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Good morning. Thank you to the sub-committee for inviting me to testify today. I am pleased to testify in support of the National Endowment for the Humanities on behalf of the National Humanities Alliance.

I am a student at Jefferson Community College in Watertown, NY--home to Fort Drum. I am a retired Navy Veteran, an aircraft mechanic by trade. I have been deployed twelve times including a seven-month deployment to Iraq and a thirteen-month deployment to Afghanistan. Last year, the college offered a class tailored for military combat Veterans called Dialogues of Honor and Sacrifice. The class was made possible by a National Endowment for Humanities grant. This program was intended to not only teach about the history and literature of three different eras of war, but to also look at art, poetry, music and short stories from each war.

I needed a three-credit history class to fulfill my basic requirements for my degree but this subject was so interesting to me because I wanted to better understand my Uncle's experience. He is an Army Veteran who had been shot on two different occasions during the Vietnam War and was awarded a Purple Heart medal for each occurrence. As a child I remember my uncle as being intimidating, quiet and a scary man who wanted nothing to do with an eleven-year-old kid, blood relative or not. We hadn't spoken more than two full sentences to one another by the time I left to join the Navy in 1996. I visited my uncle every chance I could during my time in the Navy, but nothing was as special as the last few visits after I had experienced real combat deployments. Now, seeing me as a fellow combat veteran, he let down his guard. He smiled, he laughed and even joked around. My uncle was now able to talk, even if just a little bit, about his experience in Vietnam. Many years had passed but I could see his memories were still raw when he mustered the strength to talk about it. Knowing I could relate, and maybe understand, he let me see the guilty pain he had been harboring for years. Guilty for wanting to be proud of wearing his Army uniform even after being spat on and disrespected when he stepped off the plane. Guilty for being able to come back home to his family, unlike so

many brothers who lost their lives in front of him. During that time, I could only slightly, superficially, relate to the severity of horrors he faced during the Vietnam war, but I could begin to understand.

It would take another deployment to Afghanistan, this time as a civilian contractor, this time for thirteen months to realize that my uncle and myself were not so different. When I returned from Afghanistan and started my new life as a civilian, it was only then when I started to self-medicate with alcohol. If I wasn't drinking alcohol, I was working out six times a week for about two hours a day. I worked out to the point where I was exhausted and sleeping throughout the night became easier. My relationship with my husband, children, and family were severely strained. My children, especially my oldest, were afraid of me when I got angry. I could not wrap my head around why I felt the way I did, lost, alone, and misunderstood.

When I learned about the The Dialogues of Honor and Sacrifice course in 2018 I hoped it would help me understand more about my uncle but did not realize how it would help me as well. The course began two weeks before Jefferson Community College's 2018 fall semester with a weeklong trip that took both professors and students to Gettysburg, Arlington National Cemetery and Washington D.C. for guided tours. We learned in great detail the history of every site we visited and during that trip we bonded quickly, forming a strong cohesive unit. Although we were strangers, we entrusted in one another taking turns talking and listening. Not talking over one another, not "one upping" the last but combat soldier to combat soldier. Sometimes no words needed to be spoken, only the presence of a fellow combat soldier who understood. Deep conversations told and heard in complete silence with just looks, body language and reactions. Like a secret language no one else could understand but we were all fluent.

We were required to keep a daily journal throughout the trip. Quickly this went from a task to a very helpful tool, one that I still use today. Being able to recount the D.C. trip and to analyze our personal experiences in relation to the class curriculum is just one great outcome of the journal. There was a strong sense of brother and sisterhood amongst us all and new friends made by the end of the trip.

When we returned, fall semester began immediately, the trip still fresh in our minds. We dove straight into the history of the Civil, Vietnam, and Iraq wars. We studied contrasts between

the three wars but much more so we studied the similarities. To our amazement, we realized that these soldiers were not so different from us. Experiences in Vietnam, the battle and firefights in Iraq were all so similar. Being veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, we could relate to stories from a Civil War soldier. We could understand the struggles of Vietnam soldiers. This camaraderie across decades, across conflicts was amazing. It's a special bond most could never fathom or even hope to understand, and we were blessed with it, right from the start with so much more to come.

We also dove into related literature, poetry, music, movies and art. While exploring literature and poetry we read *Here Bullet*, a book compiled of short poems. One of our exercises was to create our own poem, this was intimidating at first, but became an amazing, touching and lasting experience. There is something liberating about pouring all your emotions onto a page and arranging it so that it rhymes, makes sense and the reader can understand. It goes so far as to be labeled as therapeutic and calming. Eventually we moved onto the book, *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien. It became everyone's favorite because every student carried something special in their combat war zone. We could all relate to one another across different branches of the military, different theaters of war and even drastically different duties while at war. Moving towards the last week of the course we entered the world of art, the most exciting part for me and one that I had been looking forward to since the beginning. Every student was given a blank mask, the objective was to decorate it as we saw ourselves. That became the most powerful outlet I have ever experienced. The introspection and self-evaluation produced every raw emotion I had ever felt, and they poured onto my mask. It was evident in other student's art, their reaction and the energy they put into this project that they had a similar experience with this.

The syllabus surely did not reflect therapy or liberation as a goal, but the class really delivered. It has helped me face my past and realize that none of us are alone in the battle of normalcy. There are so many things that I loved about this class. We, as veterans, were able to lend our expertise and explain in depth military structures, rank, conduct, courtesies, etc. The curriculum allowed everyone to engage and like any good military leader (in this case it was every single student) we challenged one another often over many subjects in the class. This forced everyone to try different perspectives and think differently than they normally may.

During the last week of the course, we had the privilege of speaking with two Vietnam Veterans. My initial drive for pursuing this program was upon me, trying to understand my uncle, hoping to learn how to bond with him. I learned horrific details from these Vietnam Veterans but ones I wanted to hear; ones I knew would help me relate to my uncle. After reading my journal I began to realize that searching for a better understanding about my uncle was not going to be impossible as I had originally thought. He and I were not so different but very much alike. Our lives and experiences paralleled each other at times and occasionally even mirrored each other. My experiences maybe were less gruesome and less drastic, I feel they could never compare to his, but in the end he and I carry the same demon from war, we are kept awake at night for the same reasons. But through a combination of the course and therapy, my night terrors have lessened dramatically, anxiety attacks are almost gone, I still do not like big crowds, but I have learned to work through my fears. My relationships with my family both immediate and extended have improved and is no longer strained. For the first time in my life, I have been at peace with myself and I no longer self-medicate to drown out the noises in my head.

I am so grateful for the opportunity I had to take this course and appreciate the support this sub-committee has offered the NEH in recent years, making programs like this one possible. To ensure that more veterans, and all Americans can benefit from humanities as I did, I ask that you fund the NEH at \$170 million for Fiscal Year FY 2020.

Thank you for your time.