

# WRITING LESSON

# SUPPORT FOR VETERANS



The YES! Magazine article **Heal the Warrior, Heal the Country** by **Dr. Edward Tick** is a story about the many veterans he sees physically and emotionally wounded from serving in the war, and how we, as community members, can help these warriors heal.

Students will use Dr. Tick's story to write a letter to a veteran, real or fictitious, and express their support for veterans returning home.

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# Heal the Warrior, Heal the Country

Breaking the cycle of war making: our country will not find peace until we take responsibility for our wars.



A veteran with Iraq Veterans Against the War marches in New York on the 5th anniversary of the U.S. war in Iraq. Photo by: Joseph O. Holmes

**By Edward Tick**

*Reprinted from YES! Magazine, Summer 2008 issue*

GUILT, SHAME, SLAUGHTER WITHOUT PURPOSE, ALIENATION FROM HOMELAND AND LIFE ITSELF—this was the legacy that Günter passed on to his son Walt from his World War II combat service in Hitler’s Wehrmacht. Walt, “the only child born in freedom,” was born in the United States shortly after his parents emigrated here from Germany. Growing up in the Cold War 1950s, Walt longed to be an all-American boy, but was always the Indian to his friends’ cowboys and the “Kraut” to their

G.I. Joes.

When he turned 18, Walt enlisted and volunteered for Vietnam. “I wanted to finally be one of the good guys,” Walt said. “Service in the American military in a righteous cause would expunge my family’s past and earn our place in society.” He could not know that, instead, he would return with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), feeling less than ever like “one of the good guys.”

## The Warrior's Path

Our troops do not enlist because they want to destroy or kill. No matter the political climate, most troops seek to serve traditional warrior values: to protect the country they love, its ideals, and especially their families, communities, and each other. If they must kill or be killed, they need transcendent reasons to do so. Throughout history, the only reason for fighting that has survived moral scrutiny is a direct attack with real, immediate threat to one's people. PTSD is, in part, the tortured conscience of good people who did their best under conditions that would dehumanize anyone.

Almost all cultures, past and present, have had warriors. They have also had complex stories and rituals to help them recover from combat and

**Most conventional therapies teach healers to avoid talk of morality. But war is inherently a moral enterprise and veterans in search of healing are on a profound moral journey. Healers and communities must walk with them.**

guide them through the life cycle. The occurrence of warriors is so universal that depth psychologists understand Warrior to be one of our foundational psycho-spiritual archetypes.

In traditional cultures, boys and men studied a "warrior's path." In these societies a warrior was not the same as a soldier; not merely a member of a huge, anonymous military institution used for the violent execution of political ends. Rather, warrior was one of the foundational roles that kept societies whole and strong. Warriors were fundamentally protectors, not destroyers.

People respond to the same call today.

Michael, a Marine who served in Afghanistan, proudly declares that at age 18 he was the first in his state to enlist after 9/11. Nick, an army officer who served in Iraq, enlisted because of a lifelong desire "to be like Hector defending the gates of Troy."

Warriorhood, however, is not so valued or nurtured in modern society. "Warrior" is not even a recognized social class. A veteran, especially one with disabilities, appears to many, and sometimes to him or herself, as a failure in terms of normal civilian identity. Michael fears that, as an experienced combat veteran, the only place on the planet he now fits is in the French Foreign Legion.

## The Echoes of War

War abroad fosters war at home. When we go to war, we inevitably bring its violence and horror back to our homes and streets. We cannot help it.

Rather than feeling that he had restored his family's honor, Walt spent years ravaged by nightmares, homeless, abusing drugs and alcohol, and sitting with a shotgun in his mouth trying to find the will to end it all. He married and had children, then divorced and neglected his kids. He could not keep a job. He could not come home.

War echoes down the generations. Known or hidden, we all carry the wounds of war. Walt was wounded by his father's history. His children were wounded by his.

When a veteran has PTSD, his or her entire family and community are inevitably affected. The individual symptoms of PTSD—sleep disturbances, substance abuse, depression, and problems with intimacy, employment and authority—are the same symptoms that are epidemic in our society. When we take a close and unprotected look, we see: We are a nation and a planet of wounded warriors, their offspring, and their neighbors.

## Cleansing the Warrior

War poisons the spirit, and warriors return tainted. This is why, among Native American, Zulu, Buddhist, ancient Israeli, and other traditional cultures, returning warriors were put



In Sierra Leone, traditional purification rituals using ash soap have been an integral aspect of psychosocial healing and reintegration for girls forced to serve as child soldiers. Photo by Lindsay Stark

through significant rituals of purification before re-entering their families and communities. Traditional cultures recognized that unpurified warriors could, in fact, be dangerous. The absence of these rituals in modern society helps explain why suicide, homicide, and other destructive acts are common among veterans.

In Viet Nam Walt had exhumed bodies of enemy dead from mass graves and reburied them. He felt like he had dirtied and damaged his soul. Nick declared that, though he had wished to be a great champion of his people, “all they gave me was this dirty stinking little Iraq War.”

In traditional cultures, warrior cleansing was often guided by shamans, and particular shamans presided over “warrior medicine.” Among his many offices and honors, for example, Sitting

Bull served as Medicine Chief of the Hunkpapa Warrior Society, responsible for overseeing the spiritual lives and well-being of the society’s warriors. Sitting Bull considered this to be the most important of all the offices he held.

Walt entered individual and group psychotherapy for combat veterans. It helped to tell his stories, have his feelings and losses confirmed by other vets, and receive honor as part of a brotherhood. But he was in search of more cleansing, blessing, and soul healing than traditional therapy could provide. He eventually partnered with a Native American woman. He studied her culture, and participated in sweat lodges and other traditional rituals. He attended a Pow Wow where he was honored as a returned warrior. He was accepted by the Native community far more than he had been by mainstream America.

I annually lead healing journeys back to Viet Nam, and there, too, vets report feeling more welcomed and honored by their former foes than they have ever felt at home.

## A Double Wound

Sitting Bull and his warriors, and other bands from innumerable traditional cultures, were never plagued with self-doubt about the value of their mission, as many of our soldiers are today. In order to do battle with a whole heart, the danger and threat to one’s home must be real, and the people must experience it as immediate and about to threaten their total existence; there must be no alternative. A people and their warriors must be in unity.

The effect of that unity shows in Nguyen Van Tam, known as Mr. Tiger, a robust, friendly, and serene man of 87 living in Viet Nam’s Mekong Delta. He is a veteran of wars against the Japanese, French, and Americans. Though at war for a quarter century, he has no disturbing symptoms. “We Vietnamese,” he says, “do not have PTSD because we never hated Americans. We only fought to protect our families and homes from invaders.”

When, to the contrary, wars are based on false pretenses, a moral vacuum results. As Martin Luther King Jr. observed, troops then experience

“not simply the brutalizing process that goes on in any war,” but also “cynicism to the process of death, for our troops must know after a short time that none of the things we are fighting for are really involved.”

Walt explained, “I didn’t realize until it was too late that I was just like my father—a good man fighting on the wrong side for the wrong cause.” Moral trauma is at the core of PTSD. An idealistic and sincere young soldier discovering that he is in fact fighting for false or distorted political, economic, or historical agendas can experience deeper and more complicated psychic wounds than those traditional warriors experienced.

The severity and extent to which veterans suffer with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder is a direct response to our culture’s blindness about war’s true cost. PTSD is the expression of the anguish, dislocation, and rage of the self as it attempts to cope with its loss of innocence, reformulate a new personal identity and cultural role, and awaken from massive denial. Veterans with PTSD are people whose belief systems have been shattered. We can better understand PTSD as an identity disorder and soul wound rather than a stress and anxiety disorder, as it is presently classified. War dehumanizes anyone it touches, but especially a veteran who questions the cause he served.

Most conventional therapies teach healers to avoid talk of morality. But war is inherently a moral enterprise and veterans in search of healing are on a profound moral journey. Healers and communities must walk with them. As a society, we must honor those wounds in ways that recognize their depth and degree of psychic suffering.

## **Lifting the Burden**

Warriors in traditional societies served the need for protection, and all that was done was done in the tribe’s name. They had rituals transferring responsibility for actions during warfare from veterans to the entire culture. Ultimately leaders, not ordinary troops, were held responsible for the results of battle and for the deaths that occurred.

Our veterans cannot heal unless society accepts responsibility for its war making. To the veteran, our leaders and people must say, “You

did this in our name, because you were subject to our orders, and because we put you in untenable and even atrocity-producing situations. We lift the burden of your actions from you and take it onto our shoulders. We are responsible for you, for what you did, and for the consequences.”

Walt received this acceptance from Native American communities. In my seven trips to Viet Nam, and with every veteran and civilian I have met who has visited Viet Nam since the war, the Vietnamese people have offered such acceptance and forgiveness to any American returning to the country to reconcile. In contrast, since Afghanistan, Michael says, “I still love America, but America does not love me.”

Without this transfer of responsibility, the

**If we are to return war to its proper place as a last defense when absolutely necessary, we must heal the wounds of our soldiers and communities. We cannot achieve peace-making without first achieving true and comprehensive war-healing.**

veteran carries war’s secret grief and guilt for us all. Too many veterans collapse into a silent suffering disability and thus serve as our broken scapegoats while the rest of us proceed with “business as usual.” In contrast, during my healing retreats, veterans tell their stories, civilians speak of their lost loved ones, and everyone shares their damaged values and broken dreams. Finally, our vets enter the center of our circle and civilians pledge to accept responsibility for any harm done in their name and to help carry the veterans’ stories for the rest of their lives. By sharing this burden we become a community united in service to war-healing.

## Healing for All

We wish, as the gospel song says, “to study war no more.” But scholars count over 14,600 wars in the last 5,600 years of recorded history. War is so epidemic in its occurrence, devastating in its impact, and lasting in its aftermath, that we must study it and tend to it and treat it. If we are to return war to its proper place as a last defense when absolutely necessary, we must heal the wounds of our soldiers and communities. We cannot achieve peace-making without first achieving true and comprehensive war-healing.

Walt finally put away his shotgun and quit drinking. He enjoyed a successful relationship with his new partner and was adopted by her tribe and its warrior society. He took up a spiritual path that restored his belief in the goodness of life and order of the universe. He volunteered with more disabled veterans, visiting the infirm at his regional V.A. hospital and helping create annual veteran reunions. Both in therapy and beyond, we created rituals that allowed this soldier to find healing. The Native American and veteran communities helped support and bring this warrior’s wandering spirit home. In turn, Walt became a devoted advocate for other veterans more wounded than he. The disabled veteran became an elder warrior.

But war completed its damage. Only in his 50s, Walt died of Agent Orange-related cancer last year.

We cannot heal from war without involving the entire community and society, and without invoking transpersonal help. We must develop modern rituals that acknowledge the additional wounds caused by war fought for non-defense reasons. Much as we might disagree with a war, our rituals must include purification, public storytelling, and community acceptance of responsibility for what the soldier has done.

These war-healing rituals and practices serve us all. They bring home to us the need to break the cycles of war-making and violence both within the individual soldier and within

the society. When we return to our veterans their silenced voices, when we accept our true responsibility as individuals and communities, we will no longer see war as an adventure or a legitimate tool of power politics. Then, perhaps, we may see that all over our country and world, we share the same legacy of war-wounding. When we join together to address those wounds wherever they appear, we will finally “study war no more.”

I asked Walt’s permission to tell his story during our farewell visit in the hospital where he was dying of Agent Orange cancers. He was surprised at first, but finally said, “I was afraid my life was worthless. But please tell my story. Please make it mean something. Maybe it can help some other poor souls avoid my fate.”

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Edward Tick wrote this article as part of A Just Foreign Policy, the Summer 2008 issue of YES! Magazine. Edward is author of *War and the Soul* and three other books. He has worked with veterans for three decades and is director and senior psychotherapist of Soldier’s Heart: Veteran’s Safe Return Initiatives.

## Part 2: The Writing Prompt

Imagine what it's like to serve in war. Write a letter to a veteran, fictitious or someone you know. Whether or not you agree with the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, how might you welcome this soldier home, and express your support for the transition this soldier faces as he or she returns to civilian life?

## Part 3: Writing Guidelines

The writing guidelines below are intended to be just that: a guide. Please adapt to fit your curriculum.

- Provide an original essay title.
- Reference the article.
- Limit the essay to no more than 700 words.
- Pay attention to grammar and organization.
- Be original. Provide personal examples and insights.
- Demonstrate clarity of content and ideas.

Common Core State Standards:

This writing exercise meets several Common Core State Standards for grades 6-12, including W. 9-10.3 and W. 9-10.14 for Writing, and RI. 9-10 and RI. 9-10.2 for Reading: Informational Text. This standard applies to other grade levels. "9-10" is used as an example.

### **How did this lesson work for you and your students?**

Share your feedback with us and other teachers  
by leaving a comment on our website:

[www.yesmagazine.org/for-teachers/writing-competition-essays/writing-lessons/support-for-veterans](http://www.yesmagazine.org/for-teachers/writing-competition-essays/writing-lessons/support-for-veterans)

## Part 4: Evaluation Rubric

Our rubric should serve as a guide, not an unreasonable or rigid standard. You've probably encountered similar rubrics before, but here are two quick pointers for using ours:

1. In the left column, find the criteria for evaluating essays.
2. In the top row, find scores from 4 (outstanding) to 1 (poor).

	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Focus on topic</b>	There is one clear, well-focused topic. Main idea is supported by detailed information.	Main idea is clear, but general.	Main idea is somewhat clear, but there is need for more supporting evidence.	Main idea is not clear. There is a seemingly random collection of information.
<b>Organization</b>	Details are placed in a logical order and the way they are presented effectively keeps the reader's interest.	Details are placed in a logical order, but the way they are presented sometimes make the writing less interesting.	Some details are not in a logical or expected order, and this distracts the reader.	There is no clear introduction of the main topic or structure of the paper.
<b>Originality and strength of ideas</b>	Formulates a thought-provoking, well-developed, and fairly original position on an issue.	Writer takes a clear position on an issue, though it is not developed fully.	Writer's position is evident, though it is vague.	Fails to take a clear position, or writer contradicts herself.
<b>Evidence and/or reasoning</b>	Provides specific reasons and/or evidence that demonstrate understanding and insight.	Offers adequate – though perhaps vague or incomplete – supporting reasons and/or evidence	Provides less than adequate or contradictory reasons or evidence to support position.	Offers only general reasons or evidence or none, or offers evidence contradictory to the writer's thesis or main idea.
<b>Command of grammar and conventions</b>	Command of conventions exhibited. Creative word choice and varied sentence structure.	Correct use of grammar and conventions (for the most part).	Weak control of grammar and conventions. Errors are distracting.	Use of grammar and conventions interferes with understanding.
<b>Voice</b>	Author's voice is strong and engaging. Draws reader in.	Writing attracts reader's interest. Author's voice shows engagement with the topic.	Technically well written; however, author's voice is weak.	Writing fails to engage the reader. Does not demonstrate writer's interest in topic.

\* Adapted from "Rubric for Editorial – Commentary Essay" from LAEP.org and "6+1 Traits of Writing Rubric" from ReadWriteThink.org.



## Part 5: Sample Essays

### La Fuerza, “The Strength”

By Karla Gomez, Grade 8

An imagined letter to be sent to her cousin, a veteran.

Dear Private Eduardo D.,

You made it to the army, Cousin. You were the first one out of all the family to make it. Many others from our family have tried but they all eventually gave up because of racism. They said it was ironic for a Mexican to defend a country that does not accept us. You managed to persevere despite all those negative comments. You felt honored to fight to defend OUR country; you wanted to be a warrior—a good man for your family and country—because no matter what others say, this IS your country.

In the YES! Magazine article, “Heal the Warrior, Heal the Country,” Ed Tick tells the story of a German American named Walt. Walt enlisted in the Vietnam War to try to clear his family’s history. He wanted to finally be considered one of the good guys, and not have people judge him because of the deeds of Germans in the past. He entered the military without knowing he would come back traumatized from war and feeling worse than before.

Your story relates to his story because you enlisted to prove that being Mexican does not make a man incapable of showing patriotism for the country in which he lives. You enlisted to prove that not all Mexican Americans are criminals, as some people believe. You wanted to show them that you weren’t enlisting in THEIR Army but in OUR army.

You became the Mexican guy who was willing to sacrifice his life to save thousands more. You took the cold, the hot, the rain, the pain, and the bullets so others wouldn’t have to. Now, you feel like the naysayers were right: you weren’t meant to go to war for the United States of America, nor were you strong enough mentally and physically.

You had an entirely different picture of reality in your head, and you had to learn a new definition of strong. You went to fight for our country without realizing that the experience would leave you marked.

It will be hard to go back to the life you were living as a civilian before enlisting. I’ve seen you struggle day by day. You can’t close your eyes without seeing bombs go off, guns firing, and soldiers going down. You can’t seem to see yourself without guilt and shame. Our religion instilled in you that it is wrong to kill, but in a “kill or be killed” environment you had no choice.

You can’t hear a loud sound without getting scared. You scream because you don’t know what to do. You feel frustrated, like you are losing your family because you no longer have control over your actions or flashbacks. You’ve changed, and you feel like your family does not love the veteran you.

You can’t go back to the way you used to live because once you joined the army to fight for this country, you became a new man—a new person. Like Mike Corrado’s song “On My Watch Tonight” says, you were “broke down and built up and reborn a fightin’ man.”

As you face all of this pain, you don’t seem to recognize that I, one of your youngest family members, understand why you did everything you did at war. I welcome you right back into this family and into this country. I will never judge you, nor will I deny you. I will always be proud to consider you family.

You survived war for a reason: you are meant to continue your life. Remember “God only gives his toughest battles to his strongest soldiers.” Getting better after war is your toughest battle, and I know you can win it, Cousin.

I hope you see that you are not alone. You will always have your family and other veterans to discuss your troubles with. We will all love you through your battle with your mental and physical wounds. Hopefully you learn to love your veteran self. We refuse to judge you, so why judge yourself?

Sincerely,  
Your cousin Karla

# Dear Veteran

By Jim Xie, Pierre Elliot Trudeau High School

An imagined letter sent to a veteran.

Dear Veteran,

Nowadays, ordinary people like me scare from simple things, such as creaks from a floorboard or a passing shadow. Even things we cannot see, notions of the supernatural, elicit unbound fear. Yet we do not know true terror. Real terror. It may be described as the adrenaline of entering the battlefield, or a sinking feeling of helplessness as one watches those around him fall like dominoes, their eyes growing a depthless grey. You should know, after serving for what must seem like an eternity with death as a constant companion.

War. What a small word for what it means, what it is. War is often defined by trivial facts such as victor, date, and duration. However, I believe that the concept should instead be understood with the violence it embodies, the people it abducts, and the irrevocable aftermath that follows.

I think that war doesn't ever really change. In my opinion, things like war and terrorism are merely tangible manifestations of greed. Whether it's by fist or gun, the motive is always the same – a yearning for power, for control, for domination. Did you know that 14, 600 wars have occurred in the last 5, 600 years of recorded history? It's a wonder how something as simple as emotion can lead to the interminable struggling and deaths of millions. Maybe that's why it still exists today, in places such as Afghanistan and Iran. Forever and always, the effects of war will constitute one of society's biggest skeletons in the closet.

As much as I may think that war is abject, imagining what you went through is similar to contemplating what it is like to drown when

you have never been in water – it is impossible unless you experience it firsthand. As such, I will be careful not to remind you further of any pain you may have endured. Nevertheless, please accept my humblest congratulations on returning home safely. It is nice to see that you are safe, even though you are not without scars, both visible and hidden.

I read that veterans are often alienated from the rest of society, and are viewed by both others and themselves as failures in civilization. Although it may not be my place to say, to me, you are the exact opposite of a failure. You fought valiantly for your country, and in the process, you became more than a soldier – you became a warrior. Were you not fighting for something more than a simple political agenda? Were you not fighting to protect, not to destroy? Whatever you may feel, I implore you not to give up. The gravity of your absence – the void it would create – would bring much more sorrow than happiness. Wouldn't you agree that it is better to live, to fight to see another day?

I recognize that it may be extremely difficult for you to carry your wounds of war, and even more so to find their remedies. I am familiar with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, what it may do, and what it may cause. To witness violent death, or kill another person, steals one's innocence and leaves grievous wounds. In order to understand the depth of your psychic suffering, we – your family, friends, and community – will strive to share these burdens with you.

Know that you are not responsible, that you are blameless. We have sent you out to fight our war, and we take full responsibility for you and the repercussions of your actions. Deeply honoring your scars, we fully accept you as who you are – a survivor and a warrior. For every step you take in the moral journey to redefine your battered identity and values, we will walk alongside you, shoulder to shoulder. In

## Part 5: Sample Essays

*(Jim Xie letter continued)*

consolation and beyond, we will heal your eyes to look past the burdens of yesterday and into the pregnancy of tomorrow. After all, we are your neighbors, your brothers and sisters. In “a nation and a planet of wounded warriors, their offspring, and their neighbors,” we cannot help but to help each other.

Your friend,

Jim Xie

## Part 5: Sample Essays

# Silence, My Old Friend

By Blaine Stine, Northern Oklahoma College

An imagined letter to be sent to a fellow soldier.

Dear Brother or Sister,

You know me, but you do not know my name. I am the same as you. I have been to the fields of battle and lost friends. You and I are surrounded by an unseen barrier in the wind. Others see us but cannot hear our pleas for help. We have bled for their safety, but now threaten that safe little world ourselves. Our scars are not always visible or easily explained. Our wounds are buried deep within our own minds. With or without help, we must deal with our shattered lives. I offer what help I can from my scattered existence at the edge of a society that both adores and despises us.

Call out to me in the silence of this world; I will listen. You may even name me Silence. Embrace my silence and tell me your tale. I have seen all manner of depravity and destruction, so you cannot scare me away. There is no healing a hidden wound, so open yours to me and speak to my silence. Our society abandons us, but my silent vigilance still haunts you. They give money to charities and send us to doctors, but this is partially out of a sense of guilt, and not just their concern for us. I smile at their lonely guilt for ours is shared with each other. Many of them do not even realize their shame and are as distraught as us, but they do not know the reasons as we know them.

Society placates us; they say we are not at fault. Yes, we are at fault. We are to blame for every step we take and every breath we have stolen from others. We are guilty, even for the ones who deserved the ends they received. We are guilty and covered in blood, but we do not have to suffer this burden alone. This burden is shared by every society and culture that has ever

existed. They will not accept their share of the shame, but we will lay it on them nonetheless. We will share our stories together, even if they remain unheard to all but us.

Our guilt is confounded by our disease. Doctors spout off their research and say that we have 1,000 yards stares, shell shock, or post-traumatic stress disorder. I laugh at these flimsy excuses. We have seen Hell incarnate; naturally, we must be diseased for no “good man” would willingly suffer through such horror. Whatever our reasons, we good men and women choose this suffering. We fight to defend our loved ones from one threat or another, for traditions, or just to have somewhere to belong. It has always fallen to those like us so that the innocent can feel safe and guilt free. I will accept my guilt and yours as well, for we are brothers and sisters. I will not deny my brothers and sisters or claim they are diseased. We are all broken in one way or another. We know our pain, and together we still stand strong.

In his article for YES! Magazine “Heal the Warrior, Heal the Country,” Edward Tick wrote, “Throughout history, the only reason for fighting that has survived moral scrutiny is a direct attack with real, immediate threat to one’s people.” This is a childish dream because we know the truth: war has no moral compunction and truth is only decided by the victor after the war is over. Right and wrong are both meaningless points of view. If anything is “right,” it is that we, the battered souls left over from forgotten battlefields, bear witness to the horrors we have seen.

We must bear witness because history has taught us that forgetting leads to repetition. Our mission is to remember, and it does not end with coming home. Speak to your friend Silence and tell me your story. We will remember together.

Sincerely,  
Your Friend, Silence

## Part 5: Sample Essays

# Dear Emily

By Audrey Cameron, Grade 9

An imagined letter to be sent to a veteran friend.

Dear Emily,

I miss you like crazy. It's so strange to go about life without you! The mind plays tricks on you when you want to see someone as much as I want to see you. Sometimes I think I see you around—up the street or just around the corner—but you're always gone just as I catch up. Just another stranger with your frayed jeans and cat eye sunglasses. Who even wears glasses like that? Life feels so empty without your smiling face. I can't wait till you're back next week!

Your friend,  
Audrey

Dear Emily,

I am waiting for you to call so we can catch up, OK? I don't want it to be awkward tomorrow. My heart is ready to explode with relief! I have been so worried about you. I'm glad your tour is over so you can get back to normal life.

Your friend,  
Audrey

Oh Emily,

I am so sorry. I heard about the flashback you had on the way home from the airport. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is nothing to be

ashamed of. I know you can get through this. Please believe me when I say, I am here for you always.

Your friend,  
Audrey

Dear Emily,

The doctors won't let me see you. I guess only family for now. How are you feeling? I'm so sorry that I just assumed life would, or even could, go back to normal right away. I may not believe in the Afghan war, but your dedication inspires me so much.

Your friend,  
Audrey

Dear Emily,

I was at your mom's house today cleaning up your room for your return. I didn't know you kept that picture of us at graduation! They say I can visit on Wednesday. Is that alright with you? I read an article from YES! Magazine today called "Heal the Warrior, Heal the Country." The United States may be good at fighting wars, but we need to work on welcoming home vets. I am so proud of you and your strength.

Your friend,  
Audrey

Dear Emily,

It was so wonderful to see you today! With all that has been going on, I forgot how much I

## Part 5: Sample Essays

missed just being around you. I am glad you  
(*Audrey Cameron letter continued*)

are starting to feel like your normal self again.  
Remember, I just want to be there to support  
you in whatever ways you need.

Your friend,

Audrey

Dear Emily,

How is life at home again? I always find  
comfort in familiarity. Another source of  
comfort, if it isn't obvious by now, is writing.

Did you get the journal I left on your bed?  
I hope you can relax better at home than at  
the hospital. I have also been researching  
“returning veteran” sites online. You should  
take some time to look for anything you think  
might help you. Let me know if you want to  
talk about anything. I could never imagine the  
horrors of war or the pain or guilt or fear that  
you went through, but I can always listen as  
you try to work through it. You are stronger  
than I could ever be.

I am so honored to know you and to call  
you my best friend.

Peace and love,

Audrey

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## Part 5: Sample Essays

# Dear Hero

By Cheyanne Marie Smith, Northern Oklahoma College

An imagined letter to be sent to a friend and hero.

Dear Friend,

I don't know how to start this letter other than to say, "Dear Friend," or perhaps I should say, "Dear Hero," for without you, I would not be here today. Without any soldiers, I would not be here. I owe you an apology. Like many other Americans (most all), I have forgotten why I am allowed to live a "normal American life." Why I have my freedoms, my rights, and the privilege to live life without fear. I know it comes with a cost—nothing is free. My freedom in exchange for yours. Dear Hero...How are you now that you're back?

Do you mind if I ask a personal question? What do you do on the Fourth of July? Do you sit in the commissary and remember the hot dogs and hamburgers your dad used to make? Do you recall the vibrant colors of the exploding fireworks? Do you and your fellow soldiers miss it? Do you wish you could be a child again so you could forget the images left in your mind from the hell you just walked through? Dear Hero...How are you now?

My grandfather was a soldier, just like you. He was brave and strong, yet quiet and unattached. He had fought in the worst battles in Vietnam. He rarely spoke, but I recall his deep voice asking me as a young child if I wanted an ice cream cone. Growing up, I never knew what he had endured: the horrors he saw, the things he could not forget, the nightmares he had that woke my grandma. He was always just Grandpa. I never knew he had PTSD until after he was gone. It makes me wonder, honestly wonder, What could he not forgive

himself for? What thoughts crossed his mind as he condemned himself guilty and created his own hanging? What regrets made him want to leave his family, his children, grandchildren, and wife forever? Did he think of me before it was over? Did he not know that he was a hero? Please, do not let this be you. Dear Hero...How are you now?

Dear Hero, do you miss school? You probably hated tests, just like I do. Will you come back to school? Perhaps you can join me at my college. We have a nice, small campus nestled in a small town. I work in the library. Four times a week, I watch students scramble in and out of our little library; they carry packs slung over one shoulder and clank away at the keyboard like a million metal hammers. School makes you forget the troubles of the world. This is what we must get you back to. This is where you belong—home in America. Dear Hero...How are you now?

Can I ask another personal question? What did you want to be when you grew up? Was it a soldier? Or, was it a different career? Did you want to be a chef, accountant, stylist, or lawyer? Maybe a technician, model, actor, or politician? Was it this, and not school that you missed while you were away serving us? This is where you belong—with your dreams, becoming what you wanted to be when you grew up. Dear Hero...How are you now?

I read an article about you and other heroes like you. It said you struggled, it said you hurt. It said you felt bad for your actions. Dear Hero, is this true? How could you, when none of this was your fault? Why feel guilty for the actions of the government and for the evils of the world which none of us can control? You are a soldier, not a killer. You are not the enemy, you are the hero. Dear Hero...How are you now?

Dear Hero, never give up. Come back home. Come back to what you have always wanted. Come back to your dreams. Remember who you are. You are a hero. Dear Hero, welcome back.

Oh, and before I go: Dear Hero...Thank you.