Compare and Contrast:

Process and perceptions of creating the military piece

At the beginning of this quarter, I didn’t know what to think about devising a piece that highlighted the hardships student veterans are up against transitioning to Ohio State. It was an issue I had never before contemplated or even considered. Sometimes we get so wrapped up in our own lives that we overlook the things that “don’t apply” and perceivably do not affect us. This is not to say I wasn’t aware of the fact that veterans might be scattered about my campus, but it simply never occurred to me to take into account the adversity that these people face, even after leaving their respective military base. That being said, going into this project, I tried to be as open-minded as possible. I was fully aware that I was relatively ignorant to the topic at hand, seeing as I’ve never served a day in my life and happen to fall into the more traditional student bracket.

At times it was difficult for me to articulate my thoughts on the military, having possessed only some insight from a few individuals that are or previously have had some sort of affiliation. In my first journal I wrote that “I’m aware that there are numerous reasons why someone might decide to join the military, but for the people I know/have known; it’s always been more of a means-end sort of thing”. This may be true, but one of the things I’ve come to realize is that although I had superficial conversations with family members and friends who are vets, I never actually pried much further to reveal other aspects that surely must have weighed in on their decision to join. Yes, it’s true that people in the military can make decent money and
acquire benefits, but I feel as though I may have been using this shallow monetary fact to justify why someone close and/or related to me chose to become a part of something that is, fundamentally, at odds with my own beliefs. Any ambivalence I feel in regards to the long-lived institution of the military, I attribute to its direct connection with combat, with war, with something I do not support in any capacity. I recognize that I was/am not the only one dealing with such feelings of discordance. In initial discussions, I recall other classmates expressing that they too were in disagreement with what the military stood for, yet at the same time, felt compassion in lieu of disapprobation for those who have served. I wondered if it made me wishy-washy, perhaps even hypocritical, to simultaneously hold these two opposing sentiments. But, could they not coexist?

I think that a big turning point for me, and likely the entire ensemble, was when we began actually interviewing with living, breathing veterans currently enrolled at Ohio State. These interviews were invaluable in so many ways, providing an opportunity to take in the person holistically, and not just their experience as a soldier. It was a tremendous learning experience that was unlike any class I’ve taken over the years. You never know how much you don’t know until you do know. As a class, we spoke with four different student-vets. While they seemed to share a certain sense of humility, every last one was unique in terms of background, reasons for joining, personal experience, and views on various social issues. Similar to Rose, the character I portrayed, I espoused a misconception that many people who join the military do so as a last resort to score some cash, whether it be to support their family or to attend school. I ended up finding this theory to be dispelled during the interview process. For example, Kyle Sayre served twelve and a half years active duty in the Air force and has been in the reserves for the past two years while he completes his degree at Fischer, Ohio State’s school of business. From what I
understood in the interview, Kyle grew up in a comfortable middle-class family and upon graduation from high school; his parents were capable and willing to fund his college education. Taking advantage of their generosity, Kyle enrolled at a community college, but expressed that he simply wasn’t “feeling it” and did not engage with the curriculum there. Even though he wasn’t footing the bill himself, Kyle’s conscious told him that it was wrong to waste their hard-earned savings as long as he was doing subpar work and not maximizing his education. He made the decision to drop out and join the military, mostly because he longed for adventure and exotic travels, but also because he wanted to be accountable for his actions. He pointed out that that he takes his college experience much more seriously now, having been in the military, than he did when his family was paying. I was very impressed by this; I think that it spoke volumes of Kyle’s integrity as well as the influence that the military has on work ethic. The fact that he had an upbringing with opportunities not all that different from my own, but actively chose to enlist, proved that you do not have to be “desperate” or devoid of options to join the military. For some people, such as Kyle, money was not the one and only motivation.

I doubt I’m alone when I say I found a kindred spirit in Bryan Bedford, who also formerly served in the Air Force, and has been studying at OSU for a little over a year. He confessed that when was younger, he had this enthusiasm to become a soldier and kill the enemy, but overtime came to see the futility of war and that, alternatively, education and understanding one another’s cultures could make a world of difference. I was really awestruck at how passionately he spoke of his views and his level of commitment towards pursuing a career in education as a civilian. He truly believes that if he puts his mind to it, he can do just about anything. All too often we become discouraged in life and convince ourselves that what we do as a singular being doesn’t matter because we could never truly make a substantial impact.
However, Bryan challenged this notion with the question, “But what if you could?” I’ve told many of my friends about Bryan and his humanitarian ambitions that certainly defy the oftentimes demeaning stereotypes implemented by society of what it means to be a military guy. Veterans, just like Theatre majors, are no different than anyone else. People that decide to serve come from all walks of life, and there are as many exceptions as there are archetypes.

Ultimately, I’ve realized that it is okay to have a little dissonance in life. In fact, it’s inevitable. The fact that I am anti-war, that I might question some functions of the military itself has absolutely no bearing on my attitude towards student veterans who served the country I live in. It does not discount the struggles they encounter when they return home after any number of years and nothing is the same, everyone they knew has changed, and then, to top it all off, adjusting to Ohio state’s sprawling campus where feeling like a mere brick in one of the countless buildings is a virtual guarantee. After taking a summer off and returning fall quarter, I always feel a little out of the loop. It typically takes a good week or two before I get back in the swing of things and reclaim my manic academic mindset. As a comparison, I cannot even begin to imagine how hard it must be for these veterans who may not have written papers, solved math equations, or taken midterms for several years. I remember Trent commenting that he felt he had to put in at least twice as much effort as a traditional student that sprung into college straight from high school.

Prior to this quarter, even though I would have been more than happy to talk to a student-veteran, I don’t think I would have known what to say. I did not understand their circumstances. Now that I am more informed of all the potential things student-vets might be experiencing at my school (other than PTSD), I feel confident that I can carry on a meaningful, normal conversation as opposed to falling silent or saying something crass such as the infamous, “did you kill
anyone?” I was quite reluctant to admit in class (out of guilt) that I did pose precisely that question to a veteran once before. I was a sophomore in high school, and fortunately, the former soldier managed to keep his composure as he (surprisingly) solemnly replied, “about 46 people”. In hindsight, it was incredibly childish and insensitive of me, but of course, at the time, I didn’t know any better—I just said it. Rest assured, that will never happen again.