

MIDDLE SCHOOL WINNING ESSAY

Face to Face with Valor

By

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Selflessness... Until recently, it was a word for which I did not truly know the meaning. I understood it to mean "not being conscious of self, but helping others instead."

"What else could it be?" I had occasionally asked myself that question, and whenever I saw someone being helpful, I allowed myself to believe that positive actions equaled selflessness. As simple as that understanding seemed, I've been satisfied with it until my understanding deepened.

I learned that deeper, truer meaning one hot, muggy evening; it was the day I went to take part in deployment activities for SELFLESS men and women going to serve our country in Afghanistan. In the past, I had collected items for soldiers. I had sent cards to troops, and I'd sold a lot of Girl Scout cookies for them, but I had never before been given an opportunity to actually be with soldiers on the verge of leaving to actively protect and serve our country's interests. The smiles and the genuine enthusiasm I saw when the soldiers picked up "Dang-It" dolls, (oddly shaped stuffed dolls for them take their frustrations out on) and the kind words that they had for me as I had handed them boxes of Girl Scout cookies, made it worth standing in a hot, stuffy airplane hangar. It was a night that I met not only a score of the heroes of today, but I also got to meet a few of the heroes of the past. I was able to spend some time with men who had left precious blood and sweat on the battlefield for me.

On that evening, I learned more about what true selflessness and sacrifice was, from a Congressional Medal of Honor recipient himself.

The Medal of Honor is the highest award for valor in action against an enemy force which can be given to an individual serving in the Armed Services of the United States. The Medal of Honor is presented to the recipient by the President of the United States of America. It is not an award that is given lightly. It is a token of the gratitude and appreciation of the American people for the exceptional acts of heroism that certain soldiers, sailors, and airmen exhibited while protecting our freedoms. The recipients of this prestigious award share and uphold the sentiments and ideals originally held by the patriots who founded and fought for this country 234 years ago. The Medal of Honor is more than just an award; it is a symbol of selflessness and a testament to dedication, hard work, and sacrifice.

In researching the Congressional Medal of Honor, I talked with veterans, current servicemen, and citizens. I was struck by the depth of feeling expressed – admiration, gratitude, and awe – for the individuals that define the prestigious honor.

The Preamble to the Congressional Medal of Honor Society defines selflessness as thinking of others before yourself and recognizing that success is based on the actions of a group more than the individual. The society's definition goes beyond the common perception of selflessness. Selflessness isn't just the opposite of selfishness, as many might believe. It is an understanding that an individual's reactions affect the success of the group. It is a character trait that must be ingrained in the nature of the individual, so it will serve as the instant, natural reflex in any situation.

Shaking hands with Col. Charles Murray, I looked into eyes of a man who epitomizes the definition of selflessness. He is a man who fully represents the "Greatest Generation." During World War II, he inspired his troops through selfless leadership.

While leading a platoon with an important job to do, Lt. Murray observed a dangerous situation that could have proven to be disastrous for his group. Due to his strong character and ability to think quickly, he effectively led his men to complete their objective. In doing that, he crawled ahead of the group and fired against the Germans. His actions disorganized the German troops, allowing him to capture ten (10) German soldiers. He was wounded in the process, but he didn't allow his injuries to slow him down until the mission was accomplished.

To date, there have been 3,446 people honored with the Congressional Medal of Honor. Each has met all of the ideals of the award with honor and grace. Examples include local heroes, such as Donald Leroy Truesdale, born in Lugoff, South Carolina, who was recognized for his selfless sense of duty in saving the members of his patrol in Nicaragua in 1932 by throwing away a live grenade and being wounded in the effort. Also, Richmond Hobson Hilton, born in Westville, South Carolina, a World War I veteran, sacrificed his safety and lost his arm to a bursting shell in France. He, incidentally, is the only recipient to actually be named for a prior recipient of the honor.

Selflessness is a trait that is intertwined with sacrifice, but in today's world, it seems that selflessness and sacrifice are values that are seriously undervalued. Listening to the evening news or walking down a crowded street, it is easy to believe that we live in a time of ME. Selflessness is not in vogue – self comes first. Some say it is a lost virtue, but that night, as I walked through the hangar, I learned by talking to the deploying soldiers that selflessness is still alive and well. It lives in the men and women serving in our armed forces today, just as it has since the first patriots fought for American independence. I could feel it in their presence, and in their words of gratitude to me, even as I was thanking them for serving our country.

Sacrifice - a word known by most, but truly felt by very few. The average American

citizen couldn't possibly be capable of comprehending the rush of emotions that must overcome a soldier in time of need, or the feelings that must come with sacrificing everything. The Medal of Honor's definition of sacrifice is giving back to the community and others for the prosperity and freedoms we enjoy as Americans. Amazing, that is all that can be said about soldiers who have made sacrifices. Sacrificing everything seems unreal to someone my age. Granted, each of us could learn valuable lessons from making minor sacrifices, but most choose to live with selfish, "I want that" attitudes. Sacrifice is a character trait that seems easy enough to talk about, but actually living it is something no one seems to believe in doing anymore, even if it's as basic as giving up nonessential, unused possessions.

Many of the recipients of the Congressional Medal of Honor walked the same path as today's soldiers. They set an example for those who now follow in their footsteps. They were soldiers with strong character, a sense of duty, and the ability to think quickly in dire circumstances. They weren't thinking of awards, accolades, or notoriety. They were ordinary men in extraordinary situations. When the opportunity arose, their strong character went into action. They set an example for each of us. As I think of these great patriots, I realize that they have left us a legacy. I can see the value of the characteristics that make for a hero and apply it to everything I do, currently as a student and later in my life as a citizen of the greatest nation in the world. I am grateful for Col. Murray, and for all of the heroes our nation has honored with the Congressional Medal of Honor, and will live my life to the same high ideals.

In my opinion, selflessness is more than just a word to be defined; it is more than a momentary action. It is a lifestyle. It requires sacrifice.

The Congressional Medal of Honor is absolutely defined by, and defining of, the strong, positive character of each and every man or woman to whom it has been awarded. Character has everything to do with this award, and the soldiers who have received the Congressional Medal of Honor have demonstrated amazing degrees of sacrifice and selflessness. Their selflessness in battle has shown a firm belief that helping others was far more important than even their own lives.