

Winning Essay - Category A (Grades 6-8)
"What freedom means to me after interviewing a Veteran" 2006
Zachary Lemieux - Lawrence Junior High
Teacher - Mr. Groueau Veteran - Al Gibson

"Give me liberty, or give me death."
Patrick Henry, March 23, 1775.

This powerful sentiment trickled through my mind as I stared into Al Gibson's warm inviting eyes. I thought about the history of countries who have not been as fortunate as we have been. Saying those words in any place other than the United States would have ultimately led to death. Why, then, can we say such things? The answer lies in our veterans. Our great grandparents, our grandparents, our parents, our brothers and sisters who all have fought to keep our country safe in our times of peril.

When we were informed that we would be visiting Mr. Cole's Museum, my reaction was not unlike the other students'. "Oh great, a museum, what are they gonna do to us next?" Then they informed us we would be interviewing a veteran. Again, the same reaction. Upon later reflection, and after the interview, I was appalled to think that I would feel anything other than extreme gratitude. These people went to the ends of the earth for us, were willing to die for our very existence, yet at the beginning of the day we had been indifferent.

Freedom is the premise upon which our country is based. We sing "Land of the Free, Home of the Brave," and I believe that never before has a phrase rung more true. In the years past, when we have faced merciless enemies that could not have been more ferocious, we looked death in the face and laughed, because United We Stand.

What is freedom? Webster's says, *"The power or right to act, speak, or think as one wants without hindrance or restraint; or absence of subjection to foreign domination or despotic government; a state of not being imprisoned or enslaved."* All very true definitions of freedom, but I am not here to expound the strict textbook definition of freedom. Quite the opposite, in fact; I want to leave you with a lasting impression of how our liberty takes hold of my thirteen year old mind. Freedom is ... well, have you ever seen a wild bird that did not fly where it wanted ... do as it pleased? No. That's because a wild bird is free. How about an unbroken Mustang galloping fiercely across the grassy tundra. Freedom. But what does freedom mean to me? Freedom means everything to me, from free speech to the right to bear arms, to the freedom of worship.

Have you ever been unhappy with the President? Yes, I'll bet you have. And because he is a democratically elected president, we can openly express our feelings about him no matter how bitter. Freedom means electing a leader by a democracy rather than by nepotism or coup. Freedom means all children are able to go to school no matter what sex, race, or religion. Freedom is having churches of all kinds and religions in one town. But in the words of many, freedom is not free. It is earned, not given. Because we

have earned it, we may feel it cannot be taken nor destroyed, neither relinquished nor revoked. But this freedom, that we take for granted every day, is always under threat. When that threat becomes imminent, will you be there to help? Will you be there to preserve what freedom means to me?

Al Gibson's warm eyes and inviting narrative remain in my mind as a window into the true meaning of freedom. I am sure that Mr. Gibson would agree with Patrick Henry's words, "Give me liberty or give me death." In fact, it is the sentiment Mr. Gibson went to war believing in. This Patriot's words swirl around in my mind, opening doors of understanding. Pride surges within me to think that two men in my country's history were brave enough to live their lives according to this creed. But not just these two men, countless more have given their lives so that we can live as we do today. Freedom cannot exist where there is no reverence for life, and living in our nation with these heroes is truly what it must mean to be free.

Winning Essay - Category B (Grades 9-12)

"What freedom means to me after interviewing a Veteran" 2006

Josh Young - Brewer High School

Teacher - Mr. Cyr Veterans - John Moore and Raymond Perkins

Independence

Bang! Boom! The U.S. Army artillery rang out, hurling shells at the Japanese zeros flying overhead. Raymond Perkins did not flinch. Not because he was used to the sound, but because he was delirious. He had just contracted malaria, a blood-borne disease carried by mosquitoes, one of the many things besides the enemy that claimed the lives of American soldiers in World War II. John Moore heard a blast from under his cockpit. His helicopter was under attack. After surviving combat in Korea, he was now flying choppers for the US. Army in Vietnam. He and his helicopter survived the blast but, after returning to base, he realized that a piece of shrapnel had penetrated through his leg. He had served six years on active duty and was planning to do fourteen more. What was going through these gentlemen's minds? I can only imagine, Like many millions more, Raymond Perkins and John Moore were being asked to defend freedom with their lives, the freedom our forefathers orchestrated over two hundred years ago. They were realizing, like I did from talking to them, that freedom comes at a high price: the unimaginable value of people's lives.

Think about the last couple of days and how many choices you have had to make. Now think of how many you have made over your lifetime. We have these choices due to a capitalist economy and a free republic. Shackled populations run by a dictator can only dream about these individual choices because the government chooses for them. It is nearly so that people cannot eat, sleep, or breathe without the government telling them how to do it. That is why it is worth it, to risk so much in defending government of the people, by the people, and for the people.

Freedom was born in the United States because we were oppressed by Great Britain. Their government was making all of our decisions for us without our consent and taxing us without representation. This is much like the communist and dictatorial governments John Moore and Raymond Perkins fought to rid from the earth. Humans do not want to be treated like slaves, and, as Thomas Jefferson said in the Declaration of Independence, it is our right to rebel, to throw off these oppressive governments and live freely. When our freedom from Great Britain was won, the people of the new United States of America made a new government where all people are free and have individual rights. Over two hundred years later we still possess these freedoms. But these freedoms are threatened by evil. Evil that would do anything to destroy freedom and bring back oppression. That is why our military, with people like Raymond Perkins and John Moore, is present to engage and destroy these wicked scoundrels and to protect our Constitution, which guarantees our freedom.

Freedom, as a concept, did not begin in America. It started back in ancient Greece and Rome, and resurfaced with the signing of the Magna Carta and the creation of Parliament in Great Britain. From these beginnings, self-government has revolutionized not only the way in which nations govern themselves, but the ways in which they deal with each other as well. Because of our belief in the American principles of freedom, we are not as forgiving to those nations that do not have the same respect for human rights and individuality.

For thousands of years, people have pursued true freedom from the oppression of others. They have given their lives to this cause. That is why the freedom I enjoy in America is now much more important to me than ever. After talking to Raymond Perkins and John Moore, I received a first-hand account of the price people pay daily in order to preserve liberty. Whether it is suffering from a deadly disease or being thrown into the line of fire, people in the military are constantly risking everything for others, like me. They buy my freedom with their sacrifice, and that is why I respect them so much, because they protect the rights so vital for humans to naturally exist.

Starting with the Revolutionary War, and continuing with the War of 1812, the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam conflict, the Cold War, and now the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, millions of American men and women have died for my freedom. Because of them, we still hold the American flag up high: red, signifying valor and bravery, white, meaning purity and innocence, and blue, for vigilance, perseverance, and justice. Now, when I look at the flag, I think of the many people like John Moore and Raymond Perkins because the flag symbolizes them.