



COMMUNITY SALUTE / LIBRARIES AND MUSEUMS SERVING  
VETERANS AND MILITARY FAMILIES

# Supporting Veterans and Military Families: Stories from the Military Community

Museums and libraries have long served as place-based hubs for members of the public to engage in informal learning, access collections for educational or aesthetic purposes, and participate in civic dialogue. Across the country, changing community needs and priorities along with new modes of engagement have created an imperative to connect with and serve the public in ways that extend beyond traditional institutional formats and settings. Museums and libraries have begun to respond to this imperative. In so doing, they are connecting with the public in new and deeper ways, strengthening the social and institutional networks that support community wellbeing, and acting as catalysts to spark positive change.<sup>1</sup>

Community Salute is an initiative of the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) with the goal of studying how libraries and museums are responding to the needs of veterans and their families and developing new strategies through community partnerships to provide better services for this important constituency.<sup>2</sup> Community Salute is an example of the ways museums and libraries can work as community catalysts.

# Despite veterans and military families building lives and laying down roots in every state, the military experience is still not well understood by civilians, organizations, and communities.<sup>3</sup>

In the United States, there are 22 million veterans and 725,000 military spouses. But 71 percent of civilians say they have little to no understanding of the military experience, even though they have a strong appreciation for the military.<sup>4</sup> This “military-civilian divide” is echoed from the military community as well: 90 percent of military families surveyed felt the general public does not understand the sacrifices they and service members have made.<sup>5</sup>

This brief provides a tool to help bridge the divide between libraries and museums and their communities. It provides a starting point for museums and libraries to understand the diverse experiences within the military community. It also aims to illustrate and spur reflection about the different opportunities museums and libraries may have to support and engage veterans and military families.

## THE MILITARY PERSPECTIVE

Military experiences are distinct from civilian experiences. From day one at boot camp, service members abandon their civilian habits for a highly structured routine and hierarchical environment. Many experience active combat, which can be beyond comprehension for the average civilian.<sup>6</sup>

When museums and libraries look to engage with veterans and military families, there are several military perspectives, or ways of thinking, that the institution should keep in mind because these may affect a veteran or military family’s ability or desire to seek out services.<sup>7</sup> Of course, each individual and each experience is unique—but understanding the context and culture of the population can help institutions reach them in authentic ways. For example:

- The military community tends to be **self-reliant and independent**. They may struggle to acknowledge their needs or to advocate for themselves.
- Veterans may be **hesitant to identify** with the military community. They may feel undeserving of the benefits and services they’ve earned. For instance, a veteran may not feel comfortable accepting what he or she perceives to be “handouts,” such as healthcare benefits. Veterans may also believe others need the services more, so they won’t use the benefits they are eligible to receive.<sup>8</sup>
- Veterans and their families are **team-oriented**. They tend to put the needs and success of their team or community before their own.

## It's important to understand some common perspectives among veterans and military families



### UNDERSTANDING MILITARY JOURNEYS

Understanding the journeys of veterans and military families is critical as libraries and museums consider the best ways to support this population, whether in programming, narrating stories, or in providing convening space for veterans and military families. A journey map, which describes an individual's unique life path, can help provide a glimpse into the military experience.

Essentially, there is no singular experience that defines a veteran or military family's journey. Even the characteristics mentioned earlier won't be true in all cases. The population is diverse, and the range of their experiences is tremendous.

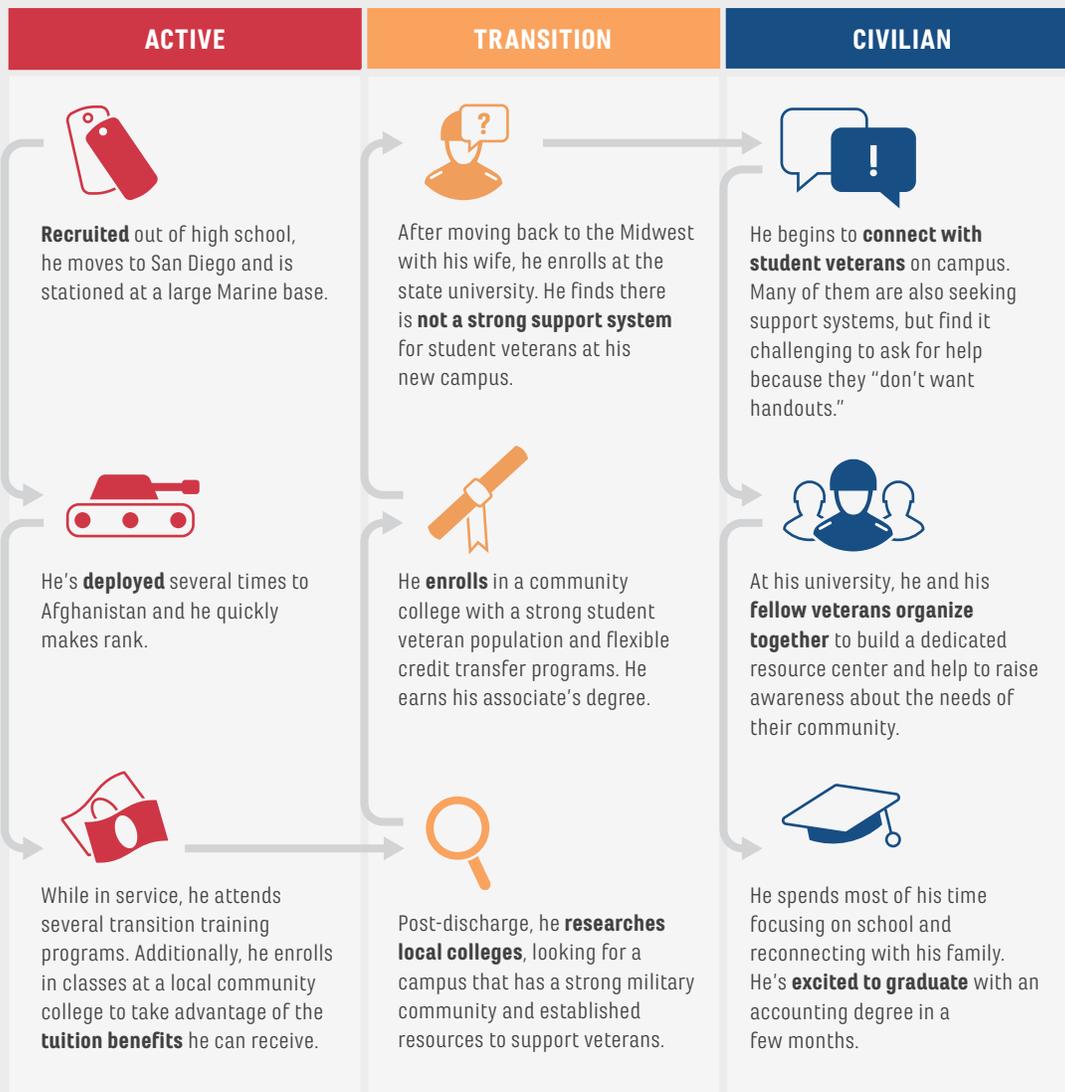
The following are six sample journey maps based on conversations with veterans and military spouses that highlight various experiences.<sup>9</sup> For each journey map, consider the following questions:

- What opportunities exist to support and engage this person/family along the journey?
- How might your museum or library play a role at each of these critical points?

## Vu's Journey: College-bound vet creates community on campus

### HIGHLIGHTS

Vu is a post-9/11 vet who uses his GI benefits to pursue a college education. Lacking a support network during this transition, he connects with other vets on campus.



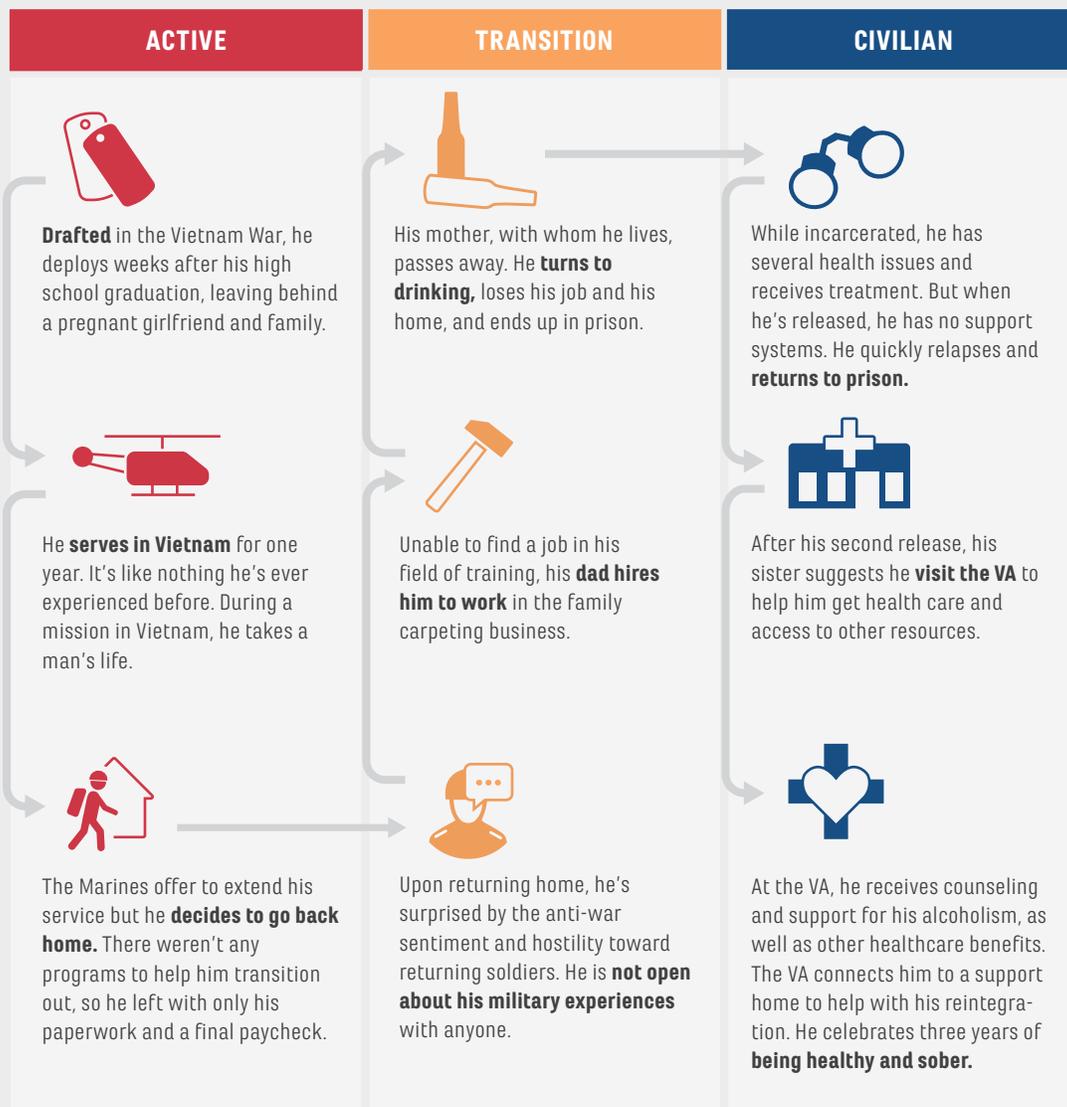
### CONSIDERATIONS

- What are opportunities for libraries or museums to connect with Vu in an academic setting?
- What are opportunities to engage Vu long-term as he starts a family and new career?
- What different perspectives and ways of thinking are at play here?

## Darryl's Journey: Vietnam War vet finds support for invisible wounds

### HIGHLIGHTS

Darryl is a Vietnam War vet who has difficulty transitioning home and into civilian life. He is incarcerated twice and eventually gets life back on track with the help of the VA.



### CONSIDERATIONS

- How could libraries or museums connect with Darryl during incarceration?
- What types of partnerships would be required to support him effectively?
- What different perspectives and ways of thinking are at play here?

## Aimee's Journey: Army spouse navigates the military family lifestyle

### HIGHLIGHTS

Aimee is a military spouse who shepherds her family through 14 relocations over the course of her husband's army career. This lifestyle brings a unique set of challenges for her and her sons.



Twenty-four years ago, her husband graduates from West Point and **joins the military**.

Early in her career, she works at a social services and mental health clinic. After she **has her first child**, she stays at home to care for him.

Her family is **constantly on the move**. This isn't a natural fit for her, but she makes roots quickly. Sometimes finding military spouses her age is challenging, so her social circle is limited.



With every move, she **visits the library** first to learn about the local resources. Yet, she's always hesitant to become too attached in anticipation of another move.

Her sons seem to enjoy their lifestyle and the sense of adventure. But after 14 moves, they each have switched schools many times. They **struggle to make long-lasting friendships**.

Her **spouse is deployed** abroad seven times to both combat and noncombat zones.



While her spouse is on deployment, she **connects with a military family life consultant** who helps provide counseling and parenting advice. She tries to be strong so her husband won't worry about being away from home.

Now that her sons are in college, she's thinking about going back to work. She's **enrolled in computer training courses** and wants a degree in college and career counseling to help military youth apply to college.

### CONSIDERATIONS

How could libraries or museums aid the transition into a new community?

How could museums or libraries help new families understand what the community has to offer and what services and programs may be available?

What different perspectives and ways of thinking are at play here?

## Leticia and Josh's Journey: National Guard family straddles military and civilian worlds

### HIGHLIGHTS

Leticia and Josh both serve in the National Guard and have two young children. Drill weekends twice a month pose challenges to long-term child care.



At 17, she **enlists in the Army**, primarily as a way to pay for college. She's deployed to Afghanistan for one year.

Around the same time, they **meet and get married**. While she is deployed, communication between them is tough. She feels like her life is "on pause" while everyone else moves on.

After eight years of service, she **earns rank and becomes an officer**. Meanwhile, he enrolls in the military and attends Officer Candidate School.



He is gone much of the next four years for training and deployment. She is **pregnant twice during his absence** and he has four days' leave for each birth.

Post-service, she uses her GI Bill to **attend the local university**. She struggles with feeling like she missed out on being a young college student. She feels more mature than her classmates and feels disconnected from their experiences.

She **teaches at the local school district**, but isn't completely happy with her career.



Missing the camaraderie, they both **join the National Guard**.

They rely on extended family to care for the kids while they are away twice a month on drill weekends. They **wish there were more resources** on site, like childcare.

They look forward to retiring in five years. Even though they will miss the military experience, they're **excited to be around for birthdays and family events**.

### CONSIDERATIONS

- How could museums or libraries provide support for busy military parents?
- In what ways could museums or libraries engage with military family children?
- What different perspectives and ways of thinking are at play here?

## Mia's Journey: Post-9/11 female vet tries to access services post-discharge

### HIGHLIGHTS

Mia is a post-9/11 vet who struggles with her veteran identity, hampering her ability to access the services that would enable a smoother transition.



### CONSIDERATIONS

How could libraries or museums help connect Mia with supports that would aid in her transition?

What types of outreach would be required to connect with individuals who do not necessarily identify as veterans?

What different perspectives and ways of thinking are at play here?

## CREATING YOUR OWN JOURNEY MAPS

As a museum or library, creating journey maps of veterans and military families in your own community will help you understand your local context and how to begin engaging with those groups. Journey maps often begin with conversation among strangers, but can lead to deep connections between individuals. Journey maps are rooted in [Human-Centered Design](#) (HCD), a practice that emphasizes empathy and understanding.<sup>10</sup>

Here are steps for creating your own journey maps:

- 1. Identify local veterans or military spouses to interview.**  
If you do not already have existing relationships, partner with local veteran service organizations (VSOs) to connect you with veterans or military families in your community. Request their help in arranging or scheduling one-on-one interviews. An interview should be at least an hour to provide sufficient time to build rapport and absorb each story. If possible, identify interviewees from diverse backgrounds (e.g., different gender, age, economic, or racial demographics) who can provide different perspectives.
- 2. Consider interview logistics.** Creating the best interview experience for both the interviewee and interviewer requires advanced planning and preparation. Consider the most appropriate location for the interview—it should allow for privacy, but also be a place of comfort and familiarity (e.g., community center, coffee shop, home, or library). Consider these other key questions as you design your interview:
  - Do you need a legal waiver to talk to any interviewees (often if under 18)?
  - Do you want to take pictures, or video or audio recordings? If so, do you need permission?
  - Do you need an interpreter or an interviewer with language skills if you are speaking to a particular subpopulation?
  - Would a form of payment be appropriate or feasible (e.g., gift card or small gift)? Is there a need for childcare or to cover transportation costs for interviewees?
- 3. Create an interview guide.** Draft a list of three or four high-level questions to guide your conversation (see appendix for examples). Questions should be broad enough to allow the interviewee to expand on responses and communicate the way the interviewee is thinking or feeling. Avoid yes/no questions.
- 4. Conduct interviews.**
  - Before beginning, introduce yourself and explain the reason for your visit (e.g., *“I want to understand your journey as a veteran or member of a military family in order to learn how my museum/library can support and engage the military community.”*).
  - Ask for permission to take notes, and remind them their name will not be associated with anything shared outside of your conversation.
  - During the interview, focus on active listening, not talking.
  - As the interviewer, avoid leading the conversation or interjecting in the story. Instead, allow the interviewee to lead the conversation and encourage him or her to talk about what first comes to mind when responding to the interview questions.
  - At the end of your conversation, remember to thank your interviewee—offer a gift card, refreshments, or some other form of appreciation.<sup>11</sup>
- 5. Take notes.** Interview in pairs so one person can lead and the other can take notes. Handwriting is better than typing; it is more personal and less distracting for the interviewee. Capture the important parts of the conversation, including key milestones, events, and decisions points. These highlights will be the basis of your journey map.
- 6. Create the journey map.** Using your notes, identify the key pieces of the story and translate those to the map. Don't expect completely linear stories—individuals may share one-off experiences that were especially powerful, but that may create “gaps” in the story flow. Be intentional about preserving those gaps in the journey map, and when possible, supplement facts with observations about how the individual perceives or feels about the journey. Depending on how many interviews you conduct, consider aggregating similar stories to create an illustrative composite story.

## ADVICE FROM THE FIELD

As you connect with veterans and military families and create your own journey maps, consider advice from libraries and museums working with this community:<sup>12</sup>

- **Acknowledge and understand cultural differences.** Military culture is significantly different from civilian culture, and there is often a perceived disconnect between the military and civilian worlds.<sup>13</sup> Recognizing this disconnect can help build rapport and trust between you and your interviewee. For additional information on building cultural competency, see Kristen Mulvihill's and Sarah LeMire's book, *Serving Those Who Served: Librarian's Guide to Working with Veteran and Military Communities*.
- **Test and check your own assumptions.** While the military experience may create unique challenges for veterans and their families, it does not affect everyone in the same ways. When considering the whole of the military family and veteran population, most lead stable lives and contribute deeply to their local communities.
- **Don't stretch yourself too far.** Learning about different journeys can spur a laundry list of activities, programs, and services that your library and museum could develop. It is important to remember that in most communities, there are a variety of programs and services offered to veterans and military families. You do not need to fill every gap in the journey you identify. Rather, focus on those your organization can best address.

## CONCLUSION

The ultimate purpose of journey mapping is to shed light on the diversity of military experiences. As you consider some of the stories shared here, think about using this tool to learn about military perspectives that inform the different decisions and paths individuals may take. Understanding these diverse stories can help identify the ways your library or museum can support and authentically engage the population.

## APPENDIX: SAMPLE INTERVIEW GUIDES

### FOR INTERVIEW WITH VETERANS

- 1. Please tell us about your military service background.**
  - In which branch of the military did you serve?
  - Where did you serve and for how long?
  - Did you have a family (spouse, significant other, children) at the time? If so, what was the experience like for them?
- 2. How would you describe your experience transitioning out of the military into civilian life?**
  - How did you feel about it?
  - What were your first steps?
  - What resources did you access?
  - What were some things you wished you had known?
- 3. How would you describe your experience as a civilian with veteran status?**
  - To what extent is being a veteran part of your identity?
  - How does it influence your daily life or decision making?
  - How frequently do you tap resources for veterans?
- 4. Can you tell us about a time when you visited a library or museum recently?**
  - What was the experience like?
  - How do you typically use libraries or museums?
  - If you haven't visited a museum or library recently, why not?

### FOR INTERVIEW WITH MILITARY SPOUSES

- 1. Please tell us about your family's military service background.**
  - In which branch of the military does your family member serve?
  - How long has your family member been in the military?
  - Where have you lived during this service?
- 2. How would you describe the experience of being a military family?**
  - What's most exciting to you? What's most challenging for you?
  - If possible, describe a typical day for you or your family.
  - Has your active duty family member ever been deployed? If so, what was that like?
  - Do you have children? If so, what was the experience like for them?
- 3. What do you envision for your civilian family life after discharge?**
  - What are you most looking forward to?
  - What makes you most anxious?
- 4. Can you tell us about a time when you or your family visited a library or museum recently?**
  - What was the experience like?
  - How do you typically use libraries or museums?
  - If you haven't visited a museum or library recently, why not?

## ENDNOTES

1. In 2016, the Institute of Museum and Library Services launched the Community Catalyst Initiative geared toward identifying new ways for museums and libraries to strengthen community involvement. To learn more about the Community Catalyst work led by the IMLS and its partners, please read the IMLS [press release](#) and the recently published report, [Strengthening Networks, Sparking Change: Museums and Libraries as Community Catalysts](#).
2. In 2016, the IMLS launched Community Salute: Libraries and Museums Serving Veterans and Military Families to help strengthen museums and libraries' ability to develop community-based solutions in response to veterans and military families' needs. To learn more about IMLS and its partners, please read the IMLS [press release](#) and visit the Community Salute [blog](#).
3. "Veteran Population," National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, Office of Policy and Planning, [https://www.va.gov/vetdata/veteran\\_population.asp](https://www.va.gov/vetdata/veteran_population.asp); "2015 Annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey, Comprehensive Report," Blue Star Families (2015), [https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/bsf\\_2015\\_comprehensive\\_report.pdf](https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/bsf_2015_comprehensive_report.pdf).
4. "The Military-Civilian Gap: War and Sacrifice in the Post-9/11 Era," Pew Research Center (2011), <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/10/05/war-and-sacrifice-in-the-post-911-era/>.
5. "2015 Annual Military Family Lifestyle Survey, Comprehensive Report," Blue Star Families (2015), [https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/bsf\\_2015\\_comprehensive\\_report.pdf](https://bluestarfam.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/bsf_2015_comprehensive_report.pdf).
6. Carter, Phillip and David Barno, "Military bases are our most exclusive gated communities—and that hurts veterans," *The Washington Post* (2013), [www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/military-bases-are-our-most-exclusive-gated-communities--and-that-hurts-veterans/2013/11/08/27841b1e-47cb-11e3-a196-3544a03c2351\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.77fe1f4a4111](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/military-bases-are-our-most-exclusive-gated-communities--and-that-hurts-veterans/2013/11/08/27841b1e-47cb-11e3-a196-3544a03c2351_story.html?utm_term=.77fe1f4a4111); Eikenberry, Karl and David Kennedy, "Americans and Their Military, Drifting Apart," *The New York Times* (2013), [www.nytimes.com/2013/05/27/opinion/americans-and-their-military-drifting-apart.html?\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/27/opinion/americans-and-their-military-drifting-apart.html?_r=1&); FSG Interviews.
7. FSG Interviews.
8. "State Summary: California," Department of Veterans Affairs (2015), [https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/SpecialReports/State\\_Summaries\\_California.pdf](https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/SpecialReports/State_Summaries_California.pdf); "Los Angeles County Veterans Study," USC School of Social Work Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans and Military Families (2014).
9. FSG Interviews.
10. For more information on this practice, known as Human-Centered Design (HCD), visit [IDEO.org](http://IDEO.org) or the [Institute of Design at Stanford](http://InstituteofDesignatStanford.org).
11. For more information on preparing for and conducting interviews, please reference the resources provided by [IDEO.org](http://IDEO.org) and the [Institute of Design at Stanford](http://InstituteofDesignatStanford.org).
12. Community Salute Town Hall, 16-17 November, 2016. San Antonio, TX; FSG Interviews. Note: The advice presented in this document was gathered from input from librarians, museum staff, and other experts in the field during a two-day workshop, Community Salute Town Hall, hosted by the IMLS in San Antonio, Texas.
13. Ninety-one percent of Americans say they have felt proud of the military, but 71 percent agree that they have little or no understanding of the military experience. "The Military-Civilian Gap: War and Sacrifice in the Post-9/11 Era," Pew Research Center (2011), <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/10/05/war-and-sacrifice-in-the-post-911-era/>.

## FIGURE ENDNOTES

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1. FSG Interviews.

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Institute of Museum and Library Services  
955 L'Enfant Plaza North, SW  
Suite 4000  
Washington, DC 20024-2135  
202-653-IMLS (4657)  
[www.ims.gov](http://www.ims.gov)

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