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**ABSTRACT of a Paper Submitted to AABRI 2010**

**Marketing the Military: Tangible vs. Intangible Benefits of Service**

### **Background and Marketing Relevance**

The problem of marketing volunteer service in the military is that the essential exchange situation involves the considerable risk of death in the short term in order to gain life-improving benefits (such as financial support for higher education, home and small business loan preferences etc.) over the longer term. Enlistees are typically contractually obligated to serve for 4 years of active duty followed by as much as 8 years of potential recall to service should the nation's military needs require it. In today's all-volunteer force situation marketing this experience based on benefits is a critical challenge for the nation, but what does it actually provide for the participants? Are the benefits advertising in recruitment campaigns those that actually take place post enlistment and post-service?

In the United States there are legal constraints on marketing activities permissible to the various branches of service. All must be conducted solely for the purpose of recruitment and none may be used for any other purpose. These constraints, coupled with an unusually dramatic marketing problem, provide a unique opportunity for understanding the dynamics of marketing on the basis of intangible vs. functional benefits.

In recruitment marketing there have been two trains of thought regarding the definition and presentation of benefits to drive military enlistment. One focuses on the utilitarian after-service benefit package included in G.I. Bill. The other focuses on the experiential benefits of serving such as development of technical skills or advancing one's organization and leadership capabilities. Both rest on the assumption that the decision to enlist is a rational-calculative one and that the after-service benefits will also be evaluated that way. But the experience of service, especially in forward areas, may not be so simple.

Interestingly, both approaches have only called on one strain of scholarly research as their basis for developing marketing strategy – research devoted largely to matching individual propensity characteristics with utilitarian-inspired incentives. However, another strain of scholarship points to the possibility of benefits to military service unrecognized by those tasked with recruiting.

### **Theoretical Antecedents in Military Scholarship**

There is a rich sociological research tradition into the military as an institution in democratic societies. Shaped by Morris Janowitz's book the *Professional Soldier* in 1960, this body of research examines the changing situation of the Post WW II military, its separation from 19<sup>th</sup> Century conceptions of the heroism and glories of war and, in the United States especially, the

steady evolution from conscription toward a professional all-volunteer force that must rely on persuasion to gain recruits.

Military Sociology also includes 50 years of public opinion polling research that has charted the fall (during the Vietnam Draft era) and rise (the Gulf Wars II episodes) of the military as an institution. Today it is the most highly regarded of the institutions measured, much higher than doctors, lawyers or legislators.

Two distinct theoretical streams American military sociology shape our inquiry. One is the social cohesion aspect that suggests the power of intangible benefits of socialization, identity formation and a structure of belonging as significant. Janowitz & Shils (1948) work on the persistent unit cohesion of German soldiers in WW II POW detention launched this direction.

An example of modern research stemming from this tradition is the positive effect of a meritocratic social structure that aids assimilation of minority groups including Hispanics and women into equal roles with white males. Findings that compared military service to civilian situations showed more advanced perceived equality of formal but also informal treatment and therefore greater satisfaction in the military than in civilian situations.

The other theoretical approach focuses on the individual's motivation to serve (or propensity to enlist) by examining the relative appeal generated by specific functional benefits offered to individuals and how they are communicated. This latter strain has investigated the impact of various approaches to marketing based on different combinations of service benefits to those who enlist (Yonkman et. al. 2009)

### **This Research**

This paper describes discovery research intended to explore whether or not the functional platter of benefits is an adequate description of what veterans actually get in return for their service. We focus on the experience of actual service to provide an opportunity to learn whether there are actual benefits that are not currently recognized yet are nevertheless considered important among those who have already served. While the marketing utility of such discovery may be obvious, the utility to policy makers regarding the role of military service in benefitting young Americans may be even more important.

### **The Research Design**

The research design was structured to encourage discovery of relevant aspects of military service that are not used in recruitment today and that it might not occur to current scholars to ask about. The sample is a self-selected one of 10 veterans of Afghanistan and Iraq combat service whose time in-country took place between 2001 and 2008. Since these men have experienced the extreme risk possibility of service and are now experiencing the post-enlistment benefit of higher education, their situation offers the best opportunity for uncovering overlooked benefits and

offering insights that might revise the theoretical focus of previous research into enlistment issues.

The investigation was conducted at Florida Gulf Coast University during 2009 and 2010 and is ongoing as part of a much broader veteran's history project. The veterans in this sample were the first to be invited to provide their experiences as they were on the university's list of those who are currently receiving G.I. Bill college education benefits.

Each interview totaled between 2-4 hours and each veteran was interviewed 3-4 times, making the total testimony of each participant between 6 and 12 hours long. An open-ended format was used in which the veteran was encouraged to offer any thoughts on three general topics (over the course of all the interviews) as well as to raise any topics he or she considered important..

The three topic areas include:

- I. History of how and why the veteran enlisted. The participant's aspirations, expectations, and deliberations before and during the enlistment process were specifically probed during discussion.
- II. The experience of serving, comparing it to expectations prior to enlistment, promises made during the recruitment process, skills learned within the service member's MOS as well as other skills developed. Participants were explicitly encouraged offer added topics they thought we should hear about several times during each conversation.
- III. Transition back to civilian life taking place in a college environment. This topic usually began with discussion of the college student role. It included the roles of University Administration and the Veteran's Administration in facilitating the transition back to civilian life. This proved to be the topic area that most often was a doorway to a wider variety of issues.

**Analysis:** is qualitative and inferential.

### **Overview of Findings**

Discovery was made of a set of benefits that aided participants in the process of self-transformation in several areas of their lives during and following military service. The nature of these experiences and their perceived impact on participant's civilian lives does not fit neatly within the commonly discussed parameters of "maturity, responsibility and leadership" development so often attributed to military service. Nor do they necessarily stem from specialty training to a particular job experience (MOS). They extend well beyond G.I. bill functional benefits of service.

Instead they involve reflection, development of personal meaning and belief systems that depart from the individual's upbringing, discovery of abilities and ambitions new to the individual's biography. They include intangible benefits of experience that if recognized explicitly as

meaningful to veterans in post-service transition might also prove to be meaningful to recruitment prospects. These might influence recruitment strategies, but more importantly could also improve the design and implementation of post-service transition programs.

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