



# I AM A POST-9/11 VETERAN



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SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY'S INSTITUTE FOR VETERANS AND MILITARY FAMILIES (IVMF) HAS BEEN CONTRACTED TO SUPPORT THE GEORGE W. BUSH INSTITUTE'S RESEARCH TO SERVE AND EMPOWER OUR POST-9/11 VETERANS & MILITARY FAMILIES.

I am a post-9/11 veteran.  
I am one of the more than 2.5 million Americans who has served my country  
in a military uniform since the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001.

## I AM A POST-9/11 VETERAN

There are many different perceptions and mis-perceptions about who I am, and who I'm not. The truth is, while many veterans of my generation face significant challenges, we also possess immense strengths that position us to lead a generation every bit as great as any that came before it. In the end, what's most important to us is that the American people come to understand us – the good and the bad – in a way that empowers us to realize our full potential as individuals and citizens. So while we're an inherently diverse group, let me tell you about me, so you can understand *all of us* a bit better.

When I entered the military, I most likely joined the enlisted ranks (83%), and there's also a good chance (37%) that I enlisted as a member of the National Guard or the Reserves. By the numbers, I probably served in the Army (37%), but 23% of my peers served in the Navy, 23% in the Air Force, 14% in the Marines, and another 3% served in the U.S. Coast Guard. And, while it's true that the U.S. military is composed of a cross-section of our society, chances are that I'm white (77%), male (83%), and between the ages of 18 to 34 (60%). That said, just over 15% of my post-9/11 veteran peers are African American, 12% are Hispanic, and 3% are Asian American. Further, women serve alongside us at a rate unprecedented in history – close to 17% of post-9/11 veterans are women.

It's important to remember that I served the nation during a time of war, and because of that there's a high likelihood that I deployed overseas at least once. More than two million of my peers have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan since 9/11. For many, those deployments happened multiple times. On average, my generation of veterans spent one of every three years of our military service deployed overseas.

As it was for many of my fellow veterans, leaving the military was difficult for me. My service had become a large part of my identity and gave me a sense of purpose. But when it was finally time to leave, I probably decided to settle in either Texas, Florida, California, Virginia, or Georgia; almost 38% of my post-9/11 veteran peers live in these states.

For me and my friends, proximity to family, educational opportunities, and employment options are the things we most strongly consider when deciding where to settle after service. Yet it turns out that too many of us aren't really prepared with the best information to support our decision-making process. It's clear that we would benefit greatly from enhanced training and additional resources to help with the choices we have to make before leaving service. They could make us truly informed consumers as we enter our post-service lives.

When I took off the uniform, I was excited to start the next chapter of my life. Like many of my peers, I sought out opportunities to both serve my community and reconnect with my family. For some of us, the transition from military to civilian life was seamless, but for others there have been challenges.

## THE MILITARY-CIVILIAN DIVIDE

One significant issue we talk about often is simply feeling like we “fit in” – so many of my buddies still talk about how after coming home, they felt disconnected and isolated from the very people they served while in uniform. It turns out that, when asked, the great majority of us (84%) say that the American public has “little awareness” of the challenges facing those of us who wear – or have worn – the nation’s uniform.

Interestingly, it seems that the American public agrees – 71% of Americans say that they don’t understand the problems faced by those who have served since 9/11. This cultural disconnection has come to be called the “military-civilian divide,” and it impacts many aspects of our post-service lives. Education is just one example.

As a post-9/11 veteran, I’m highly educated. I’ve almost certainly completed high school or an equivalent (99%), and I’ve probably also spent at least some time taking college courses (72%). If I have taken a college class or two, I’m as likely as my civilian counterparts to have completed my bachelor’s degree or higher (28%). In fact, more than one million post-9/11 veterans (or members of our families) have already decided to go back to school, taking advantage of the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

A million post-9/11 veterans and veteran-family members attending school is a big number. But we’re actually a small minority on the nation’s college campuses – only about three percent of the universe of college students in the United States at a given time. As a consequence, sometimes we still don’t feel like we fit in on campus. Many of us believe that our professors (63%), administrators (63%), and non-veteran student peers (70%) don’t understand the unique challenges that veterans face on a college campus. Moreover, female veterans are even more likely to feel isolated at school, and less likely to seek out and participate in programs and services designed to advance their educational experience.

It shouldn’t surprise anyone that the path to education is going to be different for veterans like me. My life experiences make me different from college students who have not served. Student veterans like me tend to be older than traditional, non-veteran students – 40% of us in school are over the age of 40. More than that, we’re more likely to be married than our non-veteran student peers (47% vs. 37%), and if we’re in graduate school, we probably have a child (58%). And that highlights another fact about veterans like me – family is important to us.

In fact, 58% of all post-9/11 veterans are married, and if I got married while I was serving in uniform, there is an 11.5% chance that it was to another service member. Dual-military marriages are difficult, and for many the stress of our deployments – and now the post-service challenges related to disability, employment, and other transition-related issues – have put a significant strain on our family relationships. While we understand this reality because we live it, research also tells our story.

Recent studies focused on the stability of our families highlight how some veterans report feeling like a guest in their own household, distant or afraid our children or our partners, and general uncertainty surrounding their family roles. Some of these challenges are heightened for those of us now learning to live with disabilities, as the research suggests that our health and wellness concerns could negatively impact the quality of our marriages and contribute to anti-social behavior. All that said, researchers have demonstrated how my service has contributed in a very positive way toward advancing the state of my family. This includes increased maturity, more appreciative attitudes, and an increased work ethic.

## MAKING THE TRANSITION

It's also true that as we navigate the transition from military to civilian life, my friends and I may encounter a variety of physical and mental health-related challenges connected to our service. Many of these have their origins in the fact that we may have had a run-in with an improvised explosive device (IED) while deployed, a signature weapon of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Indeed, if I served in combat, I probably had an emotionally traumatic or distressing experience (52%), and I likely served with someone who was badly injured (60%) or killed (47%) in service. Of those veterans of my generation who were seriously injured, 1,700 have lost one or multiple limbs as a consequence of their service. Traumatic brain injury (TBI) is also a consequence of the prevalent use of IEDs in these wars.

The Department of Defense tells us that among my peers, there have been 253,330 cases of TBI diagnosed between 2000 and 2012. More than 6,000 of those cases have been severe or penetrating brain injuries. My service also places me at a risk for hearing loss (27%), ringing of the ears (32%), or both.

Importantly, the scars of war are not always – or only – physical. Instead, sometimes the wounds are invisible. For example, while there have been many different numbers put forward about how many are dealing with the consequences of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), most experts say that PTSD affects between 13% to 20% of us who fought in Iraq or Afghanistan. (By the way, some of us would prefer to drop the “D” in PTSD, as a way to reduce the stigma that comes from calling it a *disorder*).

It's also true that 22% of post-9/11 veterans enrolled in the VA healthcare system have been diagnosed with depressive disorder, and that there is a one-in-five chance that my female veteran peers respond “yes” when screened for Military Sexual Trauma (MST). These invisible wounds sometimes present complex challenges when navigating life after the military. Researchers don't yet fully understand the relationship between military service and suicide. But it is possible these challenges contribute to rates of suicide among veterans that are higher as compared to non-veterans.

I know this because in 2010, the Veterans Affairs looked at suicide data from 31 states across the nation. It extrapolated that, on average, military veterans accounted for 22.2% of all suicides in the United States – 22 a day – in spite of the fact that they represent just about nine percent of the U.S. population. Exactly how many of those suicides are veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is still unsettled, but we do know that the suicide rate for veterans who likely served after 9/11 – those ages 18-29 – has increased every year since 2009.

What's more, we also know that male veterans are twice as likely as their civilian counterparts to take their own lives. Female veterans are three times more likely than female non-veterans to act on suicidal thoughts. During recent years, my fellow veterans were more likely to die by their own hand than to have died at the hand of the enemy.

We've also learned that these invisible wounds are often more difficult to identify and care for than our physical scars. For me and my friends, stigma and other barriers associated with seeking treatment for mental health concerns make it less likely that we will seek the care that we need. If we do seek treatment, we may not receive adequate care when we ask for it.

In fact, a study in New York highlighted that only one-third of us who needed mental health care actually sought treatment. Only 50% of that group received treatment that was determined to meet a minimally adequate standard.

## THE SKILLS I BRING

All that said, in spite of the physical and psychological challenges that I may face, it's also true that my military service conferred upon me skills, experiences, and traits of that group that make me an extraordinary addition to the civilian workforce and a leader in the community. I am comfortable operating in diverse work settings and leveraging my international and cross-cultural experiences. I tend to have advanced technical training that allows me to develop technology-based solutions to institutional problems, and I demonstrate strong organizational commitment and loyalty to my employer.

My demonstrated propensity towards trust in my co-workers and supervisors fosters strong and high-performing teams, which I am adept at organizing, defining, and developing for quick and decisive action in the face of uncertainty and change. It's a testament to my fellow veterans that researchers have demonstrated that even if I am dealing with a service-connected disability, I am more likely to be employed than a non-veteran with a disability.

As a result of my military service, I have developed a sense of resiliency that helps me bounce back from personal, professional, and organizational failure more quickly and completely as compared to those who have not served. Additionally, I tend to be highly entrepreneurial. I display a high need for achievement, a strong comfort with autonomy and uncertainty, and an ability to make effective decisions in the face of dynamic environments. This not only helps me as an employee or leader in a traditional employment setting, but makes me more likely to start my own business than my civilian counterparts (13.7% vs. 9.8%). If I do start my own business, I am more likely to be successful.

It remains a fact, however, that the employment situation facing some veterans of my generation has been an obstacle to a successful transition to civilian life. Over much of the past five years, the youngest among us have been more likely to be unemployed than their non-veteran peers. For these veterans, the unemployment rate has remained stubbornly high – above 15% – for much of the last four years. The fact that a great many of us have struggled with securing and maintaining jobs has certainly impacted other aspects of our transition to civilian life as well.

For example, it's difficult to assume the burden of rent or home ownership without a job. In fact, as a male post-9/11 veteran, I am 1.3 times more likely than my non-veteran peers to become homeless.

The story is worse for female veterans. Due to the unique challenges that women veterans face, including underemployment, childcare, and sometimes being a single parent, young female veterans are two-to-three times more likely to become homeless as compared to male veterans. They are two- to-four times more likely to be homeless than female non-veterans.

All of us hope that the VA's pledge to end veteran homelessness by 2015 is realized. We're heartened by the progress that's been made in recent years – homelessness among veterans has been reduced by 24% since 2010.

## PROUD OF SERVING

As I said previously, the overwhelmingly majority of those who call ourselves post-9/11 veterans are proud of our service (94%). According to the folks at the Pew Research Center, we joined the military for many reasons – to serve our country (88%), to advance our education (75%), to see more of the world (65%), or to learn skills for civilian jobs (57%). Despite many of the sacrifices associated with our service, we still consider ourselves more patriotic than the average American (61%). Speaking for those of us who served in combat, I know we feel that we appreciate life more as a result of our experiences (86%).

Like generations before us, my veteran peers and I are also beginning to take on roles of increasing leadership in society. Whether it be volunteering as Little League coaches, helping in disaster relief efforts, joining fitness-related support groups, getting involved in a local school board, or running for Congress, we continue to find ways to leverage our service for the good of society. For many of us, we joined the military to lend meaning to our lives. As we navigate the ambiguity of the future, leadership through service serves as an anchor, helping us maintain that identity through our post-service transition.

You might ask, would we do it again? On the whole, we say that we would. We feel that our military experience has helped us get ahead in life and grow as a person (71%), taught us how to work with other people (65%), gave us self-confidence, (61%) and prepared us for a post-service career (41%). In fact, those of us from the post-9/11 generation are more likely to recommend military service to a young person, as compared to veterans who served before 9/11 (82% vs. 74%). It's true that we have conflicting views about whether or not the wars in which we served were worth fighting. But in the end, we were sent all over the world, and we served a public which often did not understand us or what we were doing – but we answered the call, and each of us is proud to say:

**“I am a post-9/11 veteran.”**

*This information comes from a multi-dimensional analysis of the post-service experience completed by the Military Service Initiative at the George W. Bush Institute, with our partners at the Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) at Syracuse University.*