

DISSERTATION

SOLDIER-STUDENTS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF  
SERVICE MEMBERS TAKING ONLINE COURSES WHILE DEPLOYED IN COMBAT

Submitted by

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## ABSTRACT

### SOLDIER-STUDENTS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF SERVICE MEMBERS TAKING ONLINE COURSES WHILE DEPLOYED IN COMBAT

The purpose of this study was to describe the phenomenon of United States Service Members (SM) who took online college courses while deployed in combat zones. Prior to this, only two phenomenological studies had identified soldier-students as their focus. This study sought to more formally understand the experiences and implications of SM as soldier-students. The study examined how SM experiences and/or SM educational goals were affected across three categories of environmentally influenced variables, and explored what the military and higher education institutions could do to improve quality of life for SM. Nineteen participants from the Army, Air Force and Navy were interviewed about their experiences of matriculating online while being deployed. Overall, the results show that soldier-students were resilient in both their missions and educational pursuits. Primarily, the combat environment played a crucial role in the phenomenon, while the participant's general higher education experiences and their course-specific experiences added additional qualities to the phenomenon. Finally, this qualitative research presents the participants' own perspectives: how they benefited, how it reduced their stress, how kept them grounded in a larger reality, and why they would recommend for others to take classes during their deployments. Significantly, the participants showed a great desire to learn and to be supported by the military and higher education. The findings of this research demonstrate that soldier-students are resilient in their missions and education equally, yet this resiliency must be better understood and further developed towards meeting the needs of SM, the military and universities.

*Keywords: Soldier-students, online classes, deployments, military students, adult learning*

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## CHAPTER 1-INTRODUCTION

*“There isn't a battle-torn country in the world where American soldiers can't earn college credit if they are determined enough” (Gallagher, 2004, November 7).*

Since the United States Military began combat operations in the Middle East region in 2001, an estimated 2.3 million service members have been deployed in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) (Bonds, Baiocchi, & McDonald, 2010). The war in Afghanistan accounts for the longest war in U.S. history with U.S. Service Members not expected to fully withdraw until 2016 (Landler, 2014, May 27, para. 1). Even when the current conflicts officially end, it is probable that a continued military presence along with other NATO troops will be necessary to stabilize and support fledgling governments. At the heart of these conflicts are American Service Members. For many, combat has become a way of life because of multiple deployments to these regions. About forty percent of U.S. military personnel have deployed more than once and over two hundred thousand have deployed more than twice (Defense, 2012, July 31).

Many of these service members are not only serving in combat but are also engaged in a new and intriguing phenomenon. These service members, or soldier-students, are serving in combat while simultaneously continuing their college educations in online programs. This phenomenon is made possible by the expansion of technology in war zones and higher education institutions providing expanded online course offerings (McMurray, 2007). The Department of Defense (DOD) estimated that the Tuition Assistance (TA) program, including the Montgomery G.I. Bill and the Post-911 G.I. Bill, aided 302,000 service members who utilized \$531 million dollars to pursue postsecondary education in 2010 alone (Scott, 2011). In 2009, an estimated \$360 million TA funding paid for distance learning courses. While it is unknown how much DOD TA

funding was specifically utilized by soldier-students taking courses in combat, with this type of investment, it is critical to understand this phenomenon better.

An additional and major concern is whether or not soldier-students are earning credits that have value. In 2011, the United States Government Accountability Office examined the DOD Education Benefits and determined that the DOD accountability of educational benefits lacked oversight. Specifically, from 1991 to 2010, the DOD utilized the Military Installation Voluntary Education Review (MIVER) to evaluate programs, yet it only reviewed face-to-face courses offered at military installations (Scott, 2011). There was no formal review for courses or programs receiving TA funding that were offered on college campuses or online. Additionally, there was no formal complaint tracking system to help identify problems and issues faced by soldier-students receiving TA. The report found that the “DOD does not systematically target its oversight efforts based on factors that may indicate a higher risk for problems” (Scott, 2011).

This lack of oversight led to accusations of abuse of the TA program particularly by for-profit colleges, which typically only offer entirely online courses, programs and degrees. Between 2010 and 2012, six congressional hearings found an array of disturbing tactics and poor outcomes by for-profit colleges including low graduation rates, high student debt, false promises about accreditation and job forecasts, deceptive recruiting practices and aggressively targeting veterans and service members (Golden, 2010, September 23; Leo, 2012, April 26; Leo, 2012, February 16; Ordonez, 2012, August 8). The congressional hearings further found that for-profit colleges accounted for 35% of the estimated 1.8 billion tax dollars available for veterans’ education since the implementation of the Post-911 G.I. Bill in 2009 (Ziezulewicz, 2010, October 6). In an attempt to address these issues, President Barack Obama signed an Executive Order in April 2012, increasing oversight strategies and “marginalizing colleges with poor graduation rates and

demanding better college comparison information for all student veterans” (Leo, 2012, April 26, para. 1).

This oversight was an important step, yet there continues to be little known about the experiences of soldier-students and few studies have examined the many questions that surround this phenomenon. As McMurray noted,

Ten years ago, it would have been highly improbable that service members deployed in combat zones could have been provided the opportunity to have access to higher education while deployed...further scholarship related to the efficacy of distance learning under duress or in adverse conditions is needed (McMurray, 2007).

### **Purpose Statement**

The intent of this phenomenological study was to discover the experiences of soldier-students who take online courses while deployed in combat zones.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the experiences of soldier-students who take online courses while deployed in combat zones?
2. How does the combat environment affect the soldier-student’s experiences of taking online courses while deployed in combat?
3. How does taking online courses in combat relate to the educational goals of soldier-students?
4. What measures can be taken by soldier-students, by higher education institutions, and by faculty to improve the experiences?

## **Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this study, soldier-students are those pursuing higher education while also in the midst of traditional military combat (McMurray, 2007; Roach, 2001). Combat is a war zone or theater of operation where the soldier receives combat pay. Combat missions are the occupations or assignments that soldier-students conduct in the combat zone. Online classes are entirely online courses or classes, excluding military training, that meet completely through the Internet and are offered through an institution of higher learning in the United States.

## **Delimitations**

There are several delimitations for this study. First, this study examined U.S. soldier-students as defined by McMurray (2007). Second, the participants were volunteers and had the option to withdraw from the study at any time. Third, the study examined this unique phenomenon since the start of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan in 2001 and Operation Iraqi Freedom in Iraq in 2003 and proceeded through the present. Fourth, the combat zones specific to this study were military combat bases located in Afghanistan or Iraq. Additionally, students must have been stationed or visited a combat base for a period of at least ten days while simultaneously taking an online course. Finally, the online courses only included courses or classes offered through institutions of higher learning. This did not include any training courses offered by the military or any other outside agency. To qualify as an online course, all meetings, activities and interactions necessarily took place through the Internet.

## **Significance of the Study**

This study helps to fill a gap in the research literature and to shed light on what soldier-students experienced as they took online courses while simultaneously deployed in combat. This area of phenomenological study can lead to better decision making, planning and budgeting by the federal government. Higher education can determine how to design better courses, provide

support, and recruit and retain students. Soldier-students can be made aware of the experiences of other soldier-students that will lead them to examine their educational benefits and usages. Most importantly, this study provides a forum where the lived-experiences of soldier-students can be told.

### **Federal Government**

The federal government, including the DOD, congressional leaders, and researchers, recognize the need for more oversight of how education for the military is evaluated and funded. A growing concern is that, "Taxpayers are investing more than \$30 billion a year into companies that operate for-profit colleges, including 25% of Department of Education student aid funds, 37% of Post-9/11 G.I. Bill benefits, and 50% of Department of Defense Tuition Assistance funds" (U.S. Senate, 2012, July 30, para. 4). With this type of investment, it is important to understand the educational experiences of soldier-students and whether or not the experiences are valuable. This study can also serve as a basis for additional studies that shed further light on this phenomenon.

### **Higher Education**

Institutions of higher learning have recognized the additional economic challenges they have faced since the current recession began in 2007. Each institution is focused on increasing funding through a multitude of avenues, including federal funding options, as well as student recruitment. As noted earlier, military students are targeted in higher education recruiting because of the various funding options they have available to them. How are institutions identified, or recognized, for being true advocates for military students, especially soldier-students? What must an institution provide for soldier-students to be perceived as an institution of quality? There is little current literature to guide institutions about what to do to both earn that important federal funding

as a source of revenue, moreover, even less guidance in providing the quality education that soldier-students are seeking.

There is also little known about the ways that faculty deal with this unique phenomenon of instructing and/or mentoring students in combat. How does faculty determine what participation looks like while student-soldiers are engaged in combat and how does faculty assist students when they face time constraints, technology issues, and/or the sheer insistent reality of combat? “So it goes for the soldier-student: Academic schedules are at the mercy of defense strategists. All-nighters include disruptions by enemy fire and incoming wounded” (Gallagher, 2004).

Higher education institutions also provide veteran organizations for students and can be a voice for soldier-students. They can seek to help students find institutions that are truly military friendly and can be advocates for soldier-students who may be facing an issue with a faculty member or in a course. For example, the Student Veterans of America recently revoked the charters to twenty-six schools because they felt they were exploiting the organization to appear more military friendly (Leo, 2012, April 26). Student-veteran organizations are crucial for potential soldier-students as they consider which institutions to attend. These organizations can utilize this and other studies to further their understanding of the unique phenomenon, and to become better advocates for soldier-students.

### **Soldier-students**

One of the key elements of this study is to help guide future service members in understanding the experiences of taking online courses while being deployed in combat. While each soldier-student’s experiences will be unique, there may be issues and concerns that potential soldier-students should consider. They also need to recognize that not all colleges may provide them with an education that is truly valuable and worth the price of their educational benefits.

Finally, and most importantly, this study tells the real stories of soldier-students taking courses while deployed in combat zones. Combat is a unique and chaotic experience, often putting its participants in adverse and harrowing environments. What possesses soldier-students to sit in a dark tent late at night with just a computer, taking classes to improve their future, while paradoxically not knowing if they will even make it home alive? These stories need to be told because these are the stories of American heroes, and can be of value in the service of other soldiers and institutions of higher education.

### **Researcher's Role**

My dissertation topic involves men and women who are both service members in combat and students in online courses. This is a group of people that I relate to in many ways, including my own combat experiences and over ten years of designing and teaching online courses. I found it vitally important that I take time to reflect on who I am as a person, a student, a teacher, a professional and a combat veteran before I embarked on this study. I had a great many things to consider about why I was interested in this topic, about my own social constructs, about how power dynamics may have influenced interactions and interpretations, and about the significant ethical considerations in writing about combat experiences.

### **Topic Interest**

My dissertation topic—exploring the experiences of online soldier-students in combat—is truly meaningful to me. I have worked in the field of instructional design and educational technology in higher education for over ten years.

The second aspect of the study relates to my service in the military. I was a member of the Army Reserve for twelve years and was activated and deployed to Iraq for thirteen months. I have considered my experiences as a soldier and I wonder how soldier-students manage their time,

stress and fatigue. I have considered the many emotional challenges that a soldier may encounter—fear, anger, helplessness, grief, depression, homesickness, anxiety, sadness, loneliness, irritability, and/or difficulty concentrating—while then also managing the expectations of online education.

### **Socially Constructed Identities**

I must acknowledge that I am a white female completing a doctorate degree. I recognize that my background may be very different than many of the participants in this study.

### **Insider and Outsider Perspectives**

I recognize that I certainly have power as an insider in this study. One of the biggest challenges I encountered was unconsciously overlaying my own combat experiences over those of the participants and subsequently failing to hear their stories. I could not assume that my deployment or combat experiences were at all like those of participants in the study.



## **CHAPTER 2-LITERATURE REVIEW**

To better understand the phenomenon of service members taking online courses while deployed in combat, it was important to examine the relevant literature. First, this chapter will discuss the U.S. Military, particularly the service members in combat operations; military distance education history; and military distance education research. Second, this chapter will examine the experiences of taking distance education courses and programs, focusing specifically on the past ten years and the advent of online or eLearning programs. Third, a presentation of the very limited literature, specific to soldier-students taking distance education courses while deployed in combat, will be presented. Finally, there will be an examination of the concerns that have been raised about the military and distance education.

### **The United States Military**

The U.S. Military has been actively engaged in combat operations since 2001. These conflicts include Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan and Operation Iraqi Freedom in Iraq. Combat operations began on October 7, 2001 in Afghanistan, and commenced on March 20, 2003 in Iraq. Officially, the last U.S. service members left Iraq on December 18, 2011, and the majority of troops are expected to leave Afghanistan by the end of 2016.

### **Service Members and Combat Operations**

Since the U.S. Military began combat operations in the Middle East region in 2001, an estimated 2.3 million service members have been deployed in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) (Bonds et al., 2012). About forty percent of U.S. military personnel have deployed more than once and over two hundred thousand have deployed more than twice (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2012, July 31). Active duty military accounted for close

to 1.4 million service members deployed, with the reserves deploying over 235, 000, and the National Guard deploying over 304, 000 service members.

Of those service members who have deployed in combat since 2001, 47% were between the ages of 20 and 24 years old, with 89% being male. Caucasian service members made up a significant majority at 66%, while African-Americans made up 16%, and Hispanics just 10% (Committee, 2010). Over 55% of active-duty service members and 49% of reserve-component service members from all service branches were married at the time of their deployment, and both active duty and reserve-component military members had 2 children on average (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2012, Jul. 31).

### **Military Distance Education History**

The military has an extensive history of distance education. As early as the 1940's, the military utilized print-based correspondence courses (CNET, 1984). The use of television training courses followed in the early 1950's (Kanner, Runyon, & Desiderator, 1954). In 1973, the Air Force Institute of Technology (AFIT) created Teleteach, which used the telephone to provide instruction to remote areas (Christopher & Milan, 1981). Computers first made their appearance in military distance education in the 1980's with the Army instituting Asynchronous Computer Conferencing (Waggoner, 1992). The majority of these distance education programs delivered information statically, and remained non-interactive. In 1991, the AFIT adopted a video teleseminar to be utilized in training. It provided a one-way video, paired with a two-way audio system. The AFIT went on to create a broadcast station that included seventy-one Army Logistics Management College sites (Westfall, 1994). The real emphasis on using distance education to train service members was to save money.

By the late 1980's, military training planners had already adopted the view that it would be cheaper to send instruction to people who could study in their own home than it would be to pay per diem and travel [expenses] to bring these personnel to a central location (Duncan, 2005).

The implementation of distance education in the U.S. Military has not been without its obstacles. Various hurdles had to be overcome and were highly dependent on the attitudes of senior leadership. Some leaders did not believe that service members benefitted as greatly through distance education as they did in face-to-face training programs. Other leaders were concerned about the loss of revenue to surrounding communities when service members did not come to their bases for training. The transition to distance education suffered because of these and other conflicts, and most online programs ended up being nothing more than the paper correspondence courses being repackaged online or onto CD-ROMs. One of the most significant setbacks was in 1993 when new senior leadership spent the entire distance learning budget paying other bills, demonstrating little to no commitment to the advancement of distance learning (Duncan, 2005).

Throughout the 1990's, the U.S. Military was being downsized and budgets were being reduced. By the year 2000, the military had been reduced by 31% from 1990 (Scott, 2011). In 1996, the Army created a master plan that strongly advocated for distance education to save money. There was also a recognition that service men and women were deploying globally with longer and with more persistent missions, and that distance education must be supported by leadership in order to maintain force-readiness. This stance carried over into other branches of the service. In 1997, the Department of Defense (DOD) launched an Advanced Distributed Learning (ADL) Initiative (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Garza-Mitchell, 2009). The ADL was a collaborative effort between the DOD and the White House Office of Science and Technology. "The ADL

movement became the voice of change for distance learning, which moved from a primarily paper-based and television delivery format to one that would include the value and benefit of the emerging training technologies, including the Internet” (Duncan, 2005).

With leadership now providing the much needed backing for military distance education, the biggest obstacle faced by the military was attempting to transfer the vast amounts of paper-based course material into online formats, while not duplicating content and not straining already tight budgets. It was also important that multimedia, that was costly to develop, be utilized in multiple courses instead of duplicating the production of non-interactive materials. The concept that emerged was the Shareable Content Object Reference Module (SCORM) (Duncan, 2005). This was a significant breakthrough for military distance education and allowed content to be broken down into small blocks where each module could be used repeatedly in a variety of training courses, saving an immeasurable amount of money.

The military did not focus solely on using distance education for training, but as a way to recruit and retain high achieving service members. Notably, more high school graduates were choosing college over the military. In August 1999, the Secretary of the Army created a plan that would allow recruits to not only join the Army, but also achieve college degrees (Friel, 2001). The U.S. Army launched eArmyU.com in January 2001, with the purpose of providing a one-stop shop for service members to sign-up for classes and programs, to access financial aid, and to take their courses. The program began with 120 colleges and was initially focused on recruiting; however, it also became a retention tool. In the first six months, 14% of service members had to reenlist in order to continue to take advantage of the program (Friel, 2001). In the first year of operation, about 70% of participants in eArmyU had never taken college courses through any Army program (Friel, 2001). The success of eArmyU was unparalleled, as noted: “In a mere 20 months ... more

than 30,000 eArmyU soldier-students were pursuing their college degrees online from 32 countries, 4 U.S. territories, and 47 states. In 2002, the total number of eArmyU course enrollments is expected to top 45,000” (Lombardo, Fairbanks, & Johnson, 2002, p. 3).

In August 2011, the DOD announced it would be shutting down eArmyU because it had reached its recruitment and retention goals. Despite the end of eArmyU, it was clear that service members had embraced distance education for both training and college credit, with 78% of tuition assistance going toward online courses. During the lifespan of eArmyU, an estimated 11,741 service members had earned certifications or degrees through eArmyU (Tice, 2011).

### **Military Distance Education Research**

Military distance education has been a target of research since its inception. With billions of dollars and millions of service members, what worked or did not work in military distance education had become a template for business and higher education distance education planning. The earliest research studies on distance education were conducted in the 1950’s and examined how television-based training programs compared to face-to-face training. Two studies found there were no differences between the distance education training programs and the face-to-face training programs (Kanner, Runyon & Desiderator, 1954; Kanner, 1958).

Since those early studies, others have examined the differences in learning comprehension between learners at a distance and those that receiving training instruction face-to-face. Wisher, Priest and Glover (1997) examined the use of audio teletraining for Army National Guard unit clerks. They found that those taking the audio teletraining received higher passing rates on the first tests taken after the course than those who received face-to-face instructions. Wisher and Curnow (1999) found no difference between those taking training at a distance and those completing a National Guard information operations course face-to-face. Phelps, Ashworth and Hahn (1991)

also found no difference in tests, homework and practical exercise scores in a Reserve Component Engineering Officer Course taken in the classroom and through computer-mediated conferencing. Despite the disbelief of students who did not believe they would be able to learn as much through distance education, results showed no difference in knowledge and application as those taking face-to-face courses. Schumm, Webb, Turek, Jones, and Ballard (2006) compared traditional face-to-face training with distance education training in promoting critical reasoning and thinking skills. These factors were directly aligned with student satisfaction and the feeling of usefulness of the training. Traditional and distance education produced similar results, and the study found no difference between the formats.

More recent studies have examined a number of different issues. Artino (2009) examined academy cadets and assessed how motivational beliefs (self-efficacy and task value), negative achievement emotions (boredom and frustration), self-regulated learning strategies (elaboration and metacognition), and course satisfaction affected continuing motivation to enroll in online courses. The study found that task value beliefs were the most consistent positive predictors of elaboration, metacognition, satisfaction, and continuing motivation. On the other hand, student levels of boredom and frustration were statistically significant predictors of metacognition.

Harrison (2012) examined the barriers that active duty Air Force personnel have in participating in higher education. A main barrier for not participating in higher education while at their home base was its interference with family time, which was already limited due to deployments. One participant stated, "Between work and deployments, the little time I have, I want to spend with my family" (p. 69). Other barriers indicated specific accessibility issues related to their deployments, like not being able to attend class regularly, or the courses being offered at an

inconvenient time or in an unsafe area. One of the recommendations to improve participation in higher education was to “Provide courses at austere remote locations” (p. 53).

Bonk and Wisner (2002) examined ways to adapt the benefits of “collaboration and e-learning to military training in a soldier-centric paradigm” (p. 3). A complaint often heard in online education and training is the lack of interaction and the feeling of isolation. The researchers examined over two hundred database resources to outline the collaborative tools that the military might employ to encourage more success in online training. Bonk and Wisner found that success in online training depended on the following: roles of the instructors, moderators, perceptions of the learners, methods for online collaboration, interaction schemes, collaborative tools, online communities, and learning styles.

Gaddy (2000, April) examined the history of distance learning, particularly in the 1990’s, and made recommendations for non-technical approaches that the Army should use to ensure successful training. The most notable finding in this study was the need for cultural change and attitudes about distance learning because technology itself would not create quality distance learning. Gaddy asserts, “But the next ‘great leap forward’ in DL will be driven, not by technological marvels, but by understanding the basis of human learning, both individually and in groups, and incorporating that understanding in instructors and courseware” (p. 40).

Wisher, Sabol and Moses (2002, May) examined the history of distance learning in the U.S. Army and specifically focused on the soldier’s perspective. The study found that 85% of participants felt moderately confident they could complete online education or training (p. 8). Also, about two-thirds of the participants either still believed that face-to-face training was more effective or were simply not sure (p. 8). Confidence in successfully completing online courses was

highest among those that used the Internet regularly, among younger respondents, and those that had previously completed online or CD-ROM courses.

Sakamoto (2004, March) discussed how there was no clear choice of instructional media in military distance education and often times they were combined with other formats, and/or modules were dispersed in fragmented parts, resulting in a lack of clear evidence whether training had been effective. Sakamoto had asked, “What methods of instruction and training within the electronic learning construct provide the highest rate of return on resources invested” (p. 4). Sakamoto’s research examined three primary constructs, including media richness, content flexibility, and forced engagement, to determine their efficacy in facilitating learning. The findings asserted that media richness did not affect learning outcomes, which indicated that creating more advanced media options would not be cost effective based upon the evidence. The flexibility of the content, which allowed participants to move through the content in individual ways based upon learning styles, did not produce higher learning outcomes. Forced engagement between the content, instructor and other participants was also not found to be significant.

Myers (2008) studied senior officers who had completed a two-year distance education program through the United States Army War College. The study found that those that had more interaction and more true to life applications showed significant improvement in the application of strategic-level cognitive skills. The specific improvement was noted in the areas of performing long-term planning, boundary spanning, and network development.

Fall, Kelly and Christen (2011) examined the concept of instructional immediacy, or the need to communicate in a way that makes the person receiving the communication feel physically or psychologically closer to the sender of the message. It was proposed that the more instructional immediacy occurring in a course, the more it would increase the student’s motivation to learn. The



study compared military online students with civilian online students and found no difference between the two groups. Both groups were able to similarly identify the computer-mediated instructional immediacy, which resulted in a similar motivation to learn.

Hills (2010) examined the relationship between one's status as a digital native or a digital immigrant with student attrition in online distance learning environments in the Army War College and the Air Command and Staff College. Hills proposed that if there was a difference in the response to the use of technology based upon one's status, then the design and delivery of the course would affect satisfaction and attrition. The study confirmed that digital natives, who had extensive technology experience, had lower attrition rates. Also, prior completion of an advanced degree resulted in lowered attrition rates. The results suggested that if more is known about the age and technology background of students taking online courses in these programs, different learning approaches could be designed to support both digital native and digital immigrant learners.

Weston (2010) looked at student preferences in order to improve distance education for those in the United States Army Command and General Staff College. The study found that the majority of the participants favored print-based content, instructors facilitating courses, and flexible completion times and locations.

### **Distance Education Research**

Over the past ten years, online education has significantly expanded its role and options in all higher education institutions. This section will discuss the research related to the experiences of the study's participants in online education.

#### **General Information about Online Education**

Each year, annual studies attempt to gauge the status and trends of online education in the U.S. One of the longest running studies is by Allen and Seaman (2010), which was their sixth

annual study of online learning in the U.S. The study provided an overall picture of who is taking online courses and how this affects higher education. In the fall of 2008, an estimated 4.6 million students were enrolled in an online course (p. 5). Allen and Seaman (2010) examined evidence on the growth of online education which showed that online course enrollments continue to grow far more quickly than the traditional face-to-face higher education student population, which has remained constant across seven annual reports. Next, the study looked at the economic impact of online education. “The economic impact has been greatest on demand for online courses, with 66 percent of institutions reporting increased demand for new courses and programs and 73 percent seeing increased demand for existing online courses and programs” (p. 1).

Next, higher education institutions were asked if offering online education was part of their long-term strategy. The reports showed only a small increase in colleges believing that online education was vital for their long-term strategies. This may be due to the majority of higher education already offering online courses and programs. Two additional questions addressed whether the faculty had accepted online education, and whether or not they had received training to teach online. The results indicate faculty acceptance has remained constant since 2000, with less than one third of chief academic officers believing that their faculty has accepted the value of online education. Lastly, only 19% of higher education institutions currently do not offer some format of faculty training programs for online teaching (p. 3).

Another approach in gauging online education in the U.S. has been to interview those involved in the delivery. Heubeck (2008) conducted interviews with higher education officials about online education to determine the pros and cons of this delivery method. The two advantages presented were that online education provides a diverse educational experience and it pushes the traditional boundaries for both professors and students. First, this included a growth area of more

international and military students matriculating. Next, professors noticed how it was changing their way of teaching and thinking. Finally, for students who typically do not participate well in traditional classrooms, they were more likely to get involved online when they had sufficient time to think about what they wanted to contribute. This last result was particularly true for older and non-traditional students. The disadvantages discovered included: the need for disciplined students, extra work for professors, a lack of niche programs, and the proliferation of unreliable or sham online programs.

### **Effectiveness of Online Education**

A common research area in online education is its effectiveness. Just as early studies looked at the difference between online and face-to-face traditional classrooms, more recent studies have examined similar comparisons of online programs with each other, and the overall effectiveness of online education. Merisotis and Phipps (1999) examined the research of online courses through the 1990's to identify gaps in the literature, the effectiveness of online education, and overarching trends. The meta-analysis found that most research concluded that learner outcomes were similar for traditional and online learning, and that both student and instructor feedback was favorable. Bristow, Shepherd, Humphreys, and Ziebell (2011) also found that online learning outcomes were comparative with face-to-face courses.

### **Online Education Experiences**

The experiences of the students and faculty in online environments continue to garner research inquiries. This area of research is often correlated to the success of the students or teaching improvements by faculty. Other areas of current research concern the varieties of technology that are utilized and how those technologies play a key role in the online learning experience.

Young and Norgard (2006) attempted to develop a survey for determining the quality of students' experiences in online courses. Key to their study was their extensive review of the existing literature. This meta-analysis helped them identify several areas for inclusion in their survey that were common in the literature. Student satisfaction with online instruction included interactions between students, timely interaction between the instructors and the students, a consistent course and program design, and also technical support and flexibility. Similarly, Song, Singleton, Hill, and Koh (2004) determined that course design, learner motivation, time management, and overall student comfortableness with online technologies, all significantly impacted the experience students had in online courses. Additionally, students noted a negative experience when they encountered technical issues, a perceived lack of community, unworkable time constraints, or difficulty understanding course objectives.

Interestingly, Palloff and Pratt (2007) also describe the concept of community and the concepts of an active and collaborative learning environment related to online courses. Gonzales and Lao (2005) also supported the concept of learning communities as essential. Gallagher-Le Pak, Reilly and Killion (2009) concluded that an online community should be structured to ensure that it takes place, because when students are busy, they will not create that community on their own.

Another aspect of the student experience is the question of the overall student experience. McKeown (2012) attempted to determine if online learning can reproduce the full college experience. While a "full college experience" was difficult to define and was subject to individual interpretations, the researchers were able to categorize that experience into three separate areas: education, social and extracurricular. With the advent of learning communities that address the educational needs of students, so too has arrived the advent of online social groups, clubs and even

virtual worlds; the researcher argued that much of the full college experience can be achieved in an online environment that integrates the education, social and extracurricular.

A reliable evaluation of the student experience is imperative to improving online education. Often times the experience and/or its measurement is not forthright. Dziuban, Moskal, Kramer and Thompson (2012) hypothesized that the ambivalence that students feel towards their online courses modifies the scope in evaluating their learning experiences. When course quality is clearly poor or clearly superior, students can easily judge their experience, yet when there are both poor and superior qualities, the student experience becomes ambivalent.

### **Drop Outs and Barriers to Online Education**

With estimates of dropouts in online education as high as 50%, the area of student dropouts and barriers to enrolling and completing online education has been a common research topic (Frankola, 2001). Muilenburg and Berge (2005) examined student barriers to online learning and found eight factors perceived as barriers, including: administrative issues, social interaction, academic skills, technical skills, learner motivation, time and support for studies, cost and access to the Internet, and technical problems. Each of these barriers was significantly affected by the participant's perceptions, such as: the perceived ability and confidence with online learning technology, confidence in the effectiveness of online learning, online learning enjoyment, success in online courses completion, and the likelihood of taking a future online course. The more confident, more experienced and more positive students were, the less affected they were by these barriers.

Morris, Finnegan, and Wu (2005) found the three factors that contributed most to success in online education were the number of discussion posts viewed, the number of content pages viewed, and the seconds spent on viewing discussion pages. Similarly, Park and Choi (2009) found

that dropouts had significantly different external factors than completers. Students were much more likely to drop out if they did not receive support from their family or the institution while taking an online course, even if they had previous academic success. Also, students were much less likely to drop out of an online course when they were satisfied with the course and felt that it was applicable to their lives. Frankola (2001) reported lack of time, lack of motivation, poorly designed courses and incompetent instructors as the reasons for attrition. Hara and Kling (2001) found the most common reasons for distress were technological problems and communication. Wang, Foucar-Szocki, Griffen, O'Connor, and Sceiford (2003) found that students drop out because of lack of personal motivation, poor course design, conflicts with work and family, and whether they had learned what they wanted to learn.

Dropping out of an online course often occurs early in the course. Simpson (2004) estimated that 35% of students withdraw from online courses before the first assignment is due. Tyler-Smith (2006) proposed that cognitive overload was a key contributor to high dropout rates, particularly in the first few weeks of a course and recommended a number of tactics that could be utilized to offset cognitive overload. Osika and Sharp (2002) found that students must not only learn to master the content of the subject, but must also learn the technology and that most students over-estimated their technology ability which led to cognitive overload as they adapted.

### **Soldier-Students: Taking Courses while Deployed in Combat**

There is very little known about the experience of soldier-students that take online courses while deployed in combat. McMurray (2007) examined the legacy of the Montgomery G.I. Bill along with the technological changes in higher education that made this phenomenon possible, yet acknowledged that scholarship in the field was severely lacking. He emphasized the need for an examination of quality, technology and delivery systems, in addition to the effectiveness of

completing distance education while in hostile conditions. McMurray stated, “It will be through additional study of the present reality that all parties involved in the processes of distance education in the military will gain a greater grasp of what works, what does not, as well as future trends” (p. 149). One additional study examined the need for library support for service members taking an online course while deployed in combat (Murphy, 2009). A focus group examined Embry-Riddle’s library services and searched for specific problems that soldier-students might encounter. These included: lack of electricity, unreliable Internet, long-lines and limited usage time at Internet cafes, and the lack of availability of education offices. Despite these issues, soldier-students still reported the ability to access library resources when needed.

Beyond the previous studies, what is known about this phenomenon has only come from news and magazine reports. These articles gave a varied picture of what the experiences might be like, and of what difficulties are often overcome to complete classes in a combat zone. There are seven major themes that arose. First, the most significant challenge for soldier-students was either the lack of Internet access or else poor Internet stability and bandwidth (Murphy, J, 2010; Peter, 2011; Kenyon, 2002; Jopling, 2010; Carnevale, 2006; Bates, 2012; Benedetti; 2010). Second, soldier-students tended to use online classes as a way to fight the boredom they experienced between missions (Lorenzetti, 2007; Peter, 2011; Rickley, 2010). Third, taking online courses in combat helped soldier-students to forget about the demanding realities of combat (Gallagher, 2004, November 7; Schlicht, 2009). Fourth, soldier-students used laptops less, and began utilizing mobile devices that offered even more flexibility (Bates, 2012; Halligan, 2007; Lorenzetti, 2007). Fifth, adequate communications between soldier-students and colleges was vital in helping the student to be successful (Gallagher, 2004; Padilla, 2003; Jopling, 2010; Keleher, 2011; Naylor, 2011; Carnevale, 2006). Communication with soldier-students and institutions included: financial

aid, advising, and most importantly, rapport building between the instructors and soldier-students. Sixth, the nature of the job or combat mission affected the soldier-student's ability to complete courses (Peter, 2011; Naylor, 2011). Finally, inflexible time constraints were significant obstacles (Jopling, 2010; Naylor, 2011).

### **Concerns about the Military and Distance Education**

As noted in Chapter 1, the DOD's Tuition Assistance (TA) program estimated that 302, 000 service members utilized \$531 million dollars to pursue postsecondary education in 2010 (Scott, 2011). In 2011, the United States Government Accountability Office examined the DOD Education Benefits and determined that the current DOD accountability of educational benefits lacked oversight. Specifically, from 1991 to 2010, there were no formal reviews for courses or programs receiving TA funding whether offered on college campuses or online. Additionally, there was no formal complaint tracking system to help identify problems and issues from soldier-students receiving TA.

This lack of oversight led to accusations of abuse of the TA program, particularly by for-profit colleges. Between 2010 and 2012, six congressional hearings found an array of disturbing tactics and poor outcomes by for-profit colleges which included: low graduation rates, high debt, false promises about accreditation, false job forecasts, deceptive recruiting practices, and aggressive targeting of veterans and service members (Blumenstyk, 2006; Golden, 2010; Goldberg, 2012; Uwiman, 2012; Leo, 2012, February 16; Leo, 2012, April 26; Ordonez, 2012). Accusations also arose about for-profit recruiters signing up severely brain-injured veterans simply to access their benefits (Leo, 2012, February 16). President Barack Obama signed an executive order in April 2012 increasing oversight strategies and "marginalizing colleges with poor



graduation rates and demanding better college comparison information for all student veterans” (Leo, 2012, para. 1).

The college organization, Student Veterans of America, has also expressed concerns. SVA revoked charters for twenty-six for-profit colleges after finding that they were not in compliance with policies of the organization; specifically, a student veteran was not the main point of contact for the organization. It is thought that of the forty institutions that were originally suspended, some either did not understand the model the SVA used, or did understand it but ignored it “for personal gain” (Leo, 2012, April 26, para. 2).

There are a number of tougher and newly proposed legislative initiatives targeting for-profit schools by both Republicans and Democrats in Congress. Most legislation proposes limits on the amounts of federal funding for-profit schools can receive, yet none of this proposed legislation has gathered much support. The main purpose for this type of legislation is to promote discussion between the two parties about what can and should be done to protect veterans and military soldier-students, including preserving the federal funds made available to SM who pursue higher education. “Supporters from the Military Officers Association of America and Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America said they hope the legislation prompts schools – and in particular, for-profit colleges– to clean up their recruiting practices and education priorities.” (Leo, 2012, February 16, para. 8)

## **CHAPTER 3-METHODOLOGY**

The intent of this phenomenological study was to discover how soldier-students experienced online courses while deployed in combat zones. This chapter discusses the methodology that was utilized for the study and includes the research rationale and design, and information about participants and site, data collection, data analysis, and trustworthiness.

### **Research Approach and Rationale**

This study utilized a phenomenological approach because of the unique situation of the study (Creswell, 2009). The study was unique because it examined the lived-experiences of service members who took online courses while deployed in combat zones. As Strauss and Corbin (2007) stated, a reason for choosing a phenomenological study is to better understand a phenomenon when there is little already known about it (Strauss & Corbin, 2007). The phenomenological paradigm was also chosen because the aim of the study was to specifically capture a phenomenon “in meanings and essences of experience rather than measurements and explanations” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 21). According to Patton (1990) the phenomenological study focuses on what and how people create experiences. The concurrence of combat and continuing education is unique, and can only occur because specific factors have aligned to make it possible. Soldier-students and the environments in which they served and learned were critical factors in the service members’ experiences. From these experiences the participants have generated perceptions, motivations, and actions based upon their lived-experiences of taking online classes while deployed in combat zones.

Further, as Finlay (2009) noted, phenomenological studies should seek “experiential meanings aiming from a fresh, complex, rich description of a phenomenon as it is concretely lived” (Finlay, 2009, p. 1). Also, phenomenology should not seek to substantiate the experiences of the participants against the independent reality of the event (Husserl, 1969; Kvale, 1996). This was

important in this study because the focus was on the individual interpretations and meanings made from the experiences, and was not an attempt to create empirical generalizations about the phenomenon. Husserl (1969) recommended that the researcher attempt to grasp the essence of the specific phenomenon through the participants' experiences. A soldier-student essence was what was shared by those in the study and was what makes the experiences unique. As the literature review demonstrated, the experiences of soldier-students remained a mystery even after over ten years of combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. There had been studies focused on the Tuition Assistance expenditures for service members, research on various military online education programs, and anecdotal criticism of for-profit colleges, yet the experiences of the soldier-students remained untold. The intent of this study was to tell the lived-experiences of these soldier-students.

### **Participants and Site**

I initially sought ten to fifteen participants who had served in a combat zone since 2001 and who had taken an online course(s) from an institution of higher education. As Creswell notes (2007), criterion sampling is a good option for phenomenological studies when the set criteria lead to participants having significant experiences of the phenomenon. Additional participants were sought when the initial group did not generate saturation of the phenomenon during the data analysis. After nineteen participants were interviewed at least twice, saturation occurred and no new experiences were found to have occurred. I attempted to access a variety of ages, genders, military branches, ranks and missions to gain the widest perspectives of the phenomenon. Participation in the study was voluntary and the participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. None of the nineteen participants chose to withdraw from the study. The study complied with the guidelines for the protection of human participants, and the participants were

not contacted until after the study had been approved by the Colorado State University (CSU) Institutional Review Board.

There was no singular site utilized for this study. This was due in part to the difficulty in finding enough potential participants at one site who met the criterion, and who also wished to participate in the study. One cooperating university in the mid-west was utilized as the base of the study.

To be able to retrieve potential participants' information, I set up an online self-enrollment form on a secure website. I then spread word about the study and the location of the website in a variety of ways. First, a student veteran's organization at the cooperating university agreed to distribute the study information and to share the link to the secure website with the self-enrollment form. The university's IRB was also contacted and agreed with the proposal approval from the CSU IRB. Second, posters were hung around the cooperating university's campus with the self-enrollment website link. Third, information about the study and the website link was distributed on the RallyPoint.com social media website. RallyPoint is a military and veterans' professional network similar to LinkedIn, and whose purpose is to share and build military connections. Finally, I utilized snowball sampling by asking colleagues, veterans with whom I served, and also potential participants, for referrals to other potential participants. This was by far the most successful strategy and garnished at least half of the participants. A particularly helpful colleague distributed the study information to a Special Forces group that continued to share the information.

As soon as a participant's information was collected on the secure website, I contacted the potential participants and arranged the first interview. The first thirty-minutes of the first interviews were used to screen the participants and ensure they met the minimum qualifications for the study. During the screening interview, as recommended by Seidman (2006), the potential

participants were asked if they met the criteria. They were also asked to describe their experiences of taking online courses while deployed in a combat zone. No further information about the phenomenon was provided to the participants. Phenomenological studies require that the participants express their experiences of the phenomenon without anyone defining the phenomenon or instituting parameters that may impede the participant's expression (Ashworth, 1999). The purpose of the screening session was to confirm that criteria were met, but also to gauge the depth of the experiences to ensure that they were significant and meaningful (Creswell, 2007). The questions asked during the screening interview are located in Appendix D. Once the participants had successfully met the criteria, the interview schedule continued. A second interview was scheduled at the end of the first. During the second interview, the remaining questions were asked. Four of the participants were interviewed in person. The remaining participants, who were distributed globally, were interviewed by telephone.

### **Ethical Issues**

There were several ethical concerns in this study. One ethical issue was the possibility of violating military security levels. Participants may have inadvertently discussed top secret or secret information. Participants divulged their deployment locations, missions, strength of force, and rotations. This information was removed from the results of the study. Second, there was a concern that participants may disclose information about themselves or others in their unit that were cause for concern: particularly, the disclosure of suicidal thoughts or behaviors, anxiety or depression, violence towards other members of the military or civilians and non-combatants (outside of mission objectives), criminal behaviors, chemical and/or alcohol usage, financial concerns, and/or family stresses.

The first issue was handled most effectively by the use of participant release forms. By clearly stating that restricted information would not be discussed on the release form, it may have dissuaded participants from sharing that information. The second ethical concern was that participants may make statements or express feelings that were concerning or troubling. There was a plan in place in case this was to occur. Following Seidman's (2006) advice, "interviewers must avoid changing the interviewing relationship into a therapeutic one" (p. 107). If a participant became distressed, they were allowed to work through the issue that caused the distress, or the interviewer could refrain from the line of questioning that was causing his or her distress (p. 108). If the participant made statements that caused the interviewer to be concerned for his or her safety, the interviewer should have concluded the interview and discussed with the participant his/her option for finding help or discussing his/her feelings further. These options included military base mental health services, university and community college mental health services, and local community mental health services. Additionally, local law enforcement would have been contacted if the participant expressed violence towards him or herself or others outside of their combat experiences. The consent form did include the following cautionary statement,

You should know, however, that there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your information to other people. For example, the law may require us to tell authorities if we believe you pose a danger to yourself or someone else.

Fortunately, the participants in this study did not express any obvious mental health difficulties or indicate violence that would have required me to take further action.

### **Data Collection**

Once the participants were selected to participate in the study, each were interviewed according to the processes established by Irving Seidman (2006). This included a three-interview

series where each participant was interviewed twice within a short amount of time. The first interview was a “Focused Life History” where “the interviewer’s task [was] to put the participant’s experience in context by asking him or her to tell as much as possible about himself or herself in light of the topic up to the present time” (p. 17). The second interview was “The Details of Experience” which focused on the phenomenon and the lived experiences of the participant in the phenomenon (p. 18). The second interview concluded with a “Reflection on the Meaning” where participants simply reflected on the meanings of the experiences they had with the phenomenon. Seidman called this the “making sense” or “making meaning” process that let the participants understand how they have arrived at their present situation (p. 18). Each interview lasted between sixty to ninety-minutes as proposed by Dolbeare and Schuman (Seidman, 2006). The interviews were spaced between three days to a week apart (Seidman, 2006). Participants were interviewed at a location that was convenient, and that also provided a safe, quiet and uninterrupted interview environment. For the majority of the participants, this was achieved by telephone after they had returned home from work. Face-to face interviews occurred at two restaurants and in an available office at the cooperating university’s campus. The participant’s identities were masked to protect their identity and privacy. Their identity was changed utilizing the NATO Phonetic Alphabet system, i.e. “Alpha”, “Bravo”, etc. (National Imagery and Mapping Agency, 1969, p. 18).

Notes were kept during each interview, and audio recordings were made of all interviews. The interview questions and notes were put into the participants’ folders in the same manner for each interview and were available for an audit trail (See Trustworthiness) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Addresses, phone numbers and e-mail addresses were added to the folder flaps. Additionally, the gift card information sent to each participant was also noted in the folder. Finally, e-mails and member-checking comments were printed and put into the participants’ folders.

The audio of each interview was recorded using a hand-held digital recorder. After the interview, the audio file was downloaded and transferred to a password-protected desktop computer accessible only to the interviewer. The audio file on the hand-held digital recording device was then deleted. The audio was then transcribed, and the transcriptions were stored on the password-protected computer. All audio and written documents utilized the phonetic identifier and were maintained on a password-protected computer and only accessible by the interviewer. The participant's identities were maintained in an Excel Spreadsheet on the same computer. Written consent forms were maintained in the participants' folders in a locked desk drawer. A copy of all electronic documents and audio files were backed up on a password-protected, external hard drive only accessible to the researcher.

### **Data Analysis**

A thematic analysis of the interview transcriptions utilizing the six phases of analysis as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) was then conducted. Thematic analysis is a qualitative analytic process for "identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). One transcript at a time was analyzed until at least three analyses of the transcripts had been completed. From this analysis, each participant's transcript generated themes. The thematic analyses were maintained in an Excel document for all participants. Additionally, unexpected and unusual themes were also examined. Finally, the themes "that address a larger theoretical perspective in the research" were examined (Creswell, 2009, p. 187). This was done by combining together each participant's Excel file data into a master Excel file. From this compilation, the themes became ordered together and thus established the themes of the phenomenon.



In order to observe scientific research protocols, prior to starting the analysis, a researcher reflexivity journal was begun and a follow up reflexivity was conducted (to what was provided in chapter 1). The purpose of the reflexivity was to attempt to bracket out researcher assumptions and biases, in an attempt to identify the data in its purest form (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Further, to ensure remaining as unbiased as possible during the data collection and analysis, the reflexivity journal was utilized throughout the process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A second audit journal was kept, simply to provide an area to make notes, write questions, track thoughts or concerns. This second journal has been made available as part of the audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The participants in the study responded rather quickly and an effort to conduct the first and second interviews in a short amount of time was made in order to not prolong the obligation of the participants. After each interview with each participant, the researcher reviewed the audio file prior to the next interview. This allowed the researcher to make notes and write additional questions to be used in the next interview. After all thirty-eight interviews were completed, the audio files were transcribed. As the analysis of each transcript was conducted, the researcher noted additional follow-up questions.

While interviews were conducted, data saturation was sought. After the first ten participants, it was clear that new experiences with the phenomenon were still being recorded. The researcher continued to interview participants and started to reach saturation after fifteen participants. Four additional participants were then interviewed to be sure that data saturation was met. After nineteen participants, no new types of experiences with the phenomenon were recorded and no additional participants were recruited.

During the first phase of the analysis, the data was thoroughly examined (Braun & Clark, 2006). The transcripts were read and reread, while key statements and identifying patterns were

examined for a direct link to the phenomenon. Tentative terms or definitions were created to identify the statements, and the reasons behind the codes and notes were added to the audit journal. In the second phase, the initial codes and patterns were generated (Braun & Clark, 2006). Statements were broken into parts when different ideas or codes arose. This process occurred three separate times and each statement was checked and rechecked against the assigned definitions to ensure the code was not straying from the assigned definitions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Further, the reflexivity journal was utilized to ensure that bias was kept out of the analysis as much as possible. In the third phase, which is called a search for themes, similar codes were combined into themes and sub themes (Braun & Clark, 2006). “A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (p. 82). Explanations of analysis, code definitions, and why codes were combined were noted in the audit journal.

The fourth phase of the analysis which is called reviewing themes was then conducted. The themes and the definitions were reexamined, and then modifications expanding some concepts, while condensing others were made to the themes. At this stage, by combining the themes into a master Excel file, the themes from the larger background of the data could be examined. As Braun and Clark (2006) stated “At this level, you consider the validity of individual themes in relation to the data set, but also whether your candidate thematic map ‘accurately’ reflects the meanings evident in the data set as a whole” (p. 91). At this phase, Braun and Clarke (2006) warn that coding and analysis could go on “ad infinitum”. Moustakas (1994) observed that the essences of the experiences are never fully exhausted and do not constitute universal truth, but come from a specific place and time and are based upon the individual’s experiences as seen from the perspective of the researcher.

In the fifth phase, defining and naming themes, each theme was described in a few sentences and identified sub-themes when necessary (Braun & Clark, 2006). Once the theme was clearly defined and named, then data and statements to support the theme were organized in the Excel file. The descriptive sentences were documented in the reflexivity journal. After this phase, each participant was sent his/her transcribed analysis and asked for feedback as part of the member-checking process. Any relevant additional questions noted for the participants were also asked, and their feedback and clarifications were included into the master Excel spreadsheet. In phase six, the final analysis and write-up were concluded (Braun & Clark, 2006). The write-up included “rich, thick description” to not only be the voice of the participants, but also to ensure external validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Trustworthiness**

Establishing measures of trustworthiness are an essential element of a qualitative research study. Numerous measures were employed to establish trustworthiness as established by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Creswell (2009).

### **Reliability Procedures**

Creswell (2009) advocated for several rather basic reliability procedures that were utilized in this study. First, the transcripts were double-checked by the researcher for obvious mistakes. Second, when the coding was conducted, the definition of each code was checked repeatedly against the transcriptions to ensure that the definition remained constant. If a coding definition began to slip, then the definition of that code was reexamined along with the last ten items to have been labeled with that code. If any slippage in code definition was found, then items labeled with the code were reexamined to determine any definition slippage among coded items. This occurred several times when trying to determine whether an item should be part of the combat environment

or part of the actual student experience. Subsequently, this was resolved by dividing the statements between the two themes. Third, both “negative and discrepant information that runs counter to the themes” was looked for in the study (Creswell, 2010, p. 192). There were no obvious negative or discrepant matters noted. Finally, all notes and transcriptions were labeled and maintained in each participant’s folder to ensure each participant’s information remained in one location, and would not be confused with other participants’ data or analyses.

### **Validity Strategies**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) have proposed four important aspects of validity: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. All four of these were utilized to ensure the truthfulness of this study.

**Credibility.** Credibility helped to establish the truths of the study because it ensured that the researcher bias was accounted for, and that the participants were given the opportunity to evaluate the researcher’s interpretations. This study employed a member-checking process to allow the participants to review both the transcriptions and interpretations of the researcher. Each participant received an e-mailed copy of his or her analysis Excel file containing a full interview transcript. Participants were given two weeks to answer any follow-up questions and to review the analysis. Additions and changes were made when necessary. Also, participants will also be given access to the final study.

**Transferability.** Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that the only way to demonstrate transferability or application in other settings is to provide rich, thick description. “With such detailed description, the researcher enables readers to transfer information to other settings and to determine whether the findings can be transferred ‘because of shared characteristics’” (Erlandson

et al., 1993, p. 32). Specific passages from the transcriptions were utilized in the results to demonstrate examples of themes.

**Dependability.** To show the dependability of the study, an inquiry-audit was utilized (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An inquiry audit was conducted at the end of the study, and during the final write-up which allowed for an outside researcher to examine all aspects of the research. The auditor determined the “accuracy of the study and evaluate[d] whether or not the findings, interpretations and conclusions are supported by the data” (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006, para. 1).

**Confirmability.** The most important elements of this study were the participants and confirmability ensures that the participants’ stories are told with as little researcher bias as possible. In an attempt to control bias and reaffirm confirmability, several steps were taken. Personal reflexivity was provided. “Reflexivity is an attitude of attending systematically to the context of knowledge construction, especially to the effect of the researcher, at every step of the research process” (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006, para. 1). Next, a reflexivity journal was maintained throughout all phases of the study. Also, an audit trail, which described the steps in the development of the research proposal, data collection and analysis and write-ups, was established. This was done through journaling about the process. The audit trail and journal were written in the same format, but were maintained separately.

## **CHAPTER 4-RESULTS**

### **Overview**

Chapter 4 examines the findings of this study. Part 1 is an introduction to the nineteen participants in this study. Included in the introductions is a short biography of the participants. Each participant was interviewed twice for this study. Part 2 presents the Contextual Framework by reviewing the participants' backgrounds. Part 3 discusses the results, including the experiences of the participants in a combat environment, in taking courses, their support mechanisms, and their perspectives of their experiences. Part 4 summarizes the findings of this study. Part 5 completes the chapter with a discussion on the phenomenological essence of experiences of the participants.

### **Part 1: The Participants**

Listed below, in alphabetical order, are the biographies for each of the participants. These are then followed by Table 1 which shows the participants' demographics, branch, rank, MOS/NEC (Military Occupational Specialty/Navy Enlisted Classification), current military status, deployments, classes taken while in combat and the degree being worked towards.

#### **Alpha**

Alpha is a 32 year-old male who served eleven years of active duty in the U.S. Air Force. He earned the rank of E-4 and his Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) was Combat Communications. Alpha was married during all of his deployments to someone he met in middle school, and they now have two children. Alpha came from a military family background. His father was a Vietnam Veteran, having served in the Army. His brother also served time in Afghanistan. Alpha join the military because many people in his family had served, and it was "part of what the family did". In high school, Alpha was mostly an "A" student, but did not take any advanced math courses because he did struggle with math. He finished high school through a

Department of Defense independent study high school program, because he worked overseas for the Army and Air Force Exchange Service (AAFES). Alpha eventually decided to go to college while in the military because he could see how the combination of both military and civilian education had helped his brothers secure good civilian jobs.

Alpha served approximately three years in combat deployments between 2001 and 2011. His most recent combat deployment was from 2012 to 2013 and lasted twelve months. It was during this most recent deployment that Alpha took five college courses during a sixteen-week semester. Only two of these courses were officially designated as online classes. For the other three courses, Alpha personally went to the instructors to set up independent study courses prior to being deployed. Alpha was working on a Bachelor of Science degree at a state non-profit college.

### **Bravo**

Bravo is a 34 year-old male who retired after serving thirteen years of active duty in the Army. Bravo retired as an E-6 and his MOS was Cavalry Scout. Bravo was married during all of his deployments and has one child. Bravo had a strong military family background as his father and a number of uncles were Vietnam Veterans. His parents had both earned master's degrees and preferred that he skip the military entirely. Bravo reports that he was a standard high school student that really did not "put a whole lot of effort out in school" and that it was incredibly easy for him. Bravo had started college after high school, ran out of money, and decided to join the military. He knew that the military would help pay for college, and as part of his initial contract, received a signing bonus and choice of European duty stations. Bravo deployed into combat zones in 2004, 2008 and from 2010 to 2011. During his 2008 and 2010 deployments, Bravo completed eleven eight-week courses towards his Associate Degree.

## **Charlie**

Charlie is a 46 year-old female who is currently on active duty in the Army. She is a Chief Warrant Officer and has been on active duty for seventeen years. Charlie's MOS is a Human Resources Technician. Charlie was married during all of her deployments and has one adult child. Charlie does not come from a military or collegiate family, but had always wanted to join the military. She graduated from high school early and married a service member. At 29 years old, Charlie joined the Army so that she would have money for college, and would be able to support herself if needed.

Charlie started taking college courses while in the military because she enjoyed it and earned promotion points. Her educational endeavors eventually earned her the rank of Warrant Officer. Charlie deployed into combat zones from 2004 to 2005, and again from 2008 to 2009. During the deployments, she took seven college courses towards her Bachelor's Degree.

## **Delta**

Delta is a 32 year-old male who is currently in the Air Force Reserve. He was also on active duty and completed a short stint in the Air National Guard. Delta enlisted in the Air Force and later earned his commission as a Captain and as a Combat System Officer. Delta was married during all of his deployments and his wife also spent time in the Air Force. They have two children. Both of Delta's parents were college graduates and his father had served three years of active duty in the Air Force. Delta was a very good high school student and was in the top ten percent in his graduating class. After high school, Delta had started going to a community college but ran out of money to continue his studies. Delta joined the military for college money and to get away from home. Delta had earned numerous college credits through the Community College of



the Air Force through his completed, enlisted training. This motivated him to continue his education and finish his bachelor's degree.

Delta earned his commission and completed three deployments in combat zones between 2001 and 2012. In 2012, Delta was deployed to a border country with extensive travel into a combat zone when he attempted to take one sixteen-week college research course. After three weeks, he was forced to drop the course because he could not access library resources through a VPN (Virtual Private Network) that was blocked throughout the combat region. Delta was working on a master's degree.

### **Echo**

Echo is a 31 year-old female Air Force Captain who has served on active duty for nine years. She is currently slotted in the Air National Guard, while trying to get back on active-duty at location closer to her husband. She was an Air Battle Manager. Echo was married to an Air Force Pilot during her deployment, and they do not have any children.

Echo grew up as in Army family, and spent much of her youth on military bases. Both of her parents were in the Army and both earned associate's degrees. Her mom eventually returned to college and earned both a bachelor's and master's degree. Echo was a very good high school student and earned a ROTC (Reserve Officer's Training Corps) scholarship to attend college. In high school she was also very active in sports and activities. Her goal was to eventually go to the Air Force Academy and become a JAG (Judge Advocate General) officer. She eventually accepted the ROTC scholarship because she did not want to wait to go to the Air Force Academy. After earning her bachelor's degree, Echo received her commission. She decided to go back to college because it was imperative to earn a master's degree in order to get certain promotions.

Echo completed one deployment in a combat zone and three deployments to border countries. During her time in the combat zone, she enrolled in four courses and was able to finish three. Echo was not able to finish the third course because it occurred during a time when she was moving between locations and had extended Internet outages. She was attending a for-profit school that changed both its official name and its course expectations during her classes. After she returned from her combat deployment, she said the university was unwilling to work with her in completing the course. At that point, Echo decided to quit the college program and ceased her attendance at the college. Echo volunteered to deploy twice.

### **Foxtrot**

Foxtrot is a 26 year-old male who is still on active duty in the Army. He is an E-5 and is an Information Technology Specialist. Foxtrot was married during his deployments and has two children. Foxtrot's four grandfathers and father all served in the military. His family was supportive of him joining the military as long as he did not choose a combat related military occupational specialty because his cousin had been killed in action. Foxtrot's mother had earned a bachelor's degree. He graduated from high school early and started going to the community college because it seemed like the thing to do, but he did not really have a lot of interest in college. Foxtrot then went with a friend, met with a recruiter and decided to join the military.

Foxtrot deployed into a combat zone from 2009 to 2010, and again in 2013. In 2010, he signed up for courses but had to drop them because of the demands of his missions. In 2013, he was able to complete two courses during a sixteen-week semester. Foxtrot was working on a Bachelor's degree.

## **Golf**

Golf is a 39 year-old male who is still on active duty in the Army after 16 years. Golf started out as Military Police, and later became an Engineer. He enlisted and later earned his commission. Golf has been married for sixteen years, and has two children. Both of Golf's parents were college graduates, and it was always expected that he would go to college. Golf was an exceptional high school student, was the student body treasurer, and was an Eagle Scout. Golf credits the Eagle Scouts as making a huge difference in his life and as a big influence in his military career. While finishing his Bachelor's degree, Golf decided he wanted to be a park ranger and was told the quickest way to do that would be to join the Army as a Military Police Officer.

After finishing his bachelor's degree, he enlisted and then immediately put in for a direct commission, just as he had promised his mother. Golf had originally started out his college career in electrical engineering and had later switched to wildlife management. However, the military decided to commission him as an engineer based upon his early interest in engineering. Golf served three combat tours, with the first being from 2005 to 2006. The second combat tour was in 2008, and the third was in 2011. In 2006, he completed one six-week course, and in 2008, he completed one six-week course. Golf was taking courses towards his master's degree. He attended a for-profit college.

## **Hotel**

Hotel is a 29 year-old female who spent ten years in the Army Reserve and is now out of the military. She earned the rank of E-6 and was a Medic. She was engaged during her deployment, and her fiancé also took college courses. She does not have any children. Hotel's father had served in the Marines when he was younger, but she does not consider her family a military family. No one in her family went to college until her mom eventually earned a bachelor's

degree later in life. In high school, Hotel was an average student, but admitted that she did not put out much effort because she did not like school, and she did not feel it was challenging for her. Hotel did not know what she wanted to do after high school, and she knew her family could not afford for her to go to college. She decided to join the Army Reserve to help earn money for college.

Hotel deployed for one year into a combat zone from 2008 to 2009. During that time, she was working on general education credits towards her bachelor's degree and completed eight eight-week courses. Towards the end of her deployment, when she was looking to transfer her credits to another college, she became aware that the college that she was attending was not regionally accredited. She learned her degree and her credits would not transfer to most regionally accredited colleges. She decided to finish the Bachelor's degree at the non-regionally accredited college because the military accepted the degree from that college.

## **India**

India is a 44 year-old male who has served on active duty in the Army for twenty-five years. He became a Chief Warrant Officer in the Special Forces after having started in the Army as a Military Police Officer. India married his high school sweetheart, and they have been together for twenty-five years. They have three children, and one of their sons is in the National Guard. India's family has a long history of military service. All of the oldest sons, from his great grandfather down to the current generation had served. His grandfather was a World War II Veteran, and his father was a Vietnam Veteran. India admits that he barely made it through high school, and he said that the only reason he went to school was for the girls. India decided to join the military because he wanted to be a fighter pilot. He knew he needed to earn money for college, so he and a buddy decided to join together.

India took a few college classes in the 1990's to go into law enforcement. He was accepted to the Green to Gold program and intended to study, however the funding was reduced during the Clinton Administration. After 9/11, India did nine combat deployments between 2001 and 2012. He took eight or nine eight-week courses between 2003 and 2009 while working towards his bachelor's degree.

### **Juliet**

Juliet is a 29 year-old male who served on active duty in the Army for 10 years. He is currently in the Green to Gold ROTC Program as a cadet at a university. While on active duty he had the rank of E-5 and was a Petroleum Supply Specialist. He is currently assigned that same slot in the National Guard. Juliet was married during his deployments and has three children. Juliet was a straight "A" student in high school and had almost a full ride scholarship to college. He said he knew in high school that he wanted to join the military and never really considered college. He had wanted to be a NASA pilot, and once he was in the Army, he really enjoyed the military lifestyle. His mom never finished middle school, and his three brothers and one sister never finished high school.

Juliet served four tours in combat zones from 2003 to 2012. He attempted to complete college classes while he was deployed in combat, as early as 2005. Unfortunately, because of the tempo of operations and the poor Internet access, he failed all four courses. From 2008 to 2009, he completed ten eight-week courses. From 2011 to 2012, Juliet completed an additional ten eight-week courses towards his bachelor's degree. Juliet had a unique experience in the context of the study, because while in combat, he took classes from four different colleges, with one being a for-profit institution. He also lost between 70 and 80 college credits when he was accepted into the Green to Gold ROTC program due to accreditation concerns.

## **Kilo**

Kilo is a 42 year-old male who retired from the Army after twenty years of active duty and one year in the Army Reserve. He achieved the rank of E-6. Kilo was first an Administrative Specialist, and then a Motor Transport Operator. He has been married for 25 years, and has two teenage daughters. Kilo was the first person in his family to join the military, and he joined for money to go to college. After he got back from basic training, Kilo met his future wife at the age of 18. Instead of returning to the Army Reserve and going to college, he got married and went on active duty. Kilo decided to go college after talking with a college recruiter who reviewed his completed CLEP (College Level Examination Program). Exams and DANTES (Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support) exams reassured him that he was close to earning an associate's degree. He only needed to take one additional class to earn an associate's degree. This encouraged him to continue his education towards a bachelor's degree.

Kilo originally did a combat tour during operation Desert Storm in the early 1990's. Since 9/11, he did two combat tours from 2006 to 2007 and from 2009 to 2010. During the 2009 to 2010 tour, he took three five-week courses towards a bachelor's degree from a for-profit school.

## **Lima**

Lima is a 32 year-old male who was on active duty for fifteen years and is now currently in the Army Reserve. He is an E-7 who started out as a Petroleum Supply Specialist, and later became a Military Police Officer. He got married on his last deployment, and has one child. Both of Lima's parents had bachelor's degree, and both had been in the military. He is considered an Army child who grew up on various military installations and in different military schools. He was an average high school student and struggled in math. Lima decided to join the military because he wanted to fly the space shuttle. His father, who was also an Army Recruiter, enlisted Lima in the

Army Reserve so that he could go to college. Once Lima got in the military, he enjoyed it so much that after one semester, he quit college and went on active duty.

From 2008 to 2009, Lima served one border country tour where he had significant movement within the combat zone. During his 2012 to 2013 combat tour, he took two nine-week classes towards his bachelor's degree from a for-profit school.

## **November**

November is a 42 year-old male who retired after twenty years of active duty in the Army. November was an E-8 as an Intelligence Analyst before becoming a member of Special Forces. November was married during his deployments, and had three children. November was an average high school student, but he really hated school, the cliques, and the peer groups. He was hesitant to go to college, worrying that he may experience similar behaviors. November joined the military and the Army Airborne because both were traditions in his family. November was the first member of his family to make the military a career.

November was encouraged by one of his Non-Commissioned Officers (NCO) to earn college credits. He signed up for college courses in 1992 and realized that college was very different than high school. November took classes from a variety of institutions, all in an attempt to put together a bachelor's degree in a specific field that he was interested in. From the 1990's through 2009, he attended four different institutions, one of which was a for-profit college. November lost numerous credits switching between institutions. When he was close to finishing his bachelor's degree, he essentially had to start from zero towards his degree, except for his general education credits.

November did six combat tours from 2003 to 2009. During the 2008 to 2009 tour, he completed one eight-week course. Through the 2009 tour, he completed two eight-week courses towards his bachelor's degree.

### **Québec**

Québec is a 29 year-old female who was in the Air Force as a Scientist. She was an ROTC graduate, and spent six years on active duty. She deployed as a Second Lieutenant, and left the military as a Captain. She was single during her deployment, and had no children. Both of Québec's parents had bachelor's degrees. The plan was for her to go to college, but she did not have the money. She was an excellent high school student, and always thought she would go to college. Her family was very excited when she received an ROTC scholarship. She earned her bachelor's degree and then was commissioned.

Québec deployed in 2008 to a combat zone for five months. She took two classes towards her master's degree. She had started the classes prior to her deployment, and then finished the last month of the classes while in the combat zone.

### **Sierra**

Sierra is a 25 year-old male who joined the Army as a Chaplain's Assistant. He earned the rank of E-5, and spent seven years on active duty. Sierra was married during his deployment, and had no children. Sierra's parents are Mennonites, and both had sixth-grade educations. They did not support his ambition to complete his middle school, high school or college education, nor his joining the military. In the Mennonite community, the possession of firearms is forbidden. Sierra reported that it is feared that the more educated you are, the more likely are to abandon your faith. Sierra's first language is German, which is what was spoken in his Mennonite community. Sierra was forced to drop out of school after the sixth grade to become a migrant worker, but chose to go



back to school and finish high school. He decided to join the military because he felt God had called him to serve in the military. His decision to continue his education and join the military resulted in him being banished from the Mennonite community.

Sierra chose to join the military as a Chaplain's Assistant, and he received a waiver to work in a special burn unit after his initial training. He really wanted to deploy into combat, so he volunteered seven times. Sierra decided to go to college because, in order to make E-5, he needed education credits. He started taking college courses and really enjoyed it, so he continued. Sierra deployed to a combat zone from 2010 to 2011 for 10 months. He completed three five-week courses and dropped two courses because of mission and time requirements. He was working on an associate's degree and then on a bachelor's degree during his deployment.

## **Tango**

Tango is a 33 year-old male who spent fourteen years on active duty before getting out as an E-7. He was a Counter Intelligence Agent, and was later in Special Forces. He was married during his deployments, and had three kids. Tango was an Army child, and spent his youth on military bases and in military schools. His father was on active duty throughout his childhood. He decided to join the military after dropping out of high school and working in a factory. He had dropped out of high school after failing the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, and later went on to get his GED. Tango reported that he hated working in the factory and disliked watching people getting injured. He felt like working in the factory was like "hitting rock bottom" so he joined the Army.

Tango decided to start college classes because he felt he needed to get a bachelor's degree for the civilian world. He started taking college courses from various different colleges on his base in 2005. Tango served three nine-month combat tours in 2004, 2005 and in 2007. During his 2005

deployment, Tango took one sixteen-week course. During his 2007 tour, he took four sixteen-week courses. All of his courses were taken as credit towards his bachelor's degree.

### **Uniform**

Uniform is a 42 year-old male who retired from active duty in the Army after 20 years. He retired as a Major. He joined the Army as a Field Artillery Officer and then later switched to Military Intelligence. Uniform was married during his deployments, and had two children. His wife had also served in the military, and had deployed to Eastern Europe. Uniform's father was in the Army Reserve for a long time, and then went Active Reserve. His mother was also in the Air National Guard. Uniform was a very good high school student and always had plans to go to college. He felt the military was a good option to get college paid for, and had earned an ROTC scholarship. He finished college with his bachelor's degree and his commission.

Uniform deployed to a combat zone four times between 2003 and 2009. During his 2004 to 2005 combat tour, Uniform took two sixteen-week courses towards his master's degree.

### **Victor**

Victor is a 53 year-old male who retired from the Army as an E-8. He served twenty years of active duty, seven years in the National Guard and three years in the Army Reserve. He served as a Ground Surveillance Radar Operator, and then served in Special Forces. He was married during his deployments, and had one child. Victor's parents were from Mexico, and his father and mother both had a sixth-grade education. In high school, Victor was a better-than-average student, but there was never a plan go to college. Victor decided join the Army because he was intrigued by it, and had always used to play soldiers when he was a child. He talked to a recruiter when he was seventeen years old and decided to join the military. He decided to complete his bachelor's degree when he put together a five-year plan in 2003. He wanted to retire with a bachelor's degree.

Victor completed four combat deployments between 2003 and 2007. During his 2006 deployment, Victor took four eight-week courses. Also, during his 2007 deployment, he took four eight-week courses towards his bachelor's degree. He also volunteered for all four of the deployments.

## **Yankee**

Yankee is a 29 year-old male who is currently in the Navy Reserve. He served seven years of active duty in the Navy as enlisted, and is currently trying to earn his commission. Yankee started in the Navy as a Nuclear Engineer Technician and later transitioned to an Intelligence Specialist. He is single, and has no children. Yankee's family has an extensive history in the military, and the majority of his family served as military officers. Those that did not go into the military all went to college, and are professors, lawyers, doctors, and Congressmen. His grandfather was put into a Japanese Internment Camp during World War II, and then later volunteered to serve in the Korean Conflict. Yankee's father is an Air Force Academy graduate. Yankee had planned to follow in his father's footsteps and attend the United States Air Force Academy (US AFA). In high school, Yankee worked a full-time job to help his family and did a number of extracurricular activities. This caused his GPA to be lower than needed to go to the US AFA. Yankee was in a ROTC program in high school, where he was able to talk to a recruiter from the Navy. Because of his high ACT and SAT scores, he was offered an opportunity to join the Navy as a Nuclear Engineer Technician.

In between several deployments, Yankee finished his bachelor's degree in ten months from a for-profit college, even after losing eighty credits after transferring between several colleges. During his first deployment in a combat zone from 2009 to 2010, Yankee signed up to take a course towards his master's degree. He dropped the class the first time, and then failed it the

second time because of mission and time restrictions. During his second deployment from 2012 to 2013, he completed two eight-week courses towards his master's degree through a for-profit college. Yankee volunteered for one of his combat tours.

*Table 1: Participants' Basic Information*

| Name           | Gender | Age | Branch | Rank*    | MOS/NEC               | Current Military Status                              | Marital Status* | Children* | Deployments   | Classes  | Degree |
|----------------|--------|-----|--------|----------|-----------------------|--|-----------------|-----------|---|--|--------|
| <b>Alpha</b>   | M      | 32  | AF     | E-4      | Combat Comm.          | Retired Active-11 years                              | M               | 2         | Combat, 2001-11<br>Appr. 3 years total<br>Combat, 2012+ | 2012, 5<br>16-week courses                                   | BS/A   |
| <b>Bravo</b>   | M      | 34  | Army   | E-6      | Cavalry Scout         | Retired Active-13 years                              | M               | 1         | Combat, 2004<br>Combat, 2008+<br>Combat, 2010-11+       | 2008, 8<br>8-week courses<br>2010-11,<br>3 8-week courses    | AS/A   |
| <b>Charlie</b> | F      | 46  | Army   | C<br>W-2 | Human Resources Tech. | Active-17 years                                      | M               | 1         | Combat, 2004-05+<br>Combat, 2008-09+                    | 2004-05,<br>2 8-week courses<br>2008-09,<br>5 8-week courses | BS/A   |
| <b>Delta</b>   | M      | 32  | AF     | O-3      | Combat System Officer | Reserves-6 years<br>Guard-6 months<br>Active-8 years | M               | 2         | Combat, 2001-12+<br>3 deployments<br>Border, 2012       | 2012, 1<br>16-week course<br>(dropped course)                | MS/A   |
| <b>Echo</b>    | F      | 31  | AF     | O-3      | Air Battle Manager    | Guard Active-9 years                                 | M               | 0         | Combat, 2009-10+  | 2009-10,<br>6 8-week courses<br>(dropped 1 course)           | MS/A   |
| <b>Foxtrot</b> | M      | 26  | Army   | E-5      | IT Specialist         | Active-7 years                                       | M               | 2         | Combat, 2009-10+<br>Combat, 2013+                       | 2010,<br>dropped courses<br>2013, 2                          | BS/A   |

|               |   |    |                   |      |   |  |   |   |  |  |      |
|---------------|---|----|-------------------|------|---|--|---|---|--|--|------|
|               |   |    |                   |      |   |  |   |   |  | 16-week courses  |      |
| <b>Golf</b>   | M | 39 | Army              | O-3  | MP/Engineer                                 | Active-16 years                            | M | 2 | Combat, 2005-06+ Combat, 2008+ Combat, 2011                              | 2006, 1 6-week course<br>2008, 1 6-week course   | MS/A |
| <b>Hotel</b>  | F | 29 | Army Reserve      | E-6  | Medic                                       | Out Reserves-10 years                      | E | 0 | Combat, 2008+  | 2008, 8 8-week courses   | BS/A |
| <b>India</b>  | M | 44 | Army              | CW-2 | Military Police/Special Forces              | Retired Active-25 years                    | M | 1 | Combat, 2001-09+<br>7 deployments<br>Combat, 2010                        | 2003-09, 8 or 9 8-week Courses   | BS/A |
| <b>Juliet</b> | M | 29 | Army              | E-5  | Petroleum Supply Specialist                 | ROTC Active-11 years                       | M | 3 | Combat, 2003-04<br>Combat, 2005-06+ Combat, 2008-09+<br>Combat, 2011-12+ | 2005-06, 4 8-week courses (failed 4 courses)<br>2008-09, Approx. 10 8-week courses<br>2011-12, Approx. 10 8-week courses | BS/A |
| <b>Kilo</b>   | M | 42 | Army              | E-6  | Admin. Specialist/Motor Transport Operator  | Retired Active-20 years<br>Reserves-1 year | M | 2 | Combat, 2006-07<br>Combat, 2009-10+                                      | 2009-2010, 3 5-week courses  | BS/A |
| <b>Lima</b>   | M | 32 | Army and Reserves | E-7  | Petroleum Supply Specialist/Military Police | Reserves Active-15 years                   | M | 1 | Border, 2008-09<br>Combat, 2012-13+                                      | 2012-13, 2 9-week courses  | BS/A |

|                  |   |    |      |     |  |  |   |   |  |   |               |
|------------------|---|----|------|-----|--|--|---|---|--|---|---------------|
| <b>Novem-ber</b> | M | 42 | Army | E-8 | Intelligence Analyst/ Special Forces               | Retired Active-20 years                                      | M | 3 | Combat, 2003<br>Combat, 2003-04<br>Combat, 2004-05<br>Combat, 2007-08<br>Combat, 2008-09+<br>Combat, 2009+ | 2008, 1 8-week course<br>2009, 2 8-week courses   | BS/A          |
| <b>Québec</b>    | F | 29 | AF   | O-2 | Scientist  | Out Active-6 years   | S | 0 | Combat, 2008+  | 2008, 2 16-week courses                           | MS/A          |
| <b>Sierra</b>    | M | 25 | Army | E-5 | Chaplain Assistant                                 | Out Active-7 years   | M | 0 | Combat, 2010-11+   | 2010-11, 5 8-week courses (2 courses dropped)     | AS/A and BS/A |
| <b>Tango</b>     | M | 33 | Army | E-7 | Counter Intelligence Agent/ Special Forces         | Out Active-14 years  | M | 3 | Combat, 2004<br>Combat, 2005+<br>Combat, 2007+   | 2005, 1 16-week course<br>2007, 4 16-week courses | BS/A          |
| <b>Uniform</b>   | M | 42 | Army | O-4 | Artillery / Military Intelligence                  | Retired Active-20 years                                      | M | 2 | Combat, 2003-04<br>Combat, 2004-05+<br>Combat, 2006-07<br>Combat, 2008-09                                  | 2004-05, 2 16-week courses                        | MS/A          |
| <b>Victor</b>    | M | 53 | Army | E-8 | Ground Surveillance Radar Operator/ Special Forces | Retired Active-20 years<br>Guard-7 years<br>Reserves-3 years | M | 1 | Combat, 2003-05 2 deployments<br>Combat, 2006+<br>Combat, 2007+  | 2006, 4 8-week courses<br>2007, 4 8-week courses  | BS/A          |
| <b>Yankee</b>    | M | 29 | Navy | E-6 | Nuclear Engineer/ Intelligence Specialist          | Reserves Active-7 years                                      | S | 0 | Combat, 2009-10<br>Combat, 2012-13+  | 2012-13, 2 8-week courses                         | MS/A          |

\*During most recent deployment

+Online College Courses Taken

Note: Combat is officially stationed in Combat Zone. Border is officially stationed in country that borders or is close to a combat zone, but the participant spent significant time in the combat zone.

## **Part 2: Contextual Framework**

This section presents the participants' family, military and educational backgrounds. This background sets the contextual framework, which resulted in the participants becoming part of this phenomenon.

### **Family Background**

As the participants concluded their high school educations, they faced decisions about their futures. Those decisions were affected by the participants' family backgrounds and influences. Twelve of the participants had a member of the family who had served in the military. These family members included parents, siblings, uncles and/or grandparents. For Alpha, India, and Yankee, this service extended through every generation since World War II, and it was a family tradition to serve. Alpha, Bravo and India's fathers were all Vietnam Veterans. Due to his service in Vietnam, India's father was opposed to India joining the military, particularly the Army. It was not until India had been in the military for quite some time and had joined Special Forces, that his father told him that he was proud of him.

Yankee's family has served in the military since World War I. Significantly, Yankee's grandfather enlisted in the Air Force for the Korean Conflict after being held in an American Japanese Internment Camp during World War II. For November, his family tradition extended beyond merely joining the military, but also included becoming Airborne certified. To become Airborne, the individual must complete the basic Department of Defense Paratrooper Training Course, which includes five live parachute jumps ("Basic," 2015). Also, it was not just the male relatives of participants who had served. For Uniform and Lima, both their fathers and mothers had been in the military. Echo, Tango, and Lima came from a traditional military family where at least

one parent served in the military during a lengthy part of, or for most of, the participants' childhood. These children, often colloquially referred to as "military brats," have a unique perspective on the military experience, with many having lived overseas at multiple bases and having changed schools regularly. It was not uncommon for these participants' to have a more positive family view of joining the military.

For some families, their concerns were not limited to their son or daughter joining the military, but also included their children choosing a military career. Foxtrot's cousin was killed in action during Operation Enduring Freedom, yet his family accepted that he wanted to join the military while they made him promise not to choose a combat related MOS. Foxtrot joined the Army as an Information Technology Specialist.

Seven of the participants came from families where at least one parent had completed a higher education degree, ranging from an associate's degree up through a master's degree. It was not surprising that these family members had preferred that their children go to college instead of joining the military. Bravo's parents, both of whom have master's degrees, are one example. "My family didn't understand why I was joining the military because everyone in my family always just kind of graduated high school, [went] to college, and then went on to [a] graduate degree and that was the 'just what you did'" (Bravo, personal communication, 2014). For one participant, the military provided the only opportunity to go to college. Québec's parents, both of whom have bachelor's degrees, were thrilled with the military option that included ROTC.

In many situations, even families that had some military background preferred their children go to college. "We lived in base housing, so I kind of grew up in the environment, and my parents made it very clear that not going to college was not an option" (Echo, personal communication, 2014). Kilo's parents had both served in the military and both had bachelor's



degrees. Despite having both served, “I think at that time my parents would have probably preferred I would have went to college” (Kilo, personal communication, 2014). India’s father, who was a Vietnam Veteran, also did not want him to join the military. “My dad didn’t want me to join the military. He really wanted me to go to school. I just didn’t want to go to the little, little local college” (India, personal communication, 2014).

Three of the participants came from families that had not served in the military, nor had high school educations. “My parents had no college. My dad didn’t finish school at sixth grade, and mom was a little later, but they grew up in Mexico” (Victor, personal communication, 2014). For Juliet it was more than just his parents. “Nobody in my family even graduated high school. I have four, three brothers and one sister, and they all didn’t make it through high school” (Juliet, personal communication, 2014). Both Victor and Juliet reported that joining the military gave them an opportunity to create a better life for themselves.

One of the most unique participant family backgrounds was that of Sierra, who came from a Mennonite family. Sierra reported that all family members were required to quit school after the sixth grade to work as migrant workers. Church members were also prohibited from bearing weapons. Sierra was banished from his church and disowned by his family for going back to high school and for joining the military.

The nineteen participants in the study came from a broad range of backgrounds that included both military and education traditions. Each of these influenced the choices that the participants made in joining the military and in pursuing their college endeavors.

## **Educational Background**

This section will review the participants' high school experiences and describe what kinds of students they were. Following that will be a review of their experiences with higher education prior to joining the military.

**High school education.** The participants were asked about their academic record from high school, and what kind of students they felt they were. The purpose of this information was to understand the participant's academic potential towards future college efforts and desires. Ten of the nineteen participants report being very good high school students with a "B" average or higher. Several of these participants also participated in extracurricular activities like student government, athletics, ROTC and employment. Delta graduated in the top 10% of his class. Echo had wanted to be a JAG officer in the Air Force. Golf was an Eagle Scout and student body treasurer. Two participants were "A" students and Juliet received close to a full ride scholarship to college. "I was a straight A student. I did awesome on my SATs. I got a 1290 on my SATs" (Juliet, personal communication, 2014). Echo, Québec, and Uniform were all ROTC scholarship recipients out of high school. "My parents were very happy for me for going to school on a ROTC scholarship" (Uniform, personal communication, 2014). Additionally, three participants graduated from high school early, including Charlie, Foxtrot, and Kilo.

Four of the nineteen participants confessed to being poor or average students in high school. Hotel openly admitted that she really did not try very hard in high school. India admitted to struggling with peer pressure and cliques, and stated that the only reason he went to high school was because of the girls. Yankee did not have a very high GPA. He was holding a full-time job and very active in extracurricular activities, but because of his SAT and ACT scores, he was offered a number of very challenging Navy career positions.

My sophomore year in high school I had every intention of going to the Air Force Academy. I had stellar SAT and ACT scores, but my GPA wasn't there, so the Navy recruiter came to my ROTC class one day, and pitched me the idea of becoming a nuclear engineer (Yankee, personal communication, 2014).

Additionally two participants, Tango and Sierra, both dropped out of school. Tango was the only participant who completed a General Education Development test or GED after dropping out of high school in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, instead of earning a traditional high school diploma. Sierra stopped attending school after the sixth grade, but later returned to earn his high school diploma.

As part of the Mennonite culture, I was forced to drop out after 6<sup>th</sup> grade, and so I went to work in the field full time. The cotton fields, peanut fields, stuff like that. And did that full time till I was 16 (Sierra, personal communication, 2014).

Seventeen of nineteen participants have a strong educational foundation, excluding Tango and Sierra. Their high school history, however, may be misleading. Sierra made up for the lost time in school in an accelerated fashion.

[I] Made an agreement with my parents that if I kept a full time job and worked my school around that, then they'd allow me to go to school, so I got traditional high school diploma in a year and a half, going from 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade (Sierra, personal communication, 2014).

Tango was the only participant who dropped out of high school, yet his first job in the military was Counterintelligence. Counterintelligence is an Army's MOS that requires a high minimum score on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) Skilled Technical section. While not necessarily academically strong in all subjects, Tango would have had to do well on science, writing, math, and mechanics on his ASVAB test.

**Higher education.** A bachelor's degree is a basic requirement in the United States Military to be commissioned as an officer. Four of the participants joined the military after having completed their bachelor's degrees. Three of these were ROTC graduates who completed their degrees, received their commissions as part of their contracts, and served a set amount of time in return for their educations. Golf finished a Bachelor's degree in Wildlife Management and enlisted in the Army, and then earned a direct commission. Delta went to college for three semesters on a scholarship, but when funding ran out, he joined the Air Force. Delta then earned a direct commission after having earned a Bachelor's degree by taking advantage of the Air Force Community College. All airmen and airwomen earn college credit from their military training, and over time these credits can accumulate into an associate's degree. Once Delta had earned an associate's degree through the AFCC, he was able to quickly earn a bachelor's degree. Thus, he could earn his commission and become a pilot as he had dreamed.

Foxtrot also started at community college after high school, but quickly realized he was not putting in much effort and was wasting money. He then joined the military. Hotel, Kilo, and Lima all originally joined the Army Reserve to earn money for college. Kilo and Lima both decided to go on active duty shortly after returning home from basic training, instead of going to college. Kilo decided to go on active duty after getting married at eighteen years of age.

**Educational motivation.** As mentioned in the previous paragraph, some of the participants had earned their commissions or attended college prior to joining the military. The remaining participants found the desire, or opportunity, to go to college after having joined the military. For each participant, there were specific motivations and that pushed them towards higher education. These motivations included promotions, time concerns, money, support, civilian transition, and courage.

In order to stay in the military, service members typically need certain advancements in time in service, and time in grade, or rank. The higher the rank means fewer slots or opportunities. Often, the competition to get promoted can be reduced to a few points earned by doing better on a physical fitness test, by qualifying better at shooting range, or by taking a college course.

I was really pushed when it came to promotion, and the promotion points, how many promotions points I could get from taking these college courses. And that kept pushing me over to that education, decided just to look at different ways to touchdown in classes, to start, you know, signing up for classes, and that's what I did (Charlie, personal communication, 2014).

For an officer, the competition for promotion is even more intense. Even though a Master's degree is not a written requirement to be promoted from Captain to Major, it certainly is an unwritten rule. Echo advised that many wing commanders would not recommend anyone for promotion without a completed Master's degree. Uniform also noted that he completed his Master's degree to earn the rank of Major in the Army.

Time was another factor that affected participant's motivation to go to college. Bravo started back to college after realizing that he was losing time.

During the deployment I was kind of realizing, doing the math, I was like you know its 2008 right now. I've been in college for roughly ten years. Started in 1998 when I graduated high school. It was like ten years and I don't have an associate degree and sort of realizing my age and my friends back home were finishing their 4 year degrees prior to that and I felt the pressure (Bravo, personal communication, 2014).

Sometimes it isn't the ticking of the clock, or the passing of the years, but the time required to finish that motivated the participants. For instance, Kilo decided to go to college after meeting

with a college recruiter and finding out that he had only one class to take to earn his Associate's degree because of the CLEP and DANTES' credits he had earned. After earning his Associate's degree, the drive to complete a Bachelor's degree continued. For Victor, the motivation was to finish the remaining five years of his military career and retire with his Bachelor's degree. For Yankee, it was downtime between deployments that gave him the time and motivation to finish his Bachelor's degree in ten months from a for-profit college.

At least two participant's motivation to go to college was financial. "I had a G.I. Bill that was ticking away that I never used" (Delta, personal communication, 2014). An unusual financial benefit was the prospect of earning G.I. Bill funding including BAH (Basic Allowance for Housing Rates) in a tax-free environment, all in an effort to fund a wedding. Hotel and her fiancé were planning their wedding. Since she and her fiancé were both deployed, they both took classes in order to earn G.I. Bill money on top of their deployment pay.

Several participants mentioned how people in their lives had encouraged them to go back to school or to finish school. November had an NCO who encouraged him as a young trooper to take classes whenever he could to help him with promotions and career options. Others encouraged participants to go back to school simply because of a unique opportunity.

My first sergeant just said, you know, hey, look, you know, you know you should finish your degree and such, and yada, yada, yada. And, you know, and there's a lot of opportunities for Special Forces guys to attend some pretty cool universities (India, personal communication, 2014).

Transitioning out of the military to a civilian career was also a motivating factor to go to college for at least two participants. "I know I'm transitioning, and I want to do something other than military, make military secondary or not at all" (Delta, personal communication, 2014). As

mentioned above, Victor also knew he would be transitioning to the civilian world and wanted that bachelor's degree in hand before retiring.

For Sierra, the military helped him to realize the possibility of going to college was real. He confessed,

I'd thought about going to college, but it was like an illusion. It was something that you could not obtain. I think I, I'm the first person to ever go to middle school, high school, anything outside of elementary from my family and so my parents don't even have an elementary level education. And so for me it was one of those things that it was unobtainable but when I joined the military I was like why not? (Sierra, personal communication, 2014).

For the participants, the obstacles and opportunities that came while completing their high school educations eventually led them to higher education. Their motivations were found in promotion opportunities and transitions to the civilian world.

### **Military Background**

This section discusses the reasons the participants had for joining the military, including the need for college funding. Following this will be an overview of the participants' combat deployments and a summary of those that volunteered for their deployments.

**Joining the military.** The decision to join the military for each of the participants was spurred by desire for a better future, for some by the desire to serve, others the promise of collegiate funding, and yet others to better their future prospects. First, Sierra came from a deeply religious Mennonite community and felt called by God to serve in the military. "I grew up in a Mennonite community, and so people didn't join the military. And, I just felt called to go, and so I did" (Sierra, personal communication, 2014). For many of the participants, the call to serve came

from their strong family backgrounds in the military. For example, almost everyone in Alpha's family had served in the military, and with his father being a Vietnam Veteran, the call to military service was strong.

Seven participants mentioned the need of money for college as a significant reason for having joined the military. "After high school, I was just kind of partying and I was doing nothing. And then kind of a moment of clarity you know, "What I am doing?" I need a drastic change and I always thought about military service" (Bravo, personal communication, 2014). For Charlie, who joined when she was 29 years old, the prospect of being able to both support herself, and to get an education, was very appealing. She shared,

I think I really wanted to be able to support myself if I lost my husband and also an education and I knew that I could get it in the military, so it is one of the reasons that prompted me (Charlie, personal communication, 2014).

For others like Uniform, there was never a plan to join the military but the promise of college funding was appealing. "Joining the military wasn't always the plan, but it was definitely an option to get school paid for" (Uniform, personal communication, 2014).

Joining the military gave four participants the hope of bettering their lives. Delta, Juliet, and Victor came from a lower income families and joining the military gave them the opportunity to break the pattern of poverty. For Tango, seeing his life as an undereducated, blue-collar worker helped him to realize the military was a better option for him. "I joined the military at eighteen, basically having no other prospects, being a high school dropout. I worked in a factory for a while. It was really miserable" (Tango, personal communication, 2014).

**Combat deployments.** The nineteen participants spent approximately 444 aggregated months deployed in combat zones, which totals over 37 years of combined combat deployment



time. The shortest deployment was one month, while the longest single deployment was seventeen months. The participants deployed a total of fifty-four times, each participant averaging almost three combat deployments. India was deployed the most often, with a total of seven combat deployments between 2001 and 2014. Not included in these numbers are the non-combat deployments. Yankee additionally deployed on an aircraft carrier, and India had three additional deployments to other hostile areas of the world. Echo deployed three times to a country neighboring a combat zone to support air missions, in addition to her one combat tour. Delta and Lima also deployed to border countries of combat zones, but because they both had spent significant time and ran numerous missions in a combat zone, those experiences were included in this study. Kilo had also deployed during Operation Desert Storm in the 1990's. Not surprisingly, the participants who were members of the Special Forces deployed the most often.

**Deployment volunteers.** Six of the nineteen participants volunteered for their combat deployments. Additionally, those that volunteered for combat assignments often volunteered multiple times. Sierra volunteered seven times to go on his deployments, saying, "My family really wanted me not to go. I volunteered for about seven deployments at this point, and finally got picked up for one." (Sierra, personal communication, 2014). Victor volunteered for all four of his deployments. "I volunteered to go back every time, and they kept asking me, 'Want to go back?' I volunteered to go back, so nothing held me back, but I enjoyed every single minute of it" (Victor, personal communication, 2014). Echo volunteered for two deployments. She felt like she needed to go on the deployments because it was crucial for future assignments and promotions. "I kind of begged my commander to let me go and take the deployment, because I even replaced a senior officer" (Echo, personal communication, 2014). Additionally, Yankee, Foxtrot, and Kilo all volunteered for their deployments.

## **Part 3: Results**

### **Overview**

This part of Chapter 4 presents the themes that emerged from the participants' experiences of taking college courses while deployed in combat zones. The first theme is the combat environment, which includes the living and working environment of the participants, as well as the resources available to them. Second, the higher education theme includes the types of colleges the participants attended and registrations and course enrollments. The third theme includes the actual experiences of taking courses, including course extensions, self-paced courses, and the support mechanisms for the participants. Finally, the participants provided their overall perspectives on the phenomenon of concurrent matriculation and deployment.

### **Theme 1: Combat Environment**

This section discusses the first theme of the phenomenon related to the physical environment. The theme included interfaces related specifically to the combat environment. The focus that emerged from the interview transcripts was on the living and working environments of the participants, as well as the unique aspects of war. This was an essential part of the phenomenon, because it significantly affected all aspects of the phenomenon. The combat environment included the living conditions, combat environment resources, Morale/ Welfare/ Recreation (MWR), missions, and casualties. In this study, the term "base" is utilized as a generic term fungible for this paper with, and in place of, post, airstrip, facility, station and/or installation.

**Living conditions.** The way that service members lived while in a combat depended on many factors, including: base location, size, mission, logistical significance, maturation, enemy activity, technology, resources and/or operation tempo. It was not uncommon for enemy bases to be secured and outfitted for U.S. and Allied Troops. These buildings, roads, airfields and

perimeters could have been in a variety conditions and decay when they were first acquired. Early troops may have slept on the ground, in vehicles, tents, and in abandoned buildings. Additionally, bases established by Allied troops and even between military branches may have had differences between resources.

The participants discussed their living conditions only for the deployments in which they took college courses. The living conditions of the participants varied tremendously and were particularly dependent on the maturation of the combat zone. Obviously, individuals who deployed early in military campaigns, as in 2003, lived in more primitive environments than participants who deployed to the same locations in 2009. This maturation of the environment happens when locations solidify, and as resources are introduced over time. Obviously, the length of combat operations and the base's missions are key to the growth and development of the location. With the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) being the longest war in U.S. history, many large and extensive bases have been established in combat zones. The exception to this is when locations are mobile, and do not have sufficient time to become established. Further, movement between bases and around the combat zone can increasingly generate a variety of housing prospects for service members, from standard military issued housing to temporary, makeshift housing.

Some of the early entrants into contemporary combat environments were Special Forces. India, who deployed nine times and took classes almost continually through those deployments, arrived in combat by helicopter. Much of his early deployments were spent living and working out of his vehicles. Almost all of the participants lived in makeshift housing during all, or part, of their deployments. Old and dilapidated buildings were by far the most popular housing options. "We lived in an old blown out school, and they basically put wire around it, and the bathroom was a hole in the ground" (Bravo, personal conversation, 2014).

The four Air Force participants reported access to less makeshift housing, except for Echo. Because of her unique mission, she was stationed in a contractor camp by an airfield. She was the only female in the camp, and one of only four armed personnel. Her living conditions put her right into the heart of her work.

My room was in one of those buildings, it was made of what looked like stucco, but it was crumbling. When aircraft turned their engines on the whole building would shake and pieces of it would fall down. I got in my room and realized that was the blast wall. That's why it was empty (Echo, personal conversation, 2014).

To explain, a blast wall or jet blast deflector is a protective wall or fence at the end of a flight line that blocks the jet exhaust to prevent damage to surrounding structures (“Blast away”, 2013, October, para.4).

Another living option was to take and make use of whatever the military had dropped in the area. Shipping containers, or Conexos, are used by the military to move almost everything by truck, train, ship and planes.

We actually lived in shipping containers, and a quarter was sectioned off for, it was supposed to be three people, but we wound up hot seating beds. You have one set of bunk beds, and one mattress on the floor, and four people lived in that area. So you go to work, somebody else would come in and go to sleep (Alpha, personal conversation, 2014).

Sometimes the nature of the participants' missions made it important to blend into the neighborhood. For one of Tangos' mission, he lived in a three-story house. Each person had his own room with Internet, and they cooked and created a theater room. Makeshift living was not always substandard. “We were in like one of the old little like VIP houses I guess you could call it.

Used to belong to the former regime. And everybody had Internet in their room” (November, personal conversation, 2014).

Seven participants lived the majority of their deployment in military issued housing, from large tents to Containerized Housing Units (CHU). Large tents were typically an open bay style with as many as twenty persons sleeping in bunk beds. Service members often quartered off sections of the tent using rope, sheets, wood, plastic or whatever means they can find to section off an area where they could gain some privacy. CHUs are shipping containers that are fabricated into living quarters. They can be stacked on ships or trucks, and are preset to plug into available electricity sources. Some of the trailers are set up to plug into water and septic tanks, for showers and latrines. This type of living in combat assures a better quality of life for service members in combat. Notably, compared to earlier deployments, the ...

quality of life has improved dramatically over the last couple years, particularly after the U.S. military shipped in containerized housing units, or CHUs. Most permanent personnel ... typically share an air-conditioned 8-foot by 20-foot space with at least one other service member (Lamothe, D., 2012, Apr. 23, para. 2).

**Combat environment resources.** This section discusses resources that may have been available to the participants in the combat zone. These resources varied greatly depending on the location of the participants, and on the maturation of the combat zones. Bases became more established over time, and resources like education centers and Morale, Welfare and Recreation (MWR) resources were established.

The U.S. Department of Defense Voluntary Education Program establishes education centers on military bases, currently maintaining 204 education centers worldwide, including in combat zones (Voluntary Education Programs, n.d., para. 2). During deployment, these education

centers served a variety of roles. They provided educational funding information, testing locations, college recruiters, course enrollment assistance, and act as liaisons between service members and faculty and colleges. Established bases in combat zones that had education centers provided resources to service members on the base and those visiting the base. From the participant's experiences, the education centers varied in the services that they provided, with some being very robust, while others were very limited.

Only one participant, Lima, went to the education center in a combat zone and started his college enrollment process from scratch. For Lima, the availability of an education center in the combat zone made all the difference.

Once I went to the education center and talked to the counselor, she showed me what was available. When I found the program that I liked, it was two weeks out before the registration deadline. I was like, oh this is great. So two weeks passed, and then the registration happened, and then I started my class (Lima, personal conversation, 2014).

The other eighteen participants had already established their enrollments prior to their deployments by using the education centers on their home bases or doing it on their own. The majority of the participants did not have access to, did not use, did not know about, or used the education centers in a limited fashion. The limited use was most likely due to the participants being already established in their educational endeavors.

Charlie and Lima successfully used the education center to order books and to have tests proctored. The other three participants who attempted to use the education centers found its availability limiting. "The education center closed at a certain time, and I usually got off work well after that certain time" (Foxtrot, personal conversation, 2014). Tango also experienced similar frustration with the education center.

At the time the education centers, it didn't fit my schedule. You know, basically the only times they were available for me to talk to them were times that I had to be at work, and it was not a good arrangement. So I ended up just doing everything online. Signing up for classes, joining colleges (Tango, personal conversation, 2014).

Besides the limited availability of scheduled times, Yankee did not feel that he was close enough to conveniently get to the education center location. "I didn't use base education resources because the resources were only available during certain times, which were completely contradictory to my work schedule and I would have had to have traveled a fair distance" (Yankee, personal conversation, 2014).

Four participants were unaware of whether or not there was an education centers available on their base. "I think there was probably some kind of education center but not anything that you hear about" (Hotel, personal conversation, 2014). For whatever reason, they did not seek it out or did not feel like they needed to use it if it was available "The base might have had an education center, I don't know, I never went there" (Juliet, personal conversation, 2014).

**Morale/Welfare/Recreation (MWR).** MWR facilities included a variety of options for service members to unwind. These facilities may have had simple items like board games, books and televisions. They may have been more established and had telephones, computers, gyms, swimming pools, workout classes, dances, music, pool tables and/or movie nights. The obvious purpose of MWRs was to boost the morale of the service members while they were in combat. Just like in other areas of the combat zones, the MWR resources varied tremendously. Sometimes they were established by the military, or sometimes by the service members themselves. Tango reported that on one tour, he helped set up an MWR tent with a few free weights and a book exchange.

For this study, the most important attribute of MWRs was the availability of computers for participants to use to complete their course work. Five participants reported using MWR computers for course work. This occurred when they did not have access to their own Internet through their housing or work, or when their own Internet was not working. For some participants, this was their only available Internet. These participants would use the MWR computer to get into their courses, download material and complete work offline. They would then return to the MWR computers to upload their completed material.

The MWR was able to provide the Internet bandwidth so I could download the class. I had my own personal laptop. They did allow me to connect my personal computer up to the MWR Internet so I could download the class and then upload my homework. I could connect up to three times a week (Uniform, personal conversation, 2014).

Later in the combat tours, most service members had access to Internet in their rooms or in their work locations. This Internet, provided by local contractors, will be discussed below. Even the Internet that was available in participants' living or working areas would occasionally be unavailable and the MWR computers were then used. "I did actually go over to use the MWR computers a couple times when something was wrong with my Internet. I'd go over there to like submit homework" (Charlie, personal conversation, 2014).

The use of the MWR computers was dependent on timing. Typically, service members would wait in line to use the computers and were given twenty-minutes of usage time. When their time was up, they had to get off of the computer. The biggest challenge was the speed of the Internet. It was possible to wait the full twenty-minute time limit for one e-mail to open, yet at other times one might be able to read numerous e-mails. Participants reported MWR Internet



speeds as unpredictable. If possible, participants did their best to try to utilize MRW computers when they were least busy.

The other place I used before we got the Internet service was down at the MWR café. And I would go in there at like five in the morning, and there wasn't anybody there so they didn't kick me off every 20 minutes" (Golf, personal conversation, 2014).

Another obstacle was the installation of software. Occasionally, needed software was not available on MRW computers. "For my classes I had to use, they were standard MWR computers. So Microsoft Windows; however, ironically they didn't use the Microsoft Office Suite, so it was a slight adjustment in actually producing my homework documents" (Yankee, personal conversation, 2014). This also meant that participants were unable to install any software, add-ins or plug-in that they might need to complete a class. "I did have trouble because I could not install software because one of the classes I took was like a computer class. It wasn't anything extreme but it was Adobe or something that we didn't have" (Hotel, personal conversation, 2014).

Four participants experienced issues with saving course work on peripherals and being able to load those on MWR computers. Bravo reported saving papers on CD-R discs because that was the only peripheral allowed.

At the MWR, the only thing you could do is put content on a burned CD. You couldn't use a jump drive, but you could burn a CD, and so attaching it to a laptop in a Word document, burning it onto a CD. CDRW if you have the option, and then take it over upload it, and there were a lot of restrictions. And rightly so, there were viruses" (Bravo, personal conversation, 2014).

Bravo also noted that as soon as you would load the paper on the MWR computer, you would inevitably find a mistake and have to go back to your room, fix it, and then re-burn it to a CD.

Another popular peripheral were flash-drives, and some participants reported that these were not allowed to be used on MWR computers because of the threat of viruses. Only one participant, Uniform, reported being allowed to connect his personal laptop to the MWR Internet service.

The majority of the participants reported the ability to purchase Internet in their living quarters from contractors or local community members. “We had the local Internet from the locals that the military would let them come on post, so whatever that was. Internet was like \$80 or \$90 bucks a month and sucked really. But it was worth it” (Juliet, personal conversation, 2014). Participants reported the cost for this service to be between \$50.00 and \$100.00 monthly. All of the participants felt that this was extremely expensive particularly for the quality of the Internet. “For the barracks, I paid \$100 for their best speed a month and the best bandwidth, and that was dial-up speed” (Lima, personal conversation, 2014).

Another popular location to complete course work was in the participant’s work area, or a community computer in their Unit’s Tactical Operations Center (TOC).

Taking classes actually worked out because of my job, like I was in charge in one of the compounds for medical. We needed Internet access at the compound, so we had that, so I would often times do homework at work” (Hotel, personal conversation, 2014).

One participant, Tango, attempted to set aside a computer in the TOC designated just for educational use, but it was quickly taken over by everyone wanting to use the Internet.

Educational and MWR Internet resources varied widely depending on the location of the participants, and when they did their tours. Through a variety of means, they found ways to utilize the resources to complete their courses. The challenges they faced are important to understand as part of this phenomenon.

**Missions.** For obvious reasons, participants' locations, activities, specific missions, movements and military operations cannot be discussed. However, a broad understanding of what one might experience in a combat zone will be. Each branch of the military is responsible for different missions and responsibilities in a combat zone. Within each branch, there are combat related jobs like "reconnaissance, security and both offensive and defensive combat situations. Jobs include artillery specialists, infantry, special operations and tank crew" (Careers and Jobs, n.d., para. 1). There are also combat support roles that include administrative, intelligence, computer, constructions, medical and transportation responsibilities.

The purpose of this section is to understand the strain the participants were experiencing because of their mission responsibilities. Six participants were performing activities that kept them within the wire, or on base. These jobs included: working as a medic at a sick call facility, a weapons range qualification sergeant, reviewing reconnaissance footage, company commander, customs for troops entering and leaving the theater, and human resources personnel ensuring yearly military requirements were being met for each service member. These participants tended to be on more established bases with a wider range of resources. They also may have worked every day, but typically had a set schedule. Most had rotating work schedules that allowed for days off. These participants were more likely to be able to plan their college activity, and most admitted to being able to work ahead and to regularly stay connected with the course.

While these jobs rarely, if ever, took the participants off of the base, threats occasionally occurred on bases. "We had mortars land in our housing areas, and I know they were getting rocketed and mortared a lot. People were getting killed" (November, personal conversation, 2014). Mortars were by far the most common threat experienced by these participants, but bases could

also experience small arms fire, vehicle borne improvised explosive devices at entry points, and suicide bombings from locals who performed tasks on the bases.

Even though a mission was exclusive to a base, the base itself may have contained substandard security. The airport in which Echo performed her duties did not have its own security, and a simple wire gate was the only separation between Echo's camp and the civilian population. Echo was considered to be performing a job within the wire on a flight line; however, because of the vulnerable nature of her location, she was under constant threat.

The physical danger was the stress of the combat zone, like being in my room and trying to sleep, because I have to work that night, and feeling the building shake and putting my helmet on in my bed because I just heard a convoy get blown up right outside where we were (Echo, personal conversation, 2014).

Delta performed missions that put him outside of the wire by air in flights over and into the combat zone. He described incidents of taking fire while in flight. "Look out and see tracers coming at you. You know, you know there's bullets in between 'em" (Delta, personal conversation, 2014). He experienced taking fire while in air, during takeoffs and landings, and then occasionally being on bases that also took mortar fire.

The majority of the participants were regularly performing missions outside the wire. These missions included guarding entry points between the combat zone and other countries, intelligence gathering, disrupting enemy activities, establishing and maintaining communication lines, moving throughout the theater with the chaplain, and air and ground assaults. Missions could come at any time, and participants did not have regular schedules, or regularly scheduled days off.

Always missions. Always, always, always missions. We were always hitting the X or going to pick up a guy, or I had to, you know, go meet some dude and gather intel and you know, and just, you know, on and on and on (India, personal conversation, 2014).

Obviously, enemy activity was never on a set schedule.

We'd have to do indirect fire missions every once in a while, maybe once every two weeks or so, for some sort of little skirmish or something. There was never, like our house was going to be overrun, but there was always little things happening here and there (Tango, personal conversation, 2014).

When there were casualties or incidents in a combat zone, the military sent chaplains to the locations to assist the command and other service members to deal with the event. This could obviously occur at any time and place.

I was always on duty. I literally, sometimes at 1, 2:00 at night, they'd be like, hey, somebody died, you're going. I'm like, okay. So I was kind of used to it. I was on the contact list along with the commanders, so any time there was a significant issue, that was happening, I was aware of it immediately, because I was part of the operations staff, and so I was always, always, always on the clock (Sierra, personal conversation, 2014).

The majority of participants dealt with the unknown for most of their tours. They were on the go constantly, and had little time left at the end of each day to complete their course work. "When you're in combat, you have a lot more stress to deal with, whether you're on the FOB (Forwarding Operating Base) or outside the wire, you have to deal with direct threat" (Foxtrot, personal conversation, 2014). All of the participants had to find ways to be on guard, while also trying to learn and meet course demands. Bravo expressed the challenges that these participants experienced during this phenomenon.

It's very difficult, and then once all that was done, and you're absolutely beat, and the last thing you want to think about is continuing education, especially when you go through fire fights, you're like 'Am I going to be around to use this degree in the end.' So it's very hard to stay motivated, to sit down and write a 5- 6 page paper, when ... I mean, absolutely, it's very difficult to try to stay focused on that (Bravo, personal conversation, 2014).

**Casualties.** Casualties were an inevitable part of combat environment, particularly when the missions took participants outside of the wire. Twelve participants experienced casualties: U.S. military, Allied, contractors, combatants and/or civilian deaths. These experiences with mortality played a unique part of their experiences with the phenomenon.

Several participants reported being affected very little when casualties occurred, particularly if they had extensive combat experiences. Most, however, had some reaction. The participants attempted to compartmentalize, to escape their thoughts, to bottle up feelings and to desensitize their responses. For these participants, course work was put on hold until they could regain their focus. Charlie processed paperwork for casualties as part of her mission in the combat zone. "When there were casualties, we just tried to take our minds off of it, and schoolwork was at that moment not important to us" (Charlie, personal conversation, 2014). India acknowledged that at times soldiers simply needed to mourn, but missions kept going and it was difficult to have time to deal with casualties.

There's that time where you just, you have to mourn, but you can't stop. I mean those are rough days. I don't even know what to say. You know when you're in that situation, you, you're dealing with it, you know, afterwards you have to deal with it (India, personal conversation, 2014).

For Bravo, dealing with casualties was never easy, particularly because he was occasionally directly involved. When he would try to do course work, he would lose his focus:

You're sitting there trying to do work, or read, and play out the events that just happened, and then you're not actually reading. You'd be like, did I just read something. Or you're reading, and then all of a sudden, emotion is going to come wave over you and then.

Compartmentalize, choose, and pick your battles. Lesser of two evils. Pick which one you're going to do, and usually, I mean, something like that happened, I would just go walk around the perimeter, you know, catch my bearings, catch my breath. And then come back focused. (Bravo, personal conversation, 2014).

Alpha and Echo felt that being enrolled in the college courses helped to distract them from losses, and helped them to maintain their focus. "If anything, taking classes probably helped just because of my burying myself in the school so I wouldn't have to think" (Alpha, personal conversation, 2014). Victor and Yankee used casualties as motivation.

Casualties did not affect my long term educational goals. I'm still very motivated, I think actually, if anything, if it did affect me. It affected me in the positive realm. In the sense that it pushed me to further my education" (Yankee, personal conversation, 2014).

For Victor, casualties strengthened his resolve to leave the military.

When there were casualties, it reinforced my motivation. I say that because I always tell people the last thing I'm going to do is die in some God forsaken country for something, you know, so I just decided I want to get out of the military and with a degree" (Victor, personal conversation, 2014).

War was not easy for the participants, nor was it supposed to be easy. Taking online courses while being deployed in combat and while dealing with casualties created unique

experiences for the participants. Their living environments, resources, MWR, and missions played a significant role in every aspect of their deployments. There are probably no other environments where students take online classes that are so complex and challenging.

## **Theme 2: Higher Education**

This section will report on the types of institutions the participants attended, and their experiences with college registrations and course enrollments.

**Types of institutions.** In the review of the literature, there were several media reports and online articles that criticized certain types of higher education institutions. For-profit institutions received the majority of that criticism because of accusations that they were taking advantage of military students by offering worthless degrees and credits. The concern eventually prompted President Barack Obama to sign an Executive Order (EO) called “Establishing Principles of Excellence for Educational Institutions Serving Service Members, Veterans, Spouses, and Other Family Members” on April 27, 2012. Two of the major outcomes of this EO were the implementation of a centralized complaint system for service members to be able to officially report, and to be able to track, their issues with higher education intuitions. The second was the monitoring of higher education institution’s websites to ensure that they were not deceptive or fraudulently marketing to service members (Hogan Lowells, 2012, May 11, p. 3).

Participants were asked about their colleges, which generated the following data:

- Eight participants\* attended five different public, non-profit, regionally accredited colleges.
- Four participants\* attended three different public, non-profit, regionally accredited community colleges.
- Two participants attended three different private, non-profit, regionally accredited colleges.
- Seven participants attended three different for-profit, regionally accredited colleges.



- One person attended a for-profit, non-regionally accredited college.

\*Two participants attended more than one type of college.

The majority of participants reported positive experiences with their colleges. Three participants reported issues. One participant dropped a class from a public, non-profit, regionally accredited community college because he felt like they were inflexible with his deployment schedule requests. A Master's student at a for-profit, regionally accredited college dropped out of the program after not finishing a course. She had requested an extension, and then had been travelling for several weeks between her combat location and her stateside base. During this time, she had little Internet access. When she arrived back home, she contacted the college again about the extension, but they advised that too much time had passed. She contacted the college's Associate Dean who then advised, "they did not need students like her." Finally, the only participant who took classes from a non-regionally accredited school found out late in her degree program about problems with her degree. She became aware that her degree would not transfer to other colleges. However, she went on to finish the degree because the military did accept the degree as earned.

I was pretty close to finishing my Bachelor's when I realized that ... was nationally accredited, not regionally, and then a whole lot of that work was basically for nothing because I tried to transfer to a regional school, and they would not take any of it (Hotel, personal conversation, 2014).

Three participants, who took classes from for-profit schools, felt that they were not reputable even though they were accredited. "I feel some of the online schools that I've seen and/or dealt with come across like diploma mills. My degree from ... wasn't going to be worth

toilet paper” (Echo, personal conversation, 2014). Alpha felt that students simply needed to go through the motions of the classes without really learning anything.

You can take your time, and if you have a good enough sob story, you can turn in all your assignments the last day of class, and you’re fine. There really was no educational merit behind what I was doing. ‘Cause it was really learn this enough to take the test, pass it, and you’re good (Alpha, personal conversation, 2014).

The challenge of going to a for-profit school for Golf came in trying to convince his peers that his degree was of value and was worth the time he was spending on it. “Instead I’m taking .... college online, which from their perspective is some kind of mail order degree that I’m getting. Um, so was it negative, a little. It was enough to make me angry at my situation, not them” (Golf, personal conversation, 2014).

While the anecdotal literature suggests a high frequency of military students taking courses from non-regionally accredited programs, only one participant had this experience. Despite being regionally accredited, several participants did experience problems with communications with their colleges, and some found that they were not learning what they had hoped to learn.

**Registrations and course enrollments.** All but one participant was enrolled in a college program before being deployed, and had been taking classes as part of that program while they were at their home duty stations. Only Lima used the education center in a combat zone to find a college, discover a program, and to sign up for courses. Having already enrolled in classes, and also having a program degree plan, helped the majority of the participants to be able to continually sign up for classes as their deployment progressed.

I mean ... had pretty flexible schedules, where I more or less just kind of worked my way down the required courses, and just basically, you go online, and you look up the course,

and you look at the dates in which the courses are, those courses are starting. And then, basically, I just sign up for them in order” (November, personal conversation, 2014).

When there were problems with enrollments, or a need to get additional information to register for classes, the participants knew where to turn.

I had my degree plan, so I knew what classes I had to take, and it’s just a matter of picking and choosing the classes. When I did have an issue, I would write an e-mail to my education center on my home base, and it usually got squared away. But other than that, it was if you knew how to use a computer, you were in pretty good shape (Victor, personal conversation, 2014).

Besides the education center helping service members enroll in classes, communicating with the college was also sometimes necessary. “I talked with advisors down range as well. Because the course schedule wasn’t always posted, so even if I had an idea of what I wanted to take, I didn’t know if it was going to be offered, or whatever” (Sierra, personal conversation, 2014).

One of the reported problems with registering was getting the classes that the participants needed, when they needed them.

I think the hardest thing I had was getting the right class at the right time. That what was difficult, because sometimes they just didn’t offer things that I thought I was going to be able to complete while I was down range. I need, you know, the simple, little thing over here that I can do (India, personal conversation, 2014).

Two other participants reported classes filling up before they could register. “There were a few times where classes would fill up, or lock, before I could get to it and register, and then it was kind of frustrating. It was like, now I have a month where I can’t take classes” (Bravo, personal conversation, 2014).

Two participants reported problems when they registered for classes that started or ended when the participants were in transit between the combat zone and their home bases. Echo requested a course extension, and then during transit was away from the Internet for three weeks. The extension ended up not being granted. Bravo attempted to keep up with the class during the transit, but did not have success.

I was enrolled before I left, with dire consequences. The first class started while in transit obviously, and I was trying to connect to these Wi-Fi hot spots, paying \$20 a day to have Internet, so I could submit my papers. And then when I got to the actual patrol base, there was no Internet for a while. I ended up failing the class, which I then had to pay for, and pay for again, when I had to retake it the next time (Bravo, personal conversation, 2014).

### **Theme 3: Course Experiences**

The third theme examines the actual course experiences of the participants. This includes technical challenges they faced, acquiring textbooks, communication with the instructors, interactions with the course materials, course work, self-paced courses, time commitments, course extensions, and support mechanisms for the participants.

**Technical challenges.** Regardless of where the participants used the Internet, most reported having problems accessing Internet sites and poor Internet connectivity. Three participants reported Internet sites that were blocked. Charlie could not access a course math lab site in her work area or at the MWR, so she had to purchase Internet in her room. She also reported that on the work computer she could not make purchases, so she ordered her books through the education center and through the Internet in her room. Alpha also experienced blocked websites. “The only problem was our Internet came from Indonesia, so it blocked a lot of content coming

from the U.S.” (Alpha, personal conversation, 2014). This obviously limited some of the resources participants could use to write papers.

The most notable issue of blocked Internet access was for Delta. His Internet did not allow a VPN (Virtual Private Network). The college where he was taking a research course required a VPN to access the library. Without being able to use the VPN, he could not complete the research needed and had to drop the class after three weeks. “That’s such a vital area that it was essentially choked off for me, because the host government didn’t allow any VPN access through their Internet” (Delta, personal conversation, 2014).

All but one participant reported slow Internet and Internet outages that affected their experiences of taking classes. Some of the Internet outages could be contributed to casualties. It is the U.S. Military policy to implement a 48-hour communications blackout after an incident that involves a casualty in order to prevent the information of those killed in action to be reported to the family in advance of the delivery of a face-to-face notification. The other outages would occur because of weather conditions in the region, particularly dust storms. “There were Internet outages any time there were dust storms. There were always dust storms there. Then there would be no connectivity” Bravo, personal conversation, 2014).

Participants were not as affected by the outages as they were by poor Internet connectivity. Lima and Yankee both referenced old dial-up Internet speeds in discussing their frustration with the Internet. “The internet was slow, and I mean, let’s go back to, I don’t know ’97 Internet on dial-up. Yes. It was about that slow” (Lima, personal conversation, 2014). Also, Yankee said, “The Internet connectivity was garbage. I believe the download rate was about 250 KB. And the upload rate was at like 10 KB. So, you know, my cell phone’s faster than that.”

Many of the participants were able to get online, to successfully get the materials they needed, and to get off of the Internet while they had connectivity and access. They would then return to upload their completed materials during a subsequent session. The greatest challenge came when participants needed to be online while completing the course work. This proved particularly challenging when trying to research materials to write papers.

The limitation of research is very difficult just because of limitation of Internet. Limitations of connectivity. You can't really go online and start searching databases for research, and doing that because it all requires you to be online. You can't go on there and start downloading all the articles, so really it was limited to the textbook, and Microsoft office, and that's all you really had. It was unrealistic (Bravo, personal conversation, 2014).

Participants would often find themselves spending time trying to get on the Internet or finding alternative locations to complete their work. Charlie said,

The biggest challenge probably would have been the Internet, because sometimes in my room the Internet didn't work correctly, and I would be very frustrated, spend a lot of my time trying to get on the Internet. That would probably be the biggest challenge, was just the connectivity (Charlie, personal conversation, 2014).

Sometimes the extra time spent was in trying to locate another place to complete their course work. For example, Alpha reported waiting for up to two hours to get processed into the U.S. Embassy to be able to access the Internet when there were no other options available.

The majority of the participants reported that not being able to get online was a significant irritation and an additional source of stress, yet most still found ways to do their course work. The participants reported they would wait for improved Internet connectivity, or do something else for a class until the Internet was available again. The majority of the participants reported that

connectivity and outages caused them to be late turning in assignments. Two participants reported that when they were late turning in course work, they would lose points.

Only two participants reported significant issues experienced because of Internet outages and slow downs. Echo experienced exceptional Internet outages and slow downs. She reported these problems to her instructors, but “the poor internet, it was almost like the burden of proof was on me to prove” (Echo, personal conversation, 2014). The other common occurrence was for Echo’s instructors to compare her deployment to others in the classes that were also deployed. “The instructors said, well we have other people who are deployed too, and they’re still turning stuff in on time” (Echo, personal conversation, 2014). These outages resulted in Echo having to request extensions for her classes, and in her ending up dropping out of her program entirely. Echo did not blame the instructors because they seemed to be following the college’s policies on late work, but did attribute this policy to a lack of understanding of deployed students. She felt that instructors assumed that all students who were deployed had equal access to Internet and resources, which was not the case.

Yankee also felt that there seemed to be a lack of understanding in the college policies regarding late work, and that his instructors were bound by the policies without being able to consider the individual students’ needs. Yankee said:

I specifically am remembering my midterm for my first class, the paper was submitted two days late, and that was due to a blackout, an Internet blackout, when our computers were down for an entire week. When the Internet finally came back up, I submitted the paper almost instantaneously and attached a memo to it to my professor letting him know, I’m in this location and we had some fallen soldiers, we had to wait until their families were notified before we had access to the Internet again which is why this is late. And he said,

you know, I understand that it happens, but you know you could have found another way to do it. You could have gone to the U.S.O. You could have gone to the library. You could have gone to somebody else to get it submitted. So he wasn't real forgiving on that. And, it was essentially out of, well according to him, it was out of his control because the school policy on late submissions is you know, the reduction in points (Yankee, personal conversation, 2014).

While all of the participants felt that their instructors were fair, they did feel there was a true lack of understanding in the experiences of deployed students. The misunderstanding stemmed from instructors believing that all deployed students had equal access to resources like Internet and education centers. Further, the instructors' inability to change college policies related to late assignment tied their hands when it came to penalizing the participants.

**Textbooks.** One of the surprising findings of this study was the ease at which the participants received textbooks for courses. Two participants took their textbooks with them when they deployed. Two participants reported that their courses used electronic textbooks (e-book) only. When they would register and pay for the course, they would be sent the e-book by e-mail. Four participants reported that as soon as they registered and paid for a course, the college would automatically send them the textbooks. Two participants utilized the education center to order and receive their textbooks.

One key to getting the books on time appeared to be registering early enough to allow approximately a month for the textbook to arrive.

I'd usually have my book order in about a month ahead of time, and still sometimes I would get it a week or two late. But it was always, especially down range, something that if



I planned accordingly. It was something that didn't hinder my progress in the class (Sierra, personal conversation, 2014).

The majority of the participants agreed that if they could get registered well enough in advance, they never had an issue with getting their textbooks.

A second key practice appeared to be communicating with the instructor when there were problems with the textbook. Hotel reported getting the wrong textbook automatically sent by the college. When she notified the instructor of the error, and of her concern in getting the book in time, the instructor chose to send her an e-book version. Sometimes the book the participants ordered or received was not the correct edition being used in the class, particularly if information posted on the college website or bookstore did not reflect the change in editions. Again, communicating with the instructor seemed to solve the issue.

If it wasn't the right edition or it wasn't exactly the right book, I would just tell my instructor, hey, look you know, I'm working off this. No problem. You know, here's what you need to do for your assignment, and I'd just find it in the book and go (India, personal conversation, 2014).

There was one participant who received special assistance from the college's bookstore manager.

Since I was overseas, the manager of the bookstore would get the books on my military account, and then ship them to me overseas. If he had not sent my books, I probably would have had to do like a power of attorney or something to my wife or something like that so she could get my books (Juliet, personal conversation, 2014).

**Interactions with instructors.** The majority of the instructors communicated with the participants by telephone, through e-mail, discussion postings and through feedback on

assignments and tests. Two participants, Alpha and Juliet, had access to Skype for synchronous meetings with their instructors. Skype is a computer software program that allows computers to make telephone calls between computers. Overall, the participant's experiences in interacting with their faculty were positive. Ten of the participants reported that their instructors were fair.

One important finding was that communication with the course instructors was imperative to the success of all of the participants. The majority of the participants notified the instructor either through e-mail or in opening discussions postings that they were deployed in a combat zone.

Those introductions at the start of the courses are kind of important, because that's my opportunity as a student to let my professor know everything that's going on in my life right now. That way, they have a context for where I am academically (Echo, personal conversation, 2014).

Even prior to deployment, communications proved to be important. Alpha actually went and met with all of his instructors prior to his deployment, and was able to stay in constant communication with them because of those meetings. This helped him complete fifteen credit hours, and to complete three courses through independent study that were not even available online.

Participants communicated with instructors about time lines, both in getting permission to turn work in early, or in notifying them when they were going to be late. The majority of the instructors responded positively to this interaction.

I was up front with them, said, look, hey you know, this paper's due at this time, but I'm not going to be around. I'm going to turn it in to you this week. And they're just like okay, thanks. You know, that, that's the way I did it (India, personal conversation, 2014).

Again, staying in communication with the instructor when the Internet was not working made a significant difference in the way the instructors worked with the participants.

After an Internet outage, I would first try to send an e-mail off to the instructor or my student services person, I would say hey, here is the issue, I am getting stuff going. And then I would just try to get caught up and I would submit stuff even if it was like an instructor that would say, I don't accept delayed assignments. I would still submit stuff in, I don't think I ever got a zero or anything (Hotel, personal conversation, 2014).

When the participants communicated their situations with the instructor many of the participants reported that the instructors were very lenient.

You'd have to e-mail the professor, and say, you know, "Hey I was taking this test. We got mortared. Power went out and my test submitted prematurely. Can you reset it or allow me to finish." So it took a lot of coordination to the professors. They had to be very lenient. If you ever had a problem, most of them would say, you know what, I understand. This happens to a lot of people, so no problem" (Bravo, personal conversation, 2014).

This leniency was appreciated by the participants, and for some, it meant a commitment from them to not take advantage of the situation.

There was a promise that they [the faculty] would, they would work with me, and then for my side, I felt an obligation to be genuine, not to just say like, well I'm in the military, you don't know what I'm doing over here (Delta, personal conversation, 2014).

The only negative reports about faculty were lack of feedback on assignments, absence in discussion postings, and slow grading. "They're trying to get us to discuss these things and learn from each other, and that's all interesting, but in my opinion, the instructor was not participative, enough. So he wasn't saying, hey, hey you over there, you're just wrong" (Golf, personal conversation, 2014).

**Course learning materials.** All nineteen participants reported that the vast majority of the courses learning materials were presented to them in text format. Materials came in the form of text in the course learning management system: as downloadable pdf (Adobe Acrobat Portable Document File) or Word documents; as links to blogs, articles and other text-based websites; as text on PowerPoint presentations; and as assigned readings from e-books and textbooks. All of the participants reported being able to access the text-based materials, and many were able to download and review materials offline, which was critical because of the noted Internet issues. The only reported problem with text-based material was by Echo, who received a CD from the college with the course learning material listed on it. Unfortunately, the materials on the CD were not the actual documents, but Internet links to the websites that contained the material, which obviously required her to be on the Internet to utilize.

Two participants, Alpha and Juliet, had access to Skype for synchronous meetings. Alpha used Skype for one-on-one sessions to discuss course materials with his professors. This was important because only two of the five courses that Alpha took were actually online. Three classes were traditional face to face courses that he took utilizing independent study. This meant that there were no online resources available to Alpha, and he relied on his textbooks and his synchronous interactions with the instructors. Juliet reported that in some classes, faculty would have weekly Skype sessions available for anyone to attend, but were also recorded for students who could not attend to listen to later.

Charlie and Victor both took math related courses that presented math problems and displayed accounting Excel spreadsheets. Foxtrot took a music course that required him to review music clips, but he was unable to listen to them through the course. When he contacted his instructor about the issue, he did not receive any assistance. Instead of dropping the course, Foxtrot

would look each clip up and play it through the YouTube website. This was not an option for him during exams, and he would be unable to answer some exam questions because the music clips would not play.

Three participants reported videos that were uploaded into the courses for the students to review. These would often require the participants to plan how and when to access this material, and all three participants reported that it was important for this information to be disclosed in the course syllabus.

I'd download big files and then come back to it the next day or whatever, and it'd be downloaded, but it was always a timed planning, so if I wouldn't have planned for it, or if I wouldn't have known that there were going to be video lectures, then that would have been an issue (Sierra, personal conversation, 2014).

**Course work.** For the majority of the participants, coursework was a combination of written papers, projects, discussion boards and exams. Nine participants also participated in group work with one participant, Uniform, having to complete a video group project. The following discusses the participants' experiences with each type of course work.

**Assignments.** Assignments consisted of written papers, and one video project. Not surprisingly, the six participants who took classes towards their Master's degree reported the majority of their course grade was based upon assignments. Seven participants working towards their Associate's or Bachelor's degrees reported writing at least one paper in their courses. The most commonly reported problem was getting online to do the research to write the paper. The majority of the participants would try to gather the materials they would need to write during multiple Internet sessions. Once they had gathered the materials, they would then write their

papers offline and upload them once they were back online. Those that wrote papers tried to gather and write their papers as early as possible.

I'm very, very proactive and so by the time midterms come around, I'm usually done with writing papers for the week of finals. That's my goal every semester. In that way I'm not stressing about stuff that's going to happen later (Sierra, personal conversation, 2014).

All participants who were required to write papers admitted that this activity caused more stress than other course activities. The stress was caused because of the limited amount of time most of the participants had to both research and then write the papers.

It was stressful sitting down and having to write a college paper. That can be stressful. You had to, you got hours of work in front of you that has to be done, and you have a very finite amount of time to do it (November, personal conversation, 2014).

Some of the participants stress was caused because of worrying about how much they were required to write.

The biggest challenge was probably the paper assignments, just knowing at least for me, the stress level of it. I was used to very much writing short, brief, structured writing, and so during my deployment, I started transitioning into more upper division classes, and so there was more writing involved, and so to me it was more or less just the stress of, oh my goodness, I've got a 10 page paper, a 15 page paper (Sierra, personal conversation, 2014).

Three participants admitted writing papers caused frustration because they rarely had the opportunity to write, review, edit and make improvements in papers.

I could probably proofread my paper if I had some more time, but I have to type it and be you know, I literally had no time to proofread it. I must type what I'm going to write, and when I'm done. I'm done. I spell check. Make sure I got my periods and my paragraphs are

busted up, you know, and it's kind of logical, but I don't have time to review it. You know, and that's terrible way to go about course work (India, personal conversation, 2014).

The participants that were required to write papers admitted that they often sacrificed sleep in order to complete papers. "Because of the nature of my job, I had to get it done, and a lot of times I just had to sacrifice sleep and say I'm getting this paper done, and I'm just going to work through the night" (November, personal conversation, 2014). Echo, who worked seven days a week on twelve hour shifts, also recounted sacrificing sleep to get papers done. "Sometimes during the deployment when I was like oh my God, I can't sleep tonight, because I have to get this paper done, because I can't turn it in late" (Echo, personal conversation, 2014).

An interesting finding of this study was that participants used small blocks of times in order to complete papers. Yankee would actually hand write out notes and ideas about his papers before and during missions.

I would hand write papers out during missions when I had a little bit of lull in the mission. Sometimes while I was waiting around for a pre-mission briefing or something like that I would be taking notes or writing down my ideas, so that I could maximize my computer time and be well collected in my thoughts before I made it to the computer. So, ultimately wherever I could if I had a thought I would make notes (Yankee, personal conversation, 2014).

November and Victor both wrote whenever they had a few minutes. "You kind of like start and you kind of write a paper like sentence by sentence in a way, or paragraph by paragraph, so you go and you kind of research something, and then write a paragraph" (November, personal conversation, 2014). By planning ahead and using their time wisely, they were able to successfully write their papers. "Do a page, page and a half, whatever, something, next day 'cause

I had limited time, and I'd do another page, another page, and by the time the week ended I had, I had 10 pages" (Victor, personal conversation, 2014).

A surprising finding in this study was that some participants were willing to sacrifice their personal safety in order to complete written assignments. Of course, writing papers in a combat zone, whether on a mission or not, could put you in peril. Bravo summed up what several participants experienced by saying,

The only time that that I would jeopardize my safety for classes was if mortars are falling, and I need to save something. I'm not going to a bunker until I've saved this damn paper. I'm not rewriting this. I mean, I'll take a direct hit before I write this God damn paper over, so in times like that, personal safety out the window. Saving the paper or submitting the test. That came first. They are like get in the bunker! (Bravo, personal conversation, 2014).

The one non-paper assignment was a group video project that was required in Uniform's course. This went surprisingly well considering the previously noted connectivity issues that participants experienced. The group each chose sections to discuss in a video and then sent them to a group leader to combine into one project. The sending of the completed video was slow but Uniform was able to successfully upload his video online and share it with his group. "I think it was one clip but it made it through. It did take a long time" (Uniform, personal conversation, 2014).

*Asynchronous discussions.* Most participants reported that they were required to post to asynchronous discussion or message boards. These discussions were typically set up to answer weekly questions posted by the instructor. Most also were required to post a minimum number of times during the week or to post a minimum number of words. Some were required to post an



original post, and then reply to the posts of others students. The exceptions to this were self-paced courses that required a minimum number of posts to a discussion board through the length of the course. The participant could post all of their posts at the beginning of the course, throughout the course, or at the end of the course. This could result in a lack of discussion about the course material. “You could make every post for the entire eight weeks the day before it was all due. It made it difficult to actually discuss” (Hotel, personal conversation, 2014).

Most participants reported that during their initial discussion post, they would report that they were in combat. None of the participants received any negative feedback from other students, and most reported that they received positive support for being in the military. It was not unusual for several, or even most, of the students in the courses to also be in the military or to have been in the military. This was because several of the participants were taking classes from colleges with very high military populations.

Only Alpha, November, and Lima reported that they felt that the discussions were beneficial to their learning in the courses. The remaining participants felt that the discussions were a requirement that simply needed to be met. They felt that it was an item that had to be checked off weekly. One reason was because of the lack of participation by the instructors. Another reason was because of student’s rapid, uninspiring postings to the discussion just to meet their minimum post requirements. A third reason was that the feedback that was received from other students was not substantive. “The classes did have discussion boards. There was like you’d put something and they you’d comment on two other peoples. I wouldn’t call it interaction. You read their stuff kind of half-heartedly and you’re like “Good. Good job.” See ya” (Bravo, personal conversation, 2014).

This lack of value in the discussion boards became a frustration for some of the participants, especially Sierra:

Discussion boards frustrated me mainly because it was a check the block thing. It was never, well for me even if I wanted it to not be a check the block thing it turned into it because if somebody replied to my post and I'd get all excited and go check it and it was always like oh, it's just, hey, great job on this. I agree with you on that. It's like, no, give me some constructive feedback. Give me something of substance. And there was never that, so to me it was, discussion boards were always a waste of my time, so it was just a, and I hate to admit it, but towards the last few classes that I took it was a check the block for me thing too, because I just stopped trying. I was like there is no point. There is no relevance to discussion boards. Whereas at first I was like, oh you know, I can see how this should make up for the classroom discussion, which it does not (Sierra, personal conversation, 2014).

Several participants tried to post as early as they could so they would be done with the activity. They had to occasionally wait for others to post too, so that they would be able to respond back to them. In general, participants did not feel like asynchronous discussions were beneficial to their learning.

*Exams.* The majority of the participants were required to complete exams during their courses. The first challenge with this was that many were timed exams. Participants reported difficulty in setting aside enough time to complete the exams in one sitting. The second challenge was the fact that many participants did not have uninterrupted access to the Internet for the length of time the exams required. It was impossible to take a two-hour exam in an MWR Internet café because of the twenty-minute blocks the participants were allocated to be online. Those that had this requirement were forced to try to take their exams at odd times when the Internet café had low wait times such as between 0100 and 0500. This required the participants to try to plan this activity

when they were not sure what their missions might entail. The stress of both trying to find the time to take the exam, and to find uninterrupted time online, caused many to wish for other exam options.

I would much prefer having the final assignment be a 20 page paper, as opposed to a 2-hour exam, because it wasn't just the two hour exam, because you have to study for that exam, and then you have to block out time. You'd have to hope that you get to say I have two hours. Especially with the second deployment with the MWR computers, the best time to get the 2 hour block was 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning (Bravo, personal conversation, 2014).

The third issue that participants faced when completing exams were those exams that required proctors. Charlie had access to an education center where she was able to have her exams proctored. Bravo was on a very remote base without an education center and had a significant struggle in finding proctors.

The one thing that we didn't have was a proctor and I couldn't be a proctor and nobody else wanted to be a proctor. This border lines on unethical but with a lack of options, somebody had gotten a proctor's exam password and I proctored people's exams (Bravo, personal conversation, 2014).

Tango reported that at times he was forced to create a "mission" to a base with an education center to take a proctored exam. This was not as easy as just getting into a vehicle and going over to a base. This had to be planned carefully, and affected a whole group of troops that had to put their life on the line just in order to get a student to a base to take an exam. "If you have to travel for a proctored exam, basically it does mean that they're planning the operational day around somebody's exam, and his entire team is part of it" (Tango, personal conversation, 2014). Juliet

actually dropped out of the community college because of the proctored exams. “I don’t think they understand the military. They were the ones that wanted proctors and all this other nonsense, and I’m like, I can’t get that” (Juliet, personal conversation, 2014).

**Group work.** As mentioned before, nine participants did participate in group work. Of the nine, only two reported a positive experience with group work. Uniform took a project management course that required participants from multiple locations to put together a project. This was a real life activity for Alpha, and he felt that because of the different time zones and locations of his group, it made learning that much more effective. “Doing a group project worked out perfectly for the class where we do projects like in the real world. People can be like now, all over the place. It was actually very beneficial my instructor thought” (Uniform, personal conversation, 2014). Alpha was also able to successfully do group work because of his use of Skype. There was no delay in the trading of e-mails and the waiting for responses, so he was able to be much more proactive with their projects.

Five people, or person, team. The group leader would put out our requirements with what we would do that week. Once a week we would get together in a Skype meeting, they would include me through Skype. We’d go over what we had done that previous week, what the client was asking, all of the concerns or anything that needed to be addressed. So it was basically the same thing if I was here (Alpha, personal conversation, 2014).

The remaining seven participants struggled with group work. All admitted that group work was a major challenge, particularly because of the time difference and the inability to meet with the group synchronously. Bravo would attempt to immediately dictate the group requirements at the start of the project, to avoid the lengthy discussion about who was going to do what. This

helped to get projects underway quickly, and helped him complete the projects on time. Even doing this, Bravo felt that it was unfair to his group members for him to be in a group.

During group assignments, normally I would say, ‘you know guys, this is my situation.

This is the best I can do. You assign me what you feel what you need me to do, and then on my own time and expeditiously as possible, I will get it back to you’ but for most people there was no other choice. I was in the group. And it’s either they do more work than I do, or they accept the terms that I had to give them. And obviously it wasn’t fair to them, you know, I wasn’t sharing ideas. I wasn’t going back and forth and helping out as much. But I was still trying to do my part (Bravo, personal conversation, 2014).

**Self-paced courses.** Four participants took courses that were self-paced during eight-week blocks. While there were suggested due dates in the scheduled, they were not concrete. All four agreed that the self-paced model was preferred, because it allowed them the flexibility they needed to do course work around missions. All four admitted that they did procrastinate more than if there were set due dates. “That’s where it goes back to having to write 16,000 words of essays in two and a half days because I fell behind. It was just missions. I mean, we had a few fatalities clustered together pretty closely” (Tango, personal conversation, 2014).

Hotel probably had the best perspective on self-paced versus set due dates. Her college changed from the self-paced model to concrete due dates while she was taking classes during her deployment, and she definitely preferred the self-paced model.

The classes got a little more frustrating and difficult at the time they changed the program from self-paced to set due dates. It is logical for a class that you need to have weekly things, but it was just a little harder because it wasn’t always conducive for the environment (Hotel, personal conversation, 2014).

**Time commitment.** The nineteen participants spent an average of twelve hours a week doing homework per course. Yankee spent the most, with up to thirty-five hours a week and India the least, with as little as two hours a week. Regardless of the time the spent studying, homework was a normal part of the participant's life. "All you did was work, eat, and sleep, and do your homework. That was your whole life. There was no social life" (Charlie). Also, studying always required planning and making sure to prioritize missions, and then plan for homework. "Other than having to go out and do a mission, nothing held me back from class work. I managed my time very wisely. Knew what I had available and what I could get away with" (Victor, personal conversation, 2014).

**Course extensions.** Five participants reported having to get extensions after course end dates to complete courses. None reported problems in getting the extensions, but two participants experienced problems because of the extensions. Echo had requested an extension and then went several weeks without Internet. She later learned the extension had not been received. When she attempted to get the extension upon arriving stateside, the request was denied because the college said the extension request came too late. When she attempted to appeal to the Associate Dean of the college, he wrote a scathing e-mail telling her that their college did not need "students like her." Juliet was granted extensions but when he would return home, he would fail to complete the course in time. "When I got home, I wouldn't finish the incomplete classes. So then I actually got a whole bunch of Fs, which hurt my GPA" (Juliet, personal conversation, 2014).

**Support mechanisms.** This section will discuss the kind of support mechanisms that were in place for the participants as they took classes during their deployments. It will focus on the participants, their families, and their military leadership and peers.

**Participants.** Originally, the participants were asked about those around them that supported them while they took their courses. It became clear that many of the participants themselves were the support system for others. They encouraged and counseled other service members to take courses, helped them to register and pick classes, and also proctored tests. This was all in addition to completing missions, their own responsibilities, and course taking experiences.

The education center was actually me, because no one else was taking classes, and they kind of realized this, and I'm there carrying my books around. I became the unofficial go to on how you sign up for college, how to do all that stuff. And I didn't mind. I had at least 4 people that came to me that wanted classes. So I got them all signed up (Bravo, personal conversation, 2014).

Victor became the education spokesperson just by carrying his books around with him and by stopping to talk to whoever asked about what he was doing.

I walked around with my books in my hand, and people were like, hey, where you going? I'd tell 'em what I'm doing. Like give 'em my spiel about getting something out of it, and the following year I had like, there was seven kids walking around with books in their hands. They took my advice, and I said, wow. That's awesome. That's great (Victor, personal conversation, 2014).

Sometimes the participants just helped to encourage and motivate others that were also taking courses. "Everyone taking classes in the office would say keep working hard, or oh, I got an A on my test. So we all encouraged each other" (Charlie, personal conversation, 2014).

**Family.** Family support was crucial for the majority of the participants. This support ranged from verbal support to actually submitting assignments for participants when they could

not. The participants' family members sent books, proofread papers, did research, e-mailed research documents, took paperwork to the colleges and occasionally turned in assignments. An example of this was when Golf could not get online to post in a discussion board that was due that day. Golf said, when the Internet went down,

I immediately pulled out my government-issued Blackberry and was typing a 350 word text message to my wife. I texted to her, she could copy/paste and drop it into school discussion so it counted as participation, so I had to do it (Golf, personal conversation, 2014).

Family members were available to discuss grades and encourage participants when they were feeling overwhelmed. All participants felt that their family support played a critical role in their success in completing classes while deployed in combat.

**Military.** Six of the participants reported that their command was very supportive of them taking classes. The majority of these were officers working on Master's degrees. The caveat was that the mission always came first.

Good for you is what my command thought of me taking master's classes. They endorsed it. I mean they had to sign off on it in order for me to get my Tuition Assistance, so they approved of it. They said I was doing good things, and they encouraged me to go to school, but they ensured that I knew that the mission comes first (Yankee, personal conversation, 2014).

Even when the command was supportive of the participant's endeavors, five participants found that other service members, both in and out of their chain of command, were not supportive.

I did run into opposition for taking classes during my deployment. There was an Army Sergeant First Class that absolutely despised the fact that I was doing something to further



myself. He thought that the mission was the only thing that was important in life (Yankee, personal conversation, 2014).

Lima's commander approved his Tuition Assistance to take the classes during the deployment, but continually questioned his military performance because of it.

The commanders' condescension. He would say, Sergeant Lima why are you doing homework? There are two SOPs that you have not done. I would have to say, sir they're in your inbox. 'Cause I would send 'em back, and he would always send 'em back with changes. How come it's not done? So his thing was why I am doing homework when I should be doing these SOPs, when in turn I sent them to him for review (Lima, personal conversation, 2014).

For November, it was not about taking classes while deployed in combat, but taking college classes in general.

My first sergeant made a little quip expressing his displeasure at me taking college courses. I took it was not just the fact that I was taking college courses down range, but college courses period. That's the way I took it. He had an issue of his subordinates being more educated than him or maybe he felt that college was not for enlisted (November, personal conversation, 2014).

There were two other participants that also received negative support for taking courses while deployed in combat. Alpha received negative support from his command, but it was out of concern for his safety. "My commander, and the equivalent of like my first sergeant, just didn't think it was a good idea to put yourself under that much added stress by taking classes during combat" (Alpha, personal conversation, 2014).

However ambiguously, Bravo was supported and even encouraged to take classes. His Non-Commissioned Officer's used his success to get positive reviews on their annual performance reports. He felt they took credit for his endeavors, but the actual support he received seemed vacant.

They could put however many classes I took on their NCOER/OER. They take credit and they'd be like, Oh yeah, I supported this person. So they didn't mind. But when it came time to I'm doing something right now. That's a back seat to a mission, mission first (Bravo, personal conversation, 2014).

Only one participant received negative feedback from his fellow service members.

Some people didn't understand the sacrifice that I was willing to put in less sleep, which there was already little sleep, in order to do classes, and so some people were like I don't see how you have time for that, or whatever but they necessarily didn't have the drive that I did, the motivation to do what I did (Sierra, personal conversation, 2014).

### **Phenomenon Perspectives**

The participants were asked to share their overall perspectives on their experiences with the phenomenon. This included ways that taking classes in combat helped the participants, or conversely, ways that made things more difficult. The participants shared their interpretations of how higher education and the military can better support their educational endeavors while they are deployed in combat.

**Benefits.** All nineteen participants believed that taking courses while deployed in combat was beneficial to them and their academic endeavors. Five participants felt that it made the deployment seem faster. Two participants believed that it helped fight off homesickness. The majority felt that it helped them keep on pace and not lose large chunks of time in their degree

programs. All of the participants were very proud of what they had achieved while balancing missions, casualties, lack of sleep, time restrictions, limited resources, poor connectivity and stress.

Bravo summed up what the participants felt about the phenomenon.

Do you want to have the best Xbox on line video games scores? Oh yeah, I'm awesome.

Or do you want to come back with a transcript that said I earned even if it's one class, two classes. I earned these credits. It helps with your military career, your promotion. Civilian education helps when you do eventually separate from the military. You're further in your way towards a degree. And I consider any deployment without education a wasted 12 months (Bravo, personal conversation, 2014).

**Desire to learn.** None of the participants wanted to take easy classes or to earn easy degrees. Several reported that they heard about other service members that took easy programs or found colleges that were not strict, just to earn degrees without much effort. These participants felt that high standards, rigor, and learning were important components in their educational endeavors.

I think rigor is essential. You can't get rid of rigor. But you can let them know I'm over here. I'm sure that people try to get over, hey, I'm in a war. What do you want me to do? I'm like, no, man, you're taking a class you need to take the class (Tango, personal conversation, 2014).

In fact, five of the participants said that they hid their deployed status from their instructors because they did not want preferential treatment.

Even when instructors were aware of the participant's deployed statuses, the participants took their responsibility to do their best in the courses seriously.

My responsibility as I saw it, being deployed, was balancing the differences in time, the time zones and military duties and being able to get that work done, and in a genuine

manner, not just skimming and posting randomness on the website (Delta, personal conversation, 2014).

**Stress.** Stress in combat went without question. Little sleep mixed with dangerous missions was stressful simply by its nature. All nineteen participants felt stress during their combat deployments. In addition to combat stress, eleven participants felt that the phenomenon added stress to their deployments. None of those, however, said they regretted their decision to take courses during their deployments. Two participants believed the phenomenon added good stress.

I do think that my stress level was increased, but I think that that was a needed stress because it was what pushed me, what motivated me to get stuff done in the beginning of the week, not at the end. So it was I guess positive stress (Sierra, personal conversation, 2014).

**Grounded.** One of the surprising findings of the study was the way the participants found that taking courses while deployed in combat helped them to stay grounded in reality.

I don't want to say that it was a vaccination against PTSD, that's not right. But, it gave me a different picture. It kept me from having tunnel vision about some of the other more interesting things that were going on" (Golf, personal conversation, 2014).

While in combat, it was easy to forget about the larger world and become engrossed in the immediate, especially when under constant threat. Seven participants felt that the phenomenon was a way for them to remember the broader reality. India called it a separation, a shifting of gears, and a reprieve. Charlie called it a distracter, and Hotel called it a diversion. Golf seemed to capture it best when he said:

I think taking the classes made me a little more grounded in the broader reality of the world. Those soldiers that went overseas and were in it and saw all the bad stuff, they

didn't have the time, they didn't have any other frame of reference. They were literally in it all the time. And when they turned left and right, their buddies were still in it. When they went back to the base they were still in it, 'cause the only thing they were thinking about, the only context and culture that was there but I had to get online. I had to be thinking about organizational behavior. I had to be thinking about budgeting and finance. Maybe that helped a bit to at least, at least keep me thinking about something else (Charlie, personal conversation, 2014).

**Useful time away from family.** In the literature review, there were anecdotes that said that taking classes in combat was easier for some service members because they did not have the typical family responsibilities they did while at home duty stations. Seven of the participants reported this to be true for them. While at their home duty stations, family and household responsibilities often took time away from course work.

It is easier to take classes in combat, because you don't have your family there. If I go home it's so hard for me to get homework done online, because I got my wife. I got my kids. They want to play. They want to go somewhere. When I'm there I'm either at work. I'm in the gym. I'm sleeping, or I'm doing homework, or I can substitute any one of the two, except for missions. It was all I had to do was worry about me. I didn't have to worry about anything else. So it honestly is a little bit easier (Juliet, personal conversation, 2014).

**Recommend taking courses during deployments.** All nineteen participants said they would recommend taking courses while deployed in combat to other service members. Each said there were conditions, however, that needed to be considered. All said that the mission had to come first, and that if you could not perform your mission and complete school work, than you should not take classes. Several said that it was dependent on the person's job during the

deployment. If you were constantly outside the wire and on the move, taking courses may not be realistic. Others said that the service members had to be motivated and be able to handle the workload of both the military and the civilian education. Two believed that service members should take classes only when the theater they were deploying to had sufficiently matured to offer the needed resources. One said that if a soldier were already in a program, the soldier should continue, but did not recommend for soldiers trying to start a new and unknown program during a deployment. The main reason the participants said they would recommend other service members take courses during deployments was because it would be impossible to complete their educations otherwise. “Especially over the last decade, it was about the only way that any soldier in the U.S. Military is going to be able to get school done. So I’m definitely for ‘em” (November, personal conversation, 2014).

**Military support.** All nineteen participants believed that the military should support service members who choose to take courses while they deployed, as long as it does not affect the mission. Most agreed that, for the most part, the military already does support the effort. They suggested that those in leadership should receive additional training in ways to support troops taking classes during their deployments. Two recommended that young enlisted troops be encouraged to start courses and earning CLEP and DANTES credits as soon as they are done with basic training. One participant felt that the military should also look out for service members taking courses.

I think the military needs to look out for the soldiers. Some colleges may be marginally accredited or may not be very helpful. And I think the military should make sure that the military educational services are always looking out for schools trying to take advantage of service members (Tango, personal conversation, 2014).

**Higher education support.** The participants felt that colleges are doing the best they can with service members who take courses while deployed. Leniency and flexibility were words that participants used to describe what they wanted from colleges, especially when it came to due dates in courses.

I think being lenient towards soldiers deployed will be a lot more beneficial to soldiers, so if there ever comes a time when there is a big assignment due, they don't absolutely like stress, stress out, because of you know, their missions are going on. So I think just that, you know that leniency (Juliet, personal conversation, 2014).

Several of the participants believed that better training for instructors was on the only way to lead to leniency and flexibility.

Maybe if faculty were a little more educated on some of the challenges that we face when we take these online classes while deployed. Maybe if they understood a little bit more. Maybe faculty should have a basic training type of what a soldier goes through (Charlie, personal conversation, 2014).

However, flexibility and leniency should not be confused with giving an easy "A" in a course, or with basically passing students who are deployed when they have not turned in any work.

I'm not looking for easy instructors. What I'm looking for is someone who is user friendly. Are they flexible? Or are they just rigid? Can they work with the old edition? You know, are they amicable to having assignments in two weeks early or finishing the final a week out? Can the university say I understand you need to have your grades in by this time, okay well, you know, give the guy a break? He's down range. And, oh by the way, he has no access, but he wants to continue his education (India, personal conversation, 2014).

#### **Part 4: Summary**

Chapter 4 began with introductions to the nineteen participants, including their military backgrounds and deployments. Following these introductions was a contextual framework for the participants, including their family and educational backgrounds, their educational motivations and their military experiences. The participants' decisions and actions towards education and the military eventually led them to be part of the phenomenon. Secondly, Chapter 4 presented the lived experiences of the participants as they took online courses while deployed in combat zones. Thirdly, the combat environment was examined and light was shed on the harsh and unforgiving backdrop in which the phenomenon occurred. Fourthly, a detailed inspection of the higher education environments included the experiences of the participants in taking the courses. Fifthly, the support mechanisms of the participants were introduced, including the important roles that the participants had in encouraging other deployed service members in continuing their educations. Finally, the participants' perspectives on the phenomenon were presented. These reflections helped to solidify the experiences into the key findings in this study.

#### **Part 5: Essence**

The essence of the lived experiences of the participants taking online college courses while deployed in combat zones was *resilience*. There was no one common living situation or one specific shared mission experience for the participants. Combat casualties were a regular occurrence for some, while others were shielded from that brutality. Available resources varied from participant to participant, and from deployment to deployment. Support was there for some, while others were questioned about their priorities. Different colleges used different teaching approaches and different time lines. Assignments, tests and group work came and went. Participants found success and failure. They experienced pride and frustration. They went through



highs and lows. They continued on through the courses regardless of the obstacles. They simply toughed it out, instead of giving out. Whether it was contending with connectivity issues, mortars falling, waiting to get into the U.S. Embassy, finding proctors, leadership struggles, the participants of this study were resilient in their efforts to complete college courses while deployed in combat. Sierra said it best,

I think the only thing that could slow somebody down is themselves. And so for me, I want to excel with education, but I also wanted to be in combat. And so for me, it was more or less, well, am I going to sacrifice one for the other? And I was like, why not just do ‘em both (Sierra, personal conversation, 2014)?

For the military, the essence of this study was to be resilient in ones efforts to support service members, no matter where they are serving. It was what the participants wanted and needed. Of course, it was always “mission first” and that was clearly stated by all participants. Beyond the mission, the military recognized the needs of the participants to stay active and engaged. This resiliency to support the whole troop was an important element for the success of the missions. Delta mentioned the Air Force’s Four Pillars of a healthy person, which includes physical, mental, social, and spiritual aspects for a balanced lifestyle (Crane, 2010, July 28, para. 7). Delta felt it would be contradictory to the Four Pillars to not allow service members to continue their educations during combat. Charlie summoned up the need for the military to support service member’s educational goals in combat,

I think it’s just important. We’re already away from our family. We’re distracted with that. We’re distracted with combat and death and just negativity. Taking classes is a positive thing and distracts our mind and helps us make it through that deployment (Charlie, personal conversation, 2014).

Higher education has an opportunity to make an important impact into the lives of soldier students. They must be resilient in providing online programs that service members want to take. They must be resilient in communicating with deployed service members and providing them with flexibility. Instructors must be resilient in taking extra time to listen to the needs of deployed service members. Support services, like libraries and tutoring, must find ways to be available to students even in the most remote locations. Most importantly, higher education institutions must be resilient in their efforts to provide quality, online learning-experiences to deployed students, and to not simply take in the generous financial boom that the military and veteran students bring to their campuses. This will take more research, training and interactions with soldier-students. College deans, department chairs, faculty, instructors, librarians, and Veteran's Offices must continue to research the dynamics of this phenomenon and try to find better ways to provide quality educations to students, regardless of where they are.

## **CHAPTER 5-DISCUSSION**

### **Overview**

Chapter 5 discusses the findings of this study as they relate to the research questions and the literature. The first part will discuss each of the research questions and how the findings of the study answer the questions. Second will be a discussion of the researcher assumptions and biases. This expands on the assumptions and biases listed in Chapter 1. Third will be a discussion of the relevance to the literature. This includes how the study fits into the current literature as well as findings that were not found in the literature. Fourth will be the implications for practice and ways that higher education institutions can assist deployed soldiers as they take courses while in combat. Fifth will be the recommendations for future research. Finally, I will include my final reflections on the study and its findings.

### **Part 1: Response to the Research Questions**

This part of the chapter examines the research questions and how the findings answer the posed questions. Each will be addressed individually with a discussion to follow.

The first research question was what are the experiences of soldier-students who take online courses while deployed in combat zones? There is certainly no one combat experience and therefore, no one experience for soldier-students. The experiences of the 19 participants were about balancing the responsibilities that came with being in combat while also trying to pursue higher education. The combat responsibilities included being deployed multiple times over the last fifteen years. During these combat deployments, the participants lived in a variety of environments that were often remote and sparse. Resources varied from participant to participant and deployment to deployment. The participants engaged in duties on bases and off. Missions could be dangerous and include enemy engagements. Death and dying were real life day to day occurrences.

The deployments into the combat zones are what the participants expected as part of their military responsibilities.

The participant's experiences of taking college courses while deployed in combat were all very personal and unique. From them we learned about stress, time management, connectivity issues, class discussions, proctored tests, group projects and communications blackouts. We learned that taking a course while deployed in combat is not easy even for those stationed inside the wire, for those that have fairly regular schedules and for those that have a generous availability of resources. We found out how important family support was for the success of the participants. For a handful, the courses offered them an escape and reprieve from the chaos of war. Participants yearned for flexibility from their colleges and support and resources from the military.

From the experiences of the participants, we learned that this extraordinary group wants and needs to continue their education during their deployments. With so many deployments in the past fifteen years and the very real possibility of continued deployments in the future, U.S. Service Members may have little choice but to take courses while deployed in combat. These participants taught us that they will work hard, sacrifice sleep and safety, want to be held to high standards and may turn in things early or late and groan when put into a group; nonetheless, they will persevere because they are resilient.

Mostly, we learned that we have so much to still learn. These participants simply gave us a brief glimpses into their stories. There is so much more that can be learned from them and other soldier-students. With only two previous studies even touching on the topic of soldier-students, the experiences of soldier-students is only barely coming to light.

The second research question is how does the combat environment affect the soldier-student's experiences of taking online courses while deployed in combat? The combat

environment had a momentous effect on the soldier-students experiences of taking courses while they were deployed in combat zones. Even if the only issue facing the participants in this study was poor Internet connectivity that would be enough of a disruption for many online students to quit attending, withdrawal or drop a class. After all, dropout rates for online students were estimated to be as high as 50 percent (Frankola, 2001). Connectivity is certainly an important factor in an online course, but these participants took this obstacle like they did all the others, in stride. Obviously, the combat environment affected communications, time management, sleep, down time, stress, and frustration. It certainly is not to say that regular online students are not affected by these things while taking their classes, but the combat environment certainly amplified these obstacles.

Each factor in taking an online course became a larger issue because of the time differences and remoteness of the participant's locations. Being able to pick up a cell phone and call the instructor to ask a question was not realistic for the majority of the participants. The combat environment augmented issues that many online students face and turned them from irritants into significant problems. For example, asking for a course extension would have been a fairly simple request for most online students, but for Echo it turned into a frustration that ended her participation in a master's program.

The most obvious factor in combat that affected the participant's ability to complete online courses was the very real everyday threat of violence. All of the participants had the potential to hear and see death and to become casualties themselves. A number of the participants were directly involved in violence and then had to put their weapons down and pick up their books. Tango gave a sobering account of the combat environment.

You're deprived of creature comforts. You're exposed to illness. You're tired. You're not eating well, you're you know, you're scared all the time, but you never admit that while you're in there. Like I don't think anybody, including myself, would have ever said during your deployment, it's like I'm tired of being scared every day. But looking back five years later I'm like, man, I was tired of being scared every day (Tango, personal conversation, 2014).

The combat environment affected the participant's experiences of taking courses profoundly. For some it was a positive release and for others an unneeded stress. For the nineteen participants in this study serving in a combat zone and taking online college courses is an inseparable part of their experiences.

The third research question was how does taking online courses in combat relate to the educational goals of the soldier-student? The participants all sought to earn college degrees. For some it was about military promotions and for others to open doors in the civilian world. Several mentioned that it was a benefit that was provided to them because of their service and they felt obligated to utilize it. Regardless of their motivation to continue their educations, the participants' deployments significantly affected their educational goals.

It became quite clear from the contextual background that these participants deployed often. A combined thirty-seven years of combat deployment time by nineteen service members means that the option of starting and finishing courses and college degrees outside of their deployments would have been difficult. The participants reported concerns of lost time in their college programs, falling behind on their degree plans, graduating later than they wanted and overall frustration in having to start and stop taking college courses because of multiple

deployments. To overcome this frustration, they simply chose to continue taking classes even while they were deployed.

The U.S. military has been engaged in combat operations since 2001. The participants all realized that they could no longer out wait the conflict. They would deploy again and again. They simply shifted their educational goals to include completing courses in combat. This is certainly not surprising based upon the resiliency of the participants.

It is also important to remember that from 2001-2008 there was a 73 percent increase in demand for existing online courses and programs (Allen & Seaman, 2010, p. 1). More recent numbers show that online enrollment increased from 9.6 percent of students in 2002 to 33.35 percent of students in 2012. This translates into almost 6 million additional students taking at least one online course in 2012 than in 2002 (Allen & Seaman, 2014, p. 15). College and universities responded to this increased demand by putting more courses and programs online (McMurray, 2007). This increased the access the participants had to continuing their educations during their combat deployments.

The fourth research question was what measures can be taken by soldier-students, by higher education institutions and faculty to improve the experiences? The participants felt that overall higher education intuitions and faculty were doing a good job and were fair during their courses. Flexibility on due dates and late assignments was the most requested measure that the participants' requested. Also, the participants felt that communication with the institution and faculty was imperative to their success. The participants attempted to communicate prior to and during their deployments to make sure that expectations were being met. Communication through all phases of the student's experiences was certainly a key for many of the participants. This question will be further addressed in the implications for practice section.

## **Researcher Assumptions and Biases**

In a phenomenological study, the researcher is the instrument that analyzes the data. By going through a process of epoche, the researcher identifies their biases and assumptions so as they review data they are able to do so with a clear and open mind (Moustakas, 1994, p. 87). As the researcher that analyzed the data in this study, I listed my biases and assumptions in Chapter 1. Understanding these biases prior to the analysis helped me to bracket these out. As I progressed through the analysis, I did acknowledge additional assumptions and biases that arose. First, I assumed that the majority of the participants that took the courses while they were deployed in combat would be those that had missions inside the wire. I did not expect those completing missions off bases would have time to complete course work in addition to missions. Several early participants helped me realize that despite the missions off base, they did complete courses. Second, I assumed that there would be a significant fail and drop rate for the participants. This was partly based upon the literature and my own experiences with online course retention. The participants actually completed one hundred and six courses while only dropping or failing eight.

Third, I assumed that getting textbooks would be a significant challenge. This was not the case for the majority of the participants. The use of e-books was certainly a factor in this not being an issue. Also, the participants planned ahead and signed up for classes in enough time to get textbooks. Even while taking classes, they were always looking ahead and planning. Finally, I assumed that the more participants would choose colleges that were not regionally accredited. This assumption was based on both the literature and the prolific marketing to military students that some non-regionally accredited colleges utilize. Only one participant actually took courses from a non-regionally accredited college and ended up not being able to transfer any of her credits.



## **Part 2: Relevance to the Literature**

In the literature review for this study, there were only two studies that actually mentioned the concept of soldier-students. The first study was a review of the influences of the Montgomery G.I. Bill and the second was about efficiency of Embry-Riddle's library resources for deployed soldier-students. Because of this lack of literature related to the phenomenon, the following sections will also include the anecdotal information and how they findings of the study compare.

### **Findings Confirmed in the Literature**

In the Murphy (2009) study, Embry-Riddle's library service noted specific problems that soldier-students might encounter. These included lack of electricity, unreliable Internet, long-lines and limited usage time at Internet cafes and the lack of availability of education offices. These finding were all confirmed by this study. One key difference was the availability of personal Internet made available to the participants in more mature theaters.

From the anecdotal articles, there were five issues identified that affected soldier-students. First, the most significant challenge for soldier-students is the lack of Internet access or poor Internet stability and bandwidth (Murphy, J, 2010; Peter, 2011; Kenyon, 2002; Jopling, 2010; Carnevale, 2006; Bates, 2012; Benedetti; 2010). This was a major issue for the participants in this study. This caused some of the participants to seek various locations in which to complete their work. This also inspired the participants to work offline as much as possible. Even with the implementation of private Internet, connectivity continued to be an issue. Second, soldier-students tend to use online classes as a way to fight the boredom they experience between missions (Lorenzetti, 2007; Peter, 2011; Rickley, 2010). The participants in this study did not specifically mention boredom in their experiences. Most did not see the type of downtime that perhaps others that were deployed experienced. For many in this study, downtime was an opportunity to take

classes because they had fewer responsibilities than when they were home. Not one participant ever mentioned boredom as a reason for taking college courses.

The third finding in the anecdotal articles was that taking online courses in combat helps them to forget about the realities of combat (Gallagher, 2004, November 7; Schlicht, 2009). This was confirmed by a number of participants. Distraction, separation, shifting gears and reprieve were named by the participants to explain the benefits of taking the courses. Some went further saying that taking the courses kept them grounded in a larger reality than the conflicts of war. This became for them a slice of home and hope. Fourth, the communications between the soldier-students and the colleges are vital in helping the student be successful (Gallagher, 2004; Padilla, 2003; Jopling, 2010; Keleher, 2011; Naylor, 2011; Carnevale, 2006). This was definitely an important factor for the participants in this study. Their ability to work with their instructors on time lines and get work in late proved vitally important to their success. Had the participants not been able to communicate with their instructors, their success rates may have been much lower. The ease of registration and getting textbooks were also imperative to the success of the participants.

Finally, time constraints were significant obstacles (Jopling, 2010; Naylor, 2011). This claim was supported by the participants. The participants often sacrificed sleep and looked for every opportunity, even while waiting on missions, to be able to complete their course work. Timelines and due dates were constant pressures the participants experienced while taking courses coupled with spontaneous missions and unpredictable work schedules.

### **Findings not Found in Current Literature**

While the anecdotal stories and the two published journal articles supported some of the findings of this study, this study presented many new findings. The most significant findings dealt

with the experiences of completing the actual course work. The use of discussions, research papers, groups, timed and proctored exams in a combat environment are all things that need to be examined closer by further research. Also, the stress levels and the reprieve that college courses offered was hinted at in the literature but was discussed in more depth by the participants. The overall benefit that courses offered was also an important finding. It was also interesting how the soldier-students supported and encouraged other deploying service members to take online courses during their deployments. Many of the participants became the educational spokesperson in their units and often helped others get enrolled and choose classes.

### **Implications for Practice**

Higher education institution should examine how soldier-students fit into their overall mission and strategies. For many institutions, the value of tuition assistance and both the Montgomery G.I. Bill and Post-911 G.I. Bill are certainly enticing reasons to market to soldier-students. They have the opportunity to do more than use soldier-students as ways to profit. These are the type of students that can benefit the institution while they are students and as alumnus. The institutions also have an obligation to the students as well as the taxpayers to ensure that real learning and useful degrees are earned. They have an obligation to the soldier -students to provide value to the degree that they have earned.

Streamlining communication mechanisms between higher education and deployed soldiers is certainly a possibility. This is a great opportunity for campuses, perhaps through their Veteran's Offices, to provide liaisons to deployed service members. Things like getting their books and communicating with their faculty could certainly ease the burden that the deployed service member may feel during their deployments.

There is also plenty of opportunity to produce better online courses that provide soldier-students with the flexibility they need. First, colleges could examine ways to present more content to the student's offline. For example, utilizing compact discs and jump drives to present course materials has tremendous potential if they contain actual material and not simply links to online materials. This could even extend to providing research topics to students and then providing them a CD of articles to use when they cannot get online to do the research. Second, a review of what defines and measures participation in online courses should be conducted. If students are not benefitting from posting in asynchronous discussions, maybe there should be alternative options so that they do not simply become a check boxed item where no real discussion occurs. When there is no real discussion then there is no real learning. Third, the use of proctors and timed exams could be waived or other options provided to soldiers deployed in combat. This additional stress and burden was certainly a factor for the participants and they could have easily been exempted. Fourth, options could be provided for deployed students to opt out of group work in favor of alternative assignments.

The military has an extensive history of providing distance education. In fact, it is often the military that sets the standards and leads the way in distance education. This provides a tremendous opportunity for military leaders to examine ways that deployed soldiers can be supported while taking courses. The military always puts missions first. That is something that was clear to every single participant. This focus on mission should encourage the military that taking courses in combat is not a negative but a positive for the soldier-students. The military needs to continue to provide resources and opportunities for students to pursue higher education. Additional training for military leaders on how to both accomplish missions and support soldier-students should be explored.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study sets a foundation for higher education institutions to examine the role that soldier-students have in their missions and strategic plans. As mentioned before, it is highly likely that service members taking courses at institutions will deploy and perhaps deploy often. How can institutions better serve soldier-students? How do their policies and procedures affect soldier-students? How can they improve communication mechanisms for soldier-students? What resources can be improved or changed? What kind of training could help instructors be more responsive to the needs of soldier-students? What technologies hinder or help soldier-students? These are just a few of the possible research options that could be undertaken at higher education institutions.

Another recommended study would be to ask faculty about their own experiences with soldier-students. It would be interesting to learn about how much flexibility they give soldier-students in their courses when it comes to late work or non-participation. Successful strategies that they use with deployed service members would be helpful for other faculty to know. Also, studies into how institutional policies and procedures influence their decisions when dealing with soldier-students could help change and expand policies and procedures to allow more flexibility for soldier-students.

Finally, it would be extremely useful to know how many service members take courses while deployed and their retention rates. Also, when a service-member does not complete or fails a course they have to reimburse the tuition assistance program. It would be interesting to find out how much tuition assistance is used for deployed service-members taking courses while they are deployed and how many end up owing for failed courses. This would be extremely valuable to service-members as they make their own decisions about whether to pursue education while deployed in combat.

## **Final Reflections**

When I was trying to find a dissertation topic, everyone said to pick something you are passionate about. I knew I was passionate about online education and the opportunities it holds for those in remote locations. I have always been passionate about the military. I wanted to join the military since I was a child. Having served in the military, having been deployed in combat, and then working in online education for almost fifteen years, I knew I had found the topic that I was be passionate about. I was also tremendously excited by the lack of research that had been conducted in the area of deployed soldiers taking college courses. This gap in literature meant that I had a tremendous opportunity to share experiences that few people knew anything about. The passion started when I chose the topic and grew through every process of the dissertation.

When I wrote the proposal one of the hardest things for me to do was to come up with the actual interview questions. I certainly did not know where to start and what to ask. There was little known about the experiences and I wanted to be sure that I utilized the volunteers time to gather the most important experiences. The three-interview series proposed by Seidman (2006) was tremendously helpful in building a strong background and allowing the participants to discuss the phenomenon and then reflect on the experiences.

One of the challenges I faced early was to try to find locations to would allow me access to potential participants. In working with my committee, I was able to come up with a plan of self-selections and snow-ball sampling. This allowed me to have participants join the study on their own and from various parts of the United States and even Europe. My colleagues at the cooperating university did a tremendous job of spreading word about the study and I was able to get the volunteers I needed for the study.

The participants in this study came to me slowly. I had narrowed my search to those only having returned from combat within the past year of the first interview. I did this because at the

time I thought that the experiences would be more enlightening if they reflected the most recent experiences of the participants. What I learned is that the combat experiences did not fade for these participants. In fact, many had time to reflect and truly judge the experiences they had. I feel that the participant's stories were richer because they were able to compare different deployments and see the implications of their choices.

I interviewed each participant twice. I wanted them to have time between interviews to reflect on our discussions. This helped many of the participants come to the second interview with things that they had remembered after the first interview. This also gave me the ability to review the first interview and to ask follow up questions to statements made during the first interviews. I tried to get both interviews completed within two week so that the participants' obligation was not extended longer than several weeks.

As I progressed through the interviews, I was amazed at the challenges that the participants faced. Not only were many living in strenuous environments, they were running high frequency and dangerous missions. Many of the participants were engaged in direct battles with enemy combatants. As I heard them discuss these experiences and then returning to their living quarters, I was awe struck by their attitudes and accomplishments. Not one participant had any negative feelings towards their instructors even when they instructors penalized them for late assignments. Not one participant said that their instructors were unfair. Several of the participants refrained from even telling their instructors they were deployed because they did not want to have an unfair advantage over other students in their classes. I was so honored to hear the stories of these brave and principled participants.

There was so much rich data that arose as I went through the analysis of the interview transcriptions. I kept thinking I could simply write about one participant and have such a rich story

to tell and at times was disappointed that I could not share more of their stories. As I went through their experiences, the themes that arose told me that these were honorable and hardworking students that any college should be proud to call their students. The challenges that they faced to be able to complete their course work was surprising. I knew the environment would be challenging but things like timed exams and proctored exams were unexpected findings. The way the participants continued to communicate throughout their courses with their instructors helped most of them succeed. Their sheer resilience to obstacles and constantly finding ways to succeed made me proud to write their stories.

Resilience was a word that came to me over and over again. In my experiences, I have seen and heard students drop and fail online courses for a variety of reasons. None of those reasons were ever as serious as the reasons that these participants had to quit during their deployments. I was reminded again and again why the military draws the best and the brightest. They are simply not quitters. Their resiliency helped them achieve their educational goals. For many taking courses in combat was something they had to do if they wanted that promotion or that transition to the civilian world.

Through the literature review, I read many negative accounts of colleges preying on military students to gain their financial aid. I was surprised that the majority of the participants in this study did not have that experience. It was clear how important the choice of which college to attend was for the participants. Higher education institutions must be resilient in providing these students the best education they can provide. Higher education must be resilient in providing flexibility but not lower standards. Higher education must be resilient in providing resources and support and communication so that the students have the best opportunity to be successful.



The resilience of the U.S. Military tells me that they will continue to support and assist those deployed service members. By simply opening education centers and MWR facilities as quickly as possible in combat zones is a true sign of resilience in supporting the troops. This is what makes the U.S. Military strong and mobile. An educated force is a better force and this is something the U.S. Military has known for a long time. By being a leader in distance education, they recognize the need for diversions, for self-growth and for support.

The participants in this study are amazing people that did amazing things for their country and for their educational goals. My hope is that by telling their stories the foundation will be set and that future researchers will take these stories and find tangible ways for higher education and the military to support soldier-students' endeavors. The participants are hard charging service members that are not easily dissuaded from their goals. The participants are truly the best of the U.S. Military and their resiliency to complete the mission and to continue their educations is a story that I am proud to share.

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## APPENDIX A

### Online Soldier-Student Participant Self-Select Form

My name is Tracy A. Parks and I am a doctoral student at Colorado State University. I am conducting a research study on the “Experiences of Service Members Taking Online Courses While Deployed in Combat”. I am also a Veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. I am hoping that you can help me complete my doctoral research. Please click Yes or No for the following two questions and provide your contact information if you would like to participate in the study.

\* Required

Did you serve as a member of the military in Afghanistan and/or Iraq? \*

- Yes
- No

Did you take an online course from a college or university while in Afghanistan and/or Iraq? \*

- Yes
- No

Your First and Last Name \*

Please provide a telephone number where you can be reached. \*

Your Email Address: \*

In what city/town are currently located? This will help me determine if we will need online meeting technologies.

Any other information you wish to provide?

### Additional Study Information

You will receive a total of \$25.00 if you participate in all three interviews. Overall Anticipated Benefit: This study hopes to tell your story about what you experienced while taking a college course(s) while you were deployed in combat. The U.S. Military, colleges, universities and faculty may all benefit by better understanding what you experienced and may develop better ways to support your educational efforts. Location: Colorado Interviews will be audiotaped. Primary Investigator: James E. Folkestad, Ph.D., [folkestad@cahs.colostate.edu](mailto:folkestad@cahs.colostate.edu)

## APPENDIX B

### Poster



# Served in Combat? Took an online course while deployed?

**Tell your story.**

I am conducting a research study on the "Experiences of Service Members Taking Online Courses While Deployed in Combat." My name is Tracy A. Parks and I am a doctoral student at Colorado State University. I am also a Veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. **Participation in this study is voluntary.**

**Steps to participate:**

1. Let me know you want to participate by filling out the online enrollment form at [www.tinyurl.com/soldierstudy](http://www.tinyurl.com/soldierstudy)
2. Meet me in person for 30 minutes to discuss the study and your participation.
3. Participate in up to three additional interviews lasting 60-90 minutes each.

You will receive a total of \$25.00 if you participate in all three interviews.

**Overall Anticipated Benefit:** This study hopes to tell your story about what you experienced while taking a college course(s) while you were deployed in combat. The U.S. Military, colleges, universities and faculty may all benefit by better understanding what you experienced and may develop better ways to support your educational efforts.

**Location:** Globally

**Interviews will be audiotaped.**

**Research Participants Sought**

- ⇒ Did you deploy with the military to Iraq and/or Afghanistan since 2001?
- ⇒ Did you take an online college course during your combat deployment?



**Enroll at:**

[www.tinyurl.com/soldierstudy](http://www.tinyurl.com/soldierstudy)

**Contacts:**  
**Tracy A. Parks**  
[tparks@lamar.colostate.edu](mailto:tparks@lamar.colostate.edu)  
**Primary Investigator**  
James E. Folkestad, Ph.D.  
[folkestad@cahs.colostate.edu](mailto:folkestad@cahs.colostate.edu)

## APPENDIX C

### Consent Form Consent to Participate in a Research Study Colorado State University

**TITLE OF STUDY:** Soldier-Students: A Phenomenological Study of the Experiences of Service Members Taking Online Courses While Deployed In Combat

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** Dr. James Folkestad, Ph.D., School of Education, Associate Professor, (970) 491-7823

**CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** Tracy A. Parks, School of Education, Doctoral Candidate, (903) 330-1865

**WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH?** You have been asked to participate in this study because you took an online college course or courses while you were deployed in combat for the U.S. military.

**WHO IS DOING THE STUDY?** My name is Tracy A. Parks and I am a doctoral candidate at Colorado State University. I am also a Veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. Dr. James Folkestad is my advisor and is helping me with the study.

**WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?** This study hopes to tell your story about what you experienced while taking a college course(s) while you were deployed in combat. The U.S. Military, colleges, universities and faculty may all benefit by better understanding what you experienced and may develop better ways to support your educational efforts.

**WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?** This study will take place globally from September 2013-July 2014. You will be asked to participate up to three interviews lasting from 60-90 minutes each. Your total approximate time commitment is up to 5 hours spaced out between several separate meetings preferably during a one month time frame. A mutually convenient location will be selected based upon your schedule and location. If you are at a distant location, I will utilize the telephone to conduct the meeting.

**WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?** You will then attend up three one-on-one interviews with the researcher at a mutually convenient location or by telephone. During these interviews, you will be asked a series of questions related to your background, your experiences with online courses, your experiences in the military and your experiences of taking a course or courses while you were deployed in combat. The audio of these interviews will be recorded and maintained securely by me. After the final interview, I will provide you a written copy of your interviews and my analysis of them and you will be asked to check my understanding of your experiences and add to or correct items.

**ARE THERE REASONS WHY I SHOULD NOT TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?** You should not participate in this research if you did not take an online college course(s) while deployed in combat for the U.S. Military.

**WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?**

- This study will discuss experiences that you had while you were deployed in combat zones. These experiences may be sensitive and bring back painful and emotional memories.
- It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but I have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential, but unknown, risks.

**ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?** While you may not directly benefit from this study, it may help other soldiers, the U.S. Military, colleges and universities and faculty to better understand the challenges that you faced by taking classes while you were deployed in combat. This may lead to better support services for service members who take courses in combat and remote locations in the future.

**DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?** Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**WHAT WILL IT COST ME TO PARTICIPATE?** You may be asked to commute to the interview locations. The cost of the commute, either through public transportation or personal transportation, is your responsibility.

**WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT I GIVE?** I will keep private all research records that identify you, to the extent allowed by law.

For this study, I will assign a code to your data (Alpha, Bravo etc.) so that the only place your name will appear in our records is on the consent and in our data spreadsheet which links you to your code. Only I will have access to the link between you, your code, and your data. The only exceptions to this are if I am asked to share the research files for audit purposes with the CSU Institutional Review Board ethics committee, if necessary.

You should know, however, that there are some circumstances in which I may have to show your information to other people. For example, the law may require me to tell authorities if I believe you pose a danger to yourself or someone else.

Your identity/record of receiving compensation (NOT your data) may be made available to CSU officials for financial audits.

**CAN MY TAKING PART IN THE STUDY END EARLY?** If you fail to show up to a scheduled face-to-face meeting or answer the telephone for a phone interview, you may be removed from the study.



**WILL I RECEIVE ANY COMPENSATION FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?** You will receive a total of \$25.00 if you participate in all three interviews as a token of our appreciation for your time.

**WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?**

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions about the study, you can contact the investigator, Tracy A. Parks at 903-330-1865. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact Janell Barker, Human Research Administrator at 970-491-1655. We will give you a copy of this consent form to take with you.

This consent form was approved by the CSU Institutional Review Board for the protection of human subjects in research on September 3, 2013.

**WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO KNOW?** Please initial next to each item below giving your consent for the item.

\_\_\_\_\_ **I agree to participate in up to 3 additional and separate interviews from 60-90 minutes each.**

\_\_\_\_\_ **I agree to the recording of the audio and/or online sessions being recorded during the interviews.**

Your signature acknowledges that you have read the information stated and willingly sign this consent form. Your signature also acknowledges that you have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document containing 3 pages.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of person providing information to participant Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Research Staff

## APPENDIX D

### Interview Questions

#### Interview 1

The first interview will be the “Focused Life History” and “the interviewer’s task is to put the participant’s experience in context by asking him or her to tell as much as possible about himself or herself in light of the topic up to the present time” (p. 17).

1. Tell me about yourself?
  - a. How old are you?
  - b. Where are you originally from?
  - c. At what age did you join the military?
  - d. Why did you join the military?
  - e. What branch of the military?
  - f. What was your MOS?
  - a. How long have you been or were in the military?
  - b. Where have you been stationed?
  - c. Are you still in the military?
  - d. How many times have you been deployed in a combat zone?
  - e. Where was your most recent combat deployment?
  - f. How long were you deployed?
  - g. When did you return from combat?
  - h. What was your rank during your most recent deployment?
  - i. What was your mission during your most recent deployment?
  - j. Deployed in non-combat zone?
  - k. Did you deploy in country or border country (i.e. Kuwait only)?
  - l. How long were you in country?
  - m. How long was your total deployment(s)?
  - n. What was your primarily mission?
  - o. Was this the mission you expected or trained for?
  - p. Was your mission primarily inside or outside the wire (on base, off base, a combination)?
  
2. Tell me about your family
  - a. Did your family support your decision to join the military?
  - b. Do you come from a military family?
  - c. Have any other members of your family been in combat?
  - d. How did your family react when they found out you were going to combat?
  - e. How many family members have attended college?
  - f. Do you think your family would rather you be in the military or go to college?
  - g. What did your family think about you taking online courses while you were deployed?
  - g. Were you married, single, divorced, or in a relationship during your deployment? Has that changed?
    - i. What did your spouse think of you taking online classes in combat?
  - h. Do you have children?

- i. How many and what ages?
  - ii. How often do you see your children?
  - iii. What did your children think of you taking college classes in combat?
- 3. Tell me about your past education?
  - a. When did you graduate from High School (earn GED)?
  - b. What kind of student were you in high school?
  - c. When did you decide to go to college?
  - d. When did you take your first online class?
  - e. Did you prefer online or face to face classes?
  - f. How successful had you been in online courses before your deployment?
  - g. What is your major?
  - h. Do you have a minor?
  - i. What do you want to do with your degree?
  - j. What motivates you to continue your education?

## **Interview 2**

The second interview, “The Details of Experience” will focus on the phenomenon and the lived experiences of the participant in the phenomenon (p. 18).

- 1. Tell me about your experience of taking an online course(s) during your deployment(s).
  - a. Why did you decide to take online courses during your deployment(s)?
  - b. How many online courses did you take during your deployment(s)?
  - c. What were your goals for your online courses during your deployment(s)?
  - d. Did you get recruited by colleges offering online courses? If so, what types of things were the promising if you took courses from them?
  - e. From what institutions did you take your online college courses while in combat?
  - f. How did you choose that college?
  - g. What % of time were you on a base, camp or Logistical Support Area (LSA)?
  - h. Were you ever housed at a Forwarding Operating Based (FOB) with limited resources? If so, how long?
  - i. Could you describe your living situation during deployment(s)?
  - j. What Moral, Welfare and Recreation (MWR) resources were available to you?
  - k. What technologies were available to you?
  - l. What on base face to face educational resources were available to you?
  - m. Did you utilize these? Please explain.
  - n. Were there any off base face to face educational resources available to you?
- 2. Now we are going to talk more specifically about your classes.
  - a. Did you have any trouble registering for classes?
  - b. How did you know what classes to take?
  - c. Could you describe your course(s)?
  - d. Did you have any face-to-face meetings?
  - e. What technologies did you use for taking the online course(s)?

- f. Did you use your own computer?
- g. Did you have to download or install any software?
- h. When you are working online what resources did you use, i.e. textbook?
- i. Were you able to access the online library? Tutoring services
- j. Did your professor know you were deployed during the course(s)?
  - i. How did they know you were deployed?
  - ii. Did they do anything special to help you be successful in your course(s)?
  - iii. Was the professor fair to you during the course(s)?
  - iv. How would you describe the professors' role in the course(s)?
  - v. Do you feel that the professor interacted with you in a manner which facilitated your learning in the course(s)?
- k. Did the other students in your course(s) know you were deployed during the course(s)?
  - i. Did you ever discuss your deployment with other students?
  - ii. If they did know you were deployed, do you think they treated you different?
  - iii. If they knew, do you feel like they helped you more, the same, or less than everyone else?
- l. Did you receive any negative interactions from other students because you were deployed?
- m. Where did you complete the online materials?
- n. Why did you choose to work there?
- o. When did you typically do your work?
- p. Why did you choose to work on the day(s) and time(s) of day?
- q. How did you communicate with others in the course?
  - i. How often did you communicate with others in the course(s)?
  - ii. What communication required for your grade in the course(s)?
- r. Did you experience technical issues during your online course(s) during your deployment?
  - i. If so, what technical problems did you have?
  - ii. How did you handle this/these problems?
  - iii. How did you receive help with this/these problems?
- s. How many hours a week, on average, did you spend on college work?
- t. Did your family ever have to help you with something in your online course?

### 3. Thoughts and feelings about the experience

- a. What were the biggest obstacles for completing the online college course(s)?
- b. How did you handle the stress of combat and the stress of course work?
- c. How did you balance missions and course work?
- d. Did you ever fall behind in your coursework? How did you handle this?
- e. How did the communication in the course help you? Hurt you?
- f. What was the most difficult challenge for you in the course(s)?
- g. Did anything frustrate you in the online course(s)? Could you describe it in detail?
- h. Did anything significantly bad occur during your deployment?
  - i. How did you cope with this event?
  - ii. How did this event affect you emotionally?
- i. Did this effect your motivation to continue your course work?
- j. How did this experience affect your view of your educational goals?
- k. Do you feel like you would have learned more had you taken the online courses stateside?
- l. Do you feel you would have learned more had you taken the course face to face?

3. Now we will discuss the support you received during your online course(s) during your deployment.

- a. How did your mission affect your ability to complete the work for your online course(s)?
- b. Were you able to access resources, like the library, tutors during your course? Did you utilize any special services to help you be successful?
- c. What did your command think of you taking online courses during your deployment(s)?
- d. Did your command work around your need to be in classes or complete homework?
- e. What did the other soldiers around you think of you taking the course(s)?
- f. Did you experience any problems or issues with your command or other soldiers because of your participation in the online course(s)?
- g. Did you receive a negative response to your participation in an online course(s) by anyone during the deployment? If so, by who and how did you handle that negativity?

### **Interview Questions** **Interview 3**

The third and final interview will be “Reflection on the Meaning” and I will let the participant simply reflect on the meaning of the experiences he or she has had with the phenomenon. Seidman called this the “making sense” or “making meaning” process that will let the participant understand how they have arrived at their present situation (p. 18).

1. Tell me what you think about your deployment?
2. What do you think about taking online courses in combat?
3. If you were deployed again, would you take more online courses?
4. How did taking the online course(s) benefit you upon your return?
5. How do you think online courses affected your stress level?
6. What would you change about your online course experience during your deployment(s)?
7. Would you recommend that others take online courses during deployment(s)? Do you think the military should support or oppose the taking of online courses during deployment(s)?
8. Did you agree or disagree about the military need for your deployment(s) during the deployment(s)? Has your opinion changed?
9. What would you want the military to know about your experiences?
10. What can colleges and universities do to help other soldiers who also may take online courses in combat?