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## Guest Editors' Introduction

Veterans' Voices

*D. Alexis Hart and Roger Thompson*

The academy is in a pivotal moment. The war in Iraq is over, the war in Afghanistan is ending, and the service members who fought those wars are coming to our campuses. Indeed, they are already here. The most recent numbers show a substantial increase in veteran enrollments. A November 2013 report by the Pat Tillman Foundation and Operation College Promise reveals that “the influx of these learners to college campuses surged in the four years since [the Veterans Educational Assistance Act, or what is now commonly referred to as the Post-9/11 GI Bill, was enacted], resulting in nearly 1 million military-affiliated students—active and separated—attending higher education institutions across the nation” (Lang and Harriet 2013: 1). Additionally, another four hundred thousand veterans receive education benefits for their military service from other government programs such as the 1984 Montgomery GI Bill and the Tuition Assistance Program. Nationally, Student Veterans of America has grown to more than five hundred chapters in 2012, from only twenty in 2008, an “increase of more than 300% since the summer of 2009” (MFRI-SVA 2012: 5). In other words, the veteran population on some campuses, where GI Bill recipients may top two thousand students, is significant, and the number of veteran students is expected to increase even more.

External signs may sometimes alert us to the presence of service members in our classes. Perhaps they are a bit older, or a bit more mature, or speak with more authority about life outside of the ivory tower. Maybe

they carry camouflage backpacks that indicate they were in the Marines or in the Army, wear ball caps with military insignia, or sport tattoos with military slogans, revealing their veteran status. But many times veterans in the classroom remain invisible, their lives in the military and their stories of service (in peacetime or in war) going largely unheard. Indeed, their silence may exemplify the type of psychological invisibility that Jose Coll (2013) has described as “a syndrome created by the perception of an individual who may feel depersonalized and overshadowed by stereotypical assumptions and prejudices.” Coll insists that this type of invisibility “often plagues our veteran population with subjugation of stigmas such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), military sexual trauma and traumatic brain injury.” In other words, cultural narratives about what constitutes a “veteran” efface the veteran presence in our classrooms.

Of course, the question of whether or not the classroom is the place to prompt disclosure of prior or current military service is itself a complicated one, and in courses that examine literature or cultural studies it becomes increasingly complex. Literary traditions have deeply embedded narratives about military service, heroes, war, violence, homecoming, and societal upheaval, and those traditions often explicitly challenge the implicit ethics of a culture. In classes where readings prompt discussions of cultural differences, the effects of war, or the nature of combat, faculty likely bear some obligation to consider how students who have been at war might experience such texts. In writing classes where personal essays are one of the major assignments, faculty may face even more direct disclosure of wartime or service experience, and in those cases the student veteran experience of “coming out” may be as difficult as the experiences of other students who disclose culturally stigmatized statuses.

The potential for students who are in some way closely connected to the current wars to face difficult questions about their wartime experience leads to a larger, more important question: Should we prompt discussion about current wars at all, especially in classrooms populated by veterans? The Executive Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication thought so when in March 2003 they passed the following resolution:

WHEREAS in our best moments we have relied on the power of rhetoric to mediate disputes, and in our college classrooms we teach students to understand one another, respect their differences, and resolve their disputes through discourse; BE IT THEREFORE RESOLVED that we encourage teachers of writing and communication at

colleges and universities across the country to engage students and others in learning and debate about the issues and implications of the Iraqi war and any other acts of war perpetrated by the United States of America.

Despite the well-meaning nature of this proclamation, it presents an orientation to war that is itself combative and confrontational in characterizing the United States as “perpetrating” acts of war. As such, the resolution fails to account for the resultant influx of “perpetrators” into college and university writing and literature classrooms. Indeed, it ostensibly presumes that veterans will not be among the students it describes as part of these classroom conversations, perhaps because the writers could not have imagined that the wars would go on for more than a decade. Still, the opposition is striking for a number of reasons, one of the most important being that it not only fails to account for the possibility of military students in a class but also essentially fails to consider the way that war has infiltrated the American imagination.

Since the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, we have been bombarded with the images and rhetoric of war. Nightly profiles of fallen soldiers, descriptions of acts of heroism, debates about torture, and images of profound sacrifice by both military members and civilians have filled our living rooms, and newspapers’ early obsession with weapons of mass destruction and the nature of a “just” war has given way to stories about homecomings, transitions, trauma, and PTSD and traumatic brain injury—the “signature wounds” of the wars in Iraq (Operation Iraqi Freedom, 2003–10, and Operation New Dawn, 2010–present) and Afghanistan (as part of Operation Enduring Freedom). Our students have become habituated to a constant stream of these stories in the media, and these wars, while distant geographically, have been more visible and more accessible than any previous wars, thanks to twenty-four-hour news channels, social networking sites, and other Web 2.0 technologies. As Chris Tomlinson (2008) points out, “Wars have often been defined by the new technologies that shaped them. The Civil War was the first photographed conflict in U.S. history, news of World War II was delivered by movie news reels, television made Vietnam the ‘living-room war’ and Desert Storm was the first war broadcast live by satellite. Historians will likely remember Operation Iraqi Freedom as iWar v1.0. The Web has done more than quicken reporting from the battlefield; it has made war interactive.” Indeed, our “traditional” students, having grown up in the post-9/11 era, simply do not know an America that has *not* been engaged in active ground combat operations. So, how do we respond to the specter of war in our classes?

College and university professors have had to ask similar questions before. After the passage of the original Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (commonly called the GI Bill), college enrollment skyrocketed by 45 percent in the first year after World War II and another 24 percent the year after. Most of this increase in student population was due to the presence of veterans, who "accounted for 70% of the total male higher education enrollment in the years following World War II" (Livingston et al. 2011: 316). While the GI Bill of 1944 was passed in part to help "renaturalize" veterans into the broader civilian society, it was passed as much out of economic necessity as it was out of gratitude for the veterans' service. Eight million service members returning to the United States into a demobilizing economy would have put a tremendous strain on employers. College, therefore, seemed to be a reasonable place to train and occupy the veterans for a few years. Although the GI Bill has gone through several iterations between World War II and the modern era, none of the intervening legislation (the 1952 Veterans Readjustment Assistance Act, the 1966 Veterans Readjustment Benefits Act, the 1976 Post-Vietnam Era Veterans Assistance Program, and the 1984 All Volunteer Force Educational Assistance Program, a.k.a. the Montgomery GI Bill) provided opportunities as generous as the first version passed in 1944 and the one most recently enacted in 2008, commonly known as the Post-9/11 GI Bill. As did the 1944 bill, the 2008 bill provides veterans with tuition assistance as well as a housing allowance and small stipend for books. Yet today's economy is such that, despite these benefits, few veterans are able to attend college full time. As one of our contributors discusses in a following essay, GI Bill benefits are not always sufficient to allow full-time study, especially in the case of veterans with dependents or the many veterans who viewed their military service as a vehicle to find opportunities for economic advancement and education.

As educators in the academy, then, we have an opportunity to engage our own histories and narratives at this new moment of transition. In doing so, we need to consider both the legacies of prior instances of integration and new ways of approaching the culture of war. Among those ways is to seek opportunities to give military experience and, more specifically, *war experience* a voice in higher education, and this cluster of essays aims for precisely that. Our scholarship and the scholarship of others suggest that some student veterans feel the need to articulate and share their experiences with their new "chain of command," their faculty. As one student veteran said during an interview with a group of researchers, "The biggest thing that I want to come into this interview and say is the fact that I think the faculty needs to know who we are. They need to know who we are" (DiRamio et al. 2008: 89). That

yearning to be known and to be heard is shared by any number of diverse populations on our campuses, and we are now presented with a moment in time when we can address that need for our veteran population.

In offering this cluster of veterans' voices, we hope to encourage language, literature, and writing faculty to rethink their own preconceptions of war, warriors, and military culture—to approach the classroom critically and ask hard questions about what we know about the wars, the people who fight them, their families, and the public narratives that have controlled our access to "combat operations." We concur with fiction writer and Iraq war veteran Phil Klay (2014), who asserts that "believing war is beyond words is an abrogation of responsibility—it lets civilians off the hook from trying to understand, and veterans off the hook from needing to explain. . . . We can do better." In an effort to do better, we encourage faculty to engage in the complexities of war, to honor the complicated questions and dilemmas members of the military face, and to understand how those questions are likely to filter into classrooms, social interactions, and broader national discourse. We want to provide our colleagues with an opportunity to hear veteran voices and to remove unintended silences in the hope that when veteran experiences are described, classroom teachers can have some grounds on which to reconsider and engage with the culture of war. We have at this moment an opportunity to theorize classroom practices that are in clear contact with veteran experiences.

While any number of excellent books may provide avenues for understanding the experience of war, we solicited essays from veterans who are on our college campuses, often in unexpected places. The contributors voice their experiences from many perspectives—those of faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates—and from many types of institutions: public, private, research, and four-year. Still, some recurring themes emerge in their essays that suggest a commonality of experience among veterans in higher education. Among them are a strong sense of isolation and alienation during the transition to higher education, a focus on the "relatively easy" mission orientation of military life as opposed to the often open-ended self-direction that constitutes student life, an ongoing reluctance to use service as an "excuse" for difficulties in meeting the challenges of civilian and student life, and a willingness (and even an eagerness) to find ways to make meaningful contributions to our classes.

We do not mean to suggest that these essays represent the veteran experience writ large. Differences among military branches, between front-line combatants and nondeployed service members, between enlisted and officers, among ranks, and between the wars in Iraq and in Afghanistan all

influence the war experience, to say nothing of differences in gender, race, and ethnicity. Further, we hope to avoid essentializing the veteran, categorizing the “warrior” into a kind of trope that resists inquiry. As retired army captain Shannon Meehan (2012) has argued, “The stories we tell consistently portray veterans in extremes—either emphasizing vets’ heroism beyond comprehension or their propensity for erratic violence. . . . Because of the unreal, formulaic depictions of vets in our culture, [veterans] remain distanced from society, leaving little chance that anyone will actually see [vets] as real people with both strengths and struggles.” Indeed, because we are drawing on the experiences of veterans from across institutions, experiences, and histories, we hope to show that the idea of *veteran* defies easy categorization and certainty. Indeed, we hope that the essays in this cluster will expand some readers’ definitions of *veterans*. While some of our writers call on recognizable narratives of the hero (sometimes in surprising ways), others resist such narratives to posit new identities. Regardless, we hope that by providing essays by veterans within the academy, we will help prompt more deliberate engagement with the culture of war and the texts of war within our classrooms. Doing so likely makes us better teachers not only of student veterans but of all our students. A sense of isolation, a sense of feeling overwhelmed, difficulties transitioning from one life to another, uncertainties about how to participate in discussions about emotionally charged topics—these are surely not confronted by veterans alone. Understanding these veterans’ experiences likely will help us to better understand the experiences of a wide range of students who need our help in making sense of the literature, language, and writing they encounter within our classrooms.

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## I Am a Marine

*Micah Christopher Wright*, US Marine Corps

I am a United States Marine. A Devil Dog. A Jarhead. A Warrior. Even after six years of living the life of a civilian, I still have a bumper sticker on my car that reads, “Still in the fight.” I have an Eagle Globe and Anchor on the bumper of my car, and my mind, body, and soul are all scarred with the memories of my past. While my life as a college student may push me further into the realms of academia, the stickers and emblems on my car, the scars on my leg, and the past I see every day are representations and reminders of my never-ending identity—a character that was formed living a life in which I was more than just another college student.

In my four years of active duty, I proudly served three tours in Iraq. My first tour was uneventful. I met up with my battalion only two weeks after completing the School of Infantry; Baghdad had already been taken. On my second tour, however, I truly learned the meaning behind my lifelong identity