



What Comes Next: Finding Purpose Post Trauma

VOICE

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ABSTRACT

What comes next? As two former active-duty military officers this is a question we have personally engaged with in our own lives and know it to be true for many fellow veterans. However, asking oneself, “What comes next?” does not need to be done in isolation, leading to a sense of hopelessness or lack of self-worth. It could very well be the exploratory stage needed during one of the most unique and oftentimes intense transitions a veteran may experience. The transition from military service to civilian society can be a tremendous culture shock and lead to veterans questioning their new identity as a civilian. This article highlights the cathartic effects of doing something bigger than yourself to reinforce your sense of purpose after military service. It combines the experience of two former military officers across different military disciplines—mental health and combat.

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When an individual takes the oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic, they either consciously or subconsciously divorce themselves from their civilian identity and adopt the collective identity of the US military (Smith & True, 2014). Collective identity, rooted in social identity theory, is defined as self-concept derived from group membership which shapes individual identity (Meca et al., 2021). Military identity, a form of collective identity, requires individuals to internalize a common set of values and goals of the armed forces thus establishing the same individual purpose for all service members (Meca et al., 2021). Events like military discharge can challenge this military identity and necessitate identity reconfiguration in response to changing circumstances (Mitchell et al., 2020). Moreover, concrete adherence to military identity can pose significant barriers when formulating a new individual identity (Dolan et al., 2022).

When a service member exits the military, collective purpose is removed, forcing a transition into society's traditional system of individual purpose (Meca et al., 2021). This transition can present a significant amount of stress as veterans often search their new surroundings for the same level of commitment, camaraderie, or purpose that they experienced during active duty (Meca et al., 2021). Protective factors that mitigate the challenges of veteran reintegration include high levels of self-image and self-esteem (Zarecky, 2014). Using a personal narrative, this article seeks to explore how veteran involvement in a civilian-level collective purpose, either professionally or personally, can derive happiness, inspiration, motivation, and proper adjustment post-military service.

FINDING PURPOSE: THE VETERAN VOICE OF FORMER CAPTAIN DR. KENNETH MARFILIOUS

As a United States Air Force veteran, mental health professional, and academic, my personal and professional purpose is to support the welfare of military service members, veterans, and their families by adapting the Air Force value of service before self. The social work profession utilizes evidence-informed practice which places emphasis on the client's preferences and culture to guide and inform the delivery of treatment and services (National Association of Social Workers, n.d.). In the context of my line of work, if military culture is not considered in the delivery of treatment, barriers to service utilization may develop. For example, the use of civilian language can often be misinterpreted by the military veteran. This misinterpretation by either side could

result in a fundamental breakdown in the therapeutic relationship, further complicating treatment and demotivating members of the military ultimately leaving issues unresolved. Thus, utilizing evidence-informed practice, I am able to place the importance of individual experiences over my own knowledge to better serve the individual.

My co-author, Dee, is a retired US Army colonel who is a proven combat leader with over 32 years of experience. Post-service, he has embraced resiliency and adversity by engaging in social change activities, which focus on training and mentoring thousands of young individuals to lead their lives with character. During a recent conversation with Dee, we discussed his personal experience at the intersection of military culture, post-service life, familial impact, behavioral health services, and the lack of awareness and understanding regarding the experience of military personnel. Through this conversation, I sought to access the veteran's voice, an essential feature of ethically and competently engaging in evidence-informed practice. Despite not being the focal point of this story, I emphasize Dee's accolades to provide a key example of how even a high-achieving Army colonel is not immune to the inherent struggles of post-military transition. The following is an excerpt of Dee's comments from our conversation.

FINDING PURPOSE: THE VETERAN VOICE OF RETIRED COLONEL DEE DAUGHERTY

As a senior leader on the battlefield, I can honestly say that the soldiers in my command performed brilliantly. They were well-trained, motivated, and worked together as a team. Although my higher headquarters had limited resources, they never impeded our operations. They did all they could to lend a hand. In other words, even though it was a "come as you are" war, we were prepared and resourceful and we accomplished our mission. Our battalion ran 6.6 million mission miles and experienced 108 firefights/ambushes out of 1,724 convoys. We delivered over one million tons of critical and essential supplies to all points on the battlefield by improvising convoy security and armoring solutions ad hoc, out of hide. At the end of one year of unrelenting combat operations, I was, unbeknownst to me, a physical and emotional wreck. After many memorable ceremonies and award presentations, we went our separate ways. Given only 30 days of leave to reunite with family and friends I have very little recollection of that time. My greatest memories were just being in the same room with my children; however, I am unable to recall any other events of that time. It was

as if I just sat on the couch and stared into space and then one day I returned to duty, but it wasn't the same. I liken being a leader in the battle to driving a turbo-charged Porsche 100 miles per hour (mph) in a 25-mph school zone with the kids being let out of school. Once you get home, it is like being told you must drive 5 mph in a 25-mph school zone at midnight. No outlet for adrenaline. In combat, you are in a persistent state of hypervigilance that produces a steady stream of adrenaline. When you arrive home, there is no natural outlet for that state of being. That learned state of hypervigilance, which was once a necessity of daily life, becomes a physiological and emotional drain. In my transition to civilian life sleep deprivation was an obstacle that took years to overcome. Even today, I am a light sleeper. However, during combat, I slept no more than four hours a day for an entire year. These four hours were usually broken up into 10–15-minute bursts at a time. After about 60 days at home, I could feel instinctively that I was not myself. I was struggling to adjust to my home life, work life, and social life. I had feelings of guilt knowing that the fight was ramping up and I was at home. I felt disillusioned at how life in America had not fundamentally changed other than the implementation of “inconveniences” in the airport. After many years of military service, I was aware of the stigmas attached to posttraumatic stress disorder and how those stigmas could negatively impact one's upward mobility. I was also aware that I was coming out of my skin. Despite the potential negative impact, I went to see the senior chaplain on the post. This officer outranked me. Professionally we were not on an even playing field. However, when I told him how I had been feeling, he broke down crying and fully recounting his nearly identical experiences. I consoled him. As I walked out of the chapel into the parking lot, I yelled obscenities at the top of my lungs in desperation. I simply felt that help did not exist. I felt forced to lean forward and continue to serve and to lead because there was no proper outlet to process my mental health. When I finally did see a mental health care provider, which took a great deal of moral courage, I shared with her that the only thing keeping me afloat was self-respect; self-respect meaning a sense of self-worth that I had a set of transferable skills gained during my military service that could be applied in the context of a new purpose. In other words, I had a responsibility to uphold the Army values and my personal values within the context of my post-service life.

As time progressed, this responsibility, this role, caused me to immerse myself deeply in my work. Upholding these values from my previous service felt familiar when nothing else did. It was a coping mechanism that allowed me to exist within an established framework of behaviors and conduct which provided me spatial and temporal

boundaries that kept me from going to extremes. During one session, I told my mental health provider that when I look in the mirror, I saw the value I held. I saw what I could contribute, but I felt the gut-wrenching misalignment of my value and the environment I was now in. I was struggling to make my value fit. I also shared with her that as I reflected on my experience of transition, I felt a sense of empathy for younger, less experienced soldiers who may also be struggling to transition but do not have the foundation of experience and accomplishments I had that ultimately provided me with the self-respect I needed to see my value. Self-respect, consideration of others, and relying upon my faith carried me out of the darkness. Slowly, I realized that the fulfillment I felt being in service to others in the military could be transferred to my work as a humanitarian. I could trade my rifle for a white dove and feel the same sense of purpose. Subconsciously, I was re-creating a passage out of the book of Isaiah; I metaphorically hammered my sword into a ploughshare and converted my skills and abilities into serving and uplifting others in need rather than fighting.

CONCLUSION

As I listened to Dee's story, I was captivated. The vulnerability and pride he felt simultaneously penetrated his voice. His story was raw, vivid, emotional, and riveting all at once. I could feel the intensity of his emotions as if I were driving a turbo-charged Porsche 100 mph in a 25-mph school zone with the kids being let out of school. Hearing Dee's narrative was teaching me everything I needed to know about how to support him in this interaction. I did not need to draw upon textbooks or even my own experiences within the same military culture. His willingness to share his story with me was igniting my post-service purpose of service over self.

Transition to civilian life and redefining our individual purpose and identity after service is, ironically, a collective struggle. For Dee it was upholding the military values within the context of civilian life and for me it was committing to listening to the individual stories of the collective military experience in order to support veterans. With this story I share an example of the power of civilian-level collective purpose—or the idea that individuals with unique identities and diversity of thought can strive to reach a common goal—and how this can lead to post-service success.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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Dr. Ken Marfilius is the Falk College Assistant Dean of Online and Distance Education and Associate Teaching Professor at Syracuse University. He is a United States Air Force Veteran. He was an active-duty Air Force officer and uniformed mental health clinician. Dr. Marfilius has experience working for the Department of Defense and the Department of Veteran Affairs. His teaching, research, and scholarship are focused on military service members, veterans, and their families. He is honored with an Air Force Commendation Medal for Meritorious Service, National Defense Service Medal, Global War on Terrorism Service Medal, and Nuclear Deterrence Operations Service Medal. Colonel (Retired) Dee Daugherty is currently the Chief Development Officer of Government and Public Sector for the Brilex Group of Companies in Youngstown, Ohio. He serves as the executive director of Total Courage, a non-profit organization whose clientele includes interscholastic and intercollegiate institutions, professional sports teams, health systems, and governmental entities. A highly decorated officer and combat leader, Daugherty retired from the US Army with a Colonel military rank. He successfully led his troops through 108 enemy engagements. Among his many decorations are the Legion of Merit, the Military Order of Saint Christopher, two Bronze Star Medals, and the Combat Action Badge.

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