

**ENG 180: First Place**

Literacy Narrative

By Kaleb Wadsworth

The bell rang, the students quickly took their seats, and Mrs. Willhite began speaking about the upcoming poetry assignment. Little did I know, this would be the first literacy as a writer experience in my life. Writing letters home while I was fighting two wars was another time where my proficiency increased. Lastly, writing saved my life as I transitioned to civilian life from military service.

I was an interesting student at Sherrard High School. I was always in trouble and could never fully apply myself. While I cannot remember a teacher ever giving up on me, I can certainly remember the amazing teachers I was blessed to have. Mr. Kovac, a science teacher, was one such example, but Mrs. Willhite, my English teacher, truly stood out as an example of what a teacher should be. She was an amazing, albeit stern woman. The class and I were assigned to tap into our personal lives and creativity, then construct a rhyming poem that conveyed our heart's content at that period in our early lives. While I do not have the poem anymore (it was lost quite a long time ago), I do remember how I toiled tirelessly to fully adhere to the assignment and produce extraordinary results. Through this assignment, the tutelage of my teacher, and my own inner ambitions, I planned to create a truly unique, artistic creation that no other could claim or copyright. Some of the poem echoes in my head as I recall its long distant memories. "Stabbed by a blade of darkness, cold as a winter's night..." Short, cropped, and disrupted lines of text erupt into my brain. I am slowly remembering! I do hope that someday the

knowledge of that poem will come back to me. On the day that I presented and read aloud my poem, that old English classroom was filled with the sounds of clapping and cheering. Such a marvelous spectacle it was! Mrs. Willhite immediately commented, “Is it really dark at your house?” I fired right back with, “Only when I turn the lights off!” I was and still am a facetious smartass. After class, a friend asked if she could have a copy of the poem that I had wrote, and hinted at what it had meant to her. Times like those make me wish that I could be young again, but the wisdom I have found since then overshadows them, and now I am merely humbled and left content knowing that I was able, in some small semblance and manner, to positively affect someone else’s life.

Through the rigors of battle, every ounce of my being was tested. My body, spirit, brain, morals, and innocence were all tested. I saw and did things I can never forget. Afghanistan is a terrible place with a completely different culture than I had ever experienced. With all of the death, destruction, poverty, and the mission at hand, few things helped me through it. My brothers fighting beside me, the letters to home I wrote, and the mail I received from home were my greatest support. The care packages with tobacco were a nice touch, though. It was because of this seemingly primitive and undeveloped geographical location that our only source of communication to the “real” world was by using old fashioned snail mail. The part of Afghanistan I was in was a blend of shades of brown and scarce green, unless we were patrolling through an opium or marijuana field. We would occasionally come across a river to bathe in, or we would dig holes and sleep in them, but they were brown too. Because I had no other options of communication, I used writing to connect and convey information, feelings, and situations to my friends and loved ones back home, but there was more. Perhaps I was channeling the feeling

from the previously mentioned English class poem, but something sparked me to pursue the art of letter writing. It was in this deployment and method that I learned how to use words like an artist uses a paintbrush. My letters were always honest, heartfelt, and overly lavish with regards to the highest hopes for my loved ones back home. "To be dear and beloved mother" was the standard greeting when I wrote to her. When I say overly lavish, I seek to clarify that, I could die at any moment, and as a direct result, that letter I was currently writing would have been sent home in accordance with my wishes and guaranteed by my brothers in arms. I did use a lot of colorful wording and sought to make sure that my family knew that I loved them and missed them dearly. I still have most of those letters, and I consider them to be priceless treasures in my collection of junk.

Having survived the wars and now trying to learn how to be a civilian again is an arduous and ongoing process. It's been ten years since I was in combat, but I have endured much more than the average person shall know. When I was honorably discharged after completing my active duty service period, I lost my sense of belonging, purpose, identity, and the camaraderie of my brothers. I was existing, but not living. Writing offered me an outlet that allowed me to express my darkest and deepest burdens in a healthy way. Words like "monster" and "hatred" were commonly found initially, but over time, I began to understand what altruism is. It was not a smooth, easy, or enjoyable process, but it forced me to recognize where I had been and why I am the person I am today. Heart-wrenching and agonizing memories from my past were chronicled on paper and submitted to officials at the department of Veteran's Affairs. I quickly learned that I had to provide intimate details of my experiences and situations involving terrible ways of human beings dying. I had to recall and document these torturous events. That was a

necessary step, and through that, I was later able to feel more at ease in regards to those situations. In a way, I was learning to live again by finally dealing with my trauma. Later still, I would find the happy moments in those sad times and create positivity.

My literacy as a writer was greatly influenced by a poem written in a high school English class, by writing letters home on deployments, and by writing about my combat experiences. These examples are only part of a truly complex and lengthy path, and my destination as a writer has not yet been reached. I will continue to develop my skills as a writer and someday I will write a book based on my own experiences, successes, and failures, all with the hope of my heartfelt words and most sincere wishes reaching a veteran whose life may be impacted in a profoundly positive and uplifting way. I do not fully understand the power of the words I write, but I can hope that they will be useful and bring peace to somehow who has not known it for some time.