

Defending Liberty & Freedom - Northwood University Veterans Day Observance
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Sergeant Gregory Wentz, U.S. Marine Corps/Retired & NU ADP Student

It is truly a pleasure to be here today, and I want to sincerely thank Dawn and Marla for inviting me to speak at this great ceremony in honor of all of our veterans whose sacrifices have made it possible for us to be here today.

If there is one thing I would like to leave you all with, it is the understanding of the mettle that our men and women in the armed forces possess. In doing so, I would also like you to be understanding and patient with these young men and women as they return home, for it is not an easy transition.

I have fought side-by-side with some of the bravest and most courageous men imaginable, and because of them, you can rest assured that we will always be safe.

To help you understand what I mean by this, I would like to give you some examples of the hardships our troops endure while overseas.

While in Iraq, my unit was charged with occupying a city in the al-Anbar Province that contained no coalition forces. Our mission was to chase out the insurgents, establish a police force, and be the watchful eye while this new police force established itself.

Needless to say, the first several months brought many tough times, and many losses. Our missions consisted of raids through the entire city that lasted anywhere from 12 to 36 hours straight. During times of rest, men would be on guard while the others attempted to sleep, but the anxiety was too much for anyone to close their eyes for more than a minute or two.

Often times, I would look across an alley way and see one of the members of my team hitting himself in the face just to stay awake so he could protect his brothers-in-arms. Others who were normally not smokers would chain smoke cigarettes, while making sure to cover the glowing cherry so as not to give away our position, just to get a buzz so their mind would be alert for another 15 minutes or so. Some even chewed coffee grounds, or stuck them in their lip like chewing tobacco to get a higher concentration of caffeine into their system.

These raids were constant for the first three months while we established our presence. The numbers of wounded and killed mounted as our bodies grew weaker from the toll of long days and sleepless nights. We often carried our body weight in gear as we ran through the streets from house to house looking for weapons caches, or intentionally drawing fire so that we could locate the hostile threats.

While we were all brothers, tensions rose as the mental stress took its toll. Marines fought amongst each other due to the stress of witnessing the fallen. Many wanted revenge for their lost comrades, others tried to talk sense into them.

These are extremely tough times for men as young as 18. Not long before their time in Iraq, they were just young high school kids. Less than a year later they are thrown into a world that couldn't be more different than the one they were previously accustomed to.

This is the courage and fortitude I previously mentioned. These young men were not worried about what they were going to be doing in 10 years; they were only concerned with surviving the next 10 minutes. They did not care about some petty nicotine addiction that could impact their life down the road, so long as it kept them awake so they could stand watch over their brothers that night.

I now want to tell you a story of two Marines. Two Marines whose dedication to duty led them to an untimely death; these Marines are Corporal Jonathan Yale and L.Cpl. Jordan Haerter, and I am going to outline the last six seconds of their lives.

Haerter was a 20 year old from Virginia who was raised in a very poor family. He had a young wife and child as well as his mother and younger sister who lived with him. He provided for everyone on a base salary of \$20,000 per year.

Yale was from a very typical, middle-class family in New York. He had a loving, patriotic family who supported his every decision.

These two Marines were very different in almost every aspect of their lives, and if it wasn't for their decision to enlist in the Marine Corps, they would have never met.

They started their watch one night out in front of an outpost in the notoriously dangerous city of Ramadhi, which is situated in the al-Anbar province of Iraq. Ramadhi is the single deadliest city since the wars started in Afghanistan and Iraq.

While starting their watch, their orders were simple: "Let no unauthorized personnel or vehicle pass."

Their job was to protect 50 Marines and 100 Iraqi Police who were sleeping in the makeshift barracks behind them.

Only a few minutes after they took their position in a small, wooden guard house that is just large enough to fit two young men, but just small enough to make it uncomfortable, a large blue truck turned into the alley leading to their hut. Six seconds.

The vehicle accelerated as it began to navigate the maze of jersey walls that were set up to keep vehicles from gaining too much speed. This alley was only about 60 yards in length.

Only a couple of seconds after the vehicle entered the alley, the Marines came to the same unspoken conclusion. They presented their weapons and opened fire. They had 4 seconds left to live.

At this point, a video tape captured the Iraqi guards at the gate fleeing. They knew exactly what was taking place, and like the sane men they are, they ran. Yale and Haerter, however, did not even shift their weight.

For the next three seconds, the Marines' bullets shattered the windshield of the blue truck while it came to a slow, rolling stop at the gate. At this point, the two Marines had still not moved. They continued firing at the man who came to kill their brothers, and they were not going to let that happen. They now had only one second left to live.

The truck, now stopped at the entrance to the gate, explodes. The two Marines go to their God, but the 50 Marines and 100 Iraqi Police behind them are safe.

When the investigation was conducted, the Iraqi guards who fled gave their statements, and were confused as to why these two Marines would literally stand there and stare death in the face. One Iraqi guard said "Why did they not run? Any normal man would have run to save his own life. No sane man would have done what they did. They saved us all." What he did not realize is that Marines are not normal.

These are the young men and women who have volunteered to watch over you. They have volunteered to do the unthinkable. They have answered the call of their country, so feel safe; and feel privileged to have these young men who are willing to make the ultimate sacrifice.

As a part of my new occupation, I work with these veterans as they attempt to get help for the issues they have returned home with. Unfortunately, most of the help these veterans receive is from other veterans who have the same problems they do. It is time that we as a whole step up to the plate. At every conference and gathering where I speak, I am floored by the amount of veterans who are there to support other veterans, but it is time for everyone to have a hand in this. These men and women answered the call of their Country...now I hope you will answer theirs.

Ladies and gentlemen, it has been my distinct honor to have been here with you here today. I thank you all very much for coming out and showing your support. God bless.

About the speaker: Sergeant Gregory Wentz served in the United States Marine Corps for five years and was honorably released in 2008. Today, he works for the Department of Veterans Affairs and is a student in Northwood University's Adult Degree Program in West Palm Beach, Florida pursuing a BBA in Management.