KENNETH WITZ

Kenneth Witz is a graduate of McHenry High School West, where he played varsity baseball team and was a member of Math Club. Kenneth is getting his degree in mechanical engineering, and he hopes to design more efficient cars and machines to improve the environment. Kenneth wrote his narrative because he wants to help the general population understand what our troops go through, especially as seen through a young adult's eyes.

Kenneth wrote this essay for Nicole Smith's English 103 course in the fall of 2010.

Note: “Live in the Now” received the second place award in the Y1 Writes: A Collection of Student Essays contest.
We all stood tall like a group of lifeless creatures. As the morning sun draped over us, a hundred blank faces stood beside me. I felt like a statue, hearing the voices and seeing the emptiness inside everyone standing next to me, but I could not recall what was being said. Each of us had crispy uniforms with a thick coat of dust and salt imbedded into them and ourselves from the endless desert days. Though the sun was surly blazing, it seemed like a thick, saturated raincloud hanging above us as we each took turns sharing memories and remembering one of our brothers.

The previous morning was like any other. We rose early as usual, full of motivation and dirty jokes. One by one, we crept out of our manmade ditches. After brushing my teeth and shaving, I met up with a few good friends at a makeshift picnic bench full of slivers. As always, it was hot and extremely dry. The ground was covered in very fine sand that resembled moon dust. Each of us looked a few shades darker due to the many coats of sweat and dust that sunk into our young, but experienced, faces. I fired up a cigarette, and my good friend Chris established his presence with some stupid John Wayne quote from a war movie. Chris stood tall and frail and wore government issued eyeglasses that we referred to as “BCGs,” or birth control goggles. He looked nerdy but when it came to mortars, he had it down to a science. He had pasty white skin and elongated monkey arms. His hair was short and dry like hay from the parched desert air. For such a tall goofy character, he could really suck down a beer and talk some smack. Naturally, he was a Marine.

“When we get back, bro, we’re going to Vegas,” he said.
“Don’t forget your diaper this time,” I jokingly replied, as Chris was known for having an accident once in a while after a long night of drinking.

Occasionally, we spoke about all of the crazy and childish havoc we wanted to cause as soon as we got back to the States. We talked about college, parties, cars, beer, and babes. You would be surprised, too, at how many luxuries, such as carpeting, beds, and hot showers, that you never knew you took for granted. Regardless of the situation or plan we discussed, we both chose this path, and we both were going to get through it together. As other members of our platoon showed up, we received our patrol order and began to plan routes, checkpoints, and areas of interest that we would investigate later that day.

We were then ordered to drive along a route frequently littered by roadside explosives and hostiles. We were victorious in our share of
skirmishes along this route, and unlike you would expect, we enjoyed them. This action was a bit more exhilarating than pacing around the blazing Syrian Desert in hopes of a few pop shots for twelve hours on end. We loaded up our armored vehicles with ammunition, radio equipment, food, and maps. Chris and I carried cases of water encrusted in sand from an earlier storm. The trucks were tan and each one told its own story with the cosmetic damages it had obtained from a few years at war. Inside, each was littered with thousands of dollars-worth of computers and equipment that I thought only existed in the movies. The seats were a faded olive green with scattered rips and tears; the glass sat a robust five inches thick, daring for someone to make an attempt to penetrate it. The trucks crouched low and wide with a stiff suspension made to handle the rigorous terrain that we constantly covered. Once full, there was barely enough room inside to turn my head and look out the windows.

Sharing a hot bottle of water, Chris and I sat down, leaning on the tires of our vehicle, waiting for the order to move out. As we rested with the sun pounding down on our faces, the mail boy walked up and handed Chris a letter. His eyes sparkled with joy. I could tell it was from his girlfriend, whom he had been with for the past few years. “Check this out,” he said as he handed me a small wallet-sized photo. It was a photo of his two-year-old daughter wearing a shirt that read: “My Daddy is a Marine.” She shared her smile with her dad, as well as her dirty blonde hair.

“As soon as we’re back, I’m going to ask her to marry me,” Chris stated.

“It’s about time,” I griped. He was always talking about asking his girlfriend to marry him but could never seem to work himself up to it, even after his beautiful baby girl was born. Now, he said he was ready and that there wasn’t a better time to ask her, considering that his contract would be over a few months after our return from war. Chuckling, I imagined how fun the wedding would be when we got back.

Minutes later, we were given the go-ahead to push out for the day and begin our daily procedures. We performed radio checks and obtained accountability of each member in our vehicle. We fired up the diesel engines and started moving through the thick, unforgiving dust. I could tell we were out of the green zone due to a plethora of trash and broken down vehicles that were scattered alongside the roads. The ground was lumpy and shook the dust loose from inside our vehicle. Though we did the same thing each day for the past seven months, I never got fully accustomed to the heat. We reached our destination and posted vehicles with turret gunners along a main road while the rest of us began an eight-hour foot patrol through town. By that time, I could feel the grittiness in my teeth from all of the sand I had ingested. The thick, pungent stench of
burnt garbage, mixed with sizzling temperatures and a full pack, caused instant frustration. My stiff pants made raw meat of my tired, sweaty legs as I meticulously panned the area in search of threats. Chris was right beside me on the other side of the street, doing the same. The locals were so used to us they rarely acknowledged that we were there. There was always a lot going on around us, which made it difficult to react to hostile situations. Kids running amok, vendors selling produce, and families traveling along the road were a daily occurrence. Tall palm trees rose high into the hazy, brown sky. Instead of tumbleweeds, waste scraps trickled along the desert floor. The females wore long, colorful burkas. The men wore curtain-like attire that looked like an old drape. Their heads housed turbans of many colors that would match their outfits. It was obvious the desert had taken its toll. Along their eyes, deep leathery wrinkles spider webbed up to their heads. Their hands were weather beaten and powdery.

After we were a few miles into town, a barrage of lead began to pierce the air beside us. We located where the volley came from and decided to take position on top of an old abandoned building made of brittle adobe that crumbled as we ran up the stairs. As soon as we reached the top, we retaliated with our own barrage of bullets. The sound was deafening, and the taste of burnt gunpowder invaded my mouth. With each shot, the sights of my rifle would slightly bounce up, only to be fired again as soon as they fell back onto my targets. To me, everything was completely silent, all sights in my peripherals were a blur, and I focused on one thing and one thing only. Our enemy stood about four hundred meters away behind a tall, narrow building that overlooked the entire city. They would pop out and lay fire upon us for a few seconds, only to scurry back to their cover like a bunch of frightened squirrels. Our platoon leader ordered Chris to get back to street level and drop some eighty-millimeter mortars on their position. His long, lanky body scrambled down the uneven steps. He looked into the sight glass of his mortar tube and slowly adjusted the angle and direction of his weapon. Within seconds, mortars screamed and crashed into his target. Mortar after mortar: he kept dropping them, disregarding the bullets whizzing past his head.

Then, just as quickly as it all began, it was over. The air turned silent, bullets stopped, and what seemed like hours turned out to be only a few moments. The scene instantly returned back to normal, as if nothing had happened. We waited a few moments to make sure our enemy was eliminated.

The Navy Corpsman sprinted down the steps towards Chris. He lay limp, with confused, glossy eyes staring into the sun. Thick red blood soaked into his uniform, covering his last name. His mortar tube spewed plumes of smoke, and the smell of death swarmed the air. The blood oozed out of more than one gaping wound. He had at least seven visible
gunshot wounds, but somehow, he managed to stand his ground and drop mortars until his job was done.

Days and weeks passed and all I could think about was Chris. He had big, life-changing plans for when he returned that he would never be able fulfill. I couldn’t even fathom the fact that he was gone. During the rest of my deployment, I started to ask myself what I was doing there. Would I be content with my life if I died tomorrow? Would I have wished that I had told my family I loved them one more time? I came to realize that I wouldn’t be satisfied with my life thus far. Life is too short to wake up with regrets. I’m sure Chris would have lived much differently if he knew that he would die that day.

I stood next to the rest of my platoon, staring at the boots and helmet of a fallen brother, realizing that we don’t always have the luxury of tomorrow. Just like combat, life takes unexpected twists and turns, and at any one point in time, the impossible can happen. I have several memories, both good and bad, from serving in the military. A good friend was lost and left a very important message behind. I now live life with the fear of tomorrow never coming. Life ends far too quickly, and the volatility of it will never be predicted.