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## Put Yourself in My Combat Boots: Autoethnographic Reflections on Forms of Life as a Soldier and Veteran

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## Put Yourself in My Combat Boots: Autoethnographic Reflections on Forms of Life as a Soldier and Veteran

### Cover Page Footnote

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the Department of Veterans Affairs or the United States government. There are no conflicts of interest to report for the author.

# Put Yourself in My Combat Boots: Autoethnographic Reflections on Forms of Life as a Soldier and Veteran

Shawn Dunlap

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## Abstract

The link that current and former service members have with the governments they serve is unique. Following Giorgio Agamben's work on forms of life, this paper argues that those who choose to take part in military service exist as a unique, emergent form of life. This form of life often stands at the intersection of nationalistic mythmaking and the lived realities of service members prior to, during, and after their service. The author employs content relevant non-fiction vignettes. These sections follow Leon Anderson's notion of "analytic autoethnography." Topics explored include liminal experiences in military service and military operational realities. The paper also explores mechanical allegories of the soldier and veteran their implications on the life of the veteran. This research was conducted between August 2016 and May 2017. The author is a veteran and sole researcher for this work. Through the autoethnographic method, the work decodes and organizes the author's personal military experience, highlighting service member and veteran voices that are often filtered through more traditional academic work on the topic as a means of demystifying military service and experience. The author concludes that by developing our understanding of service members and veterans as a form of life we can make the notions surrounding them more intimate and contextual, allowing us space to understand those individuals outside of the images and myth that often precede them.

## Introduction

For many Americans, current and former service members historically represent the best values that they identify as being important in society. Military values like loyalty, duty, honor, integrity, and selfless service are ideas the nation is supposed to aspire to individually and collectively. In the contemporary War on Terror, the service member exists as a symbolic representative of those values. They are placed, literally and metaphorically, in opposition to the entities that sovereign governments identify as threats to peace and security. We often know these enemies as state and non-state actors or terrorists and insurgents, all of whom we are told threaten our way of life. Relative to these enemies, service members are mechanistic and necessary implements of conflict. Their bodies work to stem the real and perceived tide of external state and non-state (and, therefore, illegitimate) violence.

In the national narrative of the United States, service members are said to sacrifice themselves for the people, their freedoms, and their way of life. Their lives are sacrificed for ideas the nation values or, in the minds of some citizens, particular political views. They lionize service members and their service to the nation. The real rhythm of soldiers' lives are starkly temporal, marked by deployments and training around the world. They

define, for many, the proper exercise of state power and civic citizenship, two concepts that have become linked in the modern era. More graphically, they exist to kill and die for our security at home and abroad. This aspect is paramount, since, as Anna Simons (1999) tells us, "security remains the *raison d'être* of states" and these states "will continue to support militaries in order to protect their citizenry and/or themselves from being overrun, absorbed, and conquered" (p. 91).

## Purpose and Method

The goal in this paper is to describe the experiences of U.S. service members and veterans in the War on Terror to explore how, more generally, those who perform military service exist in relation to the governments they serve and, more importantly, in relation to themselves, their service, and the reality that often entails. This examination of soldiering focuses on the experiences as a form of life specifically aimed at to demystifying military service in our larger societal narratives, exposing the functional realities of governments with their citizens. As is often the case, the actual material and social nature of military service can undercut larger narratives of civil engagement, whose fidelity is frequently referenced in policy making at the highest levels. More troubling, however, are the real results of conflict: injury and death, doubts,

fears, moral and emotional pain are downplayed in the wider narratives our society creates about military service. These consequences are almost always reserved for the individual, the veteran, their family, and their healthcare providers to deal with. The results of conflict represent a whole breadth of experiences that it seems can only be waded through in the past tense, often leaving the veteran feeling isolated from others, and many fail to negotiate these highly charged histories in ways that are productive, healthy, and not harmful. Although this paper is critiquing modern-day military service in the United States, it is not intended to be a wholesale indictment of it. Military service can be a source of great pride and meaning for service members and veterans, something that is inextricably linked to them as they move forwards in their lives.

Giorgio Agamben (2013) finds that a form of life is characteristically defined by a set of norms. These norms, he says, are “constitutive,” meaning that they “do not prescribe a certain act or regulate a preexisting state of things, but themselves bring into being the action or state of things” (p. 71). Forms of life are generally granted to ways of being that we recognize as unique based on how their inherent rules dictate the expressiveness of those involved. This analysis also follows the work of Didier Fassin et al. (2017) on immigrants as a form of life, who experience power in many more bleak and diffuse ways than service members and veterans, but who are also receptacles of it, nonetheless. This paper seeks to interpret service members’ experiences as they emerge in military service and labor and their collective aftermath in the veteran’s life. It also describes the unique relationship modern warfare has with the tools used to enact it and the soldier’s agency in using those tools, and conceives of soldiering, meaning the specific act of someone engaged in military service and its aftermath, as a specific form of life, a way of knowing, for its participants in a way that avoids deconstructing its various parts.

My own experiences in the military influence how I conduct my research and form my conclusions. I will employ Leon Anderson’s (2006) conception of analytic autoethnography to acknowledge this fact. Anderson defines analytic autoethnography as “ethnographic work in which the researcher is (1) a full member in the research group or setting, (2) visible as such a member in the researcher’s published texts, and (3) committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena”

(p. 375). My involvement in the community is clear through my directly stated and described military service. My research agenda’s goal is to bring a closer understanding to the experiences of service members and veterans through an in-depth discussion of their being as a form of life. Military service members and veterans have injected their experiences, wittingly or unwittingly, into our social and academic discourses. These writings (both fiction and non-fiction) seem to pop up in the aftermath of conflicts as those individuals, myself included, seek to process their experiences.

### **Significance of Lived Experiences**

The accounts I present in this paper happened several years ago. This was before I knew what anthropology was or what and how its preferred research methodologies are performed. The scenes are ones I’ve replayed in my head in the ensuing years, scenes which stand out to me as watershed moments in my larger experiences in the military. It should be understood that because of this lack of vocational rigor at the time the events happened that I did not document my experiences in any methodical way. What I do remember can only be bracketed in terms of things like rank, deployment location, or even weather. These specifically reflect an idea Birgitte Sørensen (2015) has called “ontological narratives,” which are representative of the complex negotiation that every veteran must go through as they seek to contextualize their experiences in relation to the state, public opinion, and actual on-the-ground realities of military service, especially abroad (p. 231). These memories are ontological exactly because forms of life themselves spring from specific forms of knowledge. The creation of these narratives conveys certain meanings about a veteran’s experiences while also working to create shortcuts through explanations for military service to society at large. They are war stories that reference the tools of war, injury, and life itself. My negotiation with the meaning of the vignettes is thus ongoing and my feelings toward them continue to evolve. It is through these vignettes, war stories, that I attempt to analytically acknowledge the realities of service members’ shared experience.

The majority of the uncited data about military structure and practice comes from my personal experiences in the United States Army from 2006 until 2014, appearing within the text as the uncited data about military practice and habit—the sorts of information that become so engrained in soldiers’ minds as they serve, sacrifice, and are sacrificed.

## Dunlap: Put Yourself in My Combat Boots

My experiences include two deployments in support of Operation Enduring Freedom to Afghanistan in 2008 and 2009. Later, between 2011 and 2014, I was in the Army Reserves assigned to an aviation company. Both groups of soldiers with whom I served taught me different things about the military. Though the missions of the units and my roles within them were very different from one another, the continuity of those experiences in my mind and their contributions to my lived

experience and knowledge serve as a lens through which I view military service and its ensuing form of life. Throughout the text I use the term “soldier” as representative of all service members, which is interchangeable with other common terms for members of the military like troop, sailor, marine, or airman—the only difference being their branch of service, not their relationship to the government and the public.

### ***Basic Combat Training, July–September 2006; Fort Jackson, SC***

*Arriving at Fort Jackson for United States Army Basic Combat Training (BCT) was a jarring experience. The in-processing center at Fort Jackson is best described in one word: chaotic. Upon arrival I was issued my first round of uniforms, which included clothes for physical training (PT) and fatigues (i.e., the Army Combat Uniform (ACU) blouse and pants, matching cover, desert tan boots, tan belt, tan underwear, tan shirts, and olive-green socks). Every recruit also gets a new haircut, several vaccinations, and new running shoes. Rumors swirl about what we should expect. It almost seems like a requirement that the information never be first-hand. There is a lot of what I later learned was called “hurry up and wait.”*

*As the first few weeks came and went, I adjusted to my surroundings. The uniform requirements for specific tasks and the schedule began to sink in and become more routine. For the record, the ACU is not complete without a belt, and when you are given a formation time, they really mean 15 minutes earlier than that. For us new soldiers, BCT seemed to operate at a company and platoon level, with drill sergeants running the daily trainings and offering guidance. They led us through our first trainings on military etiquette, directed us on the proper way to complete the Land Navigation course, and hastily educated us on the proper use and wear of the M40 gas masks before unceremoniously running us through the gas chamber. Together as a group of recruits we started to memorize the Army Creed and the Army Song (both of which are inspectable) packed our first rucksack, and learned the ins and outs of road marching. Within the first month we were issued our weapons without live ammunition and a blank firing adapter, which remained on our weapons at all times when we were not on the firing range. We fired what felt like an infinite number of blanks while learning about buddy movement and spent an inordinate amount of time cleaning our weapons and the barracks.*

*At some point in this seemingly endless stream of training, you start to buy into what you’re actually there to do and turn a corner. For me, that corner was the bayonet assault course. While not the deadliest weapon in the United States Army arsenal (in fact, they aren’t even issued regularly anymore to many units, even in deployment settings), the bayonet symbolizes the terror of face-to-face combat. As I learned later, if you come to the situation where you are using your sidearm you are already having a bad day. The bayonet brings this notion to an even closer meaning. It is the last weapon before unarmed combat, the last force multiplier available to a soldier to subdue the enemy. The bayonet course was no different from many of the other trainings I had and would receive in basic training and afterwards in my active duty unit, less intense than some, more intense than others. Somewhere someone checked a box on a training log with my name on it. As I lined up, bayonet fixed to the end of my M-16, I was ready to attack. The target was a sandbag, already full of holes, hung on a post. A switch in my mind seemed to click. I knew what I had to do and where the power had to come from: grab the weapon tightly on the narrow part of the buttstock. Firmly grasp the hand guards on the barrel, just above the slip ring. Muster up your strength and rush toward the enemy, thrusting the weapon into the meatiest part of the body. Withdraw, repeat, continue on past the post. It helps to get angry. Return to that feeling as necessary.*

### Service and Citizens

BCT is one of the universal, liminal rites of passage that all military service members and veterans share. Rites of passage, as defined by Arnold Van Gennep (1960), are identified by their three phases: separation, margin, and aggregation. While discussing rites of passage as defined by Van Gennep, Victor Turner (1969) points out that as the neophytes pass through the experience, they “among themselves...tend to develop an intense comradeship and egalitarianism. Secular distinctions of rank and status disappear or are homogenized” (p. 95). Basic training follows this example closely as it serves to sever, both socially and functionally, your former self from your newer military self in the same ways that many cultures use rites of passage to mark adulthood. Through the completion of a series of basic soldiering tasks, the individual arriving at basic training is transformed into the uniformed soldier, someone who can be relied upon to follow the orders of their superiors and train tirelessly in the defense of the duly elected government that they serve. This marking of the service member is the first key to the discussion of military service as a form of life. It is also the first understanding of how nation-states mark and unmark different categories of people to achieve political goals and exert political force. Obliquely speaking, the categorization of citizens and non-citizens into different legal statuses by the state is an archaic form of exclusion used by sovereign governments to justify their uses of force internally and externally (Agamben, 1998, p. 9).

A citizen's qualification through social categories like “service member” and “veteran” further atomizes these distinctions. These categories are granted what Catherine Lutz (2001) calls “supercitizenship” as they are seen to exceed the public in discipline, virtue, and moral authority (p. 236). This image lands in the core of soldiering as a form of life. It is what is added to and taken from to produce the notion that there may even be something identifiable and reproduceable in those experiences of soldiering. However, as Lutz herself implies, it is something given to the servicemember, and is the precursor, I think, of endless waves of “thank you for your service.” Moreover, the part of my mind that could be labeled “veteran” is wary of any individual who would actively solicit these hierarchal distinctions between themselves and the service member. The ambivalence I feel is, for me, tied to mixed feelings about the purpose

of my service, my agency in making those decisions, and the fact that I still do find some pride in the experiences. It could be summed up like this: I wouldn't do it again but I would not (and cannot) change a thing.

### Conceptions of Military Uniform(ity) on Forms of Life

In his discussion of what constitutes a form of life, Agamben (2013) describes how the habits and practice of a monastic way of life constitute an example of it. Describing the origin of the root term “habitus,” he tells us that the term originally “signified a way of being or acting,” noting that among the Stoics it “became synonymous with virtue” (p. 13). Classically defined by Pierre Bourdieu (1977), “habitus” are “systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structuring structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” of which he says that “even when they appear as part of the realization of the explicit, and explicitly stated, purposes of a project or plan” produce practices which enable “agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations” and “are only apparently determined by the future” (p. 72). Agamben's discussion of the monk's habit suggests that a great deal of how we morally understand different actors can come from their dress. The monk's leather belt specifically denotes the actor “as a warrior of Christ.” The sight and symbol of the leather belt is directly connected to its sacred meaning, which Agamben (2013) calls a “sacred sign,” marking when the “neophyte takes off his secular clothes to receive the monastic habit” (p. 15). Without invoking the full meaning of religious sacrality onto the soldier, a service member's uniform acts as a marker that conveys to the viewer details about the rites of passage the individual has gone through as well as their likely allegiance to the state. It also tells the viewer how the person might react to different stimuli and how their lives might be structured both in and after their enlistment ends. The fatigues, the tan shirt and tan boots, the cover, are all shorthand for this. These ideas are bound up with the uniform and its wearer and continue for the veteran indefinitely as their own habitus, an integral part of the form of life they now embody.

The understanding that dress can represent both morals and lifestyle should be seen as a part of the state-building project itself. State creation, as Phillip Corrigan and Derek Sayer (1985) tell us, is “always accompanied by the moral

regulation of society,” creating classifications of citizens as a byproduct of their relations to the means of productions in capitalistic societies (p. 4). Military service’s connecting of morality and citizenship, much like Lutz’s (2001) discussion of “supercitizenship,” is a defining way to understand the modern state’s economic and political goals. Moreover, the connection between dress and morality, combined with the access to arms defines how we think of soldier’s labor and what it means to us. Soldiering as a form of life is defined by the tasks contained within it. As the first vignette shows, these tasks are often physical in nature. They also work to build mental toughness and resolve in the recruit. The ability to be precise in uniform wear and proficiency in the use of military equipment is continually pressed into the mind of the soldier. This information is shorthanded in the image of the soldier. The uniformed body of the soldier is a transformed object. This uniform body is then used by the state to create cohesive national narratives.

### **Meaning and Sacrifice**

This shift in status from civilian to soldier dictates how we should begin to understand service members’ experiences in the military. At the deepest level, they do serve as tools of the state, made to die if necessary, for its purposes and policies. More important, though, is to have that person sacrifice willingly for the state. This agentic action helps to create viable national narratives and supports claims made by states for continued legitimacy. The agentic difference between “being sacrificed” and “sacrificing” is an important one. By sacrificing themselves with agency for the security of the state, the soldier becomes part of a narrative which lends legitimacy to the actions that government has chosen to undertake. As Veena Das (2008) suggests, this vying for the soldier’s consent is mostly to “claim legitimacy for a nation’s own wars” as it “creates boundaries between so called civilized warfare and savage violence” (p. 287).

Thus, the problematic notion of sacrifice for the state is key to our understanding of the life associated with it, especially its aftermath. This seems to fall in line with more modern narratives of soldiers who “put themselves in harm’s way,” which as Lutz (2002) points out, “reverses the image of soldiers as warrior-killers and [elides] the state’s role in their movements” (p. 725). As Ivan Strenski (2003) suggests, “sacrifice is not just a social deed,” it also “has potent religious

resonance” as the act of “giving something up” or the act of “a giving of” is what “makes something holy” (p. 8). This social aspect, again bordering on a sort of sacrality, is what makes military service a powerful force in politics and other national and social discussions. It has weight.

The notion that military service and sacrifice is a social act ties that act to our own cultural prejudices, coloring how the military is used and the context in which it is read. Sacrifice, who can make it, and in what context act as “the primary means, by which we give meaning to the world around us; they allows us to interpret what we see, and indeed, what we are” (Kertzer, 1988, p. 4). If the soldier does sacrifice themselves willingly, then the goals of the state are validated. Their coffins return home draped in an American flag and the soldier thereafter becomes a synecdoche for the state and its sacred goals (Kertzer, 1988, p. 7). Telling of this, as Kenneth MacLeish (2013) points out of modern combat casualties, is the fact that “even in death, one can’t be human” as most casualties in contemporary conflicts “just happen, unceremoniously” (pp. 88–90). This allows for both their easy absorption into the conflict’s political narrative and the completion of their sacred duty to the public. These deaths are often stark and violent. It solidifies the service member’s status, transitioning them into a permanent status in death.

### **Homecoming and Transition**

The transition from service member to veteran is often invisible, however. As Sørensen (2015) describes, rather than experiencing homecoming in explicit ritual terms of death and living, modern Danish veterans experience homecoming as a “displacement into an unsettling environment,” which “constitutes a ‘critical event’ that requires new social practices and relationships” inside an “entirely new narrative” (p. 231). United States military personnel experience a similar disconnect after service as they move from a visibly marked category, the soldier, to the unmarked veteran. Even more ambiguity exists in this transition when considering those service members and veterans whose bodies are permanently physically or mentally altered by their experiences. The presence or seeming absence of these changes again re-inscribes veterans’ bodies to society at large, marking them with assumed mental health diagnoses and other categories that fit into the cultural understandings of what and how the form of life exists.

Sørensen (2015) also describes how there seems to be a taboo among many former service members' of speaking openly about the extent of their combat experiences to outside questioners who only seek to know the explicit details of their military experience. "Such questions," she tells us, "are typically felt as an assault, a transgression of a moral boundary, that robs the Veteran of the privilege of controlling silence and disclosure about this most sensitive matter" (p. 234). The discussion of warfare and the individual's role in it is thus a taboo for soldiers as they attempt to leave the military and transition into civilian life. They feel trapped in the context of trying to decode those experiences for people who do not share them and whose lives offer very little context for their discussion. This is when they must begin to control the narratives about their service and themselves, creating the war stories they choose to share with others while negotiating their meanings to themselves.

The vignettes included in this paper are the ones I felt I could share—they are coherent to me and their meanings have crystallized. The subtext, as I mention above, is steeped in deep ambivalence about my role in these experiences. As I explain later, those experiences are both anonymous and intimately familiar to me. As a part of the discussion around a form of life, however, we see that the making of this life extends from the deeply personal through to the broadest examples of the social, cultural, and political world.

### **Soldiers and Warfare**

The social nature of conflict and how we define it to exclude certain forms of violence and life, like chemical weapons and the intentional targeting of civilians, is bound to the fact that we understand warfare as social action. All military conflict is tied to this notion as it disrupts, realigns, and forever alters social landscapes in the places where it occurs. The operational reality of these ideas in places like Afghanistan, however, has become more opaque as both sides of the conflict balance violence in terms that are both efficient and, seemingly, short term. Words like "detainee," "insurgent," and "Local Nationals" seemed to blend together. The long-term status of any one person could not be guaranteed as those groups shifted and changed, often in response to the time of year and our own actions. In Afghanistan, I saw Local Nationals hired to be gate guards, cleaners, and cooks in endless cycles of individuals who we as

soldiers did not know and were not encouraged to know. They shared uniforms, especially winter boots, as the seasons and our missions changed.

To truly understand the landscape in which soldiers act, we must understand the nature of warfare and how the bodies in both sides of a conflict are reshaped to meet its task. Talal Asad (2007) defines the term "war" as "a defined activity in international law" that has "a formal cause and formal conclusion," though one which should not be mistaken for the "beginning and end of organized killing by the state" (p. 26). This definition suggests that warfare can be legitimate and ostensibly morally justified. It also suggests a level of (a)temporality to the event that is war. Modern conflicts have shown how complicated this situation can be on the ground, however, as they create quagmires of meanings surrounding the purpose of specific military operations, often spanning multiple theaters, decades, and generations of service members.

The soldier is especially wrapped up in this violence. We are imagined to be constantly vigilant, kicking in doors, conducting convoy and dismounted patrols, finding the enemy and defusing the source of political violence thought to be being perpetrated against all United States Citizens. The reality for many of us, however, is a slow negotiation with goals and policies that often begin high above us. They echo down chains of command and intelligence, leading us to blacked-out planes and runways. The next vignette is an example of my own involvement in violence. However, I was so far removed from the decision-making that led me there that I was not even deemed as a *need-to-know* person in the events of my own life. As an image to our enemies, however, I did represent the powers necessary to have them detained in their own countries and essentially *disappeared*. As often is the case, soldiers are also themselves disappeared. The policies and practices that brought me to that intersection in time are easier to track. The veterans and, more troublingly the Local Nationals, slip offstage, leaving unresolved experiences in their wakes.

**Operation Enduring Freedom, August–September 2008; Bagram Airbase, Afghanistan**

I got orders from my NCOIC, the non-commissioned officer in charge of my section, to go over to Ops at 1600 for a detail. When I arrived, the sergeant on duty told me where to be and when and with what gear: body armor, weapons, Kevlar helmet, ear pro. Full battle rattle. We were going to pick up a high-value target one of our teams had recently captured. I wasn't told which team had captured the person, the person's identity, or relative importance to our mission. I wasn't "read-in," meaning I didn't need to know, for that level of information and it was not pertinent to the detail. I was joined by three other soldiers from different sections. Two non-commissioned officers (NCO) drove us to the flight line.

We flew out on a C-130 that evening after dark, landing about an hour later at a firebase I had been to before. The plane idled on the blacked-out runway while we waited for the prisoner to be handed off and prepared for transport. "Transport" in this context means zip tying the person's hands, blindfolding them with goggles that had been painted black, covering their ears with hearing protection, sitting them on a dog pee pad, and using a tow strap to strap them to the aircraft. The pee pad was there in case the detainee decided to soil themselves in a last-ditch protest, a situation the flight crew prepared for since it had happened frequently enough in the past. The entire transaction lasted less than ten minutes. The plane taxied quickly, turning at the end of the short runway, and made a hasty exit. We flew with the ramp of the plane open, which undoubtedly created an unwanted sensory experience for our detainee exacerbated by his sensory deprivation.

We arrived back at Bagram less than an hour later. We waited on the dimly lit flight line for the truck, a white Toyota Hilux, to arrive. We loaded the detainee into the back of it, maintaining positive control to direct him into a kneeling position. The four of us, still wearing all our gear, got into the back with him, sitting on the edges of the truck bed as he knelt between us. We drove in silence down a small back road of the air base. We were taking him to be processed into the prison located on the base. We wouldn't see him again after that.

I was picked up for another guard detail a few weeks later. I was assigned to guard a detainee who one of our teams had recently brought in after a less-than-effective exchange of fire with one of our helicopters. The helicopter crew's report stated that the detainee shot at the Apache, an advanced attack helicopter, with an AK-47, the assault weapon of choice for enemy combatants in Afghanistan. The standing ROE (rules of engagement) required us to render aid because he hadn't been killed in the lopsided exchange of weapons fire. The information relayed to me was that the man was already apparently a single amputee before this incident. He was remarkably unscathed overall, I thought, considering the disparity in combat power between himself and the aircraft. He did, however, lose his second leg below the knee as a result of this encounter with U.S. forces.

He was unconscious when I arrived at the main base hospital in full gear to guard him. The NCO in charge gave me brief instructions on what I should expect and sat me down in a plastic chair facing the foot of the detainee's bed. A sucking sound periodically emitted from the machine that pulled fluid off the newly amputated leg. I was meant to guard him in case he "got out of control," though even I knew there wasn't much he could do in his current state. The room was dimly lit and had no windows. The door was closed. The nurses weren't fazed by my presence there. I sat in the chair; it was night outside. I read a mystery novel that had been left there by some guard before me. Every few lines were punctuated by the sucking noise coming from the direction of his leg. He regained consciousness at some point. He looked down at his second leg, now lost. He didn't seem to notice me and I couldn't offer any consolation; I didn't speak any of the Afghani languages and nobody else was in the room.

## **Wars: Soldiers as Objects and Locations of Violence**

As Lawrence Freedman (2005) suggests, the wars we fight now are no longer wars over national territories, what he calls “wars of necessity,” but, instead, modern wars are “wars of choice” as states attempt to police other countries’ spaces from within and outside their borders. These missions, often tied to the political clout of the leader in charge at the time, are, as Harald Müller (2012) observes, “complex” as “soldiers are expected to fight insurgents, protect civilians, and perform non-military tasks within environments where lines of distinction between ‘friend’ and ‘foe’ are increasingly blurred” (p. 283). “Force projection” is itself a regular activity for units operating in modern theaters of war, though the targets of that force are never fully described and are not intended to be. They are objects with which we interact. Shows of force are meant to dissuade local nationals and enemies from continuing their insurgent and supporting activities through a demonstration of military might.

The soldier’s role is identifiable in these exchanges. Their appearance signals their involvement in the military, like the uniform and standardized haircut. We use militaristic jargon. As Carol Cohn (1987) describes, the use of sanitized language by members of the military is a linguistic technique used to change humans into objects that can be killed more easily (p. 691). Throughout writing this series of vignettes, I often translated terms and meanings for the sake of clarity. The act of recoding often seemed to sanitize the events and remove me from them, as if I were hidden behind the orders and decisions made by those few who had a *need to know*.

Further, as historian John Keegan (1978) tells us, the rise of “thing-killing” weapons like heavy artillery, whose purpose is to remotely destroy objects with the side effect of killing people, so-called “collateral damage,” is the genesis of this type of speech. Its purpose is, arguably, the creation of bare life, meaning life that is reduced to its biological fact only and ignores how it might be lived (pp. 329–330). Using language in this way is also a method of euphemistically masking violence and, as Das (2008) suggests, this “discursive technique” allows “certain kinds of violence by dominant groups” to “disappear” (p. 289), thus allowing violence to continue while masking actual military practice with increasing jargon and self-reference. The social implications of this are well known. Dehumanization of the enemy is often the first step to more expansive

violence and acts of this sort, things like massacres and, more broadly, genocide, are socially and culturally remembered as failures of leadership at every level, inhumane, and morally indefensible.

This is an important inflection point as we continue to interrogate forms of life in this vein, especially when we consider generational changes in how the military recruits and retains its forces. I joined the military as a means to an end, a fact that colors how I weigh my experiences and how I subsequently tell those stories. As mentioned above, war itself is a social action. So much of the reality of soldiering as a form of life appears to be violence visited upon and by the service member. This leaves less space to interrogate the soldier’s own motives in seeking out enlistment and these motives themselves should be understood to be within social and economic contexts. In their study of recruiting tactics in Sweden and the United Kingdom, Sanna Strand and Joakim Berndtsson (2015) identify several methods currently used to persuade new recruits to join those militaries. Recruitment rhetoric in both countries, they observe, promises new recruits “that they will grow as individuals” thereby making them more “employable and attractive to private labor markets” (p. 234). As Strand and Berndtsson (2015) further point out, modern military recruitment exists within the context of a long list of military transformations as soldiers now enter a “redefined global security arena” whose weapons, tactics, and premises are different from the wars of the past (p. 234).

Set within this roiling social context, forms of life and ontological narratives seem to become more convoluted. The question of how we reconcile these realities is hard to answer. This confusion is key, however, as we, the outsiders of personal experience, look in on the experiences of others. Soldiers like myself are recruited from small towns with long affiliations with the military, plucked, as it were, straight from our high school classrooms. We are sent to fight wars that no longer even make it onto the news. The terms for resolving these conflicts is ambiguous at best. We do so for economic, political, and social reasons. The reality of the experiences, however, are often morally gray and amorphous in their apparent larger purpose. As a view into the form of life, the unevenness itself is the most telling. It complicates easy narratives about war and peace, sacrifice and honor, and forces individual service members and veterans to continually weigh their own position in their own social worlds and beyond.

***Operation Enduring Freedom, September 2009; Forward Operating Base Farah, Afghanistan***

*Our repair team was being sent out again. For this and most missions the repair team consisted of myself, one private, and a box of items that we thought we might likely need on-site. Functionally this meant components of our units preferred radio and night vision, the tools to fix them, a length of cable with its associated adapters, and the paperwork to document our work. Our mission this time was to Farah, a small firebase in southern Afghanistan. To get there we first had to fly to Kandahar, then catch a second Chinook flight further out to Camp Bastion, and then, finally, convoy a small distance further to reach our destination. We arrived with the knowledge that the group at Farah had recently lost a team member to an IED, an improvised explosive device, less than a month prior. We had been sent out by the battalion for routine equipment repair, meaning we'd check their radios and fix any broken NVGs (night-vision goggles) and probably make some radio cables for them. The movement to the firebase took about a day and a half. When we arrived, however, our point of contact told us that there wasn't much for us to do. A team from 2nd Battalion had been out to the base not long before us. The only thing they had for us was the grim task of trying to get the secure equipment, things like radios and the jammer, out of the rack of the truck that had been hit a few weeks before.*

*The "truck," in this case was a GMV, a ground mobility vehicle, which is a Humvee that has been modified to the specs needed for the missions our unit carried out. They were favorites of the teams for a few reasons: they were easy to drive, had large stable wheelbases, and were familiar to most soldiers. The GMV, which shared a flat bottom with its predecessor, the Humvee, had by 2009 been deemed by the Army (and the enemy) to be an easy target for IEDs. The 120mm Howitzer shells preferred by the Taliban and the Mujahideen in their construction of IEDs could effectively punch a hole straight through the bottom of the vehicles, killing, maiming, or ejecting all the occupants inside. This would often lead to additional casualties as the enemy often set ambushes at these chokepoints, wounding additional troops as they rolled out of the trucks disoriented and injured. Not unsurprisingly, the United States Army had started to train its soldiers to identify the signs of IED emplacement while on mounted patrol.*

*By 2009, the various United States military branches had begun to replace GMVs with MRAPs, or Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles, which, as the name implies, were designed to try and overcome some of the glaring weaknesses of the flat-bottomed GMV and Humvee. The MRAP was designed with a V-shaped hull and higher ride height, which lessened the intensity of the blast while also deflecting it, thereby protecting the vehicle's passengers. The entire vehicle could be buttoned up, making it a harder target than the vehicles it was meant to replace. The enemy responded in an almost ingenious way to this change in our military hardware. Rather than giving up on manufacturing IEDs or using other non-conventional tactics, they did something much simpler: they canted the angle at which they buried their explosives, instead placing the IED in the ground at a 45-degree angle, effectively nullifying the supposed protection of the hull.*

*Thus, we found ourselves in a GMV which had no chance of surviving the encounter in which it had been placed. The equipment in question had melted and become fused with its rack and still sat where it had been left when the blast hit the vehicle. The mangled remains of the vehicle had inoperable doors, and so we had to go in through the top, where the turret had been. The inside smelled of rust, like a nosebleed. It smelled of smoke. The smell burned in your nose. We weren't able to get the equipment out that day. We only had tools for radio and night-vision repair: screwdrivers and Allen keys. Nothing meant to cut metal or chisel out equipment that had effectively been fused to its rack. We added the relevant details about the situation to the paperwork. The truck, I can only assume, would be sent to the junk yard to be dismantled and processed by an army of military contractors.*

## Men and Machines

Soldiering and militaries have historically been at least partially defined by their armed nature, the nature of the armaments they employ, and to what success. The tools of contemporary soldiering materially compound and exponentially increase the body's effectiveness for the realities of modern warfare. The tools of a given conflict shape a battle's rhythm and expectations. Innovations in battlefield medicine and the widespread adoption of ceramic body armor to replace older flak jackets, an innovation that dates back to the Vietnam War era but whose premise goes back much further, have led to decreasing numbers of service members being killed by combat actions while weapons such as drones have increasingly removed the act of killing from the actor. Soldiering, as a form of life, derives a large part of its mandate from this.

Underscoring this focus on the material nature of the tools of conflict and their connection to the acts themselves, Woodward and Jenkins (2011) observed that when British soldiers were asked to describe the act of soldiering, they focused on its materiality as a means of measuring success in that role. Using the soldiers' own descriptions of personal photographs, the authors identifies several key concepts linked to this, noting that for some "these skills were clearly identifiable as military tasks," such as "accuracy in marksmanship" and "surveillance and observations skills," or "the deployment of technical knowledge in the act of patrolling hostile urban areas" (p. 258). These are the factors that the soldiers themselves bring to the fore to explain their service and their success or failure in it. Through this it becomes clear that military identities, as Woodward and Jenkins (2011) suggest, "have a materiality to them in that they are constituted and expressed through the use of equipment," extending all the way to weapons, the key part of what makes a soldier a soldier, and "the trained ability to correctly handle and use them" (p. 259). This connection to the proper use and deployment of military technology is paramount to understanding soldiering as a form of life. However, as MacLeish (2013) tells us, "modern warfare does not ensure the protection of the human body so much as it subjects it to previously unimaginable forms of harm and exposure—levels of violence..." (p. 53).

Much like the discussion of thing-killing as a language device, the actual act of killing is now facilitated by the implements of war that variously and simultaneously protect and expose the soldier

to harm. As a soldier, I was explicitly aware of the shifts in armor technology and the resulting contracts the government would use to help reduce death tolls. But I, like many other service members and veterans, was also aware of the futility of the process in which I found myself. From flak jackets that dated to the Desert Storm era, to more modern interceptor body armors (IBA) that use ceramic plates as their main method of survivability, I felt as though I understood the material evolution of protecting soldiers from small arms fire and other anti-personnel weaponry and the logic surrounding it. The result of this type of warfare offers what MacLeish (2013) calls a false sense of "technomagical invincibility" to the troops, at least in the United States military, which belies the number of ways in which it can fail, resulting in the death of the individual soldier (pp. 53–54). As a form of life marker, there are few things closer to a soldier's heart as they train and toil. It pervades the stories we tell ourselves about who will win, who will lose, and what our odds of coming back alive from deployment are for any one of us. The results of thinking of oneself in these terms is what MacLeish (2013) describes as a state "biological precarity" for the soldier, as they are "the agents and instruments of sovereign violence, but also its objects: equipped and trained to kill, kept alive in extreme circumstances, and placed deliberately in harm's way" (p. 54). Thus, the greatest irony of the soldier, and the resulting cynicism, is that they exist as lives "kept alive" by great bulwarks of technology that are "fundamentally linked to the logic that endangers them in the first place" (p. 54).

Often, however, the discussion of war itself is limited to this discussion of machinery. War in the mechanical context suggests a certain scalability, functionality, and modularity to the body of the soldier. It lends a notion of replicability to the soldier's body. Machine-centered thinking is also a tool for the soldier, though, as "cyborg" thinking allows soldiers to interact with their weapons in more useful and meaningful ways. As Gusterson (1996) points out, "the figure of the cyborg does not so much describe a literal phenomenon as provide a metaphor for the increasing technicization of daily life and interdependence of humans and machines" (p. 121). The notion of cyborgism is related to soldiers, Gusterson continues, as it "makes symbolic connections" between weapons and bodies, allowing the creation of metaphors that allow the soldier to "make sense of the world" (p. 123). These connections build into stories and ontologies. Haraway (1991) concurs by telling

us that the “cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation” (p. 150). It is through this understanding that we see how the image of the soldier, their material being, and their meaning and purpose, create the hierarchies of meaning necessary to a form of life being formed, with the weapons of war being references for the violence level of the conflict and, often, how we as soldiers and the public expect or imagine death to arrive to ourselves and our enemies.

Referencing the last vignette, the presence of the wrecked Humvee and my knowledge of its shortcomings as a platform allowed and allows me to frame its destruction and the death of the soldiers in it into a larger personal and political commentary and understanding. In doing so, it becomes part of the ontological narrative I create for myself and others about the meaning of the conflict and my place within it. It is the memory work of soldiers and veteran’s, however, that tells us how these machines work. Reflecting on his own ethnographic information, MacLeish (2013) notes how they concurrently inform us of the effects of war that are “necessary and worthy” and those that are “abhorrent and avoidable” (p. 10). There is often a great deal of moral ambiguity about which actions represent each category.

### **Time and Horizons**

Inasmuch as soldiers can be approximated to machines, they should also be understood regarding the temporal nature of their experiences. As MacLeish (2013) accurately tells us, soldiers experience their service as an unfinished present. In the case of his informants, he describes how they are “repeatedly shuttling between home and Iraq,” often returning home with the foreknowledge of their next deployment (p. 8). However, this same precarity seems to be a defining feature when we think of what makes soldiering a form of life. I have a sense of what time of year I was in the truck, my futile attempts at trying to pry out the sensitive equipment so that our unit could do the necessary paperwork to make sure it was taken off of the inventory, but that is not my focus. My focus is on the heat of the sun, the jagged metal, and the smell of rust and smoke generated by the bodies lost in the vehicle. MacLeish (2013) details this sentiment thoroughly, describing how “the soldier goes to war, and labors at it for months and months, perhaps in a job in which he never even takes

a shot at an enemy combatant”. Depressingly, he continues, “at the end of it, though things may seem to have changed strategically or politically for better or worse wherever he was, the war typically has been neither won nor lost” (pp. 14–15). This sort of slow encounter with the possibility of death creates feelings of being stuck in slow time, where every ping of a rock or shake of the ground can mean the death of you or your comrade.

### **Community Engagement and Forms of Life**

In a larger sense, the discussion around forms of life is a chance to reflect on shared notions about groups with which increasingly few people engage. In a time where “thank you for your service” seems almost reflexive for many people, the ability to peer deeply into what that experience is or might be is crucial. The personal stories used to frame the discussion in this paper are unique to my experience, but they are also universal for many veterans across many generations of conflict. Autoethnography can then be seen as a point of departure from theory into experience.

As a form of community engagement, disclosing my own experiences creates spaces into which other service members, veterans, and their families can inject their own knowledge. This then begins to flesh out our larger communal understandings of their lives in relation to military violence and its aftermath. The decision to do so stems from my desire to describe experiences that, far from heroic, represent the laborious nature of military service. While service members and veterans are far from marginalized, in the contemporary sense of the word, they are at risk of something much worse: being taken for granted. As so many other communities work to get their stories into a mainstream consciousness, so do many veterans feel great isolation from a lack of appropriate cultural spaces available for them to process their own experiences.

This work further seeks to engage researchers in fields related to military and veteran studies in the social sciences with first-hand accounts from members of that community. The decision to use autoethnography allows the readers from those fields of study to understand very clearly where I am drawing my conclusions from, thus allowing them to challenge and expand on those findings while demystifying military service realities that they often do not share with their subjects. This translation, so to speak, is the major draw for researchers who are also community members, like myself, who find gaps in the literatures

surrounding their own experiences. The use of forms of life compliments this, working as a concept that allows the topic to be understood in more contextual way, as veterans' lives continue well after their military service but always, and in many intangible ways, relative to it. As one veteran said to me, "[in my mind] there is no time before the Army, and while you're in, there isn't any time after."

As a vehicle for researchers who seek to work with the military and veteran communities, the usefulness of understanding the layered experiences of military service cannot be understated. The very notion that there may exist something recognizable as a discrete form of life opens up the possibilities of what types of research might benefit both the community and the researcher. Qualitatively speaking, it expands many things we already know about the benefits of interviews, ethnographic, and other more subjective and contextual types of data collection. For those who work with more quantitative data, models, and frameworks, this work allows those researchers to reflect on more confounding issues that might not yet have been accounted for in their work.

One limitation inherent in this paper is the fact that I do not speak for all service members or veterans, each with their own unique experiences. The work I produce, especially in regard to this topic, is biased by my education, worldview, time in service, time of service, and the sheer opportunity to work in this space. What is needed for true community engagement, beyond the premise of forms of life, are opportunities for other members of this community to speak their truths. Many of those stories will be far from my own, influenced, like mine, by political narratives and personal beliefs. My assumption, however, is that their confluences and the meanings for those individuals will reflect and build on the discussion here even as the details are parsed out. True community engagement thus moves forward from this as dialogues and concepts are created for those discussions to take place. This is echoed by Shalowitz et al. (2019) because, as they point out, "the process of engaging community members... represents the necessary 'first step' in conducting a research project" (p. 353).

## Conclusion

Forms of life, as a concept, presupposes a generalizable notion of the service member and veteran and calls it into contention. It acknowledges

that the experiences necessary to define it are as much a set of activities as they are political imaginings. The continued use of ideas like forms of life are calls for stakeholder engagement in research to disentangle those two incarnations of life from each other. An acknowledgement of this call, in turn, points towards an alternate future to the categories of service member and Veteran, one where they are understood more representatively by the individuals which inhabit them. The uncoupling of this relationship between image and reality is, most importantly, the path forward in truthfully speaking to the realities and needs of service members and veterans.

As a form of life, soldiers are trapped between dichotomies of logic. They are wedged between our ideas of individual responsibility and institutional practice. They also straddle the intersections between harm, biological precarity, and strength. They are equipped with the most modern weapons, disciplined to endure pain and hardship, and taught to create stories out of these difficult experiences that define them as veterans and people throughout their lives. Service members are expected to, if necessary, commit acts that, outside the context of military service, exact the highest forms of penal punishment. They assent to all of this for what could be seen as purely personal gain, such as a college education, healthcare, and financial stability. All the veterans (myself included) who I spoke with felt that their military service was a beneficial stepping-stone for their careers and personal lives. Service, accordingly, becomes very linked closely to our narratives about ourselves.

Conversely, our understanding of the actual lived realities of soldiers and those who would become soldiers undermines our notions of honor and sacrifice. They confound our understanding of the military as a body that represents the public it serves. Soldiers' day-to-day experiences in combat zones, MacLeish (2013) says, demand a "complex synthesis of practical knowledge, emotional discipline, and bodily discipline" (p. 77). This habitus remains with them long after their service ends, creating meaning and trauma for the veteran as they attempt to make sense of the lives lost around them for politically ambiguous goals. They return to a climate that concurrently venerates their "service" while placing them into stigmatized mental health categories.

I use an autoethnographic method in this paper to discuss the realities as a form of life to reveal the heterogeneous nature of military

experience. Intriguingly, beyond that, is that the universality of those experiences can be made into any one coherent notion like a form of life. It changes the service member and veteran from passive beings into active creators of their own experiences as the activities concomitant to their service define their social intelligibility to others. There is no vignette describing my life as a veteran after my military service. As a category of my experience, the time in it is marked by normal experiences that need no explication: college graduation, relationships, changing vehicles, moving to different cities and states. These are universal experiences, but they are framed by my military service in ways of which even I am only slowly becoming conscious.

It is arguably this process of reflection that truly marks soldiering as a form of life. By understanding the processes that bring about the “soldier” category in modern armies as an act that itself creates a form of life, we are better able to see how these experiences fuse into what we recognize as a person, rather than an object or image. This recognition of a soldier’s humanity outside of a category is what will enrich the discourse surrounding them for some time to come. The veterans’ acknowledgment that their body was and is the currency upon which the state makes its calculations when contemplating new and existing wars causes waves in that person’s life that they must endure. We can and do know that through different intersecting subjectivities, service members are made to act as controlled but agitative agents, at once docile while also enfolded the projection of sovereign military power. They are recruited by the state for both physical security and to reinforce hegemonic and gendered civic ideals. The shared cultural ideas we associate with soldiering are themselves often weaponized to create new forms of media that appeal to the use of overwhelming force and technology. These are then used to create national narratives of freedom and democracy, suggest how they might be achieved, and reinforce the role of the United States military in the realization of these goals. The service member and veteran are intertwined in these facts. The task beyond this work, in this light, becomes how to understand the intersections of these forces as they emerge in service members’ experiences as they negotiate the mediated, ongoing meanings of those realities while also attempting to move forward with their lives.

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