

The Final Battle

In the beginning we asked “**Why are We Talking About Veterans?**” We have heard a lot about veterans today. I believe it is appropriate to close this session with words from a veteran. I want to read you a statement entitled **The Final Battle**, written by Master Sergeant Dennis Whall, US Army Combat Engineer, Retired, who is currently a hospice volunteer with the Maine Hospice Foundation.

“Veterans” – we are a special breed. Whether we volunteered or were drafted, we took the oath of our country: to serve with honor, to respect our colors (our country’s flag) and to perform our duty. Men and women of uniform; we are comrades – brothers/sisters. World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War, Iraq, Afghanistan and all the conflicts in between we served with dignity. All wars produce disability, death. And heartache, yet they all have their differences, their own issues.

I would sacrifice myself for I know that my brother would do the same for me, so that we might accomplish what we were trained to do – the mission of our unit. Together we face unspeakable horrors, to be witnessed and the stored away forever. Our family and non-vet friends ask us about our missions; what we did and what we saw. They can’t understand why their husband, father, aunt won’t talk about their time at war. How do you explain hell? What words do we use? Many veterans try not to think about it and in fact work very hard to keep it buried in the recesses of their mind so they don’t hurt. It is self preservation. If I put my finger in a flame, it hurts; so I don’t do it. In the same way we suppress our war experiences – no story telling = no pain. This however is our turmoil. The hell is imprisoned within us. Veterans don’t ask veterans to share their hell story, although when trust is gained it may be offered.

Veteran’s age, their bodies degrade, like everyone else, we are no exception. But here lies the difference that makes us unique in dying. These combat experiences may manifest themselves as greater anxiety, hyper vigilance, agitation or stoicism. As a dying veteran starts their travel from this world to the next, the walls that have been built by the person to contain their personal hell start to erode. As medications take hold the long repressed memories may begin to surface. The conscious mind, trained to be stoic, strong, and show no pain is beginning to break down. The first battle ensues. “I’m losing my ability to contain this; I’m fighting for every last breath; I’m afraid I’ll lose my dignity; my pride in myself. I’m aware that my body cannot continue. I wonder how God will perceive me when I stand before Him. Will I be forgiven for my deeds on earth so that I may have peace in heaven or will this hell consume me for eternity?”

The VA knows full well that veterans die with dignity within their walls. Why? Because it is like coming home to familiar surroundings – the ‘colors’ the uniforms, the camaraderie. But not all veterans die in a VA Hospital. As a hospice volunteer I have had the honor to bear witness to the final battle of several veterans. The bond between us was immediate. I would introduce myself with a military greeting “Sir, Master Sergeant Dennis Whall, US Army Combat Engineer, Retired; permission to come aboard.” His eyes grew wide, a small smile appeared, “Permission granted.” Although this was a WWII battleship sailor and I was a Vietnam Army engineer, it did not matter. We were veterans; we had a common bond – duty, honor, country.

Hospice staff and volunteers can help the veteran face the “Final Battle” with strength and dignity if you learn who we are and the challenges we faced then and now.