

# Memories of War: Michigan Veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars

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## Introduction

Approximately 4.59 million American troops have served in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001 (Bilmes, 2021, pg. 6). By 2007, more than 9,000 Michigan National Guard members were deployed overseas (Granholm, 2007, pg. 2). In this project, I analyze seven oral histories of Michigan veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, particularly the experiences of those in the Army and Army National Guard, to (a) identify their contributions to these conflicts, (b) determine the ways in which their service shaped their lives, and (c) interpret their experiences for a public audience in a digital history project, a growing form of scholarship for professional historians and public historians. In doing so, I aim to draw attention to this important history, as well as grow the historical scholarship in military history, Michigan history, and oral history.



A weapon qualification day in Baghdad, Iraq. The walls with targets are located to the back of the city. Soldiers were told to not fire over the walls. Photo by Rene Trudgeon (2006-2007).

## Key Themes, Connections, and Quotes

### Enlisting Young

After completing my first three interviews, it was clear that each narrator enlisted into the military at a young age. Specifically, each narrator joined the military at nineteen.

### Discipline

Each narrator referenced how their experience in the military made them incredibly disciplined in their work and even throughout their return to civilian life. This discipline helped them not only during their time in the military, but also continues to influence them today.

### Enabling World Travel

With each narrator, the military provided them the opportunity to travel the world. Without the military, it is likely that the narrators would not have otherwise had these experiences.

### Generations of War Trauma

As narrators shared their experiences, they often drew connections to their families' war experiences and trauma. These connections make it easier for veterans to understand their own experiences, as well as shine a light on how war, regardless of when or where, greatly impacts soldiers for the rest of their lives.

### Notable Quotes from Narrators:

#### Kathleen Trudgeon [Army, Army Reserve, National Guard]:

•“My grandpa, ... he told me that he wished he could have done what I did. He was born in 1902, so he was too young for World War I, and when World War II and Korea came around he was too old, but he said, you know, I can just remember him taking me aside and saying 'You're gonna meet so many different types of people and see so many different things' and he knew I could do it.”

•“I would never discourage anyone from joining the military. I've had younger people come up and talk to me about it and it did nothing but good things for me. I wouldn't have met my husband if I hadn't been in the military... it's not easy. No. Is it a cake walk? No, but I would never discourage anyone from joining and I've never regretted it for a minute.”

#### Philip Trudgeon [National Guard]:

•“You know, you got to the point where you just stopped taking pictures. It's like 'I don't want to remember this stuff'. So, I've never looked at the pictures of Iraq since I've been home. I do have a photo album from the first one, so, but I haven't looked at that in years.”

•“Well, you know, the premise of going into Iraq was weapons of mass destruction, and that turned out to be a big lie. So, I kinda knew that going into it and, you know, look how long we were there. So yeah, I've got an opinion on it. We never should've gone in there, but, you know, it's not my job to really question that. It's my job to do my job.”

#### Rene Trudgeon [National Guard]:

•“Well, most of the mental stuff has worn off. I would think, or hope, possibly. I should probably have a third party say that, but no there was just certain thing. I mean, when you're deployed like to Iraq you carry a weapon around everywhere you go. Took me a long time after getting home to realize I didn't have to carry my weapon around with me because I didn't have it. You'd wake up startled—I mean, 'cause you didn't go anywhere without your weapon. Everywhere you went you took it with you, and when it's not with you, you just kinda feel out of wack.”

## Current Findings

Through further analysis of the three interviews conducted, as well as deeper analysis of four interviews within the Veterans History Project, it is clear that military shapes the lives of veterans in positive and negative ways. The military enables individuals to experience new cultures, learn new skills, and meet new people. Those who are deployed sometimes struggle to readjust to civilian life, and those who are not deployed must grapple with staying home while their fellow soldiers are sent away. Despite this, no narrator in my conducted interviews said that they would change their time in the military. Clearly, the relationship between the military is a complex relationship that shapes their experiences throughout their lives. With our current findings, our future plans are as follows:

- narrative analysis
- development of digital history project
- donation of conducted interviews to the Library of Congress

## Future Plans

As analysis and further research progresses, experiences will be interpreted in a manner that is assessable for a public audience. This will be done through the creation of a digital history project. In addition, interviews conducted will be donated to the Veterans History Project (Library of Congress) to ensure that the histories of these veterans are not forgotten.

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