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English 201

25 October 2014

Other than Honorable Discharge Synthesis Essay

As servicemen return home from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars they deserve our upmost respect and gratitude. That is fair considering the sacrifices they have made in the defense of our country. It is understood that veterans should receive what is entitled to them such as federal benefits and medical treatment in order to help them cope with possible psychological and physical trauma they may have endured. They require these benefits to be able to economically begin their new lives as civilians. However, some veterans who have received an other than honorable discharge have been stripped of benefits. Phillip Carter, an Iraq War veteran, the director of the veterans research program at the Center for a New American Security as well as OP-ED contributor for *The New York Times* shares this sentiment. He writes, “we are turning our backs on hundreds of thousands of veterans who were discharged “under conditions other than honorable” and so do not qualify as veterans under federal law.” Carter asserts that the nation has ignored these veterans solely on their discharge. Through the knowledge that I have gained on this issue I believe that veterans who receive other than honorable discharge have been denied benefits they would otherwise enjoy given a different designation. While they may not have garnered an honorable discharge they still have made the same sacrifices, both physically and mentally as those whom are enabled with the same government benefits.

An other than honorable discharge is issued to soldiers who do not follow military protocol. An *about.com* article called “Military Justice 101 - Part III” describes the specific circumstances this discharge is substantiated under. The article states that in order for a serviceman to earn said discharge he/she would have to commit actions that are “based upon a pattern of behavior that constitutes a significant departure from the conduct expected of members of the Military Services.” Behavior associated with members of the military are known to be in the nature of honor and respect. This form of conduct is to be strictly adhered to by all members of the armed forces. For a soldier to stray away from these principles indicates that they have committed crimes of a volatile nature. This means that offenses which are under the guise of an other than honorable discharge can be extreme. Some of the offenses as noted in the article are “offense(s) involving moral turpitude” and “mutiny or spying.” These violations implicate that a soldier exhibits acts of violence towards others and is a threat to national security. These breaches of conduct undeniably warrant an other than discharge. However, a majority of violations that have been perpetrated by troops have been petty which help in garnering many other than discharges for soldiers who do not truly deserve it.

It is unnerving that most offenses that warranted the other than honorable discharge were minor. The types of infractions and the differences between minor and major ones are described in Phillip Carters piece “The Vets We Reject and Ignore”. He illustrates how one in seven of those discharged garner criminal conviction while others were minor infractions of military discipline such as missing duty or using drugs and alcohol. Only a small handful of the soldiers whom amass a less than honorable discharge truly deserved it. Essentially, the soldiers are pooled together and basically designated with the same discharge even though their actions were

in complete contrast. When criminal action is perpetrated by a serviceman it needs to be addressed accordingly. If they gain a less than honorable discharge due to serious misconduct, an argument can be made that they effected this result. However, in many cases this wayward behavior can be attributed to physical and psychological damage accrued on the battle field. More often than not the reasons behind these smaller violations are due to combat stresses particularly Post Traumatic Stress disorder and Traumatic Brain Injuries. As Phillips states, “an estimated 500,000 troops are thought to have PTSD or TBI.” Many troops suffer from these conditions evidenced by the high number presented in researches. Troops with an other than honorable discharge suffer more from problems associated with these conditions as they do not have medical benefits to help treat these issues. It is disheartening that the mental health of these troops is jeopardized to this extent and it is further insulting that these conditions are not tended to.

Issues associated with PTSD and Traumatic Brain Injuries have plagued many veterans. Veterans who received a less than honorable discharge are the ones who feel these issues the most as they are deprived of any government benefits which can aid in their treatment. In Dave Phillips *The Gazette* article “ Other then Honorable”, Kash Alvaro a twenty-four year old veteran of the war in Afghanistan has both Post Traumatic Stress as well as Traumatic Brian injuries from an IED explosion that occurred in front of him. He received a less than honorable discharge due to behaviors associated to PTSD and TBI. The military failed him first by failing to provide him with services that could potentially alleviate his symptoms, then betrayed him by giving him the discharge designation they did, and finally his designation robbed him of being viewed as a veteran thus denying him benefits. This in turn leads to random seizures that land

him in the emergency room regularly. As Alvaro's story in the article suggest that the loss of much needed benefits have resulted in his condition deteriorating. Alvaro's situation is frustrating. There is no doubt the he served his country because he has both the mental and physical scars as proof. His chance at a possible recovery has been hampered by his inability to gain benefits due to the fact that he unjustly received an other than honorable discharge. In essence his sacrifice does not matter. The opportunity for him to pay for treatments that could save his life have been virtually stripped. Alvaro's story is only one of many similar to his. Alvaro like many veterans has experienced homelessness since being discharged. However, it can be inferred that this problem plagues veterans with an other than honorable discharge the most as they do not qualify for housing due to their discharge.

A vast number of the homeless are comprised of war veterans but most recently many Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have joined the ranks of the homeless. In his article "Veterans more likely to be homeless, study says" for *USA Today* William M. Welch writes about a government study that found that "136,334 veterans spent at least one night in a homeless shelter — a count that did not include homeless veterans living on the streets." These statistics point to how massive the problem of homelessness has become for these veterans. We can only surmise that this is a situation encountered at a higher rate by those veterans that are discharged as other than honorable discharge. The study also found that "11,300 younger veterans, 18 to 30, were in shelters at some point during 2009." There is an appalling number of young veterans who are homeless as evidenced by this number. It is demoralizing considering how young they are. These young veterans lives are doomed before they even begin. It can be assumed that it is intolerable for those who have it compounded with an other than honorable discharge because of the

difficulties that such a designation creates. As stated in Carters article former troops “end up in distress or on the streets, their communities must bear this burden alone”. An other than honorable discharge has forced veterans to rely on their communities which often are not compassionate and are already feeling the burden of homelessness of other members of society. Soldiers have fought valiantly for our nation and they should not have to resort to living on the street. Without government benefits, they have been put in a position where being homeless is a part of routine living. The struggle for troops with an other than honorable discharge usually begins while they as still enlisted as they get caught up in military politics.

During the Iraq and Afghanistan wars the number of misconduct related discharges have skyrocketed. Dave Phillips of *The Gazette* states, “ the annual number of misconduct discharges is up more than 25 percent Army-wide since 2009.” That number is unsettling. A his high number can lead to someone to interpret that this statistic will increase in the future. Phillips also writes that “more than 76,000 soldiers have been kicked out of the Army since 2006.” It’s awful knowing that there is a sharp increase in veterans returning home without benefits and affordable medical treatment to assist them in their transition. The basis for the increase in numbers is pressure to decrease the number of soldiers as well as save money. As stated in *The Gazette* article, the Army aims “to cut the force by 80,000 troops by 2017, and top officials said they may cut an additional 100,000 because of mandated federal budget cuts.” The agenda of the U.S Military is to save money and not waste time in properly designating the correct discharge for servicemen. As a result, many troops amass an other than honorable discharge and contend with a difficult future without the benefits they fought so hard for. The incorrect labeling are a result of their superiors inability to distinguish a bad soldier from damaged one.

The trouble for many veterans originates during their tour of duty as they are misunderstood by commanding officers. It seems that commanding officers are poorly educated in the required skills to adeptly communicate with their men and properly evaluate their needs. The commanders' inability to decipher the signals that point to those soldiers who require services leads to mislabeling them as bad soldiers. Consequently, this translates into improper discharge designations. Kash Alvaro from Phillips *The Gazette* article is an example of these circumstances. His former Sargent Daniel Davids claimed "He was a dirt bag". His former squad leader epitomizes the thought process that many had as related to soldiers' behaviors they did not understand. Alvaro is quoted as saying "They thought I was a malingerer" and "They'd say things like 'worthless soldier, you're just garbage; I don't know why you are in the Army.'" His superiors ostracized him rather than take the necessary steps help him. In his time of need Kash was abandoned presumably due to the ignorance of his superiors. Alvaro is representative of soldiers such as himself who suffer the stigma of being branded as a bad soldier due to extenuating issues, which in turn causes them to receive an other than honorable discharge.

We don't have to look far to encounter soldiers who are affected by the consequences of being discharged other than honorable because they are found amongst friends, family, and neighbors. Studies and statistics prove that we have witnessed the condemnation of veterans under such a discharge. Menial actions carried out on behalf of soldiers in comparison to the grand scheme of war should not be punished forever. It is as though all their sacrifices are meaningless and they have been erased. It seems to me, responsibility lies with military officials to properly analyze and classify veterans under the appropriate discharge. This is imperative as it

has become evident that soldiers who are assigned an other than honorable discharge encounter a life of hardship due loss of federal benefits.

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