

DELTA RAIDERS: A STUDY OF COLLECTIVE NARRATIVES WITHIN VETERANS'  
REUNIONS

by

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the therapeutic nature of veterans' reunions through a qualitative analysis of interviews and participant observation of the 2010 Delta Raiders of Vietnam Association biannual reunion. Eight Vietnam veterans who served in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 501<sup>st</sup> Infantry, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division (Airmobile), Company D during Vietnam were interviewed, as well as three wives of these veterans. The following research question directed the study: What communicative functions do veterans' reunions serve? By examining the quality of social support and the rationality (probability and fidelity) of the narratives that these veterans provide one another, this study seeks to understand why Vietnam veterans continue meeting for reunions, what in particular is so strong about the Delta Raider reunions, and how personal narratives communicatively function within a veteran's reunion context. Results show that the veterans' reunions primarily serve to rebuild narrative probability for the veterans, as well as construct boundaries for narrative fidelity to work within. Additionally, veterans' reunions provide therapeutic relief, forming a second family through renewed company pride, and revealing tension between shared veteran experience and family communication.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .....	v
Dedication .....	vi
Chapter 1 - Introduction .....	1
Chapter 2 - Literature Review .....	6
Vietnam Veteran Mentality .....	6
Social Support .....	8
Past Empirical Research on Veterans' Reunions .....	10
Narrative Probability and Fidelity .....	12
Revisions and Interpretations of the Narrative Paradigm .....	13
The Role of Narrative in Veteran Communication .....	15
Chapter 3 - Research Method .....	19
Research Site .....	19
Data Collection .....	20
Procedure .....	23
Data Analysis .....	23
Chapter 4 - Analysis .....	25
Collective Narratives .....	25
Rebuilding Narrative Probability .....	29
Creating Boundaries That Encase Narrative Fidelity .....	31
Therapeutic Relief .....	33
Forming a Second Family Through Renewed Company Pride .....	36
Recognizing Tension Between Shared Experience and Family Communication .....	37
Chapter 5 - Discussion .....	41
Conclusions .....	41
Limitations .....	44
Future Research .....	45
References .....	48
Appendix A - Interview Protocol for Raiders .....	51

Appendix B - Interview Protocol for Wives .....	52
Appendix C - List of Open Codes and Number of Occurrences.....	53
Appendix D - List of Selective Codes and Number of Occurrences.....	54

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## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this work to my mother Susan, whose encouragement kept me focused despite the distance, to my brothers Dan, Eric, and Zach for keeping me grounded through the years. Encouragement and time-management that made this research possible stemmed from Craig Brown, Bobby Imbody and the Kansas State Forensics Team, the primary reason I arrived at Kansas State. The Raiders: Chris, Chuck, Cleo, Marguerite, Mary, Mike, Paul, Roy and Terry, along with every single Delta Raider that served in Vietnam; those who came back and those who gave the ultimate sacrifice. Finally, and most importantly, to my father Raymond, whose incredible passion for a group of guys called the Delta Raiders, is what inspired me to write this thesis.

## Chapter 1 - Introduction

Ray “Blackie” Blackman served as a rifleman and squad leader in Vietnam from April 1970 to February 1971 for 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 501<sup>st</sup> Infantry, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division (Airmobile), Company D: the “Delta Raiders”. During a particularly heavy firefight, “Blackie” nearly fell to his death when the helicopter he was evacuating in took evasive maneuvers, which threw him from the aircraft. It was not until nearly twenty years had passed that “Blackie” finally met the man who had reached out and saved his life by grabbing his rucksack on that fateful day. The men met at a Delta Raiders of Vietnam Association (DROVA) biannual veterans’ reunion, which serves to reunite members of Company D for a weekend of relaxation and reflection on the war. Without this reunion, both men may have never discovered the identity of one other, and a traumatic war memory would be left with an uncertain gap. However, with the knowledge gained through a personal narrative shared at a veterans’ reunion, “Blackie” was able to henceforth put a face to the man who saved his life overseas.

Veterans’ reunions are not a new concept, with gatherings dating back to the American Civil War (NPR, 2009), joining soldiers from both the North and South on hallowed battlefields for discussion and remembrance. These meetings continue today with veterans of foreign wars in past and current conflicts such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Reunions offer the opportunity for soldiers to use narratives by both recalling war stories and catching each other up on events since the war through the scope of storytelling.

Seen through the narrative paradigm, humans are essentially storytellers by nature (Fisher, 1984, 1985) ultimately seeing the world through the lens of narratives. However, the common war story told to friends, co-workers or even family has more sub-text than many

veterans let on (Murphy, 2008). Narratives can help veterans cope with, rather than avoid, traumatic memories (Hunt & Robbins, 1998). Narratives that focus on negative cognitions serve as a superior option to simply avoiding traumatic experiences because they enable veterans to “take control” of the distressing situation. Taking control could be reaching a higher level of understanding the previous instance of trauma or even reconstructing the event with a better or more informed perspective. Since storytelling is the primary communicative phenomenon that occurs during veterans’ reunions, one might wonder how functional narratives are at healing those who attend and tell stories.

Fisher laid down the foundation for narratives and their functions within the world through the lens of a paradigm, as well as providing two tests of rationality within a narrative, probability and fidelity. According to Fisher, every human is born with the innate ability to recognize the consistency (probability) and level of truth (fidelity) within a narrative, thus judging if a narrative is rational or not. This was applied by Baesler (1995) in a test of probability and fidelity’s functions within persuasive messages. Further application of the narrative paradigm, specifically with the two rationality tests and their presence in combat experiences of Vietnam veterans, will be made within the current study.

Scholars have challenged the narrative paradigm in its definitions (Rowland, 1987), (Kirkscey, 2008) and (McClure, 2009). This leaves the paradigm and its concepts to remain in flux, thus warranting continued research into the functions and applications of narratives within everyday or even sporadic communicative events.

Narratives are more complex than previously imagined, especially for those who have suffered trauma (Burnell, Hunt and Coleman 2009). Research on narratives within all victims of traumatic events is essential, as the way these victims construct, reconstruct or even view past



traumatic memories, shaping their attitudes and behaviors within the world. According to Burnell et al., without a well-constructed narrative, veterans will be motivated to find a like-minded individual and share experiences to fill in any gaps left memory.

Construction of a solidified narrative could not occur following the Vietnam War, however, due to negative public opinion of the war and the soldiers once returning home. Veterans of the Vietnam War currently are, and have been, in a delicate situation since returning from overseas. With public opinion of the war drastically negative both socially and from the media (Adams, 1977), Vietnam veterans felt little support upon returning to the United States. This lack of social support is critical, as it causes the Vietnam veteran to hold a unique narrative, one full of isolation and little communication on their war experiences when regarding those without war experience, or legitimacy (Braithwaite, 1997). If all members of a small group are “legitimate”, communication occurring within the group on a particular topic can lead to open understanding through a narrative lens (Ryfe, 2006), thus warranting continued attention by scholars. Veterans’ reunions functioning as a group gathering could be an effective tool for helping veterans cope (to make sense of or reconcile) after they have returned to civilian life.

Unfortunately, research into the therapeutic effects of the communication at veteran’s reunions is negligible. Most research has focused on primary and secondary psychological factors affecting recovery (Dekel et al., 2005), as well as social support contributing to healing (Cohen and Wills, 1985), (Keane et al. (1985). Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has emerged as a major issue with troops in combat within the last twenty to thirty years. According to the Vietnam Veterans of America:

Around 1980, the American Psychiatric Association designated PTSD to describe a delayed-stress syndrome commonly experienced by combat-veterans. This condition had

previously been referred to as “shell-shock” and “war/combat neurosis. Although PTSD is often associated with Vietnam veterans, it appears in veterans of all wars and eras.

(VVA, 2004)

1983 marked a notable year in PTSD research, as a Congressional mandate started the National Vietnam Veterans’ Readjustment Study, which produced staggering results. At the time of the study 15.2% of all male and 8.5% of female veterans suffered from PTSD, with 30.9% and 26.9% of Vietnam Veterans estimated as suffering from the psychological disorder at some point following combat. Although we are unqualified to determine the effects of PTSD as Communication scholars, it is necessary to understand that postwar trauma is quite realistic for all veterans. Trauma for veterans, in this case, can be defined as when: “quality of life is impaired as they continually “relive” the event through recurrent intrusive thoughts and images associated with the original event” (Blackburn 2009). Trauma inhibits a person from living their life as routine or ordinary, which would be qualified by their lifestyle before the traumatic event occurred.

While seeking treatment for war-induced psychological trauma may seem daunting, it is nevertheless vital to a veteran’s recovery (King, King, Fairbank, Keane & Adams 1998). This initial step may be nothing more than simply acknowledging and supporting veterans as brave men and women who fought to defend our country’s freedom. This kind of social support was found to be instrumental in accelerating the recovery of veterans who suffered from the disorder (Green, Grace, Lindy, Gleser, Leonard 1990). Veterans’ reunions provide a context for veteran-to-veteran communication, thus possibly offering an opportunity for a veteran to walk away with a new perspective on life. The purpose of this study is to examine how communication amongst Vietnam veterans can assist with traumatic memories that have developed upon returning from

the war. The following research question will guide this study: What communicative functions do veterans' reunions serve?

However, before the specific Vietnam veterans' reunion for this study can be examined, past literature on the relevant subject areas must be reviewed. After the literature review, the methodology for the study will be described, followed by analysis of data and overall conclusions. The end of this study will reach a better understanding of the functions narratives play in group communication with post-trauma victims, as well as current applications of narrative probability and fidelity within day-to-day communication. Stories and narratives are major tools in all communication, and their use, as demonstrated by this study, can be further uncovered.

## **Chapter 2 - Literature Review**

Before addressing the research question, six key areas of literature must be discussed: the Vietnam veteran mentality, social support, empirical research on veterans' reunions, narrative probability and fidelity, revisions and interpretations of the narrative paradigm, and the role of narrative in veteran communication.

### **Vietnam Veteran Mentality**

The first concept to be examined in past literature is that of the general psyche and attitudes of Vietnam veterans. As is common with soldiers from any conflict, Vietnam veterans have a different way of communicating their experiences with other soldiers who "were there," than with civilians who were not. Braithwaite (1997) conducted a 30-month participant-observer study with a group of Vietnam veterans who met monthly to engage in political discussion and make a better life for all veterans. Shared service experience distinguished the veterans as "legitimate," a unique theme found by Braithwaite. This concept of legitimacy is key in some groups of veterans, and as Braithwaite put it:

Experience in Vietnam appeared to give the speaker certain "rights" as to the legitimacy of their viewpoints because "when it comes to the 'Nam, you have no right to talk like you know something when you don't." You can only "know something" about the Vietnam War if you had been there. Additionally, some members of VET talked about non-veterans as not only being unqualified to speak about the War, but also unwilling to listen to a person who actually was a participant. Therefore, the non-veteran speaker "don't know shit." (p. 435)

While not all veterans groups adapt such an insular view, this study helps us to understand that there is a considerable gap between combat veterans and civilians when it comes to both knowledge and experience. Veterans will communicate differently when speaking with a fellow veteran than they will with someone who did not experience the war.

This sense of legitimacy is echoed in Adams' (1977) study on television coverage of the Vietnam War. Adams compared 300 Vietnam veterans, 67 Combat and 233 Non-combat in their perceptions of how the war was covered on television. Overall, television is seen to have affected public support, perceptions of war, and the hero-less nature of the Vietnam War specifically leading to decreased support.

The responses of the combat participants reflected a strong consciousness of the lack of public support for such a war and the effect of television coverage on the viewer who had no firsthand knowledge of Vietnam nor the pressures experienced by the American soldier there. (p. 252)

Television coverage tended to de-legitimize the war because it did not allow the public to fully grasp the situations soldiers faced. Without understanding, public support of the war went down, along with public support of the veterans returning to the United States. Upon returning to the United States, veterans were often met with opposition and sometimes, no one to turn to if they desired to speak about the war.

An additional way of examining the psyche of Vietnam veterans is through their various forms of memorializing the war, specifically, the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Washington D.C. Carlson and Hawking (1988) examined the redemptive cycle taken by Vietnam veterans as they visit the National Vietnam Veterans' Memorial in Washington D.C. The researchers believe the items left at the wall and the granite stone itself offer a very unique twist on

communication- and nickname those who visit the wall “rhetorical pilgrims.” Carlson and Hawking estimated that over twenty million people visited the Wall during the first five years it was open, (or roughly ten percent of the American population in 1988). Carlson and Hawking (1988) explain that a Vietnam veteran’s visit to the Wall is like visiting “Mecca,” and this “therapy” is frequently found with expression of emotions in the artifacts left at the Memorial. Especially the letters exemplify a tragic ritual of guilt and redemption. Such a ritual is to be expected; the war was a tragedy and thus demands response” (p. 204). With the Delta Raiders reunion taking place in Washington D.C., this idea of redemption was personally witnessed by the author during the participant-observation of the current study.

Blair, Jeppeson and Pucci (1991) take a postmodern approach to analyzing the Wall. According to Blair et al.: “...it does not suggest one reading or the other, but embraces even contradictory interpretations. The Memorial both comforts and refuses to comfort. It provides closure and denies it. It does not offer a unitary message but multiple and conflicting ones” (p. 281). Veterans visiting the Wall, will experience the Memorial in different ways. As Blair et al. (1991) underscore the mentality of the Vietnam veteran is characteristically ambivalent. It is simply impossible to pinpoint an exact “feeling” about the war, since every person and their war experience is different.

### **Social Support**

Given the nature of reunions, the concept of “social support” is relevant to the current study. According to Cohen (2004): “Social support refers to a social network’s provision of psychological and material resources intended to benefit an individual’s ability to cope with stress” (p. 676). Along with Cohen and Wills (1985), it can be determined that social support within interpersonal relationships and the buffering effect (perceived support from others to

dampen stressful events) work hand-in-hand providing social backing for those who need it. As long as those in need have a strong network of relationships, they will be able to cope with stress better than those without the buffering effects of social support. This support can help align family members and their roles with veterans and stressful occurrences following the Vietnam War. Not only do family members help to serve as close social support, but also other veterans in the company who are a phone call away can provide the necessary buffer as perceived support- available if needed.

Keane et al. (1985) conducted a cross-sectional study of three groups of veterans; Vietnam veterans diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), Vietnam combat veterans who were well adjusted, and non-combat veterans that were hospitalized. These three groups were examined with regard to the size and quality of their social support systems. Keane et al. found that support systems for PTSD victims tended to decline drastically following the end of their service. This was an unfortunate finding, as PTSD veterans had seemingly turned away from their support systems, yet due to the psychological burden of the disorder, they were the veterans with the most need for social support to help them through a rough time in their lives.

Researchers have also found strong evidence that social support is a leading factor to recovery and readjustment in veterans' lives. King, King, Fairbank, Keane & Adams (1998) conducted a 9-factor structural equation modeling procedure on 1,632 Vietnam veterans to examine the connections between factors such as war zone stressors, stressful life events, hardiness, social support and PTSD. With regard to social support and recovery from PTSD, King et al. found that functional support (family and friends' readiness to listen and lend a

helping hand) reduced PTSD, thus higher and more complex levels of social support would be a direct catalyst in recovery from post-war stressors.

Finally, while having a complex social support system in place for victims of traumatic events is key to accelerating their recovery, secondary effects on the support system cannot be ignored. Dekel et al. (2005) conducted a qualitative study of nine wives who were married to veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and the overall quality of their marriages; Dekel et al. found that many wives were suffering from “secondary traumatization,” or specific feelings that mirrored those of their husbands’ symptoms from PTSD. Although distressing, the wives struggled to balance supporting their ailing husbands and continuing living their lives. As Dekel et al. put it: “The entire family system was affected by the post-traumatic injury, and the wives bore the burden of supporting and caring for their husbands and families” (p. 34). Emotions are not one-dimensional, and despite veterans needing social support to ease recovery and readjustment, everyone the entire support system must rely on each other to keep afloat.

### **Past Empirical Research on Veterans’ Reunions**

An additional idea to explore is the past research done on veterans’ reunions, spanning a variety of academic disciplines. Many focus on the historical or sociological implications of Civil War reunions, especially within the Southern Army veterans’ reunions. Hattaway (1971) provides a historical account of one such former Confederate group, the United Confederate Veterans (UCV) during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This historical study examines the implications of the UCV’s own preservation of history and Hattaway argues: “The veterans revealed early their strong interest in history and especially in the compilation of a certain kind of history” (p. 216). The UCV formed a committee and wanted to commission a literary man from the South to compose a complete history of the Civil War. However, the leaders of the UCV objected,



knowing that such a historical report written by a southern man would be biased in the telling, demonstrating the veterans' keen interest in documenting the experience as fact, rather than the opinions and viewpoints of one side of the war.

According to a military history article by Kelly (2003), the UCV met officially for the final time in 1932 in the old Confederate Capitol of Richmond Virginia. While it was their 42<sup>nd</sup> reunion, the crowd gathered was immense and lively: "What tales those old vets had to tell- "in hotel lobbies, at the encampments, everywhere that two or three men in gray are assembled," reported the Times-Dispatch at the time" (p. 82). Past literature on veterans' reunions depict the affairs as energetic and celebratory. Veterans often tell war stories, and when these veterans are gathered at a reunion having shared similar experiences, it gives them even more to share through their narratives.

Rennick (2006) utilized veterans' reunions and memorials as a way of understanding spiritual remembrance, a private understanding and coping of events through one's personal beliefs. While not directly studying veterans' reunions, this study does help bring understanding to the motivation behind attendance at such reunions:

Vietnam memorials and veterans' reunions bring significance to the veterans' experiences and provide a focus for their sentiments of grief, loss, guilt and hope for the future. By attending these places, the men demonstrate an act of allegiance and devotion to other veterans and their fallen comrades. (p. 18)

This religious examination of veterans' psyche is beneficial both to the current study and future veterans.

Although mentioned in many articles and occasionally used as a tool for data collection, scholars, especially in Communication Studies, have not extensively studied veterans' reunions.

However, given the clearly important role that communication plays at such gatherings, such study is past due.

### **Narrative Probability and Fidelity**

Before the role of narratives within veteran communication can be discussed, a thorough breakdown of narratives must be made. The logical first step with this literature is one of understanding Fisher's (1984, 1985) narrative paradigm. As Fisher (1984) argues, the narrative paradigm can be used to view the world through the lens of storytelling. Fisher defines a narration as: "a theory of symbolic actions-words and/or deeds- that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them." (p. 3). Humans are essentially storytellers, and the way they communicate their stories can indicate the way they perceive the world to be.

Although the narrative paradigm has numerous elements, this study will focus attention on how someone tests the rationality of a narration. According to Fisher, humans are inherently aware of two narrative concepts that test the rationality of every story: probability and fidelity.

Probability is the formal feature of a narrative or the coherent elements that a narrative holds to, essentially testing the order and believability of the sequence of events within a story. Fidelity tests whether or not stories ring true based off of past experiences of those listening to the story, or the substantive features of a narrative. Without strong elements of the two rationality tests, probability and fidelity, Fisher argues a story will be judged as bad, and will not augment the decisions made by those listening to the story. However, those stories that meet the tests of probability and fidelity can communicate moral truths to the listener, thus spreading a particular worldview.

To better understand the concepts of narrative probability and fidelity, imagine a Vietnam veteran telling a war story to his teenage daughter. This story focuses on a battle the veteran

experienced overseas, but since it's been 20 years since the battle occurred, the veteran becomes hazy on the details and simply sums up the story for his daughter by saying he did not do anything heroic in Vietnam. Since the story did not have very many details, its coherence suffered and the narrative probability was low for the daughter due to a lack of details. Additionally, since the daughter had previously seen her father's Vietnam War medals, her previous beliefs of his bravery contradict the story he told. Thus, the fidelity of this narration suffers as well, and the story is deemed unsatisfactory.

This fictional explanation can be supplemented by further evidence of narrative probability and fidelity. Baesler (1995) conducted a quantitative analysis of persuasive messages (written and oral) to test the support of Fisher's narrative coherence and fidelity. 25 students were tasked with creating and delivering a 5-7 minute story speech with varying topics while 41 students were asked to write short persuasive messages on campus crime and birth control. Although coherence and fidelity were reliable factors with a narrative increasing persuasion, Baesler found that coherence was more important to testing persuasive outcomes. As Baesler asserts "...Fisher claims that the theoretical constructs of narrative coherence and fidelity provide an explanation for why stories influence reasoning, values, and courses of action." (p. 97). These two rationality tests, narrative probability and narrative fidelity, will be crucial to understanding a veteran's war narrative, as well as multiple war narratives being told at a veterans' reunion.

### **Revisions and Interpretations of the Narrative Paradigm**

Fisher's work is the stepping-stone by which scholars could begin to take in the world through the lens of stories, but numerous researchers have both attempted to amend the paradigm as well as critique it. Moving beyond Fisher, Rowland (1987) had three legitimate concerns over

the narrative paradigm, calling for a critical examination of narratives and their use as discourse versus their involvement in an entire paradigm. One of these concerns is over the definition of narrative and its broad scope. Taking Fisher's definition of narration as including sequence or meaning, Rowland argues that this definition is too inclusive: "It is hard to imagine a type of communication that does not possess sequence or meaning" (p. 265). This broad definition suggests a limitation of the narrative paradigm and Rowland offers the suggestion of clarifying narrative to be only storytelling, which includes plot and characters, therefore separating some forms of rhetoric from being grouped in with narratives.

Fisher (1989) responds to Rowland's criticism by claiming: "he does not test the narrative paradigm, that he tests his understanding of it, and it is his understanding that fails" (p. 55). Fisher argues that narration is not rhetoric, but provides the space for which all rhetoric should be built and influenced. He clarifies:

...the narrative paradigm is a philosophical statement that is meant to offer an approach to interpretation and assessment of human communication—assuming that all forms of human communication can be seen fundamentally as stories, as interpretations of aspects of the world occurring in time and shaped by history, culture, and character. (p. 57).

This points to the idea that narratives are much more complex than meaningless stories, but have history and culture influencing them.

Kirkscey (2008) expands on the narrative paradigm, specifically within rhetorical criticism. Kirkscey argues that instead of being *homo narrans*, or ones who tell stories, humans should be considered *homo attendens*, ones who consider stories. Kirkscey claims: "rhetorical critics—as audience members simultaneously attending to many stories and fragments of stories—should work to uncover and/or create alternative, competing narratives rather than

passively accept or reject narratives” (p. 4). This would shift the power of the critics, or audience members, to focus on power shifts within a narrative rather than the fidelity found within. While interesting, Kirkscey’s revision of the narrative paradigm focuses heavily on rhetorical criticism and the use of narratives as a voice for the powerless.

McClure (2009) challenges the use of probability and fidelity within the rationalization process of the narrative paradigm by arguing this process is actually too similar to the rational world paradigm, a split Fisher intended with his initial introduction of the narrative paradigm. McClure states:

Narrative identification, then, is a symbolic process of association that provides for consubstantiality with preexistent narratives via the processes of analogy, allusion, and metaphor and provides a potential theoretical account for the stretching and reshaping down by auditors of polysemic, polyvalent, and multivalent narratives via all of the subtleties and processes of identification as discussed by Burke. (p. 201).

By adopting identification, McClure argues that the narrative paradigm could stand to branch out and help explain inconsistencies, such as why improbable or false stories are sometimes still accepted. In addition, identification could also add to the understanding of what happens when narratives are changed or reconstructed over time.

### **The Role of Narrative in Veteran Communication**

The final concept that needs foundational support for the current study is how veterans utilize narrative within their unique style of communication. Langellier’s (1989) landmark study on personal narratives defined five theoretical positions of the function and nature of personal narratives. Her third position on personal narratives is that of conversational interaction. Rather

than a lone speaker giving a narration, conversations between two or more people create a specific type of personal narrative, one that is co-constructed. This co-construction is described:

...some stories may be described as co-narrated. The result of the mutual construction of a story is not the solid narrative structure of Labovian interview texts or folkloric performance texts. Rather, stories are chained or clustered within an interactional sequence. (p. 256-257)

Langellier continues by revealing the interest level of a story that is co-created is dependent on the context, ranging from personal, to social, to cultural. According to Langellier: “Culturally-interesting material is noteworthy to those who participate fully in a given culture and share its values, beliefs and world view” (p. 257). With veterans attending a reunion and communicating largely through narrative, even a highly specific war tale will be of interest to the rest of the veterans due to shared experience within the culture of war veterans.

Burnell, Hunt and Coleman (2009) analyzed ten World War II veterans and their narratives based on a model for narrative content and narrative form. Burnell et al. found that comradeship played a key role in how veterans felt about their narratives. If a veteran had not discussed their experiences with other veterans and felt their experience was lacking in frequency or coherence, he or she had an increased desire to share their memories with cohorts. In addition, veterans’ interaction with their friends and family depended on the level of narrative coherence:

Veterans with coherent narratives reported positive interactions with family and friends both in earlier and later life; veterans with reconciled narratives reported mixed interactions, which improved in later life; and veterans in the incoherent group reported negative interactions both in earlier and later life. (p. 101)

Feelings of an incomplete narrative, or an incoherent life story, have negative implications within the veteran community.

With regard to healing and the use of narrative, Krieshock, Hastings, Ebberwein, Wettersten & Owen (1999) conducted a study on using narratives in vocational rehabilitation of veterans in a Veterans' Administration hospital. For this study, veterans were already enrolled in the vocational rehabilitation program, and suffered from a variety of complications, most of which were negatively affecting their work lives. It was discovered through the course of the study that either individual or group sessions in which a veteran could successfully tell a narrative about where they would like his life to head was much more apt to actually accomplish those goals. With other veterans present to bounce ideas off and help fill in gaps that were previously missing in a recovering veteran's narrative, understanding increased. While the veterans in the current study are not attempting to recover by creating narratives of the future, they are using narrative to understand the past and reconcile traumatic memories. Any information and explanation a fellow veteran can supply with their own war story or narrative will therefore be helpful.

Ultimately, veterans use narratives to either fill in gaps of memory due to a traumatic past, or to impart a message of empathy with whomever they are communicating. Here, legitimacy and experience in war can unfortunately hinder lines of communication. Bragin (2010) conveys this with her study on clinicians co-creating a coherent narrative with combat veterans to help them find connection between their past, current, and future lives. Bragin (2010) argues that if connections can be built in any fashion, a veteran will have an easier time with reintegration to the civilian world. She states: "...the bridge of connection must come from the veteran as well. Therefore the veteran must have a clinical or social vehicle by which to

make emotional, spiritual and if necessary material reparation for the violence s/he has experienced” (p. 324). Connecting the past with the present is imperative to healing, especially if a veteran is attempting to understand a traumatic event they experienced such as combat in a foreign war.

What can be taken away from the literature on narratives is that veterans utilize stories about their lives therapeutically within their lives. These narratives connect veteran-to-veteran, and veteran-to-civilian in a form of understanding that opens up communication and emotional responses. Veterans that use each other as social support, will therefore, be more likely to recover from traumatic symptoms following their reintegration to civilian life.

With these arguments and literature in mind, I propose the following research question:  
What communicative functions do veterans’ reunions serve?



## **Chapter 3 - Research Method**

### **Research Site**

The Delta Raiders of Vietnam Association (DROVA) is a Vietnam veterans' non-profit organization that sponsors a biannual reunion for its members, who are spread across the country. The purpose of this reunion is both to enhance company pride and to provide an opportunity for the veterans to get together, share war stories and reunite with old friends. DROVA is open to all surviving veterans that served in 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 501<sup>st</sup> Infantry, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, Company D during the four and a half years the Company spent in Vietnam during the war. Out of the 1143 soldiers that served in Vietnam for Company D from December 1967 to July 1972, DROVA has located at least 450 (blackied2501.com). The association began its mission in 1976, when a father of one of the Killed In Action (KIA) located some veterans from his son's platoon to understand how and why his son died. After their meeting, the veterans from Company D kept in touch and made it their goal to locate others from their platoon, and then others from their tight-knit Company. Since 1983 and 1984, a reunion has been held every two years for veterans of Company D, who will hereafter be referred to as the Delta Raiders, their chosen name. In July 2010, the Delta Raiders held their reunion in Washington D.C., which is where observation for this study occurred.

This site was ideal for researching how social support occurs within veterans' reunions and its effects on the veterans themselves. Since this specific company's reunion occurs every two years, and moves across the country for every reunion, there could be some psychological incentive that motivates the Delta Raiders to continue attending beyond merely enjoying a fun experience.

## **Data Collection**

Data was collected from two sources: participant observation at the July 2010 Delta Raiders' biannual reunion and in-depth interviews with eight Raider veterans and three Raider wives. A five-day field observation of the July 2010 DROVA reunion located in Washington D.C. served as the first portion of data collection, due to time constraints on the study.

Festivities were planned for Friday July 16<sup>th</sup> and Saturday July 17<sup>th</sup>, but contact with the Delta Raiders began on Wednesday July 14<sup>th</sup> and lasted until Sunday July 18<sup>th</sup>. As a family member of a Delta Raider, these DROVA reunions have been a part of my life since I was born, thus offering a good opportunity for participant observation, as my connection with the reunions has deemed me a Raider in spirit as well. During the reunion, my status balanced on the line of participant-as-observer and complete participant (Hesse-Biber & Leavy), as I only revealed to a few participants that I was going to be conducting a study over them. During this observation, I took 19 single spaced pages of notes accounting for my studies and opinion, thus keeping a good record of the field observation (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw 2001). After the final official activity of the weekend, the banquet, I revealed myself as a researcher to many of the veterans and asked for permission to contact them at a later date to interview them.

Being related to a Delta Raider may leave some cause for concern, but the benefits of being so close to the subjects for data collection outweighed the drawbacks. As a participant-observer, I maintained a high level of critical subjectivity (Lincoln 1995), allowing me to uncover themes as an in-group member. Using an informant in research design is an effective way to gain access to a group (Cresswell 2007). Aside from ease of access, the insight that was revealed due to the implicit rapport of being "Blackie's son" became invaluable for the advancement of the study and the field.

During the DROVA reunion, I participated as I would any other reunion as a son of a Delta Raider. I went sightseeing with the group, I attended the memorial service for the Raiders that were killed in Vietnam, and I generally stuck with my father and listened to his war stories. During occasional breaks I retreated to the hotel room to jot down observations that I had made. Anytime the Raiders took a tour bus around Washington D.C. I found a perfect opportunity to sit across from my parents and record my observations in my field notes journal.

Field observation was the best choice to complement interviews because of the inherent ability to view the Raiders in a natural setting (Adler & Adler 1994). A researcher might only get part of the puzzle that is the communicative phenomenon if only asking the participants after-the-fact (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw 2001), and participant observation was instrumental to examine the logistics of the reunion as well as develop rapport with the group. In addition, the ethnographic interviews within the field helped clarify subjects and motivation of actions, thus marking the benefits of field observation rather than simply utilizing distant interviews.

To supplement the participant observation that occurred in July, data was also collected from in-depth, audio-recorded phone interviews with eight Delta Raiders and three Raider wives. Interviews were crucial to understanding the Raider experience since this methodological tool is potent for getting at “the social actor’s experience and perspective.” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 173). Veteran respondents were chosen on a selective basis to cover members who have regularly attended DROVA reunions. Selective sampling is often used in qualitative methods to bridge the gap between outsider and insider by carefully selecting a knowledgeable and open insider (Cresswell, 2007). Respondents were identified first through an informant I have in the association, my father. Family respondents were chosen on a selective basis to cover wives, who have an inside view of the changes that occurred in their husband from before attending the

reunions to after attendance. Eleven phone interviews lasting a maximum of thirty minutes were conducted, at which a point of theoretical saturation was reached.

Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, asking open-ended questions to allow for full disclosure of feelings towards and thoughts on the DROVA reunions (Appendix A). An adjusted interview guide was used for the wives of the Delta Raiders (Appendix B) to allow for full disclosure on a spouse's perspective of veterans' reunions. Informed consent forms were sent to the participants by mail prior to the interview, and the interviewee was reminded prior the interview as well as during that they may remove themselves from the study at any point for any reason. No participants decided to remove themselves. Due to the open nature of the association and their past with numerous interviews for historical war books, I did anticipate a need to keep their responses confidential, but offered every participant the opportunity to be associated with their data. Although every participant was fine with utilizing their name for quotations in the analysis, I have decided to keep their responses marked with only their initials. Since these veterans have been published in books before, as well as not belonging to a particularly vulnerable group (Punch, 1986), I felt comfortable leaving the initials as a way of signifying where the information came from. The veterans' identities were not known by anyone except the researcher, and all audio recordings, once transcribed, were destroyed to protect confidentiality.

My father served as a key informant for this study, and his experience in DROVA proved that his perspective was a valuable addition to the study. Ray Blackman has been attending Raider Reunions for over 20 years, has served as both a traditional member and a board member tasked with organizing the non-profit organization, in addition to producing and editing a quarterly newsletter sent to all members. He has experienced reunions from the inside and out,

thus earning the understanding of its effects on veterans. Due to an ease of transportation and communication, this informant interview was still recorded, but occurred face to face and lasted over one hour.

### **Procedure**

After the method was approved, I got into contact with the participants of the study via telephone to ask permission for an in-depth interview to be conducted at a later date. After the Raider or Raider's wife approved the in-depth interview, we negotiated a time and date for the phone interview, the most convenient for the interviewee. After asking for their address, which I kept confidential, I then mailed the participant an envelope. In the envelope I included a letter explaining my study as well as a copy of the informed consent form for each participant in the household, along with an extra form for them to keep for their records. Each participant signed the informed consent and mailed back his or her signed consent forms via a stamped and addressed envelope included with the letter sent to them.

Phone interviews were recorded with a digital recording device and listened to multiple times. After a firm grasp of the information was reached, I then transcribed the audio files while listening to them. The transcribed interviews along with field notes taken during participant observation will be referred to as "processed data."

### **Data Analysis**

Processed data, both observational and through interviews, yielded a total of 65 single space pages of data. 19 pages of field notes were taken and analyzed, and 46 pages of interview transcriptions were documented and analyzed through the constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This method uses both open coding, an initial step gathering basic concepts found in the data, and selective coding, a secondary coding analysis with more specified

concepts. Specifically, major themes on the reason Raiders continue to attend the reunions were coded. Initially, 25 open codes were documented with 296 individual occurrences spread across the 25 open codes. A list of these open codes is provided (Appendix C). These 25 open codes were then categorized and broken down into 7 selective codes that clearly represented the categories found in the processed data (Appendix D). These 7 selective codes were: Amount of communication after the war, By-products of reunions, Communicative functions, Company Pride, Mixed feelings towards first reunion, Types of communication and Other codes.

## **Chapter 4 - Analysis**

The research question asked what communicative functions veterans' reunions serve. The results of participant observation and in-depth interviews reveals what I call *collective narratives*, in reference to a collectively built story fitting into Fisher's narrative paradigm. Out of the 8 Raiders interviewed, 7 of them agreed that the storytelling that occurs at the reunions is collective in nature, resulting in an 88% agreement rate. It is necessary to understand that the narratives told by these veterans are fulfilling probability and fidelity, so themes and benefits stemming from the narratives can be analyzed. My analysis has identified two primary functions and three secondary functions of these collective narratives within veterans' reunions. The first primary function is for veterans to rebuild forgotten narrative probability, thus recreating the coherence of their Vietnam War experience. The second primary function is to create boundaries that encase narrative fidelity, making veterans' stories ring true to both themselves and those they are sharing the story with. The analysis has also revealed three secondary communicative functions: therapeutic relief, forming a second family through renewed company pride, and revealing tension between shared experience and family communication.

### **Collective Narratives**

Before discussing the role of collective narratives within the functions of communication at veterans' reunions, an explanation of collective narratives must be established. This study acknowledges the past findings on a co-creation of narratives within communication as well as other fields. Research done by Bormann (1972) on fantasy chains and symbolic convergence is fundamental to the current study. Bormann found that as group members communicate and build off of one another's ideas or narratives, they begin to co-construct meaning. These "fantasies" or personal stories told by one member of the group are easily connected with other

members' personal experiences. Another group member relates the initial story to their own personal story and the act of chaining begins, creating a more positive atmosphere as the separate group members become excited and personally involved in the fantasies being presented. This collective act of building narratives is separate from a single person creating or retelling a narrative, as multiple perspectives are shared, thus sharing legitimacy of that narrative. These fantasy chains were observed at the Raider reunion when one Raider would bring up a battle experience or past reunion and the story would be significant to other veterans in the small group talking. Additional departments such as English and Anthropology have done their own share of research on collective narratives; however, the focus of this analysis is observation through the lens of Fisher's narrative paradigm, thus separating from other collective narrative studies.

A large portion of the communication that occurs at veterans' reunions is story telling, specifically of war experiences while in Vietnam. After observing this story telling ritual with participant observation as well as uncovering its presence in the in-depth interviews with Raiders, it was clear that the way these stories are told was a significant theme. A Raider explains this collective recollection best:

You know, the conversation mostly is a question of recall. That is, someone begins to recount a moment, an incident, something that happened, and others will add something to it or correct something in the recounting, usually it will bring to them what they saw, and so I don't want to say you relive that experience, but you get a view of that experience. (CS 108-112)

Stories being told at the Raider reunions are not examples of one-way communication. Instead, these stories begin, are modified, and end as collective phenomena, with the Raider who began the story not necessarily ending it with only his recollection. As another Raider puts it:



Probably the most common thing is, you will take an incident where something happened and then you see it, I mean, I saw it from my perspective but someone else saw it differently, and someone else saw it different from them, and then you start putting all the pieces together when you get 4 or 5 or 6 people talking together talking about the same battle or incident or the same thing that happened on one of those days. It's real easy to get confused after all of these years about the chronological events, how they happened from one day to the next day to the next day, how it all knitted and tied together. (CH 116-123)

With Raiders that served together or very close in time attending the reunions and discussing their stories, it would be difficult to not relate a similar battle experience or a different perspective on the same battle. Rather than staying silent, the Raiders talk and collectively tell the story.

Considering the length of time between returning home from Vietnam and attending Raider reunions, recollections of war experiences tend to fade away. A single veteran's perception of his personal narrative is clouded with time as another Raider describes: "Things that probably was blocked out of my mind, someone brings up the subject and then: "Oh yeah, I remember that." All of these years, you didn't even remember that. And then all of the sudden it pops up. Its kind of good, makes you feel kind of good." (RM 83-86). There is a necessity to share experiences, based from simple memory recall. An additional Raider echoes this necessity:

He was showing me some pictures and I'm going like: "Damn, I know that was me in there" because seeing that brought me back to this place where we were passing C rations through this opening in this real muddy area, muddy spot, you know getting the C rations

to everybody and I'm positive that I was standing in that ditch. Bits and pieces are brought back into your head, you know "Oh yeah, I remember this" you know, and I just want to grasp it. (MA 146-151)

Memory recall is one of the benefits found by collective narratives. In addition to filling in forgotten portions of memory, shared story telling as fills one Raider in with many perspectives from the same event. As one Raider describes:

I mean, if you think about it, each person remembers it just a little bit different than the next. Depending on their mental makeup and how they felt about it and what was going on, on Hill 805 and even from one foxhole to another because one foxhole is taking satchel charges and incoming and the other one is not. So you have totally different memories and you remember things just a little bit different I found out after talking to Jerry Bull and a couple of the others, I remember a few things from the missions that were a little out of sequence because its been so long and I tried to forget. So it really puts things into perspective, you get the bigger picture. (RB 200-208)

This "bigger picture" is what collective narratives work towards. By interlacing separate perspectives, the Raiders start to piece their personal narratives back together. As emphasized by another Raider:

And it was really good, to be with people that you were with in Vietnam and could relate to things that you were talking about and it kind of made a little more sense about everything that went on. You know, it wasn't just a figment of your imagination it was actually reality and whether it be good or bad it was still reality and it was something that needed to be dealt with. You could kind of like, regurgitate it and look at it and analyze it and redigest it and look at it in a different way. So it was good, to have reunions

because of those feelings that you had and how those feelings changed after you were able to talk to those people. (PG 111-119)

The advantages of collectively recalling war experiences are one of the major reasons these veterans' attend, and continue attending company reunions. Although time clouds the specific details of their narratives, this can be recovered by sharing perspectives with others who had the same or similar experiences. These collective narratives serve two primary functions at veterans' reunions: rebuilding narrative probability and creating boundaries that encase narrative fidelity.

### **Rebuilding Narrative Probability**

Although Fisher's narrative paradigm has many important aspects concerning the uses and implications of narratives, I chose to focus this study's attention on the two essential elements required to make a narrative complete and compelling: probability and fidelity. This analysis will show how veterans' reunions work to solidify veteran narratives through the two essential elements, which therefore create therapeutic effects for the veterans.

The first primary function of communication at Raider reunions is deeply connected to Fisher's narrative paradigm: rebuilding narrative probability. Probability, as described by Fisher (1984) is the essence of creating a coherent story. A veteran's narrative, or personal war story, is often clouded by time and trauma. Therefore, by collectively recalling a narrative at a veterans' reunion, the Raiders are successfully fulfilling the function of rebuilding their narrative probability by filling in gaps of memory with additional perspectives. As one Raider explained:

Like I said, it gave you their perspective and you could be in the same firefight with someone else and their perspective could be totally different, they see a different angle from what you see. And when you put it all together you get a much clearer picture of what actually did happen. You could read all of the different reports you want to, that

they type up in the rear and 90% of the time the veterans will add something to it or say “that didn’t happen at all” or “this is what really happened. (TM, 57-63)

The “clear picture” is the result of collective narratives, requiring input from more than one Raider, or more than one perspective. This perspective-sharing act of story telling effectively gives a Raider’s narrative probability a more solid foundation. An additional Raider echoes this “clear picture” sentiment: “Its made me more comfortable with the experience that I had, being able to talk with my brothers in arms and it resolved a lot of answers, a lot of questions for me. The blanks were not filled in. It was probably the most healing thing that has happened to me since coming home from Vietnam.” (TM, 147-150). Collective narratives work to fill in the blanks for the Raiders, making their personal narratives more coherent.

Rebuilt narrative probabilities not only benefit the veterans themselves, but they also increase the amount of knowledge a spouse has on her husband’s war experience. Raider reunions are open to families, and wives play a helpful role with planning and execution of the reunion as well as being present during conversations. Thus, the blanks that wives have in their knowledge of their husbands’ narratives are also filled in. As one Raider wife explained:

...the first reunion was kind of special because I remember staying up until 2 o’ clock in the morning and talking with people for the first time and hearing about things that had happened in Vietnam and having them tell me about things that had to do with my husband. And that was very, very interesting. And so afterwards I really did have more of an understanding of what had gone on. (MS, 60-64)

A veteran’s narrative probability is as important as his wife’s understanding the experiences he went through. Raider reunions, therefore, give the wife a chance to form a coherent

understanding of their husband's story. This communicative function is reflected in another Raider's wife's testimony:

It really helped talking, just listening to the guys talk. It was really fun just to listen to them talk about the war and stuff like that, because I had never really been around anybody who had been in Vietnam, aside from your dad. So it was interesting to listen to it. Better understanding of what they did and what was going on. Because the war was pretty much over by the time I got out of high school. (SB, 41-45)

Coherence in a narrative is an important element of story telling, as according to Fisher, narratives help influence the way we perceive the world around us. For a true narrative such as a war experience with a veteran, strong narrative probability gives that veteran structure in their past experiences. By collectively forming a narrative at a veterans' reunion, the Raiders' are rebuilding the events, details, and sequence of their personal war story.

### **Creating Boundaries That Encase Narrative Fidelity**

In addition to rebuilding narrative probability, the second primary function of collective narratives and recollection at Raider reunions is one of creating boundaries. These boundaries, in effect, form a barrier in which the second portion of Fisher's Narrative Paradigm can function: fidelity. Narrative fidelity is a measure in which the truth of a narrative experienced is weighed, and how much it rings true to personal life experiences. The Raiders have a desire to share their narrative and find the connections with other veterans' narratives, to locate the fidelity within their story as well as others' stories. This was observed personally at the Raider reunion and noted from field notes:

Experience has been a common factor seen throughout the weekend so far. Although each man is a Raider and bound together in a Band of Brothers underneath that bright

blue patch, they all have different experiences while over in Vietnam. This sharing of experience to connect to a new meaning is the primary goal of story telling from the war. Although experiences are unique to each Raider, they have a common factor, making them relatable. For example, first firefight, worst battle, individual experiences on a firebase. The Raiders enjoy both sharing their unique experience as well as finding connections between “their war” and the war that came before or after them. Therefore, it doesn’t really matter which years a Raider was in Vietnam. (FN06, 19-26)

The Raiders attending the veterans’ reunion have a shared experience, and this shared experience puts a limit on the truth of the narrative that they share as their war experience. This is absolutely not implying that veterans have a tendency to bend the truth, but the collective narrative that they share at reunions does impose a boundary, keeping their stories at a higher level of fidelity and truth. One could not recall an incident or battle that occurred which was ultimately false, as there are other Raiders present who might have been in the same battle. By enforcing implicit boundaries for their narratives, veterans can tell a more compelling and truthful story.

These boundaries not only contain and restrict a veteran from stretching the truth, but also allow for implied communication due to legitimacy of the shared experience in battle. As one Raider described it:

The ones that you were with, they knew what you were talking about because you experienced the same thing and the ones that you didn’t know, the ones that you met at the reunions for the first time, you could still communicate with them because they had similar experiences. It may not have been the same experiences but they were very similar and you had the same feelings and the same emotions and how miserable you

were the time you were there. You could share that with somebody because they understood because they were miserable the whole time they were there too. It was easy to express your feelings and know that when you said something, the other person knew what you were talking about. (PG, 124-132)

Shared experience adds into the boundaries created for narrative fidelity, as the same story told to another target audience (lacking battle experience) would not have the same effect. Without the legitimacy of shared experience, fidelity boundaries in communication and story telling would not be as effective.

The same boundary that limits the fidelity of narrative elements also serves as a hindrance when telling the same story to an audience that does not share the legitimacy of combat experience. As one Raider depicts the dichotomy of shared experience: “Because they were there. They felt it. They know what wait-a-minute vines feel like and what its like to wake up covered in leeches, they know what its like. It’s hard to talk to strangers for sure.” (RB, 262-264). Boundaries created by collective narratives serve to increase fidelity within groups, while effectively pushing away individuals outside of the shared experience due to their lack of legitimacy.

### **Therapeutic Relief**

Analysis of the communication at the Raider reunions reveals more than the two primary functions, it also produces three secondary functions. The first of the secondary functions is therapeutic relief through a collective narrative. Therapeutic relief from guilt and other possible post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms is a by-product of the communication that occurs at the Raider reunions. As a Communication researcher, I am not qualified to diagnose and recognize the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. The Raiders, however, were very vocal in their

appreciation for the reunions as a form of healing, regardless of the negative symptoms it was treating. As one Raider describes it:

And some people have had a hard time coping. And I think that the Raider reunions, for one thing, helps them after being able to talk about what happened and how it happened and those are the kind of things that we get out of the reunions is talking about what happened then and what's happened since. (CH, 143-146)

A fellow Raider echoes this concept of coping:

...It's a way of healing. Its just getting that stuff off of your chest that you hold in for so long and it's just a healing process for me. Every one I go to is a different experience, something else that's been on my mind, its just lifted off there. I feel like going to therapy sort of. After going to the doctor and you talk about your problems and then you feel really good, that's what its sort of like. I feel better, every time I meet with these guys. (RM, 128-133)

The Raiders openly stated that they noticed therapeutic benefits from simply talking with other Raiders who held similar or even the same experiences. This healing was also revealed to their spouses:

It's given me an opportunity to talk about different issues and my wife has seen a change in my demeanor since I started going to the reunions. I'm not as, I don't keep inside as much as I used to since I started going to the reunions. It's an opportunity, and I've talked to a lot of the wives of the veterans, and they have really changed after going to that first reunion. They have opened up more and were able to talk about things more. The more you talk about it, the easier it is to deal with it. Some people have a hard time about what they went through over there and if they aren't talking about it, it doesn't



heal. It just scabs over and somebody picks the scab and pretty soon you are right back to that raw again where you have to wait until that scabs over. If you talk about it, it actually helps heal the wound, get rid of the scab and everything. (PG, 179-188)

Improved demeanor was a common theme revealed through interviewing the wives of Raiders. The purpose of studying the spousal reactions to the Raider reunions was to get an outside perspective on the veterans themselves. One Raider wife uncovered this common theme of therapeutic benefits early in the study:

Being at the reunions kind of brought his personality back. It's not that he didn't have personality, he had great personality before he left, he'd joke, and have fun. Then when he came back he was more serious, things had to be right on, and now, now, now, now. He was totally different he had no patience. I think he was a lot better after he talked about Vietnam, I think that he had some really bad guilt when he came back home. (MM, 111-116)

This observation was universal with the Raider wives:

I think at first he had more flashbacks, more I don't know if you would say nerves or just thinking back on it more at least at first. He was maybe a little more nervous. Then after we went to a few more reunions it really helped. Getting in touch with more people helped him relax. (SB, 49-52)

Therapeutic benefits serve as a secondary function for the communication that occurs at veterans' reunions. As a collective narrative rebuilds probability and fidelity, this more complete version of a war experience has obvious therapeutic benefits for the Raiders. These benefits may not be the primary reason the Raiders continue returning to the reunions every two years, but they serve an essential function for the Raiders.

## **Forming a Second Family Through Renewed Company Pride**

An additional secondary function of the communication that occurs at a Raider reunion is one of emotional bonding, creating a second family from the camaraderie felt at the company level of the military. Although the Delta Raiders are invited to attend additional reunions that are larger and encompass a wider group, such as a state Vietnam Veterans' reunion, they continually return to the company they called home overseas. Collective narratives reinforce and renew the band of brothers at the company level, as one Raider described the experience: "It was still a sense of family. I should say it was, it felt good that everybody was there and everybody was open to the stuff that went on over there and everybody would talk about it and everything you know. So it was good, every one of them are really, really nice." (MA, 77-80). Despite the gap of time between leaving Vietnam and reuniting, the Raiders shared a special bond that stood the test of time. The experience was hard to communicate from a Raider to the researcher, as the feeling was hard to describe:

It's hard to put it all in one sentence, but these guys are my friends, these guys are my guys. That's how I feel about it. The other guys have little different experiences than me, its interesting to trace the differences between the attitudes and the years, '67 year group, '68, '69...so forth. I go because I feel very loyal to my guys and the company. I should also say, I go because Mary and I have made new friends through the reunions, friends from other years, who we never knew and never would have known without the reunions. (CS, 151-157)

Loyalty and pride felt towards the Delta Company was a recurring theme through the interviews with the Raiders as well as the participant observation of the Raider reunion itself:

Although not all over there at the same time, the company keeps them all in common.

The Raider patch is what is common between all of them. They were asked to join the 101<sup>st</sup> Division reunions but many did not want to go to reunions with strangers.

Everything overlaps. Different times in Vietnam but same people for some. In addition, they all share the common bond of trails and firebases throughout the years. (FN02, 25-30)

Following the war, these shared experiences and narratives were lost until the Raiders were relocated by DROVA, thus leaving the Raiders without a support system. In effect, the company became their support system due to the reunions: “I know I’ve got people out there if I need someone, they are there. Where before being located and before the reunions, there wasn’t anybody.” (RB, 320-322). Delta Company serves as a second family to the Raiders, providing support and a true home for the Raiders collective narrative. This support was resonated with an additional Raider: “It was like going back to family that you hadn’t seen in years, and the feeling of camaraderie was there, the ability to talk to those guys about things that you couldn’t talk to anybody else about was just incredible.” (TM, 45-47). When the Raiders were unable to discuss the war with their family, they had the company and the reunions to turn towards.

### **Recognizing Tension Between Shared Experience and Family Communication**

The final secondary function that collective narratives at veterans’ reunions serve is one regarding recognition of the tension that occurs with different communication styles veterans use when talking with their family versus fellow veterans. Raiders expressed very open communication with fellow veterans about combat experience while demonstrating restraint during communication with family members about Vietnam. The overlying need for the Raiders

reunions to exist is due to the overwhelming nature of discussing combat experience. The Raiders interviewed were very transparent in their discussion of the difficulty they faced when communicating combat experience with their families. Without a shared experience, or legitimacy, the Raiders were uncomfortable discussing traumatic issues:

My family doesn't understand, its hard for them to get their arms around what went on, and the feelings that you had for each other, its something that if you have never been there you don't understand. And even though you try to explain it to them, it's hard to grasp something that you have no first hand experience with. (CL, 61-64)

Collective narratives cannot be created without a shared experience, and as the previous Raider explained, family members who did not go through the combat experience of Vietnam are simply unable to understand the issues to the fullest extent.

An additional reason for restraining the amount and type of communication about Vietnam with family members is one of general concern for traumatic memories. As one Raider discussed:

First off, you don't want your family to live the horrors. Especially when you first come back, the first 15 or 20 years when you come back its not something your want to talk about and its not something that they want to hear. So those are the reasons that you can't. (TM, 74, 97-99)

Lack of shared experience and general concern for familial well-being are major reasons that veterans decide to hold back when it comes to communicating combat experience with their families. This concept is creates one portion of the tension found between communication styles for veterans, as traditional support systems located in families are ineffective as veterans hold back experiences.

However, the benefit of veterans' reunions is situated in the opposite half of this communicative tension, veteran-to-veteran communication. With legitimacy comes an enhanced ability to connect and relate to a fellow veteran about combat experience. As one Raider described it:

I think since I started making it to these reunions, I can relate to these veterans far better than I could when I got back. Especially the veterans nowadays, its sort of like Vietnam, they have been over there a long time and you have feel for those people too. (RM, 69-72)

General ease of communication is present when it's a veteran discussing the same battle, trail or firebase given the common experience. One Raider explains this:

For those people who have never been in a war its hard to describe what its like, being out there or being in the jungle or being in the Riceland and bullets flying here and there and mortar rounds coming in. But for those guys who have lived it and been there with it, they may have a different appreciation for it than does someone who has never seen it or been there. So yeah, it's easier to talk to your soldiers about what happened and how it happened and so forth than it is you parents. (CH, 102-107)

Common experience cannot be found without communication, and the Raiders rely on reunions to present the opportunity to open communication, similar to the type of talking the veterans did overseas:

The best time is late at night when its quiet and just a few of us hanging out. Just like we would do in the rear. When we'd come back for stand down and refitting, where they would bring us in every month or two to regroup and let us have a good night's sleep in the rear. We would wander off, our squad or whatever. We'd just wander off and sit out

there and talk. We didn't go to the bars, you know they had bars at Phu Bai but we'd just go hang out. Because that's just the way it was. (RB, 306-312)

Although traditional support systems found within a veteran's family may be unavailable, the veteran can achieve this feeling of support through communicating with fellow veterans. By establishing an opportunity to veterans from the same company to reunite and spend time with one another, the Raider reunion provides a chance for open, honest communication with similar individuals. Tension between communication styles exist without a veterans' reunion, the reunion ultimately highlights this tension.

## **Chapter 5 - Discussion**

This study was an attempt to fill the void left by previous research surrounding veteran communication and veterans' reunions. Examples of previous communication research done at veterans' reunions could not be found. By researching the 2010 Delta Raiders veterans' reunion, a better understanding of the communicative functions that veterans' reunions serve was reached. In this section I offer conclusions taken from the analysis, limitations brought on by this specific study, as well as suggestions for future research in the area.

### **Conclusions**

This study began with the focus of determining why veterans' reunions were so therapeutic in nature. Ultimately, therapeutic functions were found to be a by-product of a larger phenomenon: collective narratives within veteran communication. This central finding arose from a veteran's necessity to fill in their personal narrative, to rediscover the story behind their war experience in Vietnam.

Collective narratives formed at veterans' reunions served two major functions: to rebuild narrative probability, thus recreating the coherence of their Vietnam War experience, and to create boundaries that encase narrative fidelity, making veterans' stories ring true to both themselves and those they are sharing the story with. Essentially, by rebuilding and partially reliving their personal narrative at the veterans' reunion, the Raiders researched in this study were able to put a new perspective on traumatic memories. The reason Raiders are able to put a new perspective on these memories is due to the strong social network they have formed at veterans' reunions. This directly relates to the afore mentioned study performed by Cohen (2004): "Social support refers to a social network's provision of psychological and material resources intended to benefit an individual's ability to cope with stress" (p. 676). Due to the

collective narrative, veterans' reunions provide a unique communication context within which social support and therapeutic communication can occur.

Research done on the Raiders also revealed tension between the different communication styles veterans use when talking about Vietnam with their families and talking about Vietnam with fellow veterans. This sense of legitimacy has been studied before by Braithwaite (1997), and the current study recognizes that veterans' reunions emphasize this difference in communication style. This tension must be recognized before veterans can seek the proper social support, which veterans' reunions offer. Recognition can be as simple as realizing that as a combat veteran, there are certain memories that cannot be dredged up at home, which most, if not all of the Raiders, have already done. Segmenting their narrative from the story they tell at home to the story they tell at a reunion is important, just as listening to other veterans' stories while at the reunion is also integral to the entire communication experience.

Additionally, this study uncovered the differences between the type and size of veterans' reunions. While some of the Raiders attend separate reunions beyond that of the Delta Company, most continue returning to the Raiders reunions due to the size and makeup of the organization. Veterans are more apt to feel comfortable spending time and discussing their war experience with veterans who are like-minded, namely, in the same company. Despite the fact that the various Raiders experienced different years of the Vietnam War, they used the same trails, fought similar battles, and operated in the same area as the Raiders who came before or after them. This shared experience was unique to their company, making their particular organization ideal for hosting reunions, rather than a larger organization such as a battalion or division. By keeping the group small and familiar, the Raiders attending the reunion may have decided to attend the reunions for various reasons, but they ultimately leave with a sense of



family and social support. By keeping open and communicating with each other (Ryfe, 2006) the Raiders find a higher level of understanding on the events within their collective stories, as well as the emotions that also accompany the experiences. This is not a new finding within small group communication, but an affirmation on the functions that group communication can serve.

Finally, this study serves to reaffirm Fisher's narrative paradigm by demonstrating the need for veterans to rebuild their personal war narratives. The Raiders interviewed for this study were somewhat lost after they returned from the Vietnam War and before they reunited with the Delta Raiders years later. Their perspective of the world and the moral truths they found important before the war were completely shattered due to the emotional trauma caused by the war. The Raiders also lacked social support in the traditional sense of family as they felt they wanted to protect their family from the same trauma a soldier endured. The stories that the veterans told themselves were either mentally blocked away because the veterans simply did not want to think about them, or were not fully rationalized and confronted because they were missing aspects lost to time and trauma. It was not until they reunited and found an outlet in which they could tell their narrative that the Raiders began a long overdue healing process.

Formal and substantive features of the Raiders narratives were filled in and rebuilt upon communication and storytelling that occurred at the Raider reunions. The Raiders formed fantasy chains from their individual war experiences that led to closer camaraderie within the group as well as filling in lost perspectives and events to each veteran's narrative probability. This study on storytelling within veterans' reunions shows that Fisher's narrative paradigm continues to be a relevant and useful methodology for understanding communication.

However, while being reaffirming, this study also reveals a limitation of Fisher's narrative paradigm, especially when it comes to fidelity within the rationality of a story. These

Raiders did have extremely similar stories despite the difference in years overseas when it comes to walking the same trails, fighting in similar battles, and generally living the exact same lifestyle as a soldier in Vietnam. This, however, is not going to be the case with all narratives of even similar traumatic experiences. These veterans have learned to cope and be open with their communication, but not every survivor of a traumatic experience could be the same.

At what point does a narrative need to be so similar that two humans can begin to openly discuss their experiences and start to rely on each other for social support? Is it possible for a narrative to transcend and be deeply understood? I was unable to hear every conversation that occurred at the reunion as well as interview Raiders who no longer attend, limiting my exposure to narratives to a degree. I am unable to claim that every function of narratives will transcend multiple experiences, but it certainly presents an interesting area for study. The veterans that communicated in this study had very similar experiences, but while they were close in essence, the details were always specific and personal to each veteran. The exact line that separates narratives and experiences from being singular and personal to collective is present, but not very clear as to this point. As Fernando Pessoa (2001) once wrote: “What is there to confess that’s worthwhile or useful? What has happened to us has happened to everyone or only to us; if to everyone, then it’s no novelty, and if only to us, then it won’t be understood (p. 21).

### **Limitations**

The current study and its conclusions are limited by methodological and epistemological factors. Methodologically, the current study was limited by time and distance. Initially, the Delta Raiders reunions are biannual, occurring in the summer on even-numbered years. This means that the participant observation of the Raider reunion was seven months before the phone interviews occurred with the same Raiders. While the Raiders interviewed were still very

excited and interested in answering questions about the reunion, the content they provided might have been different if the interviews were able to occur at the reunion or immediately following the reunion due to recency. In addition, distance played a major role when interviewing the Raiders, as the researcher was limited to conducting the interviews over the phone. With veterans located in Wisconsin, Virginia, Ohio, Missouri, Texas, North Carolina and Kentucky, the cost of travel severely limited the in-depth interviews. Interviews conducted in person would have been preferred, as the Raiders were revealing emotions tied to traumatic war experiences, thus distance and over-the-phone interviews limited the nature of the research.

Another limitation arose from the fact that there may be a bias coming from the interviewees, as every Raider interviewed still attends the reunions, thus clearly finding a beneficial function in continuing attendance despite travel and expense. This methodological limitation also affected the findings, keeping the functions of narratives on the positive end of the spectrum, without getting a varied response. This limitation could be corrected in a future study.

Epistemological limitations lie primarily with the study of therapy and veterans' reunions. As a communication scholar, I was limited in my ability to recognize the precise factors behind why healing was occurring at the Raider reunions; I was merely able to relay veteran testimony on why they believed the reunions were helping. Therefore, the analysis of therapeutic functions was restrained to those functions directly related to communication and what storytelling at reunions was doing to benefit veterans.

### **Future Research**

The final limitation to the current study is also the primary suggestion for future study in the area of veteran communication as well as therapy. I believe that this study is a starting point at which a certified Psychologist or Therapist might be able to advance the study of

posttraumatic stress disorder from. Veterans' reunions do provide a place for healing to occur, and every Raider I spoke with agreed that the reunions have strong therapeutic advantages. As this study found, collective narratives are the primary communicative function occurring at the Raider reunions. It is now time to find out exactly why these collective narratives are so beneficial. What makes a more complete veteran narrative so advantageous to that specific veteran? Why is the process of forming a collective narrative so therapeutic to any person suffering post trauma?

To supplement the current study, future research could focus on critically analyzing a more specific narrative provided by veterans. While this study did not initially begin with the narrative paradigm, a future study might start with this particular perspective to examine more facets of the narrative paradigm and trauma victims such as specific ways the veterans rationalize their past traumatic narratives.

Although reaffirming, this study must also ask if those who suffer traumatic events must be extremely similar to be able to form social support through narratives. While numerous Raiders continue meeting and communicating at reunions, there are several Raiders that have previously attended the gatherings and have discontinued to come. Were their experiences not as close to the remainder of the Raiders, or are there external factors that keep them from attending the reunions? An additional study could locate and research the Raiders or any veterans who have attended reunions in the past but have stopped attending to find the source of their absence. Are these reasons external like money or health-related issues, or is the primary communicative function of rebuilding narratives simply being left unfulfilled at the Raiders reunions?

Beyond veteran communication, why survivors of any major traumatic event refuse to share their memories or experiences with others, especially those who are close such as family, is

a rich area for research. A similar study could be conducted on different survivors' groups such as terrorist attacks, natural disasters or even disease-related trauma. From this author's perspective, the current study is a suitable launching point for important research to follow, specifically in the interplay between narratives and recovering victim's of all types of traumatic memories.

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## **Appendix A - Interview Protocol for Raiders**

### **Background Questions:**

1. What years did you serve in Vietnam?
2. How many Veterans' reunions have you attended since the war?
3. How did you initially learn of the Reunion?
4. Do you attend any other Veteran's reunions such like the Raider reunion?

### **Communication and Reunion Questions:**

5. Recall your first Raider Reunion. What feelings did you have prior to meeting up with fellow veterans?
6. Did you feel different after your first Raider Reunion? If so, describe the difference.
7. How would you describe the chance to communicate with veterans who went through the same experiences as yourself?
8. What topics do you and your fellow veterans' discuss at Raider Reunions?
9. Do you feel you can talk to these veterans in a different way than you could with your family?
10. Is there anyone else in your life that you feel comfortable talking to about these issues?
11. Why have you returned to this specific reunion?
12. Does your family also participate in these reunions?
13. Has going to these reunions changed your life in any way?

## **Appendix B - Interview Protocol for Wives**

### **Background Questions:**

1. How long have you been married to a Raider?
2. How many Veterans' reunions have you attended since your husband returned from the war?
3. How did you initially learn of the Reunion?
4. Do you and your husband attend any other Veteran's reunions like the Raider Reunion?

### **Communication and Reunion Questions:**

5. Recall your first Raider Reunion. What feelings did you have prior to meeting up with veterans similar to your husband?
6. What feelings did your husband express in anticipation to going to the first reunion?
7. Did you feel different after your first Raider Reunion? If so, describe the difference.
8. How would you describe your communication with other wives at the reunion?
9. What topics do you and other wives discuss at Raider Reunions?
10. Do other members of your family also participate in these reunions?
11. Do you feel your husband can be as honest about traumatic memories with you as he can be with other veterans?
12. Has there been any change in your husband's quality of life since attending the Raider Reunions?
13. Has going to these reunions changed your own life in any way? If so, explain.

## Appendix C - List of Open Codes and Number of Occurrences

Anxiety toward reunion	9
Bittersweet excitement	11
Bond not as strong without company	5
Career versus one tour	6
Catching up communication	6
Classic jump versus Airmobile	3
Collective recall of narrative	24
Company Pride	14
Desire to see more Raiders	5
Educational experience	3
Filling in perspectives	23
Gratifying experience	34
History of reunions	2
Humorous recall	5
Lack of communication about war	20
Narrative boundaries	6
Excitement towards first reunion	1
Open communication after war	3
Release of guilt	6
Second family	34
Therapeutic functions	23
Uncertainty towards 1st reunion	2
Veteran to veteran communication	31
Veteran versus family communication	14
Wife communication	6
Total Occurrences	296

## Appendix D - List of Selective Codes and Number of Occurrences

<u>Company Pride</u>	<u>19</u>
Bond not as strong without company	5
Company Pride	14
<u>Communicative Functions</u>	<u>59</u>
Narrative boundaries	6
Catching up communication	6
Collective recall of narrative	24
Filling in perspectives	23
<u>Other</u>	<u>18</u>
Desire to see more Raiders	5
Educational experience	3
History of reunions	2
Humorous recall	5
Classic jump versus Airmobile	3
<u>Amount of communication after war</u>	<u>29</u>
Career versus one tour	6
Lack of communication about war	20
Open communication after war	3
<u>By-products of reunions</u>	<u>97</u>
Release of guilt	6
Second family	34
Therapeutic functions	23
Gratifying experience	34
<u>Types of communication</u>	<u>51</u>

Veteran to veteran communication	31
Veteran versus family communication	14
Wife communication	6
<u>Mixed Feelings towards 1st Reunion</u>	<u>23</u>
Anxiety toward reunion	9
Bittersweet excitement	11
Excitement towards first reunion	1
Uncertainty towards 1st reunion	2