

# Understanding Military Culture and the Role of Art in Healing



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## The Basics of Military Cultural Competency

### *Introduction to Service and Branches*

The United States armed forces are comprised of five branches of service. In order of size, the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines and Coast Guard. Each branch exists under the Department of Defense (DoD), with the exception of the Coast Guard, which is under the Department of Homeland Security. **While each branch of service was founded upon and follows a unique mission, broadly we can say that the armed forces exist in order to support and defend the United States.** The oath of enlistment that new recruits swear to is the same for each branch and was written by Congress. The oath is included below for you to read and reflect upon. Note the different parts of government and democracy that an individual swears allegiance to. What examples from civilian life could you compare this oath to?

I, \_\_\_\_\_, do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; and that I will obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. So help me God.

The military is a highly structured organization. Service members are held to strict standards of behavior and must act according to their rank. To an outsider, this structure and hierarchy may seem restricting. However, because every individual works towards and shares a common mission, service members often find purpose and support in these rules. Each branch consists of enlisted personnel and officers. Enlisted personnel can be thought of as the on-the-ground labor force, whereas officers fulfill the administrative and planning duties that we associate with management. Both enlisted personnel and officers will move up in rank over time, gaining greater responsibility, higher pay and the respect and authority that comes with experience. Each service member has a defined job which can vary from electrician or mechanic, to cook, personnel and supply management, infantryman, etc. In the Army and Marines this is known as a Military Occupational Specialty or MOS, in the Navy and Coast Guard as a Rate, and in the Air Force as an Air Force Specialty Code or AFSC. **Asking someone what branch of the military they served in, and what their MOS, Rate, or AFSC was, are great conversation starters.** Note that someone may answer with the exact code of their job, such as 11B or 0341. Ask for clarification if you do not understand, it shows curiosity and interest!

### *Active duty, Guard, and Reserves*

Not all service looks the same. One of the most obvious differences is between active duty and National Guard or Reserve service. When most people picture military service they are probably thinking of active duty— when a person lives and works on a military base and their full time job is to be a member of the armed forces. They wear a uniform every day. Their family lives on

base, participates in military life, and moves with their service member to each duty station. Active duty personnel and their families visit the doctor at their on-post hospital, shop for food and household items at the post exchange, attend on-post schools or colleges and generally structure their lives around the demands of a military career. For active duty families, this can provide a tight-knit and supportive community, especially during frequent deployments. Many of the benefits that civilians associate with military service, such as the GI Bill and receiving care at a VA hospital, are earned through time spent on active duty service.

Each branch of the military also has a Reserve component. The Reserves are a group of trained and ready individuals who may be called upon to deploy overseas or within the United States in times of war, or for natural disasters and national security. The primary role of Reservists is to fill stateside positions when active duty troops are deployed overseas. Reservists train one weekend per month and two weeks out of the year to ensure readiness. The Army and Air Force also have National Guard components, which function similarly to the Reserve but are controlled by state governments. Both Reservists and Guardsmen may be called upon to deploy overseas by federal order, and while previously uncommon, overseas combat deployments for these troops increased exponentially in the Post 9/11 era. Time spent deployed is considered active duty service and members accrue benefits proportionally. Because Guard and Reserve members retain their civilian jobs and live in civilian communities, they may face unique challenges to reintegration, struggling to connect with their neighbors and coworkers about their military experience.

### *Eras of Service*

While a person's experience can vary depending on which branch they served in, the era in which they served is just as important. In the same way we talk about the shared experiences of generations (baby boomers who challenged traditional values, or millennials who grew up during the rise of the internet) each era of military service connotes shared experiences. Note that individuals who pursued a long-term career in the military may identify with more than one of these eras.

The Vietnam era spans a 20-year period between 1955 and 1975. While colloquially referred to as the Vietnam War, this extended conflict— which included combat operations in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos— was not technically a war. This is because Congress passed a joint resolution allowing President Johnson to use military force in Vietnam without an official declaration of war— avoiding the far-reaching executive powers that come with such a declaration. This new use of policy had lasting impacts on the length and outcome of the Vietnam conflict and the public's relationship to those who served (and continues to influence how the United States uses military force today.) **The Vietnam era still defines most Americans' understanding of war and military service. Because of this we should be especially careful about how media, movies and stories have shaped our perception and**

**remember to connect with the individual when speaking with Vietnam veterans.** The draft largely defines the service experience in this era. Vietnam veterans are aware of the distinction between those who actively signed up to serve, those who were drafted, and those who chose to join the National Guard or Reserves (sometimes perceived as a means to avoid combat deployments during this period.) The Vietnam era also marks the first time a desegregated military participated in extended combat. The experience of serving alongside people whose race, ethnicity, religion or class differed from one's own was both enriching and challenging. Despite DoD policy, minorities were often assigned to serve in particular units or occupational specialties, and on the home front, discrimination and practices like redlining kept many from utilizing earned benefits. While not all Vietnam era veterans experienced combat, those who did were exposed to high casualty rates, hazardous chemicals such as Agent Orange, both jungle and urban combat, and the moral ambiguity of fighting an enemy among a civilian population. Service during the Vietnam era is defined as much by combat experiences as it is by civilian reception. On the home front growing protests against the war, unemployment and substance use, and an ill-equipped VA made for difficult reintegration.

The Persian Gulf era includes deployments in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm between 1990 and 1991. Many veterans of this era also deployed to Somalia on UN-led peacekeeping missions. **The Persian Gulf era is defined by the shift to an all-volunteer force, the Don't Ask Don't Tell policy, and an increase in visibility for women serving in uniform.** While women played a crucial role in all of America's conflicts dating back to the Revolutionary War, according to DoD records this era saw over 40,000 female troops deployed in support of combat operations including authorization to fly in combat missions and serve on combat ships. Despite the fact that these operations laid the groundwork for our current involvement in the region, Persian Gulf veterans are often overlooked by community organizations or absent from public memory, lost between the attention focused on Vietnam and Post 9/11 veterans. Even when a veteran's service spans from Vietnam to the Persian Gulf, or the Persian Gulf to Post 9/11 era, it is still important to recognize and respect the unique nature and experiences of both.

The Post 9/11 era encompasses military service after September 11th, 2001 through the present and includes Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation Inherent Resolve against the Islamic State. Since the original authorization for use of military force passed by Congress in 2001, troops have been deployed to Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Djibouti, Somalia, Kenya, Eritrea, Georgia, and the Philippines according to official DoD records. This era is sometimes referred to using the more general term GWOT — Global War on Terror. **Post 9/11 service is defined by the length and number of combat deployments and the activation of Guard and Reserve troops for overseas deployments. It also includes the repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell, and despite official policy stating otherwise, women serving in direct combat.** Advances in battlefield medicine and technology

during this period led to the lowest rate of combat deaths in any conflict, with more troops surviving life-altering injuries and living to cope with their impact. This era also gave rise to the term military-civilian divide, used to explain the growing distance between the experience of those in uniform and their families versus the general population. Indeed, a Pew Research study from 2011 found that 84% of service members and 71% of civilians agree that, “The public does not understand the problems faced by those in the military or their families.” Despite this divide, Post 9/11 veterans and family members are increasingly vocal about their experiences, participate in community organizations, found nonprofits, and in recent years, they are taking on leadership roles in government.

### ***Veteran Identity***

When someone recites the oath of enlistment and becomes a member of the armed services, they embark on an intensive process that includes physical and mental training. They perform rituals and rites of passage and build a new understanding of themselves as part of a larger community. A civilian’s perception of boot camp is often drawn from media portrayals that focus on the extreme physical nature of the training. While this can be accurate, it doesn’t explain the purpose of boot camp— to indoctrinate someone into military culture and create a positive feeling of belonging within an esteemed group. The rigorous physical training of boot camp teaches recruits to be self-sufficient and capable. Group-based exercises create an understanding that one’s physical ability will have significant consequences for her peers in high-stress situations like combat. Cultural norms are strictly enforced, from dress and hygiene standards, to marching cadence, meal consumption, sleep routines and standards of communication. Through this process recruits make the shift from I to we. Upon graduation, recruits — now Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, Airmen or Coast Guardsmen — often feel a sense of accomplishment in their physical and technical skills, a belonging and acceptance among their fellow service members, and a new sense of purpose as they move forward in their career.

These cultural expectations continue throughout a service member’s time in the military. Active duty troops are assigned to a unit where they participate in daily physical fitness, follow strict work schedules and continue to learn skills and knowledge relevant to their specific role. Service members build camaraderie through shared experiences such as spending months ‘in the field’ where they learn and maintain combat skills, or during ‘forced fun’ activities like military balls and ceremonies to welcome new unit members. Active duty military bases function much like small towns. Because units train, travel, and deploy together, family members also share these experiences. During a deployment it is not unusual for families to plan dinners, children’s parties, or even holidays together as a larger community.

Whether a service member is active duty or a member of the National Guard, and whether their job is to engage in combat or be a medic, a logistician, or truck driver, military culture reinforces the understanding that each person is part of the group and that the group is working towards a

common goal that is of vital importance to the country. This ethos creates an immense feeling of purpose and responsibility. The mechanic completes their job with diligence and speed, knowing that a vehicle will safely carry troops. The supply clerk keeps meticulous records and inspects equipment, knowing that a missing item may delay an entire unit. The brigade commander creates policies that support and enforce cultural and professional norms, understanding that their leadership will set the example for thousands. **At the heart of this culture is an unspoken understanding that one error or mistake can affect the life of a fellow service member.**

While military culture may seem foreign or difficult to understand for many people, it is not difficult to find similarities within American culture. Consider the high school student who dreams of being a doctor so that she can save lives. She studies constantly and becomes the captain of the soccer team so she can build a strong college application. She aspires to be part of a select group of Ivy League college students. She carries this ethos of hard work and sacrifice with her through undergrad and medical school, sacrificing weekends and enduring sleepless nights during her clinical rotations. As she gains more knowledge and skills, she chooses a specialty, deciding that the best way to save lives is to become an oncologist. When performing surgery she follows a strict regimen for hygiene, knowing that a mistake could cost her patient's life. The oncologist and the service member both understand sacrifice and hard work. They both believe in working towards a larger goal— one that centers the common good.

### ***Florida's Veterans***

According to the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, more than 1.5 million veterans call Florida home, the third highest population in the United States behind California and Texas. The counties with the highest density of veterans are Bay, Brevard, Charlotte, Citrus, Clay, Escambia, Levy, Marion, Okaloosa, Santa Rosa and Sumter. Vietnam veterans make up the largest group and 51% of Florida's veterans 65-years or older. However, the number of Gulf War and Post 9/11 veterans is projected to surpass Vietnam veterans by 2020. As more Persian Gulf and Post 9/11 veterans leave military service and Vietnam veterans retire from the workforce, they come to Florida in search of warmer temperatures and economic opportunity.

Post 9/11 service members are the most diverse military force in United States history. According to the VA, while the number of veterans that identify as white and non-hispanic will decrease in the coming years, the percentage of minority veterans will rise. Further, while the overall veteran population is decreasing, the population of women veterans is growing. According to data compiled by Pew Research, Florida's citizens, and especially its Puerto Rican and African American communities, are overrepresented in relation to rates of enlistment and active duty military service. **It is clear that Floridians embody a spirit of patriotism and that service members, veterans, and their families will continue to be an integral part of Florida's communities for decades to come.**