

Running head: PUBLISHABLE DISSERTATION

FROM THE BATTLEFIELD TO THE CIVILIAN LABOR FORCE: WHAT ARE THE  
OBSTACLES FACING MILITARY VETERANS IN SUCCESSFUL  
REINTEGRATION TO THE CIVILIAN WORKFORCE?

by

Frank Hernandez Jr.

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Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Business Administration

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Liberty University, School of Business

May 2020

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to explore and understand the difficulties and challenges that thousands of combat veterans have encountered in their reintegration into society and the civilian workforce. The research study was guided by the four research questions: What were the lived experiences of combat veterans as they transitioned from military service to civilian employment? What were the challenges and difficulties that combat veterans experienced when seeking civilian employment? What are the successes that combat veterans have experienced in transitioning to the civilian workforce? What perceptions do human resource managers have about combat veterans and their transferable skills? In seeking answers to the research questions, an exhaustive literature review was conducted, as well as in-depth interviews with fifteen combat veterans. The data that was collected, was analyzed, and numerous themes emerged. The themes were depression with a sub-theme of self-medication, loss of identity, PTSD, and suicidal ideation. Additional themes were education, waste of time, ignorance, and discrimination. The themes consistent with the conceptual and the literature review. Findings were presented, as well as applications to professional practice, and Biblical implications. Recommendations for action, and further study were made. The researcher reflected on the entire journey. The findings accurately reported the lived experiences of the fifteen research participants.

*Keywords: combat veterans, hardships, difficulties, barriers, PTSD, TBI, suicide*

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### **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my amazing and beautiful wife, Rachel. This all began because you desired to pursue your doctoral degree, and you encouraged me to join you on the journey. You have overcome so many obstacles and are a source of inspiration for your entire family. When I wanted to quit, and there were many times, you were my biggest fan and supporter. You believed in me when I did not. Because of you, I am a better man, husband, father, and, most importantly, a better Christian. You are my best friend, my inspiration, and my motivation. You worry and take care of me, even when I don't. This journey was incredible because we made it together. Thank you for being everything I have ever wanted and needed.

To my children, Frankie and Lisa, both of you have been successful in all of your endeavors. I am so incredibly proud and grateful to God for blessing me with such amazing children. I love you both more than you will ever be able to imagine. I need to thank Mama for always believing and supporting me; you have made me the man I am today. I joined the military because of you, and it has been the best decision I have ever made. My wonderful sister Chicky, who has always protected and looked out for me, thank you for always believing in me.

This research study is dedicated to veterans, past and present who served in defense of our great nation. Each of you has made numerous sacrifices for the greater good of our country. We have a brotherhood and a bond that only other veterans can understand and appreciate. I am so grateful to the fifteen combat veterans that gave their time and shared their experiences so that future veterans may have an easier journey than we did.

Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to Michael Carbonaro, a warrior, and Viking in every sense of the word. Mikey Mike passed away six months before I completed my doctoral journey. Till Valhalla brother.

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My next acknowledgment is my wife, Rachel, who believes in me more than I believe in myself sometimes. She was the catalyst for me pursuing my doctoral degree. As a teenager, she was told by her teachers that she would never amount to anything. She took that negativity and used it as fuel. That negativity has motivated her all the way to her doctoral degree. Thank you, baby.

To my friends and family, thank you for believing in me and always supporting me. Thank you for understanding when I could not be involved in family and social events. I especially want to thank Kelly and Luke for always encouraging and supporting me. I am truly blessed to call both of you friends. If I ever grow up, I want to grow up to be just like you two.

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## **Section 1: Foundation of the Study**

### **Background of the Problem**

After World War I, the United States government made numerous mistakes dealing with combat veterans returning from the war, such as providing veterans sixty dollars and a train ticket home (Kowalski, 2016). There was no plan in place to assist returning service members in reintegrating into society and the civilian labor force. Amid World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt wanted to ensure that the government did not make the same mistake. He told Congress that the government had taught the youth of America to wage war. Now it was also the responsibility of the government to teach the veterans to live a life that would be useful and that the veterans should have the opportunity to be happy in the freedom that they had created. President Roosevelt wanted to ensure that the brave soldiers that protected the American beliefs and values would not return to their country plagued with unemployment and inflation, attempting to survive by standing on a corner to selling apples. Roosevelt proposed a package of assistance for veterans that consisted up of six points, which were separation pay, educational benefits, medical care for soldiers injured during the war, unemployment insurance, allowance credit, and pensions for disabled veterans.

The GI Bill of Rights was born from the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944. It was a comprehensive approach to assist US service members in reintegrating into civilian life, higher education, and the workforce. A mere five months after the bill's initial proposal, it was signed into law by President Roosevelt on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June 1944, which coincidentally was during the invasion of Normandy. The passage of the Readjustment Act of 1944 was critically important to the returning combat veterans successfully transitioning to society, as well as finding meaningful

and purposeful employment. The GI Bill of Rights was a way for the United States to express its gratitude for the numerous sacrifices that soldiers made for the American way of life.

According to Sherman (2010), many combat veterans described their reintegration into civilian life as the single most difficult phase of their transition. Sadly, combat veterans that retire or separate from the military feel as if they have lost their identity, meaning, and purpose in life. For members of the Armed Forces, being a soldier is more of an identity than it is a career. Millions of returning combat veterans are transitioning into the civilian labor force across the United States. They return from their deployments with ambition, hope, and desire to complete their education and find meaningful and purposeful employment. They also return with the visible and invisible issues and scars that are associated with combat. These veterans represent a diverse group of Americans who are unique in numerous ways and are facing many exceptional challenges that are related to combat duty.

Stern (2017) posited that after the attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001, President George W. Bush stated that the United States was in a Global War on Terror. Military members understood and agreed with the fact that they may be called upon to make the ultimate sacrifice. Almost two decades later, the United States is still engaged in the war on terrorism. Since the declaration by President Bush, there has never been more than one percent of the American population that has served in the Armed Forces. Of that one percent, approximately sixty percent have either retired or fulfilled their obligation to the Armed Forces. All of these veterans have one thing in common; they are returning to a world they left in service to their country and are seeking employment.

According to Stern (2017), approximately five million veterans who have served in a combat zone would be returning to American communities and the workforce by 2020. Most of

the American population does not understand military culture, service, or the effect that combat operations can have on veterans seeking to find purposeful and meaningful employment. Upon returning from combat operations, finding employment is critically important to veterans making a successful transition to civilian life. However, approximately fifty percent of returning combat veterans identified finding employment as the single biggest challenge to their reintegration. Finding employment is an even bigger challenge for combat veterans that are dealing with service-connected disabilities, such as mental health, PTSD, and TBI.

Veterans transitioning from military service to the civilian workforce greatly impact thousands of communities across the United States. Millions of sailors, airmen, and soldiers are leaving military service and joining the civilian labor force. There must be a strong support system to ensure the successful reintegration of returning combat veterans into the civilian workforce. In the last ten years, approximately thirty to forty thousand service members have retired annually, with thousands more returning from combat service in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. Each of these returning combat veterans is seeking civilian employment (Neill-Harris et al., 2016).

Further research is required to understand the difficulties and challenges that combat veterans are encountering when transitioning back to society and the civilian workforce. The human resource managers, the leadership of organizations, and hiring managers need to be adequately prepared to deal with the visible and invisible injuries that returning combat veterans are encountering.

### **Problem Statement**

The general problem that was addressed was the obstacles that combat veterans have faced when transitioning from military service to society and the civilian labor force resulting in

the inability of civilian organizations to capitalize on the extensive leadership skills, talents, knowledge, and abilities of combat veterans. Davis and Minnis (2017) stated that combat veterans face numerous challenges when transitioning from military service to the civilian workforce. According to a survey of over eight thousand and five hundred combat veterans concerning the experience of transitioning veterans, approximately twenty-seven percent were unemployed with no promise of civilian employment (Corri, Maury, & Fay, 2015). The research of McAllister, Mackey, Hackney, and Perrewé (2015) reinforced these views by positing that forty-five percent of transitioning combat veterans have encountered numerous challenges finding civilian employment. Kirchner (2018) found that civilian organizations are concerned about the shortage of effective leaders and are investing fifty billion dollars annually on the development of leaders. Civilian organizations have begun an initiative of “veteran-friendly” hiring. These companies’ have recognized the vast skills, abilities, and talents of combat veterans and what they can bring to their organizations. The specific problem that addressed was the challenges that combat veterans in Central Florida have encountered in their search for civilian employment resulting in the inability of civilian organizations being able to tap into this vast talent pool.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to add to the body of knowledge by exploring and understanding the difficulties and challenges that thousands of combat veterans have encountered in their reintegration into the civilian workforce. This larger problem is better understood by the in-depth study which explored the numerous barriers and challenges that combat veterans must navigate to make a successful transition to the civilian labor force in Central Florida.



### **Nature of the Study**

The research method for this study was qualitative. Qualitative research was the most appropriate choice for this dissertation because it provided the researcher with a better and deeper understanding of the challenges that combat veterans have encountered during their reintegration into the civilian workforce. Qualitative research allowed the researcher the opportunity to delve deeply and gain an insightful understanding of the obstacles encountered by combat veterans in their transition to civilian employment.

**Discussion of method.** According to Brooks (2017), qualitative research can offer a researcher an enlightening and rigorous approach to finding answers which significantly impact the research. The utilization of qualitative research allowed the researcher to gain valuable insight into the beliefs, understanding, as well as the lived experiences of the participants of a study. The researcher gained a significantly deeper understanding of the how and why of things that have happened. Qualitative research allowed the researcher the opportunity to understand the experiences of the participants as well as a better understanding of the overall big picture.

The purpose of this research was to explore and understand the obstacles that combat veterans have encountered when reintegrating into the civilian labor force. According to Castellan (2010), qualitative research is exploratory research. The goal of qualitative research is to explore and gain an understanding of human behavior and the experiences of individuals. Qualitative research allows the researcher to delve deeply into a problem. Qualitative research uses semi-structured or unstructured techniques, which served the purpose of gaining the trust and confidence of the research participants. Finally, qualitative research utilizes open-ended questions, which was appropriate for the research in this study.

Conversely, quantitative research seeks to quantify a problem by the generation of numerical data, which will be converted to statistics and used to quantify defined variables. Data collection within quantitative research is structured in nature and utilizes close-ended questions, which will not be as effective as utilizing open-ended questions in qualitative research. Mixed methods utilizes both qualitative and quantitative research. As stated, the researcher did not seek to quantify defined variables, so mixed methods was not an effective method for the research. Qualitative research was the most appropriate, efficient, and effective research methodology for this study.

**Discussion of design.** According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), phenomenological research has its roots in psychology and philosophy. Researchers utilizing a phenomenological research design describe the lived experiences of research participants that have experienced a phenomenon. Phenomenological research design requires that the researcher can understand and explain how the participants described, felt, perceived, remember, and make sense of the phenomenon based on their personal experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The goal of phenomenological research is to understand the human or lived experience of participants; it seeks to make sense of the experiences of research participants. For a phenomenological research design to be effective, there must be a high level of engagement and trust between the researcher and participants (Wilson, 2015). Creswell, Hanson, Plano, and Morales (2007) stated that there are numerous options for qualitative research designs to choose from; five of the options are grounded theory, narrative research, case studies, participatory action research, and phenomenological.

Phenomenological research design identifies a phenomenon to study; the researcher must bracket out their personal experiences and collect data from participants who have personally

experienced the phenomenon. Once the data is collected, the researcher will analyze the data, determine themes, and write a description of the lived experiences of the research participants.

In a narrative research design, the researcher request stories from a participant about his/her life. The researcher then retells the story in a narrative chronology. In a grounded theory design, the researcher creates a theory of an action, interaction, or process that is grounded in the views of the participant. Ethnography involves the researcher observes the language, behaviors, and actions of a cultural group for an extended period. Case studies involve the researcher developing an in-depth analysis of a program, event, or case (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Of the five qualitative research designs, a phenomenological research design relates best with the purpose of the study to understand the lived experiences and perceptions of combat veterans and the challenges they experience in finding employment.

**Summary of nature of study.** This research study used a qualitative methodology, and the research design was phenomenological. Qualitative methodology was appropriate for this research study as opposed to quantitative methodology because it allowed the researcher to explore and gain a deeper understanding of the obstacles that combat veterans encountered when reintegrating into the civilian workforce (Castellan, 2010). Additionally, utilizing qualitative methodology allowed the researcher to better understand the lived experiences of the research participants (Brooks, 2017). The researcher used a phenomenological research design over the other options because it was the most effective research design that allowed the researcher to explore and understand the lived experiences of combat veterans and the challenges they encounter when transitioning to the civilian workforce.

## Research Questions

As combat veterans transitioned to civilian employment, they have encountered numerous challenges and difficulties. Larson and Norman (2014) posited that forty-four percent of combat veterans had encountered numerous challenges when transitioning from military service to civilian employment. The challenges that were experienced by combat veterans have negatively impacted their quality of life. Additionally, the difficulties also impacted their relationships in the workplace, with family members, in higher education, and in the community. Finally, transitioning combat experiences experienced high levels of stress and difficulty dealing with the management of anger, caring for themselves, and being productive.

**RQ<sub>1</sub>.** What were the lived experiences of combat veterans as they transitioned from military service to civilian employment?

Returning combat veterans faced numerous difficult challenges when transitioning to civilian employment. Some of the challenges that combat veterans have dealt with are insomnia, severe depression and anxiety, avoiding public places and spaces, extremely high levels of stress, post-traumatic stress disorder, and traumatic brain injury. Recent studies have shown that twenty-five percent of combat veterans have had severe bouts of depression, with thirty-three percent suffering from severe anxiety, and fifty percent have dealt with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Approximately fifty percent of combat veterans have considered committing suicide, and twenty percent have planned to kill themselves. These troubling and unique challenges have created barriers to civilian employment for combat veterans (Cass & Hammond, 2015).

**RQ<sub>2</sub>.** What were the challenges and difficulties that combat veterans experienced when seeking civilian employment?

Faurer, Rogers-Broderson, and Bailie (2014) stated that a recent survey of two-hundred and twenty-seven combat veterans that utilized the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) showed that eighty-four percent had found civilian employment. Ninety percent of those surveyed felt that their resumes were made stronger by using TAP. Eighty-eight percent of the combat veterans that utilized TAP would recommend it to fellow veterans.

**RQ3.** What are the successes that combat veterans have experienced in transitioning to the civilian workforce?

According to Davis and Minnis (2017), the American workforce has become increasingly diverse. However, hiring and human resource managers continue to have misconceptions about combat veterans and do not understand their transferable skills, as well as the invaluable contributions that they can bring to civilian organizations. Combat veterans have distinctive skills and valuable capabilities that have been developed and tested in high-pressure, real-world situations. Unfortunately, many personnel in human resources management are not familiar with the knowledge, skills, abilities, and management and leadership skills of combat veterans.

**RQ4.** What perceptions do human resource managers have about combat veterans and their transferable skills?

The research questions were critical to answering the overarching question and satisfying the goals in the purpose statement of this qualitative study.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework showed the obstacles and challenges that combat veterans encounter in their reintegration process to civilian employment. Some of these difficulties were the loss of their military identity, biases, misunderstandings, and the vast differences between military and civilian culture. The conceptual framework showed the unique challenges that

combat veterans face in the civilian workforce. Many veterans who have experienced combat have dealt with issues such as wounds, visible and invisible, PTSD, anxiety, depression, experiences, and feelings of isolation and not fitting in or belonging. The federal government has created the Transition Assistance Program to assist veterans with their transition to society and the civilian workforce.

**Loss of identity.** McAllister et al. (2015) posited that millions of combat veterans are transitioning from military service to civilian employment. Many combat veterans have struggled with the loss of their military identity and how they fit within their new organization. The military identity of combat veterans served as their reference point and assisted them as they settled into social norms in the military. For combat veterans, losing their identity can make them feel confused about who they are. The identity of combat veterans can be beneficial when seeking civilian employment. The identity of combat veterans can be positive and negative when seeking civilian employment. Some hiring managers seek to employ combat veterans because they are highly loyal workers who have performed extremely well under the most stressful conditions possible. Conversely, some hiring managers view combat veterans as having mental issues such as traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Many combat veterans have experienced a sense of losing their identity when deployed to a combat zone. As their old identity is lost, the new identity deals with the killing of people. Combat veterans must learn to cope with the memories of killing; many feel as if they have compromised their identity, sense of justice, and faith by killing. They must connect with others and talk about it, while it is painful, it offers combat veterans a comfort knowing that they are not alone (Purcell, Koenig, Bosch, & Maguen, 2016).

**Misunderstanding and bias.** In the last fifteen years, the United States has sent over two and a half million soldiers to combat in support of Operation New Dawn, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation Enduring Freedom (OND/OIF/OEF). The time that veterans have spent in a combat zone has drastically altered their lives in ways they could not have anticipated. The time spent in a combat zone has presented numerous challenges to veterans. A very difficult and significant challenge has been securing civilian employment. The search for employment in the civilian sector has been made significantly more difficult by numerous misconceptions, biases, and misunderstandings about combat veterans. Unfortunately, civilian human resources managers often have limited knowledge about the range of talents, skills, and abilities that combat veterans possess and how invaluable they can be to civilian organizations (Minnis, 2017).

Over five million veterans have deployed to a combat zone, and many of them will be transitioning to civilian employment within the next several years. The limited knowledge that many Americans possess about military service, culture, and the impact of war on veterans results in numerous biases and misunderstandings about combat veterans. These misunderstandings and biases have made it difficult for combat veterans to obtain civilian employment (Stern, 2017).

**Unique challenges.** According to Sayer, Carlson, and Frazier (2014), many combat veterans are struggling with issues and difficulties associated with combat deployments. Thoughts, disturbing images, memories, and emotions have easily triggered combat veterans making their transition to civilian life and employment extremely difficult. Combat veterans have dealt with several unique challenges, such as suicide ideation, post-traumatic stress

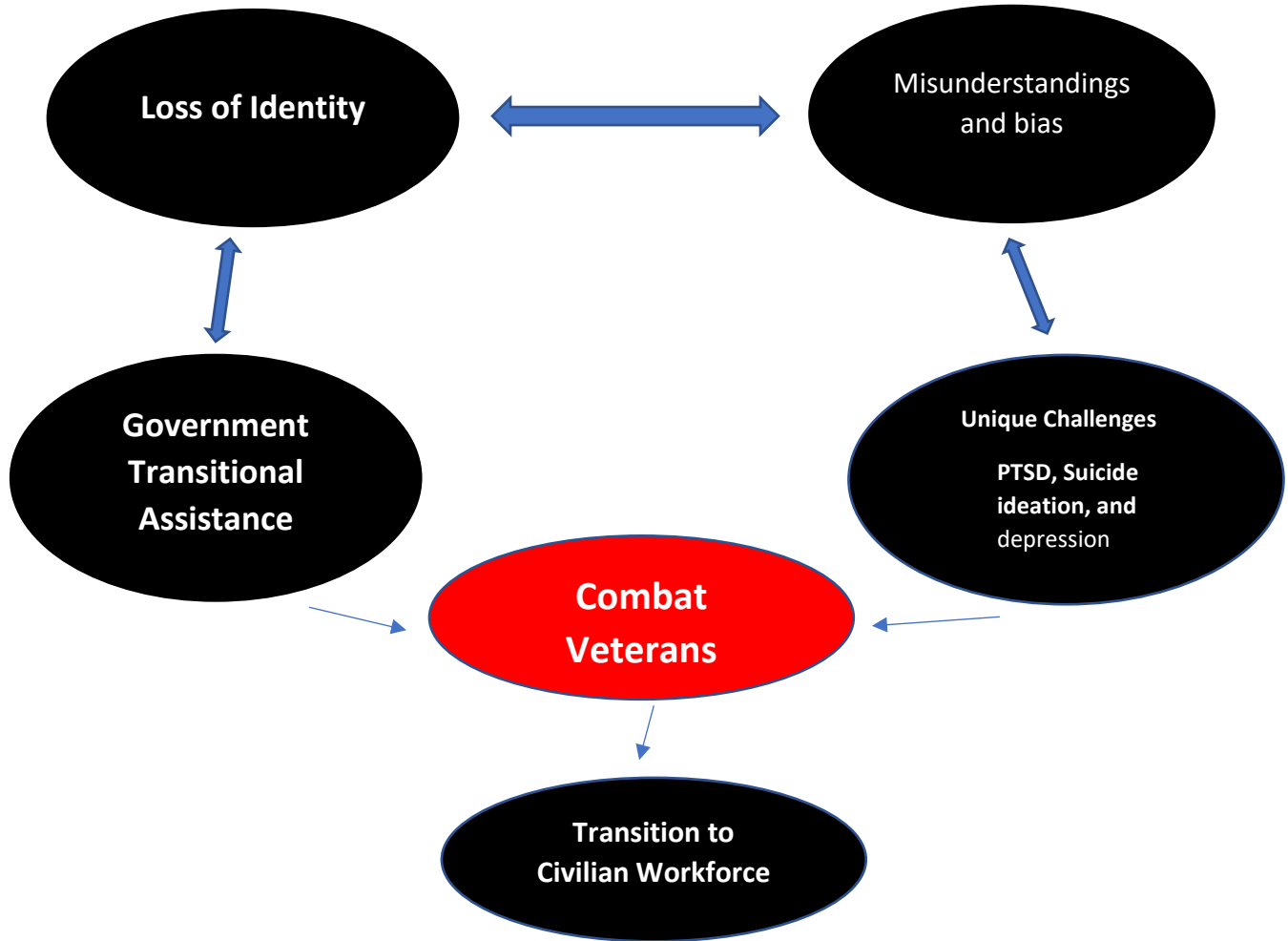
disorder, traumatic brain injuries, and physical and mental issues, which have greatly complicated their reintegration to society and the civilian workforce.

Purcell et al. (2016) stated that millions of combat veterans are returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, with numerous symptoms associated with combat. Many veterans have reported symptoms related to the trauma and stressors of combat, such as PTSD, anxiety, substance abuse, and anger issues. Many times, combat veterans have been treated by clinicians who have never served in the Armed Forces, have limited knowledge about military culture, and do not understand the unique challenges and needs of those who have served in a combat zone.

**Government Transitional Assistance.** Congress created the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) in 1991. The goal of the program is to assist veterans with their transition to civilian life and employment. With a large number of returning combat veterans from Afghanistan and Iraq, TAP has become an area of significant importance to the United States government (Kamarck, 2017).

Osborne (2014) stated that veterans that are separating or retiring from the military attend a course that was developed by the Department of Defense titled Transition Assistance Program (TAP). TAP ranges from several days to a week and is designed to assist transitioning veterans to find civilian employment.





*Figure 1.* Conceptual framework.

**Discussion of relationships between concepts.** The concepts are critical to the successful reintegration or failure of combat veterans. Each of them plays a part in the difficulties that combat veterans have encountered when reintegrating back to society and the civilian labor force. Each of the concepts is an integral part of the success or failure of combat veterans reintegrating into society and obtaining employment in the civilian sector.

Osborne (2014) posited that veterans attend a course by the Department of Defense that is meant to assist with their transition to civilian life and finding employment. The course is the Transition Assistance Program; it is commonly called TAP. The length of the course ranges from several days to one week. Veterans felt that the primary purpose of the course was to assist them in finding employment and how to live and cope with civilians. When joining the military, service members go through training that can last months, and on occasion, years to be certified or fully qualified. When the same individual is leaving the military, they attend a course that lasts three to seven days. Combat veterans are transitioning out of the military, and they are not prepared to deal with the injuries they have incurred, nor has the US government done an appropriate job of preparing them for the transition back to the civilian sector.

**Summary of the conceptual framework.** The conceptual framework for this qualitative phenomenological study focused on the difficulties and issues that veterans encounter when transitioning from the combat zone to the civilian workforce. According to Graf, Ysasi, and Marini (2015), veterans that have service-connected disabilities is approximately fourteen percent. However, service-connected disabilities among combat veterans that served after 9/11 leaps to approximately twenty-six percent. Additionally, some estimates are as high as forty percent of combat veterans are suffering from psychological and physical issues. The physical and mental issues are barriers to finding and retaining meaningful employment. The country is appreciative of the many sacrifices made by combat veterans and desires to assist in meeting the unique needs of this population.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following defines terms that are predominantly used by members of the United States Armed Forces.

*Military Retiree.* A member of the Armed Forces that have served twenty or more years on active duty and has retired from the military (Hill, Lawhorne-Scott, & Philpott, 2013).

*G.I. Bill.* The original G.I. Bill was originally called the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944. It was one of the most significant social policies that the United States has ever enacted — created for veterans that were returning from World War II (Mettler, 2005).

*Veteran.* An individual that has served in the Armed Forces of the United States and has since separated or retired from military service (Szymendera, 2016).

*Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008.* This act is more commonly known as the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill. The Bill provides a maximum of 36 months of educational benefits, as well as an allowance for housing (monthly), and a book stipend. To qualify for the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill, a service member must have served a minimum of 90 days of aggregate active duty, or be an honorably discharged veteran (Zhang, 2018).

*Separated.* Members of the Armed Forces that have completed their term of service to the United States Military and is no longer in the military (Hill et al., 2013).

*Post 9/11 Veterans.* Service members who have served in the Armed Forces of the United States after the attacks on the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2001 (Citroën, 2016).

*Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF).* The name of a military operation in Iraq. OIF began on 20 March 2003 and ended during December of 2011 (Ford & Vignare, 2015).

*Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF).* The name of a military operation in Afghanistan. The operation began on the 7<sup>th</sup> of October 2001 (Ford & Vignare, 2015).

*Operation New Dawn (OND).* The name of a military operation created by the Department of Defense regarding American military presence in Iraq after the first of September 2010 (Ford & Vignare, 2015).

*Non-Commissioned Officer.* Enlisted members of the Armed Forces. May have completed an undergraduate degree. However, the member completed the undergraduate degree after joining the Armed Forces (Sherman, 2018).

*Commissioned Officer.* Has completed an undergraduate or graduate degree before joining the Armed Forces. Members of the Armed Forces receive Commissions by graduating from a service academy, such as West Point, Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC), or Officer Candidate School (Sherman, 2018).

*Transition Assistance Program.* A program from the Department of Defense that separating and retiring service members must attend. The program is used to assist military members with the transition to civilian life and assist with finding employment (Transition Assistance, 2015).

*Transferable Skills.* Skills, knowledge, and abilities that service members acquire while on active duty and carry over to their new civilian employment. These can be technical knowledge or leadership skills (McKay, 2017).

### **Assumptions, Limitations, Delimitations**

**Assumptions.** The researcher made several assumptions. The first assumption was that employers desire to hire combat veterans and are willing to go above and beyond to provide the required support services to ensure the overall success of combat veterans. The second assumption was that the participants of the research study would answer the questions that are posed to them honestly. Another assumption is that the participants of the research would not be

commissioned officers or enlisted members. Higher education has the potential to increase employment opportunities greatly. Veterans that are utilizing the Post 9/11 GI Bill to complete their degree receive a housing allowance from the Department of Veteran Affairs. According to 223D (n.d.), the housing allowance for veterans in San Francisco, California, is \$4,368 a month or \$52,416 annually. The final assumption was that combat veterans are attending universities or colleges to earn their respective degrees as opposed to receiving the housing allowance rate from the Department of Veteran Affairs.

**Limitations.** A limitation of this study was that the research is in Central Florida. As such, the researcher hoped, but was not able to find, participants in the study from each branch of the Armed Forces (i.e., Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard). Another limitation was the number of female combat veterans that participated in the study; the researcher was only able to identify a limited number of female veterans to participate. Due to the commitments of the combat veterans participating in the study, such as being full-time employees or full-time students, the time that the combat veterans could commit to the study was also a limitation.

Noble and Smith (2015) stated that in qualitative research, personal bias could potentially influence the findings of the researcher. The researcher is a twenty-six-year veteran of the United States Air Force who attended the Transitional Assistance Program (TAP) before his retirement during 2005. While the curriculum for the TAPs course is the same across the nation, the quality and delivery methods of the instructor potentially have a great impact on how combat veterans receive the information, as well as the effectiveness of the TAP program.

Additionally, the researcher is a disabled veteran who has received benefits from the Department of Veteran Affairs for over fourteen years to complete an undergraduate degree, a

master's degree, and a doctoral degree. As such, the researcher ensured that his experiences and personal bias did not influence or impact the findings of the research.

**Delimitations.** According to Creswell (2018), delimitations are used to limit the scope of a study. The scope of a study may focus on its participants or the site of the study. This qualitative study was delimited as a result of the lack of geographic diversity in the sample. Another delimitation is that the study had combat veterans that attended the DOD Transitional Assistance Program for the Army, Navy, Marines, and the Air Force. However, it did not include veterans that attended the TAP program for the Coast Guard.

### **Significance of the Study**

Cassidy (2015) stated that in the eyes of President Abraham Lincoln, the United States truly was the home of the brave. During his inauguration speech, President Lincoln addressed the need of the USA to recover from its deadliest war, the Civil War. He made a promise to the combat veterans of the recently formed country. President Lincoln promised, "To care for him who shall have borne the bathe and for his widow, and his orphan" (Cassidy, 2015, p. 841). He committed on behalf of the United States government to care for American veterans who were injured or died in the war, as well as their families. In 1959, the promise made by President Lincoln became the motto of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Under the responsibility of providing care for veterans is the duty of the VA to assist veterans with their reintegration into civilian life and society, and employment. Unfortunately, the Department of Veteran Affairs is understaffed, overwhelmed, and is failing in their attempt to fulfill the promise made by President Abraham Lincoln so many years ago.

According to Stevens (2018), there was a great amount of concern and anxiety at the end of World War II. The anxiety focused on how to reintegrate millions of returning combat

veterans into society and the civilian workforce. The United States had just come out of the Great Depression, and the returning combat veterans had the potential to put the USA right back into another depression. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (the GI Bill of Rights) was born from this anxiety and resulted in ensuring that veterans did not add to the growing population of unemployed Americans. Instead, the GI Bill gave over two million combat veterans unemployment insurance, low-interest loans for businesses and homes, and the opportunity to attend universities and attain a degree that will greatly assist combat veterans with attaining employment. Before the end of the war, a national movement had begun in the United States, a movement to reward America's soldiers by providing a way of having them attend universities and colleges. The GI Bill was a privilege of service to one's country. Returning from the horrors of war proved to be an extremely difficult task for transitioning combat veterans.

Since the attack on American soil on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, over two million military members have deployed in the protection of the USA. Over the next six years, it is estimated that over a million personnel that are currently serving in the Armed Forces will leave the military and reintegrate into society, earn degrees, and enter the civilian workforce (Cassidy, 2015).

Kleykamp (2013) stated that in 2011, twelve percent of military members that served after 9/11, and approximately thirty percent of veterans that were between eighteen and twenty-four were unemployed. Many will be attending universities in pursuit of degrees and, subsequently, employment.

The Veteran Economic Report showed that approximately fifty-three percent of Post 9/11 veterans have been unemployed during their reintegration to civilian communities. Additionally,

during 2014, there were close to six hundred thousand unemployed veterans who were seeking civilian employment. Many of these unemployed veterans were having a difficult time competing with their civilian counterparts in their search for employment (Faur et al., 2014).

Lim, Interiano, Nowell, Tkacik, and Dahlberg (2018) stated that there is a large influx of military members aspiring to earn a college degree to assist in their reintegration to society and ultimately find meaningful employment. Over the last ten years, there has been a growing interest by society in the wellbeing and the reintegration of combat veterans. Additionally, research has shown that higher education is extremely effective in assisting veterans' transition to society and a professional career. Transitioning combat veterans must make significant modifications in numerous areas of their lives, such as social, academic, vocational, and personal, to effectively reintegrate into society, civilian communities, and the civilian workforce. Failure by employers and universities to understand the unique and special needs of combat veterans will result in turbulent and unsuccessful transitions for combat veterans.

The Department of Veteran Affairs asserted that during 2015, the unemployment rate of veterans in the age range of eighteen to twenty-four years old had reached a high of thirteen percent in comparison to under eleven percent for their civilian counterparts in the same age group. They further went on to state that the rate of unemployment for civilians ranging from twenty-five to thirty-four-year-olds was under five and a half percent, while the same age group for veterans was approximately seven percent (Department of Veteran Affairs, 2015).

According to a survey from Syracuse University, of over eight thousand five hundred veterans concerning the experience of transitioning veterans, approximately twenty-seven percent were unemployed with no promise of civilian employment (Corri et al., 2015). The unemployment rate of veterans is consistently higher than that of their civilian counterparts.



This higher rate is indicative of the difficulties that combat veterans have encountered in their transition to civilian life and employment. The high rate of unemployment among combat veterans is not just a problem in Central Florida; it is a significant problem across the entire United States. Combat veterans have endured numerous difficulties during their deployments, yet they managed to attain the desired goals of their missions under extremely difficult and stressful conditions. One would think that this would result in the unemployment rate of combat veterans being lower than their civilian counterparts.

This research is significant to all veterans, the Department of Veteran Affairs, policy, procedure, and program developers, as well as universities across the United States. Hiring and human resource managers are not aware of the barriers that veterans have encountered when pursuing civilian employment. This qualitative study has provided data directly from the veterans that is relevant and current. The results of this research will help human resource managers, organizations, and universities to better understand the unique challenges and needs that combat veterans have encountered in their transition to civilian life and employment.

**Reduction of gaps.** In the literature review, several gaps were identified concerning the unique needs of combat veterans reintegrating into society and the civilian labor force. According to Faurer et al. (2014), in 2011, President Obama announced that service members in the Middle East would be withdrawing from the region. The United States had begun its drawdown of troops in the Middle East. At the time, thousands of soldiers were preparing to mobilize in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation New Dawn, and Operation Iraqi Freedom. The soldiers who were preparing to deploy were a mix of active duty, reserve, and National Guard members. Unfortunately, this left a large number of military members scrambling to find civilian employment in a very difficult employment market. Employers had

temporarily hired replacements for the National Guard and reserve members and now had to let them go. Active duty members were subject to the military's reduction-in-force; thousands of soldiers who had volunteered to serve the US in its time of need were no longer needed. These soldiers joined over one million veterans who were unemployed and seeking civilian employment. The Department of Defense (DOD) announced a cut in the defense budget of over one trillion dollars over the next decade. The cut in the defense budget resulted in over a hundred thousand combat veterans flooding the civilian job market at a time that civilians were encountering difficulties obtaining employment.

Transitioning service members have attended a program that is run by the DOD called Transition Assistance Program (TAP). TAP is designed to assist separating or retiring service member's transition to society and the civilian labor force. The program ranges from three to seven days in length. As is the case with many programs of assistance that are run by the government, there are many levels of bureaucracy, which potentially are a factor that has limited the success of the program. Service members that utilized TAP found employment in the civilian sector three weeks earlier than those that did not use TAP. However, a gap exists in the literature as to the overall effectiveness of the TAP program. Little to no literature exists, which clearly states that the TAP program has been successful in assisting combat veterans to reintegrate back to society and finding meaningful employment. This study has reduced that gap by determining the level of successes that combat veterans in Central Florida have had in their reintegration to society and finding civilian employment after attending TAP (Faurer et al., 2014).

According to McAllister et al. (2015), many combat veterans are leaving military service; approximately forty-four percent of them have encountered difficulties transitioning back to

society and civilian employment. Part of the problem is an inconsistency between their old military identity and their new civilian environment at work. With over one million combat veterans joining the millions of already unemployed American citizens, this is an area of great concern. Enlisted members have a considerably more difficult transition to civilian life, as well as finding civilian employment. Military officers are required to have a bachelor's degree, and most have earned a master's degree while in service. The educational level of officers, combined with their leadership skills, abilities, and talents assists greatly in their reintegration to the civilian workforce.

During their time in the military, enlisted members have acquired a great deal of invaluable experience, talents, knowledge, and skills that can be of great assistance to civilian organizations. Unfortunately, the unemployment rate of enlisted combat veterans is over thirteen percent, while the unemployment rate of nonveterans is eight percent. While enlisted combat veterans may have the required skillset to obtain meaningful employment, many have encountered challenges in expressing their military skills into terms that appropriately translate into the civilian workforce.

There is a significant gap in the literature about translating military skills into language that hiring and human resource managers can easily understand. As long as this continues to be a problem, enlisted combat veterans will continue to struggle to find employment in the civilian sector. The research of this study was conducted with enlisted members and determined how many of them encountered this challenge and how they overcame it. The information can then be passed on to organizations and human resource managers to assist them in understanding military culture and language. Hiring managers should be trained to understand military culture

and language better to prevent any misunderstandings and biases associated with hiring combat veterans (McAllister et al., 2015).

According to Cass and Hammond (2015), in 1944, it was identified that the success of student veterans in higher education would require that colleges and universities would need to gain a deep and insightful understanding of the unique needs of this demographic.

Unfortunately, the gap remained in place for over sixty years. During 2008, scholars again began to call for institutions of higher education to conduct research to address the unique needs of this growing population of combat veterans. The research would be concerning military members returning from deployments and not being traditional students, and they needed unique support from staff and faculty to ensure their successful transition into higher education.

Combat veterans have encountered numerous challenges when returning to civilian life. They have left a life filled with discipline and direction, and their transition to higher education, society, and the civilian labor force is very complex and complicated. Combat veterans are a population of students that present unique needs as opposed to traditional students.

They went on to say that staff and faculty need to be adequately educated to deal with the unique needs of student veterans to ensure a successful transition for combat veterans. Statistics showed that sixty-five percent of the civilian sector had some level of college, with approximately twenty-nine percent attaining an undergraduate degree. Conversely, forty-one percent of veterans attended higher education, with only fifteen percent attaining an undergraduate degree. Combat veterans have encountered challenges that traditional students will not encounter. Some of the challenges are avoiding public places and spaces, insomnia, depression, anxiety, higher levels of stress, traumatic brain injury, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Research has shown that approximately fifty percent of combat veterans attending college have symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, with approximately thirty-three percent suffering from cases of severe anxiety, and twenty-five percent dealing with severe bouts of depression. Half of all combat veterans have considered committing suicide at some point in their life, and twenty percent planned to kill themselves. These challenges create barriers to combat veteran's successful reintegration into society, education, and the civilian labor force. The research conducted in this qualitative phenomenological study will greatly contribute and assist in bridging the gap of this growing population of combat veterans and their unique and challenging needs.

**Implications for biblical integration.** Kingsbury (2010) stated that serving in the Armed Forces may be the most dangerous and oldest form of public service. The United States Armed Forces is made up of 2.2 million men and women who have volunteered to serve, protect, and defend the United States. There are numerous reasons why people decide to serve in the military. Patriotism is the top reason that service members joined the military. Regardless as to why people decide to serve our country, they are willing to risk their lives for the values, morals, and beliefs that Americans hold near and dear to their hearts. People that join the military understand that life is about something bigger than oneself. After their service, they have come back to a life that they used to know only to find out that it is drastically different now.

Similarly, they are not the same person that they were when they first joined the military. Some military members have witnessed and experienced things that humans were not created to see or do. Many of the combat veterans are broken and have needed a helping hand reintegrating into society and the workforce. God would want society to assist our great warriors in their time of need.

Van Duzer (2010) stated that Christians lead a life of piety, not stealing, lying, or cheating in their work. However, they find their purpose or meaning for being a Christian, not in their work, but somewhere else. Christians need to acknowledge that a call to business is noble. God is inviting us to be a part of His work in the world He created. God desires for us to be His feet and hands by feeding those that are hungry and by bringing healing to our brothers and sisters that need help. God has given each of us an invitation to be His agent to further His purpose of having human beings flourish everywhere in everything they do. God tells us that the work that we do on earth will matter for eternity. Doing God's work is filled with purpose and hope.

Returning veterans have numerous issues; they have suffered from wounds that are physical and visible and some that are invisible, but equally as painful. By assisting our warriors with their reintegration, we are doing God's work. We are giving veterans purpose and hope, which they desperately need.

According to Keller and Alsdorf (2012), when deciding on which profession to enter, the school of thought used to be which profession will assist in making the most amount of money or which will give me the greatest status. That mindset must change. When choosing a profession, people must ask themselves how they can best utilize the talents, skills, and abilities that God has given them to be of the greatest benefit to others — using their talents to do God's will and help brothers and sisters in need. Those that have joined the military do not do so for monetary gain; they joined the Armed Forces to use their God-given talents to defend and protect our values and our way of life in the United States. Most veterans joined the military for the betterment of society.

Jesus desires that we help one another. This is made clearly evident in Matthew 25:35-40,

For I was hungry, and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you? (New Revised Standard Version)

And the King will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40, New Revised Standard Version).

Veterans have encountered numerous challenges as they reintegrate into higher education and society and civilian employment. Jesus makes it very clear that by helping veterans in their transition, it would be the same as helping Him.

Finally, the lives of veterans are summed up in John 15:13, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (New Revised Standard Version). Numerous veterans have given up their lives to save the life of a brother or sister in arms. People join the Armed Forces knowing that their lives may be at risk, yet they do it protect the freedoms that American people enjoy. That is truly a sacrifice on the part of the veteran. Now that combat veterans have encountered difficulties in their transition to society, higher education, and the workforce, they need the help of the American people that they have so proudly served.

**Relationship to field of study.** This qualitative phenomenological study is significant to human resources management because it advances knowledge in the field. According to Benjamin and Simon (2015), the United States currently has over eight hundred military locations in over seventy different territories and countries across the globe. In sharp contrast, the countries of France, Russia, and Great Britain have approximately 30 bases combined globally.

The United States military has a continuous presence in six of the seven continents across the world. The seventh continent is Antarctica, and on occasion and as needed, the United States has also had a presence in Antarctica. Members of the United States Armed Forces are experienced in functioning in a global market and have had numerous opportunities and experiences in dealing with people from different cultures with different beliefs and values (Benjamin & Simon, 2015).

Tung (2016) posited that human resource management had changed drastically because of reverse migration, globalization, the dominance of global markets, and the dire need of organizations to have personnel with a global mindset and experience dealing in a global market. Companies must change the way they view international human resource management (IHRM), as well as their practices and policies to remain competitive in the global market. There is a global war among organizations for talent and personnel that have experience dealing in a global environment.

During the 2006 World Economic Forum, emerging markets such as India and China implemented initiatives and policies to attract talented employees from around the globe. This war has impacted companies across the world as they attempt to attract and equally as important to retain talented employees in their respective organizations. Sadly, talent poaching has become



very common in the world of business. Globally, the workforce that is currently in place is quickly coming to the point of retirement, which makes the war for talent even more critical (Tung, 2016).

In the United States, the aging of the current workforce is potentially an issue of great concern. Frankel (2017) stated that the baby boomer generation is Americans born from 1946 to 1964. The baby boomer generation is made up of approximately 80 million people and is a massive part of the current workforce, as well as the economy. Baby boomers are considerably larger than the generation before and after them. Frankel went on to state that over 10,000 baby boomers are reaching the age of 65 daily. This trend is expected to continue until 2030. Every minute, seven baby boomers are turning 65. The aging of the baby boomers has the potential to deplete the current workforce.

According to Heathfield (2019), organizations consistently desire to improve the knowledge, skills, and abilities of their employees. Improving the skills, abilities, and knowledge of employees is critical to the overall success, productivity, and profitability of organizations. In the highly competitive global market, companies must maintain a superior workforce that can attain organizational and personal goals while providing outstanding service to its customers. Organizations improve the abilities of its employees by human resource development (HRD), which includes activities such as the training of employees (classroom training or completion of college courses), career development, mentoring, and coaching. All of these are beneficial for the employee as well as the organization.

According to Kirchner (2018), organizations globally are spending approximately fifty billion dollars annually on the development of leaders. Organizations have great concern about the potential shortage of effective leaders globally. In the United States, companies have begun

an initiative of “veteran-friendly” hiring. These organizations have recognized the talents, skills, and abilities of combat veterans and what they can bring to their organizations.

Davis and Minnis (2017) stated that combat veterans face numerous challenges when transitioning from military service to the civilian workforce. While the American workforce has become considerably more diverse, there are numerous misconceptions and a lack of understanding about the skill sets of veterans, as well as their military experience. Veterans are a valuable source of talent for numerous organizations. They have invaluable experience in a global market; they have performed extremely well in real-world, high-pressure situations, and have talents and experiences that the average worker does not possess. Unfortunately, the lack of understanding of veteran’s skillsets makes it extremely difficult for veterans to find employment in the civilian sector. It is critically important that human resources and hiring managers better understand the contributions that veterans can make to an organization. Estimates predict that over a quarter of a million combat veterans will leave the Armed Forces annually for a minimum of five years, and they will be looking for employment in the civilian sector. Human resource professionals must receive education on how to translate veterans’ knowledge, skills, and abilities into their business culture and environment.

This qualitative phenomenological study has the potential to be significantly important human resources and hiring managers who do not fully appreciate the skills, talents, and abilities that veterans can offer companies. Organizations are competing globally and desperately need new talent that has experience functioning in a global market and with people of different cultures. Military members serve all over the globe and must deal with the people of each respective nation and culture. With 10,000 Americans reaching retirement age daily, the workforce needs millions of new employees. As previously stated, Roberts (2015) stated that

over two million military personnel have served in the Middle East, with hundreds of thousands returning home seeking civilian employment. In the next several years, over a million veterans will be returning to higher education and subsequently will be looking for meaningful employment. These veterans can replace the retiring baby boomers. The Department of Veteran Affairs (2014) reported that they had invested over \$20 billion in the education of student veterans. This money is a boost to the economy while educating veterans and ultimately savings HRD funds for organizations that hire veterans. By investing in the education of student veterans, the Department of Veteran Affairs is developing skills, talents, and abilities for organizations that hire veterans. Finally, veterans have skills, knowledge, talents, and abilities that can prove to be invaluable to civilian organizations.

**Summary of the significance of the study.** This qualitative phenomenological study is significant because it has the potential to assist human resources and hiring managers to better understand the obstacles and barriers that combat veterans encounter when transitioning to the civilian workforce. Additionally, it will also assist them to better understand the knowledge, skills, abilities (KSA), and talents that knowledge that combat veterans can offer an organization. By understanding these challenges, organizations can take the necessary steps to ensure that combat veterans are successful in their transition to the civilian labor force. Additionally, veterans make numerous sacrifices to defend our country, and they need the help of their fellow Americans. From a biblical perspective, God wants the people that He created to flourish in every way possible. Veterans have made numerous sacrifices for the United States, and now combat veterans need the assistance of the US to ensure that they successfully reintegrate into local communities, society, and the civilian labor force.

## **A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature**

**Introduction.** This literature review has explored the general research problem and bridge the gaps in the obstacles that combat veterans have encountered when reintegrating into the civilian workforce. The specific problem to be addressed is the challenges that combat veterans in Central Florida are encountering in their search for civilian employment resulting in the inability of civilian organizations being able to tap into this vast talent pool.

As the conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other locations in the Middle East are waning, millions of combat veterans will be transitioning back to civilian employment. The transition of combat veterans is complicated by numerous issues such as veterans feeling as if they have lost their purpose, meaning, identity, as well as physical and mental issues. The GI Bill has allowed millions of veterans to attend colleges and universities across the United States. Student veterans are not a traditional student and must deal with numerous biases and misunderstandings on campus, as well as unique challenges. The leadership of the university, staff, and faculty must learn how to deal with and be supportive of student veterans. Student veterans must feel welcomed and engaged in universities to thrive and succeed in the pursuit of their degrees. Failure to do so can result in the student veterans feeling isolated and dropping out of school (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018; Danish & Antonides, 2009; Kato, Jinkerson, Holland, & Soper, 2016; Larson & Norman, 2014; McAllister et al., 2015; Mobbs & Bonanno, 2018; Parks, Walker, & Smith, 2015; Southwell, Whiteman, MacDermid Wadsworth, & Barry, 2018; Sportsman & Thomas, 2015; Taylor, Parks, & Edwards, 2016).

This literature review explores combat veterans and the problems they have encountered when transitioning to the civilian workforce. In this section, the researcher reviewed literature that defines a service member, explored military culture, and the importance of identity to

veterans. From there, the literature review examines the purpose and meaning of veterans and the reintegration process, challenges that combat veterans encounter when reintegrating into civilian employment. The researcher then cites literature concerning the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944, its impact on the United States, and combat veterans. The literature review then examines the Post 9/11 GI Bill and the increasing number of combat veterans that are attending institutions of higher education in the pursuit of a degree to increase their opportunities of obtaining civilian employment (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018; Danish & Antonides, 2009; Kato et al., 2016; Larson & Norman, 2014; Lim et al., 2018; Palmadessa, 2017; Southwell et al., 2018; Vacchi, 2012).

After exploring the current GI Bill, the literature review explores the unique challenges that combat veterans encounter, such as PTSD, TBI, and suicide ideation. The literature review then explores the misunderstandings and biases that combat student veterans have encountered in their reintegration to higher education and that hiring managers may have that prevent them from hiring combat veterans. From there, the literature review moves to how combat student veterans are significantly different from traditional students (Adler, Huffman, Bliese, & Castro, 2005; Schreger & Kimble, 2017; Sherman, Larsen, & Borden, 2015; Stone, Lengnick-Hall, & Muldoon, 2018).

The literature review then explores the numerous challenges and difficulties that combat veterans have encountered in their transition to the workforce, and includes difficulties such as PTSD, TBI, suicidal ideation, mental health, and isolation. Finally, the literature review examines the veteran employment, the benefits of hiring a combat veteran, the Transition Assistance Program, government support for transitioning combat veterans, and translating the distinct skills of combat veterans (Cass & Hammond, 2015; Elnitsky, Fisher, & Blevins, 2017;

Kamarck, 2017; Kato et al., 2016; McAllister et al., 2015; Osborne, 2013; Schreger & Kimble, 2017; Sportsman & Thomas, 2015; Stern, 2017; ).

### **Service Members**

A service member is a citizen of the United States who has served in a branch of the Armed Forces. The Armed Force is made up of five separate branches of the military. These five different branches of the Armed Forces are the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, the Marine Corps, and the Coast Guard. Whether or not an individual has ever deployed in support of an American operation overseas or has had an opportunity to deploy to a combat zone, he or she has earned the honor of being a service member as long as they have served on active duty in the Reserves or the National Guard. Upon separating from their respective branches of the Armed Forces, a service member is entitled to receive benefits from the Department of Veteran Affairs (Vacchi, 2012).

**Military culture.** According to Danish and Antonides (2009), the military is a community that is not open to outsiders; it has its cultural norms, customs, acronyms, abbreviations, and in some respects, its own language. Involved in the military community and culture are service members, their immediate families, and civilian employees on a military base. If someone is in a position that will be working with or providing a service to veterans, they should be aware of the similarities and differences between civilian and military cultures. While there are numerous similarities between the civilian and military culture, some of the aspects of the military culture are highly unique.

Danish and Antonides (2009) stated that whether or not a service member has ever deployed to a combat zone, their experiences tend to be very vastly different from that of their civilian counterparts. Several of the cultural differences are the amount of discipline that the

military members have within their daily lives, the rank or hierarchical system that the military uses, the ritualistic nature of the military, the wearing of uniforms, medals, ribbons, and badges. Additional differences between the two cultures are the fact that military families have to move to different locations every several years, within the military, there is a camaraderie and esprit de corps that binds combat veterans as brothers and sisters. The majority of civilian occupations are not as stressful or as dangerous as being a combat soldier. Military members and their families get the opportunity to live in numerous countries overseas. Members of the Armed Forces live by a strong code of core values, and they understand that they must make numerous sacrifices in service to their country. Finally, military members accept that the sacrifices they make and the service to their country are ultimately for the greater good of the United States.

While the military culture is unique, service members are a very diverse population. It would be a mistake to stereotype veterans and assume that they are all the same. Military members work towards a common goal, the protection and defense of our great country. When they have transitioned out of the military, some veterans view their civilian counterparts as lacking discipline and indulgent, which can potentially lead to isolation, feeling alienated, and a difficult reintegration into society. A great difference in the civilian and military culture is that soldiers are trained to kill their enemy, which is in direct contrast of most Americans, which are living a life filled with peace and following the 6<sup>th</sup> Commandment, which states, “Thou shall not kill” (Danish & Antonides, 2009).

**Identity.** Serving in the Armed Forces can have a lifelong impact on service members, their identities, and their worldviews. When an individual joins the Armed Forces, they are stripped of their identity in their civilian life and reborn into the military culture. The strong relationships that develop in the military lead service members to accept social identities that

conform to cultural norms, while reinforcing the identification that the new service member will have with the military and its culture. New members of the Armed Forces can easily adapt a mentality of us (i.e., military) and them (i.e., civilians) due to the differences in each culture. Their research suggested that most veterans have made a smooth transition to civilian life, with some veterans encountering numerous difficulties reintegrating back to society, higher education, and the workforce. After spending so many years in the military, some military veterans experience an internal conflict to their sense of self, as well as feeling as if they are potentially losing their identity (Binks & Cambridge, 2018).

Smith and True (2014) stated that returning veterans encounter an internal strain when transitioning from military service to their new life as a civilian. This conflict is caused by the stark contrast between their identity as a soldier, especially if they have deployed to a combat zone and their new postwar identity as a civilian. When individuals enlist in a branch of the Armed Forces, they have experienced an intense transformation of their identity. The transition to the military has involved the assimilation to the “total institution” that is the military. Soldiers must adjust to several new priorities, which will be a major part of their new lives. Some of the new priorities are that the rank structure and the obedience that is given to a respective rank, the greater good of the collective group, the organization, and the United States. Military members live a very regimented life, and they must adjust to the military system of hierarchy. Failure to adjust to these new priorities will result in non-judicial punishment under the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ), or a bad conduct discharge which will negatively impact their opportunity to obtain civilian employment

For numerous years, soldiers have known a life filled with military norms, values, beliefs, and culture. Now, they must make sense of their new roles and social circumstances as a



civilian. The conflict is so strong that it can be a catalyst or present itself as a mental health issue for combat veterans. The psychological state of veterans can become very distressing concerning their new role and identity in society. Veterans reintegrating into society, and the civilian workforce tend to experience feelings of isolation, dislocation, and not belonging. When transitioning to their new lives and roles, the exposure to trauma and violence that soldiers have experienced while in a combat zone can result in social and emotional withdrawal. Returning soldiers have difficulty in their relationships with family members and workers alike. Veterans have struggled to adjust to their new identity in the civilian community and finding employment in the civilian sector (Smith & True, 2014).

According to Orazem et al. (2017), approximately two million veterans are returning from service in support of conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. The names of the conflicts in the Middle East are Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation New Dawn, and Operation Enduring Freedom. The returning veterans are a diverse group of Americans who have something in common, a transition to civilian life that has numerous obstacles, difficulties, and challenges. Soldiers that have deployed to a combat zone suffer from numerous mental health disorders and are encountering difficulties in relationships, day to day functions, as well as finding employment that is purposeful and meaningful. As veterans reintegrate back to the civilian workforce, they are reporting that they feel out of place among their civilian counterparts and that civilians do not understand them. Returning veterans are going through a crisis concerning their identity; they feel as if they are stuck in the middle, between their old military culture, norms, and values and their new civilian culture, norms, and value. Combat veterans have struggled to resolve identity expectations of their new civilian life versus their former military

life and culture. The identity issues that combat veterans have experienced may potentially be central to successful reintegration into society and the civilian workforce.

The theory of identity deals with roles that one fills in society, and one's view of themselves internally. The theory also places a large emphasis on the importance of continuity and coherence in an individual's sense of self. Veterans are struggling with their sense of self. Without a sense of self, veterans experience confusion in their sense of identity. Numerous returning veterans stated that the single most difficult aspect of their transition was the fact that they had lost their identity when they separated or retired from the military. Veterans reported several areas of difficulty in adjusting to their reintegration into civilian life and employment. Returning combat veterans miss the structure and discipline of the military culture, and they feel isolated and as if they do not belong in the civilian community or workplace. Numerous veterans have a negative view of the civilian sector and the labor force. Many veterans feel as if civilian employment is full of chaos and lacks the structure and discipline that they have grown accustomed to in the Armed Forces. Many combat veterans felt that their time in the military had left them behind compared to their civilian counterparts. Finally, combat veterans found purpose, meaning, and respect in their military careers. As returning veterans transitioned to their new roles in civilian employment, many of them failed to find purpose and meaning (Orazem et al., 2017).

For many veterans, these difficulties in adjustment were intertwined and co-occurred. However, for some veterans, they remained focused on one aspect of their adjustment to civilian life. Many veterans missed the military and wished that they had remained in their respective branches of the Armed Forces. Veterans felt that their time in the Armed Forces was predictable and structured; goals and expectations were clearly defined, communication with superiors was

direct and efficient, and they did not were not required to make too many personal decisions. Conversely, veterans felt that the civilian sector was chaotic, and for some, overwhelming. In the military, superiors told service members where to go, when to be there, and what to do. Even though military life was filled with deployments to dangerous locations around the world, and extended separations from their families, combat veterans felt that life in the military was simpler than civilian life and considerably easier to manage (Orazem et al., 2017).

**Purpose and meaning.** Kato et al. (2016) stated that while serving in the military, especially while deployed to a combat zone, veterans felt as if their lives were important, significant, and their work was gratifying. Veterans that served in a combat zone felt a strong sense of pride in the work that they were doing, defending the United States against its enemies. Every detail of what combat veterans did while on deployment was significant and important; a mistake in the smallest and simplest task could have resulted in the loss of a fellow service member's life. Combat veterans felt that they had earned respect while in the military, and unfortunately, that respect did not transfer to their new life in the civilian workforce. After separating or retiring from the military, many combat veterans found themselves attempting to redefine their sense of purpose and meaning. Returning veterans who found civilian employment often felt that jobs in the civilian community did not matter. Losing the purpose, respect, and meaning that they had earned while serving in a combat zone was a great source of frustration for many combat veterans.

While serving in the Armed Forces, service members received a great amount of respect based on the rank or grade they had attained. However, that respect was lost when they transitioned to a civilian job. Conversely, many veterans reported feeling useless and having no sense of meaning or purpose if they could not find civilian employment. Many veterans believed

that they would never achieve the same level of satisfaction or gratification that they had achieved while serving in a combat zone. Numerous combat veterans found some level of satisfaction, purpose, and meaning if they found a job that was associated with the military or utilized the numerous leadership skills, abilities, and discipline they had obtained while in the military. A large number of veterans that deployed in support of combat operations felt that they had experienced a great deal of personal growth and a significantly greater appreciation for the simple things in life, such as paved roads, running water, and electricity. Service members felt that their combat experiences made them more mature, raised their self-discipline and confidence, and gave them a greater sense of purpose in life (Kato et al., 2016).

**Reintegration.** Marble (2015) states that dating back to the American Revolution, the United States has tended to reduce the number of soldiers in the Armed Forces after the completion of a conflict or a war. While the United States is currently still involved in the War on Terrorism in the Middle East, there are numerous reasons why a large number of military members are leaving the military and transitioning to the civilian community, higher education, and the workforce. One reason that a member of the Armed Forces leaves the military is that they have completed their military service obligation. Most branches of the military have an eight-year military service obligation. Once a military member has completed four years of active duty, they are still obligated to complete four more years in the inactive ready reserve. Veterans that are in the inactive ready reserve are not in the military, nor do they have an obligation to serve in the reserves. However, they are subject to being called back to active duty if there is a national emergency, and the military needs their service.

Another reason that military members leave the military is that they have completed twenty or more years of honorable service in their respective branches of the Armed Forces and

are eligible to retire from the military. Retired military members have completed their military service obligation. Military members are mandatorily required to complete physical training (PT) at least three times a week. This requirement is to keep soldiers in top physical condition to meet the strenuous conditions of being deployed in a combat zone. Unfortunately, while deployed, thousands of combat veterans have received physical and mental injuries, which can result in the soldier no longer meeting the physical requirements of military service. If military service creates a hardship on the service member or a member of their family, they may request a hardship discharge (Marble, 2015).

Finally, Congress enacted the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) during 1951. The UCMJ clearly defines offenses under military law. When military service members violate military law or commit disciplinary infractions, they can receive a discharge under other than honorable conditions or a bad conduct discharge. Both types of discharge will make their search for civilian employment more challenging (Flynn, 2017).

According to Sportsman and Thomas (2015), the federal government spends thousands of dollars and numerous months, and in many cases, years to transition a civilian into their new role and life in the military. Unfortunately, when a service member is transitioning out of the military, the federal government provides separating service members a week of a transitional course to prepare them for their new roles and lives in society and assist them in finding employment in the civilian labor force. As soldiers are leaving the military, they find themselves inadequately prepared and have encountered numerous difficulties in their attempts to find employment in the civilian world.

Based on the generous benefits of the Post 9/11 GI Bill, millions of veterans have returned to higher education in pursuit of completing a degree and obtaining civilian

employment. Unfortunately, the reintegration into higher education and civilian employment has not been an easy transition for many combat veterans. With the large influx of student veterans, universities and colleges are having to face the reality that they are not adequately prepared to meet the unique needs and challenges needs of combat veterans. Colleges and universities are striving to assist combat veterans in accomplishing their educational goals and begin a new life in society with a productive career. To accomplish these goals, staff, faculty, and the leadership of colleges and universities have to make numerous adjustments on campus, as well as in the classroom, to better accommodate combat veterans and their unique needs (Sportsman and Thomas, 2015).

According to Elnitsky et al. (2017), since the attack on the United States on 11 September 2001, approximately three million active duty, reservist, and National Guard military members have deployed in support of Operation New Dawn, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation Enduring Freedom. Returning veterans have identified numerous issues that have complicated their reintegration to their civilian roles. Some of the issues identified by combat veterans are symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), complications from traumatic brain injuries (TBI), and suffering from severe cases of depression and anxiety. Other challenges encountered by veterans returning from combat zones are their inability to function in society and the workplace, not being able to care for themselves, being homeless, and suicidal ideation.

Returning combat veterans greatly desire to have a productive role in society, these issues have greatly complicated the reintegration of combat veterans to civilian life, relationships which includes roles in the family, work, higher education, and the civilian workforce. Additionally, the suicide rate of veterans is considerably higher than the rate of their civilian counterparts (Elnitsky et al., 2017).

Elnitsky et al. (2017) found that upon returning from a combat deployment, the above-listed issues created a great amount of tension, stress, and difficulties maintaining family, personal, and work relationships. Combat veterans have experienced numerous difficulties accepting and readjusting to their new civilian roles. Sadly, many veterans feel as if they are no longer productive members of society, that they are not contributing to the betterment of the great country that they have defended for years. It is critically important that society, the Department of Veteran Affairs, and the Federal government do everything in their power to ease the struggles that these mighty warriors are encountering.

Thomas and Bowie (2016) stated that veterans that have served in combat had encountered difficulties reintegrating back into society since the ancient Roman times. It was not until after the Vietnam War that the Department of Veterans Affairs began to take notice and address some of the problems, challenges, and issues that returning combat veterans have experienced. The process by which service members readjust to their new lives and roles in the civilian community is called veteran community reintegration (VCR). The process of transitioning back to society significantly impacts returning veterans in numerous aspects of their lives, such as finding purpose and meaning in their new civilian roles in society and the civilian labor force. Veterans that have deployed to a combat zone experience numerous difficulties in social and personal relationships, which have resulted in higher divorce rates. Combat veterans have also struggled to create and maintain relationships in their civilian place of employment. Veterans that have enrolled in higher education have also faced numerous challenges, such as biases and misunderstanding, not being traditional students, and staff and faculty not understanding their unique needs. Another significant problem facing combat veterans is homelessness, and the lack of benefits, such as healthcare.

Thomas and Bowie (2016) stated that non-white veterans from Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation New Dawn are more susceptible to encountering many of the above-listed issues, challenges, and difficulties when transitioning back to civilian life and the civilian workforce. Approximately two and a half million veterans are returning to their old communities. Over one and a half million of those returning veterans have deployed to a combat zone; most have deployed at least twice, and on average, have spent approximately twelve to fifteen months in a combat zone. Veterans that have spent any time in a combat zone are more likely to experience a difficult transition back to society and civilian employment. Roughly seventy percent of returning combat veterans have encountered issues, challenges, and difficulties reintegrating into their communities, universities, and the civilian labor force.

Zogas (2017) posited that after the attacks on the USA on 11 September 2001, patriotism was at an all-time high, and millions of Americans joined the Armed Forces to defend the country. The people of the United States have received an extremely simplistic view concerning the impact that the war has had on returning military members. The media coverage of veterans who survive combat duty highlights the truly devastating impact that war has had on service members. One disturbing example was a case in 2007 that showed the truly dilapidated and deplorable living conditions of veterans who were severely injured and receiving rehabilitation treatment at Walter Reed Army Hospital in Washington, DC. Another issue that truly highlights the difficulties that returning veterans are encountering when reintegrating into society is the high number of suicides among veterans. These two examples clearly illustrate the mental and physical consequences of war.



### **Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944**

Irwin (2016) stated that the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944 (Original GI Bill) was a law signed by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944 is one of the most important laws that the United States government has ever enacted. The Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944 afforded soldiers and sailors an opportunity that previously was not available to them, it gave them the means and opportunity to attend universities and colleges and the United States government would pay for their education. Since the passing of this important legislation, millions of service members have attended institutions of higher education. Since its inception in 1944, there have been numerous versions of the GI Bill. Other versions of the GI Bill have been the Montgomery G.I. Bill, the Reserve Educational Assistance Program, the Veterans Educational Assistance Program, the Survivors and Dependents Educational Assistance Program. As the years went on, additional versions of the GI Bill were also created, such as the Educational Assistance Pilot Program, the Veterans Educational Assistance Program, and the National Call to Service Program.

By 1956, approximately forty-nine percent of all students attending universities and colleges across the United States were veterans that returned from combat duty. Over sixteen million Americans served in the military during World War II; almost eight million of them utilized the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944 to enroll in educational classes or training programs. The GI Bill has served numerous generations of service members over the years (Irwin, 2016).

**Impact on America and combat veterans.** At the end of World War II, the United States was attempting to recover from the devastating effects of the Depression. Adding millions of combat veterans that were returning from the war to the ever-growing number of unemployed

Americans could potentially send the United States reeling right back into another depression. The enactment of the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944 gave returning veterans the opportunity to attend college, boosted the economy, prevented another potential depression, and gave veterans a better opportunity to find meaningful employment. Additionally, the GI Bill of 1944 assisted returning servicemen and women with their reintegration back to society, while initiating the single greatest era of growth for institutions of higher learning in the history of the United States (Palmadessa, 2017).

Palmadessa (2017) stated that as President Franklin D. Roosevelt's time as President of the United States came to an end, the citizens of the United States elected Harry S. Truman as his successor. Due to the immense growth of higher education at the end of World War II, President Truman formed a special commission to make numerous much-needed changes to higher education. President Truman charged the newly formed special commission with the task of determining what changes were needed to ensure the success of returning combat veterans, and how best to meet the unique needs of the changing population of students at colleges and universities across the country.

A result of Truman's special commission was the Higher Education for American Democracy Report, which identified a plan of teaching, curriculum, and the creation of financial plans for higher education. The Truman Commission and the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944 allowed the federal government to play a role in assessing the needs and assisting in resolving some of the issues and problems facing higher education. The GI Bill of 1944 supported veteran students in the pursuit of higher education and offered solutions to the challenges that higher education was facing. A new era was ushered in with a new partnership between the federal government and institutions of higher education (Palmadessa, 2017).

At the conclusion of the Great Depression, the United States had barely clawed its way out of the Depression when they found themselves in the middle of World War II. The country was still attempting to recover from the devastating effects of the Depression. As the war ended, there were millions of combat veterans returning to the United States with hopes of finding employment. What they found were numerous American civilians struggling to find employment. Adding the millions of returning combat veterans to the ranks of the unemployed threatened to send the country right back into another Depression (De La Garza, Manuel, Wood, & Harris, 2016).

De La Garza et al. (2016) stated that President Franklin Delano did not desire to repeat the mistakes that the United States had made during the end of World War I. As World War I came to an end, the majority of the American people had numerous concerns about the amount of money that would be spent to treat the veterans that were returning from France. At the current time, benefits for veterans accounted for approximately one-third of the budget of the United States government. Because of these concerns, veterans returning from World War I did not receive the benefits that they needed, and they subsequently suffered in numerous ways.

Several of the challenges encountered by millions of combat veterans returning from World War I were homelessness, high rates of unemployment, addiction to drugs, and high suicide rates. To ensure that veterans that were returning from World War II would not endure the same hardships as the returning veterans of World War I, President Roosevelt signed the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944 into law. It is better known as the Original GI Bill. The enactment of this bill allowed returning veterans to enroll in institutions of higher education at record numbers; veteran enrollment in colleges increased to forty-nine percent. Beyond

educational benefits, returning veterans also were entitled to receive low-interest mortgage loans as well as low-interest small-business loans. Additionally, the GI Bill paid for job training, provided veterans hiring privileges, and payments for those veterans who were unemployed. The Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944 assisted veterans returning from World War II to have hope in their future and the opportunity to turn their dreams into a reality, as well as to obtain undergraduate degrees and find employment in the civilian sector (De La Garza et al., 2016).

**Post 9/11 GI Bill.** According to Barr (2015), the Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008, also known as the Post 9/11 Government Issue (GI) Bill is the largest expansion of educational benefits for veterans since the passing of the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944 (Original GI Bill), which was passed at the end of World War II. The Post 9/11 GI Bill has doubled the benefits of veterans; it is the single largest increase in veteran benefits in seventy-five years. The Post 9/11 GI bill provides generous benefits for veterans, such as payment of in-state tuition rate and all associated fees, a monthly allowance for housing, payment will be made based on the zip code of the college or university, and a stipend for supplies and books.

Over the last six decades, the number of individuals that have served in the Armed Forces has dropped drastically. The Post 9/11 GI Bill is critically important in the recruiting efforts of the United States Military. During a 12-year period beginning in 1944, the Original GI bill paid tuition for approximately 2 million of the 16 million returning World War II veterans. In one academic year, the Post 9/11 GI Bill has paid tuition for over six hundred thousand of approximately two million veterans that are returning from deployments in Afghanistan and Iraq. The improved and expanded financial benefits of the Post 9/11 GI Bill have had a significant impact on millions of combat veterans. Many of the veterans that are utilizing the Post 9/11 GI

Bill come from low-income families and are the first members of their families that are attending college (Barr, 2015).

President George W. Bush signed the Post 9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 on the 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2008. Similarly, to every other GI Bill since 1945, service members will receive educational benefits based on their length of service. To qualify for full educational benefits under the Post 9/11 GI Bill, members of the Armed Forces must have served a total of thirty-six months of service after the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2001. Service members qualify for a reduced amount of benefits if they have served for less than thirty-six months. The maximum amount of monthly educational benefits is thirty-six months. Recipients of Post 9/11 GI Bill benefits receive payment of tuition, a monthly stipend as a housing allowance, an allowance for supplies and textbooks, and some veterans can transfer educational benefits to a spouse or child (Taylor et al., 2016).

Ward (2018) posited that universities and colleges across the United States had enjoyed a drastic increase in veteran enrollment due to the drawdown of recent conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other locations across the Middle East. Another reason for the increase in veteran enrollment is the enactment of the Post 9/11 GI Bill. Since the Post 9/11 GI Bill was implemented in 2009, approximately two million service members have returned to universities and colleges across the United States. The Department of Veteran Affairs has paid approximately ninety billion dollars in educational benefits for student veterans.

The Post 9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 (Post 9/11 GI Bill) has resulted in the largest growth of educational benefits for veterans since World War II ended. The United States government and the Department of Veteran Affairs have spent over ten billion on veteran's educational benefits annually. During its first five years of existence, the Post 9/11 GI

Bill has spent over forty billion dollars on educational benefits for student veterans. Over two million veterans have enrolled in higher education since the inception of the Post 9/11 GI Bill. During 2014, expenses on educational benefits for student veterans accounted for almost one-third of college scholarship and grant money allocated by the United States government. Additionally, it also exceeded the combined scholarship and college grant money of all fifty states combined (Barr, 2016).

**Misunderstandings and bias.** According to Stone et al. (2018), there have been numerous efforts by businesses and nonprofit organizations to assist combat veterans in obtaining civilian employment. However, the unemployment rate of combat veterans is consistently higher than that of their civilian counterparts. Unfortunately, the high unemployment rate of combat veterans is not a new phenomenon. A 2006 report from the Department of Veteran Affairs showed that the United States has struggled with transitioning combat veterans since the colonial days. Research has shown that deployment to a combat zone can greatly impact service members, negatively and positively. Numerous combat veterans struggle with reestablishing themselves in the civilian workforce.

Stone et al. (2018) stated that part of the reason that combat veterans struggle to transition to the civilian labor force successfully is the fact that society and hiring managers view them as being unstable and violent. The perception of society and hiring managers suggest that discrimination may play a role in the high unemployment rate of combat veterans. Discrimination usually occurs because of misunderstandings, biases, and stereotypes. The majority of the time, these stereotypes, biases, and misunderstandings are based on erroneous information. The media covers violent events and highlights the mental health and military service challenges of offenders. The general population believes that post-traumatic stress

disorder is a result of military service in a combat zone. In their coverage, the media searches for negative information while minimizing the positive characteristics and traits of combat veterans. This type of media coverage has led to society thinking that combat veterans are a threat in the civilian workforce and has contributed to the high rate of unemployment among combat veterans.

Schreger and Kimble (2017) stated that evidence has suggested that some civilians have a considerable amount of ambivalence towards returning combat veterans. While many civilians are grateful and sincerely appreciate the military service of returning veterans, they are often concerned about the stability and mental health of returning combat veterans. By holding this negative bias towards veterans, whether it is explicit or implicit, it can greatly impact the transition and employment opportunities of members of the Armed Forces who have served in a combat zone.

A recent study revealed that many civilians disapprove of the United States' involvement in combat operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and various locations in the Middle East. The study also showed that civilians believe that over fifty percent of returning war veterans have post-traumatic stress disorder. This figure is considerably higher than the actual rate of veterans that suffer from PTSD and is over double the rate of mental illnesses in war veterans, including substance abuse, depression, and PTSD. Sadly, a large portion of the American population associates a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder with being crazy, violent, or unstable. These statistics support the troubling fact that many Americans have negative biases, perceptions, and misunderstandings about the mental health of returning veterans, which contributes to making their transition to society and the civilian workforce more challenging (Schreger & Kimble, 2017).

**Non-traditional students.** Lim et al. (2018) stated that student veterans are a diverse and growing population in universities and colleges across the United States. A growing body of research has shown that higher education is an effective way for student veterans to increase opportunities for civilian employment. Combat veterans face numerous challenges transitioning to post-secondary education and are not traditional students. Many student veterans are married and have part-time or full-time jobs to support their families. Many non-traditional students struggle to understand the expectations of higher education, while their traditional counterparts do not, which results in non-traditional students performing lower in their academic performance.

### **Challenging Issues**

According to Adler et al. (2005), combat veterans are experiencing multiple deployments during their enlistments. The current rate of deployment for soldiers that are serving in the Armed Forces is fourteen deployments in a twenty-one-year career. This rate of deployment is significantly higher than the rate of a soldier that enlisted twenty years ago. That rate would have been four deployments in a twenty-year career. The higher rate of deployment has greatly impacted the mental and overall health of combat veterans, which can ultimately negatively impact the quality of life, as well as the transition of soldiers that have served in a combat zone into the civilian workforce.

According to Sherman et al. (2015), the longest war in the history of the United States is the Global War on Terrorism. The United States has deployed over 2.6 million service members in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation New Dawn, and Operation Enduring Freedom. Recently, there has been a drawdown of service members serving in a combat capacity. Millions of combat veterans have returned home with numerous unique challenges, such as traumatic



brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder, and mental health issues. There must be a support system in place to assist returning combat veterans in their wellbeing and to support them in their new roles in society and the civilian workforce.

**Isolation and belonging.** According to Gorman, Scoglio, Smolinsky, Russo, and Drebing (2018), transitioning from the military to civilian employment has proven to be significantly challenging and difficult for combat veterans. In a recent survey, forty percent of veterans who served in a combat zone reported experiencing difficulties in their reintegration to their new roles as civilians. Many veterans could not establish new friendships and experienced difficulties when attempting to re-establish old friendships. Twenty-eight percent of returning combat veterans experienced difficulties maintaining the friendships that they had created during their time in the military. Twenty-five percent of the veterans that were receiving healthcare through the Department of Veteran Affairs reported a significant amount of difficulty in social functioning, getting involved in their communities, being productive in their lives, finding civilian employment, and caring for themselves.

Almost half of the veterans that took part in the survey felt isolated and as if they did not belong in the civilian community and the civilian labor force. Feelings of isolation can exacerbate mental health issues. Additionally, they can also create dysfunction in a family unit, including getting along with friends, family, children, and spouses. Research has shown that feelings of loneliness and isolation can greatly hinder recovering from mental and physical illnesses. Sadly, numerous veterans who have experienced these feelings of loneliness and isolation do not seek treatment for these issues. There are several reasons why combat veterans do not seek assistance for their mental health issues. Some of the combat veterans do not have health insurance or the financial resources to pay for the treatment. Returning combat veterans

are accustomed to dealing with the military healthcare system, and they may not be familiar with the civilian healthcare system. Sadly, numerous combat veterans do not seek assistance for mental health issues because of the stigma of being viewed as weak. If returning veterans do not seek and receive the physical, mental, and social support that they so desperately need, their reintegration into society and the civilian workforce will ultimately fail. Additionally, without treatment, their mental health conditions will worsen (Gorman et al., 2018).

**Mental health.** Kato et al. (2016) stated that over two million military members have deployed in support of Enduring Freedom and Operations Iraqi Freedom. Many returning combat veterans are dealing with mental health issues. Almost twenty percent of combat veterans have issues with mental health, approximately twenty-four percent of combat veterans experienced bouts of depression, and thirty-five percent reported having severe anxiety. They further stated that many veterans had financial concerns as well as concerns about finding employment in the civilian sector. Finding civilian employment was an issue of frustration for many combat veterans. Civilian employers were looking for employees with advanced degrees and civilian experience. Combat veterans felt that their military experience was of no use in their job hunt. Failing to find civilian employment resulted in numerous combat veterans becoming homeless.

War is one of the most stressful events a human being can experience. Combat creates an environment of uncertainty and confusion. Combatants must face the possible loss of limbs, severe injuries, and the possibility of death. In a combat zone, members of the Armed Forces must deal with separation from family members, physical demands, violence, and trauma. These extreme conditions can cause numerous psychiatric disorders. A recent study of Army combat

veterans revealed that approximately twenty percent of war veterans from Afghanistan and Iraq suffered from moderate to severe mental health issues (Kato et al., 2016).

**Suicidal ideation.** Suicide ideation and attempted suicide are an area of great concern among combat veterans returning from deployments in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation New Dawn, and Operation Iraqi Freedom. Approximately eight percent of veterans returning from combat zones have attempted suicide in the past. Additionally, up to thirty-five percent of veterans have thoughts of suicide or have a plan to commit suicide. The suicide rate of veterans who have served in a combat zone is dramatically higher than the suicide rate of their civilian counterparts (Borsari et al., 2017).

Traditionally, the suicide rate of veterans has been lower than the suicide rate of the general population of the United States. However, since the Global War on Terror has begun, the suicide rate of veterans has increased drastically. In the last ten years, the suicide rate of members of the Marine Corps and the Army has doubled. The effect of deployment to a combat zone on attempted suicides rates of veterans is a problem of great importance to the Department of Defense, the Department of Veteran Affairs, and the entire nation (Reger et al., 2015).

Hendin (2014) stated that the increased suicide rate of combat veterans is an area that requires immediate attention. Combat veterans who have a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder are four times more likely to commit suicide than combat veterans who do not suffer from PTSD. Another factor that contributed to the high rate of suicide among combat veterans was the guilt that they felt from their experiences in the war. Many combat veterans that attempted suicide felt that the effects of war played an integral part in their guilt and the increased risk of suicide.

According to Haller, Angkaw, Hendricks, and Norman (2016), post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues greatly contribute to suicidal ideation among combat veterans. They also stated that combat veterans experience a great amount of stress associated with their reintegration to society and the civilian workforce. The stress associated with their transition to civilian life greatly contributes to the high rate of suicidal ideation among members of the Armed Forces that have served in combat operations in the Middle East. Unfortunately, there is a lack of emphasis on the stress that combat veterans have encountered when transitioning to society and the civilian workforce. A recent study showed that over forty percent of returning combat veterans have encountered numerous challenges and difficulties in their transition to civilian life and work. Additionally, ninety-six percent of veterans who served in a combat zone expressed an interest in services that would assist in their transition.

The rate of suicide among combat veterans that are returning from OIF, OER, and OND is increasing daily and has become an area of great concern and priority for the Department of Veteran Affairs and the Department of Defense. Three hundred and ninety-three combat veterans participated in a recent study concerning post-deployment health, and the research showed that twelve and a half percent of the participants had experienced suicidal ideation. However, the rate of suicidal ideation increased drastically among combat veterans who experienced mental health issues; the rate increased to forty-six percent. Additionally, the Department of Veteran Affairs reported that thirty-four percent of combat veterans that seek treatment for depression or mental health reported experiencing suicidal ideation (Haller et al., 2016).

Over twenty million people attempt suicide annually. Approximately one million people commit suicide every year. In the last decade, the suicide rate of combat veterans has risen significantly. Since 2005, the suicide rate of combat veterans has doubled; this is a source of great concern for the United States government and the Department of Veteran Affairs (Levi-Belz & Zerach, 2018). There have been numerous conditions that have greatly contributed to the increased suicide rate, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, and substance abuse (Turecki & Brent, 2016).

After the attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, millions of soldiers have deployed to combat zones in Afghanistan, Iraq, and several other locations in the Middle East. Researchers believe that exposure to combat operations have contributed greatly to the increased rate of suicide among combat veterans. Combat veterans that exhibit symptoms of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder are at an increased risk of suicidal ideation. Numerous combat veterans reported feelings of shame and guilt associated with depression, PTSD, and suicidal ideation (Dillon et al., 2018).

According to Kline, Weiner, Interian, Shcherbakov, and St. Hill (2016), since the involvement of the United States in combat operations in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, and Operation New Dawn, the suicide rate of combat veterans has increased drastically. The rate has increased from ten per one hundred thousand soldiers in 2002 to over twenty-two and a half per one hundred thousand soldiers. Their research identified numerous risk factors that potentially contributed to the increased rate of suicide among combat veterans. Some of the factors were a history of suicide in the family, the stress associated with their reintegration to society and the civilian workforce, depression, alcohol abuse, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Many soldiers that served in a combat zone experienced an ethical conflict with having to kill their enemies. The ethical conflict has the potential to create a moral injury that is associated with shame and guilt and can lead to psychological difficulties, including suicidal ideation. Being the target of a violent attack increases the possibility of experiencing symptoms that are associated with post-traumatic stress disorder. However, killing another human being in a combat zone exposed the killer to an increased risk of suicidal ideation (Kline et al., 2016).

Stefanovics and Rosenheck (2019) stated that there is a great increase concerning the rate of suicide among combat veterans, particularly veterans who have symptoms associated with PTSD. Veterans who have deployed to a combat zone and were recently treated and released from an inpatient or a specialized treatment program for symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder are at an even greater risk. Stefanovics and Rosenheck found that violent behavior combined with alcohol abuse and suicidal ideation greatly contributed to attempted suicide among combat veterans.

**Traumatic brain injury.** Ahern et al. (2015) stated that the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq are the longest-sustained combat operations since the Vietnam War. The United States has sent over two million soldiers in support of combat operations, which has resulted in over six thousand and six hundred dead and over forty-eight thousand injuries. Numerous combat veterans have deployed multiple times and have been consistently at risk for injuries and death. Many returning veterans have faced numerous complex mental health issues, which have complicated their return to civilian life and work.

Approximately forty-four percent of returning combat veterans have reported numerous difficulties and challenges with their transition to civilian life and work. A significant number of military personnel that deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq have sustained traumatic brain injuries,

many of them also showing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, and substance abuse. Among combat veterans that have served in both conflicts, twenty-three percent had symptoms of traumatic brain injuries; thirty-seven percent reported depression and anxiety; twenty percent had symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, and thirty-nine percent received treatment for alcohol abuse (Ahern et al., 2015).

During 2010, approximately three hundred veterans committed suicide; over half of them had deployed in support of conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. The physical and mental health issues greatly contributed to the challenges associated with combat veteran's readjustment to the civilian workforce. During 2011, returning combat veterans that were between eighteen and twenty-four years had an unemployment rate of almost thirty-one percent as opposed to sixteen percent for their civilian counterparts (Ahern et al., 2015).

According to Combs et al. (2015), numerous members of the Armed Forces have been sent home early from deployments due to sustaining a traumatic brain injury while deployed to a combat zone in Afghanistan, Iraq, and several other locations in the Middle East. The United States government and the Department of Veterans Affairs have taken notice that traumatic brain injuries have become the “signature injury” among combat veterans serving in conflicts. A recent study showed that approximately sixteen percent of combat veterans have sustained a traumatic brain injury while serving in combat operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and across the Middle East.

Many traumatic brain injuries have been a direct result of improvised explosive devices (IED), which have become commonplace in combat zones. Combat veterans who have sustained a traumatic brain injury suffer from memory loss, cognitive and physical challenges, as well as impaired attention. Numerous studies show that cognitive challenges may resolve themselves

with three months of the injury. Research showed that approximately one-third of combat veterans returning from Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, and Operation New Dawn are suffering from both traumatic brain injuries and post-traumatic stress disorder. TBI and PTSD have proven to be a large challenge and a barrier to combat veterans securing civilian employment (Combs et al., 2015).

Traumatic brain injuries, especially concussions, are an area of significant concern for the Department of Defense and the Department of Veteran Affairs. Injuries associated with the brain can negatively impact long-term cognitive and physical abilities. Combat veterans who have sustained such injuries are dealing with a great amount of pain and are running the risk of permanent neurological damage if they suffer a second injury to the brain before fully recovering from the first traumatic brain injury. Since 2000, over three hundred and ten thousand combat veterans have received treatment for traumatic brain injuries, more than eighty percent were concussions. There has been a drastic increase in the number of concussions in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan due to the use of improvised explosive devices (IED). The prevalence and severity of traumatic brain injuries have caused Congress to develop new programs and policies to support evidence-based care for combat veterans that sustain traumatic brain injuries (Helmick et al., 2015).

Approximately fifteen percent of combat veterans suffering from traumatic brain injuries are suffering from persistent post-concussive symptoms (PCS). A symptom of PCS is disequilibrium, which causes an individual to suffer from impaired balance when walking or standing. An increased rate of traumatic brain injuries is the result of veterans deploying to combat zones in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, and Operation New Dawn for the last decade. If the traumatic brain injury is mild, then the recovery



period can be days or weeks. However, in sixteen percent of traumatic brain injuries, symptoms persist, and recovery takes a significantly longer time (Pan, Liao, Roenigk, Daly, & Walker, 2015).

According to Minton et al. (2017), estimates of people living in the United States with traumatic brain injuries (TBI) are as high as 1.7 million. Soldiers who have deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation New Dawn, and Operation Enduring Freedom are especially susceptible to suffering the effects of traumatic brain injuries. The World Health Organization (WHO) stated that traumatic brain injuries are a health crisis of global proportion.

Over the last twenty years, there have been a record number of traumatic brain injuries among members of the Armed Forces serving in numerous locations in the Middle East. During 2016, the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center reported that approximately three hundred and forty thousand members of the military had sustained traumatic brain injuries between 2000 and the third quarter of 2014. Combat soldiers who have traumatic brain injuries require continued assistance, both cognitively and physically, while reintegrating to civilian society and the civilian workforce (Minton et al., 2017).

According to Porter et al. (2018), a traumatic brain injury (TBI) disrupts the normal function of the human brain. Traumatic brain injuries can be the result of a blow, jolt, or bump to the head, and can be permanent. Unfortunately, traumatic brain injuries are common among soldiers who have deployed in support of combat operations. Approximately twenty-three percent of combatants who have served in support of Operation New Dawn (OND), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) meet the criteria and symptoms for traumatic brain injury. Many of the traumatic brain injuries experienced by combat veterans are classified as mild or a concussion, which can result in a full recovery.

Numerous returning combat veterans have experienced post concussive symptoms (PCS). Common issues associated with post concussive symptoms include dizziness, increased irritability, loss of memory, inability to concentrate, headaches, anxiety, and a wide range of cognitive, emotional, and physical issues. Combat veterans that received a diagnosis of post concussive symptoms will usually experience a decrease in their overall health, an increased and continued need for mental and physical healthcare, as well as an overall lower quality of life (Porter et al., 2018).

**Post-traumatic stress disorder.** Combat veterans who have returned from conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq have displayed a propensity to be violent towards civilians in the community. Research showed that post-traumatic stress disorder contributed to violence towards others. Many veterans who served in a combat zone have also shown symptoms of alcohol abuse. Combat veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and alcohol abuse have experienced significant challenges functioning in their local civilian communities, as well as securing civilian employment. Veterans suffering from PTSD have displayed an increase in irritability and anger, which are associated with an increase in aggression and violence (Elbogen et al., 2014).

According to Fulton et al. (2015), post-traumatic stress disorder is the direct result of a form of severe trauma. Estimates are as high as sixty percent that combat soldiers who served in Afghanistan, Iraq, and various other locations in the Middle East have significant symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. The rate of combat veterans with symptoms will increase for at least twelve months after returning from a combat deployment. Sadly, many combat veterans fail to seek treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder for fear of the stigma that is associated with mental health issues, as well the perception that their senior leadership will have of them

and their abilities to function effectively within the organization. These factors may greatly contribute to the underreporting of mental health issues among veterans who have deployed to a combat zone.

It is critically important that combat veterans with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder report their mental health issues and receive the required treatment. The huge discrepancy in the reporting of post-traumatic stress disorder among combat veterans greatly impacts the decisions that are made by policymakers concerning the allocation of mental health resources. When combat veterans fail to report their symptoms of PTSD, it can ultimately result in increased rates of medical and psychiatric comorbidity, long-term disabilities, alcohol and drug abuse, and suicides (Fulton et al., 2015).

If combat veterans do not immediately report their symptoms of PTSD and receive the required treatment, the condition tends to become chronic and will remain for the rest of the veteran's life. During 2012, the Department of Veteran Affairs reported that post-traumatic stress disorder was the third-highest disability among all veterans (Fulton et al., 2015).

Veterans who are suffering from combat-related post-traumatic stress disorder have a reduced quality of life. The United States has had a presence in the armed conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan for almost two decades. Approximately two and a half million service members have either separated or retired since the begin of war in the Middle East, with another million and a half making the transition to civilian life and employment in the next six years. Research has shown that combat veterans suffering from PTSD have symptoms such as social withdrawal and increased vigilance, which greatly contributed to challenges such as securing employment, maintaining intimate relationships, academic performance, and parenting (Vogt et al., 2017).

Many combat veterans experience a smooth transition from military service to civilian life and work. However, there is a large number who have experienced numerous challenges, difficulties, and barriers to successful reintegration. Numerous veterans returning from combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan are dealing with mental health issues such as symptoms of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, which greatly complicated their transition to society and the civilian labor force (Cederbaum, Wilcox, Sullivan, Lucas, & Schuyler, 2017).

### **Veteran Unemployment**

The United States has been in combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq for over a decade. With conflicts in the Middle East coming to an end, millions of combat veterans will be leaving military service and transitioning to civilian life and work. A large portion of veterans have encountered numerous difficulties and challenges in their transition. Of great concern is the high unemployment rate of veterans. Combat veterans have experienced significant problems in securing and maintaining employment. Human resource managers must understand the transferability of the skills, talents, and abilities of veterans, and the differences between civilian and military cultures. If hiring managers better understand these issues, it would assist organizations in utilizing the vast talents and abilities that combat veterans can contribute to their organizations (Stone & Stone, 2015).

In 2011, the unemployment rate of veterans aged eighteen to twenty-four was almost thirty percent. The unemployment rate of combat veterans from twenty-five to thirty years of age was eleven percent compared to seven percent for civilians in the same age group, from thirty-one to forty the difference was five percent for veterans and three percent for civilians, and four percent for veterans and three percent for civilians from forty-one to sixty-five. The high unemployment rate of combat veterans is due to several factors such as physical and mental

challenges, discrimination by employers, lacking the required knowledge, skills, and abilities (Stone & Stone, 2015).

**Unemployment rate of disabled veterans.** According to Sevak, Houtenville, Brucker, and O'Neill (2015), people with disabilities have encountered numerous challenges finding employment. The rate of employment of adults of working-age is thirty-three percent as opposed to people without disabilities, which is seventy-five percent. Combat veterans with disabilities have faced numerous challenges in securing employment due to numerous mental health issues, alcohol abuse, and cognitive and physical problems.

The well-being and the unemployment rate of combat veterans is an area of grave concern for the Department of Veteran Affairs and the Department of Defense. Veterans receive special hiring preferences by the government of the United States; disabled veterans receive an even higher preference. Due to the special hiring preference they receive, disabled veterans have a higher possibility of securing employment with the federal government (Winters, 2018).

Research has shown that combat veterans suffering from service-connected disabilities run a higher risk of several socioeconomic challenges, such as poverty or extremely low-income, lack of education, and difficulties securing civilian employment. In comparison to civilian counterparts without disabilities, combat veterans with disabilities had significantly higher possibilities of living under the federal poverty line. The rate for a combat veteran with one disability was thirty-nine percent, it was forty-six percent for veterans with two-service connected disabilities, and fifty percent if the combat veteran had three or more service-connected disabilities. Combat veterans with service-connected disabilities are at a considerable disadvantage in finding civilian employment, physical and mental issues contributed to their inability to secure civilian employment. The comorbidity of physical and mental issues explains

the numerous challenges and difficulties that combat veterans with disabilities encountered (Wu, Wang, & Birore, 2018).

**Why hire a veteran?** According to Shepherd, Kay, and Gray (2019), the general population of the United States views combat veterans positively and as superheroes. Approximately eighty-eight percent of Americans feel that active-duty military personnel and combat veterans have characteristics, skills, abilities, and talents that would be of great value to civilian organizations. An overwhelming number of Americans view combat veterans as noble and heroic and having the ability to take action and get things done. Veterans that have experienced combat operations are willing to respond at a moment's notice and risk their lives. Many Americans and organizations aspire to have these characteristics and traits. It would also seem obvious that many organizations across America would want employees that possess these traits.

Kirchner (2018) stated that organizations across the globe spend over fifty billion dollars annually on the development of leadership. Companies are greatly concerned about a potential shortage of leaders. Combat veterans possess the traits, skills, and experiences that can be invaluable to civilian organizations. Numerous civilian organizations across the United States have implemented veteran hiring initiatives to capitalize on the leadership abilities of combat veterans. Human resource development (HRD) professionals recognize and appreciate that leadership development is of critical importance to the overall success, productivity, and profitability of their organizations. Approximately thirty-seven percent of organizational leaders rated their leadership training programs as being effective. The global environment is consistently changing, and the global experiences in the most difficult and stressful situations that combat veterans bring to civilian organizations can be invaluable.

Historically, the Armed Forces of the United States experienced drastic troop reductions after a war is over. Since the end of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, approximately two hundred thousand combat veterans are separating or retiring from military service annually. Research showed that the knowledge, leadership skills, talents, and abilities of combat veterans would add significant value to numerous civilian organizations across the country. Veterans leaving military service have more education than their civilian counterparts and possess work traits and characteristics that employers in the civilian sector value. To attract and retain veterans, numerous employers have created initiatives and programs that seek to capitalize on the veteran talent pool (Ford, 2017).

**Transition Assistance Program.** During 1991, Congress created the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). The Department of Defense manages the Transition Assistance Program. The purpose of TAP is to assist members of the Armed Forces who are separating or retiring with their transition to civilian life. The assistance may come in the form of pursuing educational benefits to attend an institution of higher education, strengthening a resume, starting their own business, or searching for civilian employment in the public or private sector. A recent survey of two-hundred and twenty-seven combat veterans that were leaving military service and utilized the Transition Assistance Program shows that eighty-four percent of them had secured civilian employment and eighty-eight percent of them would highly recommend that fellow combat veterans utilize TAP in their search for employment in the civilian sector (Faurer et al., 2014).

During 1991, the National Defense Authorization Act created services and benefits for members of the Armed Forces that were transitioning to civilian life. The program was called the Transition Assistance Program, and it was made up of three components. The first

component provided service members with pre-separation counseling, the second component deals with transition curriculum, and the third provided training to make the transition easier and smoother for veterans. The DoD Transition Assistance Program has partnered with the United States Small Business Administration and several other partners to offer veterans an opportunity to start their own business in civilian life. The program begins with a two-day workshop, which is then followed by an online course that lasts eight weeks. The eight week-long online course is offered through Syracuse University and has been extremely successful. In comparison to their civilian counterparts, combat veterans are twice as likely to open their own business (Faurer et al., 2014).

**Translating military skills.** As combat veterans are leaving military service and have transitioned to civilian life and employment, human resource practitioners and hiring managers have struggled to translate the skills of military members into civilian language. The inability to correctly translate military skills has negatively impacted the retention of combat veterans. Recently, there has been a cooperative effort between private, federal, and state entities to mitigate the translation of military skills to civilian positions. Once hiring and HR managers understand and appreciate the distinctive skills and capabilities that combat veterans possess, they can properly align the correct person to the right job. Organizations are recognizing that hiring combat veterans can be significantly beneficial to the overall success of their respective companies (Ford, 2017).

Over two million combat veterans will be transitioning to the civilian workforce within the next ten years. The transition of combat veterans to the civilian labor force has numerous challenges and difficulties. Human resource and hiring managers do not understand the skillsets, talents, and abilities that combat veterans possess and can offer their organizations.



Additionally, human resource managers do not appreciate or understand the combat experiences of veterans. Veterans who have served in combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have developed numerous distinctive skills and capabilities in high-pressure real-world situations. Human resource practitioners and managers are not capable of evaluating and integrating the experiences, capabilities, and skills of combat veterans; this contributes to the inability of combat veterans being able to transfer their skills to civilian business cultures. It is critically important the HR managers understand that combat veterans can make very strong contributions to civilian organizations, which will greatly contribute to the success of the company (Davis & Minnis, 2017).

### **Transition and Summary of Section 1**

This qualitative research has delved deeply into the reintegration of veterans into the civilian workforce. This study examined the difficulties and challenges that combat veterans have encountered when transitioning to the civilian workforce. Veterans who have served in a combat zone feel as if they have lost their identity in the transition to the civilian workforce (McAllister et al., 2015). Transitioning combat veterans have experienced numerous misunderstandings, biases, and difficulties associated with PTSD, TBI, suicidal ideation, depression, severe anxiety, and depression (Minnis, 2017). In the next several years, over a million combat veterans will be separating or retiring from military services and will be seeking to find employment in the civilian sector (Cassidy, 2015).

In 1991, Congress created the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). The goal of TAP is to assist veterans in their reintegration into civilian life, society, and the civilian workforce. With millions of transitioning combat veterans, TAP is an area of critical importance to the United States government (Kamarck, 2017).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and better understand the obstacles that combat veterans have encountered as they have transitioned to the civilian workforce. The knowledge gained from this qualitative phenomenological study will lead to a better understanding of the obstacles and challenges encountered by combat veterans.

## **Section 2: The Project**

This section develops the role of the researcher, identifies the participants of the research study, as well as the research method and design that the researcher used for the study. Section 2 includes a description of the population and sampling, as well as data collection techniques, and the analysis of the data. The researcher discusses the process of determining the validity and reliability of the research study. Section 2 concludes with a summary of the section and an overview of the next section.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to add to the body of knowledge by exploring and understanding the difficulties and challenges that thousands of combat veterans have encountered in their reintegration into the civilian workforce. This larger problem was better understood by an in-depth study which explored the numerous barriers and challenges that combat veterans must navigate to make a successful transition to the civilian labor force in Central Florida.

### **Role of the Researcher**

When conducting qualitative research, the researcher is a human instrument in the study. The researcher must be aware of his/her biases, epistemological, and ontological views and how these factors can greatly impact the research. In qualitative studies, the researcher must consider the epistemological paradigm and reflect and understand how they know what they know (Xu & Storr, 2012). The researcher is a retired combat veteran, and put aside any and every bias that he may have had to conduct the research effectively.

The qualitative researcher had numerous responsibilities, including identifying and contacting potential participants, determining the population and sampling, as well as data

collection techniques, and the analyzation of the collected data. The researcher interviewed the research participants and administered a survey. Additionally, the researcher determined the most effective method of determining the validity and reliability of the research. It was of critical importance that the researcher took every possible measure to assure the ethical protection of research participants (McDermid, Peters, Jackson, & Daly, 2014). In the process of conducting the study, the researcher ensured that the three principles (i.e., respect for persons, beneficence, justice) from the Belmont Report concerning ethical research were put into practice.

During the interview process, the researcher was sensitive to and aware of the verbal and non-verbal signs that research participants exhibited, as they provided additional insight. The researcher created transcripts of the interviews and had them reviewed by participants to ensure that he accurately reflected the participant's experiences and thoughts. The researcher utilized NVivo 12, a software package for qualitative data analysis, to code the raw data. By utilizing coding, the researcher anticipated that themes would emerge. The researcher utilized the emerging themes to assist in building the study's narrative (Creswell, 2016).

### **Participants**

The participants of the qualitative research study were veterans who had served a minimum of one combat tour in Iraq, Afghanistan, or any location in the Middle East, and had transitioned to the civilian workforce. Some of the combat veterans have served over twenty years on active duty and have retired from military service, and others have completed less than twenty years of active duty service and have separated from the military.

The researcher utilized purposeful sampling to find combat veterans to participate in the research study. Purposeful sampling produced a better understanding, and the researcher gained deeper insights into the phenomenon. Sampling continued until saturation was reached (Patton,

2015). The combat veterans that participated in the qualitative research study have served active duty with the researcher, or the researcher has met the combat veterans at the Department of Veteran Affairs.

The researcher invited the combat veterans to participate in the study via telephone calls and email. The researcher advised participants to invite other combat veterans to participate in the study. The approach of participants inviting others to participate in the study is snowball sampling. Snowballing is a technique that can potentially grow the sample size (Frogner, Skillman, & Snyder, 2016).

The research for this study was conducted ethically, ensuring that the anonymity, welfare, and rights of the participants were protected. The participants were briefed on the significance of the research and how the process would progress. The researcher informed the participants that he would be recording the interviews for accuracy. The researcher informed the participants that while he would be recording the interviews, the name and contact information would be excluded from the interviews to protect the identity of the participants. The participants of this study are referred to as combat veteran one (CV1) through combat veteran sixteen (CV16).

Upon transcribing the interviews, the researcher sent a copy to the participants to ensure accuracy. The researcher informed the participants that they did not have to answer any question they did not feel comfortable answering, and they can expound on their answers as long as they desired. It was made very clear to the participants that the researcher desired to learn from their lived experiences and stories.

### **Research Method and Design**

The researcher utilized a phenomenological research methodology for this study. Qualitative research provided an individualized and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon

as perceived by the study participants; it made sense of why people do what they do. A qualitative research methodology allowed the researcher to understand and capture the perspectives of the participants. Several different factors greatly impacted the perspective of the research participants, such as their upbringing, personality, background, and worldview (Patton, 2015). Quantitative research would not provide the researcher with the required information to understand the experiences of combat veterans or to understand the obstacles that they encountered when transitioning to the civilian workforce.

As the researcher delved deeper and gained a better understanding as to why people do what they do, he understood that the perspective of participants is not only impacted by their individual experiences. The systems that the study participants are a part of will greatly impact their perspectives, such as family, social, community, and organizational. Utilizing a qualitative research methodology allowed the researcher the opportunity to analyze and interpret how the participants constructed and attached meaning to their lived experiences. The researcher conducted observations, interviews, and surveys to understand the experiences of the research participants (Patton, 2015).

According to Park and Park (2016), the data that were collected utilizing a qualitative research methodology were rich and provided the researcher with a detailed picture as to why people behave a certain way and their feelings about those behaviors. The qualitative research methodology was the best and most effective method to understand the feelings of research participants about a phenomenon, as well as their perceptions which have influenced their respective behavior.

When utilizing qualitative research, a researcher collects non-numerical data and codes the raw data to assist in the establishment of themes and a greater understanding of the

phenomenon (Stake, 2010). The researcher decided to utilize a qualitative research methodology to gain a better understanding of the experiences and obstacles that combat veterans encountered when transitioning to the civilian workforce. Quantitative research would have been appropriate if the researcher was seeking to quantify a problem by utilizing statistics, numerical data, and variables. Quantitative research is more structured and utilizes close-ended questions, which would not be appropriate for the purpose of this study. Mixed methods would utilize quantitative and qualitative research, which were not appropriate or effective in accomplishing the goals of the study. Qualitative research seeks to find meaning and understanding by utilizing open-ended questions, being unstructured, and gaining a better understanding of an issue or phenomenon (Creswell, 2018). Utilizing a qualitative research methodology was most effective and appropriate to accomplish the purpose of this study.

Upon determining that qualitative research was the most appropriate methodology to accomplish the purpose and goals of the study, the researcher then determined that a phenomenological research design was most appropriate and effective in better understanding the lived experiences of combat veterans, as well as the obstacles and barriers they have encountered when transitioning to the civilian workforce. Creswell (2018) stated that a phenomenological research design describes the meaning and lived experiences of a phenomenon for research participants.

A benefit of utilizing a phenomenological research design is that it creates structural and textual descriptions. A phenomenological research design answers the question of what and how of the phenomenon, as well as assimilating a description of the meaning and lived experiences of the research participants (Moustakas, 1994). The utilization of phenomenological research

design was the most appropriate, as well as greatly assisted the researcher in understanding the lived experiences of combat veterans.

According to Creswell (2018), there are several approaches to qualitative research. Phenomenology focuses on the common aspects of a lived experience of a group of people. The overall goal of phenomenology is to achieve an explanation of the nature of the phenomenon. Phenomenology is an umbrella term that encompasses several research approaches and a philosophical movement. Edmund Husserl developed the phenomenological movement; it was a radical new way of undertaking philosophy. Subsequent theorists, such as Heidegger, moved away from phenomenology being a philosophical discipline; they focused on the essences and consciousness of phenomena towards developing a hermeneutic or interpretive dimension. When a researcher applies phenomenology to qualitative research, it revolves around the phenomena, its meaning, and nature. The researcher focused on how things appear via experiences of research participants or in the researcher's consciousness, where they aim to provide a textured and rich description of the lived experience (Kafle, 2013).

According to Kafle (2013), phenomenology is a discipline that focuses on the perceptions of the research participants as it pertains to the phenomena and their lived experiences. Kafle further stated that when a researcher uses phenomenology as a qualitative research method, they must focus on the human experience, its meaning, and how the participants of the study perceive that meaning. Phenomenology describes a phenomenon; when describing the phenomena, the researcher must reduce or suspend his judgment about everyday reality by utilizing phenomenological *epoché*, commonly referred to as bracketing. Instead, the researcher must focus on the lived experience of the research participants. *Bracketing* is a term in the philosophical school of phenomenology describing the act of suspending or reducing judgment



about the natural world and instead focus on the analysis of the lived experiences of the research participants.

According to Reiter, Stewart, and Bruce (2011), phenomenology is based on the human or lived experiences of people and the meaning they perceive from the phenomenon, as well as their personal reflections concerning their experiences regarding the phenomenon. The phenomenological research design focuses on the lived experiences of people concerning a specific phenomenon and their perceptions of the phenomenon (Creswell, Hanson, & Clark, 2007).

Grbich (2007) offered one of the simplest definitions of phenomenology when he states that it is an approach to understanding hidden meanings and the essence of the lived experiences of research participants. Another noted scholar, Max van Manen (1990), stated that phenomenology is the most appropriate method to explore a phenomenon of pedagogical significance. Phenomenology is a response to how people orient to the lived experiences of others, as well as questioning the way others experience the world.

The Western view of phenomenology is broken down into three distinctive and major headings: transcendental, existential, and hermeneutical. Transcendental is the original phenomenology, as developed by Edmund Husserl. This version of phenomenology adheres to the thought that experience is transcended to discover the reality. Researchers must suspend their biases and prejudices in an attempt to get to the essence or core of a phenomenon through a state of total consciousness (Kafle, 2013).

According to Kafle (2013), existential phenomenology highlights in the subjective human experience. Existential phenomenology relates to the actions and experiences of individuals and that it reflects the values, purposes, intentions of individuals. Through existential

phenomenology, one can obtain a deeper understanding of the perspectives and experiences of others by focusing on the meaning that we create in our lives, as well as the decisions that people make that reflect our actions and understanding.

Hermeneutic phenomenology is concerned with the human experience or real-life experience as lived by individuals. It focuses on revealing trivial details and aspects in the experiences of individuals that others may take for granted in daily life. The ultimate goal of hermeneutic phenomenology is to create meaning and a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of individuals (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991). Hermeneutic phenomenology identifies the experience of a phenomenon, seeks to obtain a deeper understanding of the meaning of the phenomenon or experience; this happens by a layered and deeper reflection and the use of rich and thick descriptive language (Smith, 1997).

According to Langdridge (2007), hermeneutic phenomenology outlines that experiences can be understood best by the stories that are told by those that had the experiences. To best understand the lived experiences of research participants, one must deeply explore his or her stories and utilize a method to interpret their perspectives.

The most appropriate and effective design of phenomenology to accomplish the purpose of this research and to answer the research questions of this study was hermeneutic phenomenology. Hermeneutic phenomenology requires that the researcher make a deep connection and establish a great amount of trust with the participants of the study. The researcher must immerse him or herself in deep and meaningful conversations with the research participants. To effectively utilize the hermeneutic phenomenological approach, the researcher must be able to understand and appreciate the feelings, thoughts, and experiences of the combat veterans. The researcher must go beyond analyzing the dialogue, verbal, and non-verbal cues of

the participants, he must become a part of the lived experiences and the meaning of those experiences as perceived by the combat veterans, this will assist the researcher in identifying emerging themes. The utilization of a hermeneutic phenomenological design will allow the researcher the opportunity to clarify and better understand the meaning of the lived experiences of the combat veterans in our daily world (van Manen, 1990).

The researcher gathered demographic data from the combat veterans utilizing a survey tool. A researcher in phenomenological research seeks a complete and thorough description of the lived experiences of research participants; the most effective method to accomplish this goal is an in-depth face-to-face interview that will last approximately an hour (Englander, 2012).

Approximately a week before the actual interview, the researcher scheduled a preliminary meeting with each combat veteran. The purpose of the preliminary meeting was to establish rapport and trust with the participants, review ethical and privacy considerations, and complete their consent forms (Englander, 2012). The researcher also informed participants that they were not required to answer any question that made them feel uncomfortable and gave them a general idea of the purpose of the study and the research questions that the researcher sought to answer. The data that the researcher collected either supported or did not support the hypothesis that the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs did not adequately prepare the combat veterans for their transition to the civilian workforce.

### **Population and Sampling**

According to Creswell (2016), selecting appropriate participants of a research study plays a critical part in the attainment of the goals and accomplishing the purpose of the research, as well as the overall success of the study. For this study, the researcher used a qualitative method and a phenomenological design. When utilizing a qualitative research methodology, the

researcher desired to have a small group of research participants that have experienced a particular phenomenon in a specific setting (Yin, 2014).

For this qualitative research study, the sample population was selected from combat veterans that are currently living in the Central Florida area. To accomplish the goals and purpose of this study, research participants must have met the following eligibility criteria: 1) have served in the Armed Forces of the United States, 2) have deployed to a combat zone in Afghanistan, Iraq, or any location in the Middle East, 3) have served after the 11<sup>th</sup> of September, 2001, 4) have separated or retired from the military, and 5) transitioned to the civilian workforce.

The researcher identified twenty-two candidates that met all of the criteria to participate in the research study. The researcher has met the participants of the research study at the Department of Veteran Affairs, or they have served on active duty, and in some cases, in a combat zone with the researcher. Approximately fifty percent of the research participants have completed over twenty years of service in the military and have retired, and the remaining fifty percent of the participants have completed their enlistment obligation and separated from the military.

The researcher reached out to the candidates via email and phone calls and informed them of the purpose of the research study, and that participation is voluntary, and they could leave the research study at any time if they desired to do so. Research candidates were highly encouraged to ask any questions that they may have about the research. The researcher informed the candidates that the research will be done ethically, with their privacy and protection being of the utmost importance. The chosen population allowed the researcher the opportunity to better understand the lived experiences of combat veterans transitioning from military service to the

civilian workforce, as well as the barriers and challenges that they have encountered in their transition.

There are two basic types of sampling methods: non-probability and probability. The most common form of probability sampling is random sampling, which allows the researcher the opportunity to make generalizations and would not be appropriate to utilize with a qualitative phenomenological study. When utilizing probability sampling, the researcher can calculate the odds of finding research participants. The second option is non-probability sampling, which is the preferred choice for qualitative studies. Non-probability sampling is time and cost-effective and is appropriate when utilizing a small sample population (Merriam, 2009). The researcher utilized non-probability sampling.

There are several different types of non-probability sampling, such as haphazard, expert, quota, expert, and purposive sampling. For this qualitative phenomenological study, the researcher utilized purposive sampling to find participants for the research study. The utilization of purposeful sampling resulted in a better understanding, allowing the researcher to gain a significantly deeper insight into the phenomenon. Sampling continued until saturation occurred (Patton, 2015).

When a researcher utilizes a qualitative methodology, he or she must select the most effective type of sampling for their respective research study. When utilizing purposive sampling in a qualitative research study, the researcher must intentionally select participants that represent explicit conditions or traits (Porter, 1999). According to Zhengdong (2011), *sample framing* refers to the list or sampling range of sampling possibilities. Sample framing deals with the methods and procedures utilized by the researcher to approach and differentiate the elements of the targeted sample population.

Within a sampling frame, the targeted population is a defined population with easily identifiable elements, traits, or characteristics. A sampling frame consists of all of the possible participants of the population; it is a complete listing of everyone the researcher desires to study (Taherdoost, 2016). The population of this qualitative phenomenological research study was combat veterans, and the sampling frame was combat veterans one through combat veteran fifteen.

Morse (2000) stated that when a researcher is conducting a phenomenological study, they will conduct in-depth interviews and will collect a large amount of rich and descriptive data. For this reason, a phenomenological study does not require a large number of research participants. For phenomenological studies to be effective, there must be six to ten participants in the research study. Phenomenological research studies focus on the lived experiences of a small group of research participants. Phenomenological research requires a small participant size (Creswell, 2003).

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore and understand the difficulties and challenges that thousands of combat veterans in Central Florida encountered in their transition from military service to the civilian workforce. The researcher conducted an in-depth study that explored the numerous challenges and barriers that combat veterans must navigate to reintegrate into the civilian labor force in Central Florida.

The selected participants share traits and characteristics that are critical to the overall success of this research study. All of the selected participants have deployed to a combat zone at least one time, and several have had multiple deployments. Six of the participants have served over twenty years, and nine have separated from military service after completing their military service obligation, all have served in the Armed Forces after the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2001. After

leaving military service, all of the research participants have chosen Central Florida as their new home and have encountered numerous difficulties, obstacles, and challenges in their transition to the civilian workforce. The participants and the sample size were not selected to be a representation of the entire population of combat veterans, rather understand and appreciate the specific lived experiences of combat veterans transitioning to the civilian workforce in Central Florida.

### **Data Collection**

The researcher began the collection of data after receiving permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the approval of his Defense Proposal. The researcher collected data utilizing a survey, in-depth interviews, and veteran focus group observation. By utilizing three different data collection methods, the researcher ensured triangulation and the collection of data-rich information (Yin, 2011).

**Instrument.** In qualitative research, the researcher is the human instrument of the study. The qualitative researcher considered the epistemological paradigm and reflected on understanding how he knows what he does know. Science theory or epistemology focuses on the effort of an individual to gain knowledge (Xu & Storr, 2012). In unstructured or semi-structured qualitative research interviews, the researcher is the primary instrument of the research and must understand the potential that he possesses to impact the collection of the data. When a qualitative researcher is conducting an in-depth interview, he or she has a social interaction with the research participant. The researcher must understand that the attitude, interview style, and ability to connect with the research participant will have a large impact on the quality of the data that is collected (Pezalla, Pettigrew, & Miller-Day, 2012).

**Interview guide.** According to Boyce and Neale (2006), an effective interview guide lists questions that will be asked and explored during an in-depth interview. The interview guide should have a maximum of fifteen questions that guides the researcher when interviewing the research participants. When conducting the interview, the researcher must utilize open-ended questions, and he or she must keep an open mind to the answers they receive (Tasker & Cisneroz, 2019).

The researcher created the interview guide after conducting an exhaustive literature review, researching numerous studies about conducting in-depth face to face interviews, semi-structured interviews, and asking open-ended questions. The interview guide and questions were created to allow the researcher the opportunity to ask questions that addressed the four research questions and the problems, issues, and barriers that combat veterans have encountered when transitioning to the civilian workforce. The following are the research questions and the interview questions:

**RQ<sub>1</sub>** - What were the lived experiences of combat veterans as they transitioned from military service to civilian employment?

*Interview Question 1 - How was your transition from active military service to the civilian workforce?*

*Interview Question 2 – Have you been adequately prepared to reintegrate into civilian life and workforce?*

**RQ<sub>2</sub>** - What were the challenges and difficulties that combat veterans experienced when seeking civilian employment?

*Interview Question 3 - Have you suffered any physical distress associated with your transition to the civilian workforce?*



*Interview Question 4 - Have you experienced any emotional trauma while reintegrating into the civilian labor force?*

*Interview Question 5 - What frustrations have you experienced in your transition from the military to civilian employment?*

*Interview Question 6 - What if any, coping strategies and support are available to assist you in dealing with the challenges and frustrations you have encountered?*

**RQ<sub>3</sub>** - What are the successes that combat veterans have experienced in transitioning to the civilian workforce?

*Interview Question 7 - Has your transition to the civilian workforce been successful? If so, how?*

*Interview Question 8 - Did the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) contribute to your successful transition to civilian employment?*

**RQ<sub>4</sub>** - What perceptions do human resource managers have about combat veterans and their transferable skills?

*Interview Question 9 – Have human resource managers been able to understand and translate your military skills to be utilized in civilian employment?*

*Interview Question 10 – Do human resource managers value and appreciate your talents and skills, as well as your ability to function in the most difficult, demanding, and stressful situations?*

According to Moustakas (1994), the researcher should ask interview questions that are broad in context, which will allow the researcher the opportunity to ask additional probing questions to reach a deeper meaning with respect to the lived experiences of the participants.

The interview guide (Appendix A) consisted of an introductory statement. The researcher thanked the participants for their time and for sharing their experiences, and also informed the participants of the purpose of the research. The interviews did not begin until the participants were relaxed and felt comfortable about the process, and the researcher satisfactorily answered any questions they may have had. The interview guide was semistructured and included open-ended questions; this allowed the researcher to ask further probing follow-up questions to understand the lived experiences of the combat veterans (Yin, 2011).

After answering any questions, the researcher moved to research and interview questions. The interview questions were designed to collect rich data; they were not leading and were participant-oriented. The goal of the open-ended questions was to generate spontaneous and in-depth replies, which led to emerging themes (Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson, & Kangasniemi, 2016).

As the interview ended, the researcher thanked the participants for their time and participation in the study. The researcher assured the participants that their replies were confidential and that the data would be securely stored. The researcher ensured that the participants did not have any additional questions, and he informed them that they would receive a copy of the interview transcript for their review to ensure accuracy.

**Data collection techniques.** Demographic data were collected from the participants during our face-to-face interviews. The researcher collected data from the participants utilizing face-to-face interviews. The researcher desired to gain a better understanding and a deeper insight into the barriers and challenges that combat veterans experienced when transitioning to the civilian labor force. To accomplish this goal, the researcher felt that in-depth interviews would be the most appropriate method because they focused on the stories and the lived experiences of combat veterans (van Manen, 1990). When utilizing in-depth interviews, there

can be an additional benefit of an interview question leading to unplanned, unscripted, and meaningful and insightful conversations that the researcher would not be able to collect utilizing a more formal collection method (Creswell, 2007).

The researcher had built a good working relationship and has established trust with the participants, which is critical to the overall success of the research study. The establishment of rapport and trust with the research participants allowed them to feel comfortable and more willing to share their stories and lived experiences (Baxter & Jack, 2008). According to Creswell (2018), qualitative observation transpires when a researcher takes field notes concerning the actions and behavior of research participants. The researcher had the opportunity to observe how the combat veterans interacted with one another and other individuals in a veteran focus group. The researcher took descriptive and reflective notes about the behavior, interactions, and actions of the combat veterans.

To ensure that the researcher collected the data in the most accurate way possible, he utilized field notes to record non-verbal data, signals, and cues from the research participants during the interviews. Field notes are an excellent method to document data from participant interviews in qualitative research. When conducting qualitative research, researchers should take field notes because it adds a critical component of rigor to qualitative research and provides rich context and enhances data (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018).

To further ensure that data was accurately collected, recorded, and transcribed, in addition to taking field notes, the researcher also recorded the interviews (with the permission of the research participants). According to Skukauskaite (2012), recording the interviews serves to ensure that the researcher can provide his undivided attention to the participant's non-verbal cues, facial expressions, body language, as well as their words. It would be easy for the researcher to

miss something that the participant said, by recording the interviews, the researcher ensures that he accurately collected and transcribed the entirety of the interview. An additional benefit of recording interviews is the ability to see non-verbal cues and facial expressions of research participants, as well as picking up on stress, pitch, and intonation.

**Data organization techniques.** When utilizing the qualitative research methodology, the research creates a vast amount of data that the researcher must collect, track, organize, store, and analyze (Demchenko, Zhao, Grosso, Wibisono, & De Laat, 2012). To keep track of emerging themes, the researcher utilized research and reflective journals. To code the raw data that was collected, the researcher used a software package for qualitative data analysis called NVivo 12. The researcher anticipated that emerging themes would become evident. According to Creswell (2016), researchers can use emerging themes when building their narrative about the phenomenon (Creswell, 2016).

The researcher stored collected data on an external hard drive that is password protected and locked in a safe which utilizes biometric authentication. Information on research participants is confidential; the researcher referred to them by a pseudonym. Participants received a transcript of their interview to ensure accuracy and validity. The researcher will destroy documents, emails, recordings, and any other collected data after the appropriate retention period.

### **Data Analysis**

After data were collected, the researcher organized the data and began the process of analyzing the data. The data that were collected was transformed into findings. The results of the interviews were analyzed and entered into NVivo 12 to identify emerging themes (Patton,

2015). The researcher transcribed the interviews and typed the field notes. The transcription of the data and reviewing the field notes assisted the researcher in identifying emerging themes.

When conducting data analysis, researchers must search for emerging themes from the data that is collected. Ultimately, the quality of the data analyzation will be dependent upon the data that the researcher collected, how the data is collected, sorted, and categorized. The researcher must interpret the data and emerging themes to find meaning and understand the lived experiences of the research participants (Stake, 2010).

The researcher conducted one-on-one in-depth interviews in a private and quiet setting. The researcher guided the interviews by asking by open-ended questions. The researcher was flexible and asked follow-up questions to dig deeper and extend his understanding of the lived experiences of the combat veterans. Every attempt was made to conduct all interviews in the same location to ensure consistency of the interview process.

In qualitative research during observations, the researcher took field notes concerning the actions and behavior of research participants (Creswell, 2018). During observations, the researcher was a non-participant and took reflexive and descriptive notes. Additionally, the researcher also maintained reflective journals to record his understanding and perspective of the phenomenon, as well as what he has learned about the challenges that combat veterans have encountered during their transition to the civilian workforce.

The analysis of data during qualitative research is a challenging and complex process in which researchers analyze the massive amount of data they have amassed during the collection process of the research study. After collecting all of the data during the research study, the researcher must determine what to do with the data; this can become a paralyzing moment for the researcher. Researchers must ensure that they do not rely too heavily upon qualitative software,

such as NVivo. Qualitative researchers can easily become overwhelmed by the large amount of data they have collected, and they immediately focus exclusively on entering the data into qualitative software to identify emerging themes (Dierckx de Casterlé, Gastmans, Bryon, & Denier, 2012).

The researcher must also ensure that he or she does not lose the uniqueness of each respective individual interview. During the analyzation of data, researchers must respect and protect the lived experiences of research participants. Researchers segment the collected data during the analyzation process, which can potentially limit their understanding of the research participants' perspective, which can result in the researcher not understanding and accurately describing the lived experiences of research participants in their full richness. The researcher must ensure that he or she views the data analysis process as a team process instead of an individual process. Failing to view it as a team process can result in frustration to the researcher and not having sufficient depth in the analysis (Dierckx de Casterlé et al., 2012).

The researcher ensured that the integrity of the lived experiences of the research participants was accurately collected, recorded, organized, sorted, analyzed, coded, and preserved. According to Patton (2015), researchers should organize collected data into emerging and meaningful themes. Researchers should examine phrases that are used frequently by research participants to identify emerging themes (Moustakas, 1994). By properly analyzing the collected data, the researcher was be able to accomplish the purpose of this study.

### **Reliability and Validity**

Qualitative research tends to be subjective; for this reason, the researcher must maintain validity and reliability during the entire research process. Maintaining validity and reliability enhances the strength and success of the research study. The researcher must consistently strive

to eliminate their own biases and any errors to ensure the reliability of the study. The researcher utilized several strategies to increase the reliability and validity of the research study, such as data triangulation, feedback from research participants, purposive sampling, consistency in the location of the interviews, audio recording and transcription of each interview, NVivo for the establishment of themes and coding, member checking to ensure the accuracy of the interview, as well as ensuring that the researcher interpreted the lived experiences of the combat veterans correctly, and reflexive journaling.

**Reliability.** Reliability refers to the degree that a research method would produce a consistent and stable result even if other researchers conducted repeated trials. To ensure reliability in a research study, the researcher must consistently utilize the same methods and tools to collect and analyze data. To ensure the reliability of the study, the researcher utilized the questions in the interview guide and conducted each interview in the same quiet and private location. Qualitative researchers strive to reach saturation to validate the reliability of the outcome of the research study (Yin, 2018). Each interview was audio-recorded, transcribed, and was given to each participant for review to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the data, as well as confirming that the researcher correctly interpreted the lived experiences of the combat veterans. The combat veterans confirmed that the transcribed interview was accurate, and the researcher had correctly interpreted their lived experiences.

The researcher continued the research until saturation was reached to ensure the credibility and reliability of the research study. The credibility of the study deals with how believable the study is, as well as its trustworthiness. The point of saturation in qualitative research refers to the moment during the collection and analysis of data where the researcher observes recurring themes; no new data or themes will be observed by continuing to collect and

analyze data. When a researcher has collected and analyzed sufficient data to answer the research questions, he has reached saturation (Varpio, Ajjawi, Monrouxe, O'Brien, & Rees, 2017).

According to Merriam (2009), qualitative researchers will encounter numerous realities during their research study; the reality of each combat veteran was based on their personal interactions and perceptions. The reliability of the collected data was based on the feedback of the combat veterans that are seeking to reintegrate into the civilian workforce.

**Validity.** In qualitative research, validity refers to the research study being meaningful, relevant, justifiable, and logical. Validity is rooted in the positivist tradition, objectivity, evidence, fact, reason, deduction, and truth. In a qualitative research study, validity is concerned with the trustfulness, trustworthiness, and accuracy of scientific research findings in a study (Cypress, 2017).

Face and content validity are critically important when developing instruments for data collection in qualitative research. Face validity does not deal with what the test should truly measure, but what it appears or seems to measure. Face validity deals with the test appearing valid to the participants in the research study and any other potential observers. Content validity refers to experts evaluating if test items truly assess the content that is desired to be measured. Content validity is commonly used in vocational and academic environments, especially if an item must test the required knowledge for a respective skill or topic (Connell et al., 2018).

According to Cypress (2017), qualitative researchers erroneously wait until they have completed their research study to consider reliability and validity. Researchers must consider reliability and validity before conducting their study, as they design their study, and as they analyze their results. To ensure the achievement of reliability and validity, researchers must



incorporate several strategies into their entire research process versus at the end of the research study; this will ensure that the researcher has rigor in the entire research process. To ensure the reliability and validity of a qualitative phenomenological research study, the researcher must account for four different aspects of trustworthiness or rigor; they are credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability.

**Credibility.** According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2012), credibility refers to the accuracy of the results of the research study. The researcher utilized several different strategies to ensure the credibility of the research study, such as continuous engagement and observation in the field, the triangulation of data collection sources, member checking, the researcher will transcribe the data collected from the interviews, and shared the data and his interpretation of the data with the research participants to ensure the accuracy and credibility of the research study. Triangulation refers to a researcher utilizing several methods of data sources to ensure the credibility and validity of the research study (Creswell, 2018). The researcher also maintained a reflexive journal which showed any biases and preconceptions that the researcher may have had before and during the research study, and which may have negatively impacted the research study findings (Morse, 2015).

The utilization of computer software, such as NVivo, assists qualitative researchers that are working with extremely rich text-based information and data. The utilization of NVivo greatly supports qualitative researchers during the analyzation of their data and with the coding process. NVivo simplifies the process of organizing, storing, and retrieving stored data. The usage of NVivo or similar computer software packages strengthens the replicability and credibility of the research study (Sinkovics, Penz, & Ghauri, 2008). The researcher utilized

NVivo (12<sup>th</sup> edition) to assist in the organization, storage, and retrieval of data, as well as coding the emerging themes, which greatly contributed to the credibility of the research study.

**Transferability.** According to Morse (2015), transferability refers to the generalizability or external validity of a research study. A qualitative researcher must utilize thick and rich descriptive text to ensure that another researcher would have the capability to transfer the findings of the research study to other individuals in a similar context. Houghton, Casey, Shaw, and Murphy (2013) stated that transferability deals with the ability of the current research findings being transferred to a similar situation or context while ensuring the preservation of the original meanings and findings.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that the findings of the original research study are applicable in a different context. They further stated that it is not the responsibility of the researcher to provide an index of transferability, it is his or her responsibility to provide a database that allows others to make a judgment about the transferability of the research findings. According to Anney (2014), a qualitative researcher must provide a detailed description of the selection method used to recruit potential participants and utilize purposive sampling to ensure the transferability of the research findings.

The researcher presented a rich, extensive, and thick descriptive narrative of every process in the research study; this will allow other researchers to determine if the data from this research study is transferable or not. The researcher also applied transferability to the research study by ensuring that all of the research participants met the required criteria to be a part of the study. The researcher also used purposive sampling to ensure the achievement of transferability in the study.

**Dependability and confirmability.** According to Houghton et al. (2013), dependability and confirmability are linked closely to one another, and the process to establish both is similar. Many qualitative researchers consider dependability to be equivalent to reliability, and, similarly, dependability is concerned with how stable the data is (Sinkovics et al., 2008).

Confirmability is concerned with how neutral and accurate the data is. A qualitative researcher can establish dependability and confirmability by utilizing an auditing process. Qualitative researchers can accomplish a rigorous audit trail by maintaining an outline of the decisions that they have made throughout the entire research process; these decisions show the rationale for the interpretive and methodological decisions of the qualitative researcher (Houghton et al., 2013).

Future readers of the research study do not have to share the interpretation of the researcher. However, they should be capable of discerning how the researcher arrived at his decisions. The researcher maintained an audit trail by keeping detailed notes that relate to the contextual background of the data, as well as the rationale and impetus for his decisions. The qualitative researcher can ensure the dependability, confirmability, and rigor of the research and data by maintaining a detailed account of decisions made during the research process; the researcher can accomplish this by utilizing a software package like NVivo (Houghton et al., 2013).

The researcher utilized NVivo to ensure the dependability and confirmability of the research study; by using NVivo the researcher has an audit trail of his rationale for making key decisions, as well as the potential consequences of those decisions. The researcher also utilized thick and rich descriptions of the in-depth interviews that was transcribed and shared with the research participants to ensure dependability and confirmability. The researcher confirmed that

his interpretation of the lived experiences of the participants was accurately interpreted by maintaining reflexive notes and utilizing member checking.

Triangulation is a process that is used by qualitative researchers to increase the validity and credibility of their research. The credibility of the study deals with how believable the study is, as well as its trustworthiness. Triangulation serves to validate the data collected by the researcher and deepens the understanding that the researcher will have about the lived experiences of the combat veterans. Triangulation enhances the credibility and rigor of the findings of the research study (Varpio et al., 2017). Triangulation verifies commonalities of the viewpoints, problems, and barriers of the research participants that are in similar situations, seeking to transition from military service to the civilian labor force. The researcher accomplished triangulation by having the research participants complete a survey, conducting an in-depth, face-to-face interview with each participant, and observing the combat veterans in a focus group. Other qualitative researchers will be able to replicate this research study and achieve similar results with other combat veterans.

### **Transition and Summary of Section 2**

Section 2 of this qualitative phenomenological research study explained the role of the researcher, participants, and the research method and design that were used by the researcher. For this qualitative phenomenological research study, the researcher used purposive sampling to find potential candidates for the study. Once the researcher received approval of the IRB package, he invited twenty-two potential candidates to participate in the study. In Section 2, the researcher also discussed the instruments that will be utilized for data collection, as well as the collection and processing techniques. After the researcher has collected the data, he explained

how the data were analyzed and the steps that were taken to ensure the reliability and validity of the study.

Section 3 provides a brief overview of why and how this qualitative phenomenological research study was done, review the issues that were addressed, and presented a brief summary of the findings. The researcher organized the collected data into themes and explained and provided a detailed discussion about each theme. The researcher addressed saturation and triangulation and included illustrative quotes from the research participants to support the themes that have emerged. In section three, the researcher also provided a detailed discussion of how the findings of the research study are applicable to the professional practice of business. Section 3 also includes recommendations for action, recommendations for further study, and reflections that the researcher has experienced with the research process.

### **Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change**

Section 3 provides a brief overview of why and how this qualitative phenomenological research study was done, reviews the issues that were addressed, and presents a brief summary of the findings. The researcher organized the collected data into themes and explained and provided a detailed discussion about each theme. The researcher addresses saturation and triangulation and included illustrative quotes from the research participants to support the themes that had emerged.

In Section 3, the researcher also provides a detailed discussion of how the findings of the research study applied to the professional practice of business and the implication of the findings in relation to a biblical worldview. Section 3 also includes recommendations for action, recommendations for further study, and reflections that the researcher has experienced with the research process.

#### **Overview of the Study**

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the challenges and barriers that combat veterans have encountered when transitioning to society and the civilian workforce in Central Florida which has resulted in the inability of civilian companies being able to capitalize on the vast leadership and managerial skills, knowledge, abilities, and talents of combat veterans. According to Davis and Minnis (2017), combat veterans encounter various challenges in their transition from service on active duty to the civilian labor force. Stern (2017) stated that millions of combat veterans would be transitioning to the civilian workforce by 2020, with approximately fifty percent of them having identified finding civilian employment as their single biggest challenge.

A recent survey regarding the transition of combat veterans to the civilian workforce, which included approximately eight thousand and five hundred veterans, found that twenty-seven of the combat veterans were unemployed with little to no hope of procuring employment in the civilian labor force (Corri et al., 2015). According to McAllister et al. (2015), approximately forty-five percent of combat veterans that have reintegrated into the civilian workforce have dealt with numerous barriers, difficulties, and challenges associated with their transition.

Finding civilian employment is even more difficult for a large number of combat veterans that are dealing with invisible injuries such as PTSD, TBI, and mental health issues. In the civilian sector, there is a significant concern about the shortage of effective leadership. The lack of effective leadership in civilian organizations has become such a critical issue that civilian organizations have invested approximately fifty billion dollars annually to develop leadership capabilities in their current employees. Numerous civilian organizations have recognized the talents, skills, and abilities that combat veterans can offer their respective companies and have implemented "veteran hiring" policies (Kirchner, 2018).

Larson and Norman (2014) stated that approximately forty-four percent of combat veterans had experienced numerous difficulties and challenges in their transition to the civilian workforce. These challenges and difficulties have severely and negatively impacted the quality of life of combat veterans. Additionally, they have also negatively impacted every facet of their lives, including workplace relationships, familial relationships, as well as relationships in their local communities, and the ability of the combat veterans to procure and maintain civilian employment. All of the factors, as mentioned above, have contributed significantly to extremely

high levels of stress, as well as issues dealing with the management of anger, being productive in society and the civilian workplace, and caring for themselves.

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to add to the body of knowledge by exploring and understanding the difficulties and challenges that thousands of combat veterans have encountered in their reintegration into the civilian workforce. This researcher used in-depth interviews, the opportunity to observe combat veterans in a focus group, reflexive notes, and a journal from the first day of his journey to assist in finding the answers to the following research questions:

- 1) What were the lived experiences of combat veterans as they transitioned from military service to civilian employment?
- 2) What were the challenges and difficulties that combat veterans experienced when seeking civilian employment?
- 3) What are the successes that combat veterans have experienced in transitioning to the civilian workforce?
- 4) What perceptions do human resource managers have about combat veterans and their transferable skills?

To get the answers to the above-listed research questions, the researcher created ten open-ended questions as shown in Appendix A for each of the participants of this research study to answer.

- 1 - How was your transition from active military service to the civilian workforce?
- 2 – Have you been adequately prepared to reintegrate into civilian life and workforce?
- 3 - Have you suffered any physical distress associated with your transition to the civilian workforce?



- 4 - Have you experienced any emotional trauma while reintegrating into the civilian labor force?
- 5 - What frustrations have you experienced in your transition from the military to civilian employment?
- 6 - What if any, coping strategies and support are available to assist you in dealing with the challenges and frustrations you have encountered?
- 7 - Has your transition to the civilian workforce been successful? If so, how?
- 8 - Did the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) contribute to your successful transition to civilian employment?
- 9 – Have human resource managers been able to understand and translate your military skills to be utilized in civilian employment?
- 10 – Do human resource managers value and appreciate your talents and skills, as well as your ability to function in the most difficult, demanding, and stressful situations?

The researcher invited twenty-two combat veterans that are currently living and working in Central Florida to participate in the research study, and all twenty-two accepted the invitation. To achieve the goals and purpose of this research study, the research participants must have met the following criteria: 1) have served in any branch of the Armed Forces of the United States, 2) have deployed to a minimum of one time to a combat zone in Afghanistan, Iraq, or any location in the Middle East, 3) have served on active duty on or after the 11<sup>th</sup> of September, 2001, 4) have separated or retired from the military, and 5) transitioned to the civilian workforce. Six of the research participants have completed over twenty years of active duty in the military or have been medically retired. The other nine of the research participants have completed their full term of service or their enlistment obligation and have separated from the military.

As previously stated, the researcher invited a total of twenty-two combat veterans to participate in the research study, and they all accepted. However, the researcher continued to conduct the scheduled interviews until the point of saturation was reached. According to Fusch and Ness (2015), if a researcher fails to reach data saturation it will greatly impact the quality and validity of the research study.

The researcher must determine when data saturation has been reached. Data saturation is attained quicker in a small research study versus a more extensive research study. A researcher cannot assume that he has reached data saturation because he has exhausted all of his resources. According to Fusch and Ness (2015), data saturation is not concerned with the number of interviews conducted; it is concerned with the depth of data that the researcher has collected. A qualitative researcher has reached the point of data saturation when they can no longer collect any new data or any new themes.

After receiving approval to begin the research study from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researcher contacted the twenty-two combat veterans that had agreed to be a part of the research study and scheduled appointments to meet and conduct the interviews. The researcher scheduled the twenty-two interviews at the convenience of each of the research participants.

The research participants were reminded that their participation was entirely voluntary, and they did not need to answer any question that they did not feel comfortable answering. They were also reminded that they could terminate the interview at any point. The researcher assured the research participants that the research would be conducted ethically. The researcher further ensured the research participants that their welfare, rights, as well as their anonymity, were of the utmost importance. Additionally, the researcher ensured that the three principles from the

Belmont Report (i.e., beneficence, justice, respect for persons) were a part of every facet of the research study.

The researcher confirmed that the research participants were still in agreement concerning recording the interviews to ensure accuracy. Once the participants confirmed that they were still in agreement, the researcher assured them that their respective names and contact information would be excluded from the interviews in order to protect their identities. For this research study, the research participants will be referred to as combat veteran (CV) one through fifteen.

Appendix B shows the demographic questions that the researcher asked each of the research participants. Table 1 shows the demographic information of the research participants to include, their age, when they entered their respective branch of the Armed Forces, their current age, which of the five branches of the Armed Forces each combat veteran served in, the rank or grade each combat veteran had attained when they separated or retired from the military, the number of deployments that each combat veteran served in a combat zone while on active duty, the race of each combat veteran, the educational level that each combat veteran had attained when they separated or retired from the military, the type of separation or retirement that each combat veteran received (i.e., whether they separated due to their completion of service or was it a forced separation due to medical conditions), whether or not they are receiving disability from the Department of Veteran Affairs, and the type of disability they are receiving (cognitive, physical, or psychological). The researcher utilized the abbreviations CV1 through CV15 to identify the combat veterans.

Table 1

*Research Participants' Demographic Information*

	Enlistment Age	Current Age	Branch	Rank	Number of Deployments	Race	Educ Level	Sep	VA Disability	Type of Disability
CV1	17	25	MC	E4	1	C	HS	Comp	No	NA
CV2	23	33	AF	O3	1	H	Masters	Comp	No	NA
CV3	17	42	MC	E5	2	C	Some	Comp	Yes	Phy
CV4	18	51	Army	E7	4	C	AA	Forced	Yes	Cog
CV5	18	32	Army	E4	2	C	HS	Forced	Yes	Phy
CV6	17	27	Army	E4	1	AA	HS	Forced	Yes	Phy
CV7	20	49	Army	E6	3	AA	AA	Comp	Yes	Cog
CV8	17	41	Army	E6	12	C	BS	Forced	Yes	Cog
CV9	18	33	Navy	E5	3	C	AA	Forced	Yes	Cog
CV10	22	43	AF	O4	6	H	BS	Comp	No	NA
CV11	18	29	Army	E4	2	C	HS	Comp	No	NA
CV12	18	44	MC	E6	12	AA	HS	Forced	Yes	Phy
CV13	20	39	Army	E6	4	H	AA	Forced	Yes	Cog
CV14	25	52	Navy	E7	5	H	Some	Comp	Yes	Cog
CV15	18	47	AF	E7	3	C	Some	Forced	Yes	Cog

A total of four combat veterans joined the military at the age of seventeen, six joined at the age of eighteen, two combat veterans joined at the age of twenty, one joined at the age of twenty-two, one at the age of twenty-three, and one veteran joined the military at the age of twenty-five. Seven of the combat veterans served in the Army, two in the Navy, three in the Air

Force, and three in the Marine Corps. Thirteen of the research participants were enlisted members, and two were officers. The number of combat deployments ranged from one to twelve.

Eight of the combat veterans were Caucasian, three were African American, and four were Hispanic. Four of the combat veterans had earned their high school diploma at their time of separation or retirement from the military, three had some college credits, four had earned their Associate's Degree, two had attained their Bachelor's degree, one had earned his Master's degree, and one had earned his doctoral degree.

Eight of the combat veterans separated or retired because they had completed their service obligation or retired from military service, seven of the combat veterans mandatorily had to separate from military service or were medically retired based on injuries that they had received during their deployments. Eleven of the combat veterans qualified for and were receiving disability compensation from the Department of Veteran Affairs, and four of the veterans had never applied for disability compensation. Of the eleven combat veterans that were receiving disability compensation, seven of them were receiving it for cognitive disabilities, and four were receiving disability for physical disabilities.

As the above-listed information shows that the combat veterans that participated in the research study were a very diverse group of veterans with a total of 61 deployments to a combat zone. The research participants possessed a vast amount of time and experience spent in combat operations. The overall success of this entire research study was made possible by the honesty and willingness of the research participants to share their time and challenging experiences in a combat zone.

According to Gläser and Laudel (2013), qualitative researchers are collecting their data and conducting data analysis simultaneously. As the researcher was conducting the interviews, he was extremely cautious to ensure that his personal biases would not impact the research. As the researcher collected the data, several common themes began to emerge immediately. The researcher included this information in his notes. The interviews were compelling, and, on several occasions, the interviewees were overcome with emotion. Upon completing the interview, a few of the interviewees commented that they had rarely discussed their time spent in a combat zone, and that the interview process was therapeutic for them.

After collecting the data, the researcher had the interviews transcribed professionally. Upon receiving the transcribed interviews, the researcher met with each research participant to conduct member checking. Birt, Scott, and Cavers (2016) stated that it is of critical importance that the research participants review the transcribed interviews to ensure accuracy. Failure to do so will directly impact the validity, reliability, and the quality of the entire research study.

Once the research participants verified the accuracy of the transcribed interviews, the researcher read and re-read each line of the transcribed interviews numerous times. The researcher will use a software package called NVivo 12 to assist in analyzing the data. The themes that emerged assisted the researcher in building his narrative (Creswell, 2016). The researcher utilized NVivo 12 because of its user-friendliness and its similarity to Microsoft Word.

Throughout the entire process, the researcher ensured that personal biases would not impact the research, to ensure that the themes that emerged from NVivo would not impact the themes that the researcher had observed during the interviews and during the observation of the combat veterans, the researcher read and re-read the transcribed interviews to begin the process

of open coding. Line-by-line open coding of the transcribed interviews, as well as the notes of the observation of the focus group, assisted the researcher in generating thematic analysis that is descriptive and rich. Additionally, it ensured that the integrity of the perspectives of the research participants was accurate and preserved, as well as prioritizing the validity of the entire research process (Cascio, Lee, Vaudrin, & Freedman, 2019).

The researcher manually analyzed the data and identified numerous themes and sub-themes. As the researcher reviewed the transcribed interviews, Microsoft Word was instrumental in identifying phrases and words that were repetitively used by the combat veterans to describe their transition experiences during their respective interviews. The themes that emerged were color-coded in Microsoft Word and were input to a spreadsheet in Microsoft Excel to track the themes and sub-themes.

After the researcher identified the themes and sub-themes by open coding, the focus then turned to NVivo 12, which allowed the researcher to enter the transcribed interviews, as well as the notes that were taken during the interviews. Similar to the color-coding that was done in Microsoft Word, NVivo also allowed the researcher to color code the themes that emerged. NVivo 12 quickly organized the data that was collected and was extremely efficient, quick, and effective in identifying words, phrases, and sentences that the combat veterans repeatedly used during their interviews. NVivo allowed the researcher to search for exact matches to specific phrases or words, or the researcher can search for phrases or sentences that include words that are similar to other words. A combination of open coding and the utilization of NVivo 12 was the most effective way to ensure that the researcher correctly identified all possible emerging themes.

### **Presentation of the Findings**

The presentation of the findings of this qualitative phenomenological research study organized the data analysis by themes. The researcher provided a detailed discussion of each theme that had emerged and addressed saturation and triangulation. The presentation of findings includes numerous illustrative quotes from the research participants to support the themes that have emerged. The researcher linked the themes to the research questions that guided this research, as well as the conceptual framework and previously published literature. During the literature review and the conceptual framework, the researcher identified several potential themes. The researcher compared the themes that emerged with the anticipated themes. Finally, the researcher provided a summary of the analysis.

**Triangulation and saturation.** Stake (2010) stated that a researcher must utilize multiple sources of data to achieve triangulation. The researcher achieved triangulation by collecting a demographic survey from each research participant, conducting in-depth interviews with each research participant, observing the behavior and interaction of the combat veterans among other veterans and civilians in a focus group. Additionally, the researcher utilized a journal since the inception of this journey. Finally, the researcher utilized field notes that he made from each interview. If other qualitative researchers were to replicate this research study, they would achieve similar results.

As previously stated, the researcher invited twenty-two combat veterans to participate in the research study. Each of the combat veterans was scheduled for an in-depth interview. However, they were also informed that there was a possibility that the researcher may reach saturation before completing each individual scheduled interview. As the researcher was conducting the interviews, he was simultaneously analyzing the data to identify potential themes



and to see if he had reached the point of saturation. The researcher reached the point of saturation after conducting the fifteenth interview. At this point, it became very obvious to the researcher that there was no new information or data that would emerge.

### **Emergent Themes**

After collecting and analyzing the data, the themes that emerged from this qualitative phenomenological research study were depression, which had a sub-theme of self-medication. The additional themes were loss of identity, suicidal ideation, PTSD, education, waste of time, ignorance, and discrimination. Each of these themes is critically important to understanding the challenges and barriers that combat veterans encountered when transitioning from military service to society and the civilian workforce. Each of the themes were consistent with the conceptual framework and the literature review in Section 1.

**Relationship of themes to research questions.** At least one theme emerged from each of the four research questions. The themes that emerged were depression with a sub-theme of self-medication, loss of identity, suicidal ideation, PTSD, education, waste of time, ignorance, and discrimination.

### **Research Question One**

The theme of depression and the sub-theme of alcoholism emerged from the first research question: What were the lived experiences of combat veterans as they transitioned from military service to civilian employment? Unfortunately, one hundred percent of the combat veterans experienced varying levels of depression during their transition to civilian life and work. The depression negatively impacted every aspect of their lives during their transition. The darkness that the combat veterans experienced during their bouts of depression led eighty percent of them to use or abuse alcohol (eleven of the combat veterans) or marijuana (one of the combat

veterans). One of the combat veterans reported that during a severe bout of depression, he turned to alcohol to numb the pain, which led him to contemplate committing suicide. The percentage of research participants that reported depression and alcohol use was significantly above the average reported by the Department of Veterans.

### **Research Question Two**

The theme of loss of identity, suicidal ideation, and PTSD were related to the second research question: *What were the challenges and difficulties that combat veterans experienced when seeking civilian employment?* When an individual joins the military, it consumes their lives. The military is not like a regular 8 to 5 job; you are in the military twenty-four hours a day. The military has its own culture, acronyms, and language. Being a member of the military becomes a large part of a military member's identity. While on active duty, military members get increased levels of responsibility as they are promoted through the ranks. When combat veterans transition from military service to a civilian job, they feel as if they have lost everything they have worked for and must begin all over. Combat veterans stated that their jobs were relevant while deployed to a combat zone, and now neither they or their jobs truly mattered to anyone.

Seventy-three percent of the combat veterans stated they had experienced a loss of their identity as they transitioned out of the military. As previously stated, the combat veterans had a combined total of 61 deployments, with two separate soldiers deploying a total of twelve times each. While in a combat zone, these soldiers saw and did things that have haunted them to this day. Eighty-seven percent of the combat veterans reported having a diagnosis of PTSD, with an additional veteran that felt as if he had many of the symptoms of PTSD but would not seek treatment for fear of hurting his chances of securing employment. Another challenge for the

combat veterans was suicidal ideation. During the interviews, fifty-five percent of the combat veterans reported suicidal ideation, with one combat veteran stating that he considered committing suicide the week before our interview.

### **Research Question Three**

The theme of education and waste of time are related to the third research question: What are the successes that combat veterans have experienced in transitioning to the civilian workforce? Eighty-seven percent of the combat veterans stated that education was critically important to their ability to secure civilian employment. The combat veterans stated that earning an undergraduate or graduate degree would make them more marketable and employable. One combat veteran stated that without having earned an undergraduate degree, he would more than likely be earning minimum wage. The signing of the Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 (Post 9/11 GI Bill) made it possible for most of the combat veterans that participated in the research study to attend institutions of higher education. The researcher believed that the Transition Assistance Program had played a role in the successful transition of some of the research participants. Surprisingly, an astonishing eighty-seven percent of the research participants stated that the program was a waste of their time and that they had not gained any knowledge or skills that would assist them in their transition to civilian employment.

### **Research Question Four**

Finally, the theme of ignorance and discrimination was related to the fourth research question: What perceptions do human resource managers have about combat veterans and their transferable skills? Transitioning combat veterans have faced numerous challenges, barriers, and difficulties during their reintegration to the civilian workforce. Their transition is further complicated by hiring managers that cannot adequately translate the skills, abilities, and

knowledge of the veterans to civilian language. Sixty-seven percent of the combat veterans stated that human resources and hiring managers were ignorant about their talents and skills, which potentially led to the combat veterans being discriminated against and subsequently not being able to secure civilian employment. Combat veterans have numerous talents and skills that could greatly benefit civilian organizations. Civilian hiring managers must be trained to recognize and correctly translate the skills of combat veterans to fit into their organizational culture.

### **Findings**

The following will show the results of the findings and will answer the four research questions and the ten-opened interview questions that have guided this research study.

**RQ1:** What were the lived experiences of combat veterans as they transitioned from military service to civilian employment?

*1 - How was your transition from active military service to the civilian workforce?*

The theme of depression was a recurring theme among each of the fifteen research participants. Unfortunately, one hundred percent of the research participants stated their transition from active military service to the civilian workforce was filled with bouts of varying degrees of depression from mild to severe. Each of the interviewees had compelling and emotion-filled stories. Many of the combat veterans referred to their depression as a very dark and challenging time in their lives. Every social and familial relationship, and every aspect of their lives, were negatively impacted during this dark period in their lives.

After sitting through the interviews, it became evident why transitioning to society and the civilian workforce was so difficult for these combat veterans. The interview of Combat

Veteran 7 (CV7) was especially powerful and clearly shows why their transition was so challenging. The following is an excerpt from the interview of CV7:

My depression is not as bad as it used to be. I'm still getting therapy for it and has been very helpful. Whenever I think about what I went through in the war, I can't sleep, and I think about it every day. And, yeah, I just, I relive it just as if it was yesterday. I just remember the screams. Seeing Americans and the Baghdad guys, the men, they were soldiers; I was an advisor. I was an advisor to the Iraqi Army. Some of these soldiers were Iraqi soldiers who got wounded and killed. But still, I trained some of them. We had a rapport with them, and I just cannot forget the screams of pain and agony. And just seeing, bringing them to the medevac bird. I just shouldn't have seen the things I did see, and it got to the point where seeing dead bodies, I guess that I just became so numb to seeing a dead body, to see a dead body that's been in a canal for about a week and it's all bloated, after a while, it just didn't do anything to me anymore. It just didn't mean anything to me anymore. To give you an idea, I could see a dead body and eat my beef jerky as if it wasn't any big deal; it became my new norm. It truly stopped affecting me in any way. Looking back, I'm not sure how I survived all of this.

Combat Veteran 1 (CV1) experienced severe feelings of anger, darkness, and severe depression. His depression made it very difficult for him to connect with anyone that was not a veteran. He withdrew from his friends, family, and co-workers. He stated that his depression and anger ultimately made him lose his first civilian job; he did not desire to discuss the circumstances around losing his civilian employment. CV1 wondered what happened to the person he used to be before his deployment:

Things were very different when I got out. I remember how things, I say things, I mean myself, my attitude, my relationships with other people were. But I was gone for four years, it changed me, and I really realized this when I got home. I felt dark and depressed. I didn't want to talk to anybody because I was angry because I felt that nobody understood or, how can you be my friend if you didn't go through what I did? It just didn't feel right to really associate with anybody who wasn't there with me and did what I did. What I went through, what we all went through together. It was very awkward; I'm gonna use that word, coming back home for the first, I'd say, at least a year, my social interactions with others were delayed in the sense that I wasn't very social anymore, I just kinda wanted to be around the guys I was in with. And I kinda noticed this, I was wondering why I felt this way, and it took me about a little over a year to start realizing where's the guy that I was before my combat deployment?

The topic of depression and darkness was a recurring theme during each of the interviews. CV3 expressed that he knew something in his behavior was not right. He was consistently angry, depressed, and in a dark place, and his relationships with friends and family members were continually suffering. However, he felt that he was learning to deal with it on his own. CV3 said:

Talking about physical or mental ailments after, you know, post-military, it is so difficult. I got to see some shit that was like really messed up in the sense that walking in on friends who are trying to kill themselves. I would walk into our barracks, and I would find my friends attempting to kill themselves. This happened way too many times to me, you know. I don't know how I've been able to just kinda sweep that under the rug, but I feel like that had some part in my anger and darkness, maybe. I haven't really thought

about it too much, and I haven't really talked to a psychiatrist or anything and gotten deep about it. Who knows, but maybe I should.

After collecting, reading, and analyzing the above illustrative quotes from the combat veterans that participated in this research study, it became evident that the lived experiences of combat veterans that transitioned to civilian society and the civilian workforce were filled with numerous difficulties and challenges that require professional assistance. Unfortunately, some of the combat veterans have not sought out the help that they so desperately need. Some of the veterans stated that they can resolve their issues on their own. In their attempt to deal with their issue of depression, some of the combat veterans resorted to self-medication.

Eighty-seven percent of the research participants that were dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder, darkness, and depression have turned to alcohol and substance use and abuse to assist them in dealing with their transition to civilian work. Eleven (CVs 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 14, and 15) of the combat veterans stated that they had used alcohol and one combat veterans (CV1) used marijuana to assist them in dealing with their depression, dark periods, and PTSD. The use and abuse of alcohol and marijuana have potentially added to the challenges and barriers of successfully transitioning to civilian life and work.

During the interview with CV4, the combat veteran stated that he had self-medicated with alcohol to assist with the dark periods associated with severe depression and PTSD that he had encountered in his life. However, he stated that consuming six or twelve beers a day was not a problem for him. CV4 said:

Alcohol, so yes, I have had numerous dark periods of PTSD and severe depression. I was still experiencing many of the effects of prolonged exposure to PTSD and depression. I reluctantly took the advice of the person I love, and she said "Hey, listen, I may have

noticed a, b, and c,” and I had compartmentalized and pushed aside, and denied it and lived with it, and become accustomed to living with what I didn't know. Before going to therapy, I began to self-medicate with alcohol. The alcohol helped me to deal with the death that I saw. It's harder for me to cry when someone dies, someone dies I'm like, I'll just look and say OK. That's what happens. Being in a combat zone enabled me to come back and believe that death and destruction are the norm, and I don't think it should be that way. Alcohol helps to numb me, and I do not have to think about the things that I do not want to think about. So, if you asked me if I had six a day, I would say yeah, I've had six a day, I've had twelve a day. They taste good, and I spread them out, but if you tell a doctor that you're an alcoholic, that will just create more problems. And, you know, but did I drink to the point where I was annihilated, or inebriated, or beyond, or drunk, you know, no. I didn't do that, but I certainly, you know, spread out my consumption throughout the day, and maybe there was a little bit of this type of alcohol and a little bit of that type of alcohol.

As previously stated, eighty percent of the combat veterans reported self-medicating, the majority used alcohol, with only one of the combat veterans reporting marijuana usage. His perspective and analogy for why he used marijuana were interesting. During his interview, CV1 said the following:

Yeah, marijuana and alcohol really helped me for anxiety and pain. It gave me a sense of ease like if I could put it into a metaphor, my body was like a clenched fist, and the weed just kind of just-released that hand. The alcohol helped me to not deal with the issues I didn't want to deal with at the time.



Surprisingly, one of the combat veterans reported that while American soldiers were prohibited from consuming alcohol while in the combat zone, they had relatively easy access to alcohol if they so desired. The American soldiers in the country were living with combat soldiers from numerous other countries. The soldiers from the different countries would receive shipments of alcohol and share it with the American soldiers. During the interview with CV2, he stated the following:

When you're there in country, in the middle of the war, you can get alcohol. While I could have, I didn't. Regardless of what anyone tells you, we had access to alcohol. It's a general order you're not supposed to drink. There's access to alcohol on base. We had access on a little forward operating base, because we had individuals who were stationed there with us, and they were from other countries. They were allowed to drink on base. So they had relatively easy access to alcohol. They would get a shipment in, and they would share it with the American soldiers. So, the ability to have it is out there. I didn't because my thought was, I didn't want to be impaired in the event that I might end up in combat. So, while the opportunity was there, I just had to have the willpower to not – but yeah, you get desperate sometimes.

As the interview went on, I asked CV2 if alcohol use or abuse became an issue for him after his return from his combat deployment. He stated that alcohol became an issue after his return from his combat tour. However, he was careful to ensure that he did not leave a paper trail that could potentially hinder his opportunity to secure civilian employment. His concern about leaving a paper trail was preventing him from seeking out the professional help he so desperately needed to get on the road to recover. CV2 said:

You get those moments when I got back, yeah, I had a period where I was drinking heavily just to forget whatever you want to forget. Like what you saw, what you experienced in combat and the truth is that sometimes there's no other way to do it. At the time, I did want to self-medicate because I didn't want to see anybody professionally or a doctor because I was going through the job interview process, and I knew there was a psychological component to it. They had a psychiatric evaluation as part of the interview process. So, I didn't want to have any labels applied to me. I didn't want the use or abuse of alcohol to show up anywhere. I didn't want a paper trail of my alcohol use documented anywhere. I knew that it would screw up any chance I had to land my dream job. So, while I may have needed professional help, I was afraid that asking for that help would do more damage than good for me.

The theme of depression and sub-theme of self-medication have contributed to the challenges and difficulties that the research participants have endured during their transition to the workforce.

The following interview question deals with the preparation of the combat veterans to reintegrate into civilian society and the civilian workforce.

*2 – Have you been adequately prepared to reintegrate into civilian life and workforce?*

As the combat veterans separated or retired from military service, they were leaving everything that they had known for years and beginning a new chapter in their lives. Unfortunately, the consequences of war, visible and invisible, were following them. They were dealing with numerous issues such as anxiety, depression, and anger. The combat veterans were not ready or equipped to deal with these issues. Unfortunately, as the combat veterans transitioned to society and the civilian workforce, they were truly set up to fail. The difficulties

and challenges of dealing with depression on their own made transitioning to civilian life and work very difficult for the research participants.

Sadly, sixty-seven percent (CVs 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 12, 13, 14, and 15) of the combat veterans that participated in this research study stated they had not been adequately prepared to reintegrate into civilian life and the civilian workforce. The combat veterans were not aware of the resources that were available to assist them in their transition. Many of the combat veterans acknowledged that something was not right in their behavior, mood, and lives. Unfortunately, they were not aware that they could receive free treatment from the Department of Veteran Affairs if their issue were service connected. As such, they did their best to attempt to function normally in their relationships and jobs. It eventually took its toll in the form of losing jobs and losing relationships with friends and family. As previously stated, if the combat veterans did not seek treatment for their anxiety and depression, it could potentially lead to suicidal ideation.

During the interview with CV15, he stated:

After I retired, the system failed me, and just maybe, I failed the system. I know that I definitely failed myself and my family. There was no time for me to get ready for civilian life or a civilian job. I came back from war, which by the way, I was pretty darn good at. So, I came back and was thrown into society. I wasn't ready and I went from having all of my brothers and sisters, to being alone. I sunk deep into a deep depression. It's almost like a big black dark space from the moment that I got out of the military until where I am right now. Right, so I feel as now I live in a colorful world where I graduated from college and have found a job. I live in a beautiful world with beautiful people, but until I got here, there's was this great big void, this darkness that I dealt with every single day. My wife and I still talk about. I still talk about therapy, and how I was driven to the

brink. I quickly bottomed out. I wasn't ready, I didn't understand society, and I felt as if society didn't understand me. For at least the first year, if not the first two years after I got out, I felt like a great big fucking failure.

Combat Veteran 13 stated that not only was he not adequately prepared to reintegrate to the civilian workforce, his senior leadership did not care. During the interview, CV13 stated:

Well I was not adequately prepared, due to the fact that before I ETS'd out of the military, active duty, I was sent out on the sixth month deployment when I had less than eight months left in service. I asked one of my commanders to not send me on this deployment because it may create a hardship for my family and I. He didn't care about the hardship it would create for me or my family. He told me that my personal situation was my personal situation. They needed people that had deployment experience and I had already deployed three times. I returned from my deployment and had less than two months to process out of housing and the base. I had a TBI and it was a very difficult time for my wife and I. I didn't have the time to learn about the resources that were available or how to access them. Sadly, they didn't care how difficult it was for us.

Combat Veteran 14 also stated that he had not been adequately prepared to transition to the civilian workforce. CV14 had served twenty-two years on active duty and had become accustomed to the structure of the military. He did not have that with his transition to civilian society and work. The experience of CV14 was filled with uncertainty and a feeling of being lost, not knowing where to go. The following is what CV14 stated:

When I retired, the transition was a five-day TAP class, which just transition you out from medical and just a brief career outlook. So, there was nothing really where they would give you counseling for employment that was out there. One of the difficulties

was that I was that you didn't know where to go. At the time, you didn't know which direction to take. I was kind of, I was lost because the day they spoke about what's out there, they gave you no method to find it. No one was saying here are the resources, here's where you have to go and what you have to do. After being in the military for twenty-two years and them telling me where to go and what to do, I felt completely lost.

The second research question dealt with the challenges and difficulties that combat veterans encountered when transitioning to civilian employment.

**RQ2:** What were the challenges and difficulties that combat veterans experienced when seeking civilian employment?

*3 - Have you suffered any physical distress associated with your transition to the civilian workforce?*

Only forty percent (CVs 4, 5, 7, 12, 13, and 15) of the combat veterans claimed that they had experienced physical distress during their transition to the civilian workforce. Combat Veteran 12 was intimidating in appearance. He was a Marine who stood six feet and two inches tall and was pure muscle. During the interview, CV12 stated the following about physical distress during his transition:

The struggles I had were physical and emotional and had to do with my past in the military. Some of the places I've been, some are places I was deployed, some of the things I've seen or gone, and nobody having an understanding of what that feels like. During one of my deployments, I was beat up physically pretty badly. I had to be sent back to Germany for recovery. An IED blew up near me, so I had to walk with a cane for a while. I am pretty sure that the cane hurt my chances of getting a job a couple of different times. Why would an employer want to hire me, a disabled Marine?

Combat Veteran 13 stated that during one of his four deployments, he was a part of a convoy that went through an IED, which resulted in a TBI and damage to his left leg. The following is what CV13 said during the interview:

During my transition, I had physical and emotional distress because of my disabilities. I went through an IED blast during one of my deployments. The blast gave me a TBI which always, and I mean always gives me headaches and I have trouble focusing, it also jacked up my leg. I walk with a limp. I try to hide the limp, but the truth is that by hiding it, it only makes it hurt worse. I had a hard time getting a job in El Paso, right out of the Army in Fort Bliss. After getting out, I was unemployed for like two, two and a half years.

During the interview with CV15, he stated that his physical distress had significantly hindered his transition to civilian work and every aspect of his life. The following is what CV15 stated:

Physical distress is part of my everyday life. Two of my disks are basically fused together from wearing body armor of 25 extra pounds for 20 years. I wake up in pain, but on top of it, the stress, the stress of being back in civilian society and having to find civilian work. On top of all these things is the combat related stress, it doesn't go away. The physical pain is related to your stress. How can you be thrust into Mosul, Iraq, where it was really horrible, with a bunch of killers and getting shot at, and not come out of that and not have some kind of physical pain related to stress?

The next interview question dealt with the emotional trauma that the research participants experienced during their transition to the civilian labor force. Some of the combat veterans became very emotional and bothered during this part of the interview. The researcher could

physically see the pain and anguish that the research participants experienced during this part of the research study. The combat veterans shared the emotional trauma they have experienced while transitioning to the civilian workforce. The themes were loss of identity, PTSD, and suicidal ideation.

The following interview question dealt with the emotional trauma that the combat veterans encountered during their transition to the civilian workforce.

*4 - Have you experienced any emotional trauma while reintegrating into the civilian labor force?*

The theme of loss of identity emerged among 73 percent of the combat veterans (CVs 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 12, 10, 13, and 15). The following excerpts from the interview with CV6 show he felt as if he had lost his identity after separating from active duty. CV6 stated:

Oh, honestly, for me, I felt as if I didn't matter, my identity, I didn't know who I was. So, like the military, they essentially told me who I was. So, I didn't I didn't necessarily know myself, and it was like hard to find out who you are without that uniform. So, that uniform gave me like this sense of like just feeling like this almighty powerful feeling, whether I was a PFC or a specialist. I felt like I was within a group of individuals, and outside of that, outside of the group, I felt like I was important. So, that uniform kind of sort of defined who I was, it made me the man I was. So, when I took off the uni, I didn't know who I was. So, I had to find myself without that uniform because I'm not that person anymore. Now, I'm just a regular Joe Shmoe. I had to find myself and redefine my identity all over again.

Many of the research participants held positions of leadership during their service in the Armed Forces and deployments to a combat zone. As such, the decisions they made daily

significantly impacted the safety and lives of the soldiers under their command. A wrong or poor decision could have meant the loss of limbs or life for one of their soldiers. In their leadership positions, these military leaders dealt with a great deal of responsibility and stress. Their position and level of responsibility significantly defined the identity, meaning, and purpose of these combat veterans.

Another of the combat veterans that experienced the theme of loss of identity was CV15. He shared the following concerning his feelings about the loss of his military identity:

One hundred percent, and that's exactly what's frustrating. I'm just Joe on the street. Frickin literally five years ago, I was in charge of 410 people, I was in charge. We open our base up to everybody in the public. All of the security on that base was on my shoulders. My commander said I had done an outstanding job. Based off of the training - and I worked 18-hour days for four weeks straight, nonstop. You know, I did all that, and I mattered, my job mattered. And so, when you get out, then what do I do? I go work at Stihl picking parts because I need to because I had to pay my electric bill. As I said, I am just Joe on the street now. That makes me really sad.

During my interview with CV13, the theme of loss of identity emerged again when he discussing being in a leadership position while in the military, and he stated the following:

It's how I'm used to being; I'm used to being in that role, having my soldiers to my left, always coming to formation. Our unit was a large part of who I was. I had up to fifty soldiers off to my left, including senior NCOs, sergeants, and it's like it's missing. You miss the brothers; you miss being in the leadership position, yes, being there for your brothers left and right. My life was changed drastically. Shortly after leaving the



military, I realized that I was not that person anymore; I had to figure out who I was all over again.

Many of the research participants felt their time in the military, as well as their deployments to a combat zone significantly contributed to the person they had become and their overall identity. The military was not like a regular job; they were in the military every hour of every day, they were told where to be, what time to be there, and how long they would remain there. Their daily lives were filled with structure; they wore their uniforms to work every day. They experienced a strong sense of camaraderie and esprit de corps that was missing in civilian society and the civilian labor force. The military was a large part of their identity. When they separated or retired from the military, they stated that they felt as if they had lost their identity.

Such was the case with CV4 when he was sharing one of the most significant setbacks that he experienced during his transition to the civilian society and workforce. He said the following:

Perhaps one of the biggest transitional, emotional setbacks that I had during that transition was uncertainty, a sense of not belonging, a feeling of losing my identity and isolation. I was still proud that I was once a member. You know we can often say once a member, always a member and that we have a camaraderie within the organization, and that organization tends to take care of itself that was missing. I had so much responsibility in the military; I was in charge of important things like people's lives. Being in the military was a large part of who I was. I was starting all over again and starting from the bottom. I felt as if I was an outsider of the organization. I wasn't in the loop, in the knowledge, I wasn't informed. I wasn't important.

CV7 shared very similar feelings about his identity in the military compared to his experiences after he retired from military service. CV7 shared this information:

When I retired, I felt as if something was missing. My job was just another job. Six months ago, I was dealing with the life and death of our soldiers; what I did mattered, it was who I was. Now, I was driving a truck. It wasn't the same. Being a truck driver and then coming back and I didn't really, - it took me a couple of years to really determine my purpose, and so it took a couple years in talking with people and find my new identity and my purpose. I was trying to hang on to my old identity; I went into social work to help my brother and sister veterans.

During the interview with CV12, he shared the point in his life when he realized that his life had drastically changed. While on active duty and in a combat zone, he had numerous Marines who believed in him and trusted his ability to make decisions that would keep them alive. As he interviewed for a management position in Stein Mart, the hiring manager told him that his leadership skills, talents, and abilities would not be relevant in managing Stein Mart employees. Remembering this experience angered CV12. He expressed feelings of worthlessness. CV12 shared this information:

The guy was a complete asshole, and he was like, well, you know, I see your experiences here, you know, in the military, and thank you for your service, which I think - I think everyone means it, but they don't understand it. And he goes on, but I don't see how any of these skills can relate to working at Stein Mart. I'm thinking to myself, at the time, you know, I've had about 60 Marines under my charge. I was ultimately responsible for their lives. They would have done anything I told them to do because they believed and trusted me, and you're going to tell me I can't sell hats and shoes. Or lead those who do,

and as I remember sitting in that chair and actually this is when I was walking, had to walk with a cane, and I thought about hitting him upside the head, but I didn't. I didn't. I walked out. I mean, but it ended civilly, and it ended professionally. After I walked out, I never received a phone call. It was for a managerial position; it was like some manager position. And the first job I actually did have, I was fired within like three months. At that point, I knew that my life wasn't the same, and I wasn't the same person that I was in the Marines.

The next theme that emerged was PTSD. Of the fifteen combat veterans that participated in the research study, eighty-seven percent (CVs 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, and 15) have had a diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Additionally, one of the combat veterans, CV2, was very confident that he suffered from numerous symptoms of PTSD. However, CV2 did not desire to seek treatment for PTSD for fear that he would not be able to find civilian employment. The following are the words of CV2 during our interview:

I'll be honest; while I am 100% sure that I have PTSD, I haven't used the VA at all. I've never talked to anybody at the VA, as I was getting out, they have one mandatory meeting I had had with a doctor, not through the VA, this was on active duty. And again, I gave the doctor the answers that they wanted, and I never heard from them again. So, a lot of the answers were more geared towards combat and PTSD stuff. So, you figure out how to work your way through those interviews so that you don't get questioned, and then you never hear from them again.

During the interview with CV7, he claimed that while recovering from a TBI, he received a diagnosis of PTSD. Despite a prior diagnosis of TBI and a new diagnosis of PTSD, he still deployed to a combat zone. The following are the words of CV7:

Yeah, I was diagnosed with a TBI, severe depression and anxiety, also with mild PTSD. Because along with the TBI, plus what I lived through and what I saw, I saw soldiers being injured, blown up, body pieces everywhere. My fellow soldiers were being killed in explosions. Attempting to render aid to those who were injured, bring them into the medevac, and it was a very stressful day, that day when I got hit. It was something I'll never forget. I think that was when my depression, PTSD, and anxiety began.

In describing his diagnosis of PTSD, the words of CV15 were compelling. In the last line of his statement, CV15 stated that even though he received a diagnosis of PTSD, yet he still desired to return to a combat zone because he had become so proficient at it. The following are the words of CV15:

Yeah, I was diagnosed with PTSD in 2013. That's actually what got me out. That's what forced me out of the military; I was med boarded, forced out with medical retirement. So, when I found out I had PTSD, everything I compartmentalized for seven years came crashing down. And so, the things, the way I used be like, super happy, having a good time that all ended. Turn around, find out I have PTSD. We start doing therapy, and then I started having episodes. So, I had I my last combat experience in 2009 and I retired in 2015, even though I was diagnosed in 2013 PTSD, I still thrived for deployment. I wanted to go back again because I was so good at it.

As the interview continued, CV15 shared the fact that he hoped that none of his other friends would ever have to deal with the symptoms of PTSD. He refers to himself and his combat buddies as potential psychopaths and sociopaths. However, what this truly shows is that the combat veterans had become very proficient at what the government trained them to do in combat. The following is a continuation of CV15's interview:

I hope that no one I know ever suffers what PTSD does to a person. I hope you don't have to wake up in the middle night or only get two hours of sleep for three months straight.

You cannot in your heart of hearts, in your mind of minds live for 20 to 30 years under a certain way and then be thrust into a combat environment, and think that when you come out, everything is hunky-dory. There's not a person on the face of the earth as far as I'm concerned, that can come back from war and thrive. After a while, most of us absolutely love war, just to kill and be a part of that. You can call them psychopaths and sociopaths; it's who we were trained to be.

Combat Veteran 8 stated a symptom of having PTSD is not wanting to be around large crowds. To avoid being around large groups of people, he would attend a virtual veteran career fair and get set up for a job interview. The interview would be approximately ninety minutes from his house. He would drive the ninety minutes and arrive at the parking lot of where the interview was scheduled and would or could not get out of his car. Because of his PTSD, CV8 would not be able to attend the job interview he had scheduled because he did not want to be around that many people. The following is from the interview with CV8:

Oh, hell yeah, PTSD was in full effect. Especially when I first got out, I was just focused on going to back to school and stuff and looking for work. All of the symptoms came out like I wouldn't want to be around people. I would go for a job interview, and I would sit in the parking lot. I wouldn't go in for the interview cause I just couldn't get there. Like fuck this, and I would just drive away. Even though I wanted and needed the job, I would drive an hour and a half and get there, and as soon as you get there you see all these fucking people, I was like fuck this, it ain't worth it.

The next theme that emerged was suicidal ideation. During the interviews with the research participants, fifty-three percent (CVs 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, and 15) of the combat veterans admitted having suicidal ideation or attempting suicide. Five of the combat veterans admitted to having suicidal ideation but were not willing to discuss their respective situations. Three (CVs 2, 6, and 15) of the combat veterans were ready to present their situations in the hope that it would assist other combat veterans that were struggling and had considering committing suicide.

While discussing his twelve-month deployment in the Helmand province in Afghanistan, CV2 stated that he considered committing suicide in the middle of his deployment. He had hit a low point and was wondering why he was even in Afghanistan; he saw suicide as a way out of his current situation. The following is what CV2 said during our interview:

I contemplated suicide while I was in the combat zone, especially when something traumatic happens like losing one of your troops. I began to hit new lows, and you hit moments where you question what you're doing there. You question your life and your purpose in life. You question whether or not you want to be there, and suicide is the easy way out of the combat zone. You get desperate to the point where you'll consider suicide, or you considered just not dealing with the problems at hand when you're in combat. As an officer, I'm leading a team; I had to lead a team into convoys every day. I can't let them see that side of me because you have to be the leader. So, at the same time, I can't even turn to the people around me that are going to the same thing because they're subordinates, and I don't want my downward spiral to impact them and put their lives in jeopardy.

Combat Veteran 6 stated that he had contemplated committing suicide, especially if he had been drinking alcohol. The following is an excerpt from the interview with CV6:

At several low points in my life, I've thought of suicide. It has usually happened when I was drinking excessively. I have thought to myself that I would be better off if I were not here. I was just living in my own little world and I was getting into my own head. When it happens, I have gone into a quick and deep downward spiral. Sad thing is that I had great support from friends and family, I just was not taking it. Thank God, it has been a very long time since I have thoughts of suicide.

During the interview with CV15, he stated that he was a success because he had not committed suicide. Combat Veteran 15 went on to state that after returning from one of his deployments, he had considered committing suicide while he was on active duty. The following is what CV15 said:

I've remained alive, that's a success. I'm not a statistic. I was very close to being a suicide statistic. But I think surviving combat, has really, really defined why I should be alive now. What I mean by that is that there's multitudes of times since I've come back from combat, even while I was still active duty that I considered suicide. So, one time was attempted, and days like last week, I thought about it. So, I'm not afraid of death, and I don't fear death. That's the thing, I think sometimes it gets pretty bad, or I'm like, I just want to punch. And it's fleeting, maybe it's only two minutes here and there.

When CV15 stated that the thought of committing suicide had crossed his mind last week, I immediately became very concerned for him. I asked him if he had spoken to anyone about his thoughts of suicide, and he stated that he talked about it with his therapist and that he was feeling much better.

As previously stated, CV3 did not desire to share his experience with suicidal ideation. However, he was willing to share that he had suicidal thoughts during several periods of

darkness in his life. Combat Veteran 3 attributed the darkness and depression to severe anxiety and trauma that he had experienced during his time in a combat zone. The periods of darkness would occasionally go on for months on end. However, he was able to use the severe anxiety and trauma as fuel to pursue his educational goals. CV3 ultimately earned his doctoral degree.

The following is what CV3 said during our interview:

So, I would attribute a lot of what I've accomplished academically; I think it's fueled by trauma and anxiety. Even though it's healthy, not healthy, rather, excuse me, and I know it's not healthy at times. I just buried everything in work, because I would work, and, you know, after my first bachelor's, I typically would work and go to school so. I just stayed as busy as possible and would write and do activities associated with that stuff.

The following interview question were about the frustrations that the combat veterans experienced during their transition.

*5 - What frustrations have you experienced in your transition from the military to civilian employment?*

Eighty percent of the combat veterans (CVs 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, and 15) stated that they were frustrated in their attempt to navigate the transition to civilian life and work.

They felt lost and unsure of what their next steps should be. The following is what CV9 expressed about his frustration:

I feel like one of the biggest frustrations was looking for a job, and even bigger was missing the camaraderie and close brotherhood that we had in the military. Another frustration was that in the military, we did things a certain way, and out here, they do whatever they want.



Combat Veteran 10 expressed that the biggest source of frustration for him was with the VA and the fact that he had to figure things out on his own. The following is what CV10 shared:

Primarily, the frustrations had to do with the VA. It felt as if I'm just kind of booted out the door and have to figure it out on my own. I guess I was frustrated because I was used to the military being my home, and it seems like they just kind of booted me out. And now you're out here in the wild trying to figure things out, and the door behind you closed so you can't go back to the sanctity of that. And so, you're just kind out there in the wild.

The frustrations of CV15 were different than any of the other veterans. He felt that during a combat tour, there was a constant challenge and it was stressful. However, in civilian life and work, there was no stress or challenge. He felt that civilians would stress out about things that would not be stressful to a combat veteran; to him, his life was not in danger, no one was attempting to kill him, so he did not feel any stress. The following was his perception of frustration:

So, from combat to noncombat environment, to the civilian workforce, so the frustration well, part of the frustration is that it's not as challenging. Like the phrase goes, you had to do what you had to do. Well, in combat, there's about 12 you had to-dos every minute. We had to do what we had to do to live, to survive., and we just got it done. You did it for the greater good. And on top of it, you're still dealing with the daily bullshit, too. So, the circus comes with you. As an example, in the middle of my combat tour, my ex-wife filed for divorce. How do you juggle all that? Right. And then, so but you do, it's weird. It's such a challenge. Some of the worst things happen to you, and you survive, and you persevere, and then you switch and come into the civilian lifestyle. What's

frustrating is there's not a challenge in the civilian life or work, like we're not getting mortared here. Yet, people still stress out about the pumps of latte and stuff. Right, I'm looking for, I'm always looking for the bad guy. Scoping everywhere, where's it coming from? I'm always running to the fight yet, yet in civilian life and work, things aren't stressful. What's frustrating is that things really aren't stressful, at least not to a combat vet, yet, it is so stressful to civilians.

The next interview question asked the veterans if they were aware of the support and coping strategies that were available to them during their transition.

*6 - What if any, coping strategies and support are available to assist you in dealing with the challenges and frustrations you have encountered?*

Unfortunately, eighty percent of the research participants (CVs 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, and 15) were not aware of the coping strategies, support, and resources that were available to them. The following is what CV1 had to say:

When I got out of the Marines, the only thing that I did was go through TAPS. And TAPS was a waste. No one said anything to me about anything. I was on my own. That was it. I knew what the Marines would do for me while I was in, but when I got out, I knew nothing about how to get benefits or even where to begin the process.

The experience of CV3 was significantly different; he was not aware of the resources or coping strategies, so he created his own approach, which included alcohol. He stated that he was a high functioning alcoholic. The following is what CV3 said during his interview:

So, originally nothing. I think that, the largest part for me, for the better of ten years was alcohol and primarily self-medicating through that. To the point where I was proudly, pretty successful, high functioning alcoholic at times. And then, later, once I had

established care and talked to some people in and around the VA I did go through a cognitive behavioral therapy and then prolonged exposure therapy and I think certain aspects, prolonged exposure therapy was probably the best thing for me personally for working through some of these things. Although, it's very physically and mentally demanding to the point where if I was doing therapy that day, that's all I could do. Sometimes after therapy, I'd have to go home and go to sleep.

Combat Veteran 13 was not aware of any coping strategies or support that was available to him. He stated that he was lucky to find a veteran that worked in the Department of Veteran Affairs that offered to help him. The following is an excerpt from the interview with CV13:

No, I wasn't aware of them; no one told me anything about what was available to help me out. However, the truth is that I didn't want them either, because I felt like I would be complaining. I felt like even asking for help was an issue. Like that would be seen as an issue because in reality, who cares. So, to answer your question, I really wasn't made aware of them. Nor did I really want to be aware of them.

The next research question and interview questions were about the success of combat veterans, and if the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) contributed to their success. The theme of education and a waste of time emerged from the research and interview questions.

**RQ3:** What are the successes that combat veterans have experienced in transitioning to the civilian workforce?

*7 - Has your transition to the civilian workforce been successful? If so, how?*

During the interviews with the combat veterans, eighty-seven percent (CVs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15) of them stated that completing their undergraduate degree was critical to their overall successful transition to the civilian workforce and securing civilian

employment. Combat Veterans 8 and 10 did not think that their education played any factor in their transition to the civilian workforce. During the interview with CV4, he stated that he felt that earning his undergraduate degree would make him more marketable and successful. At this point, the researcher asked him if he would be in school if he had not qualified to utilize the educational benefits of the Post 9/11 GI Bill. The following is his reply:

Well, the motivation is what becomes affordable. Your retirement isn't set up to live some grandiose life, living a life of luxury. Your retirement, it's, you know, really not enough to live off of. So, you ask if I would be in college if I didn't have the Post 9/11 GI Bill, and the sad truth is that college would not have been an affordable option, not if you're looking at strictly the retirement. The Post 9/11 made it feasible.

Conversely, CVs 8 and 10 had both earned their undergraduate degrees and stated that their education had little to no impact on their transition to the civilian workforce. Combat Veteran 8 stated that his education had little to no effect on his transition to the civilian workforce because he started his own business. The business he started was similar to the same career field that he learned while on active duty, so his experience was more valuable than his education. He did state that his education contributed to his ability to run his own company. The following is what CV8 said:

I was successful in transitioning to the civilian workforce because I started my own business. My business degree can help me run my business, but my experience in the military is what really helped me. My experience and not to sound conceited but my intellectual abilities. I have a ton of experience in stuff that I use, so put two and two together, and I began my own company. I don't want to sit there and keep looking for

these jobs with these big corporations that don't care about their people; they just want their dollar.

Combat Veteran 10 was one of the two commissioned officers that participated in the research study. CV10 had earned his undergraduate degree through the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) program and was in training for approximately two years. Combat Veteran 10 was a pilot in the United States Air Force. His specific skill set as a pilot made his transition to United Airlines relatively easy. Combat Veteran 10 had this to say about his transition:

My transition was successful. The military trains us very well to do a job. Some jobs translate better than others. Mine obviously did. So, I mean, military pilots make up about sixty percent of the aviators out there now. In my company now, there are so many ex-military guys in leadership positions because we have that mentality of get the job done. The company loves it. The union does not, the company does.

Combat Veteran 2 was the other commissioned officer in the research study. He stated that his transition to civilian employment was relatively easy and smooth because he had earned his master's degree while on active duty. The following is what CV2 shared about his transition:

Being an officer, I had a requirement to have a bachelor's degree, that made it a little bit easier. Most of the jobs I applied for required bachelor's degrees. Also, prior to getting out, my senior leadership and my family pushed me to continue my education. So, I got a master's degree, paid for by tuition assistance. So, the master's degree made me more marketable as well. So, between having a master's degree and military experience, veteran's preference, all that, it was pretty smooth, I found it to be pretty simple to transition over.

The importance of education became very clear during the interview with CV6. During the interview, CV6 stated without having earned his undergraduate degree via the Post 911 GI Bill and being currently enrolled in a master's degree program, he would more than likely be making minimum wage. The following is what CV6 expressed about the importance of having earned his undergraduate degree:

I couldn't garner what I'm going to garner with this master's, you know, or even with a bachelors. I would be making minimum wage, and that probably would be it. Because of the Post 9/11 GI Bill, I was given the opportunity to do something different. Without the Post 9/11 GI Bill, I wouldn't have been able to pursue a college degree. Funny thing is that initially, I didn't think I was smart enough for college. So my initial motivation for college was for the sole purpose of monetary gain. However, during the process, I learned that I am smart enough and that I am pretty good at school, and I liked school.

The next interview question was about TAP, and if it assisted the veterans in their transition to the civilian workforce.

*8 - Did the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) contribute to your successful transition to civilian employment?*

The researcher anticipated that the combat veterans would view the Transition Assistance Program as an invaluable training that had assisted them with their transition to the civilian society and workforce based on the review of the literature. However, the researcher found that eighty-seven percent (CVs 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, and 15) of the research participants stated that the time they spend in the Transition Assistance Program was a total waste of their time. Additionally, they also stated that they had not gained any information that assisted them with their transition.

During the interview with CV3, he stated that he felt as if the Transition Assistance Program was a way for the military to protect themselves in case a veteran separated or retired and committed a crime or did something that the civilian population would view as unfavorable. The following is what CV3 stated during his interview:

I did not find any value in the Transition Assistance Program; it was a complete waste of my time. When I got out of the Marines, we had STEPs and TAPs classes, which, if I recall correctly, were about five days in length. A lot of the classes, you know, for example, were money management, dealing with drugs and alcohol, they had a checkbox to show that you had completed them. If we were running late to lunch or towards the end of the day in some of these classes, for example, like with alcohol, they would say "do you drink?" Well yeah. "Do you drink all the time?" No. "Okay, well, don't get drunk all the time." Check the box so they could go to lunch or leave for the end of the day. "Are you married?" No, I'm not married. "Good, well, then you won't beat your wife. Check your box." It was just a way for them to check the boxes to cover themselves in case a veteran snapped.

During the interview with CV9, he also stated that the Transition Assistance Program was a complete waste of his time. Combat Veteran 9 stated that service members should receive more individualized training with organizations that could genuinely assist the service members with their transition. The following is what CV9 said during the interview:

Looking back on it now, it was a waste of time. Unless they've made a lot of improvements, it's a waste of time, ineffective. It was a bunch of classes and throwing an awful lot of information at you and you really don't understand how that information applies to you. Instead of having a bunch of classes where everybody is nodding off

because they really don't care about what you're talking about, we should have met with individuals one on one that could have given us individualized advice.

The researcher was surprised that eighty-seven percent of the combat veterans stated that they had not gained anything of value during their time in the Transition Assistance Program. Combat Veteran 14 also stated that his time in the program was a waste. The following is what he said:

I will go with the latter part of the question first TAP; the TAP really didn't assist me at all in anything. My time there was a complete waste. However, I was fortunate, since I've retired, I have continually been led to a path of employment, good job occupations that I have had throughout my career.

The final research and interview questions were about the ability of hiring managers to understand and translate the skills of combat veterans. Additionally, did human resource managers appreciate that combat veterans have the potential to deal with extremely stressful situations. The two themes that emerged were ignorance and discrimination.

**RQ4:** What perceptions do human resource managers have about combat veterans and their transferable skills?

*9 – Have human resource managers been able to understand and translate your military skills to be utilized in civilian employment?*

*10 – Do human resource managers value and appreciate your talents and skills, as well as your ability to function in the most difficult, demanding, and stressful situations?*

During the interview process, sixty-seven percent (CVs 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, and 15) of the combat veterans stated that hiring managers were not capable of translating the skillset of the veterans into civilian language. The combat veterans also stated that the ignorance of the



hiring managers had led to discrimination against them, which potentially prevented them from securing employment. Twenty-percent percent (CVs 1, 2, 4, and 14) stated that the hiring managers appreciated their skills and their ability to deal with extremely stressful situations. One combat veteran (CV12) felt that he had experienced some hiring managers that did appreciate his skills and some that did not.

Combat Veteran 8 stated that hiring managers did not appreciate or understand the specific skills that combat veterans brought to an organization. He also stated that the only time that a hiring manager would appreciate his skills and talents was when the hiring manager was a veteran or it was a veteran-owned company. The following is what CV8 shared during the interview:

In my experience, the only time they appreciate our talents and skills is if it's vet owned or the hiring manager is actually a veteran. If that is the case, then they are more welcoming because they understand military people. Vet run organizations appreciate the sacrifices you made. So yeah, in my experience, they don't appreciate what we can do and they are worried about how stable we are, partially because of how the media portrays, or at least some channels on the media.

During the interview, CV3 said that during the hiring process, the hiring manager told him that the company appreciated the fact that he was a veteran because he had a drive that civilian applicants may not have. However, while working at the company, he sat in on a hiring board with human resources managers, and one of them commented that hiring a veteran was an area of concern for him. The following is from the interview with CV3:

I was told during my interview process that they liked that I was in the military because they knew I had a drive that other people wouldn't have. However, as far as being a

combat veteran, no I don't think HR understands by large like the soft skills and leadership skills that come with that, the stress management that comes with that, the inner cultural aspects of functioning with groups of people who aren't like yourself and not where you're from and being all over the world doing it. They don't take those things into consideration. I have sat in academics on a hiring board with HR managers, and candidates popped up who's been in the military. A member of the HR team, in a very unethical way, said that it was a concern for them. You know, for an institute, it's best to be fighting social injustices. So, I always found that interesting and then I always thought, is that how they think of me, is that how they think of our students.

Combat Veteran 6 shared an experience that he had with a human resource hiring manager. The following is what a hiring manager told CV6:

They definitely do not value our talents and skills. I was once told by a human resources manager that it's hard for veterans to get hired. He said that it was hard for veterans to gain employment at certain places because they felt like the company would rather get somebody with no thought of their own opposed to getting a veteran that has some thought and might consistently be outspoken. Plus, some people in the company were worried about the stability of combat veterans.

At the end of each interview, the researcher asked each combat veteran the same question. Each of the combat veterans identified numerous horrific experiences they had during their combat tours. Some saw friends blown up in front of them, body parts scattered everywhere; all experienced depression, many were diagnosed with PTSD, and over half have considered committing suicide. The researcher asked each of them if allowed to go back and do it all over again, would they, and amazingly each of the combat veterans answered that they

would absolutely do it all over again without any hesitation. The commitment of these brave men to the values, freedom, and our American way of life is a testament to the bravery and patriotism of each of these warriors.

**Relationship of themes to conceptual framework and literature review.** Each of the themes and sub-themes that emerged is related to the research questions that guided this study. Additionally, the themes that emerged were consistent with the conceptual framework that was created by the researcher and what the researcher found in the literature review in Section 1.

The theme of depression was a part of the conceptual framework. The theme of depression was identified and supported by the articles and numerous studies that were cited by the researcher in the literature review. The researcher identified depression, alcohol, and substance abuse as a few of the numerous difficulties and challenges that combat veterans encounter as they attempt to reintegrate into society and the civilian labor force. The research of Cass and Hammond (2015) showed that twenty-five percent of transitioning combat veterans were dealing with severe bouts of depression, as well as thirty-three percent experience severe cases of anxiety. The impact of depression on combat veterans was further shown in the research of Elnitsky et al. (2017), which showed that anxiety and severe depression were two of the numerous challenges facing combat veterans. Depression greatly hampers the ability of combat veterans to function normally in society and in the civilian labor force, as well as their ability to care for themselves.

The negative impact that depression has had on combat veterans is further illustrated in the research of Schreger and Kimble (2017), which showed that approximately twenty-five percent of returning combat veterans are dealing with depression, alcohol and substance abuse, which has negatively impacted their successful transition to the civilian workforce. In the

literature review, there was also an article from Haller et al. (2016), which stated that the Department of Veteran Affairs reported that approximately thirty-four percent of combat veterans needed treatment for depression, which could potentially lead to suicidal ideation.

The research of Kline et al. (2016), showed that alcohol and substance abuse greatly contributed to suicide among combat veterans. In 2019, the research of Stefanovics and Rosenheck found that alcohol contributed to violent behavior by combat veterans, as well as numerous attempted suicides. In the literature review, the research of Ahern et al. (2015), showed that approximately thirty-nine percent of returning combat veterans required treatment for alcohol abuse. The research of Elbogen et al. (2014) showed that numerous combat veterans showed symptoms of alcohol abuse and that these veterans were experiencing numerous challenges functioning in civilian society, and finding civilian employment.

To further support the theme of alcohol and substance abuse, the research of Fulton et al. (2015), which stated that if combat veterans failed to seek assistance for their symptoms of PTSD it could lead to the abuse of alcohol and drugs. The research of Sevak et al. (2015), showed that veterans return from combat zones and face numerous challenges in their transition, including alcohol and substance abuse.

The theme of loss of identity, PTSD, and suicidal ideation were also identified in the conceptual framework and supported by the cited works in the literature review. The loss of identity and feeling as if one does not belong were a part of the literature review and supported by the research of Binks and Cambridge (2018), who stated that military members experience internal conflicts to their sense of self, and feel as in the transition they have lost their identity.

The research of Smith and True (2014) also supported the theme of loss of identity when they stated that transitioning military members encounter an internal strain when going from

their military careers to their new roles as civilians. They further stated that when combat veterans are reintegrating into the civilian workforce, they experience feelings of dislocation, isolation, and not belonging. When combat veterans are transitioning, their trauma in a combat zone can result in emotional and social withdrawal from their family members, as well as their co-workers.

According to Orazem et al. (2017), the transition from military to civilian work was challenging for many combat veterans. Losing their military identity was identified as the single most difficult part of the entire transition. Combat veterans felt as if they did not belong in the civilian society and workforce.

Sadly, PTSD is a recurring theme in the literature review and the lives of numerous combat veterans. The research of Elbogen et al. (2014) supports the theme of PTSD. In their research, they found that returning combat veterans who exhibited the symptoms of PTSD had a propensity towards aggression and violence. The theme of PTSD was further supported by the research of Fulton et al. (2015), who stated that approximately sixty percent of returning combat veterans who have served in Iraq, Afghanistan, and several other locations in the Middle East have displayed numerous symptoms of PTSD. Unfortunately, many of these combat veterans do not seek treatment for their condition of PTSD for fear of the stigma that is associated with mental health issues.

The next theme that emerged was suicidal ideation, which was identified in the conceptual framework and was supported by numerous articles and studies in the literature review. Suicidal ideation is one of many challenges that combat veterans encounter when transitioning to the civilian workforce. The suicide rate of returning combat veterans is significantly higher than that of their civilian counterparts. Several issues, such as PTSD,

anxiety, depression, mental health issues, and stress, significantly contributed to the suicidal ideation that numerous combat veterans have experienced in their transition to society and the civilian labor force. The Department of Veteran Affairs has reported that approximately thirty-four percent of returning combat veterans that have sought out treatment for mental health issues, anxiety, and depression have experienced suicidal ideation. Combat veterans that have depression and PTSD are at an increased risk of suicidal ideation. Sadly, many returning combat veterans have experienced feelings of guilt and shame that are a direct result of PTSD, depression, and suicidal ideation. Many combat veterans experienced a moral injury that leads to psychological difficulties such as suicidal ideation (Elnitsky et al., 2017; Haller et al., 2016; Dillon et al., 2018; Kline et al., 2016).

The next two themes that emerged were education and a waste of time. The theme of education was identified in the conceptual framework and greatly supported in the literature review. The theme of a waste of time was a theme that was not expected by the researcher. The waste of time theme was associated with the Transitional Assistance Program that was created by the Department of Defense.

The theme of education was very clearly identified and supported in the literature review. There are a large number of combat veterans that have left military service and transitioned to higher education. The Post 9/11 GI Bill has generous benefits which have motivated thousands of veterans to pursue their educational goals. Universities and colleges across the United States are striving to assist returning combat veterans in the attainment of their educational goals. Transitioning combat veterans desire to be productive members of society and the civilian workforce; for this reason, many have returned to universities and colleges in the pursuit of their undergraduate degrees.

The Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 (Post 9/11 GI Bill) offered returning combat veterans the largest expansion of educational benefits since the original GI Bill, the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944. The Post 9/11 GI Bill was signed into law on the thirtieth of June 2008 by President George W. Bush. Military members qualify for full educational benefits by having served a total of thirty-six months of active duty after the eleventh of September 2001. The Post 9/11 GI Bill pays tuition for veterans, a monthly housing allowance, a stipend for textbooks and supplies. Some combat veterans qualify to transfer their educational benefits to their spouse or children (Barr, 2015; Elnitsky et al., 2017; Sportsman & Thomas, 2015; Taylor et al., 2016).

The conceptual framework and the literature review identified the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) as an area of importance to this research study. What was not anticipated was that the combat veterans would see this program as a complete waste of time. Congress created the Transition Assistance Program in 1991. During 1991, the Department of Defense realized that transitioning members of the military were not making a successful transition to civilian life and employment. The Department of Defense manages TAP. The purpose of the Transition Assistance Program is to assist separating and retiring members of the Armed Forces with their transition (Faurer et al., 2014).

The two final themes that emerged were ignorance and discrimination. These themes were a part of the conceptual framework and the literature review under misunderstanding and biases. Unfortunately, many civilian hiring and human resource managers do not understand or appreciate the leadership skills, abilities, and talents that combat veterans possess and how their organization can capitalize and benefit from those skills. Additionally, hiring managers cannot translate the skills of combat veterans into language that could be easily understood by civilian

employers. Hiring managers do not understand or appreciate the experiences of combat veterans. Combat veterans have served and functioned in the most high-pressure real-world situations. Many hiring managers feel that combat veterans are unstable and violent. The ignorance of the capabilities and leadership skills of combat veterans causes hiring managers to discriminate against combat veterans (Davis & Minnis, 2017; Ford, 2017; Minnis, 2017; Stern, 2017; Stone & Stone, 2015).

However, the researcher was surprised by a couple of findings from the research. Most of the combat veterans (93%) stated that the time they spent in the Department of Defense's Transitional Assistance Program (TAP) was a waste of time and honestly did not help them in any way, shape, or form. One hundred percent of the combat veterans felt that there should have been more of an effort put into training them on how to submit their disability claims and all of the resources that were available to them once they transitioned out of the military. All of the combat veterans felt that they learned more about "dealing" with the Department of Veteran Affairs from other veterans that had experienced the same difficulties, barriers, and challenges as they transitioned out of the military.

Another unexpected finding was faith. Sixty percent of the combat veterans "found" faith while serving in a combat zone. Of the sixty percent that found faith, eighty-nine percent of them maintained their faith after transitioning out of a combat zone and the military. Twenty-seven percent of the research participants felt that they lost their faith after serving in a combat zone. One reason cited for losing faith was having to serve multiple tours in a combat zone; they could not understand how and why God would allow them to have to serve in a combat zone more than one time. Other combat veterans felt that the horrors they saw while serving in a combat zone caused them to lose their faith. They could not understand how God had allowed



these atrocities to occur. Some combat veterans attributed the loss of faith to the acts they had to perform while deployed to a combat zone.

Finally, the researcher was expecting only to interview non-commissioned officers or enlisted members of the Armed Forces; to his surprise, two commissioned officers of the United States Air Force were a part of the research study. The addition of the two commissioned officers to the research study is valuable because it added the perspective of commissioned officers as they transitioned from active service to the civilian workforce.

**Depression.** Combat veterans that have returned from deployments in Iraq, Afghanistan, and several other locations in the Middle East are suffering from severe depression and anxiety. Numerous studies indicated that over twenty-five percent of transitioning combat veterans are suffering from severe bouts of depression (Cass & Hammond, 2015).

A recently conducted study indicated that approximately fifty percent of Americans feel that veterans that are returning from a combat zone suffer from numerous mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, PTSD, and anger issues. Unfortunately, this troubling statistic supports the fact that numerous Americans have negative perceptions, misunderstandings, and biases about the mental health of returning combat veterans, which has made their transition to the civilian workforce and society considerably more complicated (Schreger & Kimble, 2017).

Over three million members of the Armed Forces have deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, and Operation New Dawn since the attack on the World Trade Center on the 11th of September 2001. Millions of returning combat veterans have experienced numerous difficulties that have severely hampered their transition to civilian society as well as the civilian workforce. Many of the returning veterans have suffered from severe bouts of anxiety and depression, which has negatively impacted their ability to function and

maintain relationships. Additionally, if left untreated, mental health issues such as depression and anxiety can lead to suicidal ideation, as well as several other issues (Elnitsky et al., 2017).

According to Kato et al. (2016), approximately two million combat veterans have deployed to a combat zone in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation New Dawn, Operation Enduring Freedom, and other locations in the Middle East. Approximately twenty percent of returning combat veterans are dealing with numerous mental health issues. Over twenty-four percent of these veterans are dealing with severe bouts of depression, with another thirty-five percent reporting that they are suffering from severe anxiety. The above-mentioned mental health issues greatly contribute to the numerous difficulties that combat veterans have encountered in their transition to the civilian labor force.

According to Dillon et al. (2018), returning combat veterans that have displayed symptoms of PTSD, anxiety, and depression are subject to an increased risk of suicidal ideation. Additionally, many returning combat veterans have suffered from feelings of guilt and shame that is associated with PTSD, depression, and suicidal ideation.

According to Ahern et al. (2015), over forty-four percent of transitioning combat veterans have reported numerous barriers, challenges, and difficulties in civilian work and life. Many returning combat veterans that have served in Iraq and Afghanistan have suffered from symptoms of PTSD, severe depression and anxiety, and alcohol abuse. Over thirty-seven percent of veterans that have served in both conflicts have reported suffering from severe bouts of anxiety and depression.

**Self-medication.** The sub-theme of self-medication (e.g., alcohol, marijuana) emerged from the theme of depression. Eighty-seven percent of the combat veterans reported using alcohol and marijuana to assist them during their period of darkness and depression. According

to Elbogen et al. (2014), a large number of veterans that have served in a combat zone are susceptible to alcohol abuse. The abuse of alcohol greatly contributes to significant challenges, barriers, and difficulties for combat veterans when they are transitioning to civilian life and work.

**Loss of identity.** Millions of combat veterans will be transitioning from military service to civilian society and civilian employment. Many of these combat veterans will have a challenging time dealing with the loss of their military identity. Combat veterans who are retiring will have served in the Armed Forces for a minimum of twenty years and all of their adult life. Their military identity has become a part of who they are. The loss of their military identity can potentially make the combat veterans feel unsure about who they are and how they fit in with their new civilian counterparts in the civilian workforce. They feel as if they do not belong in civilian society or in civilian employment (McAllister et al., 2015).

The research of Demers (2011) showed that returning combat veterans experience a great deal of distress and stress because they are stuck in the middle of their old military culture and their new civilian culture. Their experiences during their military career and their time spent in a combat zone have shaped the identity of many combat veterans.

**PTSD.** Unfortunately, millions of combat veterans have returned from their deployments to Afghanistan, Iraq, and several other locations in the Middle East with numerous invisible wounds such as PTSD. Having PTSD makes the transition to society and the civilian workforce extremely difficult for combat veterans. Elnitsky et al. (2017) found that numerous combat veterans have PTSD, which dramatically complicated their search for civilian employment, as well as their ability to take care of themselves.

Deploying to a combat zone while recovering from a head injury, such as a TBI is an area of great concern based on the research of Helmick et al. (2015). Their research found that combat veterans who are healing from a TBI are dealing with great pain and run the risk of sustaining permanent neurological damage if they incur a second injury to the brain.

Additionally, they also supported the research of Elbogen et al. (2014) which found that combat veterans who have received a diagnosis of PTSD have a propensity for increased anger and irritability which tend to be associated with an increase in violence and aggression. The research of Elnitsky et al. (2017) found that combat veterans who have PTSD are unable to function well in society and the civilian labor force. Additionally, these combat veterans do not like being anywhere where there are large crowds of people.

**Suicidal ideation.** The research of Elnitsky et al. (2017) showed that over three million veterans have served in a combat zone in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation New Dawn, and Operation Enduring Freedom. Many of these combat veterans have returned to society and the civilian workforce with numerous difficulties and challenges such as PTSD, TBI, and suicidal ideation. According to Haller et al. (2016), mental health issues such as anxiety, severe depression, and PTSD have contributed to many veterans considering suicide. During their research, Stefanovics and Rosenheck (2019) found that alcohol contributed greatly to violent behavior and suicidal ideation among combat veterans.

**Education.** The expanded and vastly improved educational benefits of the Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 (Post 9/11 GI Bill) were signed into law on the June 30, 2008 by President George W. Bush. The Post 9/11 GI Bill has significantly impacted the ability of millions of combat veterans to attend institutions of higher education in the pursuit of their undergraduate and graduate degrees. Many of the combat veterans that have used the Post 9/11

GI Bill are the first member of their respective families to attend college, and many of them come from low-income families.

Ward (2018) stated that colleges and universities across the United States are enjoying a drastic increase in their enrollment because of the Post 9/11 GI Bill. Since its inception, the Department of Veteran Affairs has paid over ninety billion dollars in veteran educational benefits. More than two million veterans are attending colleges and universities across the United States because of the signing of the Post 9/11 GI Bill.

The Post 9/11 GI Bill has afforded millions of veterans the ability to earn their undergraduate and graduate degrees across the United States. By earning their degrees, these millions of combat veterans have significantly improved their opportunities to secure civilian employment. The importance of education was made very clear during the interview with CV12. Combat Veteran 12 was medically retired and was dealing with numerous mental and cognitive health issues that were associated with his time spent in a combat zone. Unfortunately, after deploying to a combat zone twelve different times, CV12 found himself living on the streets, he was homeless. Combat Veteran 12 utilized the Post 9/11 to earn his undergraduate degree, secure employment and living quarters, and is currently working on earning his master's degree.

**Waste of time.** Congress created the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) in 1991. The Department of Defense administers the program, and its purpose is to assist service members that will be transitioning to civilian employment. During a five to seven-day course, service members learn how to complete a resume, search for civilian employment, and pursue educational benefits at universities and colleges across the United States (Faurer et al., 2014).

While completing the literature review, the researcher found that two-hundred and twenty-seven combat veterans had participated in a recent study and eighty-four percent of the

participants had found civilian employment and eighty-eight percent of the participants recommended that their fellow veterans utilize the Transition Assistance Program (Faurer et al., 2014).

**Ignorance and discrimination.** The workforce of the United States has become very diverse. Unfortunately, many hiring managers have numerous misconceptions about veterans that are returning from a combat zone. Additionally, they do not understand the transferable and leadership skills that millions of combat veterans possess, and this does not allow many civilian organizations to tap into the vast talent pool of combat veterans (Davis & Minnis, 2017). Sadly, some of the combat veterans that participated in this research study have experienced this type of treatment from hiring managers.

The literature review in section one supported the experiences of the research participants. The research of Davis and Minnis (2017) found that combat veterans encountered numerous barriers and challenges in their attempt to secure civilian employment. Hiring managers have misconceptions about the experiences of combat veterans; they also do not understand all the talents, skills, and abilities that combat veterans possess. The misconceptions and lack of understanding on the part of hiring managers has made it extremely difficult for combat veterans to secure employment in the civilian labor force. It is critically important that human resource managers receive training on how to translate and understand the skills, knowledge, and abilities of combat veterans into the environment and business culture of their organization.

### **Summary of the Analysis**

In this section, the researcher presented the findings of the qualitative phenomenological research study. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with fifteen combat veterans in

Central Florida who deployed to a combat zone a total of sixty-one times. The data that were collected and analyzed was critical to the success of the research study and in answering the research and interview questions.

After the data were collected and analyzed, numerous themes emerged from the study, which clearly showed that combat veterans have encountered numerous challenges and difficulties in their transition to the civilian labor force. The themes that emerged were depression with a sub-theme of self-medication, loss of identity, PTSD, suicidal ideation, education, waste of time, ignorance, and discrimination.

The transitioning combat veterans were dealing with depression from the memories and horrific experiences they had from their combat tours. To cope with the memories of watching friends shot and, in some cases, blown to pieces, the combat veterans resorted to self-medication. The combat veterans were further dealing with the loss of their identity, symptoms of PTSD, and suicidal ideation.

Sadly, many of the research participants were not aware of numerous resources that were available to assist them in their transition to the civilian workforce. Many of the research participants stated that education was critical to ensuring that their transition would be successful. Surprisingly, an overwhelming percentage of the combat veterans stated that the Transition Assistance Program was a complete waste of their time, with little to nothing having been gained from their attendance. The transition of these brave soldiers has been further complicated by hiring managers that are not capable of understanding or appreciating the specific invaluable skills that combat veterans possess.

The themes that emerged were consistent with the conceptual framework and the literature review that were in Section 1. The literature review strongly supported the conceptual

framework, emerging themes, and findings of this research study. The findings clearly and concisely answered the four research questions that guided this research study from the perspective of the research participants and the interpretation of the researcher.

The numerous challenges and difficulties that these brave men have endured shows that while these combat veterans are no longer deployed to a combat zone, unfortunately, they are still in a war, a war for their lives. One thing is certain: the Department of Veteran Affairs must conduct further research to assist these brave and patriotic warriors in their transition from military service to society and the civilian workforce. Additionally, the government of the United States owes it to these soldiers to help them mentally leave the war. The memories and horrors of war have followed these brave men home, as evidenced by the number of combat veterans that are dealing with severe anxiety, depression, and elevated rates of suicide. These soldiers risked their lives to protect the freedom, values, and our American way of life. Now it is our turn to protect and serve them.

### **Applications to Professional Practice**

This section includes a detailed discussion on the applicability of the findings of this qualitative phenomenological research study concerning the professional practice of business. Additionally, this section also discusses the implications of the findings in relation to a biblical worldview and human resources.

The findings and results of this qualitative phenomenological research study showed that combat veterans have encountered numerous challenges in their transition from military service to civilian employment. One of the challenges that combat veterans have encountered in their transition is depression, which has led to using and, in some cases, abusing alcohol and marijuana, loss of identity, PTSD, and increased suicide rates.



Eighty-seven percent of the combat veterans stated that completing an undergraduate or graduate degree was critical in their successful transition to civilian work, and the time in the Transition Assistance Program, which was designed to assist veterans with their transition to society and the civilian labor force, was of little to no benefit. Sixty-seven percent of the combat veterans stated that hiring managers were not capable of translating their vast skills, knowledge, and abilities to be utilized within a civilian organization, resulting in discriminatory treatment of the combat veterans.

The results of this study can significantly advance the transition of future combat veterans of all the branches of the Armed Forces back into society and the civilian labor force. It is critically important that the leadership of each respective branch of the Armed Forces understands the challenges that transitioning combat veterans are experiencing, and that the results of this research study can assist them in their reintegration back into society and civilian employment.

The findings of this study can greatly assist the Department of Defense to make impactful changes to their Transition Assistance Program, as well as assisting the Department of Veteran Affairs to better understand and treat the challenges that transitioning combat veterans are experiencing. The findings and results of this research study can significantly impact the civilian workforce and human resources management across all of the United States by educating them on how to translate the vast talents, skills, and abilities of combat veterans.

The leadership of the branches of the Armed Forces can integrate the findings of this research study to change the current policies and procedures that are presently in place concerning the transition of combat veterans. The findings of this study will allow future transitioning combat veterans to fully utilize the benefits of the new Transition Assistance

Program, and transition to society and the civilian workforce with the full knowledge of what resources are available to them.

Over two and a half million combat veterans have deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, and many of them will be separating or retiring from military service and returning to society and the civilian workforce (Hammer, Wan, Brockwood, Bodner, & Mohr, 2019). By utilizing the results of this research study, the leadership of the Armed Forces can better prepare future generations of transitioning combat veterans, ensuring that they do not encounter the same challenges and difficulties that the current generation has endured. The veterans will be better prepared for their transition, as well as being knowledgeable about the resources that are available to assist them in their transition. Potentially, this will result in decreased rates of severe anxiety, depression, violence, alcoholism, and suicide.

The Department of Defense (DOD) created the Transition Assistance Program during 1991, to assist transitioning military personnel to adjust to civilian society and the civilian workforce (Faurer et al., 2014). Every facet of the military, our society, and the civilian workforce has changed drastically since the creation of TAP. Eighty-seven percent of the research participants stated that TAP was a complete waste of their time, and sixty-seven percent of the combat veterans stated that they had not been adequately prepared to transition. What has been learned from the lived experiences of the research participants can be invaluable in assisting the DOD in making changes that are desperately needed to truly assist combat veterans with their transition to society and the civilian labor force. The next generation of transitioning combat veterans will know what resources are available to them and how to translate their military skills, knowledge, and abilities in a manner that will be easily translated by human resources managers. The knowledge that has come from the research study can contribute to TAP creating a

curriculum that could be done in the classroom or online and would give transitioning combat veterans insight and set realistic transition expectations for combat veterans.

The Department of Veteran Affairs is understaffed and experiencing problems due to a large turnover of employees, which has contributed and exacerbated the challenges that combat veterans are encountering during their transition (Chavez et al., 2019). Veterans are at an elevated risk for suicide. Veterans suicide is a top priority in public health (McCarthy, Hoffmire, Brenner, & Nazem, 2019). To combat veteran's suicides, President Trump tasked the Director of White House Domestic Policy Council Director, Joe Grogan, and VA Secretary Robert Wilkie to create a cabinet-level task force. Director Grogan and VA Secretary Wilkie created the President's Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End the National Tragedy of Suicide (PREVENTS) task force (Rubin, 2019).

Sixty-seven percent of the combat veterans stated that they were not adequately prepared or aware of the benefits that were available to them through the VA. Additionally, a surprising finding was the loss of faith during their deployments by the research participants. The researcher attended a Town Hall Meeting in Tampa, Florida, during January 2020 that included the Executive Director of PREVENTS and the Deputy Director for the VA center for Faith and Opportunity Initiative (CFOI). Contact has been made with each of the listed individuals, and the research study will be provided to them to assist with the challenges and difficulties that combat veterans are encountering.

The Department of Veteran Affairs can benefit from the findings of the research because they would have valuable and current information about the difficulties and challenges that are experienced by combat veterans. The combat veterans wanted peer-to-peer counseling because

they felt that another veteran could genuinely appreciate their pain and lived experiences, which can potentially lead to the development of a support system for transitioning combat veterans.

Globally, there is a potential shortage of competent and capable leaders. Civilian organizations are spending over fifty billion dollars annually to develop leadership skills and qualities among their employees (Kirchner, 2018). Combat veterans possess leadership skills, talents, and abilities that would be invaluable for civilian organizations. Transitioning combat veterans are accustomed to dealing in a global environment and have been tested in real-world high-pressure situations. Additionally, they possess experiences and talents that the average civilian worker does not have. The findings of the research study can be invaluable to human resource managers in implementing programs, policies, and procedures directed towards veteran-friendly hiring initiatives. The civilian workforce, hiring, and human resource managers can benefit greatly from the findings of the research study.

**Biblical implications.** When the combat veterans return to society and are in search of civilian employment, some of the combat veterans required a helping hand, and God tells us to help each other, as is seen in Matthew 25:35-40,

For I was hungry, and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick, and you took care of me, I was in prison, and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell

you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me. (New Revised Standard Version)

Society owes it to these brave men to assist them in their transition to society and the civilian workforce.

Members of the military have committed their lives in service to our country. They willingly put themselves in harm's way for the greater good, living their lives the way God wants us to. God tells us the importance of loving and helping our neighbors in John 15:13, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (New Revised Standard Version).

Sadly, many people in our society are looking out for their own interests, not caring about the best interest of others, which is not how God wants us to live. This is made evident in Philippians 2:4, "Let each of you look not only to his own interests but also to the interests of others" (New Revised Standard Version). Military members risk their freedom and lives in service to their brothers and sisters of our great nation. Now that they are struggling in their transition, the rest of us have an opportunity to look out for their best interest.

At some point in life, everyone needs help. At our lowest, when we are in pain and hurting, we turn to God, and He comforts and blesses us. God gives us exactly what we need and when we need it to make our lives better. God would want us to comfort and help combat veterans that are struggling and hurting. God told us to comfort one another in Corinthians 1:3-5,

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those

who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. (New Revised Standard Version)

John 15:12 tells us, “This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (New Revised Standard Version). Living our lives in the manner that God has told us to would require that we love and help combat veterans as they transition back home and search for civilian employment.

### **Recommendations for Action**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to explore and understand the numerous challenges and difficulties that millions of combat veterans have encountered as they transition to the civilian labor force. The researcher has three recommendations to assist combat veterans with their reintegration into the civilian workforce.

**Recommendation One.** The findings of the research study showed that the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) was not effective in assisting veterans transitioning to society and the civilian workforce. The first recommendation is to do a complete overhaul of the Transition Assistance Program. The senior leadership of the branches of the Armed Forces, the supervisors, and managers that are running the Transition Assistance Program desire to make the transition experience of combat veterans successful. However, they are not in a position to truly understand the challenges that transitioning veterans have encountered, and their current program is not effective. The program should not begin in the last month of a military member's career; it should start a year before they separate or retire.

TAP should conduct exhaustive research to determine what are the most efficient and effective means to prepare transitioning combat veterans. Additionally, they should survey recent members who have retired or separated to learn what was and what was not effective in

their recent transition. TAP should also incorporate an online class that can be taught by civilian hiring or human resource managers to assist transitioning veterans in translating their military skills into the civilian culture and better prepare the veterans for the transitions. Finally, TAP should include a component that is taught by certified VA counselors that can clearly and concisely inform transitioning veterans of all the resources that the VA offers them. These recommendations will ensure that TAP remains current with real-world experiences of transitioning veterans and that the program will remain effective, and that the veterans are aware of what the VA offers them.

**Recommendation Two.** The findings of the research study showed that many of the combat veterans were not aware of the resources and benefits that were available to them through the Department of Veterans Affairs. Once military members separate or retire, their transition is now the responsibility of the VA. If the VA is an immediate part of the Transition Assistance Program, it will ease the transition of the veterans to the VA system. The VA should be involved with the transition while the members are still on active duty, offering counseling services during TAP. Local VA offices should offer face to face or online classes that will assist veterans with their transition and sign them up for VA healthcare. Face to face or online classes will also assist veterans that are suffering from anxiety, depression, PTSD, and suicidal ideation.

The VA currently has a one-day transition program for veterans; they should hire veterans that have successfully transitioned to civilian employment. Veterans have overwhelmingly stated that they prefer to deal with other veterans who understand and appreciate their lived experiences; they feel more comfortable with peer-to-peer counseling. The VA should expand the program to include family members because they are also significantly

impacted by the transition. The veterans that the VA hires should be trained to assist the transitioning veterans with their disability cases.

**Recommendation Three.** The final recommendation is to implement a system that requires enlisted members to obtain an undergraduate degree while on active duty. Eighty-seven percent of the transitioning combat veterans identified education as a critical component of their successful transition to the civilian workforce. It is a mandatory requirement for a commissioned officer to have earned an undergraduate degree. However, there is no requirement for non-commissioned officers or enlisted members to have any level of education. It is an unwritten rule that enlisted members must have a minimum of an associate degree to get promoted to the top two grades. The military pays up two hundred and fifty dollars per credit hour for members to attend accredited institutions of higher learning.

Enlisted members earn college credits for attending basic training, tech school training, and upgrade training. Additionally, they can also earn college credits for military education training programs such as Leadership Schools or the Non-Commissioned Officer Academy, the Senior Non-Commissioned Academy, and any other training courses they attend. Additionally, they are allowed to take the Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support (DANTES) and College Level Examination Program (CLEP) test. If they pass the tests, they will earn three to twelve credits per exam. The price for taking these exams for military members is free. An enlisted member can earn their associate degree without taking a single traditional class. The military should make it a mandatory requirement for enlisted members to have earned their undergraduate degree by their tenth year of service.

These recommendations for action will impact future generations of transitioning combat veterans. The results of this research study will be disseminated through the dissertation process



at the Liberty University Library. The research will be a part of the academic journal database at Liberty University titled ProQuest Dissertation and Theses. Additionally, the results of this study will also be disseminated to combat veterans and the leadership of the military via publications, academic journals, through presentations at conferences, and speaking events at military bases around the United States. Additionally, the researcher will share his research with members of the Department of Veteran Affairs, such as the Executive Director of President Trump's PREVENT program, and the Director for the VA Center for Faith and Opportunity Initiative (CFOI).

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

The United States has been in the war on global terrorism for the last eighteen years. As military members return from their deployments, they continue to serve in the military until they reach completion of their military obligation or retirement. They will continue to deploy to a combat zone until they do separate or retire. Approximately two hundred thousand combat veterans will be transitioning to civilian work annually for the next six years (Cassidy, 2015). The hardships, challenges, and difficulties will continue to hinder the transition of combat veterans until further research is conducted, and solutions are implemented.

The researcher has four recommendations for future research. The research study included fifteen combat veterans; all of them were males. Unfortunately, the researcher was unable to recruit any female combat veterans for the research study. The first recommendation is to conduct a similar research study with female combat veterans to determine if females are encountering similar challenges and difficulties in their transition to society and the civilian workforce.

The researcher recruited members of the Army, Navy, Marines, and the Air Force to participate in this research study. The researcher was unable to find any members of the Coast Guard to participate in the research study. The second recommendation is to include Coast Guard members in similar research to determine if they are going through similar difficulties and challenges in their pursuit of civilian employment.

The research study had a total of fifteen participants. Eighty-seven percent of the research participants felt that earning an undergraduate or graduate degree was a critical factor in their search for civilian employment. Of the fifteen combat veterans, thirteen percent were commissioned officers. The third recommendation is to conduct research that included an even number of non-commissioned and commissioned officers to determine if the transition to society and civilian employment is easier for commissioned officers who usually separate or retire from military service with a graduate degree.

The researcher conducted his study in Central Florida. To determine if combat veterans are encountering similar challenges and difficulties in their transitions, conduct a similar study in the Northeast, Southeast, Southwest, and Northwest sections of the United States. If the results are different than the results of this research study, then it must be determined why they are different. The researcher has only begun to scratch the surface of the challenges and difficulties that combat veterans have encountered in their transition. The researcher looks forward to conducting further research to assist combat veterans and their families.

### **Reflections**

From beginning to end, this has been a journey that has been exhilarating, very rewarding, and occasionally frustrating. The researcher is a disabled enlisted combat veteran who served twenty-six years in the United States Air Force; for this reason, this topic was

significant to the researcher. In the beginning, the researcher was concerned about his personal biases and how they may impact the research study. For this and many other reasons, the researcher kept a reflective journal that was consistently updated.

However, as the study began and the interviews started, the researcher kept to the approved interview questions and asked additional follow-up questions as needed. The lived experiences of the combat veterans were powerful and compelling, often filled with emotion. Upon completing the interviews, several of the research participants commented that the interview was therapeutic for them, which only confirmed the importance and significance of the research study for the researcher. The personal biases or any preconceived ideas of the researcher had no impact on the interviews or the research study.

The researcher feels that he has only scratched the tip of the iceberg concerning the difficulties and challenges that combat veterans encounter as they leave the military and plans to continue to research the subject to add to the body of knowledge. An important fact that emerged for the researcher was facing and admitting the fact that he has several symptoms of PTSD from his combat tour. The researcher has sought out treatment for his symptoms.

Beyond being a combat veteran, the researcher is also a minister in his local church. As such, the Bible and the word of God have guided him through this entire process. God guided the researcher, and the researcher gives all the glory to his Father, God.

### **Summary and Study Conclusions**

This qualitative phenomenological research study addressed the challenges and difficulties that millions of combat veterans have encountered during their transition to society and the civilian labor force. The larger overarching problem was better understood by conducting in-depth interviews with fifteen combat veterans in Central Florida. The interviews

explored the numerous challenges and barriers that combat veterans must navigate to make a successful transition to society and the civilian workforce.

Four research questions guided this research study: (1) What were the lived experiences of combat veterans as they transitioned from military service to civilian employment? (2) What were the challenges and difficulties that combat veterans experienced when seeking civilian employment? (3) What are the successes that combat veterans have experienced in transitioning to the civilian workforce? and (4) What perceptions do human resource managers have about combat veterans and their transferable skills?

To answer the four research questions, the researcher conducted a qualitative phenomenological research study, which included a conceptual framework, a thorough literature review, and in-depth interviews with fifteen combat veterans. After the researcher collected the data, it was analyzed, and numerous themes emerged.

The themes that emerged were depression with a sub-theme of self-medication, loss of identity, PTSD, and suicidal ideation. Additionally, the themes of education, waste of time, ignorance, and discrimination also emerged from the research study. The researcher presented his findings, applications to professional practice, Biblical implications, recommendations for action, recommendations for further study, and his reflections about his journey.

The themes that emerged from the research study were consistent with the conceptual framework and the literature review. Additionally, the literature review supported the conceptual framework in Section 1 as well as the themes, and the findings of the study. The findings answered the four research questions that guided the research study. The researcher accurately and honestly reported the findings from the perspective of the fifteen research participants.

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## Appendix A: Interview Guide

Date and Time of Interview:

Location of Interview:

Researcher: Frank Hernandez, Jr.

Research Participant:

Welcome, and thank you so much for participating in this research study. The purpose of this research is to explore the challenges and barriers that combat veterans encounter when transitioning from military service to the civilian workforce.

Are you comfortable and prepared to answer some questions? If you do not feel comfortable answering any question or desire to stop the interview, just let me know. Take as much time as you need to answer any question.

Let's go over the questions and feel free to stop me at any time if anything I ask is not clear to you.

RQ1 - What were the lived experiences of combat veterans as they transitioned from military service to civilian employment?

Interview Question 1 - How was your transition from active military service to the civilian workforce?

Interview Question 2 – Have you been adequately prepared to reintegrate into civilian life and workforce?

RQ2 - What were the challenges and difficulties that combat veterans experienced when seeking civilian employment?

Interview Question 3 - Have you suffered any physical distress associated with your transition to the civilian workforce?

Interview Question 4 - Have you experienced any emotional trauma while reintegrating into the civilian labor force?

Interview Question 5 - What frustrations have you experienced in your transition from the military to civilian employment?

Interview Question 6 - What if any coping strategies and support are available to assist you in dealing with the challenges and frustrations you have encountered?

RQ3 - What are the successes that combat veterans have experienced in transitioning to the civilian workforce?

Interview Question 7 - Has your transition to the civilian workforce been successful? If so, how?

Interview Question 8 - Did the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) contribute to your successful transition to civilian employment?

RQ4 - What perceptions do human resource managers have about combat veterans and their transferable skills?

Interview Question 9 – Have human resource managers been able to understand and translate your military skills to be utilized in civilian employment?

Interview Question 10 – Do human resource managers value and appreciate your talents and skills, as well as your ability to function in the most difficult, demanding, and stressful situations?

Closing Statement: Thank you so much for participating in the study. I assure you that your answers are confidential. They will be published in the dissertation. However, names will not be included. Additionally, your interview transcript will be securely stored. I will send you a copy of the transcript for your review. If you see that anything is not accurate, please correct it and send it back to me for correction. Again, I truly appreciate your assistance with this research study. Do you have any additional questions for me?

Thank you and God Bless.



## Appendix B: Demographic Questions

1. What was your age when you joined the military?

17-24

25-32

33-40

41-48

49- 55

2. What is your current age?

17-24

25-32

33-40

41-48

49- 55

3. What branch of the Armed Forces did you serve in?

Air Force    Army    Coast Guard    Marine Corps    Navy

4. What was your rank at the time of your separation/retirement?

E1       O1

E2       O2

E3       O3

E4       04

E5       05

E6       06

E7       07

E8       08

E9       09

010

5. How many times did you deploy to a combat zone?

1

2

3

4

5

More than 5

6. What is your race?

American Indian or Alaska Native

Asian

Black or African American

Hispanic or Latino

Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

White

7. What was your level of education before separating/retiring?

High School or GED

Some College

Associate's Degree

Bachelor's Degree

Master's Degree

Doctoral Degree/Professional Degree

8. Type of separation/retirement:

Forced (Injury – physical or mental)

Completion of service

Retirement

9. Did you receive VA Disability?

No

Yes

10. Type of disability:

Cognitive

Physical

Psychological