

Winner - Category A (Middle School)
"What Freedom Means to Me after Interviewing a Veteran" 2008
Student: Jennifer Poulin, Teacher: Voss, Veteran: Ed Parent

I walk along the narrow dirt road. The morning dew cleanses my worn sneakers. My mother directs me to my grandfather's grave stone. It's bordered with a little white fence and flowers, just one of the few. I look up, down, right, and left. Hundreds upon hundreds of stones seem to overlap each other with their subtle presence. I ask my mother if we can walk a little farther back and see some of the older graves. An awkward silence fills the air. We stop; one stone had been so abused throughout the years that it was laying flat on the ground. Full of cracks and moss, we can barely make out what it says, "A Hero of World War II." This is just one of the thousands who fought for our country, our freedom; this is just another one of the thousands who has been forgotten.

As the clouds gather, the key is put in the ignition. I buckle myself in and sit in the back seat close to the window. My mind wanders, and I stare through the foggy window. I imagine a young man bundled in a fox hole. His whole body tingles with pain, and his mind races with countless thoughts. His little girl at this time would be getting into her bed. His beautiful wife would be turning on her night light. Somehow that little glowing light would ease her fears. The glowing light would give her hope while he was away, hope that Daddy would walk into her room any minute. He would give her a big bear hug and tell her that everything was going to be just fine. That night and for nights to come, the little girl's cheek would only be touched with one kiss, not two. The young man chokes on the hard lump in his throat. By now it's pouring, and his tears seem to blend in with the rain. He quickly tucks his family photo away, into a pocket close to his heart. There it will be safe. He reassures himself that what he is doing is right. There is no doubt in his mind that he is going to see his wife and young daughter again. Suddenly in the night, a gun shot rattles the uneven ground. He quickly raises his gun. His target is in sight. He pulls the trigger. I blink my eyes, and the car rolls into the driveway.

A couple of weeks pass, I climb onto the school bus. Our class is headed to the Cole Land Transportation Museum. I sit on the bus, only to allow my mind once again to wander. I'm thinking what we will see, what we will do. Will the veterans keep their deepest secrets to themselves? Will they break down and cry? We get off the bus, and my feet meet the door. Galen Cole, a veteran, who founded the museum, welcomes us. We divide up into groups. I am chosen to interview a veteran first, before touring the museum. I walk into the warm room and pull a chair up next to Ed Parent. His round jolly face beams, and I can't help but smile back. I become nervous. What if I ask him something rude or inappropriate? What if he cries? How do I respond to that? I make sure not to slouch and try to put my best manners forward. He starts from the beginning; his duties ranged from a rifleman to an instructor of biological and chemical defense. I start to feel overwhelmed. I jot down the most important facts. "I was loaded on a ship with 2,000 other men. The first week we lost 350 men. Sappers went around in the middle of the night and would try to slit our throats. While I was there, I hardly got any sleep. If I got a chance, I would do it all over again, of course do a couple of things different." My eyes widen; he would do it all over? Mesmerized, I begin to fiddle with my pencil and think to myself, This hero is devoted to our country, I look around and realize every single man in this room has gone through hell and back.

I shake Ed Parent's hand goodbye. I thank him more than once, not just for letting me interview him, but for everything he has done for our country. I exit the room, and now it is time to get a tour of the building. Our guide Charlie Knowlen, another veteran, recalls a near-death experience, "Galen Cole picked a spot to sit while he was in an army vehicle. Then, a man with a higher rank explained to Mr. Cole how he had been sitting in that spot ever since he had arrived. Since he had a higher rank, Mr. Cole gave this man his spot. While driving, the man with the higher rank was shot and killed. If Galen Cole wouldn't have given his spot up, he wouldn't be here with us today." Mr. Knowlen wipes his eyes. Again I am reminded of the magnitude of war. I slowly walk past the gated-off vehicle. To think that he was so close to death and escaped it all with just one move.

People say freedom isn't something you can touch; it's something you can feel. To me, it means both. Men and women who served our country are the key to freedom. Aren't they concrete? Can't you touch them, feel their scars, shake their hands? People today seem to forget what many heroes like Ed Parent, Galen Cole, and Charles Knowlen have done for our wonderful country. Maybe one day they will remember and the word veterans will be capitalized to show how important these people really are.

2nd Place - Category A (Middle School)

"What Freedom Means to Me after Interviewing a Veteran" 2008

Student: Vivienne Harden, Teacher: Prest, Veteran: Alton Grant

This verse was a call to action for many of the brave men and women throughout our nation's history to give up their comfort, and in many instances their very lives, for the pursuit of freedom.

Answering this call was a young man named Alton Grant, who many people may view as an ordinary man, but I view as an American hero.

As a young man, Alton realized the importance of protecting his country and its freedoms, but he wondered if he would ever have the chance. At the same time, he was fearful of the fate that this chance would bring. Then, with the outbreak of World War 11, Alton realized that he would finally get the opportunity to fulfill what he thought of as his mission in life. At the age of 17, Alton enlisted, and World War 11 became his destiny.

Leaving his mother and brother behind, Alton began his life-changing journey. He first entered boot camp in San Diego in 194 1. During boot camp he had many life-changing experiences. He was eager to learn the necessary disciplines to become a fighting soldier. His favorite weapon was the M1, and he soon became a very good marksman. He achieved the highest score at the time - 321/340. It was at boot camp that Alton also began making many close friends.

Friendships, during times of war, Alton says are more intimate than any other time. He often referred to these soldiers as his "brothers." He seems to remember each one vividly, even though he hasn't seen them in many years. Making these types of close friends though came with a cost - many of Alton's friends were killed during the course of the war, and many have died since. However, this only made his love and admiration for these men even greater.

After boot camp he traveled overseas to many places and had many encounters with the enemy. When he was asked if he were frightened, he responded by saying he had no fear of the enemy because of a "numbness" that he developed that carried him through those war years. Although Alton didn't say, I believe from his comments that his only fears, and the one that plagued him, was losing his friends in combat. Speaking of them still brings tears to his eyes- and sadly he explained that today he is the last survivor of his platoon.

His years overseas were filled with many memories- some good and some bad. He spoke of letters from home and good friends- but he also recollected the terrible homesickness, the mental and physical toll of combat, the loss of life, and even "the stench of death in the air." Alton was wounded while fighting in the Pacific. He almost lost his sight due to a ricocheting bullet. Fortunately, doctors preserved his sight, and Alton fought on until the end of the war.

When he returned home, he received several medals such as the Presidential Unit Citation, a Victory Medal, and a Navy Medal with a star. But Alton doesn't think of himself as a hero. In his opinion, those who didn't make it home are the heroes.

When he began to discuss the topic of freedom, I noticed his eyes- and they glazed over with tears when he began to speak these words, "Those who fought for freedom have a taste that the protected will never know." It was then that I realized what so many men and women have lost throughout our history so that we could have freedom. Whether a flesh wound, a missing limb, or a lost life, these men and women made a sacrifice for all Americans.

Yet, many people go their whole lives without thinking about these men and women, and what they did for our nation and our freedom.

After talking with Mr. Grant, I realized how precious freedom was to him and how he is depending on the younger generations now to preserve it!

Freedom is something very special, and it never has been free. It has a great price, and Veterans like Alton Grant have always been willing to pay for it with their time, effort, and for many, their blood. In every generation, the Veterans' battle for freedom can never be completely won, for victory is only a lease, not a deed to freedom. Americans pay installments on a great debt that will never be erased as long as there is something in this world that fights against freedom.

Thank you, Mr. Grant, along with all the other men and women who served in America's armed forces for sacrificing so much to preserve our freedoms- you will not be forgotten! You command my respect and admiration. You have demonstrated "no greater love."

3rd Place - Category A (Middle School)

"What Freedom Means to Me after Interviewing a Veteran" 2008

Student: Shayn Wescott, Teacher: Prest, Veteran: Norman Rossignol

Freedom- we use the word all the time. America has many freedoms. Unfortunately, in America, we often take our freedoms for granted. But we have more freedoms than any other country in the world. We have the freedom to vote, the freedom of speech, the freedom to worship God as we please, the freedom to choose where we live, and the freedom to have what jobs we please.

Freedom is so much a part of American life. We don't even realize how much of it involves our daily lives. We have the freedom to travel across America to view our beautiful land. We have the freedom to communicate with our loved ones as often as we wish.

But freedom is costly. It has a price. For over 200 years, men and women serving our nation have paid that cost. They paid it in trenches, on beachheads, and in rice paddies. They paid it in prisons, they pay it still in hospitals, and for many a marker in a cemetery shows they paid an ultimate price.

Norman Rossignol paid a price. Norman went from milking cows to two weeks of Army basic training. Then he landed on Utah Beach with the 94th Infantry Division to defeat the Germans. There a month later he was awarded the Bronze Star for taking command of a situation when many men from his platoon were wounded. Next he fought in the Ardennes Forest in the Battle of the Bulge.

After World War II, Norman became a radio operator on Christmas Island in the Pacific Ocean. It was here that the United States conducted many nuclear tests. Norman spent twenty years in the Army, and as he says, "It was the best thing I did in my life."

Now, after my interview, I have a new sense that the price of freedom has two parts. First, it is the cherished knowledge that men and women have exchanged their lives for freedom. And second, is the commitment that every American must be willing to pay a price so America is forever "the land of the free and the home of the brave."

Veterans, I now have a feeling of humility. Truly, I feel undeserving and unworthy for what you have done for me. You have shown a great love for freedom, and I will retell your story to keep freedom alive. Please, Mr. Rossignol and others, accept my heartfelt appreciation, respect, and thanks for a job well done.

Winner - Category B (High School)

"What Freedom Means to Me after Interviewing a Veteran" 2008

Student: Nate Burke, Teacher: Frace, Veteran: Carl Carlstad

Truth first, I was elated to have a field trip and get out of school. I guess a little "senioritis" or "spring fever" starting to take hold. This was the first freedom that I thought about. It is a little shallow now, in hindsight.

The museum itself held all kinds of memorabilia that sent your imagination reeling. Being male, guns, tanks and any vehicle stirs something in you. I was enjoying the freedom already. Then I had the opportunity, and I do mean opportunity to talk and interview with a veteran.

I was fortunate enough to grow up in an extended family. We actually lived with my grandparents for a season in my life. My grandfather was 67 years of age when I was born. He was a World War II Veteran, and I sure wish he was around now to ask some more questions. The gentleman I talked with had the same kind, intelligent eyes that my grandfather possessed. He was a man that was chiseled with the character of life experience, and he was willing to share that with me.

The Veteran that I interviewed was Carl Carlsted (forgive me if spelling is incorrect). He had been in the Cold War, Viet Nam, and Desert Storm. Carl had volunteered to go in. He shared how it has only been in the last few years that people

have been honored for their sacrifices in Viet Nam. Carl shared how they received little or no respect when they returned home during Viet Nam. I could tell by the way he talked and shared there were some very painful wounds he still bore.

There are several nuggets of wisdom that I feel I took away from Coles Museum that day. One would have to be that at another time in life there was a great sacrificing love for this Country. Something that a lot of us may not truly understand in a world that is all about "me." I also learned that freedom may mean giving up yours so a greater number of people can have it. I have started to see that there were a lot of people with much stronger character than mine, who gave their lives for my freedom.

Coles Museum, I want to thank you for the great learning experience. Thank you Carl for your interview, thank you for touching my life in a positive way, and thank you for your part in the freedom I have.

2nd Place - Category B (High School)

"What Freedom Means to Me after Interviewing a Veteran" 2008

Student: Martha Ludington, Teacher: Duplissea, Veteran: John Anderson

After delving into the life of John Anderson, a veteran of the Korean War, my opinion that was already in accord with the infamous military quote, "freedom is not free", has become even stronger. Although Mr. Anderson was not actually in Korea, he held a great purpose in Germany as a member of the Intelligence Branch of the army, along with 35 other men. Their sole responsibility was to prevent Russia from overtaking Germany by using intimidation. If Russia had overtaken Germany, another war was almost inevitable. Mr. Anderson, like so many others before him, put his life on the line to keep the freedom of the United States.

Anderson dropped out of high school at the age of 17, which he described as the biggest regret of his life. He was a cocky teenager who thought he knew everything, but he still held freedom and the American flag highly. Unfortunately, Anderson does not believe that many teenagers today feel the same way as he did about freedom 50 years ago. He believes that freedom is taken for granted and is not being appreciated. Anderson is right. The younger generation has never experienced drafts and has an option to fight for America or go into a different direction. Most of us do not have to worry about our freedoms being taken away because we feel that our freedom has already been won. However, a select few of us, like me, realize the cost of freedom. Already over 4,000 soldiers have died in Iraq, a war that should have ended a long time ago. Those soldiers keep fighting to keep our freedom and to keep our country safe even though they know they should be home. As Mr. Anderson told me, war changes people, and war changed him.

Shortly after Anderson dropped out of high school, he enrolled in the army. Getting hardly any sleep, eating rotten food, and drinking disease-ridden water were only a few problems Anderson faced almost every day. Anderson would get homesick on occasion, when he had time to think, but mostly he was too busy to think about anything. The business and sleeping on the ground both contributed to his lack of sleep. He only slept for two to three hours on average. The food, like the sleep, was not particularly the greatest. Most of the time he and his comrades would have to eat sea rations (sausage patties), and if they were lucky, they could make a fire and heat up the meat, which

would maybe happen once a month. The water was just as big of a problem as the lack of sleep and rotten food Anderson and his comrades had to endure. Even when they had water, they still had a chance of catching a deadly disease. To prevent this from happening they had to put an additive (medicine) into their canteens. The worst part about the medicine was that it tasted like metal and gave the soldiers severe cases of diarrhea.

The worst loss that Anderson suffered was not loss of sleep or loss of good food; it was the loss of two childhood friends. Even though he had not gone to Korea like he had hoped, some of his friends did go to Korea and fought in the war. His best friend and a close friend were killed in combat. They paid the ultimate price for freedom; their lives. Today Mr. Anderson is nearing 70 years of age, and there are very few moments that give him more joy than telling his story to young adults and stressing to them what he and many before him gave up to keep the freedom of the United States.