

THESIS

A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF CHOOSING AND EXPERIENCING
THE INFANTRY AS AN OCCUPATION

Submitted by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Science

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Spring 2017

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ABSTRACT

A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF CHOOSING AND EXPERIENCING THE INFANTRY AS AN OCCUPATION

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of why men chose the Infantry as an occupation when enlisting in the U.S. military in the post-9/11 era, as well as the potential meaning they experienced through their service as infantrymen. Interviews were conducted with 11 undergraduate students who had served in either the U.S. Army or U.S. Marine Corps as infantrymen, and had enlisted with the specific goal to serve in an Infantry occupational specialty. All of the participants had served at least one combat deployment as infantrymen to either Afghanistan or Iraq. Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) was used to guide the study. Prominent themes that emerged relative to enlistment decision-making included strong desires to fulfill roles of being highly skilled combatants and experience combat; viewing the Infantry as the best means to fulfill those desires; and desires to serve a greater good. Prominent themes related to meaning experienced through Infantry service included fulfillment of desired roles of being warriors; having experienced growth through hardship; a sense of accomplishment and pride through being skilled at Infantry warfare and having done important things; and the incredibly strong sense of brotherhood and camaraderie shared with other infantrymen they served with. Lastly, prominent themes regarding how their prior service may influence their current civilian career trajectories included having enhanced discipline, motivation, leadership, and sense of purpose; feeling distinctly different and separate from civilians; continued sense of service; and a desire for peace and normalcy in civilian life.

Results from this study offered an interesting perspective on post-9/11 era military enlistment motivations connected to one particular class of occupational specialties. The participants did not offer any economic reasons for their enlistment motivations. That is, they did not choose the Infantry because of college benefits or job skills developed in their Infantry occupations that may transfer to civilian occupations. Rather, they appeared primarily motivated in their enlistment choices by desires to seek intense, dangerous training and combat experiences and fulfill particular warrior identity roles not available in civilian life, all through a sense of discipline and service.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis is dedicated to my children, Laraugh, Mandolin, Elizabeth, and Catherine. Graduate school ended up being a lot more than I had bargained for. Those demands resulted in me not being as present or available at times as I should have or wanted to be. My pursuit of advanced degrees was never about getting fancy letters after my name or some later financial payoff. I thought this path would best help provide the means for me to be of service to others, and I hope that lesson is the one that was most present for all of you. The four of you all still seem to love me, and for that I am very grateful.

I have a great deal of appreciation for my graduate program and thesis advisor, Dr. Bryan Dik. It was a chapter he wrote in a popular press book that used comic book superheroes as a metaphor for the importance of discovering one's unique gifts and then putting those gifts to work in service of others that first sparked my interest in vocational psychology and the interface of that with clinical work, and eventually led me here to Colorado State University (CSU). Bryan served a dual role in helping to bring this thesis project about. As my advisor he has had high expectations and provided invaluable instruction. As the external auditor for this project's data analysis process, Bryan also provided a significant amount of expert feedback. His contributions through both roles helped this project be of high quality.

I want to thank the members of my thesis committee, Dr. Kurt Kraiger and Dr. Sue Doe, for their very helpful critiques and feedback when I proposed this project, as well as their enduring patience with the many delays and disruptions along the way to completing it. In addition, I sincerely appreciate Sue's friendship, mentoring, and encouragement throughout my time at CSU.

This project was truly a team effort. Angel Antkers, John Jurica, Tim Burke, and Tom Pritchard (an Army Infantry veteran of Iraq) have my deepest thanks for all of the work they contributed as part of the research team, willingness to call me on my biases, as well as their friendship. All of them had their own school and work demands to attend to as well, but stayed committed to seeing this project through all the way to the end. It was also important to me that there was an insider's perspective relative to the topic of this project, and I am especially grateful for Tom's involvement in that regard.

Dallas Pearce, an Army Airborne Infantry veteran of Iraq, first helped me formulate the idea for this study through a series of long conversations we had when I was starting out in graduate school. His willingness to share his perspective of some of the good, bad, and ugly of having chosen the grunt life and gone to war instead of other civilian opportunities at the time was a big part of what motivated me to do this study and how to frame it. I am grateful for "The Big D's" insight and friendship. Philip Dalhof, an Army Cavalry Scout veteran of both Afghanistan and Iraq, merits a great deal of credit for the consulting he provided regarding the interview protocol for this project. He tore the initial version down and helped rebuild it from the ground up in true Combat Arms style, as well as provided further advice that helped with the data collection.

I also want to recognize Rebecca Aponte, my graduate school battle buddy, for her friendship and contributions. Relative to this project, Rebecca providing coaching on how to better manage my work in light of other stressors, as well as to better recognize the difference between healthy expressions of frustration and unproductive whining. No whining allowed. Another person that warrants recognition is Amber Murray. She has been a constant friend and fellow traveler for what seems like eons now, and has provided both material and psychological

support at critical times during my graduate school journey. Thank you, Amber, for being you. Special recognition also needs to be provided to Morgan McCowan, Marine veteran of Iraq, Elroy Louis, Marine veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan, and Justin Fishinghawk, Army Airborne veteran of Afghanistan; all former infantrymen. These guys have been true friends and brothers to me. Each of them has been willing to share some insights from their own experiences with war and the process of returning home. They have also provided valuable advice and encouragement over the years related to my career goals of working with combat veterans.

Lastly, I want to emphatically thank the eleven participants in this study for their willingness to share a portion of their experiences as combat infantrymen with a civilian graduate student. I was impressed with their character, and the courage and dedication they applied to what they did as warriors while in military service, and to the post-military paths they are on now. This statement is too often a trite cliché, but I honestly do thank all of you for your service. I hope that in some small way I have helped part of your stories to be heard. Charlie Mike!

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INTRODUCTION

“Courage is inseparable from love and leads to what may arguably be the noblest of all warrior virtues: selflessness.” – Steven Pressfield (2011, p. 36)

“The sense that I got was that they had joined the Army because they wanted to experience combat....They saw it as a kind of rite of passage – a kind of ultimate test of their manhood.” – Sebastian Junger (PEN American Center, 2010).

The United States has been at war continuously since 2001, predominantly in Afghanistan and Iraq. The current wars are unique, in that these conflicts have represented the longest period of sustained warfare in U.S. history and waged by an all-volunteer force. According to the Pew Research Center (2011), approximately one half of one percent of the U.S. population has engaged in some form of active military service since September 11, 2001. This dynamic has created a widening civilian-military gap, as well as solidified a unique “warrior culture” shared by the comparatively small number of Americans who have deployed to Afghanistan and/or Iraq.

The nature of combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq have depended primarily on the use of ground forces to directly engage enemy forces and occupy territory, with support of air and artillery power. Within the U.S. military, military occupational specialties (MOS; i.e., the individual jobs) are broadly divided into occupations that are responsible for directly engaging with enemy forces – collectively referred to as Combat Arms occupations – and occupations that are in support roles for the Combat Arms. Examples of Combat Arms occupation categories within the U.S. Army and Marine Corps include infantry, tank crew, and artillery specialists. Of those MOSs, the Infantry is an occupation that is unique in its focus, culture, training, and responsibilities (Department of the Army, 2007; Department of the Navy, 1997).

The U.S. military is an all-volunteer force, with individuals enlisting by their own choice. However, the element of choice in military enlistment is significantly influenced by socioeconomic and sociocultural factors (MacLean & Parsons, 2010). For example, American Indians have served in the U.S. military at proportionally higher rates than any other ethnicity (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012). They also have the highest rates of poverty. Therefore, cultural beliefs that may foster a desire for military service as well as motivations to utilize military service for economic benefit and other factors must be considered within the context of an all-volunteer force. MacLean and Parsons (2010) reviewed research on sociological factors related to who serves in combat occupations in the U.S. volunteer military, with a focus on the early years of the implementation of the All-Volunteer Force (AVF), which began in the late 1970s. They reported that, in general, individuals who serve in combat occupations are exposed to significantly more risks than those who serve in support roles, while learning skills that are less transferable to civilian occupations. Typically, men who served in combat occupations were more likely to come from poor and working class families, less likely to have the resources for civilian higher educational attainment, and achieve lower military entrance exam scores than those in non-combat occupations. Again, Maclean and Parsons (2010) focused their inquiry on an earlier, pre-9/11 era of the volunteer force. Interestingly, there is scant research on the sociological characteristics of those who have served in combat vs. non-combat occupations in the post-9/11 era. In a commentary on enlistment during the current military service era, Artiss (2010) said that choosing to enter military service is done with some expectations on the part of the recruits, in that they often have a general idea of what direct combat and non-direct combat related jobs may entail. Some hope they will never see combat. Others join with that specific purpose in mind.

The element of relative choice without the dynamic of compulsory service in post-9/11 military enlistment has demonstrated a phenomenon of some who qualify for and are able to select from a range of available military occupational specialties choosing to serve in Combat Arms jobs that may not provide as much post-military benefits in the form of transferable civilian job skills as other jobs. One such MOS is the Infantry. Unlike many other military occupational specialties, the skills and experience gained in the Infantry do not directly translate into any civilian occupations, therefore those who may have specifically chosen the Infantry upon enlistment did so for unique reasons. Furthermore, very little is known about how those who served in the Infantry may or may not experience meaning through their work. In examining the motivations related to choosing the Infantry as an occupation and the possible meaning experienced through that role, it is important to understand what the Infantry is, and the topics of vocational identity, occupational choice, and meaningful work as they relate to the Infantry.

This study examined the Infantry in the U.S. military as a unique occupational choice, as well as explored the meaning that Infantry soldiers and Marines may have derived from their work. First, what being an infantryman entails is defined and explained. Following that is a review of the literature on vocational identity, occupational choice, and meaningful work as they may apply to the military. Finally, Career Construction Theory will be utilized as a useful interpretive means to integrate the topics of vocational identity, occupational choice, and meaningful work.

The Infantry Soldier and Marine

Understanding military culture is a matter of ethics and competence for those who work with service members and veterans (Christian, Stivers, & Sammons, 2009; Moore, 2011; Reger, Etherage, Reger, & Gahm, 2008). This extends to understanding Infantry service as a subculture

within the military. The Infantry is an occupation within the U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps that is part of a cluster of Combat Arms occupations responsible for engaging in direct combat with enemy forces. Military Occupational Specialties (MOS) in both the Army and Marine Corps have titles and corresponding MOS codes. Both service branches categorize similar occupational clusters into “occupational fields” coded by numbers. The Infantry in the Army is Field 11, while that field is 03 in the Marines. Each specific occupation within occupational fields for the Army have single letter codes, resulting in a two number and single letter code corresponding to each occupation (e.g., Infantryman (11B)), and two additional numbers in the Marines, resulting in a four number code (e.g., Rifleman (0311)). According to the U.S. Army’s recruiting information website, within the Infantry at the enlisted entry level are the two MOSs of Infantryman (11B) (GoArmy.com, n.d.a) and Indirect Fire Infantryman (11C) (GoArmy.com, n.d.b). The U.S. Marine Corps’ corresponding recruiting information website lists four enlisted entry level Infantry specializations of Rifleman (0311), Machine Gunner (0331), Mortarman (0341), and Assaultman (0351) (Marines.com, n.d.). For an individual choosing to enlist as an infantryman in the Army, they are typically provided an 11X Infantry Option contract and then either select or are assigned to one of the two Infantry MOSs after they enter service. The process is similar for the Marine Corps, with recruits who desire to be infantrymen entering on 03XX Open Infantry contracts and then selecting or being assigned to one of the four Infantry specializations. Up until very recently all Infantry MOSs in both service branches had been closed to women.

Within the multifaceted work of the Army and Marine Corps, the Infantry is classified as being the central ground component of both branches and has a specialized mission. The Army defines the mission of the Infantry being to “close with the enemy by means of fire and maneuver in order to destroy or capture him, or to repel his assault with fire, close combat, and

counterattack” (Department of the Army, 2007, p. 1). The Marines provide a similar description: “The mission of the [Infantry] is to locate, close with and destroy the enemy by fire and maneuver, or repel the enemy's assault by fire and close combat” (Department of the Navy, 1991, p. 1-1). The work of the Infantry involves combat with enemy forces in a closer and more personal manner than other occupations in the military. Furthermore, according to the Department of the Army (2007) the role of the Infantry focuses more on the characteristics of the individual soldier more so than any other occupation, as described here:

Of all branches in the U.S. Army, the Infantry is unique because its core competency is founded on the individual Soldier—the Infantry rifleman. While other branches tend to focus on weapon systems and platforms to accomplish their mission, the Infantry alone relies almost exclusively on the human dimension of the individual rifleman to close with and destroy the enemy. This Soldier-centric approach fosters an environment that places the highest value on individual discipline, personal initiative, and performance-oriented leadership. The Infantry ethos is encapsulated by its motto: Follow Me! (p. 1).

For those who enlisted in the U.S. military with the specific desire to be infantrymen the process typically involved enlistees choosing the Infantry from a range of occupational choices that they qualify for after completing a standardized vocational assessment, completing Basic Training (Army) or Boot Camp (Marines), then Infantry school and assignment to a specific Infantry MOS, and then any specialized Infantry training that is necessary before being assigned to their first duty station and unit. Because the United States military has been engaged in warfare that has been Infantry-dependent for so long, those who enlist with the desire to become infantrymen have a significant likelihood of being deployed to a warzone. Therefore, men who

enlisted in the Army or Marine Corps to become infantrymen likely did so with the expectation of having a high possibility of experiencing combat.

Infantrymen who have been in combat have shared in experiences that have produced a changed way of viewing themselves and the world that fundamentally separates them from those who have not shared those experiences (Artiss, 2010; Brinn & Auerbach, 2015; Gifford, 2006; Junger, 2010), thus creating a unique subculture. Combat infantrymen may have witnessed and participated in the killing of other human beings, experienced their friends being killed, felt intense degrees of both fear and elation, experienced sleep and food deprivation, and other physical and mental hardships in combat that are very difficult to understand by those who haven't shared these experiences (Grossman, 1996; Grossman & Christensen, 2008).

In an extensive journalism account of a platoon of U.S. Army infantrymen that were on a combat deployment in Afghanistan's Korengal Valley in 2007, Junger (2010) found that the men whose experiences he was investigating forged intense relationships with each other through combat, and that fighting together against an enemy became an incredibly strong sense of purpose. Fighting and winning against an enemy together was a kind of "ultimate test" (p. 155) for these soldiers, and that it was not so much killing that the soldiers sought to experience, but the act of protecting others whom they love. Junger (2010) asserted that combat soldiers experience a loss of purpose when they give up their roles as soldiers. They miss the excitement and camaraderie of war. While not all infantrymen have experienced combat, Junger (2010) argued that men who join the Infantry do so wanting to experience what the role of the Infantry entails – fighting.

Vocational Identity, Occupational Choice, and Meaningful Work

Vocational Identity. According to Erikson (Porfeli, Lee, & Vondracek, 2013; Sokol, 2009), an integral part of the task of identity development that characterizes adolescence is the gradual clarification of a vocational identity. Vocational identity is defined as the realization of an increasingly clear and stable understanding of one's interests, values, abilities, strengths, and talents, and how they will play out in a career (Holland, 1997; Hirschi & Herrmann, 2012). The establishment of a vocational identity may serve as a means through which adolescents realize and assert their emerging self-concepts and integrate past and present aspects of themselves (Porfeli, Lee, & Vondracek, 2013; Sokol, 2009; Super, 1963). Holland (1997) argued that an individual with a clear sense of vocational identity would exhibit more realistic attitudes, behaviors, and choices in the career development process and would find a better person-environment fit when making career choices. Therefore, vocational identity development is important to career development and is critical in the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Sokol, 2009; Skorikov & Vonfracek, 2007). A vocational identity is not static, but is constructed over the life span, ordinarily becoming more and more stable and defined over time (Savickas, 1985; Savickas, 2005).

Porfeli, Lee, and Vondracek, (2013) articulated a process model for the development and establishment of vocational identity. Their model included three primary processes of exploring potential career possibilities, making commitments to a particular career trajectory, and reconsidering alternatives when presented with other career options salient to one's interests, values, abilities, etc. Porfeli et al., (2013) explained that those processes of career exploration, commitment, and reconsideration are ongoing throughout a person's work life, being influenced by factors such as changing interests, new opportunities presented, external economic factors,

fluctuations in the work environment (e.g., new management/owners, etc.), and more. They proffered that vocational identity can be situated among various statuses that range from a vague undifferentiation to a strong sense of identity achievement.

Vocational identity has been found to be related to overall identity development, as vocational choices and the world of work are a major part of a person's life-span development. (Porfeli, Lee, & Vondracek, 2013; Savickas, 1985; Skorikov & Vonfracek, 2007). Career decision-making self-efficacy and career maturity are positively related to vocational identity (Esters & Retallick, 2013), as is career choice readiness (Hirschi, 2007). Studies examining psychological well-being (Strauser et al., 2008) and subjective well-being (Hirschi, 2011a, 2011b, 2012; Hirschi & Herrmann, 2012) have found positive relations between those constructs and vocational identity as well. Additionally, in a sample of civilian college students, vocational identity was found to have a negative relationship to increased levels of trauma symptoms (Strauser, Lustig, Cogdal, & Uruk, 2006).

Decisions to enlist in the U.S. military typically occur in late adolescence when individuals are completing high school. Consequently, it is important to gain more understanding of military enlistment in the context of the developmental task of forming a vocational identity as well as vocational identity in the context of military service. In addition, leaving military service becomes another significant vocational identity task with unique challenges. Brinn and Auerbach (2015) conducted a qualitative study that included twelve combat veterans of Afghanistan and Iraq. The study did not focus on particular MOS's, but the inclusion criteria included participants having served in ground forces and actively engaged in combat actions with enemy forces at least once. Relative to vocational identity, Brinn and Auerbach (2015) reported themes that described those combat veterans as having developed a "warrior identity" that was facilitated by

the rigorous military training they underwent to prepare them for combat and then that identity later being solidified when they first experienced combat. Those participants described combat as an intense set of experiences that provided ongoing development of a warrior identity. Two primary themes were related to that ongoing identity development. One was satisfaction felt through the rush and stimulation of having survived and performed well in combat. The second was participants' sense of purpose felt through fulfillment of their duties. Brinn and Auerbach (2015) indicated that how much fulfillment participants felt from combat contributed to how strong of a sense of warrior identity they had. There has been scarce other research examining vocational identity in connection to military enlistment, in military personnel, or in veterans transitioning from military to civilian careers.

Occupational Choice. One's choices regarding occupations are a function of individual traits, such as personality characteristics, and environmental influences, such as socioeconomic status, that bracket the range of choices (Savickas, 2005). Individual traits include occupational aspirations and interests. Rojewski (2005) defines and differentiates occupational aspirations as "an individual's *expressed career-related goals or choices*...[that] represent individual goals given ideal conditions," and interests, which "reflect an individual's emotional disposition toward particular career options (p. 132, emphasis in original). Other individual traits that contribute to occupational choice are one's needs and values concerning work. Rounds and Jin (2013) explained that needs and values are closely interrelated. They "are [the] shared interpretations on what people want and expect from work" (p. 417). Needs and values help determine what one seeks from work and shape behavior. For example, if a person highly values a sense of adventure, then they will make occupational choices in terms of helping to fulfill that need. One's interests concerning work also play a large role in occupational choice. Dik and

Hansen (2008) explained that interests can help steer a person towards certain types of work, and that one's interests can take on a passionate character that can lead to a sense of meaning and fulfillment when those interests are lived through work. Individual and environmental influences combine to influence occupational/career choices through a mix of personal ambitions for material gain, the nature of work, and the social world that work occurs in (Rojewski, 2005; Savickas, 2005).

Coupled with influences at the individual level on occupational choices are external influences. Some external influences include family culture and expectations, life circumstances, spiritual and religious factors, and larger cultural factors (Duffy & Dik, 2009). All of these external influences interact with and help shape individual trait factors. The greatest external influence on occupational choices and career decision-making is one's immediate family environment. This extends to military enlistment, with some studies showing that family culture, in particular the attitudes and beliefs about the military that parents have, is the most prominent influence on an individual's decision to enlist (e.g., Eigmey, 2006; Legree et al., 2000).

It is generally understood in vocational psychology literature that career/occupational aspirations and interests are largely formed in early adolescence and become more stable in early adulthood, and that one's expressed career interests in early adolescence are predictors of the type of work individuals will engage later in their life (Bubany, Krieshok, Black, & McKay, 2008; Duffy & Dik, 2009). The military has embraced this fact and focuses the majority of its own enlistment research and recruitment on adolescents. Eighmey (2006) conducted a study using secondary data from three large-scale Department of Defense (DoD) polls regarding youth enlistment motivations that looked at common themes across those polls. The researchers found that enlistment motivations included themes of family influence, benefits to be gained from a

military occupation (e.g. skill training, money for college, etc.), seeking a sense of dignity in their work, wanting a challenge, to experience adventure, and to serve a cause greater than themselves. There was also an expressed concern over the potential negative risks of military service – primarily the possibility of injury or death. Since this was a study that examined enlistment motivations across the service branches and occupations, there are no results regarding direct combat-related vs. non direct combat-related occupations, or by specific occupational specialty. Kelykamp (2006) conducted a longitudinal study examining enlistment motivations among a cohort of high school graduates from Texas. For those who did enlist in the military, this study found that more exposure to recruiting in high school, having a family member who served in the military, a lower desire to proceed directly to college, and lower socioeconomic status related to the decision to enlist in the military. Again, this study looked at enlistment propensity in general, and not by specific types of military occupations.

Narrowing the focus of enlistment motivations in general to soldiers in particular units was a study conducted by Woodruff, Kelty, and Segal (2006). These authors studied a sample of 293 first-term active duty U.S. Army soldiers in two Infantry battalions. While there were soldiers in the sample that represented other occupations, the majority of the sample consisted of Infantry soldiers. This study used survey methodology to examine the relationship between the propensity to serve in the military when these soldiers were in high school (bracketed into high vs. low propensity) and the primary motivations for enlistment. The authors defined propensity as how much a participant may have expressed a desire to enlist in the military while they were in high school before having later enlisted. Motivations were divided into two broad categories – institutional motivations and occupational motivations. Institutional motivations encompassed altruism (e.g., sense of duty, patriotism), self-improvement (e.g., increasing self-esteem, gaining

discipline, job skills), and motivation related to adventure and seeking a rite of passage experience. Occupational motivation encompassed pragmatic concerns, such as pay, benefits, bonuses, money for college, personal crises, and lack of other options in the civilian world. Simply stated, soldiers who enlisted for institutional motivation tended to want to experience what they expect being a soldier entails, while those who enlist for occupational motivations tended to express treating their military service much like a civilian job. Woodruff, Kelty, and Segal (2006) found that soldiers who exhibited more propensity to serve in high school were the ones that enlisted with more institutionally-related motivation, while the opposite was true for low propensity soldiers – they were more inclined toward occupational motivations. Among the institutionally-motivated soldiers the most frequent response for motivations was to experience adventure and challenge, with patriotism second, followed by money for college, and wanting to fulfill the role of being a soldier. Interestingly, this study found that there were a large number of low-propensity soldiers serving in direct combat-related occupations – a majority of the sample, in fact. Only 30% reported having a high propensity for military service in high school. Woodruff et al. (2006) found those who enlist in the Infantry to be more institutionally motivated rather than occupationally inclined, in contrast to those who enlist with money for college as their primary motivation. Finally, they noted that the binary institutional-occupational motivation model fails to capture the complexity of why soldiers enlist and what motivates them in their service.

Although there have been studies examining military enlistment motivations (see Bachman, Segal, Freedman-Doan, & O'Malley, 2000; Eighmey, 2006; Griffith, 2008; Kleykamp, 2006; Legree et al., 2000; Woodruff et al., 2006), the majority of them have done so examining enlistment motivation in general. Of those that have focused on enlistment motivation

with samples in specific large units, they have not specifically focused on direct combat-related occupational specialties. In addition, the majority of research on enlistment motivation for combat soldiers was done at early stages of the current wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The ongoing nature of those conflicts has drastically changed the military and increased the chance of experiencing combat for those who enlist in direct combat-related occupations. More research needs to be done to examine the enlistment motivations and occupational choices of veterans who had enlisted in Combat Arms occupations during a time of war.

Meaningful Work. Work is a major part of human life, and therefore work can be a primary source of overall meaning in life (Steger & Dik, 2009). Understanding the experience of meaningful work first requires an understanding of meaning-making. Barnes, Banks, Albanese, and Steger (2011) defined meaning-making as involving a subjective

interpretive framework through which individuals assign purpose and significance to their goals, actions, experiences, and contributions and to society, selves, and existence. One's meaning framework is derived from and linked to one's worldview, which entails one's core values and beliefs, assumptions on how the world operates, and what truth is. (p. 141).

According to these authors, and in agreement with Savickas (2005), meaning-making is an ongoing process in human life that becomes one's "life project," a continual effort to be involved in things that one wants to accomplish that are part of a felt and expressed identity. In theory, this could relate to Infantry soldiers and Marines having enlisted with the aspiration to experience things that will help them fulfill a desired role of being a "fighter" or "warrior." They would then derive meaning from living those roles. Brinn and Auerbach (2015) reported themes along those lines; of Afghanistan and Iraq combat veterans appearing to have derived meaning from

developing and experiencing a “warrior identity” through preparing for and participating in combat. According to a review of the meaning literature by Park (2010), meaning-making as a process involves subjective appraisals of context-specific experiences, or *situational meaning*, in light of one’s general beliefs and worldview, or *global meaning*. Global meaning is shaped by family of origin, education, local and broader culture, work environments, self-views, and one’s sense of purpose. Global meaning acts as a cognitive framework that is applied to situational experiences as they occur and then pondered on in retrospect to understand those experiences. Experiences are said to have meaning when they are felt to “make sense” to the individual and are perceived as “fitting into” global meaning structures. Park (2010) expressed that if there are discrepancies between the appraised meaning of situational experiences and global meaning creates distress. Individuals who are able to resolve potential discrepancies reduce or alleviate felt distress, while those who cannot will have that distress persist.

Chalofsky (2003) found a number of themes in a review of the literature on meaningful work. One theme was that one’s sense of self was a key component of finding meaning in work. The process involves one discovering what values, beliefs, and purposes they have about life, and then working in a context that fits one’s values and making a contribution that helps to fulfill one’s sense of purpose. Another theme was that the work one engages in itself can contribute to experiencing meaning. A third theme was gaining meaning through experiencing the growth that occurs when one is continually challenged by their work. Chalofsky (2003) argued that none of the above themes can influence meaningful work by themselves, and that people need an integral wholeness that encompasses all of those themes. A more recent review of the literature on meaningful work by Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski (2010) is in general agreement with Chalofsky (2003). They also added that the feeling one’s work is meaningful has been positively

related to increases in motivation, job satisfaction, organizational identification, career development, performance, and personal fulfillment, while also being related to decreases in work-related stress. Rosso et al. (2010) identified sources of meaningful work as being one's sense of self or identity amid the social world of work. Work becomes meaningful by the type of work one is engaged in being authentically aligned with one's purpose and role, and by having confidence (i.e., self-efficacy) that one can truly make a difference through one's work, a strong sense of purpose, belongingness with others, and serving a cause that is greater than oneself. Barnes et al. (2011) and Brinn and Auerbach (2015) added that meaning-making through work in dangerous contexts, such as the Infantry, also involves moving beyond personal, individual motives to connect with the group or team and align or adjust individual motives to the team's mission. When individual and group motives are aligned with a group mission belongingness is increased and a deeper sense of meaning may be experienced. Steger and Dik (2010) added that work and identity are closely linked – one's occupation becomes one's identity over time. For those seeking a sense of purpose for their lives, that seeking can motivate certain occupational choices, and working in occupations based on those choices can help fulfill that sense of purpose.

Barnes et al., (2011) argued that finding a sense of meaning is vitally important for those who work in dangerous contexts where many circumstances that can threaten health and life cannot be controlled, which the Infantry certainly entails. The military provides formal and informal processes in which recruits are socialized to the organization's expectations, group norms, and mission. In a qualitative study with Afghanistan and Iraq combat veterans, Brinn and Auerbach (2015) reported themes related to meaning-making and aspects of military service participants found meaningful. They found that while serving in a warzone and later reflecting

on their experiences post-deployment, veterans attributed significant meaning to the “brotherhood” they shared with those they had combat experiences in common with. Furthermore, the brotherhood relationships appeared to serve as an aid to the process of meaning-making itself through dialogues veterans had with each other about their experiences with the intent of making sense of them. In the context of Park’s (2010) elucidation of meaning-making occurring as a process people undergo to assimilate intense experiences with general beliefs, Brinn and Auerbach (2015) communicated that combat veterans seemed to have greater difficulty assimilating experiences related to feelings of helplessness to do anything about a particular situation. Conversely, having felt that one was able to effectively do something about a situation appeared to help assimilate combat experiences. Furthermore, combat had provided a wide range of complex experiences to veterans that were appraised as neither fully negative or positive. Brinn and Auerbach argued that participants’ making of meaning appeared to have been complimented by expanding their range of experiences. However, it is unclear what further aspects of military work in general, or for Infantrymen in particular, are meaningful or how infantrymen may make meaning through their work.

A construct that is very useful in framing the importance of finding meaning in dangerous work is *hardiness*. Hardiness is defined as a combination of personal characteristics that helps people construct meaning in significantly stressful events which then convert those events into opportunities for increased performance and psychological growth (Britt, Adler, & Bartone, 2001; Maddi, 2007). In a summary of research on hardiness, Maddi (2007) conveyed that in diverse samples of people who work in high stress occupations, such as firefighters, nurses, and military personnel, those higher in hardiness engaged in more effective coping mechanisms, demonstrated better performance, and had a lower likelihood of experiencing depression or

posttraumatic stress after having faced significantly stressful events. The research also suggested that hardiness is learned and can be trained. Therefore, Maddi (2007) advocated for hardiness to be studied and trained more in military contexts, as those contexts are inherently stressful and demanding.

In a study that included veterans of various service eras ($n = 174$), Owens, Steger, Whitesell, and Herrera (2009) measured how much combat those veterans had experienced and related that to presence and level of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, guilt, and meaning in life. They found that meaning in life related to lower severity of PTSD, lower rates of depression, and less expressed guilt. Another study examined the relationship between meaning in life with emotional distress, suicidal ideation, life functioning in a sample of 273 active duty U.S. Air Force Security Forces personnel (Bryan et al., 2013). They administered surveys to the sample on two Air Force bases. Results showed that participants who had a stronger sense of meaning in life had a correspondingly higher sense of social belonging and better life functioning, while having histories of less severe emotional distress and lower rates of problems with suicide attempts or suicidal ideation as compared to those with less reported meaning in life. Britt, Adler, and Bartone (2001) conducted pre- and post-measures of hardiness, meaning in work, and perceived benefits from service with a sample of 161 U.S. soldiers on a peacekeeping mission in Bosnia. They found that higher levels of personality hardiness were related to experiencing more meaning in work, and that the soldiers who perceived more benefits from their service had experienced more meaning in their work. Schok, Kleber, and Lensvelt-Mulders (2010) conducted a survey with a sample of Dutch soldiers ($n = 1,561$) post-deployment to examine resilience, the experience of meaning in dangerous contexts, and perceived benefits. They found that resilience – as measured by self-esteem, and the experience of meaning – as

measured by optimism and sense of control – predicted lower negative consequences from deployment and higher perceived benefits. Beyond examining meaning-making and hardiness as a protective measure against negative mental health outcomes, Bartone et al. (2008) studied the predictive power of hardiness in relation to successful completion of an elite Army Special Forces qualification course in a sample of 1,138 candidates. The candidates were assessed for psychological hardiness prior to engaging in the course. The course drop-out rate was 44 percent. Those who successfully completed the course were found to have significantly higher pre-course hardiness scores than those who did not complete the course, although the difference was by a small effect size. The small effect size was likely due to Special Forces candidates having higher hardiness in general due to the preparation and training required to apply for Special Forces candidacy. However, this study demonstrated that hardiness does predict successful completion of rigorous military training at an elite level.

The above studies support the argument of Barnes et al. (2011) that finding meaning in work that takes place in dangerous contexts is important, and that doing so relates to gaining benefits through meaningful work. What is unclear are what aspects of work meaning may be derived from that occurs in dangerous contexts, in particular the work of Infantry soldiers and Marines whose primary role is to engage in direct fighting with enemy forces.

Career Construction Theory

As a means to integrate and further conceptualize the material covered above regarding vocational identity, occupational choice, and meaningful work, a theoretical model is presented here. Career Construction Theory (CCT), as described by Savickas (2005), Hartung (2007), and Hartung and Taber (2013) is a constructivist career development model that posits as a core tenet that work is a primary venue in which individuals actively construct and assert their identities

and use as a means for meaning-making across the lifespan. CCT views feeling that one's life has meaning and purpose as a universal human need and that work helps to fulfill that need. As this research seeks to further understand the motivations, career decision-making, and meaning experienced from the Infantry work and service of former infantrymen, CCT provides a useful model to form a potential profile from common themes shared among respondents.

Four foundational constructs make up CCT. They include, first, *life structure* which includes work and other roles that make up a person's life. Career decision-making occurs within a psychosocial context of roles individuals find important to pursue and emotionally invest in to realize core values. Roles are a key way of comprehending vocational behavior and its meaning to the individual. Culture and social context (e.g., family background, socio-economic status, schooling, gender expectations, etc.) influence the range of possible roles individuals consider, explore, participate in, and commit to. Second are the *career adaptability* strategies individuals use to navigate developmental tasks and role commitments and transitions that are confronted in the context of work. Differing career stages and tasks are experienced as career concerns that include exploring occupational choices and making decisions, establishing commitments to career trajectories, and managing roles (i.e., committing to, participating in, and disengaging from). The third foundational construct of CCT is *life themes*, which are the self-defining career stories individuals tell that reveal their motivations and strivings and engender and infuse their work behavior with meaning. Life themes include self-defining stories told about vocational development tasks, career transitions, triumphs, and traumas experienced by an individual. They are a self-conceptualizing activity that imposes meaning and direction on one's vocational behavior and enable a person to implement a self-concept in work. Fourth is *vocational personality* or personality style. Vocational personality is the amalgam of one's career-related

interests, abilities, needs, values, and other traits that are a person's self-concept. Those traits are rehearsed and experimented with throughout the lifespan, and are honed and practiced through work roles and career decision-making which shape one's personality over time. With the above constructs in mind, CCT will be used to conceptualize this study's results through providing a profile of the participant sample describing their shared life structure, life themes, and vocational personality as infantrymen.

Present Study

The purpose of the present study was to gain a better understanding of why men who specifically chose the Infantry as a military occupational specialty (MOS) in the U.S. Army or U.S. Marine Corps did so when enlisting during a time of war, the potential meaning they experienced through their service as infantrymen, and what influence their military service may have on their civilian career plans.

Due to the nature of the research questions and the exploratory nature of the study, qualitative methods were deemed the most appropriate approach. Qualitative methods are the most useful for exploratory research, in particular examining processes, perceived meaning, understanding phenomena in depth, and producing rich narratives of participants' experiences (Morrow, 2007).

Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) was selected as a specific qualitative methodology for this study. CQR uses a highly structured process, a research team of two to five individuals, and at least one external auditor to conduct research and analyze data (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997; Hill, 2012). CQR was chosen over other qualitative approaches because it allows multiple perspectives in the makeup of the research team to arrive at consensus in the data analysis process. This helps ensure that no one researcher's biases and expectations

are predominantly influencing what is interpreted from the data. The additional component of external auditors helps the research team check for accuracy when analyzing data. CQR provides a systematic and rigorous structure to the research process that allows readers of the final product a standard basis in which to evaluate the quality of the study.

The following research questions guided the inquiry of this study: 1) What were the factors that influenced the decision to join the Infantry? 2) What potential meaning did these men experience serving as infantrymen? 3) How might their prior service as infantrymen influence their present career plans?

METHOD

Participants

Interviewees. Participants were recruited via email sent through a campus veterans services office, by flyers displayed in that office, and by word of mouth. More information regarding recruitment is provided below in the Procedure section. Eleven prior service infantrymen who were current undergraduate students at either a university or community college in the same Western United States city were interviewed. All eleven of the participants identified as White/Caucasian. Ages ranged from 23 to 31 ($M = 26.27$, $SD = 2.65$). Seven participants were undergraduate students at Colorado State University (CSU), and four at Front Range Community College (FRCC). Undergraduate class standings included three Freshmen, five Sophomores, and three Juniors. Eight participants provided no answer for religious affiliation, two identified as Roman Catholic, and one as Christian. Four participants reported being single/never married, four were married, one divorced, and one widowed. Seven of the participants had served in the U.S. Army and four in the U.S. Marine Corps. All seven of the participants who had served in the Army enlisted with Airborne contracts and six had served in Airborne units. Of the four Marines, participant Infantry Military Occupational Specialties (MOS) included two Riflemen (0311), one Assaultman (0351), and one Mortarman (0341). MOSs for the seven Army soldiers included six Infantrymen (11B) and one Indirect Fire Infantryman (11C). Average age of first enlistment was 18 (range 17-19). Seven participants served one enlistment, two served two enlistments, one served three enlistments, and one explained that he completed one enlistment and was involuntarily extended during his last combat deployment. Total length of military service ranged from 3 to 12 years ($M = 5.67$, $SD = 2.58$). All eleven participants had served at least one combat deployment to either Afghanistan or

Iraq as infantrymen; seven served two combat deployments, two had served three combat deployments, two served one combat deployment. Two participants reported having served one non-combat hazardous duty deployment in addition to their combat deployments.

From interview data related to participants' pre-military backgrounds, two expressed that they came from low socioeconomic class. One of those two stated that he did not have the means to afford college after high school, but asserted that he had been intent on military service from the time he was in middle school. The other shared that pursuing college was not emphasized in his family. It was assumed from the interview data that the remaining nine participants were from middle socioeconomic class. Eight of those nine had expressed that they had the means to attend college after high school; two were in their first year of college at the time they chose to enlist. However, all eight expressed that they were more interested in pursuing military service than continuing into college. One of those nine from middle socioeconomic class reported that he was compelled to military service to avoid further criminal legal consequences after having been arrested. All eleven of the participants reported having scored high enough on military entrance exams to have range of occupational choices available (some qualified for a larger range than others), including Infantry.

Research team. The research team was made up of five individuals, with one being a military veteran and the rest civilians. At the time of data collection, the team makeup included the lead researcher who was a 39-year-old White male civilian graduate student in a Counseling Psychology doctoral program with practicum experience providing psychotherapy and career counseling in a Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) setting; a 21-year-old multiracial female civilian with a B.S. in Psychology; a 25-year-old White male civilian graduate student in a Counseling Psychology doctoral program; a 45-year-old White male civilian graduate student in

a Masters of Social Work program; and a 43-year-old White male prior service U.S. Army infantryman with a M.Ed. in Counseling and Career Development who was employed by the VA as a psychotherapist. One of the team members had experience conducting a qualitative study, one had worked as a research assistant on two qualitative research projects, and three team members had no experience with qualitative research. None of the team members had experience using Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR). All team members read the 1997 and 2005 CQR articles by Hill and colleagues, as well as the 2012 book on CQR edited by Hill. The research team met several times prior to commencing the data analysis process to ensure that all members had a strong knowledge of the methodology. CQR instructional material was also frequently reviewed for clarification throughout the data analysis process.

Following the CQR guidelines explained by Sim, Huang, and Hill (2012), prior to developing the interview protocol the research team discussed their own assumptions and biases about enlistment motivations and potential meaning experienced through military service by those who chose the Infantry as a MOS. The civilian members of the research team also read selected sections of literature (e.g., Artiss, 2010; Gifford, 2006; Junger, 2010) and viewed a documentary film titled *Restrepo* (Hetherington & Junger, 2010), that related to the research topic. All of the team members who were civilians expressed that they had little knowledge of the research topic and had few particular expectations regarding what may contribute to one's motivations to enlist to be an infantryman during a time of war, save expecting that the desire to do something intense and important would figure prominently. The team felt that the terms "meaning" and "meaningful" have predominant connotations related to positive events that occur in one's life, and therefore discussed how to inquire about significant experiences participants may have had as infantrymen that did not have a positive connotation. Most of the team believed

that interviewees would report themes related to having endured hardship and camaraderie experienced with other infantrymen as being significantly meaningful to them. The team member who was a former infantryman endorsed those expectations but also cautioned that during his military service, he observed a great deal of diversity in both enlistment motivations and what others felt was meaningful in their work as infantrymen. Some of the team members communicated discomfort about the notion that the work of the Infantry during a time of war necessarily involves the potential killing of other human beings. After reflecting about, and discussing, these biases/expectations, team members tried to bracket (i.e., set aside) them as best they could to focus on what was actually communicated by the interviewees.

Procedure

Ethical considerations. The Colorado State University Institutional Review Board approved the study. All participants signed consent forms prior to participation in the study. Before data analysis, participants chose and were assigned aliases to protect confidentiality.

Recruitment. Participant criteria for this study included prior service infantrymen who had served in either the U.S. Army or U.S. Marine Corps, had enlisted with the specific goal to serve in an Infantry MOS, served in an Infantry MOS for their first enlistment, and who were current undergraduate students at either a university or community college within the same city. Having served a combat deployment was not necessary for participation in the study. Participants were recruited via email (see Appendix D) sent through a campus veterans services office, by flyers (see Appendix E) displayed in that office, and by word of mouth. Prospective interviewees were screened by telephone by the lead researcher to see if they fit the criteria and, if so, were sent a copy of the interview protocol to review and assess if they wanted to proceed. Those that consented to participate were then sent an electronic survey to complete prior to the interview

that included a demographic questionnaire and the Work as Meaning Inventory (WAMI) items, which are described below.

Interviews. Participants were interviewed face-to-face by the lead researcher, after giving their informed consent. The interviews lasted from 49 to 103 minutes ($M = 72.9$ min, $SD = 19.3$ min) and participants were given the opportunity to make any additional comments at the end of the formal questions. The interviewer conducted a short debriefing with the participants at the end of each interview. The intent of the debriefing was to ascertain and address any potential emotional agitation participants may have experienced in the course of the interview. Referral information for local campus and Department of Veterans Affairs counseling resources was included in the informed consent documents provided to the participants.

Transcription. All interviews were audio recorded. Transcription of each interview was distributed among the research team members, with the lead researcher transcribing three and the other team members each transcribing two. Participant identifying information was removed from the transcripts and the transcripts were identified using the participants' aliases. The lead researcher reviewed each transcript for accuracy.

Instruments

Demographic form. Participants were asked to indicate their current age, race/ethnicity, relationship status, religious affiliation, school attending, class standing, major, branch of military service, units served in, age at first enlistment, MOS at enlistment and at discharge, number of enlistments completed, length of military service, and number and location of deployments (see Appendix A for a full copy of the demographic questionnaire).

Work as Meaning Inventory. The *Work as Meaning Inventory* (WAMI; Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012; see Appendix B) is a 10-item face-valid self-report measure assessing a person's

beliefs that their particular work is meaningful to them. Steger et al. developed three subscales through factor analysis: Positive Meaning (WAMI-PM; e.g., “I have a good sense of what makes my job meaningful”), Meaning Making Through Work (WAMI-MM; e.g., “I view my work as contributing to my personal growth”), and Greater Good Motivations (WAMI-GG; e.g., “The work I do serves a greater purpose”). The WAMI items use a 5-point response scale (1 = Absolutely Untrue; 5 = Absolutely True). In the instrument development study using a sample of employed adults, Steger et al. (2012) found scores on the total scale to have a strong internal consistency reliability ($\alpha = .93$). The WAMI subscales had high estimate internal consistencies of $\alpha = .89$ (positive meaning), $\alpha = .82$ (meaning making), and $\alpha = .83$ (greater good motivations). Each subscale positively correlated with job satisfaction (.56), career commitment (.68), and presence of life meaning (.57). The WAMI was used in this study as an aid to describe the participants by comparing this sample with a previous sample, as well as to prime interviewees about the topic before the interview. They were instructed to think of their work as infantrymen when completing the measure. Because of the small sample size of this study, internal consistency is not reported.

Interview protocol. The research team worked together to assemble a preliminary semi-structured interview protocol with questions derived from the literature reviewed as a starting point. The lead researcher then consulted with a U.S. Army Combat Arms veteran of both Afghanistan and Iraq to get extensive feedback on the interview protocol. The protocol was updated to reflect the consultant’s feedback and then used by the lead researcher to conduct two pilot interviews with individuals who fit the study’s inclusion criteria. Further modifications were made and then team members met as a group to discuss the pilot interviews and finalize the interview protocol. The final protocol (see Appendix C) comprised eight main questions with

probes within those questions covering topics of general enlistment motivations, specific interest in the Infantry, both impactful and meaningful experiences had as infantrymen, general impact of military service, and plans for the future. At the end of each interview, participants were asked what the process was like of completing the interview and if they had anything else they would like to share.

Data Analysis

The CQR analytic strategies proposed by Hill et al. (1997), and as instructed by Thompson, Vivino, and Hill (2012), as well as Ladany, Thompson, and Hill (2012), were used to code and interpret the interview data.

Coding of domains. In CQR, domains are discrete topic areas that particular categories, or themes, are grouped into. The coding of the domains commenced with each member of the research team independently reviewing the same two transcripts. The team then met and, through consensus, developed an initial list of primary domains. Four additional transcripts were reviewed independently and then changes to the domain list were made based on consensus reached at team meetings. The sample of six transcripts that had been coded using the initial domain list was provided to the external auditor for review who provided feedback. That feedback was used to update the domain list and recode segments of those six transcripts. The research team met to review the updated domain list and recoded transcripts to develop a final domain list. Afterward, all remaining transcripts were reviewed individually by team members using the final domain list and discussed in coding meetings until group consensus was reached.

Coding of core ideas. Core ideas are brief summaries constructed from the chunks of raw interview data that have been grouped into each domain. The coding of core ideas commenced with each member of the research team again independently reviewing the same two

transcripts and searching for more concise descriptions, or core ideas, with the primary domains. The research team met and discussed these two interviews and came to consensus with a list of core ideas under each domain. Each team member then proceeded to independently code the interviews they were responsible for of remaining nine for core ideas. Identical to the process used for domain coding, the research team met and came to consensus on the core ideas for each interview.

Cross analysis. The research team independently reviewed each interview and then worked collaboratively to group the core ideas within the primary domain across all cases. Interviews were reviewed by each team members, categories were created that best represented the core ideas, and through consensus among team members these categories were given appropriate labels. The categories went through several revisions as all of the interviews were reviewed, and a final list of categories was developed after each member of the research team agreed that all interview data was appropriately represented. Each of the categories was then coded as general (all or all but one case), typical (more than half of the cases), and variant (half or fewer cases).

Auditing. As an additional measure to help ensure high quality and rigor of the data analysis process and the project as a whole, CQR includes one or more auditors. The auditor is not a direct member of the research team, but is a content expert relative to the topic and serves as an external evaluator that reviews and provides feedback on data analysis and interpretation throughout the process of the project (Hill et al., 1997; Hill et al., 2005). Schlosser, Dewey, & Hill (2012) provided additional guidelines for the auditor's role, in that the auditor should have some familiarity with CQR, assist in and review the development of the interview protocol, and, in the case of a study being a graduate student's thesis or dissertation project, be the respective

student's advisor. Relative to this study, the auditor was an associate professor in a counseling psychology doctoral program with expertise in vocational psychology, experience conducting CQR projects, and the lead researcher's graduate program advisor. The auditor provided guidance on the initial version of the interview protocol and then reviewed and approved the final version. Later, after the data analysis coding process was complete, the auditor provided comments and suggestions. The auditor reviewed several interviews and assessed the validity of the domains, core ideas, and categories. Auditor feedback was discussed by the research team and, once consensus was reached based on that feedback, it was incorporated in the final list of domains, core ideas, and categories.

RESULTS

Work as Meaning Inventory

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of the scores on the WAMI for the Steger et al. (2012) instrument development study on university employees and data for the current interviewees. One of the participants in the current study did not complete the WAMI, so results are reported for the remaining sample of 10. Effect size analyses (differences between means divided by the pooled standard deviations) were used to compare samples, where $d > .20$ is a small effect, $d > .50$ is a medium effect, and $d > .80$ is a large effect. Hedges' g was the measure used due to the difference in sample sizes being compared. Scores reported by the current sample of former infantrymen compared to the Steger et al. (2012) sample of university employees were lower by a medium effect size for WAMI-Positive Meaning ($d = .78$), higher by a small effect size for the WAMI-Meaning Making Through Work ($d = .33$), and similar to the comparison sample for WAMI-Greater Good Motivations ($d = .07$). The current sample was similar to the comparison sample for the WAMI total ($d = .006$).

Interview Data

In this section, results are reported using each of the 14 primary domains grouped into the three main content areas of 1) enlistment motivations, 2) experience of Infantry work, and 3) post-military life. Within the content area of enlistment motivations, domains that emerged included participants' sense of fit/interest pertaining to military service in general as well as specific to the Infantry, and factors that influenced their interests; external influences and circumstances participants reported as also being factors in their enlistment decision-making; wanting to fulfill particular roles through Infantry service; seeking to push/test themselves through challenges provided by military training and service; and altruistic values that

participants reported having been a factor in their desire to enter the military. The content area of the experience of Infantry work included the domains of role fulfillment, which referred to participants' expressing meaning and satisfaction from having been in roles they were seeking to experience when they enlisted; fulfillment of altruistic values, which connected to participants having been able to serve others; experiencing tests and challenges that meaning was derived from or had been impactful; meaning experienced from accomplishments as infantrymen; meaning experienced through Infantry culture and tradition; the Brotherhood (i.e., camaraderie, the significant impact of the loss of friends, etc.) that is a significant component of wartime Infantry service; participants reported having had significant changes in themselves from warzone experiences; and dissatisfactions and frustrations connected to military bureaucracy and/or poor leadership and others' incompetence. Domains that emerged in the post-military life content area included participants having gained enhanced personal qualities from their military service; their desires for their post-military life; and the work and struggle involved in readjusting to civilian life.

For each domain, quotes are provided from the interviews, noting a number for each participant (e.g., P1, P2) to protect their confidentiality while allowing readers to link quotes across domains. Ellipses (...) are shown when the interview data were deleted for efficiency and clarity in presenting the findings. Similarly, phrases were deleted such as "like," "you know," and "I mean" for ease of reading. For each domain, results that applied to at least 10 participants were considered general, those that were endorsed by six to nine were considered typical, and those that were endorsed by two to five were considered variant. The domains, categories, and category codes (general, typical, or variant) for the interview data are displayed in Table 2, but only those results that were at least typical are presented in the text.

Sense of fit/interest. The *sense of fit/interest* domain included dispositional influences interviewees attributed to their decision to enlist as infantrymen during a time of war. A typical influence cited by interviewees was a pre- and early adolescent interest in military service. P2 said that “The military was always in the back of my mind;” and P6 shared that sentiment: “I think it was just something I always kinda wanted to do.” P8 was more specific, relating that “I always wanted to be in the military. When I was in kindergarten, like a little kid, I wanted to be a fighter pilot, but then as I was growing up I didn’t want to fly....But then I wanted to go in the Army ever since I was middle school age.” P9 expressed that, for him:

I couldn’t imagine having done anything else, really. I didn’t necessarily know I wanted to join the Marines from a really young age, but I definitely knew I wanted to join the military. It seemed kinda like everything in my life – in my childhood, in my upbringing – pushed me in that direction.

Participants were not directly asked about the socioeconomic status (SES) of their family of origin. Two reported having coming from a low SES background, with one saying he did not have the means to pay for college after high school, but asserted that he had a desire to serve as a Marine infantryman from as early as middle school that was present regardless of college prospects. One participant reported having gotten into significant legal trouble when he was 18-years-old and told by a judge that he had the option of military service or jail. He communicated that after he had begun the process of entering the military his predominant goal became to serve as an infantryman in an elite Army Airborne unit. The rest of the participants shared that college was a realistic option for them when they were completing high school, but that they had preferred to pursue military service instead. All of the participants reported having obtained military entrance exam scores that allowed them a range of occupations other than Infantry, but

that they had strong desires to serve in Infantry jobs. As the inclusion criteria for participants included having enlisted with the desire to join the Infantry, their specific motivations for choosing that occupation was a general category that had some overlap with other categories and included desires to be direct combatants and wanting to serve in elite units that would provide high chances of being in combat. A common belief among the interviewees was the perception that the Infantry was the epitome of military service and not something one could do in civilian life. P8 explained that “If I went into the military I wanted to be a soldier. I wanted to fight. There is no reason to go into the military to be a veterinarian.” A similar sentiment was expressed by P6: “If I’m going to join the military, I was going to do something direct combat-related. I didn’t want to sit behind a desk or work in a warehouse; something I can do as a civilian.” P5 talked about his conceptualization of the Infantry when he enlisted:

There are people who support the Infantry and then there’s the Infantry. That’s what I felt like the military was divided into. So, you have the actual warriors and then you have their supporters supplying them and helping them with a ton of stuff....I didn’t want to join the Army to do a job I could do somewhere else.

After P1 had completed his military entrance exam he was told “[I] can do anything I want, so I looked into some of the technical skills jobs....but I came back to the Infantry for some reason. In my mind that’s what a soldier was.... I really didn’t think about anything else.” P3 was emphatic about that similar mentality. He said that:

Every single MOS [Military Occupational Specialty] was opened to me....If I’m going to get paid to be a fucking soldier, why would I not want to be a badass soldier instead of being a fucking pack clerk. You know what I mean? I didn’t want to sit there handing out rifles; I wanted to be given the rifle. That was my whole mindset. I didn’t understand who

would voluntarily jump into a support role, without at least trying to get into a direct combat role.

Interviewees generally communicated that they equated the Infantry with being in a direct combat role, and that was a primary desire for military service, as expressed by P9: “I was looking at whatever every job did, and I wanted that quintessential Marine Corps ground combat element....Boots on the ground. That’s what I wanted to do. I considered a lot of other stuff, but I realized that what I really wanted was boots on the ground, rifle in my hands, you know.”

As part of the decision-making to become infantrymen, interviewees typically discussed their choice of either serving in the Army or Marine Corps in terms of which branch best seemed to fit their interests and preferences, and would provide the best means fulfill them. The consensus among the four participants who had served in the Marine Corps was that they perceived the Marines as being more prestigious than the Army, as explained by P7: “There was never really any consideration for the Army just for the simple fact that one of the biggest things I thought was that the Marines had, in my opinion, the biggest prestige of all the services.” An element of increased choice was a significant factor for those who chose to enlist in the Army as infantrymen, as the Army guaranteed specific jobs in enlistment contracts, whereas the Marine Corps sometimes did not. P3 related that “I actually wanted to go Marines, but they wouldn’t guarantee Infantry....They wanted to put me in some computer aviation job [because of his high entrance test scores]. But I wanted Infantry. They told me they couldn’t guarantee Infantry....so I walked next door to the Army recruiter and asked if they could guarantee Infantry. He said yes.” Connected with the former Marines’ choosing that branch because of the prestige they perceived it had, the participants who enlisted with the Army did so with a desire to serve in Airborne units, as they felt there would be more prestige in that. P4 stated “That was why I chose the

Army, because I wanted to be a Ranger. I pictured them as the elite. As an 18-year-old kid, I had my eyes set on that.” Similarly, P5 said that, “I felt like the Army offered better options, and then I also got to be elite with Airborne and I thought of joining Special Forces.”

As part of the process of eventually enlisting to become infantrymen, interviewees had typically cited portrayals of combat infantrymen in movies and other media as having been a component of the inspiration to pursue that course themselves, as well as having sought out information about what Infantry combat entails in order to learn and prepare for doing that work. Two interviewees both cited the movie *Blackhawk Down*, which portrays Army Ranger infantrymen in combat. P2 shared that, “I’d seen the movie *Blackhawk Down*. That image of the Infantry was what I had in mind I think;” and P4 said, “I saw the movie *Blackhawk Down* and I was, like, ‘I want to be a Ranger.’” P7, now a former Marine, stated that watching videos on YouTube was a factor in inspiring him to enlist as an infantryman. He said, “I looked at videos of Marines in Fallujah, and that really got me thinking that, wow, kids my age [18] are taking care of stuff over there in Iraq....blowing shit up. That really appealed to me.” P2 referenced seeing stories in the news that inspired him, in that, “We got guys in Iraq at the time and they’re going on patrol; that’s what I saw on the news, and that’s what I wanted to do – to be in the center of that and doing that part.” P9 explained that part of his early interest in the military led to a great deal of specific research about the Marine Corps throughout his high school years: “When I joined I knew probably more Marine Corps history than a lot of gunnies and sergeant majors....I read every book [about Marines in combat]. I was an adamant reader throughout high school and I read every book I could get my hands on.”

External influences and circumstances. One category within the *external influences and circumstances* domain was typical and included interviewees’ mentions of traditions of

military service in their families and how much that was a factor in their enlistment motivations. For some interviewees, the tradition of family service of patriarchal figures was an explicit factor. P1 said that:

My dad is military too, and his father, so there's a load of tradition.... Yeah, my grandfather was in WWII.... and my dad, he's actually still in [the military]. He's a sergeant major.... So, that was kinda always in the back of my mind.... To be honest, all I really knew was I wanted to do something like my dad did. So I signed up for 11 Series [Infantry], and then to one-up him I signed up for Airborne school.

P2 also cited his father's military service as being a significant factor in his decision to enlist:

He flew helicopters in Vietnam [in the Army].... You can say I just grew up with that tradition, kind of. He didn't really talk about it a whole lot.... I mean, I saw the photograph of him in his old uniform; things like that. So that definitely got me interested.... I think for me there was a sense of patriotism before I enlisted. A lot of that came from my dad's experience.

One interviewee, P6, mentioned having an extensive military service tradition: "It's been a family kind of thing. On my dad's side there's been somebody in every major conflict that America has been in since the French and Indian War." He added that, "My dad and my grandpa were both Air Force. Dad was in Desert Storm; Grandpa was in Vietnam." P7 mentioned that his family's tradition of military service "...really spiked an interest, for the simple fact that all the men in my family had been in at one point." He then provided anecdotes of some conversations with those family members who were veterans where they told him how their service had been a significant part of their overall success in life. Other participants who mentioned having a history

of military service in their family qualified that fact by explaining that military service was never explicitly discussed or overtly encouraged. P9 said that, "...but I don't feel like my family consciously influenced the decision [to enlist]. Just the way I entertained the idea through my childhood was a real factor." P11 had a similar qualification after mentioning that both of his grandfathers had served in the military, saying, "But it wasn't really a tradition."

Wanting to fulfill particular roles. Strong themes of participants *wanting to fulfill particular roles* emerged within this domain, referring to a major factor of wanting to be infantrymen having to do with perceiving that occupation as means to become and express identities they would not have been able to in a civilian career. The most prominent theme was interviewees generally wanting to be fighters and warriors and to experience combat, as combat is the major function of those roles. P4 expressed that, "I was 18-years-old; I wanted to know what war was like. To put it into a word: 'war.'" He added, "Infantry are the guys that fight. We're the guys on the front lines fighting, kicking in doors, and I wanted to do that – I wanted to fight." P5 stated that, by enlisting to be an Army Airborne infantryman, "I did know that by signing up I was going to see combat....I wanted to carry a gun; I wanted to be in the mud." P6 shared those sentiments: "There's a little bit of a romantic notion with it, I guess – being out there in the front lines. I would be lying if I said that didn't attract me a little bit. The actual idea of being there; being up in there in the front doing stuff." P7 was explicit about the role he was seeking through Infantry service: "I wanted to be a warrior...[the Infantry] is really like the truest way to be a soldier. It's the purest form of being a warrior that we have anymore." P9 talked about the main factor in his later enlistment process being 9/11 happening while he was in middle school, which prompted him to learn about military service options:

I really knew I wanted to do that – I wanted to join the Marine Corps; that I wanted to join the Infantry. That’s when I started to figure out the difference between somebody who sits there and does paperwork and somebody who goes and kicks in doors. That’s where I really knew that I didn’t just want to join the military to get the uniform and whatever benefits. I wanted to go fight.... For better or worse, [experiencing combat] was the goal. From the very moment I joined, that was the goal....I really wanted to experience a firefight. I wanted somebody to shoot at me. I wanted fucking explosions and all kinds of dumb bullshit that I didn’t realize at that time was not exactly tons of fun.

For P10, his motivations were similar as described by the other interviewees by sharing that, “I knew the Infantry were the ones that actually kick down doors, that go on the front lines. I did my research....if you wanted to meet the enemy, then: Infantry.” He further explained that wanting to be a warrior included fighting as a means to protect those who couldn’t protect themselves. He said:

The closer I got to joining the military I really got the sense of something greater out there than me; something important. I knew that there were people out there doing really atrocious things that I wanted to stop....I learned that there were bad people out there, and I wanted to do something about it....I wanted to be the one that stopped them. You know, they get away with a lot of stuff and there are not really too many people that are willing to go out there and stand against the enemy. There are people that can’t really do anything about it. They can’t really protect themselves.

Another interviewee, P4, shared that he desired to be an infantryman and be in the role of directly fighting in combat because that would allow him the opportunity for the epitome of service and self-sacrifice. He shared that:

I wanted to serve and fight for my country. I wanted to do everything I could....There's a difference between serving [in a non-combat arms MOS] and fighting....There is a big difference from being an X-ray Technician and being on the ground, digging a hole, filling sandbags because you're about to get attacked. I wanted to do the fighting....I wanted to risk my life for someone else.

As an extension of participants generally wanting to be in roles of being fighters and warriors, a typical category emerged of them further wanting to be in elite vanguard units, as doing so would provide them an even greater fulfillment of the roles they were seeking to fulfill and a greater chance of experiencing combat. For the four participants who chose to enlist in the Marine Corps, their common consensus was a perception that Marine Infantry is elite, succinctly stated by P6 that, "The Marine Corps is the best." He added that, "So, it was once again – I said if I was going in, I was going in all the way, and I was going to be with the best group to be with." All seven of the men who enlisted in the Army did so with Airborne contracts at a minimum, and a few with Special Operations contracts (i.e., Ranger or Special Forces). P8 related that, "I wanted to do SF [Special Forces], but at the time they didn't have an SF contract....[the recruiters] said you can do Rangers, and I'm like, all right. What's the most high speed [elite] thing you've got." P11 shared that, "I heard about Rangers and Airborne. I wanted to be elite." And in a similar vein, P4 stated: "That was why I chose the Army, because I wanted to be a Ranger. I pictured them as the elite....If I'm going to go, I'm going to be with the best. I'm going to be the best. I'm not just going to be some Leg [non-Airborne] [laughs]." P3 emphatically stated that similar sentiment: "I wanted Airborne Ranger. That was all I wanted. I figured if I'm going to do this, I might as well be the best goddamn aspect of it."

Seeking to push/test oneself. The domain of *seeking to push/test oneself* referred to interviewees reporting desires for their military service to have an aspect of being a significant challenge. A typical theme was seeking adventure and intense experiences. P1 stated that he was, “Looking for some adventure” and “I wanted to test myself. So why not go that extra step with Airborne.” After being asked what the draw was for an Airborne/Special Operations contract, P2 replied: “Well, definitely the excitement level; being in the action instead of a support role.” P5 shared regarding his desire to pursue Airborne Infantry service, “I worked at Dunkin’ Donuts in high school, and high school was easy, so I expected a challenge. Physically, I wasn’t the best in-shape person, so I didn’t expect it to be easy. I did expect to reach new levels as a person.” And regarding enlisting in the Marine Corps for Infantry to experience combat, P9 said: “I think there is some kind of instinctual recognition that [combat] is one of the most intense, real things you could ever experience. That’s what I wanted.”

Within this domain, there was a typical theme of some interviewees reporting that at the time they chose to enlist they had been experiencing a lack of direction in their lives and consequently viewed military service as a solution to that lack of direction, in tandem with their intent to serve in the Infantry. P9 shared that, “I was in high school whenever I signed up. I was a really bad student....I knew I wanted to join the military, but I had no direction in my life. I was like a little rebel without a cause kinda kid.” A similar sentiment was communicated by P1: “To be honest, my high school did not go too well. I think I was a smart student, but just really didn’t have the motivation, the drive, to do all too well. And at the end of it I was just ready to get out of there.” P11 viewed military service as a means to leave home and also gain a sense of appreciation later. He said, “I knew I wanted to get out of [his hometown], but at least stay in state somewhere in college.” He then had a disruptive experience in his life and decided, “I don’t

really want to go to school anymore. I figured the military would give me an appreciation for my education because I knew I needed to get a degree. I didn't know if I was ever going to go back to school, or I was going to make the Army a career. I just knew I wanted to get out of town."

Along a similar theme, P5 related that he viewed military service as a "launching pad" for a later focus on college. He said that,

I didn't really have a plan for after high school....I think that's one of the reasons I did join the military, because I knew it gave me options when I left [the military] for school....I really didn't have the teacher or parental pressure to pursue college, so I think I missed the boat on actually doing it and I saw the military as, I guess, just an elevated position for one, but then also an opportunity to branch off later in the future.

Role fulfillment. The domain of *role fulfillment* refers to one category within the domain of interviewees typically expressing meaning derived from having been able to fulfill the roles of fighter/warrior that they were seeking when they enlisted and having experienced combat as part of those roles. Regarding being a combat infantryman, P5 shared that, "You're in the shit. You're doing the work." P2 expressed having first felt the identity of *really* being an infantryman as occurring on his first combat deployment:

Probably when I first started going on patrols in [Iraq].... I mean, when you kick in a door, or blow a doorknob off, or go into a house and you have bullet chambered and you're ready to kill people. And thankfully I never—I don't think I ever killed anybody, so that's something that probably makes it easier to live with now. But that's when I first felt that identity.

Referring to the role of being a warrior who has been in combat, P8 shared: "It's fighting; learning how to fight and defeat your enemy....Combat was what my job was. That's what I was

in the Army for.” In the context of his third warzone deployment, P10 talked about the sense of identity he had:

In Afghanistan I was leading Marines through combat, through fire. By then I was the designated marksman, so I had the sniper rifle, which was something that I was always interested in....So in Afghanistan I was pretty much doing everything that I expected....I mean, when I was going to join the Infantry everything I expected to do in the Infantry, I did in Afghanistan....So, eventually that’s what I was doing: calling for fire, doing sniper missions, then leading Marines. Every now and then, I would be like, ‘I want to be on the turret gun,’ so I’d be on the turret gun. Everything that I imagined what the Infantry would be like all came together in that deployment.

For P3, when asked about what was meaningful about being in the role of a combat infantryman, replied,

What I would say was the best part of being in the Infantry? Blowing shit up. It’s awesome, except for being blown up yourself. That’s not as awesome, but it is still pretty exhilarating when you live. It’s a rush, that’s for sure. Firefights are pretty awesome, but I would never recommend them for everyone because they are not awesome for everyone.

Fulfillment of altruistic values. The *fulfilment of altruistic values* domain referred to interviewees’ typically deriving meaning as infantrymen through having done significant things in the service of others and/or for a greater good. P1 discussed his service as being about, “A greater good. One of those things in the Army is selfless service. I definitely think that I provided it.” He later expressed that his specific work helped protect and save the lives of other servicemen:

You know, I think as a mortarman we did lots to keep our own guys safe. We'd get woken up at two o'clock in the morning, do a fire mission, maybe illuminate a spot for some other guys, maybe ward off some bad dudes, maybe blow them up, I don't know. Depended on what the mission was....I think that we saved a lot lives. I think for that deployment, yeah, that was definitely the thing I'm most proud of.

P2 shared a similar sentiment. He related:

I think the missions where we went to support other American troops were definitely more meaningful. You don't really see a positive impact when you're just going on patrol or when you're going on a raid or something like that. But when somebody else gets ambushed or they get hit by an IED and you're in the neighborhood and you go help them out—those parts I think were the most meaningful.

Other interviewees discussed the meaning they felt from their Infantry work having helped the local civilians in the areas they were deployed to. P5 said that, "I felt my job meant something because I knew I was affecting the people around me. There were kids who were giving me the 'thumbs up;' there were people inviting me in for tea." He clarified that, for him, it was being able to see a direct impact that mattered most. P5 added, "I know I'm not going to eliminate terrorism....I know I'm not changing the world as a whole, but I'm changing this area. I think I'm having an impact." P9 shared a sense of meaning from having served local civilians. He said, "[S]omething really meaningful was truly being able to help people. And, not to say that from the overall political standpoint....but in the short run; for the person right in front of you, you know." Similarly, P10 shared: "I did a lot of work [on one deployment] with building of communities and taking care of the populace, which I actually really enjoyed....In Iraq, I really cared about the people."

Experiencing the test(s). The domain of *experiencing the test(s)* referred to one, a connection back to the *seeking to push/test oneself* domain related to enlistment motivations, in that interviewees typically sought to enlist in the Infantry to seek challenges. Secondly, this domain related to interviewees then having experienced significant impact and meaning from undergone and endured those challenges when they occurred. A typical expression from interviewees was deriving meaning from having endured hardship. P8, an Army paratrooper, described his experience as an infantryman in terms of unique experiences not available through other means. He said the Infantry was: “A lot of work; a lot of physical toil. I had experiences I never thought I would have; sleeping in a monsoon tied to a tree so I don’t fall down a hill in Korea. You know, shit like that – things that nobody would see here.” P6 stated that, “There’s some pride that comes with the Marine Corps and the amount of stuff they put you through. The Air Force doesn’t do the same.” He added that Infantry work “isn’t easy, but I think that’s what makes it a good experience – because it’s hard. It gives you a new look on things.” Another Marine participant, P7, discussed the hardship of Infantry work:

Grunts [infantrymen] are only happy when they are completely miserable. I firmly believe that. There’s nothing like sharing a fucking Virginia night covered in rain in the middle of fucking November during your [deployment] workup with your team leader yelling at you, none of your fucking socks are dry, you got wet feet....But you don’t care because everybody else is experiencing the same shit and you’re all getting shit done. There’s a sense of pride that comes from going through the misery.

From meaning experienced through the hardship that is part and parcel of Infantry work, interviewees typically expressed having experienced growth and increased self-knowledge from the hardships and overcoming challenges. P1 talked about his general pre- and post- military

service self in that regard. He shared that, “Overall, I think [his military service] has been a blessing. I’m definitely not the same person I was when I got in....You had this potential maybe you were aware of before and now you’re realizing it [through the challenges]....I really found out what my purpose was.” P4 expressed something similar, in that his service “...shaped me; made me who I am today....It’s given me that self-pride. I stand up for myself; I’ll stand my ground....I wasn’t like that before.” In reference to growth and self-knowledge, P2 communicated that his Infantry service

...taught me that people in general, and myself personally, are capable of pretty much whatever they put their mind to....If you put your mind to it, you can do it. Physically, because we’d patrol for miles and miles on end and have to stay awake for hours and hours on end, and [where his unit was based] we were working in anywhere from 60 degrees to 60 degrees below zero. So, just that physical aspect that you learn to endure. I think that’s very character building... You know it’s going to suck, and you know it’s going to be tough, but you just do it.

He then summarized that, “the character building – that whole aspect of being able to do anything you set your mind to and working past the physical and mental discomforts. Those were big things for me.” In a similar context, P5 talked about what he learned from the training required to be a paratrooper:

It was probably my greatest accomplishment in life up to that point – getting through Airborne School and all the training – because it really did test what I thought I knew about myself, just durability-wise. I wanted to quit a bunch of times, but I just kept seeing the finish....You just push through the suck.

He then added that after becoming a paratrooper and being deployed to a warzone, “I expected to be battle hardened a little bit. But [combat] really built me up as a stronger person, as an independent person to know that no matter what happens I’m going to be able to make it through.” P3 stated about having experienced Infantry combat: “I mean, [combat is] all terrible, obviously, but the whole thing as a collective was a hell of an experience. I still think the best thing that the Infantry can do for someone, though, is teach them who they are.” And P11 shared that belief when he stated: “It wasn’t until I actually got into combat that I knew what kind of man I was.”

From the discussion of having gone through hardship and the growth and increased self-knowledge interviewees developed through their service, they typically shared that they had experienced critical, significant events while deployed that tested them. P2 shared that, “You know, it really hits home as soon as the combat starts and as soon as people die and things like that....It was impactful to say the least.” P6 briefly related an experience about him and a friend having been pinned down by an enemy sniper in Afghanistan and then said, “...that was probably when I was the scariest ever, *ever* when I was over there. You don’t go through something like that without coming out a little different.” P5 talked about the impact of deploying for the first time and when the fighting started, “It’s the reality of the situation, I guess, in some ways. It’s not a movie. There’s no cameraman and there’s no makeup [laughter]. It’s just kind of a shit show, and you’re really just doing your best to have some kind of impact.” In the context of relating that he felt he had passed a significant test through surviving combat, P11 stated: “I escaped death, you know.”

Meaning experienced from accomplishments as infantrymen. The *meaning experienced from accomplishments as infantrymen* related to specific aspects of Infantry work

that interviewees found meaning in having done. The main category in this domain was a general theme that all eleven of the interviewees endorsed – that of having strived to be highly competent, professional, and skilled infantrymen. Subthemes within this category included having the physical capabilities and intelligence to do the job at an expert level, being highly skilled with weapons and tactics, and being good leaders of other infantrymen.

P5 explained a general mentality that motivated him and the men he served with to strive to be as good as they could be:

It's hating what you're doing, but knowing that you're going to do it and you're going to do it to the best of your ability....There's an integrity about it. You're relied on so heavily in that profession [the Infantry]. Its' a mentality of, if you fail someone else is going to get hurt....It's about being able to carry out the mission and being able to have this person's back no matter what.

P9 shared that mentality, saying, "I knew I could go over there [a combat deployment] – being a Marine – and that could mean the difference between someone coming home and somebody not. Being good at what you do can make that kind of a difference." And P11 stated that, after he had first experienced combat having the mentality of, "It went from being hesitant to absolutely no hesitation, because when you're seeing your buddies get hurt – people you're close to – then you're just dead set on the mission."

Regarding the physicality and intelligence required of excellent Infantry work, P3 said about having transferred from his original unit in the Army to another Airborne unit, "So I got there and they put me into the scout platoon because I was from Ranger Battalion. Obviously I was in great shape – better than most of the regular Army guys around there – and I was intelligent. Well, they put me into the tryouts for the scout platoon, which I blew through." P11

explained that he served in a “light Infantry” unit, meaning they were not mechanized (i.e., had consistent use of vehicles to operate from). Therefore, all of the equipment they needed to fight with was carried by foot. He talked about how important physical capability was as part of a light Infantry unit in Afghanistan, and for him, “I could just carry a lot of weight and I could make up for what other people couldn’t because some people...couldn’t carry that much weight.” He then explained how his physical capabilities allowed him to be more effective with a type of light machine gun called a Squad Automatic Weapon (SAW) that weighs approximately 20 pounds, not including ammunition:

I had a sling on at first because you’re walking miles and miles with it, and then after the first firefight I took the sling off and I never had it on the rest of the deployment....People thought I was nuts....I just stretched out the bipod when we stopped, put it on the ground, and kind of have it resting on the ground. That sling got in the way if I wanted to shoot standing up. But it was cool how everyone gathered around me sometimes during firefights because I could lay down rounds [get the weapon firing at the enemy] fast.

Some interviewees explained that there were core aspects of being a “good soldier” that were a prerequisite that other skills expanded from. P2 said, regarding excelling at being an infantryman involved, “Being dedicated to whatever task was at hand....[and] attention to detail.” P4 explained, “Being a good soldier is knowing what you’re supposed to do and doing it before your team leader tells you....It’s always wanting to learn more.” Similarly, when responding about what made a good infantryman, P5 said: “I was well-prepared....I was always organized. You didn’t have to tell me anything twice. I took orders well....I was always doing the right thing. I never had to be told to do shit twice....I was a squared away person.” P8 shared that he strived to be really good at the range of Infantry skills, which included, “Shoot, move,

communicate....Weapons training, road marches and knowing how to get where you need to be with what you need to have....learning radio systems, working as a team, movement tactics – bounding – stuff like that....It’s about fighting; learning how to fight and defeat your enemy and being good at everything that goes into that....Combat was what my job was.” Intelligence and adaptability was an important part of the job for P4: “It takes a different type of person to be able to not just to shoot back, but to react to that contact and to maneuver on that contact in an effective way, as well as to adapt and overcome.”

From there, interviewees talked about the pride they felt at being good at specific aspects of Infantry work. P4 talked about his expertise with a particular weapon system: “I was phenomenal at the 50-cal [a turret mounted heavy machinegun]. That was my baby right there.” After being asked what it took to be good with the weapon, he explained:

It’s just really knowing the weapon. I got my weapon down so that it wouldn’t malfunction. I would send rounds downrange when we got contact. I would just be pushing the trigger down and not letting up [laughs]. I’d be lighting stuff up, and that helped out our platoon a lot – putting down that cover fire. I got an award for it.

P6, a Marine mortarman, expressed similar satisfaction about being moved to a forward observer role and increasing his skills:

I loved that job a whole lot because, the thing was, I did the gunline stuff and I wasn’t too bad at working with a mortar. But there’s only so much you can do with [mortars] and then it’s just a matter of refining that skill; and that was boring the heck out of me....[T]hey needed a couple of forward observers....And there’s just so much to learn, because it’s not just the mortar stuff you gotta learn....but I also had to learn how to do artillery missions, and then naval gunfire missions, and then fixed and rotary wing

aircraft stuff, talking to pilots, not just calling in airstrikes. When we were in Afghanistan I had the radio and every time we had any kind of overhead [aircraft] I was the guy they were talking to....I got to see the [effects of calling in indirect fire and airstrikes]. I got to move it around, and there's a little bit of a power trip there because I get to command all this firepower and make it do whatever I want. It was really a lot of fun. I was really fast at it.

The last subtheme is this category was about interviewees having attached a great deal of importance and satisfaction to being good, skilled leaders. After sharing the process he went through of being a skilled junior Marine and good at weapons and tactics, P10 related that, "At that point, now you're focused on the next step: what do I do to become a leader? I knew I wanted to be a team leader, so you start training to the next step." He then added that, "I really enjoyed leading my guys. It really meant a lot to me....I was really good at practicing that [leadership] in the field, in combat – telling people where to go, where to shoot, setting up ambushes." P4 stated that,

Leadership was really important to me....As a leader, I hold myself to high standards....I led by example. I tried to instill that in my guys. I never told my guys to do anything that I wasn't going to do with them....When I was a team leader, do you think I wanted to walk in an IED-infested area? Hell no. I was afraid to take every step, but I didn't let that show, because as soon as I let that show my guys would be afraid. That's when it starts going downhill.

And lastly, P9 shared that his talent for leadership provided him opportunity for types of responsibility he never would have experienced in civilian life:

Probably what I was best at was motivating other people and keeping everybody minding their p's and q's. Keeping going. I got given my first section on my first deployment. I was given a truck section that I was in charge of towards the end of the Iraq deployment. It was crazy; it was a lot of responsibility. There were 19 other Marines that I was in charge of, and I was 19 years old. I had four gun trucks, and going out, and having the responsibility of the full force of a U.S. Marine truck section in a foreign country – being that person in charge of that whole freakin' shitshow as a 19-year-old.

The other category within this domain involved interviewees having typically shared specific, intense dangerous incidents while on deployment that they felt had been tests of their abilities to perform in a high stakes environment. The ability to perform well when the stakes were high was meaningful to them. P1 explained that, in a general sense regarding being an infantryman in a warzone what is needed is: “Perseverance; a discipline type of perseverance. There's a lot of things that you have to watch out for. You can't get slack.” P4 added to that notion of *disciplined perseverance* and having to always be ‘on’ by saying that,

The hardest aspects [of Infantry work] was the ‘sucking.’ You go on patrol all day, come back, and you don't come back to a bed. You maybe have a cot. You come back, you maybe get an hour to eat and then rinse off some dust, and then you may have to go back out and start filling sandbags and improving your walls because you might get hit this afternoon. And then you do get hit that afternoon. You're 24/7 doing stuff.

P9 explained that in the high stakes environment of a combat zone, “everything you do takes on such a significant meaning. You're not just going out to the range and shooting your rifle because it's fun; you're doing that because your ability to put rounds on target in an accurate and timely manner could save the life of the dude next to you. The high stakes really

makes everything very meaningful.” P3 had talked about considering himself a highly skilled infantryman, but then being involved in a major sustained battle and being able to consistently perform well in that environment:

Fallujah. That was when I realized how effective I could be as a sniper. I knew I was good on a range, but that really doesn't mean much. But when [Fallujah] happened it turned into pure chaos....Somehow, the more chaotic it got and the more extreme it got, the clearer things would get for me. They would slow down and things would just focus for me. Not too many people had the ability to react that fast and clearly, but some of us did and it really showed.

P8 also shared an incident he had that was a contrast for him regarding being able to continue to perform well when things got chaotic and others didn't:

I hadn't been in a big ambush like that. I mean, we had IEDs in Iraq and there were, like, two or three firefights that whole year....[Then in a later deployment with another unit to Afghanistan]. They hit us with an RPG right in front of our truck at first, and then our truck was stuck and it was dead in the kill zone....We were alone in the kill zone; we had no support from anybody else in the convoy....It was the unit I was in, I suppose – others not having been as well-trained or well-prepared; people being all disorganized on the radio and stuff. I thought, where the fuck did everybody go? Then I got to work to organize the right response and get us out of there.

In contrast to what P8 related about being able to perform well when those around him were not, P11 discussed the value of being in a team with others who can perform well:

It was great [to be with a high-performing unit]. I was always around really smart people combat-wise, so I felt safe. With the guys I went out with I always felt pretty

confident....Everyone knew their tactics and jobs very well, and everyone looked after each other. They would get on each other when someone might be lazy or something, because complacency is the biggest problem over there. You might be in firefights every day of the week, and then for months there's nothing. That's when you get complacent, and that's when you get hit hard. So, that was the biggest thing – trying to keep from being complacent and staying on edge.

Meaning experienced through Infantry culture and tradition. The domain of *meaning experienced through Infantry culture and tradition* referred to interviewees expressing pride and personal meaning from having been infantrymen connected to a larger culture and tradition of Infantry service. Interviewees typically felt meaning from having been a part of their particular unit's accomplishments and/or service branch's tradition (i.e., Army Airborne or Marine Corps tradition). P1 said that, regarding his Airborne unit, "Everybody goes out, they get their maroon beret – they're in the mirror making sure it looks right. [His unit] is known for its *esprit de corps*. One of those traditions way back from WWII....You almost feel like you're a continuation of that bond." P7 explained that, "There's a Marine breed, I'd say....the tradition of the Marines and Marine Infantry. We are big on tradition for the simple fact of seeing the brotherhood that you have....You see another Infantry Marine and it's that instant kinship." P6 added about Marine tradition connecting across service eras. He explained that after leaving the service and working in a surplus store, "Guys would come in that were in Iraq or even Vietnam and I would talk to them for a long time....It's just a rapport that the Marines have."

P4 talked about the pride and satisfaction he experienced from being part of an Army Airborne combat infantryman tradition. He mentioned the two different Airborne units he served in, and stated: "I was Infantry; I went to Airborne units, thank God. I wasn't a Leg [regular

Infantry] [laughter]; I was a paratrooper, and I deployed as a paratrooper twice.” P3 talked about the pride he felt in the recognition his unit received for their accomplishments: “We were the only ones over three deployments that received Presidential Unit Citation, Meritorious Unit Citation, Valorous Unit Citation. The only unit since Vietnam that has gotten all three of those.” And P11 talked about his pride in his and his Airborne battalion’s performance in a deployment that involved significant combat. He shared, “We set the standard for the whole division with what we accomplished. We [his individual unit] had the most Ranger Tabs in our battalion. And looking back and being able to tell someone and seeing in them a, ‘Wow!,’ you know. I was around all those guys, so it wasn’t a big deal then, and then [after he had left the Army] when you tell someone else it’s a big deal....I take more pride in it now, now that I’m out.”

The Brotherhood. *The Brotherhood* domain referred to the camaraderie and strong bonds interviewees felt with whom they served with, as well as the positive impact they experienced from good leaders they had. The meaning interviewees experienced from the camaraderie developed through Infantry combat service was a general theme. P1 said that, “There’s a brotherhood. There’s looking out for each other. A greater good....You’re one of the dozen, but the thing is that helps is that everybody else is right there alongside you. There really is a brotherhood.” P2 explained that, “That camaraderie you find in [the Infantry] is a lot different than other units I’ve seen. And a lot of that comes from being an all-male organization still....There’s a lot of camaraderie there. A lot of honor and integrity too.” He then went on to explain that the camaraderie develops through shared hardship:

When you get to your unit you start to make those bonds with the other guys. You start to go on field problems...we’d go to the field for weeks or a month at a time, and you’re sleeping in the same tent as these guys, you’re going on missions with these guys, you’re

filthy with these guys, and knowing that you're going to be deploying to combat with them. Those bonds are definitely good.

When deployed, P4 said that the bonds deepened with those he served with because of the shared danger and high stakes. He said, "Once the fighting season picked up [in Afghanistan] we were going out every day, either to get hit or to go help your buddy that was getting hit. It was pretty rough, but we got through it. Those are brothers to me. I don't know a bond that's stronger than that." P5 expressed something similar by sharing, "We'll get through this together. It's like, I want to be the first one in that fucking room [on a raid], and I'm trusting you guys to come in right behind me or I'm going to fucking die....I think I made some of the greatest friends I will ever have....I trust these people; I worked hard for these people." And P8 stated, "Everyone had gone through the same suck, so everyone has that in common. It creates a strong bond." P7 talked about how strong of a sense he had of those bonds while in the Marine Corps: "The biggest thing for me is you are *never* alone. That is *the* biggest thing I've ever taken away from anything....You're miserable together; but you'll make it through together." And P10 shared that, "Everyone [he served with] knew their tactics and jobs really well and everyone looked out for each other....You get a lot closer when you go through really tough times together....You make brothers for life through experiences [in combat] like that."

Within the domain of brotherhood, interviewees shared a typical sense of positive impact experienced from good leaders that was meaningful to them. Interviewees communicated that an important quality of good leaders who helped them was the leader's genuine caring for them, being a role model, and teaching them necessary skills, which, in turn, helped them be good soldiers and Marines as well as good leaders themselves. P1 shared that his Basic Training drill sergeants had a big impact on him as, "They were all Airborne qualified, so they made sure a lot

more of us got to go to Airborne school;” which helped increase P1’s chances of successfully becoming a paratrooper. P4 related that one of his sergeants was, “the definition of a leader. He would bark orders and stuff, but the difference between him and the other leaders was that he’d be out there with you....He wouldn’t just tell you to go do something, he’d be out there with you doing it all day. So, he definitely showed me what leading by example meant....He was the definition of a leader to me.” P7 cited having a staff sergeant that he loved because he was an excellent Infantry leader and cared for the Marines he led. P7 related,

Our entire platoon loved Staff Sergeant [name] because he didn’t believe in doing stupid shit. He believed in doing stupid shit when it was necessary, like for teaching lessons, but he didn’t take shit and he got stuff done. He told us why stuff happened. He motivated us. He was like a second dad for me....He cared about us, and not just because we were under his command. He cared for us because one, we were Marines; two, we were *his* Infantry Marines.

P8 and P9 both mentioned specific leaders who taught them the skills needed to be good infantrymen in their particular roles. P8 said, “He knew his job in a different way since we were mechanized and we were Bradley crewmen, not dismounts. He taught me a lot about how to work Bradleys and how to work vehicles....He taught me gunning; and after that our crew got Top Gun.” And P9 shared,

One of my real mentors was my first section leader....The impact he had on me was teaching me how to be a Marine; just teaching – being that guy who trains you, teaches you what to expect, what you’re going to need to do to save your life. Teaching you all the knowledge, the job skills – how to patrol, how to run a patrol.

Experiencing significant changes from warzone experiences. The domain of *experiencing significant changes from warzone experiences* refers to interviewees generally relating occurrences during their deployments that they felt had caused recognizable changes in them, both positive and negative. Some interviewees talked about gaining more appreciation for life after their experiences. P1 said, “Being able to take part in something that’s historically significant; being in a faraway country, that definitely opens up your eyes. I think us, as Americans, are way too fortunate. Some of those guys [in Afghanistan and Iraq] have nothing.” P6 expressed that he had, “a little bit of a different view about the world now” after having seen and experienced difficult conditions on deployments. He continued that, “It was a good experience. It’s not easy, but I think that’s what makes it a good experience because it’s hard. It gives you a new look on things.” And in that vein P11 shared that he developed, “my appreciation for everything now. I’m probably going to lose some of it by being in a comfortable atmosphere, but just appreciation for good food, a bed, a nice warm place to be, and showers....And appreciation for the opportunity to go to school and pursue a career that fits me.” Regarding now pursuing an education, P1 added that, “just the fact that [I’m] in a university is a phenomenal opportunity. The one thing I do see is that a lot of people don’t make the most of it that they could.” He explained that it was military service that gave him the appreciation and determination to maximize his current university experience.

Conversely to positive changes from deployment experiences, P2 related in the context of returning from war, “If you ask my wife it’s probably made me more pessimistic and cynical, which is true to a certain degree.” A similar self-assessment about possibly being more pessimistic about other people and the world at large was stated by P7. P10 responded about what may have changed about him after having gone to war,

I think I'm a little bit...I don't want to say colder, but...and I don't want to say down-to-earth, but maybe realistic. Not so much naïve....I think just a little bit more realistic; more pragmatic. A greater sense of mortality in general, especially with my injury...So, I know what it's like to literally lose a part of you, and that's kind of what death is...just, to never be again.

P11 described a contrast of being “a more sensitive person” before the Army. Then, “preparing for combat kind of turns you into a – we always put it as were like, soulless. And that was kind of a mentality.” He said that after he came home from that deployment, “I felt like I hurt a lot of people I cared about just because I didn't have emotions. They were just kind of shut off.” P9 expressed having experienced a sense of despair after witnessing a particular gruesome event:

You see the evil in the world. You just see the bad that's out there, you know. That is one of the most profound things that changed me....to see what people are capable of....I was saying that dude who suicide bombed himself and he blew up all those people [innocent civilians], for what? And we went out there – we got there within a couple of minutes. It was just; it was like a human piñata. It was horrible. And you can't really – there aren't words to explain what the feeling of seeing those people – women, children – all they were doing was what could be done in a town square in America. They were going about their business, going shopping, doing whatever, and it was suddenly all over for them.

Another context related by interviewees was some changes in them from the impact of the pain and loss of friends having been killed in combat. P4 shared that, “we left with 35 dudes in our platoon and we came back with 15 of us. So, we had six [killed] and 14 wounded. It was a rough one. Definitely was a gut check, and definitely made me who I am today....I set

impossible standards for myself because I feel I have to for those guys.” P5 shared the story of a very personal loss of a friend in combat in the context of having recently gotten moved to another unit without the camaraderie of the first one, and expressed, “There was no way to cope with it. It was tough because I felt by myself with this grief....I don’t know how you’re going to make a career out of that; how to get close to people and just lose them....I’d say that was the biggest loss and the biggest negative effect.” After describing the bonds he had with that person and some of the others in his prior unit, he continued, “it was definitely like you forged a new family. It was just tough. I knew I didn’t want to do that anymore;” and he explained that he chose to leave the Army as soon as his enlistment was completed as a result.

Desires for post-military life. The *desires for post-military life* related to interviewees expressed general goals for civilian life now that they had exited the military. Two categories in this domain were typical. The first related to interviewees having viewed their military work as having made important contributions and a means to serve others, and now still wanting to contribute to and serve others. P1 expressed that,

when I got out I wanted to take care of myself, first and foremost. That was just, I think, a back lash of looking after others for so long [in the military]. But now that I’ve been out for a little bit longer, I realize I just want to do more for other people once again. I am involved with a lot of veterans’ organizations here. I want to help people.

Similarly, P3 had described his choice of college major and then responded to the question of whether he still had a sense of service that related to his choice by saying, “Yes, I like helping out. There’s enough destruction that I think it’s better to do something a little bit on the building side or the fixing side for a while.” P4 expressed that the loss of friends in combat was fuel for him to stay committed to values of selfless service in his civilian career pursuits. He

said, “I have a lot of buddies who [gave their lives]....Kennedy said, ‘Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.’ I believe that down to the bone. I apply that, not only to my country, but I apply that to my job that I have right now [in the medical field]....I have to serve.” He then went on to explain that his academic pursuits were related to further advancing in the medical field as a means to continue to help others. P10 reiterated that he enlisted from a sense of wanting to serve and help others, and that now, he “want[s] to get more involved with the community, especially veterans’ issues. You know, just try to be a community leader and take care of other people....I really do feel like there’s no higher service than public service.”

The second typical category within this domain had to do with interviewees expressing a desire for peace and normalcy now that they had left military life behind. After having first intended to pursue a career in law enforcement after leaving the military, P2 said he changed his mind because, “I don’t really want a job where I’m in danger.” He added that he decided, “I wanted to use my intellectual side a lot more than the Army let me, and I already experienced all that alpha male stuff and all the physical stuff, so I wanted to use my brain.” P3 was explicit, in that after 12 years of active duty service,

I really want to give a normal life, or some semblance of normalcy, a shot. That’s why I decided to come to school....School will work out for me since I’m buying into it....I don’t want to go back to the soldier mindset. It’s a slippery slope and I want to stay away from it....I want to be able to move past it and experience more in life, because there’s way more than what the Infantry has to offer. It’s awesome what they offer, but it’s very one directional and not applicable to 99% of the world. So I wanted to do something to step away from it.

Along those themes communicated above, P6 shared that:

I think I'm done with the adrenaline rush part of my life [laughs]. I'm ready to do something normal for awhile....[military service] got real old after a while. In the beginning it was a huge rush and we were all pumped about it because it was what we were trained to do. Then, after a while....it's not so much fun....I kinda want to be comfortably off. You know, no worries about anything [laughs]. I put in my time.

And P8 was direct in saying, "To be honest, I would be happy with just a nine to five job. I don't need much; like, I don't want to be rich. I just want to be able to do my job and then be left alone."

Work and struggle of adjusting to civilian life. The final domain, *work and struggle of adjusting to civilian life*, concerned the prominent issues interviewees communicated about their post-military readjustment to civilian life. There was one typical category in this domain in which interviewees expressed a sense of feeling significantly different and separate from civilians. Interviewees typically said that they did not share their experiences as infantrymen with civilians. P2 said, "I usually don't....I would probably avoid explaining it to somebody with no idea at all....I think it's hard for them to understand and that might not be fair on them either....I just don't. I don't feel a need to tell people what I've done or what I've been through." P5 explained that, "I don't really go into it. They [civilians] all try to pry sometimes and I'll just give them vague answers that they deserve." After being asked to clarify what he meant about others deserving vague answers, P5 continued that, "it's like I feel no one really cares. I feel like they ask these questions, but they're not important questions. They ask things like, 'have you ever killed anyone?' 'Did you see combat?' 'How was it?'It's just dumb shit....Most of them are personal and most of them, they wouldn't understand." About being asked a common

question by civilians, P7 said, “‘Have you killed anyone?’ I take that as disrespect.... Why do you personally want that knowledge? What does it benefit you? That’s the one questions that sets me off the most.”

Regarding a general feeling of separateness from civilians, P8 said, “I’m proud of being an infantryman and fighting and stuff, but it’s a little bit different than things in the past – different cultures in the past. There are warrior cultures in the past where warriors would be applauded for what they did, and then I come back here and nobody cares. Which is fine; you don’t have to care.” After being asked about his sense of overall meaning from Infantry service, P4 shared that, “I am very proud of what I did. It’s a meaning that no one else will understand and no one else even really cares about....I joined the Army to fight for my country. However, going out and seeing the rest of the world and seeing war and the horrors of the world, and then coming back, I’m very disappointed with my country and what it’s become.” He went on to share a couple of poor experiences interacting with civilians after he had come home from war. And lastly, P9 shared an experience he had with his family after he had come home from war that highlighted the separation he sometimes feels from others who have not shared similar experiences as his:

It’s just a distance that separates that [experiencing combat] from where my family is. To come home – I came home; we went to Disneyland with my little nephew – he’s three – with my family. Just to see kids running around and playing; it’s just hard to go from one world to the other. It’s hard to reconcile those realities. This is all happening on the same little blue dot in the vast emptiness, you know. Yeah, man, there is definitely a wide range of emotions you really go through.

DISCUSSION

The goal of the present study was to gain a better understanding of occupational choice and potential meaning derived from work of men who chose to enlist in the U.S. military during a time of war to serve as infantrymen in the post-9/11 era. The results provided some depth to the reasons why participants chose the Infantry and what they cited as being significantly meaningful and impactful to them through their work in that role, while providing some nuance. In the following sections, I will situate the sample, discuss several of the major themes that emerged from the data organized into three main content areas of enlistment motivations, experience of Infantry work, and post-military life, and then utilize a theoretical lens to present a common profile that the participants for this study appeared to share.

The sample for this study was quite homogenous, in that the participants largely endorsed similar themes and appeared to communicate and present a similar strong sense of vocational identity regarding their prior service as infantrymen. The resulting homogeneity of the sample was partly by design. In qualitative research designed to study a phenomenon in depth, purposeful sampling is recommended to select participants who share similar characteristics and belong to a specific group who have experienced and can report on the phenomenon to be studied (Cresswell, 2007; Hill & Williams, 2012). For this study, the inclusion criteria of former infantrymen who enlisted with the specific intent to join the Infantry during a time of war was crafted with the prediction that the participants would likely share similar enlistment motivations. However, since the inclusion criteria did *not* require participants to have served one or more combat deployments to either Afghanistan or Iraq, it was unclear what the prominent themes would be related to what the participants had found meaningful and impactful about their Infantry service. As reported above, all the participants in this study did in fact serve at least one

combat deployment as an infantryman. Interview results reflected an additional component of homogeneity with the eleven participants largely endorsing similar themes and similar frequencies of those themes related to connecting their enlistment motivations to a strong sense of vocational identity, not only as infantrymen but as *combat* infantrymen who served in high performing units, as well as the aspects of Infantry service they derived significant meaning from. There was likely a self-selection aspect to the sampling process for this study. Those who chose to participate were probably much more motivated to want to tell a portion of their stories about their military service than other former infantrymen who did not share this sample's predominant characteristics. The homogeneity of the sample that resulted was a strength for this study, as it provided more shared depth to the participants' responses than there may otherwise have been.

Relative to the shared themes reported among this study's participants, a claim is not made as to these results being a comprehensive report of what was most meaningful and impactful about participants' military service as infantrymen. According to Krauss (2005), qualitative interview research is itself a process of co-constructing meaning between the researcher and participants. Co-construction occurs through the structure of the interview questions, what participants are willing to share about their experiences with the researcher based on the interview dynamics, and the dialogue that takes place within the interview process. In communicating to others what was meaningful and/or impactful about significant past experiences, people select memories that are central to their sense of self and identity (i.e., how they perceive themselves) and attempt to relate them in a manner that is consistent with their identity and how they would like others to perceive them (McLean, 2005). Furthermore, according to McLean (2005), and consistent with Krauss's (2005) argument that interview

dialogue is a process of meaning co-construction in the context of the relationship between researcher and participant, an important factor in “memory telling” is the audience those memories are shared with; how experiences are recounted change depending on the context those “stories” are shared in. All that is to say, in the context of a civilian graduate student inquiring of former infantrymen about what was most meaningful and impactful about their military service, the context of what participants were willing to share, how they recounted their experiences, what they chose to emphasize, and at the same time what the researcher chose to focus and follow-up on, should be considered when interpreting the results of this study. Post-9/11 combat veterans typically feel misunderstood by civilians and have experienced intense, stressful, and traumatic events that are difficult to recount by their very nature (Christian, Stivers, & Sammons, 2009; Gifford, 2006; Grossman, 1996; Junger, 2010; Moore, 2011; Pew Research Center, 2011). Therefore, the results of this study are best viewed as an attempt to understand and communicate what these participants were willing to recount in the context the study took place in between them and the researcher.

A meaningful work measure was used as an aid to describe the sample of former infantrymen in this study and compared son to a civilian sample of university employees from Steger et al. (2012). Scores on the measure for the former infantrymen were lower by a medium effect size for the positive meaning in work subscale, higher by a small effect for the meaning making through work subscale, and similar to the comparison sample for the greater good motivations subscale. According to Steger et al. (2012), WAMI results for the civilian sample represented those university employees reporting their work as providing considerable psychological meaningfulness, life meaning, that their work contributed to the greater good, and was significantly meaningful overall. The WAMI results for this sample reflected participants

generally feeling that their work as infantrymen provided them psychological meaningfulness, but significantly less so than the comparison sample by a medium effect size. However, their scores reflected that they felt their service provided them with a similar level of life meaning, that they contributed to a greater good, and that their work as infantrymen was significantly meaningful to them overall compared to the other sample.

Enlistment Motivations

Participants were asked what factors and influences contributed to them enlisting in the U.S. military to become infantrymen. The domain of sense of fit/interest contained a general theme that contained participants' specific reasons for choosing to serve as infantrymen during a time of war that involved perceiving the Infantry as the epitome of military service and the occupation that would provide the best opportunity to be deployed to a warzone and experience combat. There was a typically reported early interest in military service, with some participants becoming interested during middle school and others having been interested much earlier. Participants also typically shared that they were both inspired by depictions of Infantry combat in media in adolescence that later contributed to enlistment desires, as well as having used various media to explore and educate themselves about Infantry work to reinforce their interests. The desires that participants expressed regarding wanting to experience combat and doing research about what that might entail fit within commentary by Artiss (2010) about there being classes of people who enlist with more clear expectations of what military service entails and with the specific purpose of wanting to see combat compared to people who enlist without that express purpose. In light of vocational identity being a significant part of a person's self-concept and a realization of an increasingly clear and stable understanding of their self-concept as it will play out in a career ((Holland, 1997; Hirschi & Herrmann, 2012), participants in this study appeared

to have had a clear sense of searching for the realization of an identity of what being an infantryman entails during a time of war. As noted above, there was some variability reported by participants as to when they felt they made firm decisions to want to be infantrymen (e.g., some had a clear desire as early as middle school, while others became clear as they were readying to enlist in the military). What appeared to be shared among the participants was that, regardless of the timing of their desire to become infantrymen, once they made that decision they purposefully sought out information to increase their confidence that the Infantry would be a good fit for them. Another typical category was the decision-making made between serving in an Infantry job in either the Army or Marine Corps. This category involved participants basing their decision between the branches in terms of which one would be the best fit for what they wanted to do relative to becoming infantrymen, as well as the options for Infantry jobs provided by the branch they chose. Participants having shared specific reasons why those chose one branch over the other for Infantry service also appeared to reflect a strong sense of developing vocational identities specific to becoming infantrymen.

One typical category within the domain of external influences and circumstances was the influence of family histories of military service. There were two subthemes within this category that demonstrated some nuance. Some participants reported having had an explicitly influential tradition of military service by respected patriarchal figures that shaped their desire to enlist. Others that reported a history of military service in their family shared that, although they were aware of that history, it was not a significant influence on their eventual decision to enlist.

Role fulfillment was a prominent theme, with a general category of participants choosing to enlist as infantrymen because they wanted to be a fighter/warrior and experience combat. They pursued the Infantry because they saw that occupation as the best vehicle to fulfill that role.

In tandem with that was the typical theme of participants pursuing membership in elite vanguard units. There were two significant reasons reported for that pursuit. One was that being in an elite unit would provide more of a chance to be deployed and experience combat. The second was from a desire to “be the best” – to be highly skilled and capable combatants. These results reinforced participants’ having a clear sense of the vocational identity of infantrymen they were actively developing and pursuing.

Two typical categories were present in the domain of seeking to push/test oneself. One included participants pursuing military service to seek adventure and intense experiences. Those desires fit with the above themes of wanting to experience combat and be highly skilled in that endeavor. The other typical category was a lack of direction in their lives being a significant factor in perceiving military service as a solution to that lack of direction. For participants who endorsed that theme, the character of what they communicated seemed to involve them finding the mainstream civilian trajectory of going directly to college from high school or working in available low paying jobs after high school to lack significant importance, reasons for meaningful engagement, or much excitement. The above findings supported similar results reported by Eighmey (2006) regarding DoD polls related to youth enlistment. However, this sample was unique in that no economic reasons were provided about their enlistment motivations. That is, they did not choose the Infantry because of college benefits or job skills that would later be transferrable to a civilian occupation. Rather, they appeared primarily motivated by desires to seek intense, dangerous training and combat experiences and fulfill particular identity roles not available in civilian life. Those motivations fit within Woodruff, Kelty, and Segal’s (2006) model of participants having been predominantly high propensity (more expressed desires to serve in the military before enlistment) related to being more institutionally

motivated (i.e., altruism, self-improvement, and seeking adventure and rite of passage experiences) than occupationally motivated (i.e., pay, benefits, and lack of other options). These participants also seemed to have developed strong vocational identity preferences that resulted in perceptions that being infantrymen would be a good fit for those preferences, in line with findings that stronger vocational identities relate to greater career decision-making self-efficacy (Esters & Retallick, 2013) and greater career choice readiness (Hirschi, 2007).

Experience of Infantry Work

Participants were asked what the most meaningful and impactful aspects of their service as infantrymen. As reported above, all of the participants had served one or more combat deployments. They endorsed a typical theme of deriving meaning from having fulfilled roles they sought of being a fighter/warrior and having experienced combat. This theme connected back to the generally expressed desire when they enlisted to be fighters and warriors and be engaged in combat. Participants having strong interests that steered them towards particular types of work, identified a role that would fit their sense of self or identity, and then having been able to fulfill that role has been something identified as significantly meaningful in the literature (see Dik & Hansen, 2008; Rosso et al., 2010; Savickas, 2005). Having sought after and then found meaning from fulfilling and living a “warrior identity” connected with results from Brinn and Auerbach (2015) with other Afghanistan and Iraq combat veterans. A connected typical category was meaning participants felt from having directly served others and contributed to a greater good through their work as infantrymen. That also connected with Brinn and Auerbach’s (2015) study that reported participants as having derived significant meaning from an existential sense of fulfilling their combat duties well and having a strong sense of purpose related to serving others. Subthemes in this category included meaning connected to helping and protecting

their comrades, as well as having helped and protected local civilians where they were deployed. For this sample, what was meaningful for them was not just being in combat and fighting an enemy, but also viewing fighting as a means to protect others, with both being a contribution to something outside themselves. Those expressions fit what has been reported by Junger (2010) about another sample of post-9/11 era infantrymen found meaningful relative to fighting together against an enemy while deployed in Afghanistan. These findings related to sources of meaningful work identified by Rosso et al. (2010) as including having self-efficacy in making a difference through work, having a strong sense of purpose, belongingness with others, and making a contribution to a greater good.

Other aspects of Infantry work participants typically found meaningful included facing and overcoming types of hardship that is part of being infantrymen, whether experienced in training or combat, having experienced growth and increased self-knowledge through overcoming challenges, and reported critical events they experienced while deployed that were significant tests of them. Those three categories provided a greater sense of how participants viewed their experiences in the high intensity of elite Infantry training, as well as the high intensity and dangerous and life-threatening context of combat deployments. This sample appeared to typically derive meaning from experiences had in those high intensity and dangerous contexts. These results were in line with Brinn and Auerbach's (2015) findings from other Afghanistan and Iraq combat veterans reporting having derived significant meaning from the rush and stimulation of surviving and performing well in combat encounters and overcoming hardships.

The participants in this study experienced important meaning from accomplishments they had as infantrymen. A general theme that all eleven of the participants endorsed was a significant

sense of satisfaction from striving to and being highly competent, professional, and skilled infantrymen. Within that theme were discrete subthemes of meaning and pride related to being very capable at meeting the physical and mental demands of Infantry combat, being very skilled with particular weapons systems and tactics, and being effective leaders. A related category was participants typically found their ability to perform well in the high stakes environment of combat as having been meaningful. This domain can be conceptually related back to participants' earlier factor in enlistment motivations of wanting to be high performing infantrymen in elite units. That life theme connected to them having then strove to be very competent at the range of skills and demands of Infantry work, and deriving meaning from having been good at what they did. These findings can be conceptualized as a stabilization of participants' vocational identities through their Infantry work having led to more career maturity (Esters & Retallick, 2013), aspects of psychological well-being (Strauser et al., 2008), a strong sense of having a "warrior identity" that was fulfilling and meaningful (Brinn & Auerbach, 2015) and deriving meaning from facing and growing through significant work challenges and demands (Cholofsky, 2003).

The camaraderie and strong bonds (i.e., the "brotherhood") participants developed with those they served with was another general source of significant meaning for them. This resulting theme fit expectations from the literature (see Brinn & Auerbach, 2015; Grossman & Christensen, 2008; Junger, 2010), and this sample provided some depth with participants explaining that the camaraderie that developed through the hardship of training and performing in dangerous contexts was a factor that reinforced and strengthened belongingness, shared responsibility, being competent for the sake of others, and selflessness. Participants' descriptions of the brotherhood they experienced as infantrymen and the significant sense of meaning they

derived from that brotherhood related to similar reported themes from Brinn and Auerbach (2015). Those authors also asserted that that sense of brotherhood and the relationships that contribute to it itself functions as a facilitation of meaning-making. Although not explicit in this study, the same was likely the case for the respondents in this study as well. Participants also shared typical sentiments about positive impacts they experienced from good leaders that helped them become more skilled as infantrymen and better able to face the rigors of deployment. That theme again fit with the thread of this sample having conscientiously strove to be competent and skilled in their roles, which also contributed to what appeared to be a strong vocational identity (read: “warrior identity”) as infantrymen.

Participants conveyed some insight into how difficult and trying Infantry service in a warzone was for them through the general category of having shared instances of witnessing horrible things and friends being wounded or killed. Those experiences were shared in some instances of simply communicating how difficult they were and that they had a significant impact, while others were appended with some consequence or change the participant felt afterwards. Changes that were related were a mix of both positive and negative. For instance, some effects communicated about deployment experiences related to having become more pessimistic or constricted their emotions, while other effects included gaining a greater appreciate for life and opportunities. Brinn and Auerbach (2015) conveyed similar results. However, this study did not inquire of participants how well or not they were able to assimilate negative and trying combat experiences and how much their capacity to do so may have influenced their ability to make sense of/derive meaning from them.

Post-Military Life

This section was tertiary in importance to the above two sections, and consequently resulted in less transcript data. Prominent themes that emerged in what participants communicated about their prior service as infantrymen included a typical category of some still wanting to make a contribution to a greater good through their civilian career choices. Another typical category included participants conveying a desire for a sense of peace and normalcy in civilian life, as compared to their former Infantry work that was high intensity and involved significant physical hardship, danger, and life-threatening circumstances. Another typical theme was of a character of participants feeling markedly different from civilians due to their Infantry combat experience, as well as a sense of separation from others. Participants also typically did not communicate much, if anything, about their experiences as infantrymen to others who had not been in that same role. These findings are similar to what other Post-9/11 era veterans have reported in relation to leaving military service (Brinn & Auerbach, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2011). They also fit within what Artiss (2010) explained as being part of a complex mix of psychological responses for service members who have experienced combat. Those responses include a shared understanding with others who have had similar experiences, while also having a disdain for those who did not fight.

Career Construction Theory Integration

Using the explication of Career Construction Theory (CCT) provided in the Introduction above, this section provides a means to integrate this study's results through a theoretical lens. What appeared to be the shared *life structure* of the participants; which includes the context career decision-making occurs in relative to the roles one deems most important to pursue and emotionally commit to in order realize core values is first looked at. There was some variability

in when participants expressed interest in military service. The majority reported an early interest in the military, with some becoming determined to serve in a combat role as early as their middle school years. Others gained a strong interest in military service during the normal time period in U.S. culture when adolescents are supposed to be seriously examining and committing to post-high school work or college trajectories. Two participants reported having already been in their first year of college, but then deciding to pursue military service instead. And lastly, one participant shared that he chose military service rather than serving jail time in order resolve legal issues. The U.S. being involved in active warfare in Afghanistan and Iraq was a significant factor in the participants' decision-making regarding military service. In terms of their *life structure*, pursuing a role in the active duty military during a time of war was much more important than any of the more "traditional" civilian school and/or work roles open to them. But, even more, regardless of when each participant chose to pursue military service, what they all shared in common was a strong value and desire to pursue roles in the military that would provide them the greatest opportunity to be actively engaged in combat and fight, and becoming and serving as infantrymen was perceived as the best means to do so. The most common expression among the participants was along the lines of, "why join the Army/Marine Corps to do something you can do in the civilian world?" Embedded within the role pursuit to become infantrymen, a further desire and value to fulfill for these participants was not just to become "regular" infantrymen, but to pursue opportunities to serve in high performing elite units that were likely to be deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq. Therefore, these participants not only wanted to become infantrymen, but wanted to become highly skilled infantrymen who had the best chances to be deployed to a warzone and experience Infantry combat.

The career decision-making relative to pursue roles as combat infantrymen leads to the shared *life themes* of the participants. *Life themes* are the narratives one tells about their work roles and pursuits that are self-defining and make meaning of their experiences, and include stories told about the significant tasks, transitions, triumphs, and traumas one experiences. The shared *life themes* among these participants included all having deployed to Afghanistan and/or Iraq at least once and experiencing Infantry combat. As the work of the Infantry is to fight, it was being able to do so that reinforced the *life structure* being an infantryman. The prominent value connected to fighting in war was being able to do so in service of what the participants perceived as a greater good. These participants cited having fought in defense of their fellows, other U.S. military personnel, and Afghani or Iraqi civilians as significantly meaningful. Fighting as a means to protect and defend others was a prominent value made manifest through their narratives. However, the *life theme* of having fought in combat was a complex issue to attempt to narrate for the participants. Combat was reported as being a paradoxical experience of exhilaration, fear, disgust, and triumph. Through those intense experiences, the participants seemed to communicate *life themes* of feeling a great deal of meaning from having demonstrated considerable competence and skill at aspects of Infantry combat work (e.g., being highly skilled at particular weapons systems, being able to effectively manage intense emotions in order to continue to perform well, etc.); doing so in service to their fellow infantrymen and others. Furthermore, the participants' having derived significant meaning from the bonds with those they served with in difficult conditions was a prominent part of their shared *life themes* as infantrymen. Those bonds also related to powerful feelings of hurt and loss when friends had died; a particularly difficult and tragic aspect of the combat Infantry role. Participants cited other difficult and traumatic incidents that occurred in combat that had a significant impact on them as

individuals. Although, with the intent of this study being a focus on what was most “meaningful,” there was a great deal of variability among the participants regarding what was shared and how much about difficult and traumatic combat experiences.

Regarding what appeared to be the shared *vocational personality* among the participants, what was written above can be distilled as follows. These participants were men who articulated a strong sense of identity as Infantry combat veterans who expressed a great deal of satisfaction and pride in their combat service. They viewed themselves as being highly skilled and competent infantrymen, and their role models were leaders who demonstrated qualities of skill and competence they emulated and learned from. The participants valued and found satisfaction in having been able to experience intense, stressful, and dangerous things and continue to perform their work well. They shared a desire to be “the best” at what they did – striving to learn and be proficient at a range of necessary Infantry skills, not only for their own benefit, but for the benefit of those they served with and the people they desired to protect.

Limitations

The strength of the homogeneity of this sample noted above was also a limitation. All of the participants were White/Caucasian who enlisted to become infantrymen with similar interests, and who pursued and engaged in Infantry service through a desire to be highly skilled and proficient combatants. The majority reported having had the opportunity to attend college directly after high school. All of them reported having achieved military entrance exam scores that allowed them a range of occupational choices. All of them had served at least combat deployment as infantrymen. Thus, while these results likely have high transferability to populations with similar inclusion criteria and demographics as this sample, these results may

not be generalizable to other populations who had served in Infantry or other Combat Arms jobs, as well as those who may not have served a combat deployment.

Regarding what this sample conveyed as having been meaningful to them as infantrymen, the concept of meaning in work can be abstract. The interview protocol included inquiries about what was both meaningful *and* impactful to participants about their military service. The participants were sent the interview protocol ahead of time and completed a work as meaning measure prior to the interview. There was some variability in how much the lead researcher queried each participant about how they might define what was “meaningful” to them and did not inquire at all about their perceptions of meaningful work in general after they had completed the work as meaning measure. That may have circumscribed some of their potential answers for that topic area. Following from that, another limitation was the lead researcher’s relative effectiveness with each interview. More probing was done in some interviews than others. There was also variability noted in what some participants shared compared to others which influenced the depth of data collected. That may have been a function of the lead researcher being a civilian graduate student interacting with participants’ comfort and willingness to share aspects of their Infantry service with a non-veteran, as well as the interviewer’s inconsistencies with probing.

Implications

Implications for research. First, a qualitative interview study similar to this one with another sample of post-9/11 era Infantry veterans should be conducted, but in another context – such as former infantrymen who are now on solid civilian career trajectories. As this sample was current college/university students, it would be interesting to compare and contrast findings between the two contexts. Other studies with a similar purpose could also be conducted with veterans of other Combat Arms occupations, such as Combat Medics and Corpsman, to explore

the unique components of vocational identity and meaning derived from those who were in those roles.

Vocational identity is made up of people's interests, abilities, strengths, and talents, and how they function in a career. As there has been scant research regarding vocational identity related to military occupations and service, future studies should examine the specific components listed above for veterans of Combat Arms occupations. More specifically, an interesting line of research would be to investigate the relationships between Combat Arms veterans' vocational identity, perceptions of how meaningful they view their work, and outcomes such as hardiness, engagement, and resiliency. It would be hypothesized that the stronger the sense of vocational identity the more meaningful participants' work would be viewed, and they would endorse greater positive outcomes in hardiness, engagement, and resiliency.

Future studies could also examine the makeup of the vocational identities of Combat Arms veterans who are engaged in the task of post-military civilian career exploration. A study could investigate the effect of how strong participants' vocational identities as service members on their civilian career decision self-efficacy and other outcomes. Other research could further study role and vocational identity fulfillment in military service and what factors may contribute to psychological well-being through that fulfillment.

Regarding meaningful work, an interesting line of research could examine what types of civilian occupations and components of those occupations meaning is derived from for Combat Arms veterans who feel they have achieved career satisfaction.

Implications for practice. This study may help provide additional understanding regarding factors that make up the vocational identities of Infantry and other Combat Arms veterans; and the meaning and impact they experienced from their military service. That

increased understanding my assist career counselors, academic advisors, and those who train these professionals to increase their competencies in their work with those populations. In addition, professionals may be able to use these results to help develop specific interventions to assist veterans in constructing further meaning from their military service and identify ways in which they can apply that work to adjusting and developing their vocational identities to civilian life and career pursuits.

Stronger vocational identities relate to better career adjustment and development outcomes (see Esters & Retallick, 2013; Hirschi, 2007), psychological well-being and life satisfaction (see Strauser et al., 2008; Hirschi & Herrmann, 2012), and contributes to an increased ability to derive and experience meaning from one's work (Savickas, 2005). Being able to construct and experience meaning from work contributes to a range of positive psychological outcomes, such as increased work performance, greater satisfaction from work, more overall meaning in life, and greater subjective well-being (see Barnes et al., 2011; Savickas, 2005; Hartung & Taber, 2008; Steger & Dik, 2009), as well as serves as a buffer against negative psychological consequences from highly stressful or traumatic events and an increased ability to recover from those consequences (see Britt et al., 2001; Maddi, 2007). With all of that in mind, the findings of this study may serve as a guidepost for practitioners to help combat veteran clients retrospectively review their military service to identify what was most meaningful and impactful to them, and to then incorporate that information into clients' further enhancing their vocational identities and constructing their career trajectories.

Interventions drawn from Career Construction Theory (CCT) in the literature include an articulated process of *life designing* (Brott, 2005; Savickas et al., 2009) and the utility of a semi-structured interview instrument called the Career Style Interview (CSI) that can be done in the

life designing process. That process includes a recognition that people construct their own personal meanings, and that these meanings are reflected in past and present experiences in a variety of life roles. Themes across a person's life experiences reflect their personal meanings. Life designing uncovers those themes, explores values and beliefs related to those themes, assesses what values and themes are most important to a person, and then assists them in applying them more in their current work or career exploration. The process is engaged in with the express purpose of helping clients strengthen their vocational identities and craft more meaning in their work. Information from this study could be used as a starting point for working with combat veterans in an advising or counseling context, in that the themes endorsed by this sample could guide the process of helping to discover what was most important for an individual in their military service and then discover ways they can apply that knowledge in their present and future career trajectories. Many specific skills and experiences in military service may not be directly transferable to civilian jobs; that may be particularly true for Infantry service. However, rather than believing that their military service is something to be "left in past," there would be value in discovering how to incorporate what was most meaningful to them in the past to their present and future selves with the goal being to experience more overall meaning and satisfaction in their lives.

Summary and Conclusion

The eleven former infantrymen interviewed for this study provided a rich and complex picture of the factors involved in their military occupational decision-making, what they derived meaning from and had significantly impacted them in the course of their Infantry service, and some implications of their military service for their post-military lives. There was an element of homogeneity with these men in what they conveyed that helped provide depth to the study, while

also providing interesting nuances within the themes that emerged. There was some diversity among the participants as to when their propensity for military service emerged in their lives, but there was a great deal of commonality regarding why they wanted to be infantrymen and their aspirations to be best they could be at what they did. The greatest sources of meaning these men expressed about their Infantry service was connected to the powerful bonds and camaraderie they shared with those they served with, as well as their high level of competence, professionalism, and skill being infantrymen. Their roles as warriors who had fought in combat, and making contributions to a greater good through those roles was also a source of significant meaning for them. As only a small minority of their countrymen had been in similar roles, the participants expressed feeling both unique with a special knowledge civilians do not have, as well as a sense of separation and isolation from those who have not shared similar experiences.

This study did not focus on or inquire about mental health consequences or outcomes related to military combat and readjustment to civilian life. The purpose was to explore a little known area of vocational identity and meaningful work as they apply to post-9/11 era Infantry service. In no way was the presentation of the findings here meant to minimize or sanitize the horror of combat or the significant negative aftereffects combatants can experience long after having returned home. The hope with this study was to add some additional understanding to the psychological complexities mentioned by Artiss (2010) and explored in depth by Junger (2010) that infantrymen experience. A paradox of war is that it can be both horrible and beautiful; both life-taking and life-affirming. This paradox has been best articulated by Tim O'Brien (2009), an Infantry combat veteran of Vietnam, in *The Things They Carried*, a fictionalized account of his wartime experiences:

How do you generalize? War is hell, but that's not the half of it, because war is also mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead. The truths are contradictory. It can be argued, for instance, that war is grotesque. But in truth war is also beauty. For all its horror, you can't help but gape at the awful majesty of combat. (pp. 76-77)

Tables

Table 1

Means and standard deviations for WAMI-Positive meaning (PM) in work, WAMI-Meaning making (MM) through work, and WAMI-Greater good (GG) motivations for Steger, Dik, and Duffy's (2012) sample of employees from a large Western United States research university, and 10 interviewees from current study.

	WAMI-PM		WAMI-MM		WAMI-GG		WAMI Total	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Steger et al. sample, <i>N</i> = 370	15.12	1.01	10.70	3.05	11.80	2.85	37.54	8.84
Current sample of former infantrymen, <i>N</i> = 10	14.30	2.00	11.70	2.06	11.60	1.43	37.60	4.30

Note. High scores on WAMI-PM indicate high levels of psychological meaningfulness experienced in work; high scores on WAMI-MM indicate high levels of life meaning through work; high scores on WAMI-GG indicate high levels of work having made a positive impact on a greater good.

Table 2

List of Domains and Categories

Domain	Category	Frequency	
Enlistment motivations			
Sense of fit/interest	Early interest in military	Typical	(6)
	Specific interest for Infantry	General	(10)
	Interest in specific branch (Army or Marines)	Typical	(9)
	Research and media reinforcement	Typical	(7)
External influences & circumstances	Family influence	Typical	(9)
	9/11	Variant	(3)
	Recruiter's influence	Variant	(5)
Wanting to fulfill particular roles	Wanting to be a fighter/warrior & experience combat	General	(10)
	Wanting to be a protector	Variant	(2)
	Wanting to be part of an elite group	Typical	(9)
Seeking to push/test oneself	Seeking adventure & intense experiences	Typical	(6)
	Lack of direction in life at the time	Typical	(6)
	Seeking growth and maturity	Variant	(2)
Altruistic values	Wanting to do something important & serve a greater good	Variant	(4)
Experience of Infantry work			
Role fulfillment	Being a fighter/warrior and having experienced combat	Typical	(9)
Fulfilment of altruistic values	Meaning experienced from serving others/a greater good	Typical	(8)
Experiencing the test(s)	Meaning experienced through hardship	Typical	(9)
	Experiencing growth & increased self-knowledge	Typical	(8)
	Impact of critical events that tested them	Typical	(7)
Meaning experienced from accomplishments as infantrymen	Competence, professionalism, and skill	General	(11)
	Pride in having done something important/impactful	Variant	(4)
	Performing in a high stakes environment	Typical	(8)
Meaning experienced through Infantry culture & tradition	Being part of a unit's accomplishments & tradition	Typical	(7)
	Being part of Infantry fighter/warrior tradition	Variant	(5)
The Brotherhood	Camaraderie	General	(10)
	Loss of friends	Variant	(5)
	Positive impact from good leaders	Typical	(8)

Table 2 Continued

Domain	Category	Frequency	
Experience of Infantry work, continued			
Experiencing significant changes from warzone experiences	Difficult warzone conditions and traumatic incidents	General	(10)
Dissatisfactions and frustrations	Dislike of garrison mentality	Variant	(3)
	Frustration with military bureaucracy	Variant	(5)
	Frustration with others' incompetence & poor leadership	Variant	(3)
Post-military life			
Enhanced personal qualities	Enhanced sense of direction and purpose	Variant	(4)
	Enhanced discipline and motivation	Variant	(5)
	Enhanced initiative and leadership	Variant	(5)
Desires for post-military life	Still wanting to make a contribution & serve	Typical	(6)
	Wanting peace and normalcy	Typical	(6)
	Building a new sense of purpose	Variant	(3)
Work and struggle of adjusting to civilian life	Feeling different and separate from civilians	Typical	(8)
	Missing military life	Variant	(2)

Note. $N = 11$. General (10-11 of sample), Typical (6-9 of sample), Variant (2-5 of sample).

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APPENDIX A

Demographic Questionnaire

Consent Statement. The purpose of this research is to learn more about occupational choice and the experience of meaning through work as they apply in military service. This is the short questionnaire portion of the research. This questionnaire asks about demographic information and your opinions about aspects of your work in the military, and it takes approximately 30 minutes. After you complete this questionnaire you will be contacted to take part in a face-to-face interview.

Your participation in this study will be kept strictly confidential. Only members of the research team will know your identity. There are no known benefits to participating in this research. Further, we do not expect that the risks in this study exceed that of normal office work, though some participants may feel discomfort responding to questions about the meaning of their military work.

Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. If you have any questions that remain unanswered, feel free to contact Greg Loebel at greg.loebel@colostate.edu, (970) 286-7906, or Bryan Dik, Ph.D. at bryan.dik@colostate.edu, (970) 491-3235. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact Janell Barker, Human Research Administrator, at janell.barker@colostate.edu, or (970) 491-1655.

Demographics.

1. **Current age:**

2. **Ethnic heritage:**

African American

Hispanic/Mexican American

Asian American

Native American

Multi-Racial

White/Non-Hispanic/European American

Other:

Prefer not to answer

3. **Relationship status:** Single (never been married)

Married

Divorced

Separated

Widowed

Other:

Prefer not to answer

4. **Where do you currently attend school?** Colorado State University
Front Range Community College

5. **Class standing:** Freshman
Sophomore
Junior
Senior

6. **What is your major?**

7. **What branch of the military did you serve in?** U.S. Army
U.S. Marine Corps

8. **Age at first enlistment in the military:**

9. **ASVAB score when first enlisted** (put a question mark if you don't remember):

10. **Military Occupational Specialty when first enlisted:**

11. **Military Occupational Specialty at time of discharge:**

12. **Length of time serving in an Infantry MOS** (years and months):

13. **How many enlistments did you have?**

14. **Length of service in the military** (years and months):

15. **Rank at time of discharge:**

16. **Did you deploy?** Yes

 No

If yes: Please list where you deployed to, dates deployed (month and year), and what your MOS was for the deployment. If you deployed more than once, include the information on each deployment on a separate line. For example, it would look like this:

Iraq, May 2004-January 2005, 0311

Afghanistan, October 2009-June 2010, 0311

APPENDIX B

Work as Meaning Inventory (WAMI)

Items on the WAMI are rated from 1 (*absolutely untrue*) to 5 (*absolutely true*).

Items:

Positive meaning	1. I have found a meaningful career.
	4. I understand how my work contributes to my life's meaning.
	5. I have a good sense of what makes my job meaningful.
	8. I have discovered work that has a satisfying purpose.
Meaning making through work	2. I view my work as contributing to my personal growth.
	7. My work helps me better understand myself.
	9. My work helps me make sense of the world around me.
Greater good motivations	3. My work really makes no difference to the world. (R)
	6. I know my work makes a positive difference in the world.
	10. The work I do serves a greater purpose.

Instructions: For this next section, **think about when you were serving in the Infantry**. On the next page you will see 10 statements about your prior job as an infantryman. Read each statement carefully; decide to what extent the statement is true about your prior job as an infantryman using response options below the statement.

- 1 = Absolutely Untrue
- 2 = Somewhat Untrue
- 3 = Neither Untrue nor True
- 4 = Somewhat True
- 5 = Absolutely True

1. I have found a meaningful career.
2. I view my work as contributing to my personal growth.
3. My work really makes no difference to the world.
4. I understand how my work contributes to my life's meaning.
5. I have a good sense of what makes my job meaningful.
6. I know my work makes a positive difference in the world.
7. My work helps me better understand myself.

8. I have discovered work that has a satisfying purpose.
9. My work helps me make sense of the world around me.
10. The work I do serves a greater purpose.

APPENDIX C

Interview Protocol

1. What got you interested in military service?

Probe: What and/or who was the biggest influence in developing that interest?

Probe: Describe your family culture. Was there a military tradition in your family?

Probe: What were some critical events that helped shape your interest?

Probe: Why did you choose the military over a civilian career path?

Probe: What was your civilian career path prior to your military service?

2. What drew you to the Infantry when you enlisted?

Probe: What did you imagine being in the Infantry was going to be like?

Probe: What were you looking to experience as an infantryman?

Probe: What were the specific things that drew you to the Infantry in the (Army/Marine Corps)?

3. What were your most impactful experiences as an infantryman?

Probe: Who were the people that were the most impactful to you?

Probe: What were the events that were most impactful to you?

4. What were the most meaningful aspects of your work/service as an infantryman?

Probe: What were the hardest aspects of Infantry work?

Probe: What did you excel at in the Infantry?

5. Why did you leave the military?

6. What was the overall impact of your military service?

Probe: How did your experience as an infantryman change you as a person?

Probe: How did your experience change your outlook (on civilians, the U.S., the world, etc.)?

Probe: How do you describe your experience as an infantryman to others?

7. What are your plans for the future?

Probe: What do you most want for yourself?

Probe: How does your experience in the Infantry connect with what you want for your life?

Probe: How does your experience at (CSU/FRCC) connect with what you want for your life?

8. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about yourself or your service?

APPENDIX D

Participant Recruitment Email

Dear Student-Veteran:

Did you serve in the Infantry? If so, we want to talk to you!

A team of researchers from the Colorado State University Department of Psychology is conducting a study on why men wanted to serve in the Infantry when they enlisted in the U.S. Army or U.S. Marine Corps, the potential meaning they experienced through their service as infantrymen, and how their prior service may influence their current vocational development as college students.

The research team is made up of a graduate student in CSU's counseling psychology PhD program, an ALVS staff member who is a former infantryman, and two undergraduate research assistants. The project is being supervised by Dr. Bryan Dik, Associate Professor of Psychology at Colorado State University. He can be contacted at bryan.dik@colostate.edu, or (970) 491-3235.

The study involves both a survey and an interview. The survey will ask you for demographic information and some questions about your military service. The interview process will involve talking to you in person about your motivations for enlisting to serve in the Infantry, what potential meaning you experienced in your work as an infantryman, and what your career plans are. This study is NOT mental health-related – it's about occupational choice and the experience of vocational meaning. *Having served a combat deployment is not necessary for participation.*

The survey would take no more than 30 minutes to complete; the interview process would take 90 minutes. If you would like to review your interview transcript and provide further feedback, that would take two hours at most. Total time commitment for full participation in the study would be approximately 4 to 5 hours, spaced out to work best with your schedule.

Your participation in this study will be kept completely confidential.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me at (970) 218-3728 or greg.loebel@colostate.edu for more information.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Greg Loebel
Graduate Student
Counseling Psychology PhD Program
Colorado State University

APPENDIX E

Participant Recruitment Flyer



**DID YOU SERVE IN
THE INFANTRY?**

We want to talk to you!



A team of researchers from the Colorado State University Department of Psychology is conducting a study on why men wanted to serve in the Infantry when they enlisted in the U.S. Army or U.S. Marine Corps, the potential meaning they experienced through their service as infantrymen, and how their prior service may influence their current vocational development as college students.

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If you are interested in participating, please contact:

Greg Loebel, Graduate Student, CSU Department of Psychology
greg.loebel@colostate.edu or (970) 218-3728