**Poetry from Daily Life: When veterans learn to wield words, they save lives**

By Tina Hacker

*My guest this week for Poetry from Daily Life is Tina Hacker, who lives in Leawood, Kansas. Tina began writing poetry in her sophomore year at the University of Illinois, which led to a career editing and writing for a major corporation. Her works have been published in a wide variety of journals and anthologies. She likes free verse best but dips her toes in other forms like Fibonacci. Tina says that working on a new book is both joyous and excruciating. Two examples are "GOLEMS" (poetry about this folk character from Jewish folklore) and "Listening to Night Whistles" (poetry covering a variety of topics, including a true story about the Holocaust). ~ David L. Harrison*

**Saving lives, line by line, stanza by stanza**

Poetry saves veterans’ lives. I have edited veterans’ poetry for a national magazine called Veterans’ Voices for over 30 years, so I have an up-front seat to this. Veterans often reveal that they have considered or attempted to kill themselves. But this stopped for some when they discovered an alternative: writing about the emotions and experiences that prompted suicidal thoughts. Very often, they write poems. And more important to many than the writing itself is the sharing of their feelings with other veterans, encouraging them to reconsider their actions. A vet writes, ”Let me help you;/you’re not alone.”

Through writing poetry, veterans evoke their thoughts in nearly endless ways. One vet writes, “We are left to care for each other.” This sharing is a way of unburdening feelings that have haunted them for decades. Quoting a famous axiom, a vet writes “Courage is not the absence of fear” adding, “but rather bringing your fear into submission, /taming the lion within.”

Some veterans express wonder at how young they were when they were drafted. One writes that he was called to fight, “Only twelve months before/we had dates for the prom.” Others write about injuries, recovery and health. Poetry gives injured veterans the ability to walk or run without legs or arms. Poems about mental health offer veterans the chance to talk about subjects they may not be comfortable discussing in person. Of course, PTSD is a problem in all the services. “Not all wounds are visible,” one vet writes.

Coming home and leaving home — the transition between military life and civilian life — are major concerns. Sometimes the reunion is joyous; sometimes it’s not. A vet asks, “Who am I?”

There is much concern about remembrance with many poems about the Vietnam Wall, national cemeteries, and how loved ones remember soldiers who fell. Veterans write poems about the need for the government to better remember and honor the fallen, while other poems express appreciation for government measures to preserve the past.

The subject of race occurs frequently. Equality is often emphasized. One vet writes, “Brown, Black, Asian, Indian or White are all in this battle of survival;” Another’s poem says, “As soldiers we were all brothers;/we did not see different colors in our skin.”

Women veterans often write about topics that are unique to them. There is still current writing about sexual harassment and abuse and treatment not equal to that of men. But women have the same experiences and emotions as men and often write about the importance and impact of their service. One vet writes, “Do not pigeonhole us./We are survivors.”

The veterans’ subjects for poems include many things they care deeply about: the flag, freedom, pro- and anti-government and the military, spouses and sweethearts, nature, religion and more — like riding a Harley Davidson! But what counts most isn’t subjects. It’s the veterans themselves and how poetry plays a healing role, helping them to cope and thrive.

*Note: All the quoted material comes from Veterans’ Voices magazine.*

*Tina Hacker has been poetry editor of Veterans’ Voices magazine since 1976 and played a major role in the revival of The Writers Place, which is at the center of the area’s literary scene. She is a four-time Pushcart Prize nominee, was a finalist in New Letters and George F. Wedge competitions, won the prestigious Matrix Honor Award and was named Editor’s Choice in two literary journals. She has authored three books of poetry.*