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## Exploring The Experiences Of Senior Enlisted Military Wives Seeking Higher Education Through Distance Learning

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Exploring the Experiences of Senior Enlisted Military Wives  
Seeking Higher Education Through Distance Learning

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BS Social Science (Troy University) 2007  
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College of Graduate and Professional Studies at the University of New England

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirement

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## **EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF SENIOR ENLISTED MILITARY WIVES SEEKING HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH DISTANCE LEARNING**

### **Abstract**

The purpose of my study was to explore the experiences of senior enlisted military wives and document how the military lifestyle has affected their ability to attain higher education while their servicemember was on active duty. Specifically, my study focused on senior enlisted military wives who have chosen to pursue their higher education through distance learning. The study portrayed experiences of those spouses who are an integral component of today's military, yet who are often unseen not only in the military world and the civilian sector, but also in higher education. In the study, I explored four research questions:

- 1) How do the life experiences of a senior enlisted military wife align with the features of a Model Military Wife in the contemporary era as described by Enloe (2000)?
- 2) How do the challenges and demands of the role of a senior enlisted military wife affect fulfillment of their educational goals?
- 3) How has the experience of distance learning contributed to transformations for the senior enlisted military wife?

In my study, I documented the narratives of senior enlisted military wives and described their educational journeys. Narrative inquiry allowed the five participants in my study to share their stories of their educational journeys. Their narratives were restoried and two categories of themes emerged:

- 1) Challenges of the military lifestyle.
- 2) Opportunities of the military lifestyle.

From these themes, several findings were identified and recommendations determined for the military community and higher education. The experiences of the senior enlisted wives in my study point to a need for more support and a better understanding of the numerous opportunities that are available to help them along their educational journeys. I recommend that institutions of higher learning survey current military spouses to determine what types of programs, services, and support could better assist them with their educational journeys. I also recommended that university personnel be informed of the challenges that military spouses face and understand that this population does not often fit within the mold of a nontraditional student. In addition, I recommend that the military-provided services such as military education centers, libraries, and other offices that assist military spouses in relation to education make an extra effort to inform and discuss better the different education opportunities with the military spouses in their community. Meeting with military spouses to discuss their interests and educational goals is paramount. My study extends the existing literature available about military spouses and ignites interest in military spouse learners as a separate population of learners.

University of New England

Doctor of Education  
Educational Leadership

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## CHAPTER 1:

### INTRODUCTION

Walking through the United States Naval Academy cemetery, you will see a variety of headstones of servicemembers, their spouses, and other family members. Some are elaborate, others are simple, but not a single stone provides a unique identity to a military wife separate from her spouse. These grave markers date back to the 1800s and are similar to many markers located in military cemeteries across the country. Historically, a military spouse, who was married to an enlisted or officer servicemember, was thought of as a “helpmate,” whose identity was dependent upon that of her military spouse. She was often a silent partner of a “dual career,” throughout her life and even in death (Harrell, 2001). This silence is still present in the ranks of the military spouse today. Enloe (2004) stated, “Silences rob the public of ideas, of the chance to create bonds and understanding of mutual trust” (p. 70). Therefore, military spouses must have the opportunity to break this silence and share their stories.

The military troop deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq in the shadow of the September 11, 2001 (9/11), attacks on the United States have drawn attention to the military servicemembers and their families. Interest in this population had peaked regarding these deployments and the effects of deployment on servicemembers and their families. However, although the uniqueness of this subpopulation has been exposed, the culture of this society is largely unknown to those living in the civilian world. Given the increased interest and uniqueness of this population, an understanding of military culture is necessary to develop sensitivity to the distinct needs and challenges of military families and spouses.

Although much focus has been placed on servicemembers, an often invisible and unseen member of the military institution is the military spouse. Military spouses are faced with daily

demands and stressors from constant relocations to new duty stations, deployments and training, and various environmental challenges such as childcare and income. Although some of these situations are normative to other populations in the civilian sector, the senior enlisted military spouse, those whose servicemember is serving in Ranks E7–E9, has additional and distinctive challenges and demands. This specific population of the community is informally tasked with roles and responsibilities that contribute greatly to the success of a military unit in times of peace and war. Although they do not take an Oath of Enlistment, a senior enlisted military spouse has a rare opportunity to be a necessary and integral part of a military unit.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Historically, military spouses are a population that has been marginalized by the military. However, since the events of 9/11, and the subsequent troop deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq, military spouses are more visible in relation to the challenges and stressors that they face because of the military lifestyle. In addition to these challenges and stressors, other important characteristics of this population deserve greater attention. According to Enloe (2000), when a woman marries a military member, she must become militarized to maximize their value to the military institution. This militarization might infringe upon a military wife's identity because she might feel "as though not only her husband but she herself is an integral part of what she thinks of as 'the military family'" (Enloe, 2000, p. 162). Berry (2015) stated that there are "obstacles inherent within the military lifestyle that may hinder military wives' journeys through the complex process of individuation" (p. iv). Dependence, marginalization, and psychological challenges can result from deployments, permanent change of duty stations (PCSs), lack of control over life events, and loss of identity among military spouses (Berry, 2015).

As women's roles continue to change in our society, nontraditional female students have become the fastest growing population in higher education (Quimby & O'Brien, 2006). With the

increase in educational opportunities available for military spouses, transformative learning can help military spouses “consciously participate in the journey of individuation” (Dirkx, 2000). Transformative learning environments can also help military spouses participate as community of learners who are “united in a shared experience of trying to make meaning of their life experience” (Loughlin, 1993, pp. 320–321). Their collective and individual success in higher education can be a focal point from which mentorship and positive modeling can be rallied. Identifying the educational needs and barriers that military spouses face (specifically those of senior enlisted military wives as a separate student population of learners) might shed light on needed changes for these learners and other military spouse learners.

Much research has been conducted about military spouses, but “in-depth knowledge and understanding from a personal perspective by specific groups of military spouses in their own voices on their experiences is markedly absent” (McGowan, 2008, p. 5). Although emerging research from a personal perspective has been focused on officer and senior officer spouses, little to no research has been focused on the specific population of senior enlisted military wives. In the realm of higher education, this population of military spouse learners is also understudied. The sharing of experiences that are related to the roles and responsibilities of a senior military wife and the way that they might affect or interrupt higher education could be very valuable.

My study was designed to address this gap in the literature and to assist military spouses, more specifically senior enlisted military wives, in sharing their experiences of the military lifestyle and how this environment might have affected their ability to attain higher education. Their unique circumstances often preclude them from having their own identity; my study provides senior military wives with an opportunity to relate how their experiences and obligations as military spouses have affected their opportunity to attain higher education.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of my study was to explore the experiences of senior enlisted military wives and to document how the military lifestyle has affected their ability to attain higher education while their servicemember was on active duty. Specifically, I focused on senior enlisted military wives who have chosen to pursue their higher education through distance learning. Through my study, I have brought a voice to those spouses who are an integral component of today's military, yet who are often unseen—not only in the military world and the civilian sector, but also in higher education. There are unique challenges that military spouses must overcome, not merely in their day-to-day lives, but also when they seek to enroll in and to attain higher education. Some problems and challenges are examined in the literature, along with ways to overcome them, but the way that these factors affect a military spouse's ability and motivation to complete higher education has not been adequately addressed. Much focus has been placed on the negative aspects of the military lifestyle, rather than the positive aspects. However, in my study, I have documented the narratives of senior enlisted military wives and described their educational journeys.

Military spouses who are currently enrolled in higher education or courses that foster professional development are a population of nontraditional learners who are expected to grow in number because of the increase in educational opportunities and financial assistance through the U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs (VA) funds (Gleiman & Swearingen, 2012; MacDermid Wadsworth & Southwell, 2011). Currently, research about military spouse learners and programs for military spouse learners are limited because they are often lumped with either military servicemember learners or the nontraditional student population. The military lifestyle presents unique challenges; therefore, programs created specifically with the military spouse population in mind, and that acknowledge and address the challenges of the military lifestyle, might be



beneficial. The findings in my study might be of value to institutions that support military spouse learners before, during, and after their quest for higher education.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions central to my study include:

- Research Question 1: How do the life experiences of a senior enlisted military wife align with the features of a Model Military Wife in the contemporary era as described by Enloe (2000)?
- Research Question 2: How do the challenges and demands of the role of a senior enlisted military wife affect fulfillment of their educational goals?
- Research Question 3: How has the experience of distance learning contributed to transformations for the senior enlisted military wife?

### **Conceptual Framework**

Much focus is placed on the military spouse population regarding challenges of the military lifestyle; however, in the realm of education, it is largely understudied. In two recent surveys—the American Community Survey (ACS) and the Military Spouse Employment Survey (MSES)—almost half of the spouses questioned believed that their educational opportunities were hindered because of the constraints of being a military spouse (Maury & Stone, 2014). Although 80% of military spouses have attended some college, the *Quadrennial Quality of Life Review* (U.S. Department of Defense [U.S. DOD], 2009) reported that only one in five military spouses feel that they have fulfilled their educational goals. Distance learning provides a means for military spouses to overcome these challenges. Distance learning might provide exposure to transformative learning practices and might allow a military spouse to share her experiences and make meaning of these experiences (Loughlin, 1993).

Using feminist epistemology as the theoretical framework, I focused my study solely on senior enlisted military wives. Feminist epistemology allowed this often invisible and silent population to share the knowledge that comes along with their personal experiences. Military culture and tradition previously dictated that military spouses were considered “helpmates” and part of a “dual career” (Harrell, 2001). This indirect oppression of military spouses has laid the groundwork for the idea that military spouses should support their servicemembers and the mission despite often putting their desires, needs, and goals on hold. Military culture itself places informal expectations on spouses. Social role theory provided a lens with which to view and explore how the formal and informal expectations that are placed on a military spouse might shape her identity and influence the experiences that are socially acceptable for this population. Attaining higher education might be influenced by these expectations.

An important aspect of feminist epistemology is the centrality of situated knowledges; Haraway (1988) suggested that situated knowledges are specific to a particular situation and from a specific viewpoint. Lang (2011) ascertained that the previous aspects of knowing are “subjective in that they emerge through the experiences, practices, and circumstances that are specific to the knowers” (p. 88). Each military spouse has different experiences that contribute to her knowing and knowledge: where she is in her life, where they fall in the realm of military culture, their interest and desire in higher education, and how they deal with challenges of this lifestyle. These aspects might contribute to the spouses’ perceptions of their identity and might influence their ability and motivation to attain higher education. Feminist epistemology and situated knowledges provided an avenue for the senior enlisted military wife to share her narrative and describe her higher education journey while experiencing the military lifestyle and its related challenges.

## **Assumptions**

Senior enlisted military wives have valuable stories to share. One assumption in my study is that senior enlisted military wives' experiences with the military lifestyle, including challenges and opportunities, have affected their attainment of higher education in some manner. Another assumption is that senior enlisted military wives feel that they play an important and integral role in the military institution, but that their role might impede their ability to carve out their own identity. Lastly, the assumption is made that senior enlisted military wives will be honest and open about their experiences.

## **Potential Limitations**

In this qualitative research study, I explored the experiences of senior enlisted military wives and documented how the military lifestyle has affected their ability to attain higher education while their servicemember was on active duty. In my study, I used purposeful sampling to select the sample; therefore, it should not be generalized to other populations. It is also important to note that my study was focused solely on senior enlisted military wives. Male spouses and dual military couples in the enlisted and officer ranks who might share similar experiences, and spouses of senior officers, might also be faced with similar demands and challenges; however, my study was limited to female spouses in the enlisted ranks. The participants might also have been biased, for they might have responded in a way that they felt I wished to hear.

## **Researcher Bias**

As the researcher of my study, I am a veteran of the United States Air Force and a military spouse of a senior enlisted U.S. Army soldier. The review of the literature for my study mainly surrounded the Army as the branch of the military service. Most of the information presented about military spouses is generalizable to all branches of the military. I made every

effort to remove any preconceived notions or bias, and allowed the participants to tell their own stories. To ensure that their stories were accurately presented, the participants validated the narratives.

### **Significance**

In my study, knowledge about military spouses was extended and the focus was placed on the understanding of senior enlisted military wives and how their experiences as military spouses have affected their ability to attain higher education. Through this research, I have contributed to the fields of adult education, distance education, military spouse educational programs, and the military spouse learner. My study was focused on the “growth and transformation in the life story that we as researchers and our participants author” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 71). My study is significant to different contexts, including cultural (military life) and experiential (military spouse learners). These areas are examined more fully.

**Military life.** The military lifestyle is unique and comes along with its own challenges and opportunities. Military spouses have a unique role within this culture that is often overlooked, as is exemplified in the poem “The Army Wife”:

I wear no uniforms, no blues or army greens.

But I am in the Army in the ranks rarely seen.

I have no rank upon my shoulders—salutes I do not give.

But the military world is the place where I live.

I’m not in the chain of command, orders I do not get.

But my husband is the one who does, this I cannot forget.

I’m not the one who fires the weapon, who puts my life on the line.

But my job is just as tough. I’m the one that’s left behind.

My husband is a patriot, a brave and prideful man,

and the call to serve our country not all can understand.

Behind the lines, I see the things needed to keep this country free.

My husband makes the sacrifice, but so do our kids and me.

I love the man I married; soldiering is his life.

But I stand among the silent ranks known as the Army Wife. (Anonymous, n.d.)

The role that a military spouse plays in the military institution should not be disregarded; it should be considered when examining this population and the lifestyle subscribed. In his retirement speech, the outgoing U.S. Army chief of staff, General Ray Odierno, spoke about his wife,

She sacrificed her entire life for me. I can never repay her for that . . . . It's often hard for me to stand up here and make other people understand how much our spouses sacrifice . . . . You don't understand. You don't understand everything that they do every day in order to make us a better Army. I don't believe there's any other profession (where) we count on our spouses to do so many things. (Bushatz, 2015)

The life of a military spouse is often filled with sacrifice and adventure. The former is often highlighted, while the latter is often disregarded. Along with the challenges of this lifestyle, there are many opportunities. My study adds to the knowledge base of perceptions about the military lifestyle in a positive manner.

**Military spouse learners.** In August of 2015, the National Military Family Association started a campaign entitled "More Than a Spouse." This campaign encouraged military spouses to examine their goals and share them with others; "Believe in yourself. What do you want to be? More than a Spouse." On their webpage and throughout social media they promoted and asked,

Ever feel like the career and education you dream about is out of reach? As a military spouse, we know you're faced with challenges every day, like negative stereotypes, frequent moves, and spouses with sporadic work schedules.

But we think you're more than a spouse.

If you're waiting for a sign: this is it. Your hopes, dreams, goals, and future are waiting to be discovered. And it's never too late to take a new career or education path!

The possibilities are endless . . . (National Military Family Association, 2015)

My study echoed these ideas as it uncovered the life stories and narratives of military spouse learners. Gleiman and Swearingen (2012) advocated for the use of narratives "as military spouses, we knew it would be impossible to disconnect ourselves from our own personal identities and cultural understanding of the military lifestyle" (p. 78). My study echoed these ideas as it uncovered the life stories and narratives of military spouse learners.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Campfollower.** Families and other civilians who follow the military from military base to military base are called campfollowers; this is a historical term that is still used today (Alt & Stone, 1991).

**Deployment.** As defined by the U.S. DOD (2010), "The rotation of forces into and out of an operational area" is deployment (p. 66).

**Distance learning.** Courses or degree programs that are offered via electronic media where students and teachers might not be physically located together in a classroom is called distance learning (Merriam-Webster, 2015).

**Dual career.** When formal and informal demands are placed on both the spouse and the military servicemember by the military institution, the service is termed a dual career (Harrell, 2001).

**Enlisted servicemember.** “Members of the military with a rank below that of a commissioned officer constitute a vital portion of the overall strength and mobility of an armed force” (RAND [Research and Development], n.d.). These military members are in the ranks of E1–E9. This rank differs from commissioned officers that are in the ranks of O1–O10.

**Hardiness.** Having a sense of purpose, having control over situations, and having the ability to handle and embrace change is considered hardiness (MacDermid, Samper, Schwartz, Nishida, & Nyaronga, 2008).

**Identity.** “How one sees the self” is one’s identity; this identity is often related to beliefs and values and is used as a comparison to others (Senk, 2015; Giele, 2010).

**Military culture and lifestyle.** A unique way of life led by military servicemembers and their families is considered a military culture and lifestyle; it “emphasizes core values, customs, traditions, and hierarchical chain-of-command mentality, which require the commitment of the service member and his or her family regardless of personal cost” (Drummet, Coleman, & Cable, 2003; Gleiman, 2014, pp. 22–23).

**Permanent change of duty station.** This change is the relocation of a servicemember from “one official work site to another” (U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, 2012, p. 1).

**Role.** Expectations and standards that are placed upon a person because of her or his association with a group or social status are called her or his role (Brehm, Kassin, & Fein, 2005).

**Senior enlisted wives.** Enlisted servicemembers are “members of the military with a rank below that of a commissioned officer constitute a vital portion of the overall strength and mobility of an armed force” (RAND, n.d.). For the purpose of my study, this term refers to female military spouses who are married to enlisted servicemembers in the ranks of E7–E9.

**Transformative learning.** This learning results in heightened self-awareness and transformation of one's preconceived notions and beliefs (Weatherly, 2011).

## **Conclusion**

In Chapter 1, I provide a short description of the military lifestyle and the integral roles that military spouses play. The historical oppression and invisibility of military spouses is also highlighted, while rationale for feminist epistemology and situated knowledges as a framework for the study is justified. In this chapter, I also provide validation for a narrative approach to research design; this will allow senior enlisted military wives to share their stories. In Chapter 2, I present an examination of the literature that highlights the history of military spouses, characteristics of contemporary military spouses, internal and external challenges presented by the military lifestyle, and additional theories that promote a better understanding of this unique population. Chapter 3 describes the approach to research taken in my study. The methodology, research design, guiding questions, sample population, data collection, and analysis are explained in detail.

In Chapter 4, I present the review and analysis of the data gathered through narrative inquiry. These narratives were examined to find recurring themes that were significant for the senior enlisted military wife when they told the story of their educational journeys. In Chapter 5, I provide the interpretations of the findings from Chapter 4 and provide recommendations on how to help support the military spouse learner in her quest for higher education.



## **CHAPTER 2:**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

There are challenges associated with the military lifestyle and abundant opportunities afforded to military families. With the increase in educational opportunities for military spouses, including the transferability of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, My Career Advancement Accounts (MyCAA), scholarships, educational counseling services, and “military friendly” schools, the desire to obtain higher education can become a reality. With these new opportunities, over 2 million military family members are posed to enter into higher education (Gleiman & Swearingen, 2012), with approximately 1.1 million spouses of active duty and reserve servicemembers included in this population (MacDermid Wadsworth & Southwell, 2011). Studies suggest that military spouses value education, but that they feel that a variety of challenges hinder their ability to pursue higher education (National Military Family Association, 2007). These challenges result from servicemember deployments, training, work schedules, and frequent PCSs.

The sources for this literature review were gathered over an 11-month period. The majority of sources are from the last 10 years, but additional sources from up to 30 years ago are also included. Historical information provides a context for understanding how military spouses were perceived prior to the late 1980s. Database searches yielded a small number of leads to scholarly journal articles; additional articles, reports, and dissertations have been identified through the reference lists found within these leads. In addition, a general Internet search provided valuable information for this literature review. The terms used to conduct the database and Internet searches included military spouses, military spouse learners, military spouses and education, female military spouses, military spouse employment, challenges to military spouses,

military spouse benefits, Post-9/11 GI Bill, female adult learners, female distance learners, and additional variations of the above terms.

Numerous journal articles were selected from peer-reviewed publications that focused on a variety of topics related to military spouses. Seven reports are included, and two of these reports were published as books by the researching institutions. Five dissertations were incorporated into this literature review and were used as a reference when searching for new literature. These dissertations were a valuable component to this literature review and a research tool; military spouses and education is not a widely studied topic and these dissertations provided an avenue to support the need for this type of study. Studies directly related to military spouses and education are currently limited because military spouses are often overlooked and grouped together with other military learners. However, military spouses today are becoming an increasing source of human and intellectual capital (Gleiman & Swearingen, 2012).

A review of the literature was conducted and the following areas of focus were developed for this chapter: (a) why military spouses are an important population to study in education; (b) the demographics of military spouses; (c) challenges that military spouses face environmentally and internally; (d) theories that can be used to understand military spouse learners; (e) educational opportunities available for military spouses; and (f) distance learning as transformational learning and how it can be valuable to military spouse learners. The purpose of this literature review is to provide an understanding of how and why the military spouse population is unique and to expose the challenges that these spouses may face. These unique challenges often interrupt a military spouse's desire and ability to attain higher education. In this literature review, I move towards focusing on female military spouses of senior enlisted active duty soldiers, but the challenges, theories, and opportunities are applicable to both male and female spouses of all ranks. Opportunities for military spouses to succeed in higher education are

presented with a highlight on the role that distance education, as transformational education, can play for this population.

### **Bringing a Voice to the Senior Enlisted Military Wife**

Much focus is placed on the military spouse population regarding challenges of the military lifestyle, but in the realm of education, it is largely understudied. Educational opportunities have increased; therefore, approximately 1.1 million spouses of active duty and reserve servicemembers have increased accessibility to higher education (Gleiman & Swearingen, 2012; MacDermid Wadsworth & Southwell, 2011). Although 80% of military spouses have attended some college, the *Quadrennial Quality of Life Review* (U.S. DOD, 2009) reported that only one in five military spouses feel that they have fulfilled their educational goals. In two additional surveys, the ACS and the MSES, almost half of the spouses questioned believed that their educational opportunities were hindered because of their status as military spouses (Maury & Stone, 2014).

Harrell, Lim, Castenada, and Golinelli (2004) studied challenges related to being a military spouse of an active duty servicemember, which can affect the pursuit of employment and educational opportunities. Frequent PCSs, the relocation of a servicemember and family to a new military post, servicemember deployments, and the temporary relocation of a servicemember away from his duty station, often affect the availability of childcare, financial resources, educational support offered for spouses, and spouses' ability to achieve balance with their lives (Harrell et al. 2004). Despite these inherent challenges, a population of military spouses exists who, in fact, do choose to enroll in higher education, and who complete and obtain their degrees. Distance learning provides a means for military spouses to overcome these challenges. Distance learning might provide exposure to transformative learning practices might

allow a military spouse to share her experiences and to make meaning of these experiences (Loughlin, 1993).

**Feminist epistemology.** Using feminist epistemology as a theoretical framework, my study focused solely on senior enlisted military wives. A brief history of the military spouse provided a framework and context for problems that the contemporary military spouse faces because social and gender roles have consistently hindered this population. Feminist theory, and feminist epistemology specifically, allowed this often invisible and silent population to share the knowledge that comes along with their personal experiences; senior enlisted military wives told their stories. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986), stated “All women grow up having to deal with historically and culturally engrained definitions of femininity and womanhood – one common theme being that women, like children, should be seen and not heard” (p. 5). Military culture and tradition previously dictated that military spouses were considered “helpmates” and part of a “dual career” (Harrell, 2001). Prior to the late 1980s, the military did not recognize a spouse’s “right” to pursue employment (Harrell, 2001). This indirect oppression of military spouses has laid the groundwork for the idea that military spouses should support their servicemember and the mission, often putting their desires, needs, and goals on hold. The military mission will always supersede the needs and wants of military families; “the relationship between the Army and Army families will never achieve parity. By the very nature of its responsibilities, the Army must maintain control and occupy the dominant role” (Stanley et al., 1990, p. 220).

Feminist epistemology allowed the often invisible and silent population of female enlisted spouses to share the knowledge that comes along with their personal experiences. Davis, Ward, and Storm (2011) explained female military spouses in this context:

Whether from an ideological ambivalence toward the military (Hoshmand & Hoshmand, 2007), or simply a reflection of women's historical experience of "being left out of the world" (Goldner, 1988, p. 42), military wives' voices have been marginalized. Keeping in mind "an erasure need not take place for us to be silenced. . . . We are as silenced when we appear in the margins as we are when we fail to appear at all" (Bograd, 1999, p. 275), many authors have called for research into this area specifically (Evers, Clay, & Jumper, 2004; Hoshmand & Hoshmand, 2007). (Davis et al., 2011, p. 51)

Feminist epistemology allowed women in my study to explain "life and learning from her point of view" (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 5). Female military spouses of active duty servicemembers described their personal experiences related to obtaining their higher education, which provided valuable opportunities for learning about what motivated these spouses to overcome challenges and persevere.

A feminist framework helped to reveal whom the senior military spouse is, challenges and opportunities related to her unique role, and the opportunity to share her success by attaining higher education. The militarization of spouses, stereotypes, and abundant stressors that are unique to senior military spouses can be examined through the sharing of experiences. Examining the educational narratives of female military spouse learners in an effort to determine what motivates them to complete their higher educational goals and what characteristics contribute to their success, while still being faced with obstacles and challenges of the military lifestyle provided valuable insight into this unique population of learners. Only a person who is or has been a military spouse can adequately explain the challenges of the military lifestyle and the way that they affect her motivation to commit to achieving her educational goals.

Belenky et al. (1986) began a project in the 1970s that was concerned with "why women students speak so frequently of problems and gaps in their learning and so often doubt their

intellectual competence” (p. 4). Military spouses are often faced with obstacles and challenges that can contribute to gaps in their learning and often put their academic careers on hold. More often than not, military spouses will readily provide reasons why they can’t be successful in higher education, but often neglect to mention the opportunities that are available. My study allowed those who have chosen to embrace these educational opportunities to explore their experiences through the sharing of narratives. The feminist perspective adopted by Belenky et al. (1986), allowed women in their study to explain “life and learning from her point of view” (p. 5). This is an important aspect of feminist epistemology. By providing senior enlisted military wives the opportunity to describe their personal experiences related to obtaining their higher education, valuable opportunities for learning about what motivates these spouses to overcome challenges and persevere can be explored.

An aspect of feminist epistemology is the centrality of situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988). Haraway (1988) supported that situated knowledges are specific to a particular situation and from a specific viewpoint. Lang (2011) promoted that knowledge and knowing are related in four ways:

- 1) Historical location or where we are at the particular moment in time.
- 2) How our text and speech contribute to our understanding and interpretation of our knowledge.
- 3) The way historical and social contexts affect our creativity in constructing knowledge.
- 4) The way that our emotions (affectivity, commitments, enthusiasms, desires, and interests) contribute to our construction of knowledge.

Lang (2011) ascertained that the previous aspects of knowing are “subjective in that they emerge through the experiences, practices, and circumstances that are specific to the knowers” (p. 88).

Each military spouse has different experiences that contribute to her knowing and knowledge: where she is in her life, where she falls in the realm of military culture, her interest and desire in higher education, and how she addresses challenges of this lifestyle, among other aspects. These situations and viewpoints inform their knowledge and support their unique roles as military spouse learners.

It is important to note that knowledge “can change as we age, engage with the world, and learn new ways of expressing ourselves and of listening to and interacting with others” (Lang, 2011, p. 89). Feminist epistemologies highlight this interaction with others, for learners are situated with, interact with, and often depend on and are depended on by other knowers (Lang, 2011). This is an important characteristic to consider in the study of senior enlisted military wives and their pursuits of higher education. Feminist epistemology and situated knowledge can provide an avenue by which the senior enlisted military wife can explore the factors that motivate (or motivated) them to pursue and attain their higher education goals while experiencing the military lifestyle and its related challenges.

**Social role theory.** The advocates of social role theory promote the understanding of socially determined roles; these roles are constructed through a set of socially acceptable norms and expectations and are internalized by the individual (Eagly, 1987). Military culture greatly influences both the formal and informal roles that military spouses might undertake. In my study, the role of the senior enlisted wife was explored in relation to the challenges and demands not only of being a military spouse, but also of being a senior military wife with increased demands because of her servicemember’s rank. Harrell (2001) ascertained that these informal demands have increased as the demographics of the military have changed, and more emphasis is placed on volunteerism of military spouses. These volunteer expectations include institutional activities; morale, public relations, and ceremonial duties; mentoring, development, and role preservation;

entertaining and socializing; and unit and readiness support (Harrell, 2001, p. 3). These roles and experiences might affect military spouses' desire and ability to attain higher education. Richard (2008) stated, "Though academic research has examined many of the challenges that military families face, there is considerably less information on what skills and practices might best address these issues" (p. 56). The skills and practices of successful military spouse learners can be shared with other military spouses. The collective and individual experience had by military spouses contributes to their unique identities; the sharing of these experiences helps fill a gap in academic literature.

Richard (2008) found,

Military family members with whom I have spoken tend to be suspicious of advice that comes from anyone who hasn't personally gone through a similar experience. Common themes of being misunderstood or of having a life that is very different from civilian life emerged from my interviews, demonstrating that ordinary advice books on how to maintain a happy and healthy family with good work-life balance just don't apply to military families. (p. 57)

As a senior enlisted wife, I have had experiences with the military lifestyle and have held informal and formal leadership roles within the military institution. In my study, I have created significant "opportunities for readers to pay witness and share connections to the challenges of other military families" (Richard, 2008, p. 58).

### **Who is the American Military Wife?**

Those who are military spouses know a life of sacrifice and adventure. Historically, military wives occupied many different roles, including patriot, helpmate, lover, comforter, confidant, and pioneer. "Today, more than ever, the military wife is a pioneer who travels to strange lands, rears her family under nomadic and often inhospitable conditions, and, many times



cope with the stress of surviving on her own” (Alt & Stone, 1991, p. xi). The wives and families who joined their husbands during the winter of 1777 at Valley Forge set the precedent for future wives and military families to be “campfollowers” and to become an integral part of our military even today. These brave wives, who followed their husbands westward after the Revolutionary War, continued their journey and “established the tradition of the self-sacrificing military wife” (Alt & Stone, 1991, p. 31). When traveling through the history of military wives, it is easy to see that “no woman stands solely on her own merit, . . . [because] “the rank of her husband effects how she is perceived, whom her friends are, and where she lives” (Alt & Stone, 1991, p. 3). It is also important to note that throughout military history, “when the women are mentioned, little is given about them that does not directly relate to the actions of their husbands” (Alt & Stone, 1991, p. 3).

Among military spouses, historically and sometimes today, a divide exists between officer and enlisted ranks: “she is either an officer’s wife or an enlisted wife . . . “the division of ranks is so sharp that even in the 1980s one wife would say ‘It is as if a Berlin Wall were built between the two housing areas’” (Alt & Stone, 1991, p. 3). The available history of military spouses is mainly about the activities of the higher-ranking officers and their spouses; “the existing letters and diaries are those of officers’ wives who were generally, it must be assumed, better educated than the wives of the enlisted men” (Alt & Stone, 1991, p. 3). Even if they did not come from a well-off background or have extensive schooling, when a woman married an officer, they automatically “became a part of the aristocracy which the army created and reinforced” (Alt & Stone, 1991, p. 48).

Conversely, my study focused on wives of enlisted soldiers, those who in the times of the Continental Army were described as “bedraggled creatures, their faces blackened by the smoke of campfires, their backs bent under heavy loads as they straggled along with savage unkempt

brats” (Montross, 1952, p. 143). They often lived in tents with the soldiers, marched from camp to camp, and even fought alongside the soldiers. Enlisted wives were at times laundresses for the military post, and maids to the officer ranks; but there was no social interaction between these military wives. Alt and Stone (1991) stated that this division “was not a formal caste system and there were no written rules[,] but the barriers, while invisible, effectively sustained the military caste system” (p. 48). Today, these women are no longer seen as laundresses and maids, but they are often unseen. According to Harrell (2000) in her work *Invisible Women: Junior Enlisted Army Wives*, enlisted wives want to share their stories “because of their perceptions that they were generally invisible to the community and because they hoped to affect the lives of other military spouses” (p. 13). Many of the historically drawn lines between officer and enlisted spouses have been blurred as enlisted spouses are often placed in positions that require informal and formal leadership. An appreciation of the history and characteristics of this population is integral to understanding their uniqueness.

**White glove spouses and the dual career.** Prior to the late 1980s, military spouse activities, attitudes, and behaviors were directly related to their soldier’s promotions and assignments; after the late 1980s military spouses were acknowledged to have their identity separate that from their servicemember. Despite this recognition, military spouses were products of the military culture and social roles as they were often expected to put the military mission first, conduct volunteer activities, accommodate the needs of the service, and fulfill traditional roles such as hostess, mentor, ceremonial duties, and entertaining, in addition to unit readiness support (Harrell, 2001). Perceptions of the traditional military spouse are changing, while still hanging on to tradition; spouses are enrolling in higher education and seeking employment outside of the home. A military spouse’s satisfaction with her education, career, and overall quality of life can affect a servicemember’s continued reenlistment; spousal perception of life

satisfaction has been an important readiness issue for the U.S. DOD (MacDermid Wadsworth & Southwell, 2011; Savych, 2008; Welch, Meyer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2006).

**Age and educational experience of the contemporary military spouse.** Numbers of studies of military families continues to rise because of the events of 9/11, and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (Chandra & Andrew, 2013). Many of these studies focus on the effects of increased deployments on spouses and family members; demographic information gathered from multiple studies is readily available. Common characteristics of military spouses have emerged from the data gathered.

Military spouses are often female and young; in the *Quadrennial Quality of Life Review*, the U.S. DOD (2009) found that 52% of active duty military spouses are aged 30 and younger, and 71% are younger than age 36. These spouses often have young children and children still at home (Harrell et al., 2004). Military spouses often must move every 2–3 years because of servicemember's PCS and these frequent moves often contribute to underrepresentation of this population in the labor force (Harrell et al., 2004; Heaton & Krull, 2012).

Research demonstrates that military spouses have been shown to complete more education than their civilian counterparts (Harrell et al., 2004; Heaton & Krull, 2012). According to the U.S. DOD (2009) in the *Quadrennial Quality of Life Review*, 80% of military spouses have attended some college, 21% hold a bachelor's degree, and 8% hold advanced degrees. Despite these numbers, U.S. DOD reported that only one in five military spouses feels she has fulfilled her educational goals and 87% of these spouses listed attaining higher education as a goal to attain. Personal goals and professional development are the top motivators for military spouses to seek higher education. Maury and Stone (2014), using data from the ACS and the MSES, found that almost half of the spouses surveyed believed that their educational opportunities had suffered because of their status as a military spouse.

**Resilience and hardiness as positive contributors to academic performance.** When studying military spouses, resilience is a component to consider. MacDermid et al. (2008) determined that aspects of military life might contain unique stressors that require resilience, but that many challenges related to the military lifestyle (PCS, deployment, long work hours, and exposure to military equipment and activities) are normative to this population. Positive adjustments, competence, and coping skills can assist military spouses in overcoming these challenges. Individual personality traits also contribute to hardiness, which is considered a character trait that contributes to resiliency and coping skills (MacDermid et al., 2008). According to MacDermid et al. (2008), hardiness is comprised of having a sense of purpose, having control over situations, having the ability to handle and embrace change, and contributing to well-being and greater self-efficacy.

Maddi, Harvey, Khoshaba, Fazel, and Resurrection (2012) explored the relationship between hardiness and college performance, showing results that “confirm the expectation that hardiness is a central factor in school performance” (p. 190). Maddi et al. (2012) further explained that hardiness as an “existential courage” that contributes to the motivation needed to deal with change accurately and effectively (p. 191). Hardiness also allows one to turn stressful circumstances into positive, growth opportunities. According to Maddi et al. (2012), hardiness is comprised of commitment, control, and challenge:

However bad things get, the 3Cs keep you functioning in a manner that facilitates effectiveness and learning. Specifically, if you are strong in commitment, you believe it is important to stay involved with the people and events rather than shrinking into isolation and alienation. If you are strong in control, you keep trying to have an influence on outcomes rather than sinking into powerlessness and passivity. If you are strong in

challenge, you see stresses as normal, and an opportunity to learn more, rather than an imposition on your birthright of easy comfort and security. (p. 192)

Commitment, control, and challenge can potentially assist military spouses in addressing the everyday stressors of the military lifestyle, and can possibly contribute to their success in higher education.

### **Educational Challenges and Opportunities of the Military Lifestyle**

Harrell et al. (2004) found that “many military spouses perceive the military lifestyle to negatively impact their educational opportunities” (p. 134). Military spouses often face challenges not encountered by civilian spouses (Gleiman, 2013; Gleiman & Swearingen, 2012; Harrell et al., 2004; Heaton & Krull, 2012; Hosek & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2013; Jorgenson, 2010; MacDermid et al., 2008; MacDermid Wadsworth & Southwell, 2011; National Military Family Association, 2007; Trougakos, Bull, Green, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2007). The National Military Family Association (2011) identified five life-changing events that are shared by military spouses:

- 1) Servicemember deployed to combat locations.
- 2) Financial setbacks.
- 3) Reintegration of servicemember after a deployment.
- 4) Frequent PCSs.
- 5) Loss of spousal employment when the family has to PCS.

These life-changing events might make it difficult for spouses to enroll in and complete their higher education. The U.S. DOD has acknowledged this and has worked to create programs to assist military spouses with furthering their education. These programs are discussed later in this chapter.

### **Childcare, Financial Resources, and Educational Support**

In addition to the life-changing events previously mentioned, childcare availability and cost, financial concerns, finding balance between the military, family, and educational pursuits, and securing educational support that meets their unique needs, also present challenges for military spouses when deciding to enroll in higher education. In the *Quadrennial Quality of Life Review*, the U.S. DOD (2009) found that 76% of military spouses, who would seek further education, felt that the cost was their primary reason for not enrolling. Thus, the cost of tuition coupled with other challenges can inhibit a spouse's desire and ability to move forward with this pursuit.

**Childcare.** Obtaining childcare is a common challenge for military spouses (Gleiman, 2013; Harrell et al., 2004; Hosek & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2013; Jorgenson, 2010; Trougakos et al., 2007). Many military spouses have full-time parenting responsibilities because of the servicemember's work hours, training, and deployments. Military spouses might face difficulty securing a spot for their children at Child Development Centers; therefore, priority is often given to dual-military families. In addition, the hours offered by the childcare center might not be conducive to evening or weekend courses often offered to nontraditional learners. Despite subsidized childcare offerings on a military post that uses a sliding scale to adjust by income, the financial requirements of childcare might strain a fixed income (Hosek & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2013).

Hosek and MacDermid Wadsworth (2013) found that military families spent more money than civilian families for childcare; they attribute this to long duty days and different types of childcare that military families might need. In a study conducted by the National Military Family Association (2007), a Navy spouse commented,

Yes, the uniformed service lifestyle has affected my chances of going back to school, but this deals more with the personal challenges of moving, having my spouse constantly deployed, financial issues, and not being able to find daycare services so that I can go back to school. (p. 7)

This spouse saw these as personal challenges, but they are shared challenges with which many military spouses are faced. These obstacles that the military lifestyle presents can potentially be overcome with resilience, hardiness, guidance, and support from military and civilian services, and by other military spouses.

**Financial resources.** Financial resources might also pose another challenge to military families. Despite the mainly positive economic status of military families, a fixed income, childcare needs, and the cost of higher education might be large challenges to overcome (Hosek & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2013; National Military Family Association, 2007). The National Military Family Association (2007) found that, in addition to the emotional and social challenges of frequent moves, PCSs have a direct financial effect on military family budgets. For military spouse learners seeking 4-year degree or higher degrees, credits might not transfer to new institutions and students must retake courses or complete alternative courses for degree completion (National Military Family Association, 2007). The Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 established that military spouses are eligible for in-state tuition in the state where they reside or are stationed for more than 30 days. The in-state rate applies as long as the student remains enrolled at the institution. This lessens the financial burden on military families who receive PCS orders during a degree program, but can cause familial strain if the military spouse chooses to stay behind to complete her degree.

**Educational support.** Another challenge that military spouses face is the availability of educational support resources and the understanding of these resources. Numerous support

programs are in place for military spouses, but these programs are often not widely known, or are underused. The National Military Family Association (2007) found that more than 30% of military spouses were unaware of the services available to them at their duty station Education Center. In this same survey, a U.S. Coast Guard Spouse stated,

Many military spouses are not aware of what resources are available to them. Like myself, most of the information I have learned has been through word of mouth. I would like to see the government take responsibility to educate military spouses just as they do servicemembers. (National Military Family Association, 2007, p. 19)

Gleiman (2013) stated, “While many student populations face similar challenges, the combination of the military lifestyle, specific demographic information, and the use of tuition assistance and VA benefits makes the military spouse learner unique within institutions of higher education” (p. 4). Military spouses are often faced with decisions to put their educational pursuits on hold, or to change their educational paths because of frequent moves and deployments. Difficult tasks associated with these life changes can affect a military spouse’s ability to attain higher education, but they also enrich a military spouse’s identity and contributions when they do enroll in institutions of learning. Distance learning provides a way for military spouses to overcome some obstacles such as frequent PCSs, but it still does not eliminate the challenges related to childcare and cost.

### **Welcome to the Sisterhood: The Good Military Wife**

Life as an adult has many challenges; life as an adult as part of the military lifestyle is not exempt from these challenges and, in fact, presents additional challenges that are uniquely inherent to this population. In addition to the environmental challenges presented by the military lifestyle, stereotypes, militarization, seeking one’s own identity, and internal and external



stressors might contribute to how a military spouse perceives herself, which in turn might affect her desire and ability to attain higher education.

**Militarization.** “*Welcome to the Sisterhood,*” this sisterhood is composed of military spouses who, by marrying a member of the military, become part of the military institution (Henderson, 2006). The military institution exudes a great amount of power and influence over those who fall within its ranks, both as servicemembers and family members. Adopting military values such as obedience and a belief in hierarchy can contribute to the influence that one person (or institution) has over another; these are considered characteristics of militarization (Enloe, 2007, p. 4). Enloe (2007) stated:

A husband and wife’s marriage can become militarized if the husband decides to enlist in his country’s military and that military operates on the assumption that a soldier’s spouse will put the needs of the soldier in the family ahead of any other marital need. (p. 4)

A military wife is not solely defined by her marriage, but by her marriage into the military institution; she is “seen not just as a particular soldier’s wife, but as a military wife” (Enloe, 2000, p. 156). This marriage requires militarization; women who marry the military must conform to the expectations of Model Military Wife (Enloe, 2000). The characteristics of a Model Military Wife are necessary for wives’ to maximize their value to the military and contribute to the well-being of the military institution (see Appendix A for these characteristics). In cases of incomplete militarization, spouses will be “unable or unwilling to put their husband–soldier’s military duty first or to gain sufficient pride or satisfaction from their own handling of the stresses of military wifedom to sustain their marriages” (Enloe, 2000, p. 177). Incomplete militarization can often lead to readiness and retention problems as a spouse’s attitude often influences a soldier’s ability to deploy and remain engaged on the battlefield; it might also affect his decision to reenlist (Segal & Harris, 1993). Senior enlisted military spouses may feel that

they must become the ideal Model Military Wife because of the social and economic privileges that they receive and from pressures both from the military and from other military spouses.

**Just a “dependent”.** Military family members are referred to as “dependents,” a term that can have negative connotations and help establish military spouses as inferior in the hierarchy of military culture (Alt & Stone, 1990, p. 30). Historically, military spouses were not permitted to sign documents, make agreements, or attend functions in the military world without their sponsor or servicemember. Today, these activities can be conducted but often require a power of attorney from the servicemember. Dobrofsky (1976) wrote,

She [the military wife] has a lack of personhood. She is marginal in that she is recognized as an associate member of the military structure “sponsored” by her husband while[,] at the same time, she must relinquish most of her autonomy and identity with the overall social structure of civilian society. (p. 2)

This marginalization of military spouses, even by the military, can have negative psychological effects. The saying, “If the military wanted you to have a spouse; they would have issued you one” is a reflection of this. Military spouses have married into military culture and are expected to adhere to certain norms, but they are not looked upon in the same way as military members. Kunst and Sam (2013) suggested that, when marginalized individuals’ social identities are devalued, they might devalue themselves. In addition, the term *dependent* might also cause military spouses to neglect their own personal development and pursuits, such as attaining higher education (Alt & Stone, 1990; Dobrofsky, 1976; McGowan, 2008).

**Finding balance.** Segal (1986) suggested that the “greedy institutions” of the military and the family, both require time, commitment, and energy for those in a military lifestyle. The increased challenges coupled with family needs can result in difficulties with balancing different aspects of work, family, and education. Vuga and Juvan (2013) presented information suggesting

that contemporary middle-class families are often greedy regarding wives and mothers; mothers are expected to devote more time and energy to the family. Families themselves are also greedy of its members; emotional devotion, identification as a family, and the fulfillment of specific roles are expectations of this institution.

The United States military is often involved in both the public and private lives of military members. Many military families live, socialize, shop, eat, and work within the confines of the military installation to which they are assigned (Richard, 2008). Richard (2008) compared this to a “goldfish bowl” and “the totalizing nature of military identity calls for complete commitment and sacrifice from military workers and their families” (p. 38). A greedy institution might,

make total claims on their members and which attempt to encompass within their circle the whole personality. . . . They seek exclusive and undivided loyalty and they attempt to reduce claims of competing roles and status positions on those they wish to encompass within their boundaries. Their demands on the person are omnivorous. (Coser, 1974, p. 4)

The military is not the only greedy institution, as highlighted previously, but the family is as well (Segal, 1986). According to Segal (1986), “military families themselves are becoming greedier, increasing the potential conflict between the military and the family” (p. 13). Balancing the needs of these greedy intuitions can be difficult and can affect a military spouse’s ability to seek higher education.

**Stress because of internal and external expectations.** The military can place a great number of expectations on military spouses, especially those of the senior enlisted ranks. Alt and Stone (1990) asserted that, as a servicemember’s military rank increases, the challenges and obligations of the military spouse also increase. Hopkins (1996) echoed this; the higher a servicemember’s rank, the more a military spouse is expected to volunteer. Senior military

spouses are often expected to volunteer and perform different roles for military organizations; in addition to the role of mandatory volunteer, military spouses are often expected to be hostess, tradition bearer, and mentor of junior spouses (McGowan, 2008).

As an underlying enforcement to this perception, senior enlisted spouses' responsibilities are detailed in the *Battle Book for the Company Commander's Spouse* U.S. Army War College Class of 2010 (2010), which is provided to the Army's incoming Brigade and Battalion Command Sergeant Major's (CSM) spouses during the Pre-Command Course, a 2 week program that spouses are required to attend to be highly trained at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas. All new CSMs encouraged as well. This manual informs senior spouses regarding the roles, duties, protocol, and responsibilities with which they will be confronted in their role as senior military spouses.

In addition, in *The Army Wife Handbook: A Complete Social Guide*, Crossley and Keller (1996) provide invaluable guidance for the military spouses regarding first impressions, the art of communication, invitations, social graces, entertaining, social functions, military functions, military roles, and military living. The role of a senior enlisted military wife "broadens greatly; you are now the leading lady of all the unit's noncommissioned and enlisted wives" (Crossley & Keller, 1996, p. 306). This role calls for looking for problems and concerns among unit family members, and then reporting them to their spouse; military members in senior leadership positions "spend about 30% of time working to improve the quality of life for their subordinates and families" (Crossley & Keller, 1996, p. 307).

The stress placed upon the servicemember can also affect the military spouse (McGowan, 2008). According to Crossley and Keller (1996), "Your husband is rising to the top of his profession, he is given more responsibility and authority the higher he goes, and he is part of that vital core of the Army that makes things happen!" (p. 303). Crossley and Keller (1996) went on

to state, “As his partner, you will have the opportunity to share in the efforts, and the rewards, of making the Army way of life all that it can be for the soldiers and families in the unit” (p. 303).

Rook, Dooley, and Catalano (1991) suggested that the stress of a husband could affect the emotional well-being of a spouse; this might be compounded in the military realm where senior leaders are under constant stress. Accordingly, a spouse might “worry and stress over the well-being of her husband” (McGowan, 2008, p. 30).

In addition to these stressors, frequent changes in duty stations can also result in feelings of isolation for military spouses. According to Coates (1996), time is needed for people to create friendships and support groups; this requires the development of trust over time, with frequent moves and relocations, time isn’t readily afforded to military spouses. McGowan (2008) stated, “In lives of constant flux, women need friendships and conversations with friends to form and sustain their sense of self” (p. 35). The military lifestyle often makes it difficult to form deep, intimate friendships, which many might turn to in times of stress. Lack of this support system might cause more stress for the military spouse (McGowan, 2008).

**Seeking identity.** The military spouse often loses herself during their spouse’s career. As presented earlier, the military spouse’s role is often focused on supporting the military member. Richard (2008) stated,

Commitments made by military personnel oftentimes are made possible by the commitments that must be made by their families, leading to questions about the nature of the interconnectedness and interdependence of the military as an organization, and its members and their civilian families. (p. 1)

Richard (2008) also emphasized that “organizations that require high levels of commitment to shape not only the identity and behavior of military personnel[,] but their families as well” (p. 1).

Military spouses are not required to adhere to the identities and behaviors that are promoted by the brochures, handbooks, and guidebooks that try to establish what a Model Military Spouse should be, but Richard (2008) felt that they do because of *mythos* and *pathos* (p. 31). National identity, patriotism, and martial duty to the servicemember, and military institution might hinder a spouse's ability to be herself (mythos; Richard, 2008). A fear of terrorism, attack by a foreign military, divorce, or even the death of their servicemember might also contribute to a spouse's adherence to this unwritten and sometimes written code of compliance (pathos; Richard, 2008).

Richard (2008) suggested the power of *enthymeme* and ideology "drives organizational members to make decisions based on *what* is best for the group, sometimes coming at the expense of the individual decision maker" (p. 31). If the decision to enroll and attain higher education places a strain on the military family (whether monetary, childcare, or other) a military spouse might choose not to pursue her goals. If the enrollment in higher education interferes with a spouse's ability to volunteer and meet the needs of the unit, military installation, and military service as a whole, then she might again push her goals aside. If a spouse cannot adhere to the characteristics of the Model Military Wife while working towards her educational goals, her goals might again be put on hold. This "self-sacrificing" tradition began early in the history of the American military wife, and continues today (Alt & Stone, 1991, p. 31).

The Model Military Wife, whose identity has been crafted by other military spouses and from those in the civilian realm, is a preconceived idea about all military spouses. "The Making of a Military Wife" (Appendix B) illustrates how a military spouse's identity is often shaped well before she becomes a military spouse; the expectations of this role can be all encompassing, leaving limited room to explore her own identity, desires, and goals.

## **Educational Opportunities for Military Spouses**

Despite the numerous challenges and expectations related to being a military spouse, opportunities for military spouses to seek higher education have grown and are abundant. The transferability of the Post-9/11 GI Bill, creation of MyCAA, the Servicemembers Opportunity Consortium, and services offered by Military One Source are available to military spouses. Military libraries and military Education Centers are also valuable sources of opportunity and support for military spouse learners.

Educational opportunities are now greater; therefore, military spouse enrollment is expected to increase in higher education (Gleiman & Swearingen, 2012; MacDermid Wadsworth & Southwell, 2011). In 2008, the Post-9/11 GI Bill provided transferability of this benefit to spouses and family members of eligible personnel. MyCAA were also established by the U.S. DOD to provide eligible spouses with financial assistance when seeking licensures, certifications, and 2-year degrees in portable career fields. Portable career fields include careers in education, health care, financial services, information technology, real estate, and other careers supported by technical and vocational centers (Military One Source, n.d). Military Spouse Career Advancement Act of 2014 (to codify and provide new guidance on MyCAA) has been referred to the House Committee for changes. Changes seek to expand availability of MyCAA to all spouses, regardless of servicemember's rank, increasing the amount of funding available to spouses, and allowing this benefit to be used for a 4-year degree could provide even more opportunities for spouses to attain higher education (Military Spouse Career Advancement Act, 2014).

**Post-9/11 GI Bill.** Changes to the Post-9/11 GI Bill have greatly increased opportunities for military spouses to attain their educational goals. Eligible servicemembers have the option to transfer their Post-9/11 GI Bill to immediate family members. These benefits can be awarded up

to 36 months if the servicemember has already used some of her benefits. Military spouses are eligible to use this benefit immediately after it is transferred, and they have up to 15 years after their service member separates or retires from active duty to exhaust this benefit. Spouses are not eligible to receive the monthly book or housing supplement while their spouse is on active duty. The GI Bill will pay the entire amount of public university tuition and fee payments at the in-state student rate. If a spouse chooses to attend a private university, \$20,235.02 per year is the maximum amount of reimbursement (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014). Currently, spouses of active duty servicemembers are not eligible for the Yellow Ribbon program; this program provides for students to attend public universities at nonresident rates and to attend private universities that exceed the maximum reimbursement rate with no additional charge to the GI Bill entitlement (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014). The American Council on Education supported a study that was related to student experiences of using the Post-9/11 GI Bill in which 24% of military spouses surveyed stated that the Post-9/11 GI Bill was instrumental in their decision to attain higher education and 18% of military spouses surveyed stated that the benefits of the Post-9/11 GI Bill influenced their choice of institution (Steele, Salcedo, & Coley, 2010).

**My Career advancement accounts.** MyCAA are another monetary benefit available to some military spouses. Currently, MyCAA is being offered only to spouses of active duty military members in lower pay-grades (E1–E5, W1–W2, and O1–O2). Benefits are awarded up to \$4000 total and are capped at \$2,000 per year. These benefits can be applied towards certifications, 2-year degrees, and licensures. It is important to note that currently MyCAA will not pay for Associate's Degrees in General Studies, Liberal Arts, or Interdisciplinary Studies without a concentration (MyCAA, n.d). Military spouses also must complete their degree program within 3 years from the start of their first course. The Military Spouse Career



Advancement Act (2014) has been referred to the House Committee for changes that would increase beneficiaries, benefits, and degree options. These changes would allow military spouses more flexibility in their educational choices and greater financial assistance.

**Servicemembers Opportunity Consortium.** The Servicemembers Opportunity Consortium (SOC) consists of over 1,800 higher education institutions. These institutions are considered military friendly as they have created the SOC Degree Network System (DNS) that provides for guaranteed credit transfers among participating schools. These schools also grant credit for prior learning experiences and accept College Level Education Program (CLEP), DANTES Subject Standardized Tests (DSST), and Excelsior College Examinations for credits. These benefits are extended to spouses of military personnel. Schools that are members of this consortium decrease challenges to continuing education because of a PCS, and might provide guidance about attaining degrees via distance education, which might not be dependent upon residency.

**Military One Source.** Military One Source is a U.S. DOD-funded program that provides support for all aspects of military life, including education. Military spouses can participate in the Spouse Education and Opportunities Program that provides educational and career guidance to military spouses. Spouses are invited to partake in a one-on-one educational consult through Military One Source to learn about scholarships, internships, college selection, and transferring of credits to various participating schools (Sprenkle, Ko, & MacDermid, 2006). Through the Military Family Research Institute, Sprenkle et al. (2006) studied the impact and effectiveness of this program in 2006, and found that of those surveyed who used this resource, that Military One Source had a positive impact by saving time, providing high quality staff and resources, and a favorable user experience. Of those surveyed who had not used Military One Source, 81% stated that they were not familiar with the service, and 17% thought it was relevant to their current need

(Sprenkle et al., 2006). Sprenkle et al. (2006) also found that Military One Source was mainly used to address concerns in military family life that are related to stress: deployment-related stress, reunion related stress, personal relationships, personal stress, financial stress, and work related stress.

**Military education centers and libraries.** Most military installations also offer educational assistance. Education centers provide information about onsite and local institutions, scholarship programs, educational and career counseling, provide testing services such as CLEP and DSST, proctor exams, and act as a multiuse learning facility (Welch et al., 2006). Military libraries are also a source of educational assistance available to military spouses. Military libraries can provide free Internet access, research assistance from librarians, and offer training that can enrich their spouse's learning experiences (Welch et al., 2006). Military libraries also provide tax assistance, financial planning, computer training, classes for lifelong learning and distance education support; these features are important aspects that improve well-being and individual learning and development (Welch et al., 2006).

Different avenues that support military spouses can greatly contribute to their success in higher education. Identifying the educational needs of military spouse learners and providing assistance to help military spouses, as a separate student population of learners, overcome their unique barriers is paramount (Gleiman & Swearingen, 2012). These programs can help create a sense of community among military spouse learners, which might potentially reinforce a sense of belonging and well-being (Chavis & Perry, 1999).

### **Theories to Promote Understanding of Military Spouses**

Although opportunities to attain higher education are abundant, the numerous life changes that military spouses face might be difficult to understand. These life challenges that military spouses face are stressful and might very well impede their ability to pursue higher

education. Transition theory, resiliency theory, power-load-margin theory, and social role theory are provided as a foundation for understanding military spouses and their experiences.

**Transition theory.** With the transition theory, Schlossberg (1984) provided a basis for understanding changes and challenges that military spouses face. PCS and deployments occur frequently for various reasons; therefore, the military lifestyle is representative of what Schlossberg (1984) described as chronic hassle transitions, which typically are constant and continuous. Chronic hassle transitions can affect a military spouse's ability to address stressors because they might come in quick succession. Her ability to address these transitions would depend upon her coping abilities and resiliency. The demands of obtaining higher education could become an additional stressor for a military spouse and successfully undertaking this pursuit might be related to her coping skills and resiliency.

With the transition theory, Schlossberg (1984) helped researchers to understand how life-changing events such as those that a military spouse faces might affect her ability to attain and be successful in higher education. Senk (2015) stated, "Transition theory is focused on the type, context, timing, and impact of an event, and the person's perception of the transition through four stages: preparation, encounter, adjustment, and stabilization" (p. 35). In addition to the life transitions, military spouses often have "different life circumstances and priorities than traditional college students" (Senk, 2015, p. 36). Work, families, and their unique lifestyle can both hinder, or on the other end of the spectrum, contribute to the military spouse-learner to be more committed and serious about her education. In a study of female veterans who enrolled in higher education, Senk (2015) asserted, "It is in balancing a combination of individual characteristics, the environment, support resources, and the transition itself that allows for the coping strategies to be effective" (p. 36). This leads one to the question: How do female military spouses balance these elements to be successful in higher education?

**Resiliency theory.** Resiliency theory can also help one understand military spouses. Gleiman and Swearingen (2012) ascertained that spouses often develop coping skills and resiliency from their multiple experiences with deployments, moves, and other stressors. When spouses have not developed these mechanisms, their ability to handle normative stressors might be impeded, which could “translate into a spouse’s feeling unable to accomplish goals and aspirations because of the demands that result from a spouse’s military service” (Gleiman & Swearingen, 2012, p. 82). Thus, Gleiman and Swearingen (2012) illustrated why some spouses might not continue to pursue their educational goals; they might already feel overwhelmed because of the military lifestyle.

Senk (2015) also stated, “Having a sense of connecting to others with similar experiences, having accessible services, and feeling like they have peers, family, and academic personnel who understand them and can help assist them in transitioning to college” (p. 37). These elements can help lessen the normative stressors associated with the military lifestyle; therefore, programs that contribute to increasing resiliency and coping skills through the sharing of similar life experiences can benefit this population.

**Power–load–margin theory.** Another theory that can assist with understanding military spouses and their unique situations is McClusky’s (1974) power–load–margin theory. This theory can help explain military spouse’s current responsibilities (load) in relation to their coping skills, stamina and resources (power; Gleiman & Swearingen, 2012). When the load and power are equal, or if the load exceeds power, then military spouses might be unable to take on additional tasks such as seeking higher education (margin; McClusky, 1974). Experience, trial and error, and coping skills can contribute to the ability to take on a larger load. The growth of educational opportunities that are available to military spouses can increase the available load. Programs such as Military One Source, Servicemembers Opportunities Consortium, and military

education centers can provide spouses with valuable support and contribute to the ability to assume more responsibilities.

**Social role theory.** For the purpose of my study, social role theory is a leading theory that can promote the understanding of socially determined roles. These roles are constructed by a set of socially acceptable norms and expectations and are internalized by the individual (Eagly, 1987). Military culture greatly influences both the formal and informal roles that military spouses may undertake: spouse, parent, friend, student, mentor, neighbor, volunteer, and so forth. Gleiman (2013) established that the military spouse role develops overtime and that role engagement can affect well-being and life satisfaction; therefore, complexities of the military lifestyle can also affect the identity of a military spouse. The notion that collective and individual experiences of military spouses contribute to their unique identities is revisited and understood, using the social role theory. These roles and experiences greatly affect a military spouse's desire and ability to attain higher education.

### **Distance Learning as Transformative Learning for the Military Spouse**

Military spouses are a varied and unique population, with experiences that can greatly contribute to higher education (Weatherly, 2011). Gleiman (2013) stated, "These experiences are often reflected in the classroom as military spouses often hold broader worldviews than other students" (p. 3). Their shared and individual experiences help shape their unique identities (Gleiman & Swearingen, 2012). Military spouses share similar experiences such as PCS, deployments, and other challenges, but their individuality determines how they cope with each experience. Savych (2008) ascertained that people who choose to marry a servicemember have determined that the benefits outweigh the challenges, and those who remain military families and do not choose to separate from military service, have accepted the costs and hardships. Savych (2008) concluded that military spouses could be thought of as a "selected group of people" (p. 8).

Their status as tradition bearers and members of a “dual career” has evolved from that of “white glove spouses” to spouses who are seeking their own identities, careers, and academic success (Harrell, 2001). Society, families, and the desire of military spouses to attain higher education and employment outside of the home have changed; therefore, the government and other military agencies have recognized these needs, and numerous opportunities for spouses to obtain higher education have been created (Harrell, 2001). The norms and traditions of a military lifestyle often influence “how a military spouse interprets, acts in, and experiences the world through shifting cultural structures, codes, or orders such as the hierarchical chain of command experience” (Gleiman, 2014, p. 52). The senior enlisted military wife in particular, is in a unique position to contribute to the military community and to influence and mentor other military spouses.

Distance learning is a viable option for the military spouse to attain higher education. This medium can assist military spouses in overcoming the barriers and challenges presented of their lifestyle; the disruptions of moving, deployments, seeking childcare, and balancing a military family lifestyle are appreciated and the difficulties are almost eliminated in the asynchronous learning environment. Weatherly (2011) provided data that indicates that females comprise the majority of online learners; military spouses are also predominantly women (Harrell et al., 2004). In a 2005 study of online graduate students, Rovai and Baker (2005) concluded that women posted and interacted more in online discussions, they felt a greater sense of community, and that distance learning provided for their educational goals and values.

**Distance learning and well-being.** Distance learning can contribute to female learner’s well-being, and well-being is an important component to military spouses, families, and servicemember retention. Distance learning can be an avenue for female military spouses to attain positive educational outcomes. Distance learning can help military spouses reach career

goals, personal goals, increase their self-confidence, and serve as a role model for other military spouses.

Quimby and O'Brien (2006) studied nontraditional female students with children and what factors influence their well-being; their sample was representative of female military spouse demographics. They described well-being as consisting of three components including psychological well-being, self-esteem, and life satisfaction. Quimby and O'Brien (2006) found that students who were well attached, confident in managing in their different roles (student, spouse, or parent), and had social support experienced greater well-being. Distance learning can contribute to management of these different roles and provide students with a strong sense of community (Rovai & Baker, 2005). Even back during the Revolutionary War, "Washington was reluctant to order any wives out of camp for fear of [soldiers] deserting if their families were abandoned"; servicemember retention has been a continuous focus of the military institution (Sowers-Alt & Stone, 1991, p. 5).

**Distance learning and change.** Female distance learners might also experience change, possibly even transformative change. Weatherly (2011) found that distance learning could provide transformative learning experiences for women, heightened self-awareness and the transformation of one's preconceived notions and beliefs. Transformations are unique to each individual and are dependent on their experiences (Weatherly, 2011). Cranton (2010) has identified the characteristics of distance learning that contribute to transformative learning engagement:

- 1) Online learners might share experiences and thoughts that they wouldn't in a face-to-face environment. This is known as "the stranger on the train" phenomenon (p. 4).
- 2) Online discussions can be reviewed as needed by a learner; face-to-face discussions do not provide this same accessibility.

- 3) Online discussion boards provide time for reflection before responding.
- 4) Links and additional resources are often available to the learner through the online learning platform that can contribute to a more thorough understanding of the topics.

These elements of distance learning can contribute to a learning environment in which different viewpoints are presented which might lead to a military spouse's examination of her own views. The conversational environment also encourages reflection and engagement; students are given a venue to share their voices. Cranton (2010) suggested that transformative learning can be fostered "through meaningful interactions among learners in which people feel free to express divergent points of view and feel supported and challenged by their peers" (p. 8). Transformative learning environments can help military spouses to participate as community of learners who are "united in a shared experience of trying to make meaning of their life experience" (Loughlin, 1993, pp. 320–321).

For military spouses, who once were thought of by the military as their servicemember's helpmate (Harrell, 2001), and who face continuous normative stressors (MacDermid et al., 2008), the educational opportunities available through distance learning can contribute to transformative change. Transformative learning can also help military spouses "consciously participate in the journey of individuation"; military spouses can develop a greater understanding of themselves and of the world that surrounds them (Dirkx, 2000). Military spouses should believe that they can and will achieve their educational goals, despite their perceived barriers. Their success might contribute to a greater life satisfaction and satisfaction with their military lifestyle. The sharing of collective and individual successes in higher education should be a focal point from which mentorship and positive modeling can be rallied.

**Distance learning and self-efficacy.** Self-efficacy is the belief in one's competencies and abilities to achieve their goals (Bandura, 1977a). According to Senk (2015), "Self-efficacy



influences internal motivation and the drive to succeed can lead to improved learning” (p. 31). A student’s belief in her abilities often affects her motivation and results academic achievement (Bandura, 1993). Trougakos et al. (2007) identified factors that could affect self-efficacy; these factors could be personal, environment, or behavioral. Current employment status, educational level, availability of financial resources, and the use of assistance programs offered by the military contribute to positive self-efficacy. Negative variables include number of children and financial resources, which affect availability of childcare and act as barriers to self-efficacy.

Even with increased opportunities in place, military spouses might not believe that they could attain their goals. Positive mentorship from other successful military spouse learners can often provide motivation for spouses to overcome challenges and attain higher education. Bandura’s (1977b) social learning theory also supports that the relationships that may exist between students can help to support and motivate them in their learning.

## **Conclusion**

An overview of the military spouse and her unique identities were presented in this chapter. Common demographic information, recurring challenges that this population might face, and a review of theories that could help better understand the life events of military spouses have been explored. Previous studies of military spouses were often focused on the challenges that this population faced when seeking employment and overcoming other obstacles related to servicemember deployments.

Furthering their education was briefly touched upon in the literature presented, and the increase in educational opportunities for military spouses via distance education has encouraged further study of military spouses’ experiences as adult learners in formal programs. Distance learning can assist in increasing well-being and life satisfaction for military spouses, while providing for transformative learning experiences.

This literature review presented information from a variety of sources, including dissertations, journal articles, books, and published reports to provide demographic information and attributes of military family life that could often influence a military spouse's ability to seek higher education. The strength of this review lies in the variety of sources presented and in the holistic perspective it portrays about military spouses; theories, challenges, opportunities, and common demographics describe this unique population. Although the literature review is lacking in specific resources that discuss military spouses and education, this topic is emerging in dissertations; nevertheless, an abundance of literature is not yet available. This exposes a potential gap in the literature.

Continued research into the realm of military spouses and education is integral to the field of higher education and those who support military spouse-learners. This review of the literature helps establish a foundation for the development of programs and resources that support the unique needs of female military spouse learners, more specifically those of the senior enlisted ranks. These resources can help military spouse learners cope with the challenges of the military lifestyle, enhance transformative learning, and ease the transition from being a military spouse to being a successful military spouse learner.

## CHAPTER 3:

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of my study was to explore the experiences of senior enlisted military wives and to document how the military lifestyle has affected their ability to attain higher education while their servicemember was on active duty. Specifically, I focused on senior enlisted military wives who have chosen to pursue their higher education through distance learning. In this chapter, I detail narrative inquiry as methodology, the rationale for choosing this method, the participants, data collection, and analysis planned for my study.

#### **Research Approach Rationale**

Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) stated, “Qualitative research is suited to promote a deep understanding of a social setting or activity as viewed from the perspective of the research participants” (p. 27). Exploration, discovery, and description are key elements of qualitative research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). The research problem dictated the type of research approach, and in this study, I explored the experiences of senior enlisted wives that contributed to their ability to overcome the challenges of the military lifestyle when attaining higher education.

Narrative inquiry aligned with the purpose of my study as “narrative research begins with the experiences as expressed in lives and told stories of individuals or cultures” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 34). In my study, the story of military culture as experienced by individual senior enlisted military wives was shared through the telling of stories. Chase (2005) supported the use of narratives, more specifically women’s personal narratives not only to study events, culture, and social structures, but also to portray “women as social actors in their own right and in the subjective meanings that women assigned to events and conditions in their lives” (p. 655).

According to Haraway (1988), knowledge and knowing, or situated knowledges, are specific to a particular situation and from a specific viewpoint. Lang (2011) promoted the concept that knowledge and knowing are related in four ways:

- 1) Historical location or where we are at the particular moment in time.
- 2) How our text and speech contribute to our understanding and interpretation of our knowledge.
- 3) The way historical and social contexts affect our creativity in constructing knowledge.
- 4) The way that our emotions (affectivity, commitments, enthusiasms, desires, and interests) contribute to our construction of knowledge.

In my study, I addressed all four aspects of knowledge and knowing; life as an active duty military spouse is unique historically, socially, and comes with its own challenges and opportunities. Narrative research allowed for the examination of interaction (personal and social), continuity (past, present, and future), and situation (place) as important elements when telling a participant's story (Creswell, 2011). This three-dimensional space narrative, as provided by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), also allowed me to share their story. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stated, "In narrative inquiry, it is impossible (or if not impossible, then deliberately self-deceptive) as a researcher to stay silent or to present a kind of perfect, idealized, inquiring, moralizing self" (p. 62).

As inferred by Thompson (2011), "Education is informed by story" (p. 16). This idea was also supported by Rossiter and Clark (2007) when they stated, "The narrativizing of our understanding is how we make our learning visible to ourselves . . . creating that coherent narrative is how we learn" (p. 77). By using narratives, senior enlisted wives have the

opportunity to make meaning of their lives as senior military spouses, military spouses, and military spouse learners.

Studying life through stories contributes to the narratives and inquirers ability to engage “in living and telling our stories—of ourselves, of the participants, and of our shared inquiries” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 71). Making meaning of the experiences of military spouses in the military environment and the way that these experiences have contributed to the attainment of higher education can help support the purpose of narrative inquiry “to offer possibilities for reliving, for new directions, and new ways of doing things” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 189). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stated, “Narrative inquiry is an experience of the experience” (p. 189). Sharing this experience not only contributes to the knowledge base of the military lifestyle, but also provides an avenue through which military spouses can make meaning and gain new knowledge from telling their stories.

### **Research Design**

Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) discussed the collaborative narrative, “Ultimately, the narrative combines views from the participants’ lives with those of the researcher’s life, culminating in a collaborative narrative” (p. 34). Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002) also echoed this notion; “Within the story may also be the story of the researcher interwoven as she or he gains insight into himself or herself” (p. 332). Merriam (2009) described narrative research as using stories as data; stories that are retold in “story form having a beginning, middle, and end” (p. 32). These stories or “text are then examined and analyzed for the meaning it has for the author” (Merriam, 2009, p. 32). The ability to make meaning of experiences held by senior enlisted military wives in their pursuit of online higher education was a focus of my study. I am also a military wife who has shared this experience; therefore, I have become visible in this research with my own stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

An interpretive-constructivist approach has been taken when designing my study. I understood that each military spouse learner would have different realities or interpretations of the impact that the military environment has had on her higher education (Merriam, 2009).

Creswell (2007) stated:

In this worldview, individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meanings of their experiences . . . . These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views . . . . Often these subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically. In other words, they are not simply imprinted on individuals[,] but are formed through interaction with others (hence social constructivism) and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives. (pp. 20–21)

In my study, I focused on the history of the military spouse in addition to how military culture has affected senior enlisted military wives in their educational journeys. Narrative inquiry provided senior enlisted military wives an avenue to share their story and make meaning of their experiences, using feminist epistemology as a theoretical framework.

Feminist epistemology allowed senior enlisted military wives to explore how militarization, stereotypes, and stressors that are unique to this population have been overcome in their pursuit of higher education. Through the sharing of their individual narratives, these participants brought a voice to all female military spouse learners. These individual narratives were gathered and have become part of the collective experiences that military spouses share. According to Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002), narrative inquiry brings researchers and participants together to construct experiences, provides a voice for participants, and places emphasis on the value of the participants' stories.

In my study, I value the stories and identities of the senior enlisted military wife and seek to overcome the marginalization of this population. Creswell (2011) stated, “When people tell stories to researchers, they feel listened to” (p. 501). In my study, narrative inquiry supported the telling of stories by senior enlisted military wives. These wives are a small portion of the population of enlisted wives who want to share their stories “because of their perceptions that they were generally invisible to the community and because they hoped to affect the lives of other military spouses” (Harrell, 2000, p. 13).

### **Research Questions**

As supported by qualitative methodology and narrative inquiry, I shared the participants’ stories in relation to three research questions:

- Research Question 1: How do the life experiences of a senior enlisted military wife align with the features of a Model Military Wife in the contemporary era as described by Enloe (2000)?
- Research Question 2: How do the challenges and demands of the role of a senior enlisted military wife affect the fulfillment of her educational goals?
- Research Question 3: How has the experience of distance learning contributed to transformations for the senior enlisted military wife?

### **Setting**

The setting of my study varied according to the participants chosen. My study focused on the experiences of senior enlisted military wives and was not dependent upon any one site or military installation. Participants were recruited globally through a structured FaceBook post. Semistructured interviews were conducted using Skype because Skype and other video transferred conference mediums are common forms of communication that can assist with breaking down the location barriers because of military duty stations. These semistructured

interviews did not take place on a military installation; military approval was not required for my study (Black, 2015).

### **Participants**

The participants for my study were chosen through purposeful sampling; Creswell (2007) stated, “The inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (p. 156).

Participants for my study met four criteria:

- 1) They were senior enlisted military wives.
- 2) They were enrolled in or had completed their higher education degree while their military servicemember was on active duty in the ranks of E7–E9.
- 3) They were involved in informal or formal leadership roles or volunteer positions that contributed to the military institution while they were concurrently enrolled in higher education.
- 4) They were enrolled in a distance education program, or had taken higher education distance education courses, as a nontraditional learner.

These parameters were chosen specifically to highlight the core dimensions of my study. The senior enlisted military wife has unique challenges because of the military lifestyle that contributes to her value in both higher education and in that of the military environment. It is important to note that these participants also volunteered to participate and did not have a prior personal or professional relationship with me.

Senior enlisted military wives are often expected to hold informal and formal leadership roles. The core component of selection for these participants was the enrollment in higher education while their active duty military servicemember was in the ranks of E7–E9. This dimension provides for a rich understanding of the role that senior enlisted military wives often



play in relation to the military environment; spouses in these ranks often hold volunteer positions and are expected to adhere to certain military norms as described in the literature review. These participants have overcome the demands of the military institution on this specific population to achieve academic success. This leads to the next important dimension of participant selection: using distance learning to attain higher education. The challenges of the military lifestyle often present impassable barriers to education via a traditional brick and mortar environment. Distance learning provides a way to overcome the challenges of PCS, alleviates some of the need for childcare, and provides flexibility for these nontraditional students.

When describing narrative research, Creswell (2011) stated, “The procedures for implementing this research consist of focusing on studying one or two individuals, gathering data through the collection of their stories, reporting individual experiences, and chronologically ordering the meaning of those experiences” (p. 70). For my study, I selected five participants that met all of the required dimensions.

Upon Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the IRB approved flyer was posted on Facebook pages that are seen by military spouses. These pages included a public page, the National Military Family Association page, and other private Facebook pages to which military spouses must apply to be a member and of which I am already a member. The Recruitment Flyer (Appendix D) listed the purpose of the study, the requirements to participate in the study, the modes of data collection, and compensation of a gift certificate to the participants. The posting stated,

**Purpose:** The purpose of my study is to explore the experiences of senior enlisted military wives and how the military lifestyle has affected their ability to attain online higher education while their servicemember was on active duty.

Who: You are eligible to participate in my study and share your story if all of the following are true about you:

- You are a female currently married to an active duty enlisted servicemember in the ranks of E7–E9;
- You are or were enrolled in higher education and have used distance education as an avenue to complete your courses while your spouse was an E7–E9;
- You are or were engaged in the military culture (i.e., participated as an active member of the family readiness group; volunteered in company, battalion, or brigade activities; or participated in social activities, etc.) while you were enrolled in higher education; and
- You have had no prior personal or professional relationship with the researcher.

Participants will be recruited globally with no exclusions to age, race, nationality, religion, or sexual orientation.

If you do not meet the description above, you are not able to be in the study.

**YOUR STORY MATTERS.** By sharing your educational experience, you can help increase awareness of educational opportunities for other military spouses.

How: If are interested in potentially participating in my study please contact me privately at XXX@gmail.com. The period for a response is 1 week from the date of posting. For confidentiality reasons and to ensure validity of my study, please do not respond directly to this thread or make public comments regarding my study. I appreciate your cooperation and support as I strive to explore this topic further.

\*Participants who are chosen to participate and complete the interviews will be offered a \$25 gift card redeemable wherever credit cards are accepted as compensation for participation in this project.

Military spouses who were interested in participating were asked to email me at my personal, password-protected email. Interested parties were sent an email within 24 hours of their response that included the University of New England (UNE) Consent for Participation in Research Form (Informed Consent Form; Appendix C) and the questionnaire (Appendix E). This questionnaire included questions about demographics, educational history, volunteer history, and other important aspects that helped establish a timeline of the participant's educational journey. The questionnaire was available for a 1-week period and potential participants were instructed to email this tool back to me within this timeframe.

Upon return of the signed Informed Consent Form and questionnaire, I scheduled 45–60 minutes Skype sessions with the participants chosen through purposeful sampling to collect data via semistructured interviews. All scheduled sessions were confirmed through email. Interviews were conducted within 1 week from the date that the participants volunteered to be in the study, according to their signing of the Informed Consent Form.

### **Pilot to Seek Possible Participants**

As a pilot to determine whether a senior enlisted military wife population would be accessible, I identified possible participants through purposeful sampling via two, online Facebook posts to secret and closed Facebook pages created for military spouses: CSM–SGM Spouses Group and the Annapolis Area Military Spouses pages. I am a member of both of these social media pages. Respondents and participants were encouraged to refer other participants through snowball, chain, or network sampling. This type of sampling helps researchers collect “new information-rich cases” (Patton, 2002, p. 237). This avenue of sampling was useful.

Eighteen possible participants were identified in this pilot sampling exercise. This pilot also allowed me to identify potential issues using this method of gathering participants. None of the respondents to the pilot will be chosen to participate in my study. Revisions to this method were made according to the pilot and guidance from the IRB.

## **Data**

Upon receipt of the Informed Consent Form and completed questionnaire, interview sessions were scheduled with the chosen participants. The date and times of these semistructured interviews were confirmed with the participants and conducted within 1 week of the participants' return of the aforementioned required documents. A copy of the signed Informed Consent Form was also mailed to the participants.

Before beginning each scheduled interview, I confirmed the receipt of the Informed Consent Form, confirmed that the participants understood the information contained in the form, and reminded them that the interviews would be recorded. After each interview session, the recordings into written transcriptions and verified for accuracy.

In addition to the one-on-one interview, I also conducted email interviews with the participants to verify and validate the information that was discussed in the Skype interviews. Creswell (2011) stated that email interviews "can also promote a conversation between yourself as the researcher and the participants, so that through follow-up conversations, you can extend your understanding of the topic or central phenomenon being studied" (p. 219). These email interviews followed the same Interview Protocol (Appendix F) as the one-on-one interviews and the privacy of the responses was protected in the password-protected email system.

The use of these two different interview mediums allowed for a better understanding of the experience of the participant and contributed to learning through their stories. "The stories constitute the data, and the researcher typically gathers it through interviews or informal

conversations” (Creswell, 2011, p. 505). These stories created the researcher’s field text, or raw data. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stated that a “range and interplay of field texts within one complete study” (p. 95) might be used. Field notes taken during the interview and during the transcription of the interviews, the transcribed interviews, and the incorporation of the life experience of the researcher and participants are all important to my study. “Researchers’ personal, private, and professional lives flow across boundaries into the research site; likewise, though not often with the same intensity, participants’ lives flow the other way”; these life experiences are valuable and integral to the field text and related inquiry of my study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 115).

### **Analysis**

Narrative research and inquiry allows the researcher to retell the stories of their participants. Creswell (2011) described restorying as “the process in which the researcher gathers stories, analyzes them for key elements of the story (e.g., time, place, plot, and scene) and then rewrites the story to place it in a chronological sequence” (p. 509). I used the data collected in the questionnaire and interview sessions to craft each participant’s story in my own words.

According to Creswell (2011), restorying the narratives of the participants occurs three stages. Stage 1 includes conducting and transcribing the interviews with the participants. Stage 2 calls for identifying, retranscribing, and coding the key elements (raw data). Useful codes include the setting, characters, action, problem, and resolution as told by the participant and identified by the researcher. Lastly, in Stage 3, the “narrative researcher restories the student’s account by organizing the key codes into a sequence” (Creswell, 2011, p. 509). In my study, I adhered to these stages and applied the elements of Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) three-dimensional space narrative structure. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) described these terms as “*personal* and *social* (interaction); *past*, *present*, and *future* (continuity); combined with the

notion of *place* (situation)” (p. 50). The elements of interaction, continuity, and situation provide for narrative researchers to look inward, outward, backward, and forward. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stated, “To experience an experience—that is[,] to do research into an experience—is to experience it simultaneously in these four ways and to ask questions pointing each way” (p. 50).

In addition to the restorying of the participants’ experiences, I identified a variety of themes that emerged from the participants’ stories. Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002) stated, “In this process, researchers narrate the story and often identify themes or categories that emerge from the story. Thus, the qualitative data analysis may be both descriptions of the story and themes that emerge from it” (p. 332). I collaborated with the participants to validate the accuracy of each narrative. This check was conducted after the story was rewritten to ensure a precise story that shared the participant’s experience.

### **Participant Rights**

I took into account ethical considerations when conducting narrative research. The UNE’s IRB provided approval for my study and its research methods. All participants in the study were provided with an Informed Consent Form that they read, signed, and receive a copy. All participants acknowledged and understood what they could expect as participants in my study.

Participants’ confidentiality and anonymity were safeguarded throughout the study. Names were replaced with numbers; this procedure will be applied to the questionnaire, transcripts, and email interviews. Names, emails, returned forms, and information were stored on my password-protected home computer.

When restorying the participants’ narratives, I used pseudonyms in place of the participants’ names and applied other “fictionalizing methods” as necessary (Clandinin &

Connelly, 2000, p. 175). The military is a small community and it is of the utmost importance to guarantee anonymity of the participants. As long as anonymity was protected, the possible unintended outcomes of participation in the study were limited. This research was focused on positive aspects and experiences of the senior enlisted military wife; therefore, negative outcomes were also limited. I collaborated with the participants to validate the accuracy of each narrative, and participants reviewed the final story for accuracy.

### **Potential Limitations**

In this qualitative research study, I explored the experiences of senior enlisted military wives and documented how the military lifestyle has affected their ability to attain higher education while their servicemember was on active duty. My study used purposeful sampling to select the sample; therefore, it should not be generalized to other populations. It is also important to note that my study focused solely on senior enlisted military wives. Some spouses are male spouses, and some spouses are dual military couples in the enlisted and officer ranks who might share similar experiences. Spouses of senior officers might also be faced with similar demands and challenges, but my study was limited to those in the enlisted ranks. The possibility of bias also existed from the participants. They might have responded in a way that they felt the researcher wished to hear.

### **Researcher Bias**

I am a veteran of the United States Air Force and a military spouse of a senior enlisted U.S. Army soldier. The review of the literature for my study surrounds mainly the U.S. Army as a branch of the military service. Most of the information presented about military spouses is generalizable to all branches of the military. I have made every effort to remove any preconceived notions or bias to allow the participants to tell their own stories. To ensure that their stories would be accurately presented, the participants validated the narratives.

## **Conclusion**

In my study, I explored the experiences of senior enlisted military wives and the way that the military lifestyle has affected their ability to attain higher education while their servicemember was on active duty. Narrative inquiry allowed senior enlisted military wives to share their stories.

The study's purpose, research questions, and conceptual framework were aligned with the methodology chosen and supported by the scholarly literature of Creswell (2011), Clandinin and Connelly (2000), and Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002). Narrative inquiry was an optimal method for this research, and the three-dimensional space narrative structure provided for a rich and thorough restorying of the participants' narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

As suggested by Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002), this method of research "emphasizes the importance of learning from participants in a setting. This learning occurs through individual stories told by individuals" (p. 331). I collaborated with the participants in my study throughout the data and analysis phases to ensure the accuracy of the narratives. This interaction supported the experience of narrative inquiry; "these experiences in narrative inquiry are both personal, what the individual experiences, and social, the individual interacting with others" (Creswell, 2011, p. 507).



## CHAPTER 4:

### RESULTS

This study was guided by the overarching purpose to explore the experiences of senior enlisted military wives and to document the way that the military lifestyle has affected or not affected their ability to attain higher education while their servicemember was on active duty. Specifically, my study focused on senior enlisted military wives who chose to pursue their higher education through distance learning. The study documented the narratives of senior enlisted military wives, and described their educational journeys and was guided by the following research questions:

- Research Question 1: How do the life experiences of a senior enlisted military wife align with the features of a Model Military Wife in the contemporary era as described by Enloe (2000)?
- Research Question 2: How do the challenges and demands of the role of a senior enlisted military wife affect fulfillment of her educational goals?
- Research Question 3: How has the experience of distance learning contributed to transformations for the senior enlisted military wife?

Narrative research and inquiry allows the researcher to retell the stories of their participants. Creswell (2011) described restorying as “the process in which the researcher gathers stories, analyzes them for key elements of the story (e.g., time, place, plot, and scene) and then rewrites the story to place it in a chronological sequence” (p. 509). The data collected in the questionnaire and interview sessions were used to craft each participant’s story in my own words. Their stories are presented at the beginning of this chapter.

In addition to the restorying of the participants' experiences, I identified two categories of themes and subtopics that emerged from the participants' stories. Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002) stated, "In this process, researchers narrate the story and often identify themes or categories that emerge from the story. Thus, the qualitative data analysis may be both descriptions of the story and themes that emerge from it" (p. 332). The data gathered were analyzed and the resulting themes are presented with supporting data in this chapter.

### **Narratives**

As stated in Chapter 3, participants were recruited through an IRB-approved flyer that was posted on FaceBook pages that are seen by military spouses. The Recruitment Flyer listed the purpose of the study, the requirements for participating in the study, the modes of data collection, and the compensation of a gift certificate for each participant. This flyer was available for one week. Within this timeframe, 12 senior enlisted wives responded to the flyer. All wives were sent an Informed Consent Form and a questionnaire. Of the 12 initial respondents, only five responded with their completed documents. All five were asked to participate in a 45–60 minute Skype interview as their responses on the questionnaire fit the criteria indicated for purposeful sampling and each wife had a unique educational and military lifestyle story to share.

Interviews were conducted with each of the chosen participants and these interviews ranged from 30–90 minutes. The participants were asked to share their stories of their educational journeys without interruption. Some participants had lengthy educational journeys, while others were newer to the military lifestyle and had stories that spanned a shorter period.

Story themes included both the challenges and opportunities of the military lifestyle. Most notably, these wives were pleased with and used the variety of opportunities presented by this lifestyle. My study allowed the senior enlisted spouses who had chosen to embrace the educational opportunities provided by the military to explore their experiences through the

sharing of narratives. Belenky et al. (1986) presented the feminist perspective on the power of narrative, allowed women in their study to explain “life and learning from her point of view” (p. 5). Similarly, by providing senior enlisted military wives the opportunity to describe their personal experiences related to obtaining their higher education, valuable opportunities for learning about what motivated these spouses to overcome challenges and persevere were explored. An overview of the participants is presented in Table 1, and the participants’ stories are shared in the following passages.

Table 1

*Participants*

Name	Age	Spousal rank	Education in progress	Volunteering	Career and job
Dana	46	E7	B.A. in English	Red Cross, FRG, High school band	Real estate
Annabelle	45	E7	RN – LPN to RN bridge	FRG	Home healthcare nurse
Mallory	43	E8	B.S. in sociology	Chief Spouse Association, Red Cross	Pet boarding
Edith	41	E8	M.A. in health care administration	American Legion Auxiliary	Focusing on networking
Regina	37	E7	Doctorate program to begin in 2016	FRG, outreach	Small business owner, government

*Note.* B.A. = Bachelor of Arts; FRG = Family Readiness Group; LPN = Licensed Practical Nurse; M.A. = Master of Arts; RN = Registered Nurse.

**Dana.** Dana is a 46-year-old wife of an E7 servicemember. She has earned her Associate of Arts degree, but has not yet completed her Bachelor of English degree that she had worked on for over 6 years. Dana enrolled in college in 2003 and diligently worked towards her degree, but because of multiple military moves and changes in institutions, her goal was put on hold.

Dana started taking college classes in 2003 when she and her servicemember were stationed in Guam. She began taking traditional courses and reflected,

I was kind of scared to go back into the beginning[,] being so old and not having the experience with like the new technology. Because everything then was computer. You had to type everything out. I was very scared to go back.

After she became comfortable with her courses, she began adding online courses to her course progression path,

Once I felt comfortable I started going online because the area that we were at they didn't offer some of the classes that I had to take, so they did offer it online. That's when I started taking online courses. It helped me a lot because it allowed me to function everyday working around my kids were young then so I was able to work around their schedule and to work part time. The online courses did really give me that flexibility.

Dana and her family then had a PCS to Japan. While stationed there, she also was enrolled in both traditional and online courses. She again reiterated the importance that the flexibility of distance learning offered, "Again, I really enjoyed it. I liked how it was structured and how it gave me again the flexibility." After their PCS back to the states, Dana took a short break after their move and then began taking online courses. When referring to the break in her education she stated,

You have to reestablish your life every time that you move and so I think then it becomes harder to get back into the groove of things as far as your own education . . . because when we came here in 2009 my husband deployed right away, you know what I mean? It was difficult to get back into classes. I did get back into classes after he came back from deployment, but that interrupted my course in education. I guess it does. It does affect it greatly because you have to reestablish your family life before you can get into your own educational life.

When back in the states, she took a few courses at the local university, and then had to switch to the local community college because of the lack of financial support for military spouses and the elevated cost per course.

Dana and her family then PCSed to Sicily, where she took two courses and then realized that the cost was too much and that “At that time, it was just like I couldn’t fit it into everything.” Since returning to the states in 2013, Dana began a career in real estate and her educational journey has been put on hold. She stated,

My schedule is so up and down that I’m unable to really get something that will fit into my schedule. However, I think that all my courses would fit I don’t know what’s gotten into me, why I haven’t pursued it. It’s taken me from 2003 to now and I still don’t have a degree.

When reflecting on her educational journey, distance learning, and her experience as a military spouse, Dana said,

It gives you an option but as far as really applying yourself with your studies and just getting, you know, immersing in your own studies, I think, it’s difficult. It’s just very difficult when your whole life is in chaos.

“I think that every military family, they deal with the same challenges” was an important statement made by Dana. Throughout her educational journey, Dana had the opportunity to use scholarships provided by an overseas base spouses club that paid tuition for half a course as well enrolling in and using the MyCAA. Sadly, when Dana’s spouse was promoted to an E7 (senior enlisted) this financial support was discontinued, “Your husband could only be up to an E6 where they would allow you to get any money to help with your courses.”

While working and going to school, Dana still found time to volunteer in her local community. While overseas, she volunteered with the American Red Cross and found this to be a valuable experience,

It wasn't like I was there constantly, but I did want to contribute some kind of volunteer hours. The American Red Cross was a really great place to do it because they teach you.

Not only are you giving your services but they teach you as well.

During this time, Dana also volunteered at her child's school. When returning stateside, she focused most of her volunteer time on her son's high school band. The characteristic of giving back and supporting others is evident in Dana's actions and her statement of "I like to volunteer."

**Annabelle.** Annabelle is a 45-year-old military wife of an E7 servicemember. She is currently enrolled in an RN program at a brick and mortar school that offers an online program. She has been enrolled in this particular program for one year. Annabelle started her educational journey in Georgia where she earned her LPN, "One of the beautiful things about Georgia is that they consider military dependents as citizens[,] so you are eligible for all of the instate tuition programs, scholarships, and grants." With this incentive, Annabelle only had to pay for her books when enrolled in school.

Annabelle and her servicemember then PCSed to Virginia where, unfortunately, the program that she wanted to enroll in had 10 prerequisite classes and Annabelle ended up registering at another university that was not her top choice. She has taken both online and seated classes at this institution, and is currently still enrolled. When reflecting on her online class Annabelle stated,

Online education takes a lot of discipline. It is hit or miss with your instructors. I picked purposely the instructor that I took because she had great reviews online and, obviously,

they are face-to-face students because her online class consisted of, “Here’s your list of assignments, you get 15 extra credit points for getting them done on time.”

The learning platforms and the technological requirements also caused Annabelle some frustration with her online courses and the communication barrier;

It’s easier to get your questions answered face-to-face versus email where things get misinterpreted. The instructor thinks you are asking one thing and answers something she thinks you are asking, and it’s not what you are asking in the first place. That’s kind of rough. It is a good option if that is all you have.

Annabelle is currently using her husband’s transferred GI Bill benefits to pay for her degree,

I wouldn’t have been able to afford school if we weren’t married and it wasn’t for a military connection I wouldn’t have been able to do it on my own . . . I wouldn’t be where I am right now if it wasn’t for the military.

Annabelle also views her husband’s deployments in a positive light, “With him being deployed on and off, deployment actually helps me study. . . . Deployments are kind of good for that because it keeps me busy. You don’t have to think so much about where they are or what they are doing.”

In addition to working part-time as a home healthcare RN and taking classes, Annabelle also volunteers her time to the Family Readiness Group (FRG) as part of the events committee. Annabelle has recognized that tensions often exist within military FRGs, so she worked to “open some people’s eyes as to what was actually going on versus what was perceived to be going on.” Contributing to a positive command climate can often be challenging for military spouses in FRG’s that are struggling or, in Annabelle’s words, “There were a few select people that created a lot of drama. It wasn’t good.”

When reflecting on her career choice, and the military lifestyle, Annabelle was very happy with her decisions,

No matter where we go that's something that I can use. It's not as easily portable of a career as another; because it's a licensed career it's not as easily portable as something else that wouldn't be licensed, but it's worth the hassle and it's worth it. I am happy with what I am doing.

In Annabelle's case, she has to demonstrate, each time that she moves to a different state, that she meets the state standards of a registered nurse if she wishes to continue her current career.

**Mallory.** Mallory is a 43-year-old spouse of an E8 servicemember. She has a unique story because she became a military spouse, mother, and student almost at the same time. Mallory had a more than 15-year career in the veterinary field, but her life had changed when she met her husband. He had a child from a previous relationship that was living in a bad situation in Jamaica. Before he deployed to Afghanistan, he brought the child to the States to move in with Mallory,

This five year old comes to me, some woman she has never met, and is here. She was abandoned by her own mother, living with relatives in Jamaica, shifted to some woman that she didn't know and the father she hasn't seen in over a year and a half at this point.

This was indeed a change in life for Mallory,

I don't have any kids and now I'm suddenly a single mom and trying to figure out how to do that . . . . How do you do school and all of those things that moms do that I don't know how to do because I've never had a kid?

To meet the psychological needs required of this child, Mallory and her husband were married via proxy while he was in Afghanistan. This allowed Mallory to secure the care needed



for the child. As she began taking the child for psychological appointments, Mallory felt the must educate herself:

I'm realizing that these issues she was going through, the doctors talk over you. They're not talking to you, they are talking at you. They are doing these analyses on her and they are talking to you as they don't expect you to understand and they don't really want you to understand it.

Mallory then said, "I'm going to have to educate myself and so I told my husband I'm going to school . . . . At that point I was going to school for psychology. I hated psychology."

Prior to this, Mallory had no formal education, and then "suddenly, I'm studying a lot, delving into psychology, in children's psychology a lot." Mallory needed to understand what was going on with this child and she needed to know "how we can fix her." Mallory seized the opportunity to go back to school, not to pursue a career, but to "have a better understanding of what's going on in my life, literally going on in my life."

During this time, Mallory was taking seated classes, but when she moved to Japan, she enrolled in distance education. In her seated classes, she stated:

It was kind of rough because I felt like I was 15 years older than half the kids in the classroom . . . . I'm a lot older than half of them in there and they are pursuing their careers. I'm in there looking to pursue a better understanding, what's going on with my kid, some kid that I acquired recently and I had no idea really what I was going to do with anything.

Sadly, the child continued to have some difficulties and 6 months after arriving in Japan, she

wanted to be with her mom and against our better judgment we sent her to be with her mom. Now I'm not a mom anymore, so it's just a matter of school. What do I want to do?

I don't want to do anything with psychology. I don't like psychology; I'm going to be 44 in a couple of days.

Mallory changed her degree path from psychology to sociology, something that she felt better aligned with her interests: "I would rather just do something that's a little more satisfying I guess, because I can now."

Mallory also claimed,

I'm never going to pursue a career with a degree. What I will probably do is pursue something in the volunteer world, Peace Corps, the UN [United Nations], something in that field, something in that arena. Something that doesn't matter what my paycheck brings in.

She also stated, "At this point, I continue to pursue the online just to fulfill the criteria for volunteering, honestly." As Mallory doesn't have a career goal in her sights, she is focused on applying her degree to work as a volunteer. Organizations such as the Peace Corps or the United Nations often require their volunteers to hold a 4-year degree prior to serving (U.S. Peace Corps, 2015). "As far as school goes, school, it's a secondary thing for me at this point. It's just I'm a military wife with . . . because I'm here in Japan, not much else to do. There's not a lot here to do."

When reflecting on her experience with distance education, Mallory stated, "It just feels like I'm completely self-taught. It feels like I get that the value of those degrees are not well favored." When thinking about the classroom setup and the discussion boards, Mallory said, "It feels like I am chatting online with kids sometimes so I feel like I'm forced to have so many responses and I'm like, 'How am I supposed to respond to this?'" This requirement is sometimes difficult for online learners as Mallory indicated when she stated, "I just feel like, why am I here? I don't know. I'm just struggling to find a reason to respond to you."

Having become a military spouse when her husband was already senior enlisted, Mallory was not eligible to receive any additional educational assistance. She and her servicemember have also decided to save his GI Bill for his daughter,

We talked off and on about using his Post-9/11 and because I'm not going to use this to pay for our lives, the degree is never going to support us, I don't want to. I just don't want to do that.

To contribute to covering the cost of her education, Mallory pet sits although this isn't necessary, "Well, I don't need it but I don't mind it. I like having animals around, and so what it's a little extra money and if it covers the cost of a class."

**Edith.** Edith is a 41-year-old wife of an E8 servicemember who has volunteered extensively within the military community. While volunteering she concurrently completed her Bachelor degree, and is currently working on her Master of Arts in health care administration.

Prior to becoming a military spouse in 2002, Edith was a single mom who worked full-time and attended community college to work towards her degree. Completing college had been one of her long time goals and no one in her family had attended college before. When thinking about her transition into the military and her desire to keep attending college, Edith stated, "When I married my spouse, I kind of felt that was an opportunity for me because he didn't expect me to work." Her spouse had always supported her goals and understands the difficulty with frequent moves. The ability to hold a solid employment background and attending college in a traditional setting can be very challenging.

After moving overseas for the third time in 2009, Edith started taking online courses and used the MyCAA benefits that were available to her:

I used it back in 2009. That's right when it first came out and they were promoting that program, so I think that kind of was my push to. I have this money. I need to do something with it. I'll just go back to school. That was my, 'Hey, do something.'

Enrolling in online courses had its benefits; especially as the overseas duty station for her spouse require several deployments and workups to deployments. Distance education allowed Edith to manage her school, family, work, and volunteer schedule easier. She was able to take short breaks, yet remain actively enrolled when she PCSed back to the mainland:

The classes are continuous, so as long as they are offering the class for your next block that you're in, then they'll just slide you into the next class start time and you just pick up where you left out.

Edith continued to take online courses when back on the mainland as she enjoyed their convenience. Online courses allowed her to volunteer, work full time, and gain job experience with her chosen career field, important aspects of career development that are often difficult to attain as a military spouse.

When reflecting on online courses and convenience, Edith declared, Family life, it's pretty challenging especially when you're working full time, trying to schedule your time. Like right now, I'm not working so I have the time my family leaves for work and school to do my schoolwork and study and read and all that. By the time they get home, my time goes to them. My evenings go to them, but when you're working full time you don't get that. You have to squeeze in the reading time where you can, so you get up extra earlier, stay awake extra longer than everybody else and so forth. The experience itself, like I said, I don't think I would have gone back to school had they not offered me that money, and then my husband ended up transferring his, a portion of his GI Bill to me.

Despite using MyCAA and the GI Bill to attend classes, Edith still has over \$20,000 worth of student loan debt. She attributes this to the expense of online schools that she encountered after her MyCAA ran out and before the GI Bill was transferred. The only way Edith could continue her education was to take out student loans.

“I wish there was more help for us to . . . guidance in which routes we go as far as school, which schools we choose,” Edith wished that her choice of online schools might have been better supported by the military and the services they offer. Edith highlighted the fact that the military does have education counselors, but their focus is on military members and their familiarity with programs and universities that may better fit the military spouse and her goals might be limited. Edith said,

I think that if they offer those resources to help us make good choices when it comes to spending our money on the schools that . . . especially if it’s free money that the military is giving us, they should pay a little more attention to who is soliciting us and stuff like that.

One of Edith’s biggest fears is that her online degree will not be recognized when she is seeking different licenses, certifications, or admission into different associations.

Now that Edith is just two courses away from graduating with her master’s degree, she is also feeling some isolating effects of taking online courses,

but the networking part for me is hard because I don’t know anybody. I just know the ladies that I go to the gym with in the morning and I see twice a week. That part is hard as far as being a military wife, is the whole networking and engaging with people. If I was leaving my house and going to school, I think my opportunity would be better in that aspect, as far as networking, getting to know people, and just see where adults work.

To combat this, Edith has been reaching out to her local community and has joined a professional women's group. She also lives in a location that does not have a robust military community or the resources that are familiar to the military community. Edith uses this challenge as an opportunity to get out of her comfort zone and engage in her local community.

Edith had always been active in her community, has participated in the Family Readiness Group at some duty stations, and has volunteered to be the command ombudsman at two different locations. According to Edith, an ombudsman is

a command appointed volunteer who is basically you're the link between the command and command families. You're provided with the resources, or you should know all the resources in the area that you live in that a family would need. In other words, it's supposed to alleviate stress on the sailor, stress on the command, to help families kind of, just kind of help them with the resources that they need.

Ombudsmen are also there when emergencies occur with families and they act as a link between the command and any other needed agency.

This volunteer position required Edith to hold hours of availability that at times were very time consuming,

Yeah, I think that it was very busy, because normally when a ship leaves port, that's when most of your problem calls come up. Things happen. It never fails. Your spouse is gone and something's going to happen. That's when we're the busiest, but I don't . . . I think my daughter suffered more than anything because I was always dealing with something and it was like, "Hang on, Mom's on a phone call. I will get back to you in a second," or "I have to do this. Can you give me an hour so I can take care of this situation?"

In spite of the demands of this role, Edith saw this as a way to engage with and meet people in both the military and civilian communities. The experience and training gave Edith new skills, offered endless community resource knowledge, and allowed her to learn additional areas of military protocol and instruction.

Military spouses are often expected to hold volunteer positions and to adhere to military protocol, customs, and courtesies. Edith reflected on when her spouse became a Chief:

People are like, “Okay, well we can’t be friends and work and now he’s going to be in charge of us.” It was very hard. I think that once he made Chief there was . . . there is an expectation that people expect. It’s very hard for me because I am social. I like to be social. I like to meet people. I like to do things, but I also have to remember his role, so if I can make friends, I can’t expect it to be a couple’s friendship thing. That’s hard.

She also commented on the expectation for her to be a role model for other spouses, “I had to be really cautious about what I say and how I present myself and stuff like that,” “Other spouses are looking to you, kind of using you as a guide.” Regardless of these expectations, Edith still feels as though she can be herself when she is at social or command functions. She knows and accepts her limitations and the expectations that are placed on her.

At the end of our conversation, Edith made a final reflection on her experience with being a military spouse and a military spouse learner:

When I married my husband, I quit my full time job to move with him and that’s been my biggest struggle I think. Trying to keep my own identity, not losing myself. I think school has kind of helped me hold on to some dreams that I had.

With Edith's past work, educational, and volunteer experiences, she feels

a little more empowered that I can negotiate, have some negotiation experience with an education that I didn't have before. I do use my experience being on the Family Readiness Group, being on the board, and my ombudsman roles that I have done.

Edith has embraced the military lifestyle and the different experiences that she has had: "I don't feel so bad, but look how versatile I am."

**Regina.** Regina is a 37-year-old wife of an E7 servicemember. Regina and her servicemember were high school sweethearts; her husband began his career in the U.S. Navy when his family immigrated to the United States, while Regina stayed in the Philippines to complete her undergraduate degree. According to Regina,

He entered the Navy, he was starting off his career in the Navy. I went and finished college, went to medical school, and I figured out I really didn't want to be in medical school, I wanted to be in research. I convinced my parents, which is hard for an Asian family because they only know five careers. They can be a doctor, a nurse, a teacher, lawyer, and engineer. If you don't fall under those five, it might be a big problem.

Regina then applied for a master's program in molecular biology and even taught a semester of courses before becoming a military spouse.

Her long time sweetheart was stationed in Japan and soon proposed to Regina. She said yes, but not without some reservation, "It was a hard call because I had to speak to my mom and dad that I'm quitting graduate school and I'm going to be moving to Yokosuka, Japan." Regina arrived in Japan and immediately immersed herself in the military lifestyle and began volunteering for the Navy Marine Corps Relief Society (NMCRS) and the American Red Cross. With her medical background, she was assigned to work with the Substance Abuse Rehab Program for the naval hospital at Yokosuka. While volunteering, she was encouraged by the



active duty staff to continue her education. Using spouse tuition assistance through NMCRS, she enrolled in a master's degree program in human relations and completed her degree and internship before leaving Japan.

When arriving back stateside, Regina secured a position with a university as an academic counselor. Soon a position with greater upward mobility opened up with the Navy College and Regina took this position. Eventually, a government general schedule position opened up and Regina then took on the position of an education services specialist for a recruiting district. After learning more about the programs available for active duty military, Regina encouraged her husband to begin his education and enrolled herself at the same time:

I enrolled myself too in the program, for a second masters' because I started working for the University. I wanted to make sure I could guide my husband, my one student . . . I was literally taking his undergraduate courses as part of the masters' program . . . literally the same classroom with my husband for one full year.

After completing her undergraduate prerequisites, Regina took online courses and summer residency courses that were on campus. When reflecting on her online experience, she questioned,

Was it hard? Yes, he was deployed a lot at that time and I was still volunteering here and there for the Fleet and Family Support Center, for Navy Marine Corps Relief Society, whenever I got the chance.

While Regina was working on her master's degree, the MyCAA pilot program made its appearance. Regina seized this opportunity and completed a certificate program in Meeting and Event Planning. She reflected, "I might as well be using the money they're giving me for free, for something that interests me. Who knows if I'm going to use it or not, but I said, 'Go for something fun for me.'" When the MyCAA program launched officially, Regina again grasped

the opportunity and completed a certificate in human resources practices. Regina was concurrently working on this certificate and completing her Master of Science in education.

As life in the military often is unpredictable, so is life as a graduate student. According to Regina,

Lo and behold, I hit “send” the night before I gave birth, to my graduate research paper. I said literally, the night before I submitted everything. The following day, the following night, I gave birth. It was crazy, and just three weeks before that I just finished the certificate program. I was able to make it and then I did my defense via Skype.

Shortly after, Regina, her servicemember, and their new baby moved to Okinawa, Japan. Regina had already applied for a doctorate program, and had a plan to work for and use tuition assistance offered by the military, “They’re the only MCCS that provides tuition assistance for employees, at \$10,000 each year. I said, ‘Score, we’re going to Okinawa. I’ll end up in the doctorate program.’” Regina began her doctorate program using tuition assistance and even completed her first summer residency in Nebraska. Unfortunately, the director of Marine Corps Community Services (MCCS) on Okinawa pulled funding for those who were seeking their doctorate degrees; there were eight doctoral students at that time. Regina was upset by this decision, in response she replied,

If you think that we military spouses could not advance ourselves for professional development like that, if you’re saying that we don’t need the doctoral degrees completed working for you, then here’s my two-week notice. Thank you very much.

When reflecting on this even further Regina said,

I think it’s unfair. If MCCS’ goal is to be of service to our families, wouldn’t you feel lucky or fortunate to have people who are developing, who are continuously developing their craft, their skill set, and bringing in that knowledge to the program? We’re meeting

the whole vision of helping spouses move forward, because I'm a spouse. I'm one of your clients. Here I am, slaving myself to go to graduate school. I have a one year old. My husband is always away. I'm still doing my job.

Regina continued being an active volunteer within her community as a lifestyle, insight, networking, knowledge, and skills volunteer and the family readiness advisor (volunteer) for the battalion. She didn't have enough funds to continue in her doctorate program and felt defeated and disappointed. Fortunately, after a conversation with one of her mentors, Regina was inspired to open a preschool program that "encourages diversity and leadership for children." Less than 4 months later, Regina opened the doors to a new preschool on the island. This school started with just three students, and only one paying client, and now 3 years later it has grown to 88 students and a staff of 19 women. According to Regina, "Some are military spouses who have children, . . . we gave them discounts so they can continue aiming for sharpening their skills, gaining those skills." Regina also employed local Japanese Nationals in her school and at a staff thank you dinner, some of these women approached her with,

Thank you for starting the school because we just moved from Sendai, where the big earthquake was and moved to Okinawa. From then on we were unemployed and we didn't have a place to go. We were both single moms and we were trying to support our families. Thank you for starting the school and employing us. Now we have a place to go.

When reflecting on her decision to open a school, Regina reminisced,

The school originally, the goal was for me to still have a career and be with my daughter and at the same time prepare for my husband's retirement. Now, it's how can we

continue doing this, so we can serve other women who are in the same position as I was?

As Regina and her family are now stationed in the Middle East, she oversees the operations from afar and works as the assistant director for the child and youth programs on her post. She also

volunteers with assisting other spouses with their resume writing, and career and business coaching. She is also enrolled in a graduate certificate program for early childhood education online.

I wake up at four in the morning every day, so that's 10 in the morning Okinawa time, to check on them. It takes a lot of discipline. Now, I'm raising a four year old, I'm also working, and I'm still in graduate school. Crazy schedule, but it's all about putting everything in perspective.

I said, "No one's going to do it for me. It's me. I don't have to blame anyone else if this doesn't happen. It's all me." Regina will be reentering her doctoral program in January 2016. She stated,

Who said that I could never go back for my doctorate program? It was me. It was me who was limiting myself saying that . . . . I say, "Why am I doing the doctorate program? Initially, it was more of a promise. Now I'm really wanting it on my own. Now, I've got to pay for it.

When thinking about her long-term goals, Regina would like to build a nonprofit school in the Philippines and to do some work for foreign-born military spouses. She also will continue to give back to the military community, "I can give back to the military community because I think it has given me a lot. It truly has been an amazing community."

### **Presentation of the Results: Exploring the Themes**

An aspect of narrative inquiry is identifying themes that might emerge from the collected narratives. Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002) stated, "In this process, researchers narrate the story and often identify themes or categories that emerge from the story. Thus, the qualitative data analysis may be both descriptions of the story and themes that emerge from it" (p. 332). From the narratives collected and analyzed, two categories of themes emerged. These themes were

divided into challenges and opportunities and are presented in Table 2. Challenges that the military spouses faced in my study included limited financial resources, frequent PCSs, the availability of educational support resources, the understanding of these resources, and the challenge of seeking identity. Themes that emerged in relation to the opportunities of the military lifestyle include the use of MyCAA accounts, the transferred GI Bill, scholarships, military spouse tuition assistance, in state tuition, and the hidden opportunity of military deployments.

Despite the challenges faced and shared by these spouses, they all had a positive experience with their military lifestyle and the opportunities provided. Table 2 provides an overview of these themes and subtopics. As noted by Annabelle, “I wouldn’t be where I am right now if it wasn’t for the military.”

Table 2

*Themes and Subtopics*

<b>Theme Category 1: Challenges</b>	<b>Theme Category 2: Opportunities</b>
Limited financial resources	My career advancement accounts
Frequent permanent change of stations	GI Bill
Availability and understanding of educational support resources	Scholarships, military spouse tuition assistance, and in state tuition
Seeking identity	Military deployments

*Note.* GI = government issue (American soldier).

**Theme Category 1: Challenges**

**The challenge of limited financial resources.** The spouses in the study found that the cost of higher education often affected their opportunities for education. This might have affected their institution choice, course delivery medium, or program of study. This is a common problem that military spouses face, for the *Quadrennial Quality of Life Review* (U.S. DOD,

2009) found that 76% of military spouses, who would seek further education, feel that the cost was their primary reason for not enrolling in higher education.

Dana's story presents this challenge quite clearly,

I started at UNF [University of North Florida], which was a face-to-face course, and I was only able to take one course per semester then because it was very expensive. Then I took a couple of courses at the community college because it was a little bit cheaper and I was able to apply it to my degree. Other than that, when we went to Sicily I took two courses there and then by that time, each class at UMUC [University of Maryland University College] I think was around \$800 per class, so it was like getting too expensive.

Even after using MyCAA and a transferred GI Bill, Edith still has financial challenges to overcome:

I still have student loans. I still have \$20,000 worth of student loans to pay for, but it's reduced the amount of responsibility that I'm going to have to have once I graduate. I don't know. I think that it gives, the online option gives a lot of people opportunity to go back to school that don't have the flexibility of sending their kids to daycare, the extra funds that it costs for that, or those that are in school, even though our schedules kind of get hectic with being the taxi mom and being available for doctor's appointments and therapy, physical therapy or whatever.

In her statement, she also touched upon daycare as a financial constraint that might affect some spouses when seeking education.

On the contrary, Annabelle was living in New York prior to marrying her spouse. Tuition in this state was higher than she could afford and, fortunately, her moves within the military have allowed her to attend schools that were more economical:

Had I stayed in New York and not gotten married and not had his support I wouldn't be a nurse right now. I couldn't go to school. Tuition outside of New York State is astronomically less depending on where you go.

**The challenge of frequent permanent changes of duty stations.** Frequent PCSs are a challenge that has been identified as a life-changing event shared by military spouses (National Military Family Association, 2011). When sharing her story and reflecting on education, Dana made a great point, "You have to reestablish your life every time that you move and so I think then it becomes harder to get back into the groove of things as far as your own education." Military spouses move frequently and to locations all across the globe. In addition to packing up and moving, establishing a household in a new location can be difficult. Adding the rigorous requirements of being enrolled in classes during this time can indeed be challenging. As described in McClusky's (1974) power-load-margin theory, when the load and power are equal, or if the load exceeds power, military spouses might be unable to take on additional tasks, such as seeking higher education (margin). A PCS greatly contributes to a spouses "load" while decreasing her "power."

**The challenge of the availability of educational support resources and the understanding of these resources.** Another challenge that military spouses face is the availability of educational support resources and the understanding of these resources. Numerous support programs are in place for military spouses, but these programs are often not widely known or are underused. The National Military Family Association (2007) found that more than 30% of military spouses were unaware of the services available to them at their education centers.

When reflecting on her entrance into education as a military spouse, Edith shared,

There's a lot of drawbacks, too. Like I said, the first one was, especially when I first started going to school online, that the research, the quality of school that you attend, that was kind of difficult because when the program, especially of the MyCAA, when they came out with that the first time, and it was eligible for anybody that had a spouse dependent to use, there wasn't a lot of guidance. There was kind of the company's coming to you and saying, "Hey, spend your money here. We accept MyCAA. Give me your money."

Edith was not happy with her first online college experience and has since changed to a new university. Later in our interview, she elaborated:

The only thing I can think about that I wish that maybe would have been different for me as far as . . . . Like I mentioned earlier how I wish there was more help for us to . . . . Guidance in which routes we go as far as school, which schools we choose. . . . That's the only thing that I kind of see now that I wish I would have done the research earlier for or somebody would have told me "This is the program you want to go into. These are the schools I recommend or these are the ones I don't recommend." I kind of think that now that I'm kind of at the end of this journey, that I would have had that extra support for that. I don't think that Fleet and Family Support offers . . . . They have their college counselor, but it's mainly for the active duty, but I don't think there's enough research with online education that they would actually say . . . . I think just recently the military's been like, "Don't go to . . ."

Support services tailored specifically for the military spouse could contribute to their academic success.



**The challenge of seeking identity.** The military spouse often loses herself during her spouse's career. As presented earlier, the military spouse's role is often focused on supporting the military member. Richard (2008) stated,

Commitments made by military personnel oftentimes are made possible by the commitments that must be made by their families, leading to questions about the nature of the interconnectedness and interdependence of the military as an organization, and its members and their civilian families. (p. 1)

Richard (2008) also emphasized that "organizations that require high levels of commitment to shape not only the identity and behavior of military personnel[,] but their families as well" (p. 1).

Edith addressed the struggle to keep her own identity in our interview,

I think for us, a lot of times, not specifically for me, but I didn't know him when he went to boot camp. I didn't know him from the first couple of commands he went to, but I think a lot of times spouses tend to . . . . They're either their high school sweetheart or they meet them at some point, either right as they're going into boot camp or as they're exiting boot camp at such a young age that they get married and then they kind of lose themselves and their identity because they're just doing what the spouse has to do for his career. When I married my husband, I quit my full-time job to move with him, and that's kind of been my biggest struggle, I think, was trying to keep my own identity, not losing myself. I think school has kind of helped me hold onto some dreams that I had.

Edith is also excited for the upcoming prospect of working full time when her spouse retires, "That's kind of empowering that he's going to depend on me in that aspect, that the roles are going to reverse." Edith will soon be stepping into a new role of full time employment and out of the role of an active duty military spouse.

Regina shared an interesting story in our interview related to education and her success as a small business owner:

“Who’s going to do it for you?” None will push you. Really, the reality is, nobody will say to you, “Keep it going.” For me, my realization . . . . This is really funny, and I have to share this story . . . . In between leaving Okinawa, we had 2 weeks, we went on a road trip when we were stateside. We hit the road, 5,000 miles we covered, on a camper van. My daughter, my husband, and I, we started off from L.A. We went to the Grand Canyon, Lake Havasu, saw the Arches National Park, we saw Yellowstone. We saw Mt. Rushmore, we saw Devil’s Tower, we were everywhere. We literally were with a laptop and WiFi, running the school, because they were having a graduation and we were having summer camp. That’s when I felt, how was the freedom of having your own business, and you can work on your own time? I was happy. Even though I wasn’t paying myself yet I said, “You know what? I feel fulfilled.”

During that time, we were at Yellowstone National Park, in the evening. We were getting ready for the night, and I thought, “Who said that I could never go back for my doctorate program?” It was me. It was me who was limiting myself saying that. Yes, it was really tough when you’re a first-time business owner starting a school and doing everything, being a mom, being a business person, being a wife. It took a toll to me and I said, “I just have to say goodbye to something.” I love my marriage, I love my daughter. They’re the reason why I’m doing this, and I could not do this to them. Knowing and being aware, because I’m such a go-getter, I put everything on my plate, and I just do that.

Regina has carved out her own identity as a military spouse, a government employee, and a small business owner outside of the military. This can be difficult to do, but she has found happiness in her own success.

## Theme Category 2: Opportunities

**The opportunity of My Career Advancement Accounts.** MyCAAs were established by the U.S. DOD to provide eligible spouses with financial assistance when seeking licensures, certifications, and 2-year degrees in portable career fields. Portable career fields include careers in education, health care, financial services, information technology, real estate, and other careers supported by technical and vocational centers (Military One Source, n.d). Most of the participants in the study had used their MyCAA accounts.

Dana stated,

I was able to do I think a couple of courses through MyCAA, or do you know that . . . . It's a program. My CAA. I'm sure you know about it. Then all of the sudden they took away the E7. Support or whatever. Your husband could only be up until like E6 where they would allow you to get any money to help you with your courses. That kind of dropped out.

Edith also used these benefits:

They were offering the MyCAA kickback for, I think it was like six grand at the time, so it was a good chunk of money to start with school. That was another thing that, I think that delayed me too with starting school was the financial portion of it. When the military started offering those benefits to help pay for spouses to attend school, I think it made it more attractive for me to want to start, so I went that route, the online route again, start back up to school. I don't think with that opportunity that I probably wouldn't have gone back.

Of the participants, Regina made the most of her MyCAA:

If you remember, there's the MyCAA program. Before they initially launched it, there was the pilot program, and I was able to qualify. I did the certificate program in meeting

and event planning, because at the office at Navy College they always asked me, “Do the graduation ceremony. Do this for a while, do the things like this.” I said, “I might as well be using the money they’re giving me for free, for something that interests me.” Who knows if I’m going to use it or not, but I said, “Go for something fun for me.”

Regina continued,

I was able to finish that, and then they launched the second . . . . It’s not the second, but the actual MyCAA, which is now in existence. My Navy College office boss back then said, “You can be eligible, give it a try.” I tried, and this is my . . . . I tried, and I was . . . . I went for the human resources certificate from Cornell. I was finishing up that program and my graduate program, the second one.

**The opportunity of transferring the Post-9/11 GI Bill.** In 2008, the Post-9/11 GI Bill provided transferability of educational benefits to spouses and family members of eligible personnel. These benefits can be awarded up to 36 months if the servicemember has already used some of their benefits. Military spouses are eligible to use this benefit immediately after it is transferred, and have up to 15 years after their service member separates or retires from active duty to exhaust this benefit. The GI Bill will pay the entire amount of public university tuition and fee payments at the in-state student rate. If a spouse chooses to attend a private university, \$20,235.02 per year is the maximum amount of reimbursement (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014).

Annabelle uses the GI Bill to cover the expenses of her nursing program,

My husband transferred his GI Bill benefits to me. We are using the GI Bill. As far as my story goes, I wouldn’t have been able to afford school if we weren’t married and it wasn’t for a military connection I wouldn’t have been able to do it on my own.

Edith also currently uses the GI Bill to cover her educational expenses: “then my husband ended up transferring a portion of his GI Bill to me.”

**Other opportunities such as scholarships, military spouse tuition assistance, and in state tuition.** In addition to the MyCAA and Post-9/11 GI Bill, spouses might also seek out other opportunities to support their educational journeys. Some participants in my study used in-state tuition, military spouse tuition assistance, and scholarships to further finance their education.

According to Annabelle,

When I first started going to school we were stationed in Augusta, Georgia at Fort Gordon. I went to school there and got my LPN. One of the beautiful things about Georgia is that they consider military dependents as citizens so you are eligible for all of the in-state tuition incentive programs, and scholarships and grants. Which is how I went to school at Augusta Tech. We basically only had to pay for my books out of Augusta Tech.

Dana used scholarships offered by her local military spouses club:

The only way I could get help was through scholarships or the Stafford Loan. The spouses club, they did help in I think they paid half of one course. It allowed me again to just do one course per 8 weeks. That way we were able to afford it.

Regina volunteered and was employed by different military organizations that allowed her to use spouse tuition assistance, “I volunteered, I signed up for graduate courses, which at that time, they had the spouse tuition assistance program through NMCRS, which really helped me tremendously to finish my degree without owing anything.” This helped Regina complete her master’s degree. When her family received orders to Okinawa, Japan, Regina said.

I already had my eye on, “We’re going to Okinawa. I’ll be working for MCCA Okinawa, because it’s the biggest employer on the island.” They’re the only MCCA that provides

tuition assistance for employees, at \$10,000 each year.” I said, “Score, we’re going to Okinawa. I’ll end up in the doctorate program.

Regina used this money to begin her doctorate program but the funds were eventually discontinued for doctorate students and Regina put her program on hold.

**The hidden opportunity of military deployments.** Deployments are also considered life-changing events and are often seen as stressors for military spouses. Over time, Gleiman and Swearingen (2012) ascertain that spouses often develop coping skills and resiliency from their multiple experiences with deployments, moves, and other stressors. Instead of looking at deployment as a negative, the spouses in my study have embraced this time as an opportunity to develop themselves. Annabelle stated,

With him being deployed on and off, deployment actually helps me study. He was gone for the first two months that I was in school here and the week he came home it was like, “Oh my God, what I am going to do?” Obviously you want to be with him and on the other hand you have to study and I was like . . . . The first day he was home I’m in my room trying to study and he would come in every five minutes, “Hey, did you know?” He finally . . . . “Oh, are you studying?” I’m like, “No, I’m just sitting here with my book open.” We figured that out real quick, how to deal with that. Deployments are kind of good for that because it keeps me busy. You don’t have time to think so much about where they are or what they are doing.

## **Summary**

Historically, military spouses are a population that has been marginalized by the military. However, since the events of 9/11 and the subsequent troop deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq, military spouses are more visible in relation to the challenges and stressors that they face because of the military lifestyle. In addition to these challenges and stressors, other important

characteristics of this population deserve greater attention. According to Enloe (2000), when a woman marries a military member, she must become militarized to maximize their value to the military institution. This militarization might infringe upon a military wife's identity because she might feel "as though not only her husband[,] but she herself is an integral part of what she thinks of as 'the military family'" (Enloe, 2000, p. 162). Berry (2015) stated that there are, "obstacles inherent within the military lifestyle that may hinder military wives' journeys through the complex process of individuation" (p. iv). Dependence, marginalization, and psychological challenges can result from deployments, PCSs, lack of control over life events, and loss of identity among military spouses (Berry, 2015). My study allowed senior enlisted spouses to address these challenges and stressors and make meaning of their impact on her unique educational journey.

Identifying the educational needs and barriers that military spouses face, specifically senior enlisted military wives as a separate student population of learners might shed light on needed changes for these learners and other military spouse learners. My study was designed to contribute to the literature and to assist military spouses, more specifically senior enlisted military wives, in sharing their experiences of the military lifestyle and how this environment might have affected their ability to attain higher education. Their unique circumstances often preclude them from having their own identity; my study provides senior military wives with an opportunity to relate how their experiences and obligations as military spouses have affected their opportunity to attain higher education.

The purpose of my study was to explore the experiences of senior enlisted military wives and document how the military lifestyle has affected their ability to attain higher education while their servicemember was on active duty. Specifically, my study was focused on senior enlisted military wives who have chosen to pursue their higher education through distance learning.

Through my study, I have brought a voice to those spouses who are an integral component of today's military, yet who are often unseen not only in both the military world and in the civilian sector, but also in higher education. Military spouses must overcome unique challenges not only in their day-to-day lives, but also when they seek to enroll in and attain higher education. Unique opportunities are also available for those affiliated with educating and supporting military spouse learners to help them bridge the gap between these challenges and the opportunities available.

In my study, I identified several themes that were present in the narratives of the spouses whose journeys were analyzed. The participants in my study overcame many challenges of the military lifestyle when enrolled in higher education, including limited financial resources, frequent PCS moves, availability, and understanding of education resources, and the loss of identity. This small population of military spouse learners considered opportunities such as MyCAA accounts, the GI Bill, scholarships, Military Spouse Tuition Assistance, in state tuition, and military deployments as opportunities that contributed to their educational success.



## CHAPTER 5:

### CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND FINDINGS

The purpose of my study was to explore the experiences of senior enlisted military wives and document how the military lifestyle has affected or affected their ability to attain higher education while their servicemember was on active duty. Specifically, my study focused on senior enlisted wives who have chosen to pursue their higher education through distance learning. Through my study, I have brought a voice to those spouses who are an integral component of today's military, yet who are often unseen not only in both the military world and in the civilian sector, but also in higher education. There are unique challenges that military spouses must overcome, not just in their day-to-day lives, but when they seek to enroll in and attain higher education. Some problems and challenges are examined in the literature, and ways to overcome them, but how these factors affect a military spouse's ability and motivation to complete higher education has not been adequately addressed. Much focus has been placed on the negative aspects of the military lifestyle, rather than the positive aspects. My study documented the narratives of senior enlisted military wives and described their educational journeys.

Military spouses who are currently enrolled in higher education, or courses that foster professional development, are a population of nontraditional learners that are expected to grow in number because of the increase in educational opportunities and financial assistance by using VA funds (Gleiman & Swearingen, 2012; MacDermid Wadsworth & Southwell, 2011). Currently, research about military spouse learners and programs for military spouse learners are limited as they are often lumped with either military servicemember-learners or the

nontraditional student population. The military lifestyle presents unique challenges; therefore, programs created specifically with the military spouse population in mind, and that acknowledge and address the challenges of the military lifestyle, might be beneficial. The findings of my study might be of value to institutions that support military spouse learners before, during, and after their quest for higher education.

An interpretive–constructivist approach was taken when designing my study. I understood that each military spouse learner would have different realities, or interpretations of the impact that the military environment has had on their higher education (Merriam, 2009).

Creswell (2007) stated:

In this worldview, individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meanings of their experiences . . . . These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views . . . . Often these subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically. In other words, they are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others (hence social constructivism) and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives. (pp. 20–21)

In my study, I focused on the history of the military spouse in addition to how military culture has affected senior enlisted military wives in their educational journeys. The narrative inquiry provided senior enlisted military wives an avenue to share their story and make meaning of their experiences using feminist epistemology as a theoretical framework.

### **Research Questions**

Three research questions were central to my study:

- Research Question 1: How do the life experiences of a senior enlisted military wife align with the features of a Model Military Wife in the contemporary era as described by Enloe (2000)?
- Research Question 2: How do the challenges and demands of the role of a senior enlisted military wife affect fulfillment of her educational goals?
- Research Question 3: How has the experience of distance learning contributed to transformations for the senior enlisted military wife?

### **Interpretations of Findings for Research Question 1**

Research Question 1 was, “How do the life experiences of a senior enlisted military wife align with the features of a Model Military Wife in the contemporary era as described by Enloe (2000)?” Life experiences of senior enlisted military wives were explored in my study and the opportunity to identify features of a Model Military Wife in each of the participants was presented. Senior enlisted military spouses might feel that they must become the ideal Model Military Wife because of the social and economic privileges that they receive and from pressures both from the military and from other military spouses. Of the features presented in Appendix A, the following emerged as life experiences that aligned with the features of a Model Military Wife in the contemporary era as described by Enloe (2000).

**Part of “the military family”.** Enloe (2000) stated, “She feels as though not only her husband[,] but she herself is an integral part of what she thinks of as ‘the military family’ to be a characteristic of the Model Military Wife” (p. 162–164). The spouses in my study did feel that they were a part of the military family. They acknowledged that many military families must deal with similar challenges such as frequent moves and deployments, and appreciated the support that they received as members of their communities. These spouses also volunteered their time as active members within their Family Readiness Groups and at different organizations

within their military communities. As many of these spouses lived in overseas locations at some point during their educational journeys, they did share that they felt a stronger community connection at these overseas locations as opposed to stateside locations.

**Views permanent change of stations in a positive manner.** Enloe (2000) stated of the military wife, “She acknowledges the hard work generated by her husband’s constant transfers (packing up, unpacking, getting the children adjusted to new schools), but mainly she sees these moves as chances to make new friends and explore new places” is another characteristic that the wives in my study presented (p. 162–164). Most of the wives in my study have lived in multiple locations both stateside and abroad during their educational journeys. The spouses found these frequent moves at times interrupted their education, but found that these moves also opened doors to different educational programs. The opportunity to move to new locations also presented military spouses with the chance to gain new perspectives and use different opportunities available to them. The activities that these spouses participated in varied in accordance with their locations. These activities included their educational choices, their volunteer opportunities, and their career opportunities. Each military move provided a unique experience and lifestyle change.

**Social relations according to rank.** Enloe (2000) has identified comfort with social relations based upon rank as a characteristic of the Model Military Wife. The spouses in my study did not choose to talk openly about their experiences related to their husband’s rank except for Edith. She addressed rank and identity a few times in our meeting. In my study, Edith acknowledged that social relations in the military community were often according to rank, and that she often tries to eliminate this in her meetings with others. She avoids sharing her spouse’s rank and attempts to get to know other people without using rank, or their spouse’s rank, as a basis.

Enloe (2000) stated,

She is quite comfortable with social relations based on rank; they seem natural; they provide an aura of order in an otherwise uncertain world. As she rises along with her husband through the ranks, she gains a sense of expanded authority and responsibility by helping younger wives learn--and accept--the military ropes. (p. 162–164)

Although the wives in my study did not openly address spousal rank, they did acknowledge the importance of being a good role model and mentor for other spouses. The spouses achieved this through their volunteer roles both within the Family Readiness Group and at other locations within their military communities.

**Volunteerism.** All of the spouses in my study volunteered their time to different organizations. According to Enloe (2000), the Model Military Wife, “enjoys unpaid volunteer work; it helps her husband’s career and it makes her feel a useful member of the military community” (p. 162–164). Most of the participants in my study volunteer at multiple locations within their military and local communities. Despite the military’s frequent reluctance to get volunteers who were *voluntold*, the participants in my study volunteered because they wanted to volunteer, not because they were told to volunteer. These spouses found their volunteer experiences to be valuable to themselves and to their military communities.

**The model military spouse.** Enloe (2000) found that the characteristics of a Model Military Wife were necessary for wives to maximize their value to the military and contribute to the well-being of the military institution (see Appendix A for these characteristics). She asserted that in cases of incomplete militarization, spouses would be “unable or unwilling to put their husband–soldier’s military duty first or to gain sufficient pride or satisfaction from their own handling of the stresses of military wifedom to sustain their marriages” (Enloe, 2000, p. 177). Incomplete militarization can often lead to readiness and retention problems because a spouse’s

attitude often influences a soldier's ability to deploy and remain engaged on the battlefield, and might affect his decision to reenlist (Segal & Harris, 1993). The spouses in my study did not readily exhibit all the characteristics that Enloe (2000) described, but they did put their servicemember's military duty first as they successfully handled the stressors inherent to the military lifestyle. They not only handled these stressors, but also have overcome these challenges and turned them into opportunities to advance in their own academic journeys.

### **Interpretation of Findings for Research Question 2**

Research Question 2 was, "How do the challenges and demands of the role of a senior enlisted military wife affect fulfillment of their educational goals?" The senior enlisted military spouse, those whose servicemember is serving in the ranks of E7–E9, has additional and distinctive challenges and demands than those placed upon military spouses in lower ranks. This specific population of the community is informally tasked with roles and responsibilities that contribute greatly to the success of a military unit in times of both peace and war. A senior enlisted military spouse has a rare opportunity to be a necessary and integral part of a military unit, while not taking an Oath of Enlistment. In my study, the role of the senior enlisted wife was explored in relation to the challenges and demands not only of being a military spouse, but also of being a senior military wife with increased demands because of their servicemember's rank. Harrell (2001) ascertained that these informal demands have increased as the demographics of the military have changed, and more emphasis is placed on volunteerism of military spouses. These volunteer expectations include institutional activities; morale, public relations, and ceremonial duties; mentoring, development, and role preservation; entertaining and socializing; and unit and readiness support (Harrell, 2001, p. 3).

The role of a senior enlisted military wife "broadens greatly; you are now the leading lady of all the unit's noncommissioned and enlisted wives" (Crossley & Keller, 1996, p. 306).

This role calls for looking for problems and concerns among unit family members, and then reporting them to their spouse; military members in senior leadership positions “spend about thirty percent of time working to improve the quality of life for their subordinates and families” (Crossley & Keller, 1996, p. 307). The norms and traditions of a military lifestyle often influence “how a military spouse interprets, acts in, and experiences the world through shifting cultural structures, codes, or orders such as the hierarchical chain of command experience” (Gleiman, 2014, p. 52). The senior enlisted military wife in particular, is in a unique position to contribute to the military community and to influence and mentor other military spouses.

The wives in my study did not express that the challenges and demands of a senior enlisted military wife had affected her ability to attain higher education beyond the inability to receive MyCAA funds once their spouse had made E6. The MyCAA benefit is only available to spouses of servicemembers in the ranks of E1–E5, and O1–O2. The inability to access this benefit because of their spouse’s senior rank created a financial challenge. On the contrary, the challenges and demands that Harrell (2001) and Crossley and Keller (1996) identified did not influence these spouses when fulfilling their educational goals. This lack of identification might have occurred in part because of the varied and different roles that servicemembers fill and the related spousal expectations. As military members move up in rank and position, the perceived expectations of military spouses also increase. In addition to servicemember rank and position, the military member’s career field, military post, and command climate may also influence the roles of the military spouse.

Harrell (2001) stated that the military currently places emphasis on volunteerism of military spouses, and the spouses in my study did volunteer in their communities. As a member of the military community with a servicemember in Rank E9, the leadership at our current post has repeatedly addressed the drawdowns and cuts that the military has been and will continue to

make. They stress the increased importance that volunteerism will have to the military community.

### **Interpretation of Findings for Research Question 3**

Research Question 3 was, “How has the experience of distance learning contributed to transformations for the senior enlisted military wife?” Distance learning is a viable option for the military spouse to attain higher education. This medium can assist military spouses in overcoming the barriers and challenges presented of their lifestyle; the disruptions of moving, deployments, seeking childcare, and balancing a military family lifestyle are appreciated and the difficulties are almost eliminated in the asynchronous learning environment. Weatherly (2011) has also found that distance learning could provide transformative learning experiences for women; heightened self-awareness and transformation of one’s preconceived notions and beliefs. Transformations are unique to each individual and are dependent upon their experiences (Weatherly, 2011). For military spouses, who once were thought of by the military as their servicemember’s helpmate (Harrell, 2001), and who face continuous normative stressors (MacDermid et al., 2008), the educational opportunities available through distance learning can contribute to transformative changes. Transformative learning can also help military spouses “consciously participate in the journey of individuation”; military spouses can develop a greater understanding of themselves and of the world that surrounds them (Dirkx, 2000). In my study, distance learning allowed these spouses to overcome challenges of the military lifestyle while providing them with an avenue for learning that contributed to their growth and identity.

All of the spouses in my study have taken courses through distance learning and have had instances of transformation because of their experiences in higher education. Their educational experiences have prepared them to start new careers or advance in their current careers. These spouses are now poised to take over new roles within their families as career women when their



servicemember retires. Their educational experiences and volunteer experiences go hand in hand to give these wives a solid experiential background that has helped them to have a better understanding of themselves and of their future goals. These senior enlisted wives are now empowered and ready to embrace the next transition. Their identities are no longer dependent upon those of their servicemembers.

### **Major Findings**

In my study, the story of military culture as experienced by individual senior enlisted military wives was shared through the telling of stories. Chase (2005) supported the use of narratives to portray “women as social actors in their own right and in the subjective meanings that women assigned to events and conditions in their lives” (p. 655). The way that these women assigned meaning to their experiences could have been according to the concepts of knowledge and knowing which Lang (2011) described as being related in four ways:

- 1) Historical location or where we are at the particular moment in time.
- 2) How our text and speech contribute to our understanding and interpretation of our knowledge.
- 3) The way that historical and social contexts affect our creativity in constructing knowledge.
- 4) The way that our emotions (affectivity, commitments, enthusiasms, desires, and interests) contribute to our construction of knowledge.

My study addressed all four aspects of knowledge and knowing, for life as an active duty military spouse is unique historically and socially, and comes with its own challenges and opportunities. Each senior enlisted wife had a different story to share.

After restorying each participant’s story and searching for themes, two major findings have emerged from my study. First, through my study, I have found that the challenges inherent

to the military lifestyle have created (or turned into) opportunities for these spouses; challenges have created the opportunities. The second major finding was that each military spouse is on her own unique solitary educational journey into the unknown. The experiences and narratives presented by each of these women were unique and personal to them.

**Challenges have created the opportunities.** The spouses in my study faced challenges with which many military spouses are presented, including limited financial resources, frequent PCS moves, availability of educational support and resources, understanding these resources, and seeking their own identity separate from that of their servicemember. These are common challenges that these spouses overcame by seizing opportunities. In essence, the challenges that they faced created the opportunities.

Despite the mainly positive economic status of military families, a fixed income, childcare needs, and the cost of higher education might be large challenges to overcome when seeking higher education (Hosek & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2013; National Military Family Association, 2007). The spouses in my study addressed the cost of their education when telling their stories, but they had also searched for and attained different ways to finance their educations. They used their MyCAA benefits, used their servicemember's transferred GI Bill, applied for scholarships, volunteered and secured employment in locations that offered spouse tuition assistance, and used their hobbies and interests to make extra money to finance their educations. They were innovative in their quest for financial assistance, and met success.

To overcome the challenge of frequent PCS moves, these spouses enrolled in distance education courses and programs. With having to pick up and move to locations all over the globe, the spouses in my study had to choose institutions and programs that could move along with them. For military spouse learners seeking a 4-year degree or a graduate degree, credits might not transfer to new institutions and students might have to retake courses or complete

alternative courses for degree completion (National Military Family Association, 2007). PCS moves not only interrupt traditional education, but also often have a direct impact on a family's budget (National Military Family Association, 2007). Spouses in my study found that distance learning offered them more flexibility during a move and even the option to take a break in their programs if needed.

Dependence, marginalization, and psychological challenges can result from deployments, PCSs, lack of control over life events, and loss of identity among military spouses (Berry, 2015). Berry (2015) stated that there are “obstacles inherent within the military lifestyle that may hinder military wives’ journeys through the complex process of individuation” (p. iv). The spouses in my study used their education to create their own identities. The spouses understood that their educational journeys were valuable to their personal and professional growth while still supporting their servicemember, volunteering, and working. Although a military spouse’s identity is often shaped even before she becomes a military spouse, as illustrated in the “The Making of a Military Wife” (Appendix B), this role need not be all encompassing. The spouses in my study showed that room is available to pursue one’s desires and goals and to have one’s own unique identity while still being a military spouse.

According to the spouses in my study, the challenge of availability and understanding the educational resources available to military spouses is a challenge that has not been adequately met or has not created an opportunity. Military education centers should be the first stop for military spouses who are interested in starting their educational journeys, but their services are often tailored for the servicemember. Education centers provide information about onsite and local institutions, scholarship programs, and educational and career counseling; provide testing services such as CLEP and DSST; proctor exams; and act as a multiuse learning facility (Welch

et al., 2006). Military spouses might face many other challenges; therefore, information about the onsite and local institutions might not meet their needs best.

The U.S. DOD has funded a program, Military One Source, which provides support for all aspects of military life, including education. Military spouses can participate in the Spouse Education and Opportunities Program that provides educational and career guidance to military spouses. Spouses are invited to partake in a one-on-one educational consult through Military One Source to learn about scholarships, internships, college selection, and transferring of credits to various participating schools (Sprenkle, Ko, & MacDermid, 2006). The programs offered by Military One Source are available online and over the phone; however, through the Military Family Research Institute, Sprenkle et al. (2006) studied the impact and effectiveness of this program and found that, of those who were surveyed and who had not used Military One Source, 81% stated that they were not familiar with the service.

This challenge might not have created an opportunity for the spouses in my study, but it does present an opportunity for the military and higher education communities. A gap exists when connecting military spouses to resources and the opportunity to close this gap is an important finding of my study. With the closure of this gap, educational stakeholders can assist military spouses who are ready to start their educational journeys, make the best decisions for them, and assist them with overcoming their own unique challenges and turning them into opportunities for growth and success.

**Solitary journey into the unknown.** Numerous opportunities are available to military spouses to begin and continue their educations, but this process can often be a solitary journey into the unknown. Military spouses, and more specifically senior enlisted wives, are part of the population of nontraditional female students that have become the fastest growing population in higher education (Quimby & O'Brien, 2006). Quimby and O'Brien (2006) studied nontraditional

female students over Age 25 who had children to determine the internal and external influences that affect their well-being. They studied part-time and full-time students, and determined that 44% of their participants were actively involved in volunteer work. In their review of the literature, they stressed the importance of social support. Quimby and O'Brien (2006) inferred that nontraditional students found that social support from friends, family, and faculty contributed to success and feelings of satisfaction for the students.

A military spouse who is a nontraditional learner could also benefit not merely from social support, but also from educational support that would be tailored for the unique military lifestyle. Military spouse learners who are enrolled in distance education might not be a member of a cohort or have a support group of other learners to whom they can reach out to discuss their education. Distance learning, which at times can be transformative learning, can also feel isolating. The spouses in the study often felt as though they were teaching themselves, that they didn't have much interaction with their classmates, and that they weren't sure whether they had chosen the right program or institution for their needs and goals.

These women have overcome the challenges of the military lifestyle to be successful in her educational journey, but they each have also faced very distinctive challenges. Limited financial resources, frequent PCS moves, seeking their own identity, and understanding the availability of educational support resources were themes that emerged from their stories, but each spouse's story was distinct. These challenges are different and are in addition to the challenges that other nontraditional learners face. The challenges that military spouse learners face are also different and distinct from those that military servicemember learners face. Currently, research about military spouse learners and programs for military spouse learners are limited because they are often lumped with military servicemember-learners or the

nontraditional student population. My study has found that each military spouse is on her own solitary journey.

As Richard (2008) identified,

Military family members with whom I have spoken tend to be suspicious of advice that comes from anyone who hasn't personally gone through a similar experience. Common themes of being misunderstood or of having a life that is very different from civilian life emerged (p. 57).

My study supports the understanding that military life is indeed different from civilian life and that simply by being a military spouse, various challenges and opportunities must be embraced. Military culture greatly influences both the formal and informal roles that military spouses might undertake and social role theory promotes the understanding of these socially determined roles. Military spouses have many different roles to fill that have historical roots, including patriot, helpmate, lover, comforter, confidant, and pioneer (Alt & Stone, 1991). After the late 1980s, military spouses were acknowledged to have their own identity separate that from their servicemember. However, despite this recognition, military spouses are often products of the military culture and are influenced by the social roles that they are expected to play. Military spouses are often expected to put the military mission first, conduct volunteer activities, accommodate the needs of the service, and fulfill traditional roles such as hostess, mentor, ceremonial duties, and entertainer, and unit readiness support (Harrell, 2001). Perceptions of the traditional military spouse are changing, while still hanging on to tradition; spouses are enrolling in higher education and seeking employment outside of the home, as indicated by the military spouses in my study.

No one model of a military wife exists, for military wives are as unique in their experiences with the military lifestyle as they are in the way that they seize opportunities and

overcome challenges in relation to their educations. The resilience, resourcefulness, perseverance, and drive of these women are remarkable. Military spouses have allowed their challenges to create opportunities. Although living the military lifestyle, attaining higher education, working, and caring for families, these spouses have a desire to give back to their communities. They appreciate and embrace the multiple opportunities available to them and strive to help others. Increased educational support from the military and higher education can help military spouses to understand better the opportunities and support services available to them. Providing opportunities for military spouses to become a part of a community of learners can help educational journeys to become less solitary. Encouraging military spouses to share their experiences in relation to their educational journeys can help to make attaining education less of an unknown.

### **Implications**

Through this research, I have contributed to the fields of adult education, distance education, military spouse educational programs, and the military spouse learner. My study is significant to different contexts including cultural, experiential, methodological, and theoretical. Through my study, I also added to the knowledge base of perceptions about the military lifestyle in a positive manner and uncovered the life stories and narratives of military spouse learners. These four elements were intertwined because they influenced and supported each other. Culturally, through my study, I provided small glimpses into the military lifestyle and the unique role that military spouses play in this institution. Military spouses also shared their experiences in higher education as nontraditional distance learners, and explored how distance learning was transformative.

Transformative learning environments can help military spouses participate as community of learners who are “united in a shared experience of trying to make meaning of their

life experience” (Loughlin, 1993, pp. 320–321). Female distance learners might also experience change, possibly even transformative change. Weatherly (2011) found that distance learning could provide transformative learning experiences for women, including heightened self-awareness and transformation of one’s preconceived notions and beliefs. Transformations are unique to each individual and are dependent upon their experiences (Weatherly, 2011). Achieving success in higher education might contribute to greater life satisfaction and satisfaction with their military lifestyle. The senior enlisted wives in my study were successful in higher education, and were very pleased with the opportunities that they received from being a military spouse. Life satisfaction of military spouses might be related to servicemember retention, and is a topic that the U.S. DOD frequently addresses (MacDermid Wadsworth & Southwell, 2011; Savych, 2008; Welch et al., 2006).

When looking theoretically at the contributions of my study, it is important to consider the feminist perspective that Belenky et al. (1986) adopted. Belenky et al. (1986) allowed women in their study to explain “life and learning from [their] point of view” (p. 5). Similarly, by providing senior enlisted military wives the opportunity to describe their personal experiences in relation to obtaining their higher education, these spouses described military life and learning from their point of view. Situated knowledges, an aspect of feminist epistemology, provide knowledge that is specific to a particular situation and from a specific viewpoint (Haraway, 1988). Each participant in my study was in a different situation, both militarily and educationally, and shared their experiences and the knowledge that they constructed about their educational journey. Narrative inquiry allowed the senior enlisted wives in my study to share their individual successes that contributed to the collective successes of all military spouses in higher education. This narrative inquiry could be a focal point from which mentorship and positive modeling could be rallied. Identifying the educational needs and barriers that military



spouses face (specifically senior enlisted military wives as a separate student population of learners) might shed light on needed changes for these learners and other military spouse learners. Turning the solitary journey into the unknown, into a community of learners on a journey into the known, is a challenge that must be undertaken.

### **Recommendations for Action**

Continued research into the realm of military spouses and education is integral to the field of higher education and those who support military spouse–learners. The experiences of the senior enlisted wives in my study point to a need for more support and a better understanding of the numerous opportunities available to help them along their educational journeys. They use the opportunities available (e.g., MyCAA and the transferred GI Bill), but without adequate guidance and support. My study has helped to establish a foundation for the development of programs and resources that support the unique needs of female military spouse learners, more specifically those of the senior enlisted ranks. These resources can help military spouse learners cope with the challenges of the military lifestyle, enhance transformative learning, and ease the transition from being a military spouse to being a successful military spouse learner.

In her study of female student–veterans, Senk (2015) stated, “Having a sense of connecting to others with similar experiences, having accessible services, and feeling like they have peers, family, and academic personnel who understand them and can help assist them in transitioning to college” (p. 37). From the findings in my study, I have created recommendations for institutions of higher learning and military-provided services (e.g., military education centers, libraries, and other offices) that assist military spouses with their educational goals.

I recommend that institutions of higher learning allow military spouses to self-identify so that surveys can be conducted to determine what types of programs, services, and support might better assist them with their educational journeys. I also recommend that university personnel be

informed of the challenges that military spouses face and that they understand that this population does not often fit within the mold of a nontraditional student. Experiences such as deployments, long trainings, PCSs, and other military driven events can often interrupt the lives of military family members; therefore, they should be understood by these institutions. Many institutions are aware of the challenges that military personnel face, but do not take into consideration the military spouse's challenges.

I recommend that military-provided services (e.g., military education centers, libraries, and other offices) that assist military spouses in relation to education make an extra effort to become better informed and to discuss the different education opportunities with the military spouses in their community. Meeting with military spouses to discuss their interests and educational goals is paramount. As I have identified in my study, each military spouse learner is on a solitary journey into the unknown, and these offices can help turn this group effort into an area that has been well traveled by many successful military spouses. The sharing of information, stories, and mentorship is an area that must be explored further. Many military spouses are aware of the opportunities available to them, they are simply unsure of the educational programs, universities, and follow-on careers that are available.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

I recommend that further research be conducted to allow a greater number of military spouses the opportunity to share their stories of their educational journey. Each story is unique; therefore, a multitude of stories must be collected and analyzed for additional themes. I suggest gathering stories from military spouses in different ranks, including lower enlisted ranks and officer ranks to provide a comparison among the spouses of servicemembers in different rank echelons. I also recommend conducting research on the male military spouse, for my study was focused on female spouses only. Different themes and findings might emerge according to the

gender of the participant that could result in different recommendations on support and services to assist the male military spouse learner. My study focused on senior enlisted wives who had attended higher education via distance learning; therefore, I suggest that a similar study could be conducted on military spouses who had attended traditional classes to determine how the learning platform had affected them or resulted in transformations for this population.

### **Conclusion**

Although the U.S. DOD (2009) found in the *Quadrennial Quality of Life Review* that only 21% of military spouses felt they had fulfilled their educational goals, and 87% of these spouses listed education as a personal goal to achieve, some spouses have been successful and are meeting their educational goals. The women in my study were successful military spouse learners who had embraced the opportunities available to them and who were moving forward in their educational journeys.

Through the sharing of their individual narratives, these participants brought a voice to all female military spouse learners. These individual narratives were gathered and have now become part of the collective experiences that military spouses share. According to Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002), narrative inquiry, the methodology used in my study, brings researchers and participants together to construct experiences, provides a voice for participants, and places emphasis on the value of the participants' stories. The wives who shared their stories for my study were only a small portion of the population of enlisted wives who want to share their stories "because of their perceptions that they were generally invisible to the community and because they hoped to affect the lives of other military spouses," but their voices have been heard (Harrell, 2000, p. 13).

My study has found that each military spouse is on a solitary journey into the unknown. Therefore, educational stakeholders can strive to assist each military spouse with achieving her

higher educational goals, help military spouses create their own identity, and share the knowledge that military spouses are *More Than a Spouse* (National Military Family Association, 2015). It is imperative that the stakeholders involved with our military spouses and their higher education goals look at each spouse as an individual and work towards contributing to their success. It is well documented that military spouses have numerous opportunities and challenges because of the military lifestyle, but an extra effort should be made to help support these spouses and work towards eliminating the barriers that might preclude them from pursuing the level of education that they desire. Focus must be placed on changing the challenges that military spouses face into opportunities for success.

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## APPENDIX A:

### The Model Military Wife

Enloe (2000) provides a variety of characteristics that the Model Military Wife of the 20th-century should feature. Some of these characteristics come from *The Army Wife Handbook: A Complete Social Guide* (Crossley & Keller, 1996) or are also echoed in *The Battle Book for the Company Commander's Spouse* (U.S. Army War College Class of 2010, 2010). Enloe (2000, pp. 162–164) listed these characteristics in no particular order:

- She has to come to her own conclusion that the most important thing for her own and her family's well-being is that her husband perform his military job well.
- She feels as though not only her husband but also she herself is an integral part of what she thinks of as “the military family.”
- Being a supportive military wife gives her a genuine sense that she is doing her “patriotic duty.”
- She realized that she has to accept a number of restrictions, but she views those restrictions as a logical and crucial building block in “national security.”
- The material benefits that are accorded her as a military wife are, in her eyes, a source of security and satisfaction.
- She is a good mother; her children do not get into trouble, or if they do, she does not burden her husband unduly with these material worries.



- She has become a very competent occasional single partner and head of households when her soldier–husband is off on a training tour or deployed to a war zone. She knows how to handle the checkbook, fix the plumbing, and renew the car insurance.
- Still, she does not take inordinate pride in her competence. The weeks when he is away are, to her, and inevitable but “unnatural” time; a happy “normal” time resumes when he returns. She is pleased to relinquish the head-of-household mantel when her husband is home.
- She accepts that waging war – or keeping the militarized peace – is a high-stress occupation, and so she makes allowances for her husband’s moodiness, short temper, and impatience in the weeks and months following his deployment to a conflict zone.
- She acknowledges the hard work generated by her husband’s constant transfers (packing up, unpacking, getting the children adjusted to new schools), but mainly she sees these moves as chances to make new friends and explore new places.
- If she and her husband come from ethnic or racial groups that are subjected to discrimination in the civilian world, this model military wife is grateful for the military for providing a special opportunity for acquiring income, training, and public respect.
- She is quite comfortable with social relations according to rank; they seem natural; they provide an aura of order in an otherwise uncertain world.
- As she rises along with her husband through the ranks, she gains a sense of expanded authority and responsibility by helping younger wives learn – and accept – the military ropes.

- She enjoys unpaid volunteer work; it helps her husband's career and it makes her feel a useful member of the military community.
- She is sexually faithful.
- She accepts that soldier-husbands do not tell their wives everything, so she would think it neither worthwhile nor appropriate to ask her husband about clandestine missions or about any sexual activity he might engage in while away from home.
- She takes pride in her son, or nowadays perhaps even her daughter, following in her husband's footsteps by deciding as a teenager to join the military.
- The increasing likelihood that her husband will have female military colleagues on the job does not cause her anxiety.
- She does not feel much must express herself politically beyond the periodic marking of a ballot.
- She is prepared to remain militarized in her wifely dedication long after her husband's departure from actual service, supporting him in his interpretations of the meanings of his military actions, sometimes in the face of the public's critical reassessment of those actions.

## APPENDIX B:

### The Making of a Military Wife

When the good Lord was creating Wives, he was into his sixth day of overtime.

An angel appeared and said, “You’re having a lot of trouble with this one. What’s wrong with the standard model?”

And the Lord replied, “Have you seen the specs on this order? She has to be completely independent, but must be sponsored to get on post; have the qualities of both father and mother during deployments; be a perfect hostess to 4 or 40; run on black coffee; handle emergencies without a manual; be able to handle flu, birthdays and moves around the world; have a kiss that can cure anything from a child’s torn Valentine to a husband’s weary day; have the patience of a saint when waiting for the Unit to return home; and have six pairs of hands.”

The angel shook her hand slowly and said, “Six pairs of hands... no way!”

And the Lord answered, “Don’t worry, we’ll make other military wives to help. Besides it’s not the hands that are causing the problem, it’s the heart. It must swell with pride in her husband, sustain the ache of separations, beat on soundly when it’s too tired to do so and be large enough to say, ‘I Understand’ when she doesn’t, and ‘I love you’ regardless.”

“Lord,” said the angel, touching his sleeve gently. “Come to bed... finish this tomorrow!”

“I can’t,” said the Lord. “I’m so close to creating something unique. Already I have one who heals herself when she’s sick, can feed three unexpected guests who are stuck in the area because of bad weather, and can wave good-bye to her husband, from a pier, off a runway and understand that it is important to his country that he leaves.”

The angel circled the model of the military wife very slowly. “It’s too soft,” she sighed.

“But tough,” said the Lord excitedly. “You cannot imagine what this woman can do or endure.”

“Can it think?”

“Can it think? It can convert 1400 to 2 p.m.”

Finally, the angel bent over and ran her finger across the cheek. “There’s a leak,” she pronounced. “I told you that you were trying to put too much into this model.”

“It’s not a leak,” said the Lord. “It’s a tear.”

“What’s it for?” asked the angel.

“It’s for joy. Sadness. Disappointment. Pain, loneliness and pride!”

“You are a genius,” sighed the angel.

The Lord looked somber and replied, “I didn’t put it there.”

Anonymous (n.d.)

**APPENDIX C:****University of New England Consent for Participation in Research**

**Project Title:** Exploring the Experiences of Senior Enlisted Military Wives Seeking Higher Education Through Distance Learning

**Principal Investigator:**

Andrea Disque, University of New England  
(337) 353-2943  
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**Faculty Advisor:**

Dr. Carol Holmquist, University of New England  
(804) 305-5570  
cholmquist@une.edu

**Introduction:**

- Please read this form, you may also request that the form is read to you. The purpose of this form is to provide you with information about this research study, and if you choose to participate, document your decision.
- You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about my study, now, during or after the project is complete. You can take as much time as you must decide whether you want to participate. Your participation is voluntary.

**Why is my study being done?**

- The purpose of my study is to explore and document the experiences of senior enlisted military wives and how the military lifestyle has impacted their ability to attain higher education while their servicemember was on active duty. My study strives to bring a voice to those spouses who are an integral component of today's military, yet who are often unseen in both the military world and in the civilian sector, including higher education.

**Who will be in my study?**

- You have been chosen for my study since you are a female currently married to an active duty enlisted servicemember in the ranks of E7–E9, were/are enrolled in higher education and have used distance education as an avenue to complete your courses while your spouse was an E7–E9, were/are engaged in the military culture (i.e., participated as a active member of the Family Readiness Group; volunteered in

company/ battalion / brigade activities; participated in social activities, etc.) while you were enrolled in higher education, and have no prior personal or professional relationship with the researcher.

**What will I be asked to do?**

- You will be asked to complete a prescreening questionnaire, attend one scheduled Skype interview with the researcher, and participate in follow-up email interviews as needed.
- You will be asked to collaborate and validate your story as retold by the researcher for accuracy and review the final version.
- The expected duration of your participation in the project will last through February 2016 or sooner.
- You will receive a \$25 gift card redeemable wherever credit cards are accepted as compensation for participation in this project.

**What are the possible risks of taking part in my study?**

- There are no foreseeable risks associated with participation in my study.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part in my study?**

- There are no direct benefits to you for participating in my study.

**What will it cost me?**

- Participants are not expected to incur any costs as a result of participation in this research.

**How will my privacy be protected?**

- Your confidentiality and anonymity will be safeguarded throughout the study. Your name will be replaced with a number on the questionnaire, transcripts, and email interviews. In the retelling of your story, a pseudonym will be used in place of your names and I will apply other fictionalizing methods to the story as necessary.
- This project will be shared with the students and faculty at the University of New England (UNE) who are a part of the Doctor of Education in educational leadership program of study. This project will also be published in the centralized online repository that is administered and maintained by the UNE Library Services.

**How will my data be kept confidential?**

- Names, emails, and returned forms and information will be stored on the researchers password protected home computer.
- Individually identifiable data will be destroyed after the study is complete.
- The researcher will have access to the audio recordings made during the interviews. These recordings will be used to transcribe the sessions. After the study is complete, these recordings will be destroyed.
- The collected data over the Internet through our email correspondence will be kept in the researcher's password protected email until the study is complete
- You will have access to your story throughout the study and will be provided a complete copy of the study upon completion.
- Please note that regulatory agencies and the IRB may review the research records.
- A copy of your signed Informed Consent Form will be maintained by the principal investigator for at least 3 years after the project is complete before it is destroyed. The Informed Consent Forms will be stored in a secure location that only members of the research team will have access to and will not be affiliated with any data obtained during the project.

**What are my rights as a research participant?**

- Your participation is voluntary. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relations with the UNE.
- You may skip or refuse to answer any question for any reason.
- If you choose not to participate, there is no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive. You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time, for any reason. If you choose to withdraw from the research there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.

**What other options do I have?**

- You may choose not to participate.

**Whom may I contact with questions?**

- The researcher conducting my study is Andrea Disque. For questions or more information concerning this research, you may contact her at (337) 353-2943 or

adisque@une.edu. You may also contact her faculty mentor Carol Holmquist, Ed.D. at (804) 305-5570 or cholmquist@une.edu.

- If you choose to participate in this research, study and believe you may have suffered a research related injury, please contact Andrea Disque at (337) 353-2943 or adisque@une.edu. You may also contact her faculty mentor Carol, Holmquist, Ed.D. at (804) 305-5570 or cholmquist@une.edu.
- If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may call Olgun Guvench, M.D. Ph.D., chair of the UNE Institutional Review Board at (207) 221-4171 or irb@une.edu.

### **Will I receive a copy of this Informed Consent Form?**

- You will be given a copy of this Informed Consent Form.

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### **Participant's Statement**

I understand the above description of this research and the risks and benefits associated with my participation as a research subject. I agree to take part in the research and do so voluntarily.

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Participant's signature or  
Legally authorized representative

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Date

---

Printed name

### **Researcher's Statement**

The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in my study.

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Researcher's signature

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Date

---

Printed name



## **APPENDIX D:**

### **Recruitment Flyer**

**Purpose:** The purpose of my study is to explore the experiences of senior enlisted military wives and the way that the military lifestyle has affected their ability to attain higher education while their servicemember was on active duty.

**Who:** You are eligible to participate in my study and share your story if all of the following are true about you. You are/were:

- A female currently married to an active duty enlisted servicemember in the ranks of E7–E9
- Enrolled in higher education and have used distance education as an avenue to complete your courses while your spouse was an E7–E9
- Engaged in the military culture (i.e., participated as an active member of the Family Readiness Group; volunteered in company, battalion, or brigade activities; and participated in social activities) while you were enrolled in higher education
- Have no prior personal or professional relationship with the researcher. Participants will be recruited globally with no exclusions to age, race, nationality, religion, or sexual orientation.

If you do not meet the description above, you are not able to be in the study.

**YOUR STORY MATTERS.** By sharing your educational experience, you can help increase awareness of educational opportunities for other military spouses.

**How:** If are interested in potentially participating in my study, please contact me privately at XXX@gmail.com. The period for a response is one week from the date of posting. For confidentiality reasons and to ensure validity of my study, please do not respond directly to this thread or make public comments regarding my study. I appreciate your cooperation and support as I strive to further explore this topic.

\*Participants who are chosen to participate and complete the interviews will be offered a \$25 gift card redeemable wherever credit cards are accepted as compensation for participation in this project.

## APPENDIX E:

### Questionnaire

**Project Title:** Exploring the Experiences of Senior Enlisted Military Wives Seeking Higher Education Through Distance Learning

Thank you for your interest in participating in my study. Prior to completing this questionnaire, please read and sign the **UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH** Form and return this along with your completed questionnaire.

Please respond to the following questions:

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Age \_\_\_\_\_

Are you a female currently married to an active duty enlisted servicemember in the ranks of E7–E9? \_\_\_ What is your spouse's service and rank? \_\_\_\_\_ Duty Station \_\_\_\_\_

Were or are you enrolled in higher education and have used distance education as an avenue to complete your courses while your spouse was an E7–E9? \_\_\_\_\_

Institution enrolled \_\_\_\_\_

Degree Program \_\_\_\_\_

Years of enrollment \_\_\_\_\_

Did you graduate? \_\_\_ If yes, degree and date \_\_\_\_\_

Were or are you engaged in the military culture (i.e., participated as a active member of the Family Readiness Group; volunteered in company, battalion, or brigade activities; and participated in social activities, etc.) while you were enrolled in higher education? \_\_\_\_\_

Please list activities and dates: \_\_\_\_\_

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Do you have a prior personal or professional relationship with the researcher? \_\_\_\_\_

Are you willing to participate in a 45–60 minute Skype interview?

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\*Participants will be recruited globally with no exclusions to age, race, nationality, religion, or sexual orientation.

## **APPENDIX F:**

### **Interview Protocol**

Thank you again for volunteering to be a part of my study. Before we begin, I just wanted to confirm your receipt of the Informed Consent Form, and ensure that you understand the information contained in the form. Do you have any questions about the Informed Consent Form? I also wanted to remind you that the interviews will be recorded and transcribed. I want to thank you for being a part of this important and meaningful research.

*YOUR STORY MATTERS. By sharing your educational experience, you can help increase awareness of educational opportunities for other military spouses.*

I just wanted to take a moment to describe the purpose of my study and answer any questions you may have: The purpose of my study is to explore the experiences of senior enlisted military wives and document how the military lifestyle has affected their ability to attain higher education while their member was on active duty. I will be retelling your story and writing your narrative using the information provided in the questionnaire and in our interview. As needed, I will also follow up with you via email. Do you have any questions?

I would like you to begin your story with how and where your educational journey as a military wife started. Please feel free to describe the opportunities, challenges, feelings, inspirations, goals, and any aspects of your journey that you feel best describe your unique experience. I would like you to share your story with me without interruption. This is your moment to share. If needed, I will prompt you to ensure that your story is moving along and staying on track.

Possible Prompts:

When working on this degree, were you volunteering as well?

Did your role as a [FRG leader, senior spouse, volunteer, career] have any effect on your ability to work towards completing your education?

How did your spouse's [position, deployment, training] affect your education?

Describe your experience with distance education.