4. Beyond the Call of Duty: War Experience, Relationship-Building, and Community Service

I feel filled with a terrible resolve to make [my blog] a part of the fight, as well as a means to improving the situation here. I know, big dreams and an overblown sense of my importance. But without dreams, what are we?[1]

The previous chapter explored cultural practices of community-building in milblogs and how, when they are perceived as narrative rituals, their cultural work and their role in the negotiation of the social contract becomes evident. It highlighted that, while deployment places soldiers and their relatives in a considerable stress situation, their frequent reference to the social contract in milblog conversations helps bridge the gap between civilian and military life both on a personal and a collective level. Exchanges between milbloggers and their audience negotiate the often conflicting realities of life as a civilian and as a deployed soldier in a war zone as they help both sides interpret their experience and make sense of the war. These exchanges are, thus, cultural artifacts that generate, negotiate, and circulate knowledge and values. This circulation affects people beyond those who are actively engaged in the milblogosphere; it helps shape cultural practices and identity. The production and circulation of knowledge and values in the blogs, as we have seen, often follows particular scripts that engender corresponding self-conscious and ritualistic performances. The mutual awareness, acknowledgment, and appreciation expressed in these scripts symbolically reaffirm and enact the social contract between civil society and the military. Blogger-audience interaction, thus, marks an ongoing process of maintaining relationships while the soldiers are physically, socially, as well as mentally separated from civil society.

This chapter builds on this perspective of ritualized discourse to explore particular interrelated aspects of milblogging. It draws on the outline of interrelated analytic foci in Chapter Two which discussed how Native American practices

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1 Traversa, "Terrible."

shape the impact of war experience on a warrior's personality and on the respective community relationships, and how civic activism seeks to operationalize similar effects for non-Native veteran reintegration. The following observations approach milblogs from the same angle. They explore how bloggers and their audience negotiate values and knowledge in their self-reflective discussion of the bloggers' experience during deployment, as well as their assertions of relationships and mutual responsibilities in these exchanges.

The chapter considers selective discursive contexts within the script of negotiating war experience to illustrate the embeddedness of milblogs in a heterogeneous corpus of war-related texts and scenarios and to emphasize that these diverse discursive contexts conduct similar cultural work. Since all discourse on war is politically charged,[2] this selection pinpoints the diversity of contexts and perspectives in which war experience and the relationships between US soldiers and their communities are discussed, and it takes the political agendas thus conveyed into consideration. The motto above exemplifies a blogger's commitment to utilizing his blog not only to share his experience and opinions, but also as a conduit to help influence opinions and relationships, that is, to contribute to the goals of the community and its current war effort. As in the previous chapter, the analysis reads both primary and secondary texts in these sections against the background of their political agenda to discuss war in their respective discursive contexts.

Based on this contextualization, the chapter outlines the narrative and ritualistic patterns through which bloggers negotiate the process of gaining experience, its results, and the conclusions drawn from it, before analyzing the cultural knowledge that they create. In addition to reflecting the soldiers' experience and their often painful learning process, this analysis of the interaction among blog participants reveals the bloggers' personal development and their dedication to perceive extreme experience not only as a burden, but also as an asset worth sharing for the benefit of others. War experience, as the diverse discursive contexts discussed here emphasize, is understood as a conduit to build and maintain relationships within a community. Extending beyond the 'call of duty' that separated deployed soldiers from their home communities in the first place, sharing their experience marks a personal commitment to community that, since community relationships have previously been identified as important features of reintegration and mental health for soldiers and veterans, serves as an additional tie between soldiers and their communities. The exchanges on

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2   Cf. Hüppauf, *Was ist Krieg?*

war experience among bloggers and their audience assert the social contract and promote both the communal negotiation of meaning and individual soldiers' overall well-being.

For a better understanding of the interrelations between experience, (re) integration, and mental health, this chapter avoids the typical chronology of individual war experience (i.e., training, deployment, combat, and home-coming). It investigates approaches to war experience and psychological injury in psychology and therapy, contextualizing them with cultural practices and activist discourse on homecoming and readjustment in US civil society, before returning to the cultural work of sharing and working through experi-ence in deployed soldiers' milblogs. These observations on psychology draw on Indigenous examples elaborated in Chapter Two to explain how war experience is understood and discussed in different cultural environments, what the typical processes of coping are, and how (meta-)ritual scripts negotiate meaning and values in the respective cultural contexts. It is important to address discourses on homecoming and readjustment to elucidate the prevalent mutual notions and expectations of veterans and civilians and how they influence civil-military interaction. Ultimately, the discussion pinpoints how these discourses contribute to the cultural imagination of war and its effects. My observations of how activist discourse on war experience and civil-military relationships seeks to portray experience as a gift, rather than primarily as a burden, illustrates these activists' drive toward veteran reintegration. This chapter's focus on soldiers' dedication to share their experience, often with altruistic motivations, for the benefit of a com-munity, thus, highlights the role of these discourses for relationship-building and the constitution of community, and it reveals that efforts to maintain and nurture these relationships are already undertaken during deployment through conversation in milblogs.

The following sections apply the analytic lens of Indigenous practices to explore how war-related discourses in non-Native twenty-first-century US society employ notions of self-perception and community relationships. They further carve out functional equivalencies among these discourses. That is, activist discourse as well as many milblog conversations follow similar scripts and use similar arguments in their specific contexts, even where they do not explicitly refer to Native military traditions. Reading them through the lens of Native cultural practices, however, reveals the transmission and circulation of their respective, culturally specific meanings and values, their focus on notions inherent in the social contract, and their ritualistic outline.

A literature review complements the theoretical discussion on cultural transfer in military psychology and veterans' mental health care from Chapter

Two. It provides an exposition on the role of community and ceremonialism in PTSD research and therapy, investigating concepts such as 'posttraumatic growth' as well as the recent military doctrine of 'resilience.' In addition, these academic debates are contextualized with a brief discussion of activist discourse on veterans' civic engagement projects to pinpoint how non-Native mainstream society promotes a narrative of perpetual community service by referring to traditional American markers of group identity regarding citizenship, communality, and the social contract. This overview also foreshadows the discussion of activist homecoming scenarios in the following chapter.

A close reading of select blogs explores how milblog conversations convey the transformation of war experience and personality growth into a sense of personal responsibility for a community, and a resulting sense of community service even during deployment. The sample readings highlight how the respective bloggers present and justify their emerging sense of a calling to serve as mentors to younger soldiers, to future replacements, or to military relatives on the home front. They seek to educate both American readers and Afghan locals about each other's cultures and thus assume a role as culture brokers. Some authors transform their blogs into platforms for operating charity missions for Afghan children. In all these examples, the reading highlights the narrative processes, media-specific text formats, and symbolic gestures through which bloggers negotiate the meaning of their experience with their audience. It shows how audiences use equally symbolic response mechanisms to acknowledge the sharing and how they perform gestures of reintegration that, in their complex interactivity, ceremonially constitute community.

Veteran Readjustment in US Military Psychology and Civic Engagement

> *Wars require that we change the identity of the men we*
> *send to fight them.*[3]

Psychological debates and therapeutic practice on war stress and trauma since the 1980s drew on two interconnected developments. First, the definition of PTSD in the *DSM III* in 1980, facilitated through lobbying by activist scholars and therapists, marked a relatively concrete description of symptoms and initiated a surge of heterogeneous therapeutic approaches and corresponding clinical studies.[4] Second, the cultural legacy of Vietnam, manifest in images of collective

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3   Laufer, "Serial Self," 39.
4   Hagopian, *Vietnam War*, 53–58.

memory such as the scenes of returning veterans being insulted at airports, and the popular image of the disgruntled Vietnam veteran personified in the movie character John Rambo, caused the American public to reflect on society's relationship with the military.[5] Some approaches to PTSD and war trauma emphasized this civil-military relationship more than others, in part because their proponents desired a public, collective, and critical debate about Vietnam,[6] and quite a few have sought to explain the rising numbers of afflicted soldiers and to suggest solutions regarding social support by way of cultural and historical comparison. As a result, several therapeutic approaches directly address the importance of social support and community reintegration for veterans' mental health. These professional mental-health services are accompanied by a great variety of initiatives in civic engagement that promote civil society's interaction with veterans to support readjustment.

Some of these social and community-based approaches to readjustment and therapy utilize cultural comparison with Native American warrior traditions, often by invoking the idea of universality in war experience as Chapter Two explored. Like these activist projects, the alternative methods of reintegration and therapy in US society discussed below emphasize the impact of war experience on personality development and civil-military relationships. In documenting current developments in military psychology and civic engagement in veterans' affairs, I argue that social support and community relationships are relevant factors not only for Native warrior preparation, reintegration and non-Native veterans' affairs, but they are also significant factors for mental health and civil-military relationships during deployment. The following discussion of community-based therapy and reintegration projects thus provides a context for an analysis of how milblogging facilitates relationship-building and social support during deployment.

Experience and Personality

As in Native American discursive contexts where rituals generate cultural knowledge about age acceleration and social absorption, non-Native society has addressed the impact of war experience on a soldier's personality development in various cultural practices. Most obviously, US literature has provided a specific context to discuss war as a rite of passage and droves of war novels, such

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5   Cf., among others, Hagopian, 49–78; Kieran, *Forever Vietnam*; Eyman, review of *The Spitting Image* by Jerry Lembcke.
6   Cf. Hagopian, *Vietnam War*.

as Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, lent themselves to interpretations of an initiation to manhood by way of war. Similar to the Native practice of bestowing trust in responsible leadership in a veteran owing to his war record, non-Native cultural expressions have portrayed war experience as a prerequisite to active citizenship, that is, the eligibility for public office. Some works of fiction, most prominently Robert Heinlein's novel *Starship Troopers* and its 1997 movie adaptation, promote a strict understanding of the social contract, especially of an individual's responsibilities toward the community (i.e., the state). Only their personal sacrifice to the state earns veterans the right to enjoy the privileges of citizenship and the power of public office.[7] Several nonfiction texts about US veterans and civil-military relationships raise this issue, as well.[8] However, in the tribal traditions referred to above, the community's trust in veterans does not derive primarily from their sacrifice for the community in war, but from their commitment to employ their hard-earned wisdom and experience in perpetual community service.

(Military) psychology addressed 'Western' cultural perceptions of war's impact on soldiers' personalities at length. Yet, as Chapter Two has elaborated, a number of scholars draw on Native American traditions to sensitize psychology for the potential of transcultural comparison and of identifying universal elements in culturally specific therapies. They also explicitly address cross-cultural observations on how war experience affects personality. As Silver and Wilson observe, "[t]his is a recognition of the acceleration of development that

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7   Dolman, "Military, Democracy, and the State in Robert A. Heinlein's Starship Troopers."

8   Among others, Bacevich criticizes the transformation of the US military into an all-volunteer force because it allows the majority of the population to deny responsibility for both the political decisions on war and for the fighting as such: "A civil-military relationship founded on the principle that a few fight while the rest watch turned out to be a lose-lose proposition—bad for the country and worse yet for the military itself." Bacevich, *Breach of Trust*, 13. He even goes as far as interpreting the popular demonstrations of "support-the-troops" and "thank-you-for-your-service" as "[m]aintaining a pretense of caring about soldiers" through which "state and society actually collaborate in betraying them." Bacevich proposes that, instead, "defending the country once more become a collective responsibility, inherent in citizenship." Bacevich, 14. This, along with the literary examples, illustrates the culturally specific, 'Western' cultural context in which soldiering is understood as sacrifice of individual freedom (and, ultimately, one's life) for the greater good of society in the sense of the social contract. It thus also highlights the culturally specific underlying political philosophy on war.

often accompanies exposure to massive trauma. Survivors typically have to deal with issues of life and death most people do not have to consider un[til] later in life. There is a wisdom in survivorship worth salvaging."[9] If Native cultures follow ritual scripts to help their veterans cope with traumatic experience, to accept the corresponding changes in personality, and even to utilize these changes for beneficial civic activity, as Silver and Wilson argue, non-Native society should seek ways to develop comparable scripts and practices for veteran reintegration in its own cultural contexts.

In a similar vein, Tick evokes the warrior hero archetype, drawing comparisons from traditional cultures to discuss war as a rite of passage. From his universalist perspective, he posits that all societies throughout history have developed a "warrior class," shedding individuals of their civilian identities and preparing them for killing. War, as he argues, is the universal initiatory rite because societies have understood it as representing all aspects of life in a condensed and radicalized form.[10] While Holm speaks of age acceleration, Tick discusses war experience as "shock therapy" because "[t]he shock propels us suddenly and immediately, in a survive-or-die manner, out of innocence and into the biting realities of experience."[11] In describing the fundamental personality adaptations that the preparation for war requires of US soldiers, Michael Sledge quotes famed World-War-II correspondent Ernie Pyle: "Our men can't make this change from normal civilians into warriors and remain the same people."[12] In the same vein, Samuel Hynes observes that war experience apparently weighed particularly heavy on US soldiers during phases of selective service because of the cultural paradigm of the citizen army: "For the assumption implicit in the idea of an army composed of temporary civilian soldiers is that when the war to which they were called is over, they will revert to being the civilians they were before."[13] Consequently, as he argues, ethical issues and emotional distress as they were discussed in countless Vietnam War narratives become even more prevalent because temporary soldiers are confronted with the disparate codes of conduct, notions of

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9   Silver and Wilson, "Native American," 345.

10   In his claims to universality, Tick does not portray war as the only archetypal 'school of life' a society could adopt, but that, since all societies have experienced war, they all developed culturally specific practices and scripts for negotiating the types of knowledge and values derived from war, especially regarding the "shock" of violent experience.

11   Tick, *War and the Soul*, 49.

12   Qtd. in Sledge, *Soldier Dead*, 246.

13   Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale*, 219.

normalcy, and accepted behaviors of war and peace more directly when they make the transition between their soldierly and civilian roles. Hoge's self-help book for veterans similarly addresses training and aftereffects of war on soldiers' personalities. While he assures his readers that most war veterans do not develop PTSD, he cautions: "But they are also not the same person after deployment as they were before, and this is part of what it means to be a warrior."[14]

Modern (military) psychology sought to understand these experience-driven and forced changes on the self after Vietnam and offered various explanations and responses, of which many are discussed in the 1988 collection *Human Adaptation to Extreme Stress.*[15] Several theories on the impact of war stress present blanket models, such as notions of stress evaporation (i.e., 'time will heal wounds'), residual stress perspectives (discussing social support or the lack thereof), or economic factors for a soldier's vulnerability to war stress, but many of these approaches do not consider individual "psychogenic predispositions" and the significance of personality change through war experience.[16] Two contributions from this book merit discussing at length as they illustrate how developmental psychology helps understand individual veterans' predicaments in readjustment and, at the same time, provides a context for the growth of community-based social support among both health care professionals and civil society in recent decades.

Robert Laufer explores these aspects with notions of the "serial self," describing an individual's civilian, soldierly, and veteran experience as participating in different social systems that cause sequential, radical breaks in the individual's self-system and result in a fractured self struggling to adapt to a series of discontinuities. He emphasizes the typically young age of soldiers for an understanding of war trauma.[17] Agreeing with other scholars in the field, he marks war as a disruption of personality development at a critical age because "we would argue that a plausible interpretation of self and post-traumatic stress theories is that it is the exposure of the self-system to a hostile environment that fundamentally undermines the ability of the maturing organism to unfold its potentialities, which shatters the self-system."[18] A soldier tries to adapt to the new self-system and new social norms during war and, upon return, realizes he has

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14 Hoge, *Once a Warrior*, xiii.
15 Wilson, Harel, and Kahana, *Human Adaptation to Extreme Stress.*
16 Elder and Clipp, "Combat Experience," 136–37.
17 Laufer, "Serial Self," 34.
18 Laufer, 38.

been severed from the norms and self-system in which he grew up. Once more, he is confronted with a fundamentally different "social matrix."[19] The shock, as Laufer argues, is all the more radical since modern 'Western' societies have a much higher life expectancy and a young soldier is thus forced to face death and mortality at a much more unlikely age.[20]

Laufer describes the veteran's self as "truncated" because an individual's "war self"[21] has to take over from the old civilian self. As a result, it is developed in a short biographical time span, and it might suddenly become a burden when the returning veteran attempts to retake his old civilian self, hoping to resume civilian life from the moment when he left home to become a soldier. In this reading, neither the old civilian self nor the war self are allowed to continue growing, yet war memory continually imposes itself upon the veteran; it resurfaces whenever the new adaptive self faces threats; and it attempts to dominate the new sense of self, employing its threat responses learned during war. The new adaptive self of the veteran thus appears "serially vulnerable to the war self."[22] The major conclusion from Laufer's study on the treatment of veterans in the late 1980s addresses tendencies toward a "civil mindset"[23] that makes the rupture in personality development from civilian to soldier to veteran all the more susceptible to traumatization.

Erwin Randolph Parson argues in a similar vein. His work derives from the development of the psychological concept of adaptation during the 1930s, which describes the self's continuous attempt to maintain equilibrium with its changing environment. His approach employs Heinz Kohut's theory of the "cohesive self," one of several competing theories of the 1970s and 1980s, arguing that the cohesive self is the ideal developmental state in which the self is the organizing center

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19 Laufer, 38.

20 Laufer, 40. This impression becomes more intense if we take the "absence" of death in modern societies into account. People no longer die at home but in hospitals and nursing homes; stillbirth and the death of birthing mothers, if occurring at all, usually take place in hospitals; and industrialized agriculture has transferred the slaughtering of domestic animals from family farms to anonymous industrial facilities of which consumers are rarely aware. Grossman, *On Killing*, xxiii–xxviii.

21 Laufer, "Serial Self," 48.

22 Laufer, 49.

23 Laufer, 48. While this explanation seems plausible for the context of US 'mainstream' society, the underlying perspective, as discussed above, is inherently ethnocentric because it denies traditional Indigenous societies a similarly "civil" mindset, falsely arguing that these societies breed violence through an alleged prevalence of male superiority in warrior culture.

of all personality. Describing empathy and guidance (from parents, mentors, and peers) for mirroring as the major elements of self-development in a child as much as an adult, Parson argues that war veterans always need familial and societal guidance and appreciation—that is, empathetic mirroring—for full postwar readjustment.[24]

Parson's contribution is of particular interest as it combines its emphasis on developmental psychology with a call to action, i.e., to raise awareness about the necessity for social support in veteran readjustment. Focusing on self-development, he introduces the term "*posttraumatic self disorders* (PtsfD) […] to describe the utter pervasiveness of disturbances in the organization of the self in response to *psychological traumatization.*"[25] In contrast to other approaches, however, he dialogs this focus with classic neurosis theories and points to society's failure to provide mirroring (empathy, appreciation) for Vietnam veterans. He thus postulates a "dual traumatic matrix," an interrelation between combat traumatization acquired in the war zone and what he describes as "sanctuarial traumatic stress,"[26] that is, the presumed failure of US civil society to support the returning veterans in regaining their civilian selves. In this sense, he argues that the moral covenant between society and the veterans was "unilaterally broken."[27] US society here fails to serve as "parents" for its soldiers and veterans because it denies them the necessary reflection and confirmation (empathy and appreciation) critical for the learning and development process, thus effectively denying them "a place to heal."[28]

This approach can be read against the script of Native communities helping returning warriors reintegrate and reflect on their experience, particularly through

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24 Parson, "Post-Traumatic Self Disorders," 249.
25 Parson, 250. Similarly, Becknell and Tick emphasize that PTSD should be understood more as an identity disorder, a rupture in self-development, rather than as primarily related to stress and anxiety. Becknell, "Listening to Narratives of War," 58; Tick, *War and the Soul*, 106.
26 Parson, 250.
27 Parson, 253.
28 Parson, 253. It would go beyond the scope of this study to explicate in detail here, but I should point out that Parson's generalization of American society as a unified bloc, regardless of his own political stance, reveals how politically charged the debate on the relationship between the military and civil society was and still is in the context of the Vietnam War, and that even academic texts not only discuss, but in themselves carry, political implications and the cultural imagination of that particular war.

their intricate relationships based on reciprocal economic and social support. Because of the close-knit social structure and symbolic kinship relations in Native communities, the notion that civil society acts as 'parents' who provide guidance and appreciation in this process of meaning-making and reflection becomes more explicit. The following discussion highlights a few exemplary psychological and social approaches aimed at helping veterans address their experience and personality changes in more positive ways.

As Chapter Two introduced above, a number of activist psychologists and therapists proposed since the 1980s that veterans' mental health care should adopt elements of Indigenous warrior traditions for therapy and social work. Their approaches address ways to support individuals' transformations between civilian, soldier, and veteran identities,[29] as well as general philosophical perspectives designed to avoid a blanket pathologizing of war experience and to explore more positive aspects, such as the application of war experience for civilian life.[30] Even when they are not explicitly referring to Indigenous or ancient 'Western' warrior traditions, military training and psychology have similarly adopted notions of beneficial war experience, particularly in the traumatological concept of "posttraumatic growth" and the recent US military's resilience paradigm. Clinical research on PTSD that emerged soon after the first definition of the term in the *DSM III* in 1980 noticed elements of coping and growth and discussed how war experience, while painful, also taught veterans to embrace responsibility and dependability in later life.[31] Some of the most prominent scholars on posttraumatic growth, Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun, state in a 2004 article that positive outcomes of traumatic experience have been discussed in both ancient Christian, Hebrew, and Islamic traditions, while the term "posttraumatic growth" and its clinical parameters evolved only in the 1990s.[32]

Utilizing the analogy of an earthquake, Tedeschi and Calhoun describe trauma as a "psychologically seismic event" that might "shake" or even shatter an individual's ability to make sense of the world and of his or her own place in it.[33] Recovery from such an event requires "cognitive rebuilding," that is,

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29 Silver and Wilson, "Native American," 347.
30 Becknell, "Listening to Narratives of War," 50–61.
31 Elder and Clipp, "Combat Experience," 137–38, 143.
32 Tedeschi and Calhoun, "Posttraumatic Growth," 2.
33 Tedeschi and Calhoun, 5.

acknowledging these changes in life and identity and incorporating both the traumatic experience and possible similar future events.[34] If this incorporation results in a higher resistance to future shattering of the individual's "schematic structure" for readjustment, some degree of posttraumatic growth is achieved.[35] Based on their therapeutic experience and clinical tests, the authors describe this phenomenon as "the experience of positive change that occurs as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life crises. It is manifested in […] an increased appreciation for life in general, more meaningful interpersonal relationships, an increased sense of personal strength, changed priorities, and a richer existential and spiritual life."[36] Many of these manifestations can be found in the ritual script of Native American war-related ceremonies (the higher status of veterans based on, e.g., personal strength and matured priorities), as well as in non-Native veteran projects that regard veterans as "bearers of gifts,"[37] in the discursive context of war memoirs and, as the close readings in this chapter elucidate, also in deployed soldiers' milblogs. This means that, even if the experience is not per se traumatic but 'merely' a "highly challenging life cris[is]," a deployed soldier might immediately draw strength from addressing these challenges and learning from them, and he or she might use a communication platform such as a blog to involve family and representatives of civil society in the process of working through the experience and generating meaning.

Military psychology and training adopted doctrines and programs to engender such growth through "combat and operational stress control measures" (COSC), and some of these programs' goals and concepts are reflected in veteran projects as well as blogs. COSC units are dispatched to war zones as "first responders" and provide an "initial level of intervention," primarily to preserve the fighting strength of combat units by addressing stress in its early stages before it impedes the combat efficiency of soldiers and their unit's cohesion.[38] They work toward avoiding the stigma of psychological illness among military personnel by creating a supportive atmosphere, treating afflicted individuals as soldiers rather than as patients or victims, and facilitating group support from the soldier's unit.[39] Their tasks and available interventions include Traumatic

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34 Tedeschi and Calhoun, 5.

35 Tedeschi and Calhoun, 5.

36 Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1.

37 Cf. Becknell, "Listening to Narratives of War."

38 Hallman and Pischke, "US Army Combat," 245–46. The US borrowed this idea from the Israeli Defense Forces who developed COSC units after the 1948 War of Independence.

39 Hallman and Pischke, 245–46.

Event Management (TEM), different types of psychological debriefings, grief processing, and measures within the Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF) program.[40] These tasks and interventions are also supposed to nurture post-traumatic growth. Since they are conducted mostly within, or at least in close proximity to soldiers' parent units within the war zone, they take away the stigma of psychological victimization. They engender learning from experience, working through, and integrating memory. Generally, they fall under recent notions of professionalism in soldiering that entail "mental fitness" as a crucial part of the entire process of preparing and maintaining the soldiers' ability to fight and, thus, as a job requirement.[41]

While many scholars and practitioners doubt that the specifics of the 2011 CSF program will have a discernible positive effect and criticize its blanket enactment as a military policy without detailed previous tests,[42] the general idea of improving resilience and engendering posttraumatic growth has taken hold in military training, psychology, and veterans' affairs. Enhancing resilience skills has become an important aspect within programs for both recently returned veterans and their families because they "promote emotional well-being with a personalized, strength-based approach and serve to reduce the stigma of seeking mental health services during the reintegration process."[43] These programs support veterans not only in coping with the memory of hardship but also in facilitating self-efficacy on both the individual, family, and the community level. Reyes lists among the various individual self-efficacy skills the ability to discover

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40 Hallman and Pischke, 245.

41 In her plenary lecture for the 2013 conference "Aftershock. Posttraumatic Cultures since the Great War" in Copenhagen, Mette Bertelsen explained that the Danish military accompanied its preventive measures against psychological stress for its ISAF contingent in Afghanistan with comparisons between soldiering and professional sports to overcome the stigma: Once soldiers were reminded that professional athletes must pay as much attention to their mental abilities as to their physical fitness in order to excel in pro sports, they were more likely to take military psychological exams and training measures seriously. Bertelsen, "Trajectories of PTSD: Danish Soldiers of the War in Afghanistan." Canadian special forces even hired a sports psychologist who had served on the Canadian Olympic team for the same purpose. King, *The Combat Soldier*, 331.

42 Collura and Lende, "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Neuroanthropology," 134–35; McNally, "Are We Winning the War against Posttraumatic Stress Disorder?," 10.

43 Reyes, "Enhancing Resiliency Through Creative Outdoor/Adventure and Community-Based Programs," 268.

a new sense and purpose in life, developing realistic self-appraisal and problem-solving skills, and the maintenance of positive social relationships.[44] These skills are also acknowledged and nurtured in traditional Native ceremonies and social structures, and they are exercised in soldiers' self-reflections in milblogs, as well.

However, suggesting an understanding of soldiering as merely a particularly risk-laden profession, resilience and CSF, especially in their allusion to athletics, tend to overlook the importance of relationships between soldiers and civil society. While many veterans do not see their military experience as 'just a job' but as an emotionally charged commitment and are aware that it is "learning and unlearning to kill" which distinguishes soldiering from "any other job,"[45] warning voices, such as Bacevich's invocation of civil-military relationships and mutual responsibilities as part of the social contract, need to be considered. It is, thus, necessary to take a closer look at the psychological perspective on relationships—keeping in mind the above distinction of 'warriors' and 'soldiers' regarding the relationship between a war participant and his or her community—to better understand the commitment, the experience of having killed, and the challenges of "unlearning" it. Perhaps most importantly, these observations contextualize the discourse on sacrifice and relationships addressed in the previous chapter and further explain the social activist drive in many of the milblog conversations and homecoming scenarios above and in the following readings.

Military-Civil Relationships in Psychology

Military psychologists have stressed the importance of the homecoming experience for the development of a soldier's identity and sense of self. Parson posits that many Vietnam veterans' homecoming experience triggered "sanctuarial stress," echoing in his argument the prevalent cultural memory that civil society blamed the soldiers for the war's ills. Parson's perspective on personality development and civil-military relationships, regardless of the political reasons for the unwelcoming stance in parts of civil society, observes a feeling among many veterans that society broke the social and moral contract and denied them a "place to heal," that is, it failed to fulfill its wider mirroring functions as the soldiers' "parents."[46] Whereas Parson's text only briefly extends its developmental-psychology focus

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44 Reyes, 269.
45 Becknell, "Listening to Narratives of War," 7.
46 Parson, "Post-Traumatic Self Disorders," 253.

to social observations to illustrate the similarity of relationship functions among families with society at large, some activist psychologists have highlighted the importance of interlocking relationships on different social levels since the 1980s. Psychologists, social scientists, as well as historians are still engaged in arguments if this societal breach in military-civilian relationships must be considered the "lesson of Vietnam" or, if not, what exactly that lesson is, and it is beyond this study's scope to provide a definite answer.[47] However, it is obvious that, since Vietnam, an increasing number of psychological and social theories, therapies, and civic projects focus on these relationships in terms of veteran readjustment, and that, as discussed before, some of them invoke Native American traditions as role models for American mainstream society. As Chapter Two has explicated, many of these cultural comparisons in activist psychology also adopt notions of warriorhood as a community relationship into their philosophy. At this point, it is necessary to return to these perspectives on relationships to contextualize social-therapeutic approaches in traumatology and veterans' mental health care and reintegration.

One of the recent publications representing the diversity of approaches to PTSD, Scurfield and Platoni's 2013 collection *Healing War Trauma*, takes Parson's allegory of civil society as the soldiers' parents further by analyzing relationships on various social levels. In addition to sharing experiences with veterans of other eras and theaters of war for mentoring, they argue, veterans should be supported in rebuilding relationships with nonveterans on the level of family and friends, but also in their relationships with the government and with civil society in general.

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47 For discussions on often contrasting notions of these lessons, see Morgan and Michalson, *For Our Beloved Country*, 6; Hagopian, *Vietnam War*, 408–09; Gardner and Young, *Iraq and the Lessons of Vietnam, or, How Not to Learn from the Past*; Eder, *Leading the Narrative. The Case for Strategic Communication*, 123–24; Scurfield and Platoni, *War Trauma and Its Wake*, 8; Kieran, *Forever Vietnam*. Please note that many of these references explicitly use Vietnam veterans' experience and the collective memory of Vietnam (veterans) for their arguments on PTSD treatment. Regarding veteran care as a lesson of Vietnam, Michael Zacchea extends the issue into a *longue-durée* perspective. He describes veterans' affairs as a historical tradition of government promises, bemoaning the contemporary discrepancy between public praise for the veterans' services and little actual societal and government support for veterans. He adds that this tradition goes back to the War of Independence: "Not only has our nation not resolved the problem of veterans returning from war, it continues to repeat the very same mistakes." Zacchea, "Veteran's Advocacy: Social Justice and Healing through Activism," 31.

The authors posit that the experience of empty promises and the sense that the "sacred covenant" has been broken

> is a central issue of betrayal for many veterans and families. Hence, a crucial and valid therapeutic element is for clinicians to address veterans' relationship with their country, and part of the solution is for veterans to experience caring persons and organizations that are sincere and go beyond empty promises and walking the walk.[48]

Veteran readjustment is thus increasingly reinterpreted and reoriented towards relationship-building for both its individual psychological and its social therapeutic benefits. Becknell brings both together in his literature review. He stresses Judith Herman's notion that "traumatic events call into question basic human relationships" and that, therefore, traumatized war veterans often experience a loss of trust, both in formerly trusted companions (such as family members and friends) and in their personal abilities to build trust with strangers.[49] Herman concludes that "[r]ecovery can take place only within the context of relationships, it cannot occur in isolation."[50] In his analysis of civilian audiences of war narratives, Becknell adds to these observations by holding civil society accountable to take a more active role in helping veterans rebuild trust and relationships. Among other scholars, he refers to Paula Caplan who "called for more civilian and community involvement in veteran suffering and suggested that caring friends and compassionate strangers may be more helpful than trained therapists in dealing with the consequences of war" because "the moment they were asked to tell their story was the moment they began to reconnect with the listener and began, in the words of some, 'to feel like a person again.'"[51] Both Becknell and Caplan, thus, link civilians' responsibility for veterans to building relationships and trust through sharing and active listening to war narratives. Similarly, projects in social activism and social work emphasize the role of volunteering and community service for relationship-building and reintegration.

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48 Scurfield and Platoni, "Innovative Approaches," 6.
49 Becknell, "Listening to Narratives of War," 51–52; Herman, Judith L., *Trauma and Recovery. The Aftermath of Violence From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, 53; cf. Shay, *Odysseus*, 174–75.
50 Herman, Judith L., *Trauma and Recovery*, 133.
51 Becknell, "Listening to Narratives of War," 54; Caplan, *When Johnny and Jane Come Marching Home: How all of Us Can Help Veterans*, xviii.

Continued Community Service and Social Support
in Veteran Readjustment Projects

In recent years, both government services and civil society promoted community-based approaches to veteran readjustment in which the veterans' personal commitment—one might say, their personal sense of mission—to continue serving their community and to employ their war-related skills are critical aspects. This section addresses activist discourse about veteran volunteer projects to explore the interrelation between community service, readjustment, and (mental) health and to pinpoint the cultural-comparative perspective on warriorhood as a community service relationship. It is significant to emphasize the social-therapeutic focus in public discussions of such projects as they help veterans establish and display personal relationships and commitment to their communities. This discussion on community service provides a backdrop for the reading of personal missions in milblogs that extend beyond typical institutional soldierly duties, and it foreshadows the analysis of veterans' reintegration and healing projects in the final chapter, where community relationships once more are critical components.

In June 2013, a *Time* magazine report presented a number of veteran projects focusing on community service and civic engagement. Both its title "Can Service Save Us?" and its approach mirror the conclusions activist military psychologists draw from the study of Native American and ancient 'Western' military traditions of veteran readjustment.[52] The author has since extended his research and published a related book, *Charlie Mike*, using the military shorthand for "Continue the Mission."[53] The idea of extending one's service to society beyond deployment is prominent in the phrasing of these texts' and other project's titles and approaches, and it explains why social activists find the Indigenous philosophy of warriorhood as a perpetual community service relationship with mutual obligations to protection and tending so appealing. The projects featured in Klein's text address the veterans' challenge to readjust to civilian life, they promote their interaction with civilian communities through continued community service, and they seek to reintegrate veterans by employing their war-related skills and experience. These tasks facilitate personal growth and an interest in continued civic engagement and social responsibilities; and they strengthen relationships both within the veterans' families and between veterans and their

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52 Klein, "Can Service."
53 Klein, *Charlie Mike*.

communities. Klein cites Barbara van Dahlen, a Maryland mental-health coun-
selor for veterans, on veterans' challenging transition from being immersed in
the highly organized and purposeful military activities in the war zone to what
many perceive as an individualistic 'me-culture':

> When they leave the service, veterans are catapulted from an intense brother-and-
> sisterhood where the most serious issues imaginable are confronted every day, and
> plopped down into a society where they no longer have the comfort and purpose of
> being part of something larger than themselves. In a perverse way, their reaction to
> civilian life can be seen as a form of sanity: too many of the rest of us have slouched from
> active citizenship to passive couch-potato-hood. Many returning veterans find that pas-
> sivity and isolation intolerable.[54]

Note that Klein and van Dahlen, as so many commenters on milblogs, implicitly
echo the literature on civil religion in soldiering by interpreting military ser-
vice as transcending the individual, committing soldiers to "something larger
than themselves." Similar to Bacevich and others, Klein praises military service
(and veterans' dedication to continued service) as "active citizenship," i.e., sub-
mitting the self to the interest and benefit of the collective, that the majority
of Americans has presumably abandoned.[55] In portraying US civil society as
primarily a 'me-culture,' Klein and van Dahlen demonstrate the cultural pessi-
mism that is so typical of activist discourse on war experience and veteran rein-
tegration. Their criticism of individualism and self-interest in US society opens
activists toward cross-cultural role modeling and explains their pronounced
interest in the warrior traditions of Native Americans as they seek to establish
community-oriented forms of veteran reintegration and mental health care.

A nationwide 2009 study on volunteerism and veteran readjustment reflects
on veterans' desires to engage with their communities. This report with the
playful title *All Volunteer Force* presents 92 percent of veterans as regarding com-
munity service important and finds that veterans' civic engagement is well above
the national average.[56] Because more than one million veterans not involved in
community service at the time of the study expressed their willingness to volun-
teer if given the opportunity, the report calls for initiatives on the national, state,
and community levels to tap into this resource—not least because the study's
data suggest that volunteering is linked to a more successful transition and thus,
better overall well-being of veterans.[57]

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54 Qtd. in Klein, "Can Service."
55 Cf. Usbeck, "Don't Forget," 102–03; Bacevich, *Breach of Trust*; Putnam, *Bowling Alone.*
56 Yonkman and Bridgeland, "All Volunteer Force," 9.
57 Yonkman and Bridgeland, 10–11, 25.

In recent years, a number of veteran volunteer projects have gained public attention and praise for their integration of voluntary community service and social and mental support for veterans' readjustment. One project founded in 2007, The Mission Continues, propagates the idea of continued service after deployment in its title already. The group's fellowship program integrates veterans in a community project of their choice for a six-month period, provides a stipend, and accompanies their work with a "leadership development curriculum," offering vocational guidance and opportunities for developing new skills and networks for the participants' future careers.[58] This approach efficiently combines social and readjustment support for veterans with volunteering and reintegration. Another such project is Team Rubicon. Founded in 2010, the nonprofit organization Team Rubicon provides worldwide disaster relief and first response. It combines volunteerism with veteran transition guidance by providing opportunities for continued service and repurposing veterans' skills and experiences,[59] arguing that combat veterans are uniquely trained to work in danger zones, work under pressure, and interact with civilians in shock. In addition, Team Rubicon argues that their relief for civilian communities helps veterans find purpose in life and realize that helping others helps themselves. The group, thus, seeks to address the high numbers of veteran suicides in organizing veterans beyond disaster volunteer work. In both projects, experience gained in the war is employed for altruistic, ethically unambiguous civilian tasks and shared with civilians in continued community service. At the same time, protagonists perform the ritual of narrating war experience in exchange for community reintegration on both a direct and a meta-performative level in not only discussing experience, challenges, and expectations but also in ceremonially enacting and conventionalizing them.

Similar motivation, cultural practices, and social interaction can be observed in the diverse creative writing projects for veterans organized at US universities,[60] but also among the virtual communities of the blogosphere where they occur in less institutionalized form. A number of post-deployment blogs explicitly discuss PTSD issues. I argue that, by writing about both their war experience and their experience with trauma and its effects, these bloggers perform a working-through of their own trauma, once more, both directly and on the meta-level. In addition, they often develop a sense of purpose and mission through writing. Scott Lee, founder of the blog *PTSD: A Soldier's Perspective*, states that he initially started blogging in order to "vent," hoping the blog would help him connect with those

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58 "The Mission Continues"; Klein, "Can Service."
59 "Our Mission."
60 Cf. "Fallout"; "Warrior Writers"; Martin et al., *The Journal of Military Experience*.

"who understand," and to raise awareness for PTSD among the American public. Receiving his first comment on the blog, Lee was elated that "someone had heard and connected with me."[61] Over time, his growing audience inquired about his experience and problems, allowing him to give advice to both fellow veterans and caregivers to avoid mistakes that he felt he had made in trying to confront his own trauma: "The insights drawn from my experience of two messy divorces offers help to others in navigating obstacle courses that derailed my life." He adds that "offering the understanding I lack in my life" gives him hope for himself.[62]

Although Lee cannot maintain direct physical contact with most of his audience, their response in e-mails, blog comments, and on Facebook provides invaluable feedback on various levels. They reassure him that he is not left alone as he builds an online community of like-minded people who engage in an exchange about shared experience. In addition, he receives confirmation that his activities help others which, in turn, provides gratification and solace for himself. Having originated out of the frustration of feeling helpless, the blog has turned into a "mission," as a commenter pointed out to Lee: "It hit me, I'm doing what I have been prepared for my whole life. It gave meaning to my trauma and enabled further acceptance of my warrior parts. I have a mission: educate, support and engage veterans and caregivers."[63] The exchange between veterans and caregivers on this blog thus fosters a similar communalization as the veteran projects described above, enabling community-building and self-help through a sense of mission, that is, of continued community service.

However, regardless of their different formats, all these projects share veterans' interaction with their communities *after* their return from the war zone. The following close reading of milblog posts pursues similar questions and activities during deployment, exploring how life in the war zone affects the bloggers' sense of 'mission' in exchanges with their audience. It illustrates how the negotiation of war experience in these exchanges generates a 'calling' to help

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61 Lee, *PTSD, a Soldier's Perspective*; Lee, e-mail message to author, 24 January, 2013.

62 Lee.

63 Lee. To provide a brief transatlantic context, the increasing public awareness of PTSD in Germany is related to a growing number of German Afghanistan veterans willing to speak out about their experience with trauma. One example is Daniel Lücking's blog *Aufräumen Kamerad!* which uses a similar format as *PTSD: A Soldier's Perspective*. Lücking provides detailed descriptions of therapy, of the impact of trauma on everyday life, and on navigating military bureaucracy in order to receive benefits. However, Lücking seems to be more critical of the military than American milbloggers tend to be, as the strong emphasis on whistle-blowing and a more general criticism of military politics on his blog suggests. Lücking, "Aufräumen."

and educate others that affects individual soldiers' well-being, and nurtures community-building. These deliberations also discuss the cultural work of these exchanges by exploring how they provide a platform for members of the military and civil society to engage in a public discourse on war experience, to negotiate their mutual relationship, and, consequently, collectively to give meaning to their experience and contribute to how it is remembered.

The Personal Sense of 'Mission' in Milblogs

As the previous discussions of diverse cultural traditions have highlighted, war experience is not always regarded primarily as a burden, but also as a responsibility, a gift, and a resource, in both Native American and non-Native cultures. Milblogs written by deployed soldiers tend to address all these aspects of war experience, with varying degrees of emphasis. They create discursive contexts that, while enacting different practices and being embedded in the confines and intricacies of deployment to the war zone, negotiate meaning and values and produce cultural knowledge in similar ways as Native war-related ceremonies or non-Native veterans' civic engagement initiatives.

By turning their blogs into public platforms for meaning-making, community-building, and relationship maintenance, deployed soldiers often engage in missions that go beyond their required duties within the military machine. They maintain, and often actively develop their sense of citizenship through voluntary activities in the service of various communities. Their self-perception as volunteer community servants nurtures relationships with those whom they serve, reflecting the sense of warriorhood as perpetual community service that activist discourse seeks to emulate from Native American practice. These voluntary civic engagements may or may not be directly related to the war effort, and might be targeting the civilian home front, fellow soldiers, veterans, trainees, or local populations in Afghanistan. In general, however, these activities, and the reports about them on the blogs, serve to maintain contact between deployed soldiers and a generally civilian audience at home, constantly facilitating both a sense of civilian 'normalcy,' of perpetual and direct service to, and of being integrated in a community, among the soldiers.

The following sections explore patterns in select milblogs to analyze a number of individual soldierly activities that go beyond the soldiers' specified tasks. Some of these activities even develop into long-term civic projects involving many participants and requiring a great organizational effort. The first section discusses how deployed bloggers engage in the military tradition of using their accumulated war experience to mentor other soldiers, be they future replacements in the deployment roster or young 'rookies.' These mentoring tasks do not constitute

a service to a civilian community per se, but they might include mentoring for civilian relatives of other military personnel, such as spouses or parents. While some of the posts discussed here were written out of a sense of military professionalism, trying to improve procedures and institutions, they also serve the individual bloggers' well-being and sense of community integration when regarded as an opportunity to help oneself by helping others, as the above sub-chapter on veteran projects elaborated.

A second section discusses soldiers' efforts at cultural brokering and education. Many blog entries describe the everyday life of the locals in the war zone, their customs and traditions. Bloggers often directly address their audience when they discuss their topics; they contextualize their observations with their own socio-cultural backgrounds to help their American audience grasp local conditions. In many cases, bloggers explicitly state their goal to "educate" Americans about Afghanistan, both to help civilians gain an understanding of the hardships of the Afghans' everyday lives at war and to raise awareness, in contrast, for the bubble of affluence and security in which many Americans can afford to live. In other posts, American soldiers describe their efforts to explain American culture, customs, traditions, and the political system to Afghans. In this way, they turn into culture brokers and even into cultural diplomats of their own volition.

The final section takes up the issue of cultural diplomacy in investigating how milbloggers engage on a personal mission to help 'win hearts and minds' and, thus, to extend their soldierly war contributions beyond their specified military duties. While my interest focuses on the sense of personal gratification gained from these activities, this section also critically discusses the fleeting borders between personal opinions expressed in a public war narrative and these opinions become instrumentalized for the military's 'grand narrative.'

"Old Sarge" and the Rookies: Milblog Mentoring for Fellow Soldiers and Relatives

> *We have always conducted critical incident debriefings.*
> *We did them every night around the campfire, and the*
> *'Old Sarge' always led them. There was always an old*
> *sarge, an old captain, or an old chief who was the survivor*
> *of past battles.*[64]

Observers of social and cultural change in the US military have tied, among others, problems of war stress to the military's changing demographics. As

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64 Grossman and Christensen, *On Combat*, 307.

Grossman and Christensen point out in the above quote, older soldiers have always helped younger, less experienced ones understand and learn from recent battle events, and, thus, guided their initiation to killing. The authors see this informal system of intramilitary guidance and training as critical to understand and learn to manage combat-related stress. However, the high levels of education among soldiers, needed to operate ever more sophisticated weapons systems, along with the transition to an all-volunteer force in the late 1970s, have resulted in the current age-graded system of military demographics. Soldiers in the lower ranks tend to be of a very young age, and they have relatively good chances of rising through the ranks. Tick bemoans that "now the only elders on the battlefield are more experienced peers, often only a few ranks or years older than the initiate" who cannot serve as "ritual elders overseeing [the] transformational process" of being initiated into killing.[65] Marlantes makes a similar observation about his own experience in Vietnam: "There are no more old peasant soldiers with pipes dispensing hard-won wisdom."[66] He adds that, since Vietnam, older and higher-ranking officers had to "actively get down into the ranks to be more involved with younger military people's personal development."[67] It is, thus, hard to find older soldiers who could serve as mentors without encountering a gap in rank that would complicate the informal mentoring process at peer level. These gaps also lead to an often idealized and romanticized image in discussions of soldiering and soldier mentoring of bygone days.

Many works on military psychology and PTSD posit an archaic tradition of mentoring through recapitulating battle events among soldiers, stating that this system is currently being reestablished and institutionalized, mostly by formal Critical Incident Debriefing (CID) sessions, both within the units and as part of complementary military-psychological procedures, as with the stress control (COSC) units discussed above. 'Storytelling,' that is, narrating the event and providing guidance by experienced military 'elders' plays a major role in these settings.[68] In addition, the emergence of the Internet has triggered a number of independent soldier mentoring initiatives to further reintegrate mentoring into contemporary military processes. Many of these initiatives consider themselves

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65 Tick, *War and the Soul*, 59.
66 Marlantes, *What It Is Like*, 211.
67 Marlantes, 244.
68 Grossman and Christensen, *On Combat*, 302–39; Tick, *War and the Soul*, 210–23; Hallman and Pischke, "US Army Combat."

professional discussion forums on best practice.[69] On a less formal and less explicit level, milblogs serve similar functions. Mentoring in milblogs occurs either as the bloggers' advice to their military audience, embedded in the narration of recent experiences, or by enabling and inviting advice and guidance from more experienced commenters.

One of the most vivid and explicit examples of mentoring in milblogs can be found in the series of posts and comments following Buzzell's "Men in Black." This post's graphic and detailed narration of a firefight resembles the after-battle storytelling sessions discussed by Grossman and Marlantes and comes close enough—in form and function—to actual debriefings, as well as to formalized accounts of combat experience in Native warrior ceremonies. "Men in Black" details how Buzzell's unit of armored vehicles is ambushed in Mosul on 4 August 2004. Operating as a machine gunner in one of the vehicles, he takes fire from an assailant and reports: "I heard and felt the bullets whiz literally inches from my head, hitting all around my hatch and 50 cal mount making a 'Ping' 'Ping' 'Ping' sound."[70] Buzzell launches into an almost stream-of-consciousness mode of writing as he describes how events unfold, along with his own emotions and thoughts, and the chaos of battle translates into the obvious pace of writing and the lack of editing grammar and punctuation before he posts:

> I've never felt fear like this. I was like, this is it, I'm going to die. I cannot put into words how scared I was. The vehicle in front of us got hit 3 times by RPG's. I kind of lost it and I was yelling and screaming all sorts of things. (mostly cuss words) I fired the .50 cal over the place, shooting everything. My driver was helping me out and pointing out targets to me over the radio. He helped me a lot that day. They were all over shooting at us.[71]

The post describes the attack and Buzzell's unit's response in great detail. It ends with their return to base. Buzzell illustrates his physical and emotional fatigue, stating "I went back to my room, thanked god, and passed out on my bed." Less than half an hour after his post goes online, readers begin to post comments, mounting to more than one hundred until the blog is taken offline a few weeks

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69 The websites PlatoonLeader.org and CompanyCommander.com, organized by Captains Nate Allen and Antony Burgess in the late 1990s to enable mutual advice, mentoring, and guidance among junior officers, may serve as examples of such initiatives. Cf. Rid, "War 2.0"; Brænder, *Justifying*, 112.

70 Buzzell, "Men In Black."

71 Buzzell.

later.[72] Many commenters state that they are glad that he survived the battle and they thank him for the realistic description. Some comments by veterans offer congratulations and confirmation: "In two deployments to SWA, nothing I've seen holds a candle to what you just described. Sounds like you guys gave them hell, though. Be proud of how you and your comrades handled yourselves, no one could have done it better."[73] A fellow soldier who is stationed in Afghanistan at the time states that, in the nine months of his deployment, he had not "been shot at nor fired a shot. I just hope that if I have to, I perform as well as you did."[74] These statements already indicate elements of debriefing and mutual support through mentoring. In the first, an older veteran contextualizes Buzzell's recent experience with his own and confirms that Buzzell performed well under pressure. In the second, a less experienced active soldier similarly acknowledges Buzzell's performance and accepts him as a role model.

The post, its reception, and its impact on censorship have been discussed in detail before;[75] for this discussion on mentoring, it is critical to consider the subsequent entries. Two days after "Men in Black," Buzzell posts an entry titled "'Green' Gunner" in which he cites an e-mail received from a nonfiction author about Green Beret special forces in Vietnam. In the e-mail, a Green Beret veteran praises Buzzell's depiction of this firefight as a realistic representation of the chaos and confusion of battle, highlighting that the narrative avoids an omniscient first-person perspective: "The way this guy described it (with all the warts—not sure what he is hitting most of the time, shooting too close to his own men, etc.)—that is indeed how it is in a situation like that."[76] Again, a seasoned veteran of an earlier war comments on the blogging soldier's recent experience and acknowledges his performance both in battle and in narrating it. The elder confirms that battle is chaotic and that these situations entail a loss of control.

This e-mail to Buzzell, in a new technological and medial format, resembles the discursive context and fulfills similar functions as the battle debriefings in which an "Old Sarge," as Grossman has it, offers guidance and acknowledgment after combat. In this twenty-first-century version, the computer replaces the campfire as the locale that signifies winding down from the adrenaline rush of

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72 The original posts and comments can still be accessed through mirrored sites at the Internet Archive's "Wayback Machine" at <http://web.archive.org/web/20041130083756/http://cbftw.blogspot.com/2004_08_01_cbftw_archive.html>.

73 Cat Herder, at 8:53 p.m., in Buzzell.

74 RTO Trainer, at 7:25 p.m., in Buzzell.

75 Roering, *Krieg Bloggen*, 204–15; Brænder, *Justifying*, 217.

76 Buzzell, "'Green' Gunner."

battle and allows participants to reflect on the day's events. However, the specifics of the medium instigate yet another change: They turn the personal conversation among soldiers—that is, initiated insiders to warfare—into a public conversation on battle which includes the civilian audience on the home front. This particular conversation thus offers more similarities to the discursive context of Native warrior ceremonies in which civilian communities negotiate their relationships with their warriors by bearing witness to their stories and by acknowledging their experience and hardships.[77]

OPSEC requirements prohibit detailed descriptions of firefights and weaponry. Controlled by (self-)censorship and regulation efforts after 2004 (even after more permissive rules were issued in 2010), deployed soldiers' blogs generally no longer produce stories like Buzzell's "Men in Black." However, discussions on combat and tactics still occur, as in Rex Temple's depiction of a training mission in mock villages before deployment. After two engagements with 'enemy' fighters, Temple reflects on the event and, as if in a debriefing, self-critically recapitulates whether or not his actions were helpful for the completion of the mission. He even questions whether they were morally justified:

> While driving back I had another chance to rehearse the scenarios in my head. When the bad guys were running through the field, I opted not to pull the trigger because they didn't pose a threat and I figured we could round them up before they got away. The nearest village was several miles away. But is this how I would really react in combat? It's not an easy question to answer. Would I have been filled with rage because they just attacked our vehicle and my partner was injured? Could I use this as a justification for ending their life? I pray I never have to make that decision.[78]

At the time of this writing, this post had not attracted any comments. However, it illustrates a number of intertwined functions in milblogs. Because he "rehearse[s] the scenarios" not merely in his head but, in effect, publicly, by relating these thoughts to his audience in the post, Temple engages in mentoring, regardless whether intended or not. He details the events and provides his own analysis and criticism both for himself and for others to learn. This sequence of report and critical reflection might have been part of an actual Critical Incident

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77   If we regard computers and the Internet as a new 'space' that represents both the bivouac campfire where soldiers reflect on past battles, as well as the fire place at home around which families and friends gather to listen to veterans' war stories, however, the frequent unreliability of access to computers in the war zone (depending on one's duty station) elucidates the emotional strain that accompanies the soldiers' dependency on these devices.

78   Temple, "Another Training Day."

Debriefing.[79] It even includes a public reflection on the dilemma that the soldier faced in having to decide between shooting down or trying to apprehend the enemy, and possibly endangering his own team or other civilians by making the wrong decision. By performing this self-debriefing in public, Temple invites readers to draw their own conclusions and learn from his experience. This public representation of military activity, then, is as much debriefing, performed (if not explicitly ceremonial) storytelling for civilians, as well as mentoring and invitation to discuss best practice among military professionals.

However, while OPSEC regulations render this form of post-battle mentoring generally inaccessible for the more recent blogs, different forms prevailed. Bloggers often address their own amazement, culture shock, or frustration about a variety of aspects of everyday life in a military camp, life in the host country, and interaction with its inhabitants. Describing their impressions, activities, failures, and moments of success, but also embedding the conclusions drawn from these experiences, they share their learning process with their audience and invite readers to discuss the knowledge thus gained. A deployed soldier's milblog can teach trainees and future replacements what to expect in the war zone and how to prepare by complementing the deployment training provided by the military.

In one of Rex Temple's posts, a commenter introduces himself as a corporal in a National Guard unit preparing for his first deployment to Afghanistan. He states that he found Temple's blog through a Google search and that it helped him to learn more about the country as well as about an embedded trainer's (ETT) tasks: "I would like to thank you for the insight, and enlightenment your blog has given me involving mobilization training, Afghanistan, and the function of the ETT."[80] Another post describes Temple's visit to a different base camp, located near a number of Afghan historic sites, such as the Darulaman (King's Palace). Four out of five comments respond to his depiction of Camp Dubs.

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79 It remains unclear whether this detailed description of tactics and the open discussion of possible mistakes would, in fact, fall under OPSEC regulations and thus be subject to (self-)censorship—OPSEC measures are geared to denying the enemy information on weapons and tactics but, if Temple implicitly invites his readers to deliberate on the efficiency of his performance during this training session, the Taliban, known for monitoring American military personnel's online presentations, might learn from his experience, as well.

80 James Porter, 25 July 2009, in Temple, "Video Report." Readers Joe Herring (22 July 2009) and OI Doc G (12 Dec. 2009) voice similar notions in comments on the blog's "about" page. Temple, "The Writer."

Among them, a Turkish soldier remarks that he will be stationed at this camp in the coming months and that he will "need good luck there too."[81] Richard Phillips's blog received responses from a civilian medical student, commenting on his work in a camp hospital. In one post in April 2007, Maverick, a "lab tech student," expresses her admiration for Phillips's ability to work in adverse conditions at a temporary aid station (the station is housed in a tent in extreme weather).[82] The same commenter responds to a post a few months later: "I read your blogs every time a new one comes up. I check back every few days and every time i read I am amazed by the humanity you give to your patients. God Bless you…I watch with much admiration and my deepest gratitude [sic.]."[83] These expressions show that, regardless whether the commenters are younger soldiers or civilian medical students, they are learning from the bloggers' narrated experience and they acknowledge the bloggers' effort to share these experiences even in difficult circumstances.

This exchange with the audience and the intent of sharing one's learning process with potential replacements and younger soldiers is most explicitly expressed in Traversa's blog's title *Afghanistan Without a Clue*. Traversa states on several occasions that his account might be of help for those who follow him as embedded trainers, and that he would have liked to receive better preparation himself.[84] Asked about the role of the blog for mentoring in an e-mail interview, he explains:

> I felt we were poorly prepared for our deployment. We had no idea what to expect when we got there. I wanted the group coming after us to have more info. Many were avid readers of my blog, and told me later how helpful it was. I also prepared an extensive continuity book for the people coming to CMA.[85] I have always felt it was my responsibility to prepare anyone replacing me anywhere as best I can. Mentoring is very important to me, and I never really got to do it face to face.[86]

Through his blog, Traversa thus went beyond his designated tasks as an embedded trainer in order to support his replacements with his mentoring efforts. These off-duty activities obviously gained him much gratification and, apart from passing time and staying in touch with his family and friends, mentoring the specialized

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81 Bulent Toksoz, 19 Oct 2009, in Temple, "Darulaman Mission-Part 3."
82 Phillips, "Week 13."
83 Maverick, 11 Aug 2007, in Phillips, "Week 27."
84 Traversa, "From Cats."
85 The Central Movement Agency is the Afghan National Army's logistics branch where Traversa worked as embedded trainer.
86 Traversa, e-mail message to author, 25 Oct 2012.

community of military peers through the blog nurtured his and his coauthors' relationships with that community beyond institutional ties and served their sense of purpose and general well-being.

The mentoring function in blogs is not restricted to informal services among military and military-related professionals, however. Even among the very first milblogs, civilian readers responded to bloggers' descriptions of military and local everyday life to inform the authors that these narratives provided frames of reference for spouses, parents, and siblings of other currently or soon-to-be deployed soldiers. Milblogs evolve into representative insights into military life to which large numbers of civilians at home relate personally. One commenter to the post by Rex Temple above refers to "a loved one" who is currently stationed at Camp Dubs: "[H]e will be all over Alfghanistan and I wondered what Camp Dubs looked like [sic]."[87] Even almost one year after this post, commenter John Strange seeks to learn from Temple about the environment his son will soon be deployed to: "My son is going to Camp Dubs in June 2011. He's AF do you have any pictures, or know of a web site that has pictures of the base."[88] Similarly, Shannon replies to one of Traversa's posts thanking him for writing the blog because it "helps me to understand a little better the country and the people there. My husband is deployed there in Kandahar."[89]

The blog exchange as a personal mission, as a way to (possibly inadvertently) help oneself through altruism functions in the same way when commenters and bloggers work together to coordinate civilian support for deployed soldiers. Activist groups such as the Soldiers Angels routinely scan through a variety of blogs as well as other social media services used by deployed troops to network and to seek and offer help. Richard Phillips's blog receives a comment on his depiction of living conditions in Khowst province which states that the reader had "adopted" a soldier in his area and that Phillips's blog "help[s] me to know what to send/write" in order to support the soldier.[90] Rex Temple is asked by a number of readers how they can send him care packages.[91] He and his wife then post a list of charitable support groups on their blog.[92] Temple diverts much of this interest directed at himself because he is located at a large central

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87 Caroline, 17 July 2010, in Temple, "Darulaman Mission-Part 3."
88 John Strange, 2 May 2011, in Temple.
89 Shannon, 28 Jan. 2007, in Traversa, "Pirates."
90 Anon., 15 April 2007, at 01:29, in Phillips, "Week 12."
91 For OPSEC reasons, he sometimes cannot disclose his exact location and thus cannot provide a mailing address. Temple and Temple, "About Care Packages."
92 Temple and Temple.

base with many facilities providing everyday items, so he does not need many care packages. Instead, he suggests that readers send care packages to remote Forward Operating Bases (FOBs) whose troops have little opportunity to acquire such items. He then offers to provide a list of individual soldiers in need of care packages to these organizations.[93] Temple thus combines his popularity as a blogger with his duties which frequently take him to distant military sites to coordinate civilian support for others. These charitable activities, I argue, are in part efforts to mentor civilian supporters, employing the bloggers' unique position as experienced insiders. In the same post, Temple also discusses a charity drive for Afghan school children that is investigated in more detail below.

As in archaic, informal post-battle debriefings, in ceremonial narrations of warriors' experiences among Native peoples, in the early online military discussion forums on best practice, or in post-deployment blogs such as Scott Lee's PTSD self-help network, deployed soldiers' blogs serve altruistic functions by sharing war experience. They are not simply an occasion to blow off steam or send a message into the void but actively engage their audience in discourse on their specialized knowledge and values. Many bloggers understand this exchange as their personal mission to employ their experience to educate others. This experience is, thus, perceived by the audience as a 'gift,' a contribution to a community (rather, to diverse, often overlapping communities) which the commenters, as representatives of the audience, gratefully receive and acknowledge. Since comments and expressions of gratitude are made not only directly in private e-mails, but in the public forum of the blog, the effect of public acknowledgment for the soldiers' services contributes to the sense of community among all participants in this co-constructed narrative.

During the course of their deployment, some bloggers begin to use their popularity for political debates on the relationship between the military and civil society, especially on the soldiers' relationship with the media and, to a lesser extent, with politicians. One blog merits a closer look because a contextualization with Native American traditions of warriorhood as well as recent public debates on the value of continued service elucidates its discursive function. During his final month before returning home, Traversa posts a number of such reflections. In "Sgt. David Stephens," a memorial post for a soldier from his home town who was killed in Afghanistan, he muses on his adolescent reading of Napoleonic Baron Antoine-Henry de Jomini's (1779–1869) classic *The Art of War*, who suggested that political leaders should have military experience. Traversa

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93 Temple, "Charity."

contextualizes his own experience of war in Afghanistan and agrees: "We'll never see this put into our constitution, but wouldn't it be wonderful if every one of our leaders, from the President down to Senators and Congress people, had served in the military, and even better, been in harm's way (so they really understand what it's like)."[94] He emphasizes that deployed military personnel feel insecure because they are subject to erratic policy changes due to political partisan bickering, making the soldiers feel like 'pawns.' He bemoans the fact that the populace in Iraq and Afghanistan similarly suffers from such unpredictable policy-making. Traversa's readers eagerly engage in this debate. Teri Centner, a regular commenter, refers to Robert Heinlein's science fiction novel *Starship Troopers*, which envisions military service as a prerequisite for full citizenship and voting rights.[95] Such a suggestion has evoked fears of a militarized society, even of fascism in the disguise of democracy since the publication of Heinlein's novel.[96] In this particular context, however, Traversa discusses military service as a prerequisite for citizenship because he, as a deployed soldier, is affected by political decisions made by civilians who seem detached from the personal consequences these decisions have, both for the soldiers whom they command and for the local population in the war zone whose interests they claim to protect.

In another April 2007 post, Traversa responds to hate mail that he received over his publicly expressed support for the service of homosexuals and women in the military. Traversa employs his military experience gained during deployment to deflate his opponent's arguments, stating that deployment to a war zone and immersion in a completely different culture open up entirely new perspectives to approach the diversity of opinions and customs:

> Sitting over here learning how to accept and befriend people completely different from me has been a very good experience. I have learned better to look at each person as simply a person. It's very liberating. Set your hate and bias aside, and get to know people. Have reasoned dialog. If they still insist on killing you, as the Taliban do, then we do what we must.[97]

This invocation of wisdom gained through extraordinary experience is addressed in Native American notions of age acceleration featured so strongly in tribal warrior traditions, as well as in the concept of the archetypal warrior hero whose

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94 Traversa, "Sgt. David Stephens."
95 Teri Center, 24 Apr 2007, in Traversa.
96 Dolman, "Military, Democracy, and the State in Robert A. Heinlein's Starship Troopers."
97 Traversa, "Angry Bear."

quest earns him unique wisdom. Once more, Traversa engages in mentoring, explaining to his audience that his war experience uniquely taught him about the fragility of life and about cultural diversity.

Traversa also posts a "Letter to the Editor" that the blogger team had begun to solicit from their readers a few weeks before, written by a friend from his hometown who similarly comments on the value of the soldiers' experience and of their learning processes for civil society, as well as for an understanding of mutual responsibility in citizenship:

> I'd like to […] make a plea to all of the great military people who will be coming home. As you think about what you will do in the future, I ask you to consider running for political office. I have learned so much through your eyes reading AWAC and other milblogs. As I pass this on to others I have seen their attitudes change from the enlightenment. I believe you are making a difference in a way that you may not have intended, and indeed I have seen you express this sentiment. Your experiences and attitudes are so valuable to our country. I know I have a lot of nerve to suggest that those who have served so well continue to serve. But I can't resist asking since you all have so gained much knowledge [sic]. If any of you would ever decide to run, I will be there to support you.[98]

In these exchanges, the blogger is obviously aware of the value of his experience; he explicitly states how important the learning process is to him; he voices his conviction that civil society can (and should) learn from these experiences and from the soldiers' acquired knowledge. Members of the audience chime in and acknowledge both the hard-earned experience and its sharing.[99] It is interesting to note here that commenter George Bailey not only addresses Traversa's experience, but also the effect his blog has in educating his audience. Regardless whether Traversa intended to use the blog as a vehicle to share experience and, thus, to educate civil society, Bailey acknowledges both the experience and the service of sharing it. His response exemplifies the public civilian acknowledgment of soldiers' narratives called for by activist scholars and therapists such as Shay, Tick, and Becknell.

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98 George Bailey, in Traversa, "Angry Bear."

99 We do not know if the sender of the hate mail replied to Traversa's public reproving. In addition, it should be mentioned that the breadth of topics discussed and the open and critical debate encountered among Traversa, his fellow bloggers, and their audience are probably not representative of milblogs in general. Many blogs sampled for this study seem to engage in a limited range of topics and prefer an atmosphere of community-building like-mindedness, rather than public, critical, and rational debate in a more Habermasian sense.

"It Is not Like that in America." Cultural Brokering in Milblogs

> *I have only two months left to write first-hand about life here, can our simple conversations have an impact in the bigger scheme of things?*[100]

Soldiers traveling through war zones that were not part of their own country have, apart from applying a 'natural' military lens to place (e.g., terrain, obstacles, potential ambush sites) and people (e.g., adversaries, informants, noncombatants) always approached these strange places and people from a perspective of exoticism, especially since the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries when armies were comprised to a large extent of soldiers from the middle classes in an era of emerging mass tourism.[101] It is, thus, not surprising that many American milbloggers view Afghanistan with somewhat of a tourist's gaze, posting photos of themselves at bazaars, in front of majestic mountain silhouettes, or wearing Afghan clothing. They frequently discuss these activities, such as purchasing Afghan carpets as souvenirs with which to decorate their American homes, or commenting on the strange procedures of local traffic, on bad roads, landscape features, and weather conditions. This is particularly not surprising if one considers the recruiting campaigns among contemporary 'Western' all-volunteer forces that lure potential recruits with promises of exotic places to see and interesting people to meet.

However, the tourist's gaze comes naturally because, after all, deployed soldiers are —specialized—travelers. Beyond that, many milbloggers develop a keen interest in intercultural exchange, that is, they begin to portray Afghanistan's history, cultural practices, local customs, and social organization for their readers in texts and photographs because their position as long-term visitors gives them insight into the host country that often not even the media will gain.[102]

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100 Traversa, "Terrible."

101 Even in the Philippine War, American soldiers posed for photos in front of exotic buildings and landscapes. Niedermeier, "Imperial Narratives." In World War II, many Allied soldiers in Italy and France carried Baedekers to explore historic sites during their off-duty hours. Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale*, 159.

102 The 2012 conference "Krieg, Militär und Mobilität von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart" in Osnabrück, Germany, scrutinized historical interrelations of soldiering and mobility. Several contributions to the resulting print collection explore in how far these other perspectives that soldiers can assume during deployment or occupation duty would allow to understand them as a specialized type of "migrants," thus integrating migration and mobility-studies concepts with new military history. Cf. Rass, *Krieg, Militär und Mobilität*.

Deployed soldiers can, thus, report on the country and share insider knowledge that few others would have access to. Many milbloggers use this position to educate American readers, not only to share information about Afghanistan, but also to contextualize particular events and Allied activities with the local and regional background, and to contrast the harsh Afghan living conditions that they observe with the affluence they knew back home, inviting a debate about both reasons and explanations for the ongoing conflict, as well as criticism of American self-centeredness. Furthermore, some bloggers also report on their interaction with Afghans and their—often comical and sometimes frustrating—attempts to explain American culture and society and, thus, to seek common ground and gain mutual understanding on an individual level. In these attempts, they go beyond their duties as soldiers and begin to transform into culture brokers. Their blogs serve as hubs for intercultural exchange, which often engages both American and international audiences, as well as Afghan locals.

In "My First Afghan Meal," Rex Temple shares his experience of typical culture shock: Invited to a meal with the ANA unit his team is to train, he realizes that he forgot to bring his extra spoon (implying the typical fears of food poisoning among many 'Western' visitors to Asia). Temple describes the dishes in detail and observes his hosts in order to learn how to eat with his hands properly.[103] This experience of initial culture shock and adjustment to local customs can be observed in many milblogs' early entries. A similar entry a few weeks later details his problems eating unhomogenized yogurt and complains about the taste of Pakistani mangoes. However, he describes this meal at the ANA dining facility as the "best Afghan meal I have eaten since arriving here."[104] Several readers respond to his depiction of food culture, as in the following example: "Thank you

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103 Temple, "My First." The post is fascinating on other levels, as well. Temple learns about Afghan history under Soviet occupation and that, in this earlier war, infighting among Afghans occurred as well because the Soviets recruited Afghans to help fight the US-backed Mujahideen. Temple decides to research this topic further and, for now, contextualizes the situation (both for himself and for his readers) by comparing it to the American Civil War. On a meta-textual level, Temple states during this first meeting with his ANA partners his sense of personal mission. Introduced to his liaison in the Afghan chain of command who "seemed impressed with the few sentences of Dari I was able to mutter," Temple outlines the motivation for writing his blog to his future training partner: "Using the translator I explained that I was a writer and I wanted the American public to read and hear stories about Afghan life." Temple, "My First."

104 Temple, "Quiet Sunday."

for sharing the details and helping us understand a culture that is literally and figuratively a half-a-world away from the USA. Your efforts, insights and photos are greatly appreciated."[105] This commenter acknowledges the cultural divide but also lauds Temple for his effort to explain and bridge these cultural differences.

Many of the discussions between bloggers and Afghans revolve around everyday life, customs, and traditions. Since representatives of both 'Western' culture and Afghans (regardless whether Taliban or not) often consider one another's perspectives on gender relations, marriage, family life, and sex as very strange, even as abhorrent, it is no surprise that many bloggers touch upon these topics. Temple, reaching out to his ANA partners and Afghan interpreters early during his tour, describes in his blog what he learned from these conversations about engagement periods, arranged marriages, and regulations for divorce in Islam.[106] In a similar vein, Traversa shares his frequent conversations with his unit's interpreters Hamid, Wali, and Han. Because he is obviously striving to portray the complexity of Afghan culture, history, and of the contact and conflicts between his own and many Afghans' beliefs, he relates many of these exchanges almost verbatim and goes beyond many other blogs' depictions of the local culture analyzed for this study. In an exemplary debate, they discuss the cultural implications of a childless marriage in Afghanistan and, eventually, reach their respective limits of understanding:

> The cultural gulf exploded in my face. The utter casualness with which he said this was as shocking as when Wali told me gays and apostates should be executed.
> "I married my wife because I love HER. Why in the world would I leave her if she couldn't have children? I want to be with her."
> Hamid seemed as baffled as I was. "But a marriage is nothing without children."
> "Why?" I demanded.
> "Who will take care of you when you are older? Who will pray for you when you die?" he explained.[107]

The "cultural gulf" Traversa mentions here looms over many such conversations. It is noteworthy how the author struggles to maintain a culturally relativist stance, that is, he carefully deliberates judgments of whose culture and customs are 'right' or 'wrong' or 'should' change their ways. He makes sure to include contextual information for American readers (if his Afghan partner did not already do so in the exchange). In the above conversation, he explains the sociocultural

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105 Joey Niebrugge, 7 June 2009, in Temple.
106 Temple, "Slow Day"; Temple, "Mentoring."
107 Traversa, "Children"; cf. Traversa, "Marriage"; Traversa, "Anything."

obligation to intergenerational support within Afghan families, especially regarding care for the elderly in a society with brittle, if at all any, state-sponsored social infrastructure. However, he openly shares his opinion and his own cultural perspective on these matters in a tone that suggests a serious, but honest and respectful argument among friends:

> I turned off my glare, sat back in my chair, and pulled my hair back with my hands as I tend to do when faced with a dilemma. "We really do come from different worlds. I can't understand why you treat women so badly. To me, marriage is a partnership and a friendship. I cannot imagine deliberately hurting my wife, as your men do."
>
> "It is our culture."
>
> "Well, I can't change your culture, but I hope what I say can change you. I am concerned about you. I don't want you to be like that. When you get married, I hope you will treat your wife better than that."[108]

As much as Traversa and his Afghan colleagues reach the limits of mutual understanding, it is intriguing to observe Traversa's investment in highlighting commonalities and mutual interests after he depicted the 'otherness' of the local culture. These frequent references to common denominators make his blog an engaging public forum for culture brokering. Major Apple, one of his fellow soldiers who joined the team of *AWAC* bloggers, exemplifies this by sharing his childhood learning with the audience and contextualizing it with the learning process of cultural contact in Afghanistan:

> You're probably asking yourself, "What does any of this have to do with Afghanistan?" I'll tell you. Everything I've learned in life is applicable to an Afghan. They understand and respond to: Hard work, Loyalty, Family, Truthfulness, Integrity, Fun, Consistency, and everything else I've talked about. If you can forget about what makes us different, and concentrate on what makes us the same, the sky is the limit here.[109]

Traversa and one of his interpreters also set out to discuss Afghan history in detail in a short series of posts in which the author explicitly states his intent to educate readers. Yet, as he explains, he is being educated himself since it is the interpreter Han who uses both Traversa's personal curiosity and his blog's popularity to reach out to Americans: "Han is passionate about getting the truth out about Afghanistan, and I've told him I will be happy to relate his story to all of you. Han is certain that most Americans only know about the Taliban, and don't understand everything else that went before. So the two of us will do our part

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108 Traversa, "Children."
109 Major Apple, in Traversa, "Terrible."

to educate as many as possible."[110] Traversa, thus, makes clear that he is merely relaying the information gained from Han, and that it is "Han's story. Remember, this is history as related to me by Han. It is his view. I make no other claim than that."[111] These posts contain a number of brutal episodes and graphic photos of the infighting among the warlords during the 1990s, as well as the Taliban terror regime prior to ISAF's invasion in 2001. Reinforcing Han's position as the storyteller (and thus, the educator) and emphatically focusing on Han's interest in sharing this story with Americans, Traversa performs his role as a messenger by expertly understating his own part in sharing Han's insight with all his readers: "I am moved by what he must have gone through, and he is seemingly desperate to finally be able to tell his story in such detail to an American. It is urgent that I understand what has happened."[112] His readers use their own knowledge of American history to contextualize and make sense of Han's story. Leta, a regular, reminds readers that American nation-building took several decades and included mistakes and infighting, as well. She concedes that religious fanaticism on a scale comparable to Afghanistan was absent from American history and that Afghans' nation-building process is, thus, understandably more painful and riddled with setbacks. Commenting on the narratives provided by Han and Traversa, she concludes: "So, I look forward to more history lessons from Han. Hopefully HIS information will assist those who read this (including me) to understand the reality of the entire situation there and not just what the media would have us know."[113] This final potshot at American mainstream media emphasizes many readers' concern about a sense of 'liberal bias' in the media, but it also reveals the blog's role as a source of (seemingly) independent insider information and, thus, it acknowledges and elevates Traversa as the provider of such information.

Being 'Western' visitors who, initially, might be as uninformed about Afghanistan as their audience, milbloggers become insiders over the course of their deployment. They witness or partake in many events, and their cooperation with the ANA and civilian local contract interpreters gives them immediate access to informants. They are, indeed, in a unique position to acquire and distribute information about life in the war zone that traditional media do not have. Regardless whether traditional media's war reports differ because, as conservative

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110 Traversa, "History 1."
111 Traversa, "History 2."
112 Traversa.
113 Leta, 9 Mar 2007, in Traversa, "History 2."

blog readers presume, their 'liberal bias' is interested in diminishing the Bush administration's (or even the military's) reputation, or whether their dependency on reader and viewer ratings requires them to select the tragic and the spectacular over the everyday and the small steps toward nation-building, bloggers have access to mundane everyday life and are rewarded by their audience for depicting it in detail.[114]

Rex Temple features many such stories of small steps towards progress and individual joy. In "Rose Garden," he introduces an ANA sergeant who spends his off-duty hours gardening for the beautification of the military base. Temple particularly highlights this soldier's efforts to grow roses. He posts a number of beautiful pictures of this garden: "The roses are very difficult to grow and he compares this to the future of his country. He believes with hard work and determination Afghanistan will survive and be prosperous. The same goes for his rose garden."[115] Temple adds that he asked his wife to send some fertilizer and "Miracle-Gro" as a surprise for his fellow ANA sergeant. In this way, he invests in helping with these small steps. He becomes an active participant in the nation-building process but also engages on a meta-level by portraying his own efforts towards that goal. His readers appreciate the analogy of rebuilding and gardening as well as the photographs and share their own gardening expertise.[116] In a post on the Afghan tradition of kite flying, Temple portrays these cultural practices even more as acts of resistance against the Taliban, explaining that kite flying had been banned under their rule and that now, during holidays, American soldiers observed as many as one hundred kites in the air together. Invited to join and learn how to handle a kite and to engage in competition with other fliers, Temple explicitly conveys the political aspect of this activity and, thus, the political message behind reporting it: "But for the 10 seconds I held on to the line, I was feeling triumphant and defiant against the Taliban. It was truly a symbolic victory."[117]

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114 Because they are participants in a war, however, their writing, too, is politically charged, and many readers reward bloggers' divergence from the mainstream media's positions and for matching readers' expectations. In these instances, community is constituted through an expression of like-mindedness. Cf. Kaye and Tremayne, "Blog Use Motivations."

115 Temple, "Rose Garden."

116 Vickie, 11 June 2009; juliannah, 11 June 2009, in Temple, "Rose Garden."

117 Temple, "Flying." Cf. also Doug "Rat" Templeton's entry on kite flying and Teri Centner's comment (17 Apr 2007) in Traversa, "Giant."

When they describe the living conditions of local Afghans, many bloggers put them in a perspective relative to the material wealth and affluence in American society back home, and readers frequently contextualize these differences in their own comments. During my research of milblogs, I did not encounter specific discussions of economic and social stratification, poverty, and crime in US society. It seems that American bloggers and their followers emphasize the overall affluence and security of US society in contrast to the poverty and instability of war-torn Afghanistan. Richard Phillips describes unpaved roads and the erratic water and electricity supply for most homes in Khowst province:

> We take a lot for granted; power, water, safety and security to name a few. In Khowst City they get 4 to 8 hour a day of power, usually in the evening […] Of course, running water requires electricity so most homes and business use water tanks on the roof to provide gravity-fed water for drinking and cleaning. Safety and security? Well, in a place where suicide bombings and automatic rifle fire are common, safety and security are not taken for granted.[118]

One commenter acknowledges the challenges to rebuilding and peace-keeping in Afghanistan, and hopes that "some good" will result from American involvement. He envisions two distinct outcomes, comparing them with other historical American engagements: "The question is: will our tenure there have results more like our efforts in Japan after WW2 or will it be more like our efforts in Lebanon during the Reagan administration? That remains to be seen."[119]

Providing a small series of reports on a mission to Kabul and its vicinity, Temple posts photographs about local sights, such as the Darulaman (King's Palace), and describes in vivid detail traffic, housing, and public life in the capital. He mentions the diversity of vehicles on the streets, ranging from SUVs to wheelbarrows, and adds that Kabul's position as the capital city and center of administration, commerce, and rebuilding efforts attracts a vast number of migrants who seek ways to support their families. One comment exemplifies many similar responses throughout Temple's and other soldier's blogs: "Thank you for enlightening us to what the people in Afghanistan experience on a daily basis. We are so blessed. If we ever think life isn't fair…we just need to look at the pictures above and your description and realize our life is so good."[120] These realizations of the cross-cultural wealth gap from both bloggers and their audience usually result in one of two conclusions. On many occasions, the exchanges

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118 Phillips, "Week 12."
119 Anonymous (Dave), 9 Apr 2007, in Phillips.
120 Mary Lu Saylor, 9 Sep. 2009, in Temple, "Darulaman Mission-Part One."

between bloggers and their audience serve to justify the war effort, implicitly or explicitly, because all participants agree that American (and Allied) presence in Afghanistan works to overcome these harsh conditions. Sometimes, this notion is taken further, e.g., when soldiers use the culture shock about poverty in Afghanistan to launch charity drives among their audience, as the next subchapter describes. Before turning to these specific missions of social engagement, however, a few observations on exchanges in which US soldiers discuss American culture with their Afghan partners further illustrate milbloggers' efforts at culture brokering.

In their exchanges with ANA soldiers and interpreters, bloggers such as Traversa frequently encounter curiosity, based on vague ideas about American society and culture, but also about Christianity in general, among Afghans. Explaining 'America,' particularly the diversity and complexity of American society and cultural expressions to their Afghan counterparts, they once more assume the tasks of culture brokers and cultural diplomats. At the same time, they engage in individual missions of 'winning hearts and minds,' and they portray their activities as a complementary layer to the peace-keeping and nation-building mission of the US military. Traversa relates his personal mission in culture brokering to his interpreter Hamid when, once again, they face the cultural divide between them and must figure out how to explain and accept each other's opinions and world views: "True, it is not like that in America, but the point of my blog is to educate Americans on our cultural differences."[121] Traversa highlights the benefit of learning from one another in this exchange and depicts both Hamid and himself as open-minded representatives of each other's nations and cultures: "You see, when I write, you represent Afghanistan, and I represent America. Our worlds are very different, and when we talk, we both learn so much about each other, and thus about our countries. But always, no matter what we talk about, we part friends. Perhaps the same will be true of our countries."[122] Referring to these representative roles allows Traversa to understand their publicized private conversations as individual contributions to the overall war effort; he implicitly asks American readers to acknowledge their efforts at culture brokering.

During one of these conversations, Hamid confronts Traversa with sudden praise (they had discussed morality and individual ethical principles throughout the previous weeks, but also aspects of Traversa's family life, and

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121 Traversa, "Terrible."
122 Traversa, "Life."

his teetotalism): "I wish you were a Muslim. You would be a great example of how a Muslim should live."[123] In the following, they launch into another discussion of religious differences, which is plainly painful for both and leads both to exclamations about the incompatibility of the other's beliefs and faith-based cultural practices. However, Traversa adds his own conclusions from these fierce and yet friendly exchanges, inviting his audience to consider his and Hamid's eventual acceptance of these differences:

> To all my readers, be they Christians, Muslims, atheists, or anything else, my goal is not to convert Hamid to any way of thinking. We talk because we are friends trying to understand each other's world. I am not mocking his beliefs, nor would I mock yours. Freedom of Religion, Freedom of Thought, Freedom from Coercion, these are the foundations of our great country. If I don't believe the way you do, hopefully that doesn't upset you. As long as your faith doesn't want to deny me my freedoms, I don't care what you believe or don't believe. Hamid and I are exact opposites on many issues, yet we are good friends. There may be a lesson in there somewhere.[124]

Commenters recognize Traversa's quest in these exchanges as the civil-religious drive inherent in Americans' wartime self-image throughout the twentieth century. Traversa purports to assert typical American ideals in this statement, in part adapting Franklin D. Roosevelt's 'Four Freedoms' to suit his current circumstances, and he presents them as role models in his exchanges with Hamid.

A few days later, the debate on faith resumes as Hamid inquires about the Bible and resurrection, baffled by reports on religious diversity in the US and even more baffled when confronted with the fact that many Christians, in fact, question elements of scripture.[125] Realizing Hamid's struggle to comprehend a critical perspective on faith, Traversa likens apostle Paul's story and the Bible's assertion that one thousand people witnessed resurrection to making the mocking claim that he saw a giant purple lizard fly around the military base and that one thousand people witnessed the same event but somehow could not be questioned about it. Explicating that nobody could logically prove either story, Traversa argues that taking a story on faith can be a carefully considered decision by referring to the Qur'an's creation story:

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123 Traversa. "Life."

124 Traversa, "Life."

125 Other bloggers face similar notions about religiosity in the US. Rex Temple is told by an Afghan youngster that he hates Americans because they are "non-believer[s]." Temple takes great pains to 'create dialog' and enable a change in perspective, following the cultural advice of an ANA mullah: "I am not a non-believer, I just have a different book than you do." Temple, in "VMO Part 2."

> I always hated it in church when [citing one thousand anonymous witnesses] was used as a proof of the resurrection, because logically it isn't. But it's not the sort of question you would ask in church. The same is true with your view of the Qur'an. You believe the Qur'an wrote itself. This may be true. But you have no evidence of this. You must believe it based on faith. Do you understand what I'm saying? Just because I say 1,000 people saw a giant purple, rock-eating, flying lizard doesn't make it true, does it?"[126]

Readers seem to enjoy these debates immensely, and they frequently post encouraging comments or ask that specific topics be discussed. Many draw political conclusions from the conversations to acknowledge Traversa's performance as a culture broker and cultural diplomat. Seguin connects traditional American ideals discussed in "Life, the Universe, and Everything" with what he interprets as the maturation of Christianity after the Enlightenment. This commenter understands the conversations between the American soldier and his Afghan interpreter as seeds for a potential future Islamic Enlightenment which would serve the American mission of nation-building in Afghanistan. Seguin explicitly posits that Traversa's critical questions tackling Hamid's expressions of (blind) faith "are an integral part of the war on Wahhabi Theocracy […] If you continue asking these questions, and so does Hamid, I believe an Enlightenment can come to the Middle East and the Muslim world at large. Thank you, for all you are doing, this included."[127] Regular visitor Leta lauds Traversa for posing challenging questions but never telling his conversation partners "what to think." She adds "MAJOR KUDOS to you for the way you choose to allow one to think for themself as opposed to attempting to force and opinion or idea on the[m]. I'm kinda liking the idea of Bear for Ambassador to Afghanistan [sic]."[128] Another regular, Teri Centner, appreciates the diplomatic effort but also highlights the entertainment factor many readers apparently experience when following these exchanges. Readers frequently relate the debates to other sources in American (popular) culture: "Your lesson on faith was certainly a good try, Bear. I wonder if you should tell Hamid about the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster."[129]

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126 Traversa, "Giant."

127 Seguin, 11 Apr 2007, in Traversa, "Life."

128 Leta, 17 Apr 2007, in Traversa, "Giant." Commenters refer to Traversa as "Bear" because he and his fellow writer Doug Templeton share the same given name and initial in their last names, leading to their distinction by nicknames as "Bear" and "Rat."

129 Teri Centner, 17 Apr 2007, in "Giant." The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster is a satirical organization who invented their own religion in response to the culture wars over the roles of church and state in the US, especially regarding the debate over Creationism versus Evolution in school curricula. Cf. "Church."

These examples represent one side of a wide spectrum of milblogs' depictions of deployed soldiers' lives in Afghanistan. Many bloggers show little interest in local cultures, and many who are interested portray them from a superior, ethnocentric perspective. However, given OPSEC restrictions on sensitive information, bloggers' choice of topics is limited, and many soldiers, if they do not talk about pop culture, as Doug Traversa frequently does as well, see the host country's culture as a point of interest that might draw the attention of readers back home. Regardless of the motivation of the majority of milbloggers, the examples explored here offer an insight into how authors use their blogs as vehicles to both express their opinions and curiosity, and actively seek to nurture dialog among themselves, their (generally American) civilian readership, and their Afghan teammates. In these instances, bloggers not only write to satisfy their sense of a personal mission beyond prescribed military duties, their writing also metanarratively discusses the value of these platforms for enabling, and supporting, intercultural exchange. As the final subchapter emphasizes, some authors use their blogs in yet more activist functions—they go beyond sharing their experience and conversations and employ their blog as an organizational space and as infrastructure for their individual campaigns in civic engagement to contribute to the war effort.

"Winning this War with Education." Milbloggers' Charity Missions as Part of the War Effort

> *[W]e all felt a sense of accomplishment. The smiles on the children's faces and those of the local villagers were evidence that at least for a day we had won the hearts and minds of the people. The true litmus test will be with what happens in the future and whether our troops will be continually subject to attacks or hidden IEDs.*[130]

A discussion of political aspects in milblogs keeps returning to the question of exploitation and instrumentalization, as this study has pointed out before. One of the reasons why initial, frantic attempts to shut down the private use of Internet services, particularly of social media, among deployed soldiers gave way to an attitude of permissive channeling is that military planners realized how profitable soldiers' narratives could be for military public relations. Pentagon officials realized the impact of social media not only on troop morale but also on the

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130 Temple, "Tagab."

visibility and reputation of the military in public debate, and the milblogosphere actively promoted its contribution to winning 'hearts and minds' in internal military debates over social media use. Both military leaders and many of the soldiers themselves were thus convinced that, by narrating their war experience to the public, individual soldiers made valuable contributions to the war effort as much as to military public relations. This final section explores how milbloggers carry a sense of mission beyond duty into their blogging and civic engagement, and it discusses the ambiguities of private expression, military duties, and public relations that arise when private political and social activism intermingle with active deployment.

While it cannot be said that all milbloggers support the US government's military policies and strategies, or that they, thus, deliberately intend to serve as "third-party validators" and "force multipliers"[131] for the military's message, their embeddedness in the war situation must be taken into account. All writing about war is politically charged and, since soldiers are the ones who wage it, they are most immediately invested in and affected by the planning, conduct, and effects of war. Their writing, therefore, will be heavily influenced by their experiences, their own actions, and by the military culture surrounding them, i.e., by regulations, norms, and values. The assumption that blogging soldiers can truly represent an independent "third party" perspective in the depiction of military affairs must, thus, be taken with a grain of salt.

Given these underlying considerations, many blog posts leave open different and often conflicting interpretations on intent and effect regarding the venting of emotions in a post as they invite sympathetic audience responses, individual positive self-portrayal, personal commitment to the war effort beyond the call of duty, and positive portrayals of the American war effort in Afghanistan by highlighting individual soldiers' altruistic activities. The readings below there-fore focus on select posts, primarily by Rex Temple, because they highlight how these diverse interpretations and meanings often blend into each other and because, in some cases, the bloggers explicitly offer their own interpretations of the meaning of depicted events. They reveal their awareness of this blending of personal and institutional interests and missions, particularly as they revolve around the phrase about "winning the hearts and minds" of Afghans.

In frequent intervals, milbloggers mention that they and other soldiers handed out candy, chocolate, soccer balls, or everyday items, such as ballpoint pens or toys, to children. This often occurs as part of so-called Humanitarian Assistance

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131 Collings and Rohozinski, "Bullets and Blogs. New Media and the Warfighter," 4.

(HA) or Village Medical Operation (VMO)[132] missions during which troops convoy out to remote areas to make contact and establish friendly relationships with the locals. In these interactions, soldiers seek to bond with locals on a close, personal level, and the blogs offer opportunities to display the resulting emotions. Posting about one such mission, Rex Temple launches into his entry stating that its purpose was to "deliver school supplies, toys, clothing, hygiene items, and bring some happiness to the parentless children."[133] The post describes the variety of items as well as the living conditions in the orphanage visited that day, it addresses the problem of corruption, and ends noting that "[t]he smiles on the children's faces were priceless and watching them clutch their notebooks, pens, and new toys was unforgettable." During another mission, he spends a day pumping up soccer balls: "On several occasions I would hand the soccer balls to the young boys just to see the expressions on their faces. They were too young to differentiate between a Muslim and an infidel. In their eyes, all they saw was a generous man handing them a soccer ball."[134] In these and many other similar expressions, the soldiers' joy of "bring[ing] some happiness" to children is paramount. One might speculate that this aspect of these missions is particularly enjoyable for soldiers because these activities can be perceived as unambiguous and without moral complications regarding the often conflicting tasks soldiers have to perform in asymmetric wars such as the Afghanistan campaign.[135]

In many depictions of charitable soldiers, bloggers comment on the political context of the mission of which the giving of gifts is a part. That is, bloggers reflect on the implications of gift-giving, they are aware that the humanitarian and medical missions have the purpose of winning over previously disloyal or hostile civilians and maintaining the loyalty and support of others. Many blog posts thus immediately place these forms of interaction into the perspective of the larger war effort. In one post, Temple describes his unit's exercise at a shooting range. He observes that local children approach the scene to salvage spent cartridge casings to sell as scrap metal and to ask for food; one group of these visitors is from a "friendly" and another from an "unfriendly" village. "Even though a handful of the children came from the 'unfriendly village' to our west, we still gave them bottled water and some food to eat. Perhaps this small gesture

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132 Some sources use the term Village Medical Outreach.
133 Temple, "Orphanage."
134 Temple, "VMO Day 4."
135 However, Temple's reference to corruption at the orphanage illustrates that war's ambiguities continue to loom over many of these seemingly innocent encounters.

of kindness will win over the hearts and minds of these young boys."[136] Kindness toward children in an extremely poor country blends in with the soldier's awareness that his behavior as a cultural diplomat and representative of what the adults at the "unfriendly village" would regard as an occupying enemy force might benefit future interactions with these villagers.

Richard Phillips reports similar scenes from his hospital, posting a picture of two girls who received some handouts: "And still, the patients continue to come. These two little girls represent the future of Afghanistan. Hopefully they will be like Germans and Japanese children from 50 years ago who remember kind American Soldiers who took care of them and gave them candy. We can't win this war unless we love the Afghan people, and there's no better place to start than with the children."[137] The frequent focus on children vividly marks the contrast between military and civil life. Children are not only the future generation of the country at war, they are also ideal representatives of civilian life because they are considered least responsible for and most affected by war. With this focus, then, a soldiers' war narrative reveals and channels many conflicts between military and civilian realities both on individual psychological as well as political and cultural levels of the narrative. Soldiers such as Temple and Phillips thus internalize the overall mission to win over the local populace in order to dry out Taliban resources, influence, and refuge. Through small, individual gestures, they not only improve their own morale by helping others, they contribute to the war effort and, perhaps most importantly, they inform their followers that winning the war (better, winning peace) requires time, vast numbers of such small, individual steps and, thus, patience. Referring to historical examples such as rebuilding Germany and Japan after World War II serves as proof that these steps, although they might seem insignificant to some at this time, have been part of a successful strategy before.

Rex Temple's blog reveals some intriguing insights into soldiers' sense of mission to win hearts and minds. An example of a particularly self-reflective post will serve to identify diverse layers of involvement. The entry "Winning this War with Education" introduces his audience to his off-duty reading on counterinsurgency strategies and explains that Temple hopes to learn from the manuals to improve his problem-solving skills. One lesson from a manual especially catches his interest: "If you do not understand relationships, people, cultural economics, human terrain, and all those related issues, you will only see the symptoms rather

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136 Temple, "Air Force."
137 Phillips, "Week 12."

than diagnosing the problem…killing the enemy is easy, but finding him is often nearly impossible unless you have the cooperation of the villagers and the citizens," he concludes.[138]

He then relates his conversation with an eight-year-old boy who tells him that most of the people in his village support the Taliban out of fear and that handing out medical supplies and toys will not keep the boy safe once the American convoy leaves and the Taliban return to retake control of the village. Haunted by his own helplessness in giving hope to the boy, Temple explains to his audience that the Taliban apparently bomb schools and place bounties on teachers (especially women) because "they do not want the people to be educated," and that they hold sway over people's minds through the local mullahs who are often the only literate person in a village. "So perhaps one of the answers to winning this war is to educate the people, especially the young children, because they are the future of Afghanistan. I know this is a long process, but I think this is one of the essential keys in winning this war and finding a permanent solution."[139]

This seems to be one of the central moments in Temple's entire blog. It illustrates a period of change, as well as two interrelated levels apparent in Temple's writing. He blends private opinion and official statements in the posts with the evolution of his personal quest to contribute to "winning this war with education" by starting a donations drive for school supplies among his audience. Posted on 9 July 2009, the entry "Winning" is surrounded by casual remarks in posts during June and July that he volunteered as a "P[ublic] A[ffairs] representative"[140] on a particular VMO mission and as a "temporary Public Affairs Official"[141] for his unit. Assuming the tasks of a Public Affairs Officer in all but name, Temple begins to include more historical and political content contextualization in his posts after June and July 2009, focusing on the reasons behind particular military activities and on the possible implications of events.[142] This

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138 Temple, "Winning."

139 Temple, "Winning."

140 Temple, "Day 1."

141 Temple, "My Day Off."

142 It seems that the terms "representative" and "official" were chosen because Temple, as a Senior Master Sergeant, is a noncommissioned officer (NCO), while PAO positions are assigned to officers. In addition, the unit already has a PAO with whom Temple cooperates frequently. The blog does not make clear why Temple is offered this position but it could be speculated that, in the spirit of the Pentagon considerations on social media discussed above, this PAO sought to employ the popularity of Temple's blog for official military PR. For more details on the tasks of PAOs, see Eder, *Leading*

makes it increasingly difficult to distinguish Temple's private from his official, professional persona on the blog. In the sense of Dennis Murphy's observations on private social media use among soldiers, these changes elucidate that it is impossible for any soldier-narrator to function as a 'true' "third party validator"[143] because it is unclear whether particular statements after June/July 2009 were made to express a private opinion or were published in his role as a Public Affairs Official, and it reveals Temple's embeddedness and engagement as an immediate participant in waging the war.[144]

The change of the blog's visual appearance during summer 2009 is another aspect of these interrelated levels of interest. While backtracking through the Internet archive to captures on other websites from the inception of the blog show the blog's header as a simple gray background against which the title "Afghanistan My Last Tour" is set in a white font up to 23 July 2009, captures after 26 August show a photograph of a sandbagged bunker flying a US flag against the background of a mountain silhouette, as well as the complementary new subtitle "Winning the Hearts and Minds of the Afghan People."[145] It is obvious that Rex Temple has adopted the official public diplomacy mission of ISAF forces in the Afghan campaign as his own personal mission, although it is less clear whether the changes in his blog's appearance and content result from his new function as Public Affairs Official or from his personal interest to contribute to the war effort.

From the standpoint of military public affairs, depicting soldiers in charitable functions helps counteract negative imagery. Hence, military officials would have had reasons to support Temple's private initiative. Mari K. Eder, in her how-to manual on military PR, states that these images are needed to prevent

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the Narrative, especially 19–28, and for a contextualization of PAOs regarding Web 2.0 and social media, cf. also Usbeck, "Power."

143 Murphy, "New Media and the Warfighter," 3.

144 It is significant to note that, in the 'About' page of his blog, Temple explicitly states "[t]he opinions expressed within are mine alone and not endorsed by the DoD or the US Air Force." Temple, "The Writer." While it cannot be doubted that the opinions expressed in the blog are his, the blending of private Internet use and official public-affairs tasks in the text reveals the ambivalence of the notions of 'private' and 'endorsing,' with respect both to individual citizens serving as career soldiers in a modern all-volunteer army, and to the overall relationship between the military and the public in a modern communication age.

145 For the 23 July capture, see http://web.archive.org/web/20090723070709/http://afghanistanmylasttour.com/. For the capture of 26 August, see http://web.archive.org/web/20090826052423/http://afghanistanmylasttour.com/.

scandalous imagery, such as the torture photographs from Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, from dominating the "narrative":

> With a definite emphasis on outreach, engagement, listening, and involvement, the images of the events at Abu Ghraib have been, if not replaced, then supplanted by the sheer volume of photos of soldiers shown building schools, reaching out to Iraqi leaders, posing with smiling children, and providing medical care, clothing, soccer balls, and the symbolic hand stretched out in friendship.[146]

Note the similarity in imagery between Eder's and Temple's stories, both including schools, medical care, and soccer balls. However, I make the point that, although these changes toward a more official stance in the blog pinpoint the problems around "third party" narration, Temple's engagement, nevertheless, expresses a personal sense of mission beyond the call of duty from which, as his many remarks on helping children illustrate, he draws personal gratification and a sense of meaning.

The most visible marker for this personal interest and the emotional gratification that it provides is the series of posts discussing a donation drive for school supplies that Temple and his wife initiate during summer 2009. Showing the cooperation among the Temples and their respective civilian and military support networks, the blog entries on their school supply project illustrate how civic engagement nurtures the relationship between civil society and the military. It seems to prove those wrong who believe that American society has abandoned the soldiers once again—i.e., having forgotten the 'lessons of Vietnam'—by giving up on Afghanistan and rendering the soldiers' work meaningless. His individual commitment to these social activities offers Rex Temple emotional rewards, in relation both to the Afghan children thus supported, to those back home who contribute donations, and to a sense of personal contribution to the overall war effort.

In a post on 1 June 2009, Temple announces his plan to start the donation drive for school supplies. He lists items needed and immediately contextualizes the plan with his recent personal realization that the war effort requires more engagement to sway local populations in favor of ISAF troops: "This is the mission that is near and dear to my heart. Our Counterinsurgency (COIN) operations define this platform as 'Winning the hearts and minds of the people'. Our PAO […] has some great ideas and together we want to work on this project."[147] Over the course of his deployment, Temple and his wife manage an increasingly large

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146 Eder, *Leading the Narrative*, 6–7.
147 Temple, "Charity."

operation in which donations are collected stateside, shipped to Afghanistan, and then distributed to villages as part of the troops' Humanitarian Assistance missions. The blog regularly reports on the progress and solicits new donations. The project is featured in two extra pages on the blog header, and forty-nine posts are tagged as pertinent to the project between August 2009 and April 2010.[148] Temple's regular features with WUSF radio in Tampa, Florida and interviews with other media contribute to the project's expansion. Eventually, several hundred care packages are sent to Afghanistan and distributed, American schools and colleges participate in the project, and celebrities such as Miss America (1999) and Vice President Joe Biden's wife Jill become involved.[149]

Temple frequently updates readers on the progress and details of the project, combining remarks that put this individual project into the perspective of the overall war effort with amazed comments about "the outpouring of generosity that US citizens have displayed to support this project. It helps to reinforce our mission here and my belief that we can still win this war, especially by educating the children."[150] A post from September 2009 serves as another good example for this combination. Temple describes how his reassignment to a new base has affected the project. He mentions that, in this new facility, he encountered an Air Force Major who had plans for a similar project, leading both toward joint efforts. By now, care packages are coming in on a regular basis. The sheer number of items requires teams of more than twenty soldiers who volunteer to unpack, sort out, and prepare the items for distribution. Photos show soldiers carrying large stacks of boxes and sorting through supplies. Temple adds news that the Taliban have recently bombed a girls' school in Pakistan and killed over one hundred female students in an Afghan province. Reference to these news articles works to emphasize the importance of the project. Temple concludes that they "reinforced my determination to supply the students with these supplies and defy the Taliban and their warped ideology. It also supports my newly coined motto: 'Every pen and pencil donated to the kids in Afghanistan is like a sword in the Taliban's heart.' "[151] In addition, Temple states his appreciation for the American donors because they prove that "Americans still care about the destitute children in Afghanistan."[152] Implicitly, this remark also acknowledges and appreciates that

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148 Temple, "Afghanistan My Last Tour."
149 Temple and Temple, "Miss America"; Temple, "234th Marine"; Temple and Temple, "Germany."
150 Temple, "234th Marine."
151 Temple, "Mountain."
152 Temple.

Americans care about the US soldiers who protect and support these children, which strengthens the function of this project as Temple's personal mission.

This entry illuminates the 'mission' aspect even more in a further section. Temple relates that "a Canadian anthropologist has labeled us as missionaries," but he believes this to be "misleading" as their work is primarily secular.[153] It is speculative to muse about this anthropologist's meaning without knowing his text, but Temple's interpretation might be based on a misunderstanding. It is quite possible that the anthropologist did not allude to an effort at religious conversion per se, but that he referred to the traditional practice of gift-giving, used by missionaries in encounters with Native peoples to gain their trust.[154] Temple describes exactly this practice as a successful tactic in counterinsurgency strategy, i.e., gift-giving to deny the Taliban a loyal populace to hide among. Temple could be described as a missionary in yet another sense, however. From the perspective of this chapter's main thrust, Temple's experience of the war and the military's peace-keeping and nation-building mission in Afghanistan lead him to deliberate on his personal involvement in the war's progress. He invests in feeling responsible for both the Afghan community, for the military, and for his home community. He develops a sense of, and embarks on a 'mission,' or a quest, that extends beyond his prescribed duties as a deployed soldier in Afghanistan—the resulting ambivalent blends between his private and official persona in his blog notwithstanding. In this way, he employs the public forum of his blog to establish a discursive context that allows him to engage his readers in negotiating meanings and values to draw from his personal war experience.

Conclusion

Rex Temple's school supply project and Doug Traversa's reports on cross-cultural debates with Afghans serve as examples of how war narratives by deployed soldiers depict their missions of civic engagement in various forms, be they variants of individual cultural diplomacy, such as charity drives and cultural brokering, or mentoring for both military personnel and their relatives. Regardless of their forms, these individual missions use the discursive context of a milblog to portray bloggers' altruism and commitment to social relationships. They

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153 Temple.
154 The fact that, in many cases throughout history, the trust thus gained was soon breached, and that the gifts also served to generate and eventually maintain the Natives' dependency on the missionaries' material culture illustrates the ambivalence of 'gift'-giving in the context of religious missions.

reveal the potential benefits of bloggers' war-related experience, skills, and access to technology and information (such as a blog) for others. This sharing process and the corresponding collective construction of meaning generate and nurture relationships with a community that might be the soldiers' civilian home community, the military community of fellow soldiers, veterans, and their friends and relatives, or the national community that is reimagined and reconstituted through such a negotiation of meaning on the blogs. In this way, milbloggers' personal missions of sharing experience conduct cultural work in a functional equivalency with both the work of community-based veterans projects such as The Mission Continues, as well as Native American cultural practices within their tribal military traditions, although they all establish their distinct cultural and discursive contexts. In all these culturally specific forms of ceremonial pledges to community relationships, individual warriors, soldiers, or veterans employ war-related skills and experiences for the benefit of a community who reciprocates by acknowledging both the sharing and the often painful process of gaining such experience and skills. In all instances, both civilians and representatives of the military pledge mutual responsibilities and, through this pledge, acknowledge one another's affiliation with the community. As a result of this exchange, warriors, soldiers, veterans, and their civilian audiences (re)build relationships with one another and, thus, (re)constitute their communities through the joint construction and negotiation of meaning and values.