

How Veteran Sacrifices Effect Youth Today

By Jen Eckert

You know I could be like every other entrant in this essay contest and tell you exactly what you would love to be true. I could feed you a beautifully exaggerated story about how the American military marched with a fluttering star-spangled banner into every war practically invincible, wiped out the opposition and brought hope, glory and justice to America. I could say that America has made the world a peaceful place and solved most of its conflicts. Wouldn't that sound lovely, just like all the other essays? Of course it would.

But that would be lying. If you'd prefer to hear a red, white and blue fairy tale, then I suggest you listen to a different essay. The marines don't drop into a foreign country, shoot rainbows out of their eyes and then leave quietly. The Air Force doesn't drop cupcakes from their fighter jets. In war there is casualty. There is death and destruction. There are sacrifices.

Yes, sacrifices. The topic of this essay isn't "How veteran peacemaking skills have impacted youth today." The topic of this essay is "How veteran sacrifices have impacted youth today." Unless you live in a perfect world, or Walgreens, people give their lives for the future of America. And I am- my generation is- the future of America.

Here's another thing I'm not going to tell you: That every teenager sits down with a local veteran every day, talking about what he or she went through, thanking them for everything they've done. Most teenagers now don't even realize that they live in a country that has been formed by the sacrifices of veterans that they couldn't care less about. They're blissfully ignorant of the fact that they can practice religion, vote and have free speech because people of the American military have fought to keep it that way. They just turn on their iPods and take everything for granted.

They don't know that the old lady down the street with her ruddy Air Force jacket has dropped bombs on innocent villages. They have no idea that the elderly man with the prosthetic leg stepped on a Bouncing Betty while bushwhacking through razor-sharp jungles of elephant grass in Vietnam. The boy down the street who stands absently outside looking for someone to play catch with? They think he just has no friends. They don't know his Dad's jeep was detonated last week in Iraq, leaving a mother and three

children behind. Teenagers just want to complain about the “oppression of the controlling American government” and talk about how they “Want to break free of the incompetent presidents we always have.”

I recently interviewed a veteran at Cole’s Transportation Museum in Bangor. He talked about the usual things that you’d expect from a Korean Vet (I’ve heard it before from my Dad), but then filled us in on more tedious details. For example, how they ate food out of tins and often didn’t have any way to heat it. How there were no stars and no moon, the darkness so deep that it would press in on you like a black blanket. How even if you saw a man get killed right in front of you, they wouldn’t take your word for it if he didn’t have his dog tags, and the man in question would always be labeled as “MIA.” We almost always imagine war to be so valiant and wonderful. We see TV shows where the army men march into the battle with their mint condition uniforms and sweep down the opposition, with no casualties at all. It’s quick and easy. They always have tents to sleep in and hot food, nice beds and chipper watchmen. But that is not what war is. War isn’t pretty, and doesn’t resemble episodes of Captain America in the least. War is hurt and be hurt. War is fight or flight. War is sacrifice.

We have everything there is today because of sacrifice, not peace. Freedom isn’t free. It must be fought for and protected dearly. We have our lives, our economy, our opportunities because of the freedom the men and women of the military have fought, killed and been killed to protect. And I for one- am thankful.