Middle School
First Place

Why are Veterans Special?

By Tori Vanskike

"It doesn't take a hero to order men into battle. It takes a hero to be one of those men who goes into battle" (Norman Schwarzkopf). My dad left our family for his first deployment to Iraq when he was 19, and I was five days old. When I was two years old, he left again and missed my sister being born. I don't remember my dad leaving for his third deployment; I just remember him walking through the door when he came home. This quote shows that veterans, like my dad, are special and deserve our thankfulness, because these men and women choose to fight for our country everyday even when they have to leave their own lives behind knowing they could die or be injured. They should be proud to be called veterans.

If you've watched any videos of veterans coming home, you might have recognized how hard it can be for the soldiers and their families. There are many reasons why it is so hard for military families. One reason is family members do not get to see each other for a long period of time during deployment. Another reason is when veterans get back from war it is hard for them to adjust from war life to home life. Plus, even when soldiers come home they still have to worry about getting deployed again. These sacrifices make it difficult for families to be a part of the military.

Many veterans have stories to tell, but have you ever asked one if they think they are a hero? Often veterans say they are not heroes, but the people they worked with are. Even when veterans become injured at war, they still do not believe they are true heroes. How can Americans show veterans the respect they deserve for the service they've given? They can tell them, "Thank you for your service." A simple thank you can show them the respect they have

rightfully earned, as well as let them know their time serving was, and is, important just like them.

Veterans are strong and courageous heroes that need to know they are special. The amount of time and effort given to our country, from training to fighting in wars, is beyond what words can express. Your life and service matter, please do not lose hope, when you think fighting for our country is no big deal or that nobody cares. You are better than Batman or Superman. You are a real hero, and I thank you for your service.

Middle School
Second Place

Why Are Veterans Special?

By: Kyle Bavlnka

To most, a veteran is simply a person that serves his or her country. Veterans have fought in many wars for freedom. However, they also will do anything they can to keep us safe and free. Over the years, and still today, veterans have been helping people. To a veteran, helping keep others safe and lending a helping hand is the most important thing they can do.

Veterans are special because they fought for our freedom and rights. It all started by fighting in the Revolutionary War which won America's freedom from England. During World War 1 and World War 2 our veterans fought in Europe to maintain and protect people's freedom from Germany. Most recently veterans have, and still do today, fight against terrorists and help the people of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Another reason veterans are special is because they help other people. They have assisted with the Ebola outbreak in Africa by building hospitals and bringing medicine. They have aided in support of natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina, Superstorm Sandy, and floods. They are mentors to school children, helping at schools by reading, helping with homework or just being a good role model. Someday these kids might want to be like them. During the Christmas season, veterans gather toys and gifts for children gather food and clothes for shelters, and serve meals to the homeless.

Veterans are also special because of their selfless service which means they care about others more than themselves. Their devoted service can be seen in the number of holidays, birthdays and dinners they miss. Due to their service, many veterans missed the birth of their

child. This is usually very hard on them, but they would do it again because of their noble service to their country.

Veterans are special for many reasons. I have been lucky to spend most of my life surrounded by these brave people, and I am thankful every day. They have fought, and still do, for our freedom; they help people when there is a natural disaster and all this because of their selfless service. Thank-you for your service and keeping us safe.

Middle School
Third Place

Why Are Veterans Special?

Most people these days don't ever think about how they're walking around freely. We as citizens certainly would not have that freedom if it were not for the brave soldiers out there fighting for us, and for our country, the United States of America. Veterans of our country's military are sometimes considered the backbone of this nation, and there are many things that make them special.

Veterans are a huge part of the history of our country. Our veterans participated in a long history of wars where they have fought to keep this country safe from those who wish to harm it. Veterans continue to influence our country for future generations as guardians in our lives. Their pages in history are what make veterans special.

Our soldiers are very skilled, but it takes practice and training. They wake up very early and practice from sunrise to sundown. There are three different types of training they do, which includes physical, mental, and warfare training. During physical training, they do things like push-ups, curl-ups, pull-ups, running practice and obstacle courses. Mental training includes coping skills, studying war tactics, and making sure they have a sharp mind during war. The final section, warfare training, includes target practice, blocking skills, knifing, grenade practice, and more. The knowledge, skills and abilities acquired in the service are what make our veterans special.

Soldiers leave their family to go to war, yet people don't realize how hard it is for the veterans and their loved ones. It's hard for the soldiers/veterans because they have to leave their families and put their life on the line for this country. They take the risk that they might not ever see their loved ones again. It's hard for the family because they have to let their loved ones go

risk his/her life and they're worried that their soldier might get hurt, or worse die, in the war. Coping with long periods of time away from their families is what makes veterans special.

In war, our veterans have to fight with all their might. They taste the mud. They feel the breeze from the whistling bullets. They see their teammates getting shot. They are shaken by the explosions and raining down of debris. The experiences of war are often hard to cope with and understood only by other soldiers in battle. It is also hard and different for their readjustment to take place, because some of the soldiers were hurt or lost body parts. It is hard to talk and be around people, because the soldier is changed and readjusting to society. The struggles that are endured upon returning is what makes veterans special.

It takes courage to use a gun and shoot others, but it takes a heart to be a hero. Growing up, I used to look up to Captain America as a superhero. Thinking about all that our veterans do, they are the true superheroes of this country. That is what makes our veterans special.

Middle School
Honorable Mention

Why Are Veterans Special?

By Kaylee Faddis

Veterans are special because they bear the burdens that not everyone can carry. Imagine the sadness they experience as their hands brush the hands of their love ones in that final touch as they say goodbye. The tears rolling down their faces as they prepare to face the mighty war. It's more than just bullets that can pierce their hearts.

Men and women give their lives over to the military knowing there is a chance they could die. But they still do it, knowing it will provide protection for our country. They have the guts to step out onto the battlefield and fight with every single living thing within them, symbolizing the love they have for our country. They make sacrifices for us so we can live another day in amazing freedom. They go through so much, and sometimes no one realizes how hard they have it.

Their families are making the sacrifice with them. I can't imagine the horrible feeling that washes over a little kid as he find out his Dad just died in the everlasting war. They freeze taking in the news, and then comes the flooding of tears. Their bodies stiffen up, causing their legs to feel like boulders. Their entire world comes apart and collapses like an avalanche.

We all know by now that most of life is unpredictable. You may think that we all have challenging days, but it is nothing compared with what veterans and their families have had to face each day. So before you start whining and complaining about the things our country doesn't have or what it needs to improve on, think about *why* we live in endless days of beautiful, perfect

freedom. It's because our veterans charge out onto the battlefield every day. Maybe all you see is beauty and perfection. But what it really looks like is blood, death, shooting, fighting, yelling, and shrieking for help. Our freedom might look like a daydream to us, but for our veterans it's a nightmare. Our veterans squeeze the bitterness and death out of our days so that we can live another day in freedom.

High School
First Place

Kelley Tackett

The Price of Passion

America is a country built on passion and dreams. It's passion that drives the ever-quickly progressing society, and dreams that remind Americans of all that we can still be. These ideals define the nation, a nation known for refusing to stop in the face of adversity, a nation that, through the hard work of its citizens, remains a step ahead of the rest of the world. America is pride, America is passion, America is dreams; America is the country on a hill, constantly striving to achieve the next big thing. And this country is defined not just by its ideals, but by its people as well. Citizens are raised knowing that it is their responsibility to keep moving forward, their duty to be the next generation of entrepreneurs and innovators, and, most important of all, veterans. Without veterans, the dreams of the nation could not exist, and the loss of those dreams would devastate the great leaps and bounds by which the world has advanced.

In each facet of American history it is the veterans who have made the truest and most lasting contributions. Businesses have risen and fallen with the ages, the government has faded in and out through generations, social and political movements have surged and tumbled within every decade; there is little that has been maintained as America evolved to face the future. Little, except for the devotion of those citizens who refused to retreat when there were attempts to sully American greatness, who stepped up to the plate when our country most needed a home run. These citizens are our veterans.

There is much to say about sacrifice and freedom, much ordeal to be made of the hope and safety and democracy possible through the valiant efforts of brave soldiers. These praises are sung but rarely recognized, appreciated little in contexts outside of strife. Here lies the truest, ultimate reason that veterans are special. They are symbolic, yes, of American greatness, but on an individual basis they are quiet supporters of the society. Veterans return and are fathers,

husbands, uncles; veterans adopt places in the world occupied by ordinary individuals and continue working to build a better nation.

There is no greater source of pride in American culture than in our veterans, protectors of a society fueled by passion and dreams, innovation and imagining. Thanks to their efforts, America continues to be a beacon on the frontier of the world, capable of creating change and leading the way to a bigger, brighter future. Thanks to our veterans, America may truly be the land of the free, and the home of the brave.

High School
Second Place

Madison Wright
Humble Nobility

When I was twelve years old, I went to Washington D.C. with my family. During our trip, we went to Arlington Cemetery and watched the changing of the guard ceremony. I remember, looking over, and seeing both of my parents with tears in their eyes. I didn't really understand.

I remember going to football games at the university while I was growing up, standing and applauding when members of the military were recognized, and I remember being astonished by their bravery, and by their sacrifice for our country, but just as quickly as the applause was finished, I returned to my hot dog and waited in anticipation for the second half of the game to start, the servicemen or women not crossing my mind again.

Whenever I was thirteen, my cousin married a member of the U.S. army, and his entire wedding party were also members of the military. My dad officiated the wedding, and I remember watching as he thanked them genuinely for their service, and talked about how much their sacrifices meant to him and to all of us. They nodded, but almost brushed it off. I agreed with my father, but I didn't think about the full extent of his sentiments.

That same year at our family Thanksgiving, various family members asked my cousin's new husband questions about his service, and he briefly touched on injuries he had sustained during active duty, and when my family members spoke about him admirably, he waved them off, and said, "It's all part of the job," as if it were nothing.

It struck me, then, sitting across from a man I barely knew, who had experienced so much, yet acted like his sacrifices were ordinary. Veterans are special because they allow people like me to take them for granted. They accept the applause at sporting events and the "thank you for your service" remarks and the handshaking without asking people to think about the full extent of their sacrifices, without demanding pity for the horrors they have witnessed, or expecting praise for their acts of fortitude.

Instead, they return home with their heads held high, never complaining, and never expecting people like me to even *think* about the things that they've experienced, even when those tragedies sometimes leave them disabled, unemployed, or even homeless. Veterans are special because they allow me to go about my day, to say what I want, to wear what I want, to enjoy the freedoms that I barely even consider, and they don't ask me to consider the extent of their service. Instead, without flinching, they protect me, protect all of us, with silent humility, never asking for attention, but constantly being there, constantly serving.

High School
Third Place

Alli Foster

When asked why veterans are special, most people give a pretty generic answer: veterans are special because they serve our country and because they sacrifice their lives for ours. That answer is completely true. Veterans do both of those things, showing courage and loyalty on their part. I, however, don't believe that is the only thing that makes then special. I believe that at the heart of everything that makes veterans special is not the fact that they fight, but what they fight for.

Veterans fight for freedom. We have all heard that a million times, and it seems pretty common, but what does that actually mean? What really is the freedom that our men and women in uniform fight for? Americans seem to have mixed ideas on this.

Some Americans believe that freedom means equality. These Americans want everyone to be forced to take the same opportunities in life. They want people of all different races and genders to take the same exact jobs, and go to the same exact colleges. These Americans believe that freedom means forcing people to be equal, and therefore stripping them of their own identities.

Other Americans believe that freedom means entitlement. These Americans think that because they live in a free country, they deserve health care, social security, and welfare. They believe that freedom means the government provides everything for them.

The freedom that our veterans have fought and died for, however, is not either one of these freedoms. Our veterans fight for true freedom, the kind of freedom that citizens of other countries are denied. The kind of freedom that

gives people opportunities instead of money. The kind of freedom that allows people to take whatever opportunities they want to take, instead of encouraging people to take only opportunities that will make them equal with other people. The kind of freedom that allows people to succeed on a grand scale, but also the kind of freedom that allows people to fail on a grand scale.

Veterans fight for the people's freedom to choose who they are and who they want to be. At the end of the day, I believe this is what makes them special. Yes, they are courageous. Yes, they thrust themselves into harms way with only the intention of protecting those they don't even know. Yes, they are loyal, to their brothers, superiors, their country, and the people of that country. But, it is the fact that they use their strong courage and undying loyalty to fight for freedom that makes them so special. They fight for something that is so simple, but so hard to obtain. And they fight for something that most Americans can't even understand, much less appreciate, and yet couldn't live without.

High School
Honorable Mention

Understanding Veterans

Lisa Zhuang

I was indifferent to veterans.

I am a second generation Chinese, meaning that my whole family history before my brothers and I was centered in China. My knowledge of veterans came exclusively from brief classroom discussions. My passive sympathy for veterans came from thirty second commercials with melodramatic music tinkling in the background. My tribute to veterans included donations of spare crumpled dollars to foundations I never quite fully read up on. I was well aware of the existence of veterans, but I was ignorant to their full impact.

It wasn't until an early morning drive to school with my mom that I even considered my family's history. I was complaining to my mom on how I had to write an essay on veterans, but had no involvement or experience with veterans whatsoever.

"Well, you know, your great grandfather was involved in World War II," my mother mentioned. I rolled my eyes.

"He was Chinese. That's different." I said. My mom ignored me, and continued. She spoke of how my great grandfather was a commander and was revered in his home village during the war. People would go up to his wife, my great grandmother, and treat her kindly simply because her husband was so successful in the army. However, a messenger came one day and told my great grandmother that her husband was injured and in a hospital. My great grandmother sensed something was off, and demanded to see her husband. The messenger refused. My great

grandmother persisted, and eventually the messenger admitted that her husband was in fact dead.

My great grandfather's death and time in the army lead to a chain of events. It influenced not only my family's religious beliefs and social stance, but also partook in why my parents decided to move to America.

Afterwards, I felt a small blossoming of pride in my chest knowing that a part of my family had participated in history. I also felt in awe at how someone I've never known has impacted the parts of my life that I've always considered fundamental. Although my great grandfather was not an American veteran, I was finally able to begin to grasp at the extent to which a veteran influences one's personal life.

The restated fact that veterans are the source of our freedoms, our ability to practice our beliefs, and the reason why America is America is true, but there is so much more depth. They affect everyday aspects of life we don't think about. They don't just give us rights, but build who we are. In their time serving the army, veterans give up a big part of themselves to make up at the very least a little bit of us. Veterans aren't just removed figures in melancholy commercials or a short lesson in history class; veterans are the building blocks to why we are able to be who we are.

No longer am I indifferent to veterans.