

2018 Veterans Day

Essay Contest

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## ***Just One Veteran Can Make a Difference***

### **...2018 Veterans Day Essay Contest...**

It is January 26th, 1970. It is the middle of Tet, the Vietnamese New Year. It is the most active season for attacks during the Vietnam War. A lone soldier stands guard in the Ashua Valley, the northern part of the I-CORPS. Specialist John P. Ganser, of company D of the 27th combat engineering battalion, stares into the dark abyss of the surrounding jungle. The night is pitch black. The concertina barb wire that encircles the base camp holds old soda cans with their metal tabs inside of them. If the enemy tries to break in, the soda cans will make a loud, rattling noise. Suddenly, Specialist Ganser hears the clanking of aluminum, signaling that danger is near. His heartbeat quickens, and fear slowly spreads through his body. He is in bunker 27, position 270 degrees northwest, with two other soldiers who are fast asleep. Not wanting to disturb them, Specialist Ganser decides to handle this situation on his own. Training tells him that any suspicious movement in the middle of the night is to be handled by a call to the Command Post and a request for an illumination flare. After radioing the CP, the white glow from the signal flare lasts only 30 seconds and isn't enough time for him to identify the source of the sound. With sweat pouring and anxiety mounting, Specialist Ganser knows he has only three options. He can risk exposing his position to the enemy by firing off his gun; he can use powerful claymore mines that can wipe out hundreds of charging soldiers (this is a last resort and should only be used if necessary); or he can

lob a grenade in the general direction of the sound and pray. His decision is made in an instant. Specialist Ganser throws the grenade, hunkers down, and listens for the cries or moans of an injured enemy. There are no sounds at all. Questions swarm in his head. *Did I just kill someone? Did I miss? Is the enemy still out there?* All that is found the next morning is a small pool of blood in the elephant grass. This is a true story. This is my grandfather's story, and it shows what it was like for a soldier to risk his life in a combat zone.

With many everyday encounters like this, it is no surprise that most military veterans have many traumatizing experiences that will scar them for the rest of their life. We know that at least 20% of the veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan suffer from either major depression or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) according to the RAND Center for Military Health Policy. Sadly, roughly 50% of returning veterans who need mental health treatment will actually receive services. Based on current data from the Department of Veteran Affairs, we know that 20 veterans a day commit suicide. These aren't just facts and meaningless numbers. They are the effect of war on the lives of real people. If my grandfather had become a statistic, I wouldn't be writing this essay today. Our duty, as American citizens, is to honor and respect those who risk their personal well-being for our country, our nation, and our freedom, because life is the most precious thing in this world. Freedom was not just given to us; it was fought for hundreds of years ago, and it continues to be something fought for by thousands of men and women today. Each Veteran's Day, there are countless parades, events, speeches, and even store discounts for those who have served our country. Based upon these

alarming statistics, however, it seems we often fail as a nation to repay veterans in ways they need the most. With suicide rates and mental health decline on the rise, we should never take our veterans for granted, now more than ever.

Veterans do more than fight for freedom. Veterans deploy to other countries to help stabilize governments, overthrow military coups, restore others' freedoms, protect the innocent, rebuild infrastructure, and educate new armies so they can learn to defend themselves and attempt to stop genocide. They often leave small things behind that the locals don't have like warm blankets, clothing, electronics, and small toys for children. One veteran I interviewed described giving the local children chocolate, and he was dumbfounded that they had never had it before. Even though several of the children experienced a 'tummy ache' the next day, the moms were grateful because it was an experience that they could never give them. Veterans sacrifice to help not just those in this country but those in other countries as well, and we should never assume we understand all of the experiences they have gone through. You can learn much about war and what veterans faced as soldiers if you just ask them questions. Take the time to talk to a veteran if they are willing to share their story. Their stories are the stories of our country's history, and they should be heard and never forgotten.

Freedom is not free. Veterans understand this. Our enemies are only a passing shadow of evil. Freedom is our motivation. It is worth fighting for. Specialist John P. Ganser may have felt miserable during his time serving in the Vietnam War while missing his family, but without him, the base camp could have been invaded and many fellow soldiers could have died. Today, in October of 2018, Specialist Ganser says that

this experience changed him as a person. He feels honored and proud to have served in the military. Part of the definition of the word hero is someone who is admired or idealized for courage. There is no one I can think of with more courage than a veteran. They fight for our way of life, keep us safe, and some even die for our country. Every veteran is a hero in my book, and especially my grandfather, Specialist John. P Ganser.

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