any injuries, although he did indicate experiencing sleep disturbance, concentration problems, heart pounding or racing, and intrusive memories. Overall, Gabe described his military experience as positive despite the life-threatening missions and subsequent side effects. He was able to draw peace and confidence from his relationship with Christ, and he acknowledged that his military experience provided some life-changing opportunities for him and his family. Gabe was changed by his combat experience in a number of ways, both positive and negative; while he gained a greater sense of personal strength, he also became hypervigilant and experienced some diminished skills which impacted his educational journey.

Overall, Gabe’s educational journey at Integrity University was positive. Gabe had completed a math course at a community college, and after feeling called into ministry, he took some residential courses at Master’s College until he was deployed. After another deployment or two, Gabe decided to put school on hold for a few years. He found Integrity University after searching for a military-friendly online school. In addition to the convenience and flexibility of an online program, Integrity University offered the most transfer credits and he found the application process to be easy. Gabe maxed out his TA benefit every year and was able to utilize institutional benefits as well, which he appreciated. He stated,

When I sit down and explain benefits to my troops, I am like what [Integrity] provided for me and all that no one else really even comes close. Because I do not think I paid a single dime the entire five years I was going to school. No books, nothing. I mean, military-wise they gave me a book voucher, they waived all the lab fees, and all the other
stuff. I did not have to worry about where the next class and the resources were coming from.

In addition to the generous benefits, the academic experience was meaningful as well. Gabe stated, “Education-wise it was great. I learned a lot. There was a lot of information. There were a lot of different points of views. It was very much what I imagined higher education would be.”

However, as good as the academic experience was, there were a few challenges nonetheless. Despite the flexibility and convenience of the online format, the lack of face-to-face interaction with classmates and professors was a drawback that made it challenging for Gabe to stay motivated. He stated, “I had to make sure I stayed on it.” In addition, the work demands associated with being a military service member employee made it difficult to schedule time for schoolwork. Finally, Gabe experienced challenges related to diminished skills in the areas of memory recall, organization, and public speaking that he attributes to “some of the stuff I experienced in the military.” Gabe overcame these challenges with the support of his wife who made his school a priority even when he felt like throwing in the towel. He stated, “I would not even probably be graduated yet if it was not for her motivation and urging.” Gabe was fortunate to have supportive bosses who encouraged him to complete his classes well. Gabe’s faith and feeling that it was a calling was a motivating factor that drove him to pursue and finish school. Finally, Gabe attributed much of his academic achievement to the generous benefits offered through Integrity University:

I cannot speak highly enough about the ease of just getting the resources necessary to graduate or to complete these classes, not having to worry about having no money, coming up with money for books, not having to worry about certain labs and certain
access to materials and having the library fully opened to an online student. Things like that gave me the confidence to keep going and not feel like I was in over my head.

There are four areas of PTG that are exhibited in Gabe’s experience: greater sense of personal strength, recognition of new possibilities, improved personal relationships, and spiritual development. Gabe exhibited a greater sense of personal strength when he acknowledged knowing what he is made of. As an example, he would say to himself during difficult times, “Hey man, you finished this [combat], you can finish eight weeks of this course.” Gabe’s current pursuit of a master’s degree and potential doctorate indicates a recognition of new possibilities for the future. He also hopes to do something in the future to help people in need, particularly troubled youth or orphans, and people in ministry. Gabe demonstrated a deep emotional connection with fellow soldiers when he stated, “When I was deployed, a lot of that was some of the worst things I have ever had to see and experience. But it was some of the best times with people, with other men, and just co-workers.” Gabe experienced a crisis of faith during his deployment that was settled once and for all in the war zone. Gabe’s spiritual development continued long after returning from combat and continues to this day. He recalls, “I am blessed to have that moment where I could draw back to that to kind of reground me and refresh me. In a way, I came back stronger in my faith where now I have no doubt.”

Henry

Henry is a 38-year-old white male, married with one child, who earned his bachelor’s degree in psychology from Integrity University in 2014 and is currently working on a master’s in professional counseling from another university. He served in the U.S. Marine Corps for 13 years as a tank maintenance technician and recruiter. Henry served two combat deployments beginning in 2003, seven months each, during OIF. His responses to the CES indicated that he
experienced light-moderate combat exposure and did not sustain any injuries during his deployments. During his first deployment, Henry saw many of his friends change, but it was the second deployment that was most difficult for Henry in dealing with the loss of so many soldiers who were close to him. In addition, returning to the United States after deployment presented significant adjustment challenges. Henry stated,

I had a bad attitude once I came back from deployment…short temper. Anything fired me up. It was difficult to adjust to that and to calm myself down during those times. I think most of it was anger. I had a lot of anger about what happened.

Fortunately, Henry was surrounded by a network of incredibly supportive family and friends who helped him get through some difficult times. Despite the negative consequences of his combat experience, it was also a learning experience for Henry. It provided an opportunity for Henry to challenge himself and to develop discipline and leadership skills. In addition, it instilled in him a “never quit attitude” and “if you want something, go get it.”

Henry’s educational journey at Integrity University was challenging, but he appreciated the flexibility of the online format and generous transfer credits. One of the greatest challenges for Henry was the rigor of the psychology program; “It was really hard and time-consuming.” The coursework was heavy and he felt like he did not have enough time to complete the reading thoroughly. Henry was not married at the time and acknowledged that it was a benefit since school was so time-consuming. He stated, “It worked out for me because my wife wasn’t there [not married at the time]. I had that time I could dedicate to school.” Although it was not a major challenge, Henry mentioned facing some pressure from peers to go out with them instead of study. Other than the demanding program, work demands made Henry’s educational journey very difficult. Henry was working 12 hours as a recruiter, and prior to that he was working a
grueling schedule; “Basically I worked seven days a week and I never was sure what time I
would be going home.” The psychology internship requirement was especially concerning, but
Henry was able to complete the internship in Rwanda as a result of President Obama staff cuts
which he took advantage of.

Henry was able to overcome these challenges through the support of his family,
university, and drawing upon his faith. Henry relied on God through his deployments and
continued to do so throughout his educational journey. He stated, “Through the [deployments]
and through the school, there’s something that you always have to rely on God for.” He was
dedicated to his schoolwork and made use of any free time that was available. Staying organized
and physically fit was a priority; “Physical fitness is a priority. You have to stay physically fit in
order for you to accomplish your goals as well. I think that’s how I overcame the challenges
through [Integrity] University.”

Henry exhibited PTG in four areas: greater sense of personal strength, recognition of
new possibilities, improved personal relationships, and spiritual development. Henry
demonstrated a greater sense of personal strength in describing how he had more discipline and
leadership skills because of his military experience. Henry’s current pursuit of a master’s degree
and dream of counseling veterans with mental health issues indicates a recognition of new
possibilities for the future. The improved personal relationships and emotional connection
Henry had with his classmates and professors was evident when he spoke about the support and
encouragement he received from them. Henry’s spiritual development was evident as he
described his reliance on God through combat and school.
Isaac

Isaac is a 33-year-old white male, married, father of five children, who earned his bachelor’s degree in business from Integrity University in 2015. He is currently working on a master’s degree in business administration. At the time of the interview, Isaac was active duty in the U.S. Navy with 15 years of military experience, having been deployed three times during OEF and OIF for eight months each. Isaac’s MOS was religious program specialist (Chaplain Assistant), which required him to participate in dangerous missions and key battles throughout his deployments, such as the initial invasion of Iraq and the battles of Najaf, Ramadi, and Fallujah. Needless to say, Isaac witnessed a great deal of carnage. His responses to the CES indicated that Isaac experienced heavy combat exposure. Isaac was diagnosed with PTSD and also sustained injuries from a blast or explosion during his deployment. In addition, Isaac indicated experiencing the following symptoms: memory problems, ringing in the ears, sleep disturbance, irritability, fatigue, concentration problems, sensitivity to light or sound, mood swings, heart pounding or racing, and intrusive memories. Despite the trauma and sustained injuries from combat, Isaac’s military experience provided motivation and contributed to his competitive spirit. He stated, “When it comes time for evaluations, you have to be competitive for promotion, and one of the things they look for is college education.” On the other hand, as a result of what Isaac experienced in combat, his perspective of others changed. For example, he stated, “I don’t take well to people who complain about little things anymore.”

Isaac’s educational journey at Integrity University was challenging yet meaningful. It was meaningful for a number of reasons, but primarily because of the faith-component which was a great source of encouragement for Isaac during a very difficult divorce. Isaac also enjoyed the writing aspect of his online courses, which was an area of strength for him. The online
format was a benefit and a drawback for Isaac; although the format offered the flexibility he needed, Isaac also stated, “The online classes are very impersonal.” In addition to the incredibly difficult divorce that took place during his educational journey, trying to balance work, school, and family demands took a physical toll on Isaac.

Sometimes things come up in the military and you can’t always provide full attention to coursework. So, where I’m working now, I don’t get off until 4:30 and then I have an hour commute home. And by the time I get home, I’m exhausted. And when do you work on homework? Well, I have five kids…

Furthermore, TA processing and limitations created a substantial financial burden for Isaac. The timing of the TA and availability of book voucher funds were a consistent issue, and the 16-credit-hour TA cap subsequently led Isaac to take out student loans to finish his bachelor’s degree.

Isaac overcame many of the challenges he encountered through the support of his current wife who encouraged him to continue with his studies. Isaac’s father also provided support by motivating him to pursue a bachelor’s degree. From a practical standpoint, Isaac knew that he needed to remove himself from distractions, which was difficult to do in a household with five children. He eventually made the decision to work on his laptop upstairs in his house rather than downstairs where the rest of the family was. Finally, when Isaac first started at Integrity University, he was still struggling with a number of issues related to his divorce. However, he decided to email the university’s prayer line and was able to receive some encouragement.

There are four areas of PTG that are exhibited in Isaac’s experience: greater sense of personal strength, recognition of new possibilities, improved personal relationships, and spiritual development. Isaac revealed a greater sense of personal strength when he
acknowledged his strong writing skills and ability to “breeze through” the religious classes. Isaac’s current pursuit of a master’s degree and subsequent goal of working for Lego indicates a recognition of new possibilities for the future. The deep emotional connection Isaac has with his current wife was evident when he spoke about the support and encouragement he received from her. Isaac’s divorce seemed to contribute to his spiritual development, as he was directed by a counselor, “If religion is the thing that helps you, then try religion” so he enrolled in Integrity University. Isaac sought prayer support from the University and received encouragement through that prayer line on a few occasions.

Jacob

Jacob is a 38-year-old white male, divorced, father of two children, who earned his bachelor’s degree in interdisciplinary studies from Integrity University in 2015 and is currently working on a master’s degree in criminal justice. At the time of the interview, Jacob was active duty in the U.S. Army as an Infantryman with 18 years of military service, the first four of which were with the U.S. Marine Corps. Jacob served two combat deployments, 13 and 15 months, during OIF. He was part of the initial invasion force in Iraq and described the experience as “pandemonium, chaos, and lots of fighting.” The changing tactics of the enemy made the mission very difficult. Jacob’s responses to the CES indicated that he experienced heavy combat exposure. Unfortunately, Jacob was wounded in a firefight during his first deployment, sustained a TBI, and was diagnosed with PTSD. In addition, Jacob indicated experiencing the following symptoms: memory problems, headaches, ringing in the ears, impaired balance or coordination, sleep disturbance, irritability, dizziness, fatigue, concentration problems, mood swings, heart pounding or racing, and intrusive memories. As he reflected upon how his combat
experience changed him, Jacob described himself as being more patient and less anxious, but at the same time “easy to set off” when he senses a threat to family or friends.

Jacob enrolled in Integrity University at the prompting of a friend who told him that it would be “really easy.” In reality, Jacob’s experience was “not easy at all.” With the exception of having taken one community college class when he was in the Marines, Jacob had no additional college experience prior to Integrity University; it had been 10 years since he had been in school. Jacob did not remember how to study, and encountered significant challenges related to memorization. In addition to learning how to be a student again, Jacob’s TBI presented a number of academic challenges. For example, “[TBI] makes it very difficult to stay focused, or stay on task sometimes. And then, of course, it certainly impacted my short-term memory, at least for a while. So, studying was a lot harder for me.” Jacob and his wife divorced at some point during his educational journey which was a major obstacle that sidelined his education about two to three years.

Despite the challenges he encountered, Jacob was glad to have had the opportunity to earn his degree from Integrity University. The online format of Integrity University’s degree program provided Jacob with the opportunity to earn a degree and work at the same time. The educational benefits he earned for his military service meant that Jacob earned his degree without incurring any student loan debt. Earning his degree was time-consuming, but Jacob understood the sacrifice involved. He stated, “I just sacrificed some of the things I enjoy in order to ensure that I was setting myself up for success in the long run.” Moreover, Jacob believed that he gained the necessary skills and knowledge to share his faith with others. Jacob took a practical approach to overcoming some of the challenges he encountered throughout his educational journey. He had to write everything down to remember what he was studying. Jacob also used a
calendar system to “stay on top of assignments” and submitted assignments early. In addition, he was intentional about removing himself from distractions and finding an isolated place to study. Finally, Jacob received support and encouragement from his soldiers, whom he knew were looking up to him. He stated,

I was the only one in my office actually engaging in postsecondary education. And they were just so mesmerized by the fact that I was getting a degree because we’re infantrymen, we run through the woods, we shoot people in the face, or so the perception is.

Jacob exhibited PTG in four areas: greater sense of personal strength, recognition of new possibilities, improved personal relationships, and spiritual development. Jacob revealed a greater sense of personal strength as he reflected upon his educational journey; he stated,

I didn’t think I was intelligent enough to go on and get a degree. And at the end of the day, it wasn’t necessarily about what I had up here [head], it was about what was in here [heart]. To get it done, and have the heart to finish. I’m not the smartest guy on the face of the planet. I’m definitely not a rocket scientist, nor do I have aspirations to be, but I realized that I was smarter than I was giving myself credit for.

Jacob’s pursuit of a master’s degree may be attributed to his recognition of new possibilities for the future. The deep emotional connection Jacob has with his soldiers was evident when he spoke about the encouragement he received from them, and his spiritual development was evident when he stated, “Being in the Word, and just being with other Christians and surrounded by believers, I crave that a lot more.”
Results

The group and individual portraits provided an important narrative based upon participants’ descriptions of their combat and degree attainment experiences. Two major themes emerged during the phenomenological analysis of the data, which will be discussed in the next section.

Theme Development

Data analysis and organization. The purpose of transcendental phenomenology is to logically and systematically analyze and report on a lived experience until an essential description of the essence of the experience is reached (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004; Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas’ (1994) modification of the Van Kaam method of analysis of phenomenological data was used in order to understand the experiences of combat veterans with significant combat exposure and their degree attainment in online higher education. This method provided a systematic and rigorous process for analyzing the data. Prior to data collection and analysis, I engaged in the epoche process (bracketing), in order to set aside any prejudgments and biases about combat veterans and their pursuit of higher education. A researcher’s journal was maintained throughout the data collection and analysis process, which allowed me to continually record my thoughts, feelings, and perceptions (see Appendix K).

Listing and preliminary grouping (horizontalization) of the data collected from participant questionnaire responses, in-depth interview transcripts, and focus group forum transcripts resulted in a total of 357 codes that were assigned to “every expression relevant to the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 120). Through the process of reduction and elimination, each expression was tested with the goal of identifying horizons that were clustered into core themes; all other expressions were eliminated. These themes were then validated against the complete
participant transcript, which resulted in the deletion of themes that were not explicitly expressed or incompatible (Moustakas, 1994). Individual textural descriptions were then constructed, supported by the participants’ own words in order to describe what was experienced (noema). Next, individual structural descriptions were constructed to describe how the experience was experienced (noesis). The textural-structural description was then constructed, which described the essence of the experience for each participant. Finally, the individual textural-structural descriptions were used to construct a composite description, synthesizing the essence of the experience.

Themes. Two themes emerged from the phenomenological analysis about how combat veterans with significant combat exposure described their degree attainment experience: It was (1) A Challenging Journey and (2) A Fulfilling Journey. All 10 participants were changed by their significant combat experience, which influenced their educational journey in explicit and implicit ways. The significant exposure to combat seems to have contributed to the challenging journey specifically related to the visible and invisible wounds of war. Moreover, their combat experience seems to have triggered PTG in a number of key areas, precipitating the fulfilling journey for all participants.

Theme one: A challenging journey. The experience of earning a bachelor’s degree through an online program was rife with challenges for OEF/OIF/OND combat veterans with significant combat exposure. Research about combat veterans with significant combat exposure supports the assertion that many combat veterans are likely to encounter challenges in their pursuit of higher education (Elliott et al., 2011; Starr-Glass, 2015). Veterans with significant combat exposure often suffer from visible and invisible wounds of war, and research has suggested that injuries such as PTSD, TBI, and depression can have a negative impact on
academic success and degree attainment (Afari et al., 2015; Barnard-Brak et al., 2011; Barry et al., 2012; Elliott et al., 2011). In addition to the negative repercussions of combat, the current study revealed two additional factors that contributed to participants’ challenging educational journey: external factors, and internal struggles.

**Negative repercussions of combat.** Although six participants (Caleb, Elijah, Finn, Henry, Isaac and Jacob) sustained combat wounds, only four participants (Caleb, Elijah, Finn, and Jacob) explicitly stated that their combat wounds negatively impacted their educational journey (see Table 1). Elijah, Finn, Henry, and Isaac were diagnosed with PTSD, Caleb sustained a TBI, and Jacob was diagnosed with PTSD and TBI. With the exception of Henry and Isaac, these invisible wounds of war presented significant challenges for participants throughout their degree attainment experience. As an example, Elijah often fought through physical symptoms in order to meet deadlines. He stated,

> Sometimes, like I’m kind of on a deadline, like a discussion board or responses, and just having migraines all of a sudden. And just like, “Okay, I gotta keep powering through this,” so I down a bottle of aspirin just to keep going, you know? It’s bad enough you just wanna get into bed and curl up in a ball, but you got this deadline due so you don’t have that option.

Although Finn encountered some physical challenges related to “kicking smoking and chewing tobacco” during school; his primary struggle was with concentration. He stated, “The biggest problem that I can remember while going to school was the concentration factor. So, that was my biggest challenge. I mean, just trying to maintain concentration and everything.”

Henry and Isaac struggled with symptoms of PTSD and mentioned the difficulty of reinteg
counseling; Isaac saw a psychologist and “went through an entire series of what they call prolonged exposure therapy,” whereas Henry received informal counseling from his parents (both counselors). Interestingly, throughout their interviews, neither stated that their PTSD symptoms negatively impacted their educational experience, nor did it contribute to their challenging journey. For example, Henry stated, “There was a lot of stuff that was there. It can lead to other things, other negative thoughts and things like that. But it did not affect me throughout [my experience at Integrity University].”

Caleb’s TBI negatively impacted his ability to remember things he studied. He stated, “If I had to remember a short list that I’m learning out of a textbook or online, that was a challenge.” Jacob’s PTSD and TBI significantly impacted his educational journey as well. In describing the impact of his wounds of war, Jacob stated,

I do suffer from PTSD, although I’ve mitigated it quite a bit, I think. So, that was one of the things that made life a little bit more difficult, not just academically, but just functioning normally, as normal as a regular person, I guess. And then of course TBI, I got TBI from just multiple concussions, and that makes it very difficult to stay focused, or stay on task sometimes. And then, of course, it’s certainly impacted my short-term memory, at least for a while. So, studying was a lot harder for me.

Caleb, Gabe, and Jacob specifically mentioned being confronted with diminished skills throughout their educational experience which contributed to their challenging journey. Caleb’s diminished skills were a result of his combat injury, whereas Gabe believed his diminished skills were a result of his combat experience in general; both experienced issues with memory recall, which was a great source of frustration. Caleb stated, “It’s been a perpetual frustration.” Gabe experienced the same frustration in relation to his diminished skills; “My memory ability and my
ability to recall information that used to be a strong point for me is now just, it is just like a
shock. It was a very frustrating experience because I am not used to that.” For Jacob, it was the
combination of his combat experience and prolonged time away from school that contributed to
his diminished skills. In reference to learning how to be a student again, Jacob stated,

It had been 10 years. I’d been 10 years removed from high school by the time I started
my bachelor’s, and I didn’t remember how to study. I didn’t remember how to do
everything I needed to do to be a student…studying in general was really, really
challenging to me.

In addition to the challenges associated with visible and invisible wounds of war, being
deployed while taking online courses can be difficult. Four (Benjamin, Caleb, Elijah, and Gabe)
out of the 10 participants in this study were deployed during their educational journey. Being
deployed during school contributed to the challenging journey for two (Caleb and Elijah) out of
four participants. Both participants were deployed to a combat zone on at least once during their
educational journey. Caleb was deployed multiple times throughout his educational journey,
while Elijah attempted to take 12 credit hours in one semester during one of his deployments.
Caleb was not only deployed multiple times during his educational journey, he also worked his
way up in military rank. He stated,

By the time I started [school], I was a First Sergeant, so I was an E-8 in the Army. And
when I finished, I was a Sergeant Major. Over the course of deployments, and coming
and going, it [school] was a challenge.

The negative repercussion of combat deployment was particularly challenging for Elijah who
ended up “failing all but one class” while he was deployed. He came to the realization that
taking online courses while deployed was not a viable option; in order to achieve his educational
goal, he would have to re-enroll upon his return home from deployment. Although Gabe took three classes during one of his deployments, he did not describe any educational challenges specifically related to his deployment. Benjamin began his educational journey while deployed, but it was offered on base, not online through Integrity University. Like Gabe, Benjamin did not describe any educational challenges related to his deployment.

**External factors.** As participants reflected upon their educational experiences, all 10 participants expressed that external demands made for a challenging journey. There were a number of external factors specifically related to their status as combat veterans and/or military service members, some of which have already been discussed. In addition, there were also a number of external factors related to being non-traditional, online students that were not related to participants’ military status. External factors included: *school/work/family balance, military employment, financial, online format, academic, and relational issues.*

**School/work/family balance.** Eight participants struggled with balancing the demands of school, work, and family life. Eight out of 10 participants were working full time, married, and had dependent children during their educational journey. The two exceptions were Elijah and Henry. Elijah did not have any dependent children, and Henry was not married nor did he have any dependent children. The challenge of balancing the demands of school, work, and family is often referenced by the more general population of adult, non-traditional online learners; however, it also emerged as a major struggle in the current study on combat veterans in online higher education. According to Finn, “life was hectic.” Dan described his biggest struggle as “trying to balance work, family life, and school work.” Benjamin also referenced the struggle to “balance being a husband, a father, and an employee service member.” The number of dependent children ranged from one to seven (see Table 3). Of the three participants (Aaron,
Gabe, and Isaac) who have at least five children, two (Aaron and Isaac) specifically described the challenges related to balancing school and family. Aaron stated, “Definitely having kids while doing it [school] and putting off time with them, time with the family, that was the biggest struggle.” Gabe described how exhausting it was to work full-time, come home to five kids, and try to find time to work on school.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Current Marital Status</th>
<th>Marital Status During School</th>
<th>Number of Dependents During School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benjamin</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caleb</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elijah</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finn</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabe</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaac</td>
<td>Remarried</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Military employment. Seven out of 10 participants identified military work demands as a major challenge they encountered throughout their educational journey. Military work schedules were incredibly demanding; Dan, Elijah, Henry, Isaac, and Jacob specifically mentioned working 12-hour shifts or being on call, which made it difficult to plan time for study. As an example, Jacob described his military job as “the main point of contention with anything extra-curricular. You would think that being in the Army, I would be afforded more predictability. However, that couldn’t be further from what actually happens.” Moreover, Dan described in detail the demanding nature of being employed by the Marines:
I couldn’t take a sick day because I needed to get a paper done. You don’t get sick days in the Marine Corps. If you’re sick, you better be in the ER and you better have an IV bag in your arm. If you don’t, then you’re at work.

Financial. While their military service afforded all participants with considerable educational benefits, three participants (Benjamin, Dan, and Isaac) described being frustrated with logistics and restrictions associated with their benefits. The process of having the benefits applied in a timely manner was a source of great frustration and in some cases created a financial burden. For example, Isaac stated,

Getting Tuition Assistance processed was difficult…I’ve probably spent hundreds of dollars on expedited shipping for books, because I can’t do financial check-in until TA is approved, and they won’t approve TA until close to the term start date. So, you’re sitting there going, “I need my books, I need my books, but I can’t do financial check-in until I have the TA.” So, that’s always been an issue. Even though [Integrity] provides the book voucher, they don’t give it to you until you complete financial check-in. And even after you complete financial check-in, it’s a few days until they give you the voucher, and then you gotta go and order your books. Then it’s a few days for shipping, and it’s always like my books arriving the day before, the day of, or two or three days after the course start date.

Likewise, Dan stated,

The government won’t pay or approve Tuition Assistance until 30 days prior to the start of class, but [Integrity] is like, “Hey your financial check-in is like way overdue.”

Because they want it done like 60 days in advance and you’re like, “I can’t.” So, you get 97 phone calls and you get the emails…
Moreover, the credit hour limit for TA drove Isaac to take out student loans in order to finish his degree: “So, when I was trying to finish up my bachelor’s degree, I actually took out student loans because I was taking more than the 16 credit hours per year to try to finish it out.”

Benjamin encountered a number of financial issues throughout his educational journey; some were related to his wife’s lack of employment, but he also encountered issues related to TA. He stated, “At one point in time, the DOD cancelled Tuition Assistance and I didn’t know what I was going to do.”

**Online format.** While all 10 participants appreciated the flexibility and convenience of their online program, four participants described issues with the online format that contributed to their challenging journey. The online format of their respective degree programs was frustrating for Caleb, Elijah, Gabe, and Isaac largely due to the lack of face-to-face interaction with other students and the impersonal nature of the online setting. Gabe described a longing to reinforce and enhance his learning experience through classroom interaction, which he felt was missing. He stated, “I had no outlet to share this information. There was no class setting, there was no class discussion, and even the discussion boards are so much like an assignment, you just bang those out to get them done.”

Isaac expressed a desire to connect with his classmates on a more personal level. In referring to the impersonal nature of the online format, Isaac stated,

The online classes are very impersonal. Even during introductions, people will introduce themselves, and some instructors make you reply to other students, others don’t. And I think a lot of times, people just don’t even read other people’s introductions. Because why should you if you don’t have to, I guess, is the theory.
Elijah agreed, stating that his “frustration with the online program was the lack of face-to-face with other students.” On the other hand, Caleb found that the online format led to challenges related to time management. He emphasized the importance of taking advantage of the opportunity to order one’s schedule in a way that is “not so chaotic,” otherwise students may struggle to manage their time well.

_Academic._ Six out of 10 participants described how academic struggles and rigorous coursework contributed to a challenging journey. The math requirement was particularly difficult for Aaron and Gabe; both avoided this requirement until the very end of their program. Henry and Jacob encountered challenges related to the academic rigor of their respective programs. Henry recalled how difficult it was to complete the required readings and discussion board assignments:

> The reading, oh my Lord. The reading – you had to read it, which is a lot of reading. It’s a lot. I know a lot of people scan. I’m the type of person that I want to read. The hardest part – I believe, was the reading. In addition to the reading, which was a lot, you had the discussion board. That takes a lot of time as well. You don’t want to just put something out there. You want to formulate a good discussion that’s going to attract other people to reply.

Jacob expected his coursework to be “really easy” based upon his friend’s description. However, Jacob’s experience was quite different. He stated,

> He lied. He lied so much because it was not easy at all. I still remember the first class I took, Survey of Biblical Literature, and I really wanted to wrap his head around the pole at that point because I didn’t think he was very truthful.
Isaac found that he needed to adjust to a new writing style, which was challenging. He stated, “The hardest issue I had when I first got to [Integrity] was University of Memphis is MLA. And so, when I transferred to [Integrity], I was having to readjust my thinking to APA.” Elijah struggled academically early in his journey, failing five classes while deployed. Consequently, he was put on academic suspension and did not resume his education until he got out of the Army. Elijah described his journey as a “long road” and stated,

I took just about every class over again from [Integrity]. Then I had two remedial maths to be able to get into the statistics class. But I pretty much took everything over again, except for maybe three classes, but I pretty much had to do everything else from scratch.

Relational issues. Two out of 10 participants experienced relational issues that contributed to their challenging educational journey. Isaac and Jacob were both married when they began school, but their marriages ended at some point during their educational journey. For Isaac, the divorce shook his faith and marked the beginning of a very difficult emotional journey. He stated, “I ended up checking myself into a suicide ward. I was having severe PTSD symptoms. That’s when all my PTSD started, when she wanted the divorce…it was kind of like the thing that broke my body.” For Jacob, his divorce brought his educational journey to a temporary halt. He stated, “I allowed the divorce to be an excuse to not pursue my education at that time. Otherwise, I would have finished my bachelor’s two or three years ago, but I didn’t. I allowed that to be the obstacle.”

Internal struggles. The educational journey was also marked by internal struggles related to motivation, concentration and focus, and time management. Gabe, Benjamin, and Elijah struggled with self-motivation. For Gabe, the self-paced nature of the online format made it difficult to stay motivated. He stated, “The guys next to me did not care if I finished my
degree or not.” The lack of peer support meant that he often had to encourage himself to continue. Benjamin struggled to stay motivated when he just “didn’t want to do it.” His greatest struggle was about four or five weeks into a course when he would threaten to drop out. Gabe and Aaron also described the internal struggle of encountering moments when they wanted to quit. Aaron stated, “There were times when I wanted to quit.” Gabe described times when “things started going a little bit harder in life” and he would consider dropping school. Elijah encountered some moments that were “pretty rough” when he “just blew off the work and didn’t do it.” He stated,

When I wasn’t working, it was like I would just rather read a book or play video games. I spent more time in the computer center talking to family or whatever as opposed to doing work. So, I basically overloaded myself and just didn’t make the commitment to do my work.

Jacob, Finn, and Caleb had difficulty with concentration and focus. For Finn, “just trying to maintain concentration” was the greatest challenge throughout his educational journey. Maintaining the individual focus was particularly challenging for Caleb. Dan, Caleb, and Isaac acknowledged that time management presented some challenges during their educational journey. Dan stated, “time management was sometimes lacking on my part.”

Theme two: A fulfilling journey. Despite having experienced significant challenges throughout their educational journey, all 10 participants described it as a fulfilling journey. This was the second theme that emerged from the data. Finn stated, “In the end, though, the challenges were well worth the fulfilling feeling I felt after completing the program.” In addition, Benjamin stated that “it was also gratifying, rewarding, and motivating.” Participants
identified a number of factors that made their educational journey fulfilling. These factors emerged into two subthemes: external support, and personal strength.

In addition to the two subthemes, evidences of PTG were woven throughout each participant’s narrative. Whether explicitly stated or vaguely implied, PTG was demonstrated by all 10 participants in at least four out of five general areas. According to Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996), PTG can be manifested in five general areas: greater sense of personal strength, new appreciation of life, recognition of new possibilities, improved personal relationships, and spiritual development. Moreover, Mitchell et al. (2013) and Pietrzak et al. (2010) suggested a positive relationship between significant combat exposure and PTG. This concept of strength through suffering provided a theoretical framework upon which Theme Two: A Fulfilling Journey was built.

External support. Research has suggested that having a strong support system is a major factor in developing academic resilience (Morales, 2000). Although they experienced many challenges throughout their educational journey, participants credited external support as one of the key components that contributed to their degree attainment and sense of fulfillment. External support included: generous benefits, transfer credits, spouse support, family support, military support, and university support.

Generous benefits. The generous benefits referenced by all 10 participants were categorized as military and institutional benefits. Nine participants utilized military benefits such as the Post-9/11 GI Bill and TA to help fund their education. For Jacob, his military benefits provided an opportunity to graduate with his bachelor’s degree debt-free. He stated, “The Army paid for my education. I have no student debt at all.” Similarly, Aaron stated, “I got paid to go to school. It was nice.” All 10 participants benefitted from institutional benefits such
as lower military tuition rates, book vouchers, and waived course fees. Dan appreciated the institutional benefits and stated, “Integrity University reduced their rate for military so that TA covers it. And then on top of that, for undergraduate classes they gave a $100 book voucher for every class.” It was the combination of military and institutional benefits that contributed to a fulfilling educational journey for all participants. For Gabe, the generous benefits provided peace of mind and removed any anxiety related to paying for his education. He stated,

I never had to worry about where the next class and resources were coming from. I do not think I paid a single dime the entire five years I was going to school…things like that gave me the confidence to keep going and not feel like I was in over my head a lot of times.

Transfer credits. Another institutional benefit that was mentioned by a majority of participants was Integrity University’s acceptance of significant transfer credits. Military students often enroll in higher education already having accumulated a significant amount of college credit and life experience credit. A phrase that was commonly used by participants relative to transfer credits was, “Integrity University gave the most transfer credits.” Generous transfer credits were a major consideration in participants’ school selection. For Caleb, it was the combination of Integrity University’s reputation and transfer credits that helped him choose Integrity. He stated, “It was really their reputation and the amount of experience or credit they would give me. I had already been through a bunch of leadership schools, and no place could meet what Integrity was gonna give me academically.”

Spouse support. Eight out of 10 participants cited spouse support as one of the most important factors that contributed to their successful degree attainment. Without the support of their wives, many participants believed they would not have been successful. For example,
Gabe’s wife helped him stay focused and encouraged him to persist. In describing how his wife supported him, Gabe stated, “she always made sure that that [school] was a priority even when I did not want to make it.” Likewise, Benjamin’s wife provided the accountability and encouragement he needed to reach his educational goals, particularly upon his return from deployment. He stated, “Getting back, my wife really pushed me. I would not be where I am today without her. She really pushed me to go and do it [school].” Spouses also helped to create optimal study conditions at home by taking care of the children, reducing distractions, and providing encouragement. As an example, Finn stated,

She took care of the kids and that was in between her working as well. So, my biggest supporter, my biggest champion through all this was my wife. She kept me going all the time. Even when I just was like, why am I doing this, she reminded me why I was doing it.

Aaron’s wife encouraged him to set an example for their children. He recalled her telling him, “I will support you. Whatever you want to do, I will support it. But remember you can do it. You have kids watching you. They do not want to see you quitting.”

*Family support.* Isaac, Benjamin, and Finn received family support primarily from their fathers. Isaac’s father encouraged him to pursue his bachelor’s degree, which was an accomplishment that he himself had never achieved. Isaac recalled, “He never got his bachelor’s degree so he was always really pushing me to get mine.” Likewise, Finn’s father did not have a bachelor’s degree but was proud of his son’s achievement. Finn stated about his father,

He had the ability to go to school but he didn’t take advantage of the opportunity to go to school. And he told me, he was like you know, I’m proud of you. I’m waiting to see you
get these degrees because it’s a big deal. Because you’ll be the first male in our family to
get a degree, and that’s a big deal.

When Benjamin graduated, he dedicated his degree to his father. Benjamin stated that his father
“saw my potential when I didn’t see it.” Henry’s family was a support throughout his entire life,
but particularly upon his return from the first deployment. For example, he recalled,

They knew something was wrong with me and asked, “How do we get him to talk? How
do we get him back to his life?” Taking vacations and constantly calling me and
providing me with tips and advice. My parents are counselors as well. My parents tried
different counseling techniques. That’s what got me through all this.

_Military support._ Dan, Elijah, Gabe, and Jacob received encouragement and support
from military supervisors, direct reports, and fellow service members. Jacob described the Army
as being “extremely pro education.” Moreover, he felt supported and motivated by his soldiers
knowing that he was the only one in his office who was “actually engaging in postsecondary
education, and they were just so mesmerized” with the fact that he was earning a degree despite
the negative perception of infantrymen. Elijah received support from his chaplain, stating, “He
was a really big influence and just would tell me to work on school all the time.” Dan felt like he
received more support from his superiors because he was a sergeant at the time. Therefore, he
experienced less scrutiny from his superiors. Dan stated,

Me being a sergeant, they were like, “Oh, you’ve already done college so you know the
workload. Take what you need.” And they were okay with me doing schoolwork at
work. If I had nothing else going, “Go ahead, do your schoolwork. Not a big thing.”

In a similar vein, Gabe stated,
I always had bosses that were very education-focused, which I was fortunate. I always had guys that would try to remind me or urge me to complete the classes or urge me to complete them well, not to cut corners, not to take the lower grades.

*University support.* Participants felt supported by the university in a number of ways, including supportive and flexible professors, the University’s Military Affairs Office, and the University’s prayer support. Henry felt supported by faculty throughout his educational journey and stated, “The professors are always good. They encourage you and gave you the boost you needed when you really needed it.” The University’s Military Affairs Office was especially supportive of Dan throughout his educational experience, and he appreciated their effectiveness. He stated, “They know what they’re talking about and if they don’t, they know who to go to get the answer. They were very, very helpful and understood any issue you could bring to them.” The University offered prayer support to Isaac during some difficult times in his life. He stated, I remember there was a prayer request email link or something. You email and send in a prayer request or something. When I first started Liberty, I was still struggling a lot, and I remember there were a couple of times I sent emails. Very desperate emails, like, “I don’t know if I can do this anymore,” and I got some encouragement that way.

*Flexibility.* As non-traditional learners, a majority of combat veterans have additional responsibilities outside of school. Most combat veterans have full-time or part-time jobs, are married, and have dependent children. These additional responsibilities make it nearly impossible for combat veterans to attend college or university residentially. The flexibility and convenience of the online program afforded participants an opportunity to earn their bachelor’s degree without sacrificing their careers. All 10 participants acknowledged that the flexibility of
the program contributed to their degree attainment and fulfilling educational journey. Aaron stated,

I am glad that I was able to do online because it worked with my schedule well. Being a police officer of course I worked different shifts. For a good portion of the time I was on night shift so I would get up and I would do school during the day and they go to work at night…I was glad I was able to have the flexibility with the online program.

Likewise, Henry was looking for a program that would not interfere with his schedule. He stated, “I can actually go to school and go to work and I’m fine. I was looking for a program like that.” Caleb appreciated the option to study from home and stated,

I wanted the flexibility. I didn’t wanna sit in a classroom. I didn’t wanna have to go someplace to do something else. Because a lot of times in the military when you’re going and you’re going and you’re going, the last thing you wanna do in your off-time is go again and do something else.

**Personal strength.** As participants described their educational journey and how they overcame various challenges, it became evident that each participant drew personal strength from a number of sources. Two key areas of PTG is recognition of personal strength, and spiritual growth, which was demonstrated by all 10 participants. Throughout their educational journey, participants experienced *spiritual growth* as they depended on God to help them. They also described having a *determined mindset, personal discipline, and internal motivation.*

**Spiritual growth.** According to Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995, 1996), spiritual growth is one of five general areas in which PTG can be manifested. The spiritual component of Integrity University was not a major consideration for many participants in their decision to enroll.
However, nine out of 10 participants indicated that they experienced spiritual growth throughout their educational experience, contributing to a fulfilling journey. As an example, Jacob stated,

I didn’t really understand what that meant. I didn’t realize that a Christian school approaches everything from a Christian world view versus a regular school encourages more the philosophical free mind kinda thinking. But I think it’s definitely strengthened my faith.

Similarly, Benjamin stated,

As I started to study more, and develop more, and progress more, I think it kind of went hand in hand. I think both grew at the same time…my academic experiences and abilities as well as my faith. And it took a lot of time for me to understand that faith was really important for me. A lot of people don’t understand why I went to Integrity University, and maybe I don’t understand either, but God obviously wanted me there for a reason. And I think Integrity really grounded me.

In contrast, Aaron expressed a negative impact on his spiritual life when he stated,

Honestly, maybe my spiritual life suffered because of it. I did not have time. Sundays a lot of times instead of going to church with my family, I would stay at school or stay here at home and work on the computer. So, that might have actually been a negative aspect of it as well regarding my spiritual life and faith.

Prayer was a significant part of participants’ lives throughout their educational journey. They drew strength and comfort through praying, and having others pray for them. For example, Caleb stated, “I prayed a bunch. Prayed a bunch. I know my wife prayed.” Moreover, Aaron stated, “I mean, there were of course times where that is all I can do is pray.” Prayer also helped
Elijah persist; he stated, “Just having prayer and…I don’t know. If God wanted me to keep after it, then I’m just gonna keep pursuing it.”

As previously mentioned, the Christian component of the University was not an initial draw for most participants. Henry was one of very few participants who selected Integrity for its values. He stated, “What steered me to Integrity University were the values…I did not apply to other universities.” Many participants connected with the Christian values championed by the University, which contributed to a positive educational experience. As an example, Aaron, who had been ridiculed by a liberal professor, stated, “I am glad that I went to Integrity. Especially like now, politics and everything, the state of the United States right now…Integrity reaffirmed my world view, reaffirmed what I already knew.”

**Determined mindset.** Analysis of the data revealed that most participants were able to overcome challenges because of their determined mindset. Both Jacob and Benjamin recognized that they were smarter than they gave themselves credit for. This realization provided a focused determination to tackle any obstacles that hindered their academic progress. Aaron, Elijah, and Jacob described having a never quit attitude in their approach to school and life. Jacob stated, “I don’t quit, I don’t give up. So, if it’s a college course, or if I’m in a fight, I’m not gonna give up. That’s just who I am more than anything else.” Aaron believed that he was able to overcome any obstacles he encountered. He stated, “I always get it done. I always come out on top and I work my best under pressure.”

**Personal discipline.** One of the positive outcomes of participants’ military service was the ability to practice personal discipline when faced with challenges during their educational journey. In describing how they overcame challenges, participants often referred to adhering to structured schedules, prioritizing tasks, working ahead, staying focused, and reducing
distractions. Jacob took a very practical approach to his studies using a calendar. He stated, “I set up a calendar and I put for assignments, specific assignments, when things were due and I would back it up a couple days, ‘cause I never like being on time, I like being early.” Similarly, Dan tried “to stay ahead of it. Trying to get ahead a couple of weeks.” For Henry, it was “just having discipline or following a schedule,” which was crucial. He stated, “That helped me throughout the years at [Integrity] University, and I was able to finish.” Finn adjusted the time he spent on schoolwork; instead of trying to work on assignments in the evening when he was tired and stressed from a long day of work, he decided to wake up earlier and do schoolwork in the morning.

Jacob and Finn would isolate themselves from distractions in order to focus on their studies. Jacob stated,

When I studied, I would do so in an area where the football game wasn’t on, or the dogs weren’t running around barking. I would just segregate myself from the busy household that I’m in, and that definitely helped out a lot.

Likewise, Finn stated,

I used to have to isolate myself away from the family. Luckily, I had a finished basement so I would spend most of my time there while life was going on above me. Separation and keeping the noises and the distractions to a minimum really helped with that.

Henry demonstrated personal discipline in saying no to peers who pressured him to socialize rather than study. He stated,

My peers…wanted me to go out. I was like, “No, I better go to school. Have to go home and do my school work.” There was a lot of pressure there, but the biggest thing was
saying no. No is a big word…They got used to me saying no to everything, so they stopped asking to hang out and things like that.

*Internal motivation.* Participants’ internal motivation sustained them through many challenges throughout their educational journey. Gabe, Isaac, Benjamin, Dan, Aaron, and Finn believed their combat experience provided them with motivation and a new perspective with which they approached their educational journey. When faced with challenges, Gabe would remind himself, “Hey man, you finished this [combat], you can finish eight weeks of this course…this is not the hardest thing you have ever done. It is just a difficult thing.” Similarly, Aaron stated, “I can survive going out for a year and a half and dealing with the stress that comes along with that [combat], which was at that time almost unbearable. I can do college.”

Benjamin was motivated to put forth his best effort and explained, “I think that the one thing that Afghanistan taught me was that you don’t know when that [death] is going to be, so you best work as hard as you possibly can.” Finn expressed a new appreciation for life, which drove him to succeed. He believed that if he had gone to school at 18 without military and/or combat experience, he may have squandered his education. In relation to the impact of his experience on his motivation, Finn stated, “I would say it definitely had a difference on me going to school and the reasons why I want a high GPA in school.” Similarly, Dan stated that being in the military drove him to do his best. He stated, “I think being in the military you want to be the best, and you want to improve your life.”

**Research Question Responses**

*Question one.* How do combat veterans with significant combat exposure describe the experience of attaining their bachelor’s degree through an online program? Two themes emerged from the data analysis: (1) A Challenging Journey and (2) A Fulfilling Journey.
Combat veterans with significant combat exposure described the experience of attaining their bachelor’s degree through an online program as both challenging yet fulfilling. As an example, Finn stated, “In the end, though, the challenges were well worth the fulfilling feeling I felt after completing the program.” A closer examination of the main themes revealed a number of subthemes that address the remaining research questions. Theme one: A Challenging Journey included three subthemes: negative repercussions of combat, external factors, and internal struggles. Theme two: A Fulfilling Journey included two subthemes: external support and personal strength.

**Question two.** What challenges, if any, do participants describe they encountered as they pursued their online bachelor’s degree? Theme One: A Challenging Journey emerged from participants’ descriptions of the many challenges they encountered throughout their educational journey. Analysis of the data revealed three categories: negative repercussions of combat, external factors, and internal struggles. Negative repercussions of combat were primarily visible and invisible wounds of war that created educational challenges for six out of 10 participants. External factors included work demands, balancing school, work, and home, and the impersonal nature of the online format. Internal struggles were related to motivation, concentration and focus, and time management.

**Question three.** How do participants describe the experience of overcoming the challenges they identify to subsequently attain their online bachelor’s degree? Theme Two: A Fulfilling Journey emerged from participants’ descriptions of how they overcame challenges to subsequently attain their online bachelor’s degree. Theirs was a journey that was undergirded by external support and personal strength. Participants were able to overcome challenges through a combination of generous benefits and transfer credits earned; support from spouses, family,
military, and university; and the flexibility of the online program. Participants also drew upon their own personal strength in spiritual, psychological, and motivational arenas to overcome challenges.

**Question four.** How do participants describe the impact of their combat experience(s) on their degree attainment? First and foremost, all 10 participants described their combat experience as personally life-changing. Each participant described at least one life-threatening traumatic combat event, which may have been a trigger for PTG in at least four areas in his life. Secondly, the perceived impact on their degree attainment was mixed. Gabe, Dan, Henry, Aaron, Isaac, and Benjamin believed that their combat experience positively impacted their degree attainment, while Elijah, Jacob, and Caleb stated that it had minimal to no impact at all. Finn stated that he “never tried to make that connection,” however, he also stated that his military training helped him to “pay attention to the details and keep going forward” even when he didn’t feel like it.

It is interesting to note, however, that despite the claims of their combat experience having little to no impact on degree attainment, there were evidences of PTG in Elijah, Jacob, and Caleb’s narratives that may have contributed to their degree attainment. For example, Elijah had a vision of changing the world through education and sports, which indicates a recognition of new possibilities. For Caleb and Jacob, PTG was exhibited in a greater sense of personal strength, which may have equipped them to earn their bachelor’s degrees. Caleb acknowledged that “coming through the military” helped him as a leader, whereas Jacob initially thought he was not intelligent enough to get a degree, but stated, “I realized that I was smarter than I was giving myself credit for.”
Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the study and a detailed description of the results, including individual and group portraits. In addition, emergent themes were presented within the context of four research questions. Research question one revealed two major themes that emerged from the data: A Challenging Journey, and A Fulfilling Journey. Research question two revealed three subthemes that emerged from Theme One: A Challenging Journey. Participants described negative repercussions of combat, external factors, and internal struggles as having contributed to their challenging educational journey. Research question three revealed that participants were able to overcome challenges through external support and personal strength, which emerged as two subthemes under Theme Two: A Fulfilling Journey. Finally, research question four revealed that combat changes people. For all 10 participants in this study, their combat experience may have triggered PTG, which could have contributed to successful degree attainment despite the presence of challenges associated with significant combat exposure.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the essence of the experiences of combat veterans with significant combat exposure who successfully completed their bachelor’s degree through a private online program. This chapter presents a summary of the findings of the study, in addition to a discussion of the implications relative to the relevant literature and theoretical framework. Methodological and practical implications, delimitations and limitations, and recommendations for future research are also presented.

Summary of Findings

This transcendental phenomenological study explored the experiences of combat veterans with significant combat exposure and their degree attainment in online higher education. The purpose of this study was to describe the essence of the experiences of combat veterans with significant combat exposure who successfully completed their bachelor’s degree through a private online program. The transcendental phenomenological research design allowed participants to describe their lived experiences in their own words, thus providing readers with “a complex, detailed understanding” (Creswell, 2013, p. 47) of the phenomenon. The major themes that emerged from the study were presented to participants through the process of member checking. Purposeful, convenience, criterion, and maximum variation sampling were used to recruit 10 participants for the study.

A participant questionnaire, a one-on-one interview, and a focus group forum were employed for data collection. By engaging in these data collection methods, participants were able to provide detailed descriptions of their lived experiences in the combat zone and in their pursuit of a bachelor’s degree through an online program. Interview and focus group forum
transcripts were analyzed using Moustakas’ (1994) modification of the Van Kaam method of analysis of phenomenological data. In order to set aside any prejudgments and biases about combat veterans and their degree attainment, I engaged in the *epoche* process (bracketing) prior to and throughout the data analysis process by maintaining a researcher’s journal (see Appendix K). Morales’ (2000) educational resilience cycle and Tedeschi’s (2011) PTG in combat veterans provided the theoretical framework for this study. In order to describe the essence of the experiences of combat veterans with significant combat exposure who successfully completed their bachelor’s degree through a private online program despite the presence of challenges related and unrelated to their combat experience, this study was guided by four research questions.

Research question one asked, how do combat veterans with significant combat exposure describe the experience of attaining their bachelor’s degree through an online program? Two major themes emerged from the data analysis that addressed this question. Participants described the experience of attaining their bachelor’s degree through an online program as: (1) A Challenging Journey and (2) A Fulfilling Journey. Three subthemes emerged as participants described A Challenging Journey: *negative repercussions of combat, external factors,* and *internal struggles.* As participants described A Fulfilling Journey, two subthemes emerged: *external support* and *personal strength.*

Research question two asked, what challenges, if any, do participants describe they encountered as they pursued their online bachelor’s degree? The subthemes that emerged from Theme One: A Challenging Journey provided additional insight into the challenges that participants described as part of their lived experience. *Negative repercussions of combat* contributed to a challenging journey as participants struggled with visible and invisible wounds
of war such as PTSD and TBI. They were also faced with diminished skills from wounds of war and prolonged time in the military and out of school. *External factors* that made the educational journey challenging included the struggle to balance school/work/family, demanding military employment, financial issues, challenging online format, and relational issues. *Internal struggles* made it difficult for participants to stay motivated and focused. Participants also struggled to manage their time well.

Research question three asked, how do participants describe the experience of overcoming the challenges they identify to subsequently attain their online bachelor’s degree? The subthemes that emerged from Theme Two: A Fulfilling Journey provided additional insight into the factors that enabled participants to overcome the challenges they encountered along their journey to degree attainment. Participants attributed their ability to overcome challenges to *external support* and *personal strength*. External support was manifested in the form of generous benefits, transfer credits, spouse, family, military, and university support. Participants described drawing personal strength from their own spiritual growth, determined mindset, personal discipline, and internal motivation.

Research question four asked, how do participants describe the impact of their combat experience(s) on their degree attainment? Although all 10 participants admitted to being changed by combat, the impact of their combat experiences on their degree attainment was not acknowledged by all 10 participants. Seven out of 10 participants described their combat experience as having a positive impact on their degree attainment. The participants described how their combat experience helped them develop greater discipline, leadership skills, and made them more driven to succeed, which contributed to their successful degree attainment. The other three participants described little to no impact of their combat experiences on their degree.
attainment. Only one participant described his combat experience as having both a negative and positive impact on his degree attainment.

Although three out of 10 participants described little to no impact of their combat experiences on their degree attainment, it is important to note that all 10 participants acknowledged being changed by combat in positive and negative ways, which ultimately did impact their educational experience. In addition to the positive impact already mentioned, participants exhibited PTG in a number of general areas (see Table 2). Though they may not have used the specific terminology, all 10 participants described having a greater sense of personal strength, recognizing new possibilities, improved personal relationships, and spiritual development. In addition, two participants also described having a new appreciation of life as a result of their combat experience. The negative impacts described by participants were related to visible and invisible wounds of war such as PTSD and TBI, as well as academic challenges during deployment.

The results presented in chapter four indicated two major themes: (1) A Challenging Journey and (2) A Fulfilling Journey that described combat veterans’ degree attainment experience in online higher education. Participants’ challenging journey was characterized by three subthemes: negative repercussions of combat, external factors, and internal struggles. Their fulfilling journey was bolstered by external support and personal strength, which enabled participants to overcome the myriad of challenges they encountered. Furthermore, the results indicated that all participants were changed by their combat experience and demonstrated PTG in at least four out of five general areas.
Discussion

The two themes that emerged from this study describe the essence of the experiences of combat veterans with significant combat exposure who successfully completed their bachelor’s degree through a private online program despite the presence of challenges related and unrelated to their combat exposure. The first theme, A Challenging Journey, corroborates previous research on combat veterans in higher education. The second theme, A Fulfilling Journey, may provide a novel contribution to the field. Moreover, the findings extended Morales’ (2000) educational resilience cycle, as well as Tedeschi’s (2011) PTG in combat veterans, the two theories that provided the theoretical framework for this study.

Empirical Relationship

Participants encountered a number of challenges throughout their degree attainment experience related to significant combat exposure. More specifically, the psychological and emotional effects of combat exposure which included PTSD, TBI, and depression led to a challenging educational journey for six out of 10 participants. This finding corroborates previous research (Areppim, 2015; DMDC, 2013; IOM, 2014; RAND, 2008; Shea & Fishback, 2012) that pointed to the significant number of service members returning from combat with some level of trauma leading to PTSD, TBI, depression, or any combination of the three. Afari et al. (2015), Barnard-Brak et al. (2011), Barry et al. (2012), and Elliott et al. (2011) examined these negative health effects experienced by U.S. service members exposed to combat and found a significant negative impact on degree attainment.

Additional studies also supported the assertion that combat-related injuries may impede successful degree attainment (Demers, 2011; Elliott et al., 2011; Livingston et al., 2011; Rumann et al., 2011; Smith-Osborne, 2012; Whiteman et al., 2013). On the other hand, studies have
found PTG in some combat-exposed veterans (Mitchell et al., 2013; Pietrzak et al., 2010). The findings of the current study extend previous research regarding PTG in combat-exposed veterans within the novel context of the online educational setting. All 10 participants exhibited PTG in at least four out of five areas.

A majority of participants in the current study indicated using military benefits such as the Post-9/11 GI Bill to fund their education, which is supported in previous research (Griffin & Gilbert, 2012; Kelley et al., 2013). Although they expressed appreciation for these benefits, they also expressed frustration with the process of applying for and securing their military benefits. Wheeler (2012) suggested that this is a major source of frustration that contributes to a difficult transition from combat zone for veterans in higher education.

The flexibility and convenience of online education was a source of fulfillment and frustration. Participants enjoyed the flexibility of their online program which allowed them to maintain their career. However, for some participants the flexibility and convenience presented challenges with self-motivation and procrastination, corroborating previous research (Cook & Young, 2009; Griffin & Gilbert, 2012).

The current study diverged from previous research in its design and approach, using a qualitative design to examine the successful degree attainment of combat veterans with significant combat exposure in online higher education; previous studies have taken a deficit-based approach. For example, Afari et al. (2015), Barnard-Brak et al. (2011), and Barry et al. (2012) focused primarily on the academic challenges experienced by military students in higher education.

The current study makes a novel contribution to the field by providing a qualitative inquiry into the experiences of combat veterans with significant combat exposure who
successfully completed their bachelor’s degree through a private online program despite the presence of challenges related and unrelated to their combat exposure. Examining the success of combat veterans specifically, and military service members in general, has been an understudied outcome (Green & Hayden, 2013; Ness et al., 2014). The current study not only provides a description of what combat veterans with significant combat exposure experienced throughout their successful degree attainment journey, it also provides a description of how it was experienced.

**Theoretical Relationship**

Morales’ (2000) educational resilience cycle and Tedeschi’s (2011) PTG in combat veterans provided the theoretical framework for this study. The findings from the current study extended both theories. As participants described their experience of attaining a bachelor’s degree through an online program despite having experienced significant combat exposure, the manifestation of protective factors interacting with risk factors to foster resilience was evident. Furthermore, it became clear that participants exhibited PTG in a number of areas as they reflected upon their combat and educational experiences.

**Educational resilience cycle.** The educational resilience cycle (Morales, 2000) applied to the current study of combat veterans with significant combat exposure in online higher education provided an understanding of how protective factors (identified in this study as the factors that contributed to Theme Two: A Fulfilling Journey) worked in concert and interacted with risk factors (identified in this study as the challenges that contributed to Theme One: A Challenging Journey) to facilitate resilience. The five steps of the resilience cycle (Morales, 2000) were loosely followed by study participants. Participants fulfilled the first step as they identified/recognized major risk factors related to negative repercussions of combat, external
factors, and internal struggles that contributed to their challenging journey. This was evidenced in Caleb, Elijah, Finn, and Jacob’s narratives describing how their invisible wounds of war (PTSD, TBI) presented significant challenges throughout their degree attainment experience.

Another risk factor related to negative repercussions of combat was that of being deployed while taking classes; it became so challenging for Elijah that he decided to wait until he was out of the military to resume his studies. Participants identified a number of risk factors that were external, such as balancing school, work, and family. This was difficult for Aaron, Benjamin, Dan, Finn, Gabe, and Isaac, but particularly for Aaron and Isaac who have seven and five children, respectively. Other risk factors included: demanding military employment, financial issues, drawbacks of online format, academic challenges, and relational issues. Internal struggles were identified as: lack of motivation, difficulty with concentration and focus, and time management.

The second step was realized as participants manifested and/or sought out protective factors related to external support and personal strength. In addition, PTG was manifested as a protective factor in all 10 participants and will be discussed in the next section. Relative to external support, participants sought out protective factors in the form of military benefits, transfer credits, spouse support, family support, military support, and university support. Spouse support was identified by eight out of 10 participants as being a major component of their successful degree attainment. Protective factors were manifested as participants exercised personal strength in a number of ways, including spiritual growth, determined mindset, personal discipline, and internal motivation. Spiritual growth was particularly significant as it was experienced by nine out of 10 participants throughout their educational journey.

The third step was actualized as participants described how protective factors worked in concert to propel them toward degree attainment. Rather than identifying a single protective
factor that contributed to their degree attainment, all 10 participants described multiple factors working in concert. As an example, Finn described the combination of generous benefits, personal discipline, and spouse support as being particularly meaningful. For Aaron, it was the combination of generous benefits, flexibility of online courses, internal motivation, and spouse support that helped him get across the finish line.

Participants fulfilled the fourth step as they acknowledged the value of protective factors in their lives and described continuous refinement and implementation. As participants acknowledged the value of protective factors they identified, they were able to persist in their educational pursuit to successful degree attainment despite the presence of significant challenges. The continuous refinement and implementation of protective factors sustained participants’ academic achievement, the fifth and final step of the resilience cycle (Morales, 2000). Interestingly, most participants sustained academic achievement beyond their bachelor’s degree; nine out of 10 participants have completed or are in the process of completing their master’s degree, providing support for the effectiveness of continuous refinement and implementation of protective factors.

Posttraumatic growth in combat veterans. The application of PTG in combat veterans (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995, 1996) to the current study provided an understanding of how participants’ combat experiences may have triggered PTG and impacted their degree attainment experience. In order for PTG to occur, an individual must first experience a traumatic event (Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998). A significant pattern that emerged from the study was that all 10 participants recalled at least one major traumatic event from combat, extending the concept of first experiencing a traumatic event in order for PTG to occur. Additionally, every participant described being changed by their combat experience as a whole.
It is important to note that although the traumatic event may have triggered the positive outcome of PTG, the traumatic event itself is not perceived positively. Rather, what should be evaluated are the “positive personal changes that result from their struggle to deal with trauma and its psychological consequences” (Tedeschi & McNally, 2011, p. 19). In addition, special care must be taken to avoid misunderstandings and unrealistic expectations regarding PTG. According to Tedeschi and McNally (2011), rather than celebrating the trauma itself, what should be stressed is “that trauma may set the stage for beneficial psychological changes that occur in its aftermath” (p. 20). It is also important to note that PTG does not occur in all trauma survivors. Hence, “the expectation that trauma survivor must achieve growth” (Tedeschi & McNally, 2011, p. 20) should not be encouraged.

Tedeschi and Calhoun coined the term “posttraumatic growth” in 2004 and proposed five general areas of PTG: (1) greater sense of personal strength, (2) new appreciation of life, (3) recognition of new possibilities or opportunities in the aftermath of trauma, (4) improved personal relationships marked by more compassion and emotional connection, and (5) spiritual development. In extending this component of PTG in combat veterans, all 10 participants in this study demonstrated PTG in at least four general areas that contributed to Theme One: A Fulfilling Journey (see Table 2). All participants exhibited a greater sense of personal strength, recognition of new possibilities, improved personal relationships, and spiritual development. Interestingly, only two participants exhibited PTG relative to new appreciation of life, which may have been influenced by the number of combat deployments served.

Although participants encountered negative consequences of combat, they also described positive changes from their combat and military experience. Evidences of PTG in combat veterans (Tedeschi, 2011) were interwoven throughout each participant’s narrative, and their
combat experience could not be disassociated from their subsequent lived experiences, in the educational arena or otherwise. By acknowledging a greater sense of personal strength, participants were able to draw upon that strength to persist when confronted with challenges. Recognition of new possibilities compelled participants to set and achieve lofty goals for themselves. Improved personal relationships marked by more compassion and emotional connection seemed to serve a two-fold purpose. First, they provided much-needed support for participants throughout their educational journey, which was challenging at times. Second, participants were motivated to demonstrate compassion to those they served and those with whom they served. Spiritual development was an area of growth that was meaningful for all 10 participants. Their relationship with God was strengthened as they cried out to him in moments of fear and desperation, or when they offered praise and thanksgiving for His protection and provision. For Benjamin and Finn, their new appreciation of life inspired them to take full advantage of every opportunity to give their best effort.

Implications

The findings of this transcendental phenomenological study of the experiences of combat veterans with significant combat exposure who successfully completed their bachelor’s degree through a private online program despite the presence of challenges related and unrelated to their combat experience have theoretical, empirical, and practical implications for combat veterans, researchers, colleges and universities with online programs, online program administrators, online faculty, and online military student support services. The theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of the study will be addressed in this section.

Theoretical Implications
This study provided a description of the essence of the experiences of combat veterans with significant combat exposure who successfully completed their bachelor’s degree through a private online program despite the presence of challenges related and unrelated to their combat experience. The participants in this study were able to overcome these challenges and achieve their educational goal of attaining a bachelor’s degree despite the presence of challenges that would have driven most students to dropout. The educational resilience cycle (Morales, 2000) and PTG in combat veterans (Tedeschi, 2011) provided a lens through to understand the phenomenon. The findings of this study indicated that combat veterans with significant combat exposure could achieve their educational goals despite encountering seemingly insurmountable challenges, further extending the two theories. It is critical for combat veterans in online higher education, researchers, online higher education institutions, and online faculty and staff to understand the importance of examining the academic success of combat veterans with significant combat exposure within the framework of the educational resilience cycle (Morales, 2000) and PTG in combat veterans (Tedeschi, 2011). Combat veterans with significant combat exposure would benefit from educational interventions designed to increase their awareness of the educational resilience cycle (Morales, 2000) and PTG in combat veterans (Tedeschi, 2011). By developing an understanding of these two theories, combat veterans with significant combat exposure would be better prepared to overcome the challenges they may encounter throughout their educational journey.

The educational resilience cycle (Morales, 2000) theorizes that the combination of protective factors interacting with identified risk factors (challenges) can produce academic resilience. Extending this theory, all 10 participants identified multiple protective factors that were engaged throughout their educational journey which mitigated many of the risk factors
(challenges) they encountered. According to Morales (2000), helping students cultivate “their ability to recognize their needs and identify and utilize appropriate and effective resources to meet those needs is a basic part of applying the resilience cycle to potentially resilient students” (p. 20). Therefore, educating students about the five stages of the educational resilience cycle (Morales, 2000) will provide them with the opportunity to become aware of the protective factors in their lives and how they interact to mitigate risk factors (challenges) that could hinder their academic progress. This will require a coordinated effort among a number of stakeholders associated with online higher education that include online program administrators, online faculty and staff, and online military student support services.

Tedeschi and McNally (2011) suggested that providing training about PTG may actually “foster PTG among military personnel” (p. 22). PTG in combat veterans is triggered in some individuals by exposure to combat trauma (Tedeschi, 2011; Tedeschi & McNally, 2011). Extending this concept, all 10 participants in the current study reported having been exposed to at least one major traumatic event during their combat deployment. The theory suggested that some combat veterans experience PTG as a “result from their struggle to deal with trauma and its psychological consequences” (Tedeschi, 2011, p. 19). Further extending the theory, all 10 participants in the current study demonstrated growth in at least four out of the five general areas of growth. Eight out of 10 participants experienced PTG in the following four areas: greater sense of personal strength, recognition of new possibilities, improved personal relationships, and spiritual development. Two out of 10 participants experienced PTG in one additional area: new appreciation of life. This study illustrated that PTG, triggered by exposure to a traumatic event, is a realistic outcome for combat veterans with significant combat exposure. In addition, this
study made a novel contribution to PTG in combat veterans (Tedeschi, 2011) within the context of the successful degree attainment of combat veterans in online higher education.

**Empirical Implications**

Supporting combat veterans with significant combat exposure in their academic pursuit is a growing concern for institutions of higher learning across the country (Ford & Vignare, 2015; Sinski, 2012; Steele et al., 2010; Wisner et al., 2015). As the number of combat veterans in higher education continues to grow (IOM, 2014), institutions of higher education struggle to provide adequate support for these students, resulting in dropout rates ranging from 30% (Cate, 2013) to over 80% (Ginder-Vogel, 2012). Regrettably, these estimates are difficult to confirm due to the lack of reliable data relative to completion rates for combat veterans in higher education. This study added to the empirical literature by examining the essence of the experiences of combat veterans with significant combat exposure who successfully completed their bachelor’s degree through a private, online program despite the presence of challenges related and unrelated to their combat exposure. Empirical implications of this transcendental phenomenological study apply to combat veterans in online higher education, online program administrators, faculty, and staff, and online military student support services.

Combat veterans with significant combat exposure who successfully completed their bachelor’s degree through a private online program despite the presence of challenges related and unrelated to their combat exposure described the experience as a challenging yet fulfilling journey. The challenges they described are consistent with current research on combat-related injuries (Barry et al., 2012; Church, 2009; Elliott et al., 2011; Rudd et al., 2011; Widome et al., 2011) and diminished skills (Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008), resulting in a negative impact on combat veterans’ academic achievement (Afari et al., 2015; Barnard-Brak et
These negative consequences of combat presented significant challenges for seven out of 10 participants in the current study. Moreover, consistent with research on combat veterans in higher education, external factors created a challenging journey for participants in the areas of school/work/home balance (Karczewski, 2008; Radford, 2011; Wormus, 2010), military work demands (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011), financial issues (Wheeler, 2012), lack of interaction with classmates (DiRamio et al., 2008; Griffin & Gilbert, 2012; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010), and academic struggles (Durdella & Kim, 2012; Rumann et al., 2011; Steele et al., 2010).

The findings of this study diverged from current research in the area of incompletion or dropout rates for student veterans. According to current research (Hammond, 2016; Kelley et al., 2013; Radford, 2011), veterans are 21.2% less likely to attain a bachelor’s degree compared to nonveterans and 4.1% more likely not to complete a degree at all. In addition, Briggs (2012) and Wood (2012) suggested that up to 88% of student veterans drop out in their first year. Moreover, according to Griffin and Gilbert (2012), institutions have reported dropout rates as high as 50%. Conversely, all 10 participants in the current study successfully completed their bachelor’s degree through a private online program. A major component of online programs that contributed to participants’ fulfilling journey was the flexibility of taking online courses while concurrently maintaining a career.

**Practical Implications**

The practical implications of this study are applicable to the following stakeholders: combat veterans considering or currently enrolled in online higher education, online higher education institutions, program administrators, faculty, and staff. Recommendations for these stakeholders are listed in this section.
**Combat veterans in online higher education.** The implication for combat veterans who are considering or are currently enrolled in online higher education is that despite the challenges they may encounter throughout their educational journey, successful degree attainment is possible. The participants in this study encountered numerous challenges that could have impeded their degree attainment. This study revealed how they were able to overcome these challenges through the utilization of external support and the manifestation of personal strength. By increasing their awareness of potential challenges, combat veterans who are considering or are currently enrolled in online higher education will have more realistic expectations and be prepared to overcome many of the challenges they experience. In addition, combat veterans who are considering or are currently enrolled in online higher education may benefit from learning about the specific external supports that were utilized, as well as the areas of personal strength that were manifested by participants in this study. The findings of this study have the potential to positively impact current and future students and set them on a path to successful degree attainment.

**Online higher education institutions, administrators, faculty, and staff.** The implications for online higher education institutions, administrators, faculty, and staff are that they have an incredible opportunity to support combat veterans with significant combat exposure in their pursuit of a bachelor’s degree. It is important for these stakeholders to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges that may impede combat veterans’ degree attainment and how utilizing external support and drawing upon personal strength can mitigate these challenges. It is also incumbent upon stakeholders to develop and implement educational interventions for the purpose of increasing combat veterans’ awareness of the educational resilience cycle (Morales,
2000) and PTG in combat veterans (Tedeschi, 2011). Some suggested platforms include: online webinars, videos, and presentations.

Online higher education institutions can use the findings from this study to inform the development of military student support initiatives. Developing new support initiatives or enhancing existing support programs for combat veterans is mutually beneficial; combat veterans receive the support they need to set them up for successful degree attainment, and online higher education institutions realize higher student retention and degree completion rates. In addition to the creation and enhancement of military student support programs built upon the theories of educational resilience cycle (Morales, 2000) and PTG in combat veterans (Tedeschi, 2011), it is equally important for online administrators, faculty, and staff to receive relevant training on how to best support combat veterans in online higher education within the context of the aforementioned theories.

Major components of the training should address in detail the two major themes from this study: (1) A Challenging Journey and (2) A Fulfilling Journey. The first component of the training should focus on the specific challenges that were identified in the study as subthemes of Theme One: A Challenging Journey (see Figure 1). The second component should feature the factors that contributed to Theme Two: A Fulfilling Journey (see Figure 1). Educational resilience cycle (Morales, 2000) and PTG in combat veterans (Tedeschi, 2011) would provide the theoretical framework for the training material.
Figure 1. Themes and Subthemes. This figure illustrates the major themes and subthemes of the current study.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations

The delimitations for this study were purposeful decisions that I made to define the boundaries of the study. The participants of this study were bounded by the following: (a) students who graduated with a bachelor’s degree from an online degree program in 2011 or later, (b) students with significant combat exposure as indicated by a score of “light-moderate” to “heavy” on the Combat Exposure Scale (CES) (Keane et al., 1989), and (c) veterans of the Global War on Terror (GWOT) (OEF, OIF, and OND). This study was limited to combat veterans with significant combat exposure who successfully attained a bachelor’s degree from a private online program to ensure that all participants experienced a shared phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). I decided to set the graduation date range of 2011 or later because of the age of the online program; it did not exist prior to 2007. Therefore, setting the earliest graduation date at 2011 provided the greatest probability of capturing the highest number of graduates of the online program. Significant combat exposure was a major component of the phenomenon. Thus, the CES (Keane et al., 1989) was employed to measure participants’ total combat exposure in order to secure participants that had a significant level of combat exposure as indicated by a score of “light-moderate” to “heavy” on the Combat Exposure Scale (CES). I decided to limit
the study to veterans of the GWOT to ensure that their combat experience was from the same war era.

**Limitations**

The limitations of this study were primarily related to the setting and sample. Study participants were limited to having graduated with a bachelor’s degree from a private online program. The faith-based mission of the institution was another limitation that may have influenced the findings of this study. These limitations may reduce the transferability of the research findings to the experiences of combat veterans in other online programs. Although not surprising given that an estimated 65% to 77% of Post-9/11 veterans are white and 88% are male (IOM, 2014; National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2014), another limitation of this study was race and gender representation; all 10 participants in this study were white males. As such, this limitation may reduce the transferability of the research findings to female, non-white combat veterans. Additionally, nine out of 10 participants were in their thirties, with only one participant who was 53. This limitation may reduce the transferability of the research findings to older or younger combat veterans. One limitation that I brought to the study as the researcher was my lack of experience as a combat veteran with significant combat exposure. Hence, the data collection and analysis may have been impacted by my lack of personal experience with the phenomenon being studied.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study explored the essence of the experiences of combat veterans with significant combat exposure who successfully attained their bachelor’s degree through a private online program despite the presence of challenges related and unrelated to their combat exposure. Based upon the results of this study, recommendations for future research are presented.
Topics

This study explored the experiences of combat veterans’ successful degree attainment in online education through the theoretical lens of the educational resilience cycle (Morales, 2000) and PTG in combat veterans (Tedeschi, 2011). While the results of this study extended these theories, further research is recommended. Future research on the educational resilience cycle and PTG in combat veterans applied to other at-risk student groups that achieved academic success may serve to extend and increase awareness of these theories. Furthermore, research with a continued focus on successful students who defied the odds (resilient students) could yield additional findings that may help struggling students overcome challenges and set them on a path to successful degree attainment.

Populations

As previously discussed, this study was limited to all white, male participants in their thirties. In addition, all participants were enlisted rather than officers. Therefore, future research with older and younger females and non-white participants may improve transferability to studies related to the successful degree attainment of combat veterans with significant combat exposure. Moreover, future research could also focus on combat veterans by level of combat exposure, branch of service, and rank. Examining these specific groups may fill a gap in the literature related to the distinct experiences of each branch, and rank. Finally, my lack of personal experience with the phenomenon was a limitation of this study. Hence, future research conducted by researchers with combat experience is recommended, which would bring a different perspective to the data collection and analysis.

Directions
This study focused on combat veterans with significant combat exposure who successfully completed their bachelor’s degree through a private online program despite the presence of challenges related and unrelated to their combat exposure. Future research targeting the following groups and settings could add to the transferability of similar studies: residential students, online students at other private and/or public institutions, and for-profit versus non-profit institutions.

**Designs**

A transcendental phenomenological qualitative design was most appropriate for this study in order to describe the essence of the experiences of combat veterans with significant combat exposure who successfully completed their bachelor’s degree through a private online program despite the presence of challenges related and unrelated to their combat exposure. Other qualitative designs (narrative, grounded theory, ethnographic, and case study) may be appropriate for future research on the phenomenon using a different approach. Moreover, quantitative and mixed method designs should also be considered.

**Summary**

The purpose of this study was to explore the essence of the experiences of combat veterans with significant combat exposure who successfully completed their bachelor’s degree through a private online program despite the presence of challenges related and unrelated to their combat exposure. A transcendental phenomenological research design was used to capture the essence of the lived experiences of participants by providing them with an opportunity for their voices to be heard through this study. This study was guided by four research questions: (1) How do combat veterans with significant combat exposure describe the experience of attaining their bachelor’s degree through an online program? (2) What challenges, if any, do participants
describe they encountered as they pursued their online bachelor’s degree?  (3) How do participants describe the experience of overcoming the challenges they identify to subsequently attain their online bachelor’s degree?  (4) How do participants describe the impact of their combat experience(s) on their degree attainment?

Two major themes emerged from this study: (1) A Challenging Journey and (2) A Fulfilling Journey. Three subthemes contributed to A Challenging Journey for participants: challenges associated with negative repercussions of combat, external factors, and internal struggles. A number of protective factors filtered into two subthemes that contributed to A Fulfilling Journey for participants: external support and personal strength. The educational resilience cycle (Morales, 2000) and PTG in combat veterans (Tedeschi, 2011) provided the theoretical framework for this study. A significant finding of the study was the manifestation of PTG in all 10 participants that helped them overcome challenges throughout their educational journey. The findings illustrated that despite having experienced major combat trauma and its negative consequences, a positive outcome was still possible as participants drew strength and encouragement through the various protective factors in their lives to mitigate the challenges they encountered.

In many institutions of higher learning, adequate support for student veterans is lacking, and for the institutions that do provide support, there is room for improvement. Therefore, it is essential to develop focused educational interventions for combat veterans in online programs, and relevant professional training for online faculty and support staff who serve this student population. Highlighting specific challenges and featuring the components of external support and personal strength that helped study participants succeed may be an effective approach to preparing current and future students for successful degree attainment despite the presence of
challenges. Relevant training for online faculty and support staff will increase their understanding of the challenges that so many military students encounter. Moreover, training online faculty and support staff to help students identify the external support factors and areas of personal strength can set them up for successful degree attainment and beyond.
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Veterans Administration.


APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What is your gender?
2. What is your age?
3. What is your ethnic background/race?
4. Which of the following best describes your current relationship status?
   a. Married
   b. Widowed
   c. Divorced
   d. Separated
   e. In a domestic partnership or civil union
   f. Single, but cohabiting with a significant other
   g. Single, never married
5. Which of the following best describes your relationship status during the time you were working on your bachelor’s degree?
   a. Married
   b. Widowed
   c. Divorced
   d. Separated
   e. In a domestic partnership or civil union
   f. Single, but cohabiting with a significant other
   g. Single, never married
6. What is your highest level of education?
   a. Bachelor’s degree
   b. Master’s degree
   c. Doctorate
7. What is your current employment status?
   a. Employed full-time, working 40 or more hours per week
   b. Employed part-time, working less than 40 hours per week
   c. Not employed, looking for work
   d. Not employed, NOT looking for work
   e. Disabled, not able to work
8. What was your employment status during the time you were working on your bachelor’s degree?
   a. Employed full-time, working 40 or more hours per week
   b. Employed part-time, working less than 40 hours per week
   c. Not employed, looking for work
   d. Not employed, NOT looking for work
   e. Disabled, not able to work
9. In which branch of the armed forces did you serve?
   a. U.S. Army
   b. U.S. Navy
   c. U.S. Marine Corps
   d. U.S. Air Force
   e. U.S. Coast Guard
10. Were you an officer or enlisted?
11. In which military component did you serve?
   a. Active Duty
   b. Reserves
   c. National Guard
12. Are you currently serving in the United States military?
   a. Yes
   b. No
13. What is your total years of military service?
14. What is the total number of your combat deployments?
15. What was the length of each deployment?
16. Did you utilize your GI Bill or other military benefits for your education?
17. What was your military occupational specialty (MOS)?
18. My combat deployment supported (select all that apply):
   a. Operation Enduring Freedom
   b. Operation Iraqi Freedom
   c. Operation New Dawn

**Combat Exposure Scale**

1. Did you ever go on combat patrols or have other dangerous duty?
   a. No
   b. 1-3 times
   c. 4-12 times
   d. 13-50 times
   e. 51+ times
2. Were you ever under enemy fire?
   a. Never
   b. <1 month
   c. <1-3 months
   d. <4-6 months
   e. 7 months or more
3. Were you ever surrounded by the enemy?
   a. No
   b. 1-2 times
   c. 3-12 times
   d. 13-25 times
   e. 26+ times
4. What percentage of the soldiers in your unit were killed (KIA), wounded or missing in action (MIA)?
   a. None
   b. 1-25%
   c. 26-50%
   d. 51-75%
   e. 76% or more
5. How often did you fire rounds at the enemy?
   a. Never
   b. 1-2 times
6. How often did you see someone hit by incoming or outgoing rounds?
   a. Never
   b. 1-2 times
   c. 3-12 times
   d. 13-50 times
   e. 51 or more

7. How often were you in danger of being injured or killed (i.e., being pinned down, overrun, ambushed, near miss, etc.)?
   a. Never
   b. 1-2 times
   c. 3-12 times
   d. 13-50 times
   e. 51 or more

TBI and Neurobehavioral
1. Did an IED detonate near you, with or without injury?
2. Did you have any injury(ies) during your deployment from any of the following?
   a. Blast or explosion
   b. Bullet wound
   c. Fragment or shrapnel
   d. Vehicular accident
   e. Other
   f. Was not injured
3. Did any injury received while you were deployed result in any of the following?
   a. Being dazed, confused, or “seeing stars”
   b. Not remembering the injury
   c. Losing consciousness for less than 1 minute
   d. Losing consciousness for 1 to 20 minutes
   e. Losing consciousness for more than 20 minutes
   f. Head injury
   g. None of the above
4. Are you currently experiencing any of the following symptoms?
   Yes  No  Memory problems
   Yes  No  Headache
   Yes  No  Ringing in the ears
   Yes  No  Impaired balance or coordination
   Yes  No  Sleep disturbance
   Yes  No  Irritability
   Yes  No  Dizziness
   Yes  No  Fatigue
   Yes  No  Concentration problems
   Yes  No  Nausea
   Yes  No  Blurry vision
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th>Sensitivity to light or sound</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Mood swings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Heart pounding or racing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Intrusive memories</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B: EXCERPT FROM REFLEXIVE JOURNAL

7/15/16
Feeling a wide range of emotions after successful proposal defense yesterday. I need to start journaling to bracket out biases and prejudgments related to this study. Primary emotion I’m feeling right now is fear. I’m fearful that combat veterans will not open up to me because I am a civilian. While my perception of military service members has always been positive...bordering on hero-worship, I’m concerned about my lack of personal experience not being in the military. I’m not familiar with military culture and I have a lot to learn, but I truly am passionate about learning from their stories and somehow helping other combat veterans in higher ed who may be struggling. Praying for God’s peace and favor today.

9/20/16
In reflecting on the recruitment process for this study, I’m a bit overwhelmed by the sheer number of emails sent to potential participants...just under 8,000!!! I’m proud to be part of a university that is so “military-friendly.” I am hoping for a large number of responses...

10/26/16
After meeting with Dr. Milacci, I’m feeling much better about recruitment. Still trying to secure a few more participants for the study. Another concern is data saturation. What if data saturation is reached with fewer participants than the 10-15 that I am targeting?

12/7/16
Reflecting on emerging themes today. Two primary themes seem to be emerging: Challenging Journey, and A Fulfilling/Rewarding? Journey, with a number of subthemes coming into focus. A third major concept (theme?) that will not go away is “Changed by Combat.” All 10 participants have mentioned being changed by combat, but I can’t get my mind around how that fits within the context of combat veterans’ successful degree attainment in online education despite challenges...
APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

CONSENT FORM
Exploring the Experiences of Combat Veterans’ Degree Attainment in Online Higher Education
Ester Warren
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study of combat veterans’ degree attainment in online higher education. You were selected as a possible participant because you graduated with a bachelor’s degree from Liberty University Online between 2011 and 2016, and you are a military veteran. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Ester Warren, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to describe the educational experiences of combat veterans who successfully completed their bachelor’s degree through a private online program despite the presence of certain challenges associated with significant combat exposure.

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:
1. Complete, sign, and return the following forms:
   a. Participant Questionnaire (30 minutes)
   b. Contact Information Form (5 minutes)
   All information will be kept confidential.
2. One-on-one Interview via WebEx videoconferencing. WebEx is an online computer program that utilizes webcams and voice interaction to facilitate the one-on-one interview. The interview may last anywhere from one-hour to one-and-a-half hours. With your permission, the interviews will be digitally recorded. Electronic copies of the transcripts will be de-identified and stored on a password-protected computer. All information will be kept confidential.
   Participants will need the following equipment to take part in the interview:
   a. Access to a computer
   b. Webcam
   c. Internet
   d. Phone line
3. **Online Discussion Board (DB) Forum Focus Group.** Your participation in the online DB forum focus group will provide you with the opportunity to post an initial thread, then reply to other participants. Although there is no minimum or maximum word count requirement, an initial thread could be around 400 words and replies around 250 words. Two- to three-hour total time commitment over the course of two-and-a-half months. All information will be kept confidential.

4. **Member checks.** You will be asked to check my written description of your experiences in order to validate the accuracy of my description. One- to one-and-a-half hours.

**Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:** The risks involved in this study are minimal, no more than you would encounter in everyday life.

Through the course of this study the researcher may become aware of information that requires mandatory reporting such as:

- Child abuse
- Child neglect
- Elder abuse
- Intent to harm self or others

Participants may experience emotional discomfort from discussing their war experience and thoughts and feelings upon their return from combat.

There may be no direct benefit to you by participating in this study. However, the hope is that the information uncovered in this study will benefit larger society by providing institutions of higher education with valuable insight into how they can better serve military students returning from deployment. In addition, the information gained in this study may also benefit current and future military students who struggle to complete their bachelor’s degree, encouraging them to persist.

**Compensation:** Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

**Confidentiality:** The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records.
The records of this study will be stored securely and kept private; only the researchers will have access to the records. Your responses to questions will be held strictly anonymous and remain confidential throughout the study.

Physical information will be kept locked in a desk that is only accessible by the researcher. Electronic information will be saved on a password-protected computer. Since you will be participating in a focus group with other participants, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. In order to address this issue, the researcher will remind all participants to keep focus group discussions confidential. In addition, focus group participants may use pseudonyms instead of their real names to maintain anonymity.

In accordance with federal guidelines, all information collected for the purpose of this study will be deleted by the researcher three years after the research project is completed.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study:

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Ester Warren. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at 434-942-5573 or ejwarren@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher’s faculty advisor, Dr. Fred Milacci at fmilacci@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Green Hall Suite 1887, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.
Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

(NOTE: DO NOT AGREE TO PARTICIPATE UNLESS IRB APPROVAL INFORMATION WITH CURRENT DATES HAS BEEN ADDED TO THIS DOCUMENT.)

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record and/or video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

__________________________________________  ________________
Signature                                                      Date

__________________________________________  ________________
Signature of Investigator                                    Date
8/26/2016

Ester Warren
IRB Approval 2593.082616: Exploring the Experiences of Combat Veterans' Degree Attainment in Online Higher Education: A Phenomenological Study

Dear Ester Warren,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
The Graduate School

Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971
APPENDIX E: STUDY RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear Liberty University Alumnus/Alumna:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education. The purpose of my research is to describe how combat veterans earned their bachelor’s degree from a private online program despite the presence of certain challenges associated with significant combat exposure, and I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

If you are a veteran of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), or Operation New Dawn (OND) with combat experience, I would first and foremost like to express my sincere and heartfelt gratitude for your service to our country. Second, it would be an honor if you would consider helping me with this study. Should you decide to participate and meet the requirements of the study, you will be asked to do the following:

- Complete and return the following forms:
  - Informed Consent Form (15-20 minutes)
  - Participant Questionnaire (30 minutes)
  - Contact Information Form (5 minutes)
- Submit the following documentation:
  - Diagnosis of combat-related injuries (if any exist)
  - DD 214
- Participate in an in-depth one-on-one interview (about one-hour long, videoconference, recorded)
- Participate in a discussion-board-based focus group (approximately two hours total over the course of two months)
- Review my description of your experiences for accuracy (one- to one-and-a-half hours)

Any personal, identifying information you provide will be kept completely confidential. The use of any information you provide will be presented in such a way that protects your identity.

The Informed Consent Form contains additional information about my research and must be signed and returned in order to participate in this study. If you would like to participate, please complete and return the attached Informed Consent Form and Participant Questionnaire to ejwarren@liberty.edu by (date).

Sincerely,

Ester Warren, Ed.S.
Doctoral Student
Liberty University
School of Education
APPENDIX F: CONTACT INFORMATION FORM

1. Name:

2. The best times that I would be available for an interview are:

3. My preferred method of contact to set up the interview is:
   a. Email
   b. Phone

4. My email address is:

5. My phone number is:
APPENDIX G: COMBAT EXPOSURE SCALE SCORING SHEET

Answers (raw scores) on the CES can range from 1 to 5. However, the scoring of the items requires the conversions described below:

(1) SUBTRACT 1 FROM THE RAW SCORE AND MULTIPLY BY 2  
    _____ (e.g., a raw score of 4 becomes a converted score of 6).

(2) SUBTRACT 1 FROM THE RAW SCORE  
    _____ (e.g., a raw score of 4 becomes a converted score of 3).

(3) *IF THE RAW SCORE IS BETWEEN 1 AND 4:  
    SUBTRACT 1 FROM THE RAW SCORE AND MULTIPLY BY 2  
    (e.g., a raw score of 4 becomes a converted score of 6).  
*IF THE RAW SCORE IS 5:  
    SUBTRACT 2 FROM THE RAW SCORE AND MULTIPLY BY 2  
    (e.g., a raw score of 5 becomes a converted score of 6).  
    _____

(4) *IF THE RAW SCORE IS BETWEEN 1 AND 4:  
    SUBTRACT 1 FROM THE RAW SCORE  
    (e.g., a raw score of 4 becomes a converted score of 3).  
*IF THE RAW SCORE IS 5:  
    SUBTRACT 2 FROM THE RAW SCORE  
    (e.g., a raw score of 5 becomes a converted score of 3).  
    _____

(5) SUBTRACT 1 FROM THE RAW SCORE  
    _____ (e.g., a raw score of 4 becomes a converted score of 3).

(6) SUBTRACT 1 FROM THE RAW SCORE AND MULTIPLY BY 2  
    _____ (e.g., a raw score of 4 becomes a converted score of 6).

(7) SUBTRACT 1 FROM THE RAW SCORE AND MULTIPLY BY 2  
    _____ (e.g., a raw score of 4 becomes a converted score of 6).

ADD ALL CONVERTED SCORES TO OBTAIN A TOTAL SCORE:  _____

The total exposure to combat score can be categorized according to the following scale:

1 = 0-8 light  
2 = 9-16 light – moderate  
3 = 17-24 moderate  
4 = 25-32 moderate – heavy  
5 = 33-41 heavy
APPENDIX H: DISCUSSION FORUM FOCUS GROUP PROMPTS

Questions

1. How would you describe the experience of attaining your bachelor’s degree online from Liberty University?

2. During our one-on-one interviews, each of you described some challenges and/or barriers that you encountered as an online student at Liberty. Of those mentioned, which was the most difficult for you?

3. What do you think contributed to your successful degree attainment despite the challenges and/or barriers you encountered?

4. What did you learn about yourself as a result of your combat experience?

5. What did you learn about yourself as a result of your successful degree attainment?
APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Questions:

Background

1. Thank you for participating in this study. Have you ever been interviewed about your combat experiences before today?

2. What was that interview experience like for you?

Military Experience

3. What led you to join the military?

4. What expectations did you have when you joined?

5. How did your military experience compare to your expectations?

6. What did you like most about your military experience?

7. What can you tell me about your combat experience?

8. What was the experience of combat like for you?

9. Looking back on your combat experience, how would you describe the impact it has had on your life? How have you changed as a person?

Educational Experience

10. What led you to get your degree from Liberty University?

11. How, if at all, did the faith-based component of Liberty University influence your decision to enroll?
12. How did you make the decision between an online program versus a residential program?

13. What challenges, if any, did you face as you worked on your degree?

14. How, if at all, were those challenges related to your military service?

Resilience

15. How did you overcome those challenges?

16. How, if at all, did your combat experience contribute to your academic success?

17. How, if at all, did your faith contribute to your academic success?

18. How do you see those factors manifested in your life today?

19. What advice would you give combat veterans who are pursuing their online degree?

20. What plans do you have for your future? Where do you see yourself in five or ten years?

21. Is there anything you would like to add that I have not asked you about your experience of earning a bachelor’s degree after being in the military?

22. Is there anything you wish you would have shared during the interview but did not?

23. Do you have any questions for me?
APPENDIX J: DISCUSSION FORUM FOCUS GROUP INSTRUCTIONS

Step 1: Email Invitation – Discussion Forum Focus Group Invitation

Hello,

I would like to invite you to participate as a Student in my course Combat Veterans in Higher Education which I’ll be teaching using CourseSites by Blackboard. I’ve provided a brief description below for more information.

Course Description:
This online course shell will be used as a forum for dissertation research conducted at Liberty University. The forum and all discussions will be confidential and used in accordance with permissions received from the Institutional Review Board at Liberty University. The researchers conducting this study are: Ester Warren and Dr. Fred Milacci. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact them at Liberty University, 434-592-6468, ejwarren@liberty.edu or Liberty University School of Education, 434-582-2445, fmilacci@liberty.edu. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Green Hall Suite 1887, Lynchburg, VA, 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

To confirm your participation, please register using the following link. Once you create an account, you will be enrolled automatically and can begin.

- Click to confirm and register

If you have any questions about the course, please contact me via email at ejwarren@liberty.edu. Please visit the CourseSites Help page to contact support with any technical questions.
For all future visits to the course, after registration, please use the link below.

- Click to visit course homepage and login

I look forward to seeing you online soon!
Sincerely,
Ester Warren
**Step 2:** Click “I Need a CourseSites Account:
**Step 3:** Create New Student Account. Feel free to login with your real name, or if you prefer you can create a pseudonym for your interaction in this focus group. If you choose to use a pseudonym for your interaction, please email the researcher at ejwarren@liberty.edu to let her know that you are using a pseudonym for this focus group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Name</th>
<th>First Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Last Name</td>
<td>Last Name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email Address</td>
<td>Email Address</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution/District/Company</td>
<td>Liberty University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Username</td>
<td>Username</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Password**

Password

Strength

Repeat Password

**CourseSites Terms of Use**

Accept  Deny

Enter the following:

I want control

Your Answer

Go Back  Save and Continue
**Step 4:** Click the FOCUS GROUP PROMPTS Link on the Left-Hand Menu

**Step 5:** Forum 1: click Prompt #1 labeled, “How would you describe the experience of attaining your bachelor’s degree online from Liberty University?”

**Step 6:** Forum 1 Thread Creation: Click “Create Thread” to post a reply to the Forum 1 question.
Step 7: Forum 1 Authoring a thread: Insert a subject title, the body of your response, and click submit.

Step 8: Forum 1 Replies – Click the title of the current post to which you would like to reply.

Step 9: Replying – Click “Reply” to send a response to this particular thread.

Step 10: There are 5 Discussion Forum Focus Group Prompts. Feel free to repeat steps 5-9 as many times as you would like in order to respond to the prompts and interact with your peers. Please check back as often as you would like in order to carry on the conversation and discussion regarding your experience as a combat veteran in online higher education.

Please do not feel overwhelmed by the discussion forum, the purpose of this part of the research is to see what additional thoughts surface regarding your experience in online higher education as you interact with other individuals who had a similar experience. I will post all 5 prompts from the beginning of the discussion forum experience, but would like for the discussion to take place over the course of at least two weeks. Please check back as often as you can.

Step 11: When returning to the website, please follow the link: coursesites.com and login with the username and password you created in Step 3. When re-logging in, make sure to click the “Combat Veterans in Higher Education” link in the “My Classes” section at the top right (see below).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Reflective Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7/14/16</td>
<td>Successful proposal defense</td>
<td>Proposal passed!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 7/14/16    | Feedback from Dr. Barclay re: interview questions                    | Received the following feedback from Dr. Barclay:  
For demo questions, you want to have questions if they were deployed, if so, how many deployments, and the length of those deployments. Each of these will affect ones resilience.  
Also, if they were officer or enlisted. |
<p>| 7/15/16-   | Reflexive journaling                                                 | Dr. Milacci emphasis: 1. reflexive journaling, 2. Researcher’s journal/audit trail. Bracketing is crucial.                                      |
| present    |                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                 |
| 8/26/16    | IRB approval                                                        | Received IRB approval                                                                                                                             |
| 8/29/16    | Research transcription services                                     | Found three potential services I will be using.                                                                                                 |
| 9/20/16    | First recruitment email                                             | Recruitment email sent from Alumni Dept                                                                                                          |
| 9/21/16    | Change in protocol request submitted to IRB                         | Request to use Qualtrics survey to collect Informed Consent, Participant Questionnaire, and Contact Information                                  |
| 9/21/16    | Emailed Dr. Milacci                                                | Nervous about recruitment. Not sure I will have enough participants meet criteria. May need to lower CES score to light-moderate.              |
| 9/22/16    | Change in protocol approved                                         | Qualtrics survey created and ready to go                                                                                                         |
| 9/27/16    | Review survey responses, send Qualtrics survey                      | 26 responses received, sent Qualtrics survey                                                                                                    |
| 9/28/16    | Review survey responses, send Qualtrics survey                      | 3 responses received, sent Qualtrics survey                                                                                                      |
| 10/3/16    | Review survey responses, send Qualtrics survey                      | 5 responses received, sent Qualtrics survey                                                                                                      |
| 10/3/16    | Identify participants                                              | Received 6 Qualtrics responses, identified 4 potential participants to interview                                                                  |
| 10/3-10/31 | Review Participant Questionnaires and Informed Consent Forms        | Continuous review of Participant Questionnaires to identify best participants. Based upon first batch of responses, decided to change combat exposure delimitation to include light-moderate combat exposure in order to get a larger pool of potential participants. Talked through concerns with Dr. Milacci and Dr. Barclay. Both are on board. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Task Description</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10/4/16</td>
<td>Identify participants</td>
<td>Received 3 Qualtrics responses, identified 2 potential participants to interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/4/16</td>
<td>Participant selection</td>
<td>Continuing to narrow down participants that meet all criteria for the study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/10/16</td>
<td>Review survey responses, send Qualtrics survey</td>
<td>4 responses received, sent Qualtrics survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/4/16</td>
<td>Identify participants</td>
<td>Received 2 Qualtrics responses, identified 0 potential participants to interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/7/16</td>
<td>Change in criteria</td>
<td>There are currently 3 respondents with light-moderate CES so I am going to change the criteria to include lt-mod. This will allow me to include these 3 respondents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/13/16</td>
<td>Second recruitment email</td>
<td>Concerned about low sample. Sending reminder email, hoping for at least 5 more potential participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/15/16-11/7/16</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Conducted via WebEx, video and audio recorded. First interview today.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/15/16</td>
<td>Begin listening to audio recordings</td>
<td>Listening to audio continuously. Really want to get to the point of hearing and seeing participants’ voices and faces as I read transcripts and do personal reflection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/16/16-11/9/16</td>
<td>Send interview files to transcription service</td>
<td>Files sent to transcription service 1-3 days after each interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/18/16</td>
<td>Review survey responses, send Qualtrics survey</td>
<td>138 responses received, sent Qualtrics survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/18/16</td>
<td>Created shell for online focus group forum on Blackboard</td>
<td>Account created on CourseSites.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/19/16</td>
<td>Identify participants</td>
<td>Received 12 Qualtrics responses, identified 4 potential participants to interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/20/16</td>
<td>Identify participants</td>
<td>Received 3 Qualtrics responses, identified 1 potential participants to interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/21/16</td>
<td>Meet with Dr. Milacci</td>
<td>Discussed changes to criteria: -Remove documentation requirement -Open to veterans and active duty -CES to include light-moderate Also discussed faith component as it is emerging as a common theme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/24/16</td>
<td>Spoke with Dr. Barclay re: criteria</td>
<td>Provided guidance re: criteria. Veteran can be active duty. Can include light-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Event Description</td>
<td>Notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/24/16</td>
<td>Change in protocol request submitted to IRB</td>
<td>Remove documentation requirement (DD214, medical documentation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/24/16</td>
<td>IRB approved change in protocol</td>
<td>Removed documentation requirement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/25/16-</td>
<td>Transcript upload to Atlas.ti. Begin data analysis.</td>
<td>Really wish I had taken the time to learn Atlas.ti better. Looks like I will need to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/15/16</td>
<td></td>
<td>switch to Excel after initial coding (horizontalization). ☺</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/26/16</td>
<td>Meet with Dr. Milacci</td>
<td>Met with Dr. Milacci to discuss dissertation progress. Still trying to get more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>participants and trying not to get too stressed out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Also, discussed: data saturation point. How will I know?? He says: you’ll just know!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-possible addition of compare/contrast RQ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-limitation: expanding CES categories to secure enough/more participants resulting in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>greater difference in responses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-another limitation: removing the documentation requirement to increase participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Now unable to confirm medical diagnosis, but is it all that important to this study??</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/31/16</td>
<td>Identify participants</td>
<td>Received 12 Qualtrics responses, identified 2 potential participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/3/16</td>
<td>Emailed revised focus group prompts to committee</td>
<td>Received approval from committee, will submit IRB change in protocol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/4/16</td>
<td>Change in protocol request submitted to IRB</td>
<td>Request to revise focus group forum questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/4/16</td>
<td>IRB Approved change in protocol</td>
<td>Revised focus group forum questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/4/16</td>
<td>Emailed participants with link to Discussion Forum Focus Group</td>
<td>Asked participants to set up account and post initial threads and replies over the course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>of the next 3-4 weeks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/7/16</td>
<td>Change in protocol request submitted to IRB</td>
<td>Request to increase compensation for participants from $25 to $35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/9/16</td>
<td>IRB Approved change in protocol</td>
<td>Increased compensation for participants from $25 to $35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/1/16</td>
<td>Met with Dr. Milacci</td>
<td>Discussed focus group issues. Considered dropping RQ4 and replacing with compare/contrast question.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Event Description</td>
<td>Details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/14/16</td>
<td>Email follow with participants re: Discussion Forum Focus Group</td>
<td>Also reminded me that I could always follow up with each participant individually. I decided to email them. Need to use new dissertation template.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/15/16</td>
<td>Begin reviewing transcripts from focus group forum</td>
<td>Emailed participants the DB prompts they did not address in the forum with the hope of collecting more data. Received additional information from four participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/24/17</td>
<td>Meet with Dr. Milacci</td>
<td>Great interaction in DB #1, but not so great in the others even after sending email reminders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/24/17</td>
<td>Complete data analysis</td>
<td>Discussed themes. Dr. Milacci was extremely encouraging, also provided insight into how to approach ‘changed by combat’ – as a lens with which to view experiences. Also, encouraged me to consider group and individual portraits for chapter 4.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/13/17</td>
<td>Submit chapter 4</td>
<td>Identified themes and subthemes; describing the essence of participants’ experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/13/17-4/3/17</td>
<td>Edit chapter 4; revise chapters 1-3</td>
<td>Feedback from chair: themes need further development. Went back into notes and added to themes. Resubmit clean manuscript.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/3/17</td>
<td>Submit clean manuscript to committee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/4/17-4/8/17</td>
<td>Make edits based on committee feedback</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/9/17</td>
<td>Submit final manuscript for defense</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/13/17</td>
<td>Defend dissertation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX L: RESOURCES FOR VETERANS

**American Legion**  
Information/Customer Service: 1-800-433-3318  
[http://www.legion.org](http://www.legion.org)

**The Battle Buddy Foundation**  
[http://www.tbbf.org](http://www.tbbf.org)

**Disabled American Veterans**  
National HQ: 1-877-426-2838 (1-877-I AM A VET)  
[https://www.dav.org/contact-us/](https://www.dav.org/contact-us/)

**Defense & Veterans Brain Injury Center (DVBIC)**  
National HQ: 1-800-870-9244  
[http://dvbic.dcoe.mil](http://dvbic.dcoe.mil)

**Iraq & Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA)**  
National HQ: 1-212-982-9699  
[http://iava.org](http://iava.org)

**My Next Move**  
[http://www.mynextmove.org/vets/](http://www.mynextmove.org/vets/)

**National Center for PTSD**  
[http://www ptsd.va.gov](http://www ptsd.va.gov)

**Reboot Combat Recovery through Providence Farms**  
1-434-219-1000  
[http://www.providencefarm.org](http://www.providencefarm.org)

**Student Veterans Association at Liberty University**  
Email: SVA@liberty.edu  
[https://www.liberty.edu/index.cfm?PID=20132](https://www.liberty.edu/index.cfm?PID=20132)

**Student Veterans of America (SVA)**  
1-202-223-4710  
[http://studentveterans.org](http://studentveterans.org)

**Veteran Crisis Line/Suicide Prevention Hotline**  
1-800-273-8255 Press 1  
[https://www.veteranscrisisline.net](https://www.veteranscrisisline.net)

**Veterans of Foreign Wars**  
[http://www.vfw.org](http://www.vfw.org)
PTSD
To find a VA PTSD program near you: [http://www.va.gov/directory/guide/PTSD.asp](http://www.va.gov/directory/guide/PTSD.asp)

DEPRESSION
Explore these resources for more information about depression in Veterans.
Learn more about what you can do if you are experiencing specific concerns related to depression, such as chronic pain, trouble sleeping, relationship problems, retirement and aging and posttraumatic stress.

AfterDeployment
[www.afterdeployment.dcoe.mil/topics-depression](http://www.afterdeployment.dcoe.mil/topics-depression)

Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance
[www.dbsalliance.org](http://www.dbsalliance.org)

NAMI Veterans Resource Center
[www.nami.org/Find-Support/Veterans-and-Active-Duty](http://www.nami.org/Find-Support/Veterans-and-Active-Duty)

Vet Center
If you are a combat Veteran, you can bring your DD214 to your local Vet Center and speak with a counselor or therapist — many of whom are Veterans themselves — for free, without an appointment, and regardless of your enrollment status with VA.
[www2.va.gov/directory/guide/vetcenter_flsh.asp](http://www2.va.gov/directory/guide/vetcenter_flsh.asp)

VA Medical Center Facility Locator
[www2.va.gov/directory/guide/home.asp?isflash=1](http://www2.va.gov/directory/guide/home.asp?isflash=1)