



# A Special Issue on Contemporary Veteran Voices: A Literary Exposition of the Human Experience in Military Service and War

ARTICLE

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## ABSTRACT

An introduction to the special issue by the guest editors. Includes an in memoriam to one of the guest editors, explains the rationale behind the special issue, and describes each piece in the issue.

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## IN MEMORIAM

This special issue is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Kate Hendricks Thomas, who was an associate guest editor for this literary work and passed away in 2022 at 42 years of age. She was a Marine Corps veteran who made numerous and significant contributions to the field of military behavioral health and served as a healthcare advocate/activist for the rights of veterans. Kate had recently received a lifetime achievement award for her work. Through this special issue we are honoring her lifetime of service. Thank you, Kate, you will always be an inspiration to all of us for your courage, persistence, wisdom, kindness, dedication, and will to overcome all odds to fight the battles at home for equitable and just services in the systems of care for veterans.

## INTRODUCTION

The special issue, “Contemporary Veteran Voices,” of the *Journal of Veteran Studies* was the brainchild of the late, Dr. Kate Hendricks Thomas, who invited two additional guest editors (and colleagues) Dr. Eugenia L. Weiss and Dr. Kari L. Fletcher, to create a literary space within an interdisciplinary journal, with the blessing from the journal’s editor, Dr. Mariana Grohowski. Tragically, Dr. Kate Hendricks Thomas would not see this work come to full fruition given her premature passing. The impetus behind this endeavor was to give voice to veterans and their family members about their experiences while serving in the military and their transition to civilian life, among many other topics of relevance to veterans. An additional goal was to promote a deeper understanding of veterans for nonveterans (i.e., to create a veteran-to-civilian form of dialogue). More precisely, an understanding through the infusion of the arts and humanities within the artifacts of social sciences. The contributing authors to this special issue include military veteran authors/poets, academics, family members of veterans, and a clinician dedicated to working with veterans. The guest editors (Weiss and Fletcher) are both academics and clinicians who have had the honor of working with veterans for many years. Fletcher collaborated with Hendricks Thomas on academic publications and shared a long-time friendship. Weiss is the proud mother of an Iraq war veteran.

The special issue offers a compilation of carefully vetted short stories, poetry, and prose that gives the unique and yet shared veteran experience from the US and abroad, and from various war eras that transcend time. This work brings history to the forefront in a contemporary space and aims to unite the human experience through the imagination of

its writers. Through this work contributors expose the power of the human soul, and our uniquely human ability, to use language to express the complexity of thoughts and feelings.

## A CALL FOR THE SPECIAL ISSUE

In mid-2021 while the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects were still in the air, the guest editors for the journal put out a call inviting submissions for the literary issue. The call was disseminated through the journal’s website, on university-related listservs, on listservs of professional associations specific to military and veteran social work/behavioral health, and on social media. The call invited authors with the following statements:

The experiences of military veterans are cataloged and codified by the social scientists who typically contribute to the *Journal of Veterans Studies*. In this special issue, we propose to do something different; we invite authors of all backgrounds (academics, practitioners, students, military/veterans, and their families) to explore new ways of discussing the veteran experience, both in the United States and internationally. Contemporary Veteran Voices seeks literary contributions of short nonfiction, short fiction, and poetry with an accompanying narrative that focus on the experiences of any era of service members/veterans or their families.

Submissions will be selected based on their literary merit and their relevant content; we seek submissions that are innovative, creative, compelling, and related to military/veteran subject matter. The guest editors will reflect upon the work with the following questioning: What does it [the literary piece] suggest about being human? What can we learn? What questions does the work pose, directly or indirectly about behavior, justice, and the helping professions? What can social science offer in terms of background or understanding?

Additionally, the following topics for submissions were suggested (but not limited to):

- Experiences of transitioning from service
- COVID-era service
- Military service during a time of tension/conflict
- Reflections on the “forever wars”
- Grief and loss
- Military-connected children and families
- Military sexual trauma
- Combat-related trauma
- Moral injury
- Alternative healing
- War poetry

- Love
- Death
- Meaning making after service
- Hope
- Successful reintegration into civilian life
- Recovery from Addiction & Substances
- Suicide
- Disability
- Civilian-military cultural divide
- Resilience
- Compassion fatigue
- Challenges with seeking services
- Racism or sexism in the military

## SUBMISSIONS

Twenty submissions were received. Some were not within the scope of the literary call and others did not pertain to military veterans. After these were all reviewed, 12 were selected for the issue as meeting the special issue requirements. Out of the 12 accepted works, 9 were poems and 3 were short stories (both fiction and nonfiction). The authors were also asked to provide an artist statement with their background and provide context for their respective submissions.

The issue begins with the piece, “Do I Stand?” by Sieara Washington. The author describes her intersecting identities as a Black woman who served in the military. She questions the reader on how she or any individual can still be proud to serve in the face of racism and sexism, both in the military and in civilian life.

The next two poems by veterans, the first by Charles Bryan Cole titled, “Look What They’ve Done Johnny” and the second titled, “Leg” by K. Gordon Tidball, both address the disillusionment of the outcomes associated with the US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Cole speaks to the US withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan and the ensuing collapse of the Afghan government. While Tidball addresses patriotism juxtaposed with the disappointments of post-9/11 in terms of human costs and political sequelae.

The subsequent poems in the special issue take us further back in time and call upon our collective memories of historical events that span multiple wars. The first is from veteran John P. Ferrick; his piece titled “Men of Mike” is followed by “My Enemy,” by the late Donald Rajotte. This poem was gifted to Ferrick, and Ferrick submitted it for this special issue to honor his friend, Rajotte. The two poems were written in 1965 by these two Viet Nam veterans who served together and were among those ambushed while on patrol outside of Da Nang (Mike Company 3<sup>rd</sup>

Battalion, 9<sup>th</sup> Marines) where 13 fellow Marines were killed and 31 wounded. Both poems speak to Viet Nam veterans sacrificing themselves for American society. Love, not war is the answer for humanity.

The next two poems were written by Lily Jarman-Reisch, a journalist and the niece of a Prisoner of War from the Korean war era. The author draws upon other works, such as archived materials and a broadcast from National Public Radio. In both pieces, “Pantoum for Veterans of a Great War” and “I Never Talked About It After War,” Jarman-Reisch, describes the “haunting” experiences of combat veterans, both from World War I and Korea, interlaced with her own reflections.

The next poem is titled “The Arc of the Moral Universe is Long and Bends Towards Conflation.” Written from the perspective of a family member, a suicide loss survivor, having experienced the death by suicide of her brother, an Army veteran, and an uncle. Yania Padilla Sierra in this symbolic piece parallels civilian casualties of war with those bereaved by suicide.

The last poem, “Expired Term of Service” by an active-duty Gen Z military spouse, Nikki Burch Santibanez, who is preparing to transition out of the military with her Army husband and children, recounts what it means to be a civilian spouse imbued in military life, both the benefits and the sacrifices from the young spousal perspective.

The next submissions are comprised of short stories that have characters grappling with combat-related posttraumatic stress and associated mental health issues. The first, “Dancing in the Dark” by veteran Charles William McCaffrey, is storying the life of a veteran turned truck driver who is involved in a motor vehicle accident that triggers the memory of a traumatic incident while serving in Iraq. The story speaks of vulnerabilities and human beauty that cannot be expressed in military life, due to the constraints of military norms. The author also interweaves horrific events that transcend time with a re-awakening of traumatic events.

The next story is titled “Broken Soldier” by Sherife Hassan, a civilian social worker helping veterans and their families in the UK, the story is told by a narrator (who represents a composite of veterans that she treated) who is struggling with mental health and substance misuse disorders. This story illustrates the universality of combat veterans’ experiences no matter the color of the uniform.

The last story is by a veteran, David Blome, who in “Do you hear me?” describes the suffering of military families who have lost a loved one because of military service and war. The story takes the reader on a spiritual journey that aims to shed light on the broken hearts experienced by bereaved family members.

## EDITORIAL REFLECTIONS

From our perspectives and through a flexible application of the constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014), the uniting themes suggest that there is a shared social connection within the human experience that we can all learn from, that is, what it means to be human. Each of these literary works demonstrates the depth of human capacity for the linguistic expression of intense emotions and abstract thought, the enormous human capacity for love and empathy (in spite of evil), and the need for meaning making out of senseless tragedy, suffering, injustices, and loss that accompanies war.

The literary works also shine a light on the few who have served in the military, paying an enormous price for the rest of us who benefit from and enjoy the comfort and safety of our homes. The sense of community among veterans (regardless of the era of service, background, or intersecting social identity) that can be felt in each of these works is profound. While appreciating the individual experiences of each contributor, the pieces can serve as a bridge to a better understanding and appreciation of veteran lives and their varied stories. The expressive means through these literary works could also assist us in closing the gaps between veteran and nonveteran worlds (DeLucia, 2017). Additionally, the application of the humanities (e.g., the use of Classical texts, plays, contemporary novels, and engaging in theatre performances) and various art forms (i.e., engaging in art through painting, holding art exhibits, public art projects, documentary making, using photovoice, journaling, poetry, short stories, etc.) could serve as part of a greater collaborative veteran engagement approach (Franco et al., 2021). Franco et al. (2021) argued for a community of care among multiple stakeholders (such as veteran-serving nonprofit organizations, the Department of Veterans Affairs [VA], veteran consumer and advocate groups, etc.) and veterans themselves where interventions and research are veteran centered and driven by veteran involvement in decision-making when it comes to their needs and health-related care options beyond the prescribed and current evidence-based practices.

Additionally, veteran community writing groups (both within and outside of college classrooms) have sprouted as “grassroots” approaches to help veterans suffering from posttraumatic stress or moral injuries come together to make meaning of their experiences in supportive and collaborative ways (Whitworth, 2016).

Furthermore, to add scientific merit to this type of work, a VA-funded randomized control study found that veterans

who engaged in an individual and brief online expressive writing intervention experienced a greater reduction in posttraumatic stress symptoms than those that did not engage in the intervention. Albeit with small effect sizes, the researchers noted that this approach holds promise for improving health outcomes and veteran reintegration into civilian life post-military service (Sayer et al., 2015).

In conclusion, we cannot dismiss the power of the humanities (and the arts) to serve as a “dialysis of the soul” (Franco et al., 2021, p. 297) as mentioned by one of the veterans quoted by Franco et al. (2021). Our intent with this special issue was to promote the growth of the arts in both veteran health and as a vehicle towards community understanding and veteran reintegration. This special issue is nothing more than just a continued exploration and conversation into the realm of multiple possibilities for honoring veterans’ voices, supporting healing, and expanding community engagement as well as forms of inquiry.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank our contributors for publicly sharing their most intimate work in this special issue. Dr. Kate Hendricks Thomas for paving the path for this journey, along with Dr. Mariana Grohowski, our esteemed editor for taking the risk of criticism in giving space to nontraditional forms of inquiry. Finally, to all of the veterans and their family members who have proudly served our country and sacrificed so much for the rest of us.

## EDITOR’S NOTE

Kari L. Fletcher, PhD, a Guest Editor for this Special Issue, tragically passed away on February 13, 2023, after a courageous battle with cancer. Kari was an outstanding and gentle soul, a renown social worker in the field of veteran studies and academic who will be sorely missed by the military/veteran social work community and by her friends and family. There are insufficient words to describe the magnitude of our loss as she was a beloved and accomplished individual that leaves a great void in our world.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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