

Reflections on a Veteran

Growing up surrounded by veterans certainly has impacted my life in a number of ways. I have a greater appreciation for the sacrifices made by veterans. Their willingness to serve their country allows me to have the freedom that I do today.

In a civilian's eyes, veterans are the definition of heroes. Their courage and determination allows us to pursue our dreams and achieve our goals because of the rights they have defended. In a veteran's eyes, however, it is only a matter of right and wrong. The right thing to do is to honor their country.

Being raised to have the upmost respect for those who serve, I can't imagine my life if not for veterans. I've learned to show my gratitude openly and often. My interview with Tom Henderson, a World War II veteran, only reinforced those beliefs.

I have known Mr. Henderson for many years now, but in this interview I saw another, deeper side of him, full of memories of the war, reflections and appreciation of fellow veterans. It was meaningful to me to know what experiences he has had and to see how much he, and other veterans, have given to their communities and their country.

In times of war, the general population's feeling is shock. Everything changes in the world around us, and there is confusion and hesitation. Veterans take initiative and respond. There are no doubts, no regrets. The responsibility to respect and, therefore, defend this country is clear.

Every night, I am able to go to sleep knowing that I am safe and at home. However, for these veterans who were miles away from home, every day was a day of survival. They always had to be ready and do what they were told to do promptly. I can't imagine the kind of pressure and fear they must have felt in that kind of situation. Just hearing about it made me thankful for my life and what is so often taken for granted.

Constantly depending on others fighting alongside of them, strong friendships are formed. One story that specifically stood out for me during the interview was about a close friend of Mr. Henderson's. His buddy had accidentally shot himself and was buried. His body was then exhumed and moved twice. Mr. Henderson and some others who served with him did not know where their friend's final resting place was. After research was done many years later, the gravesite was finally located. Simply knowing where his friend's grave was located was enough to bring closure and peace to a painful memory.

After being so brave and honorable, they return home. Glad to be reunited with family and friends, but also struggling to find jobs to support themselves. Although they may be home, the repercussions and aftermath from the war leave shortages of just about everything. Through all of the conflicts following the war, their service doesn't stop when the war does, but rather continues through organizations such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion. A night doesn't go by when they don't think of an event or a memory from all those years ago, far away from home.

I was particularly impressed by Mr. Henderson's great sense of respect for his country, his community, and the people around him.

— Caitlin Elliott
8th Grade
Urbana (IL) Middle School