

**HIGH SCHOOL WINNING ESSAY**

*Thirty Miles, Four Men, Three Traits: One Medal*

**By**

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## Thirty Miles, Four Men, Three Traits: One Medal

Of all the decorations a soldier can be given for military service, one stands above the rest. This honor is a medal that only 3,463 men and women have ever received: The Congressional Medal of Honor. This prestigious medal is often awarded after a valiant death. Only ninety-one of the recipients are still alive, and of those ninety-one, three live in South Carolina (Archive Statistics). Of the many that have been awarded this medal, twenty-nine have been credited to the Palmetto State, and of those twenty-nine, four were born in Pickens County (Hometown Heroes). Thirty miles separated their birth sites, and time separated their lives. Ranging from World War II to Vietnam, these four men served their country with courage and selflessness, and all sacrificed their lives for their country and for those around them.

What is courage? What is selflessness? What is sacrifice? Webster might have a lofty definition for us, but that would be insufficient to describe the degree of selflessness, courage, or sacrifice that The Congressional Medal of Honor embodies. The caliber of courage, selflessness, and sacrifice that allows a person to face on-coming fire, to throw himself onto a grenade, and to sacrifice his life for others is the true definition of these words. It is absolutely forgetting about yourself, your fears, and your own future for someone else, for your country, and for everyone at home who depends upon your bravery. That is what Medal of Honor recipients give up, what they demonstrate, and why they are so rare. They represent a level of courage so fearless, a level of selflessness so humbling, and a level of sacrifice so inconceivable, that only the Medal of Honor can exemplify. This is what it means to go beyond the call of duty. Millions of Americans have answered this call, and several thousand have been decorated as Congressional Medal of Honor recipients. Four of these recipients hail from a thirty-mile stretch of my hometown in rural South Carolina. These are their stories.

Private First Class William A. McWhorter was born in Liberty, South Carolina on December 7, 1918. He enlisted in the United States Army during World War II. Some point during a battle at Leyte on the Philippine Islands, a make-shift grenade was thrown near him and his partner. Without hesitation, he grabbed the grenade and turned away from his companion and put it under himself. When the grenade detonated, he was killed instantly. His partner was spared from the grenade's blast by McWhorter's quick actions of courage, selflessness, and sacrifice. The courage to pick up the grenade rather than run and the selflessness and sacrifice behind giving up his own life to save his partner's will forever instill him in our memory as a hero for his actions (Hometown Heroes). On December 5, 1944, Private First Class McWhorter sacrificed his life for his country; he was awarded The Congressional Medal of Honor posthumously and was buried at the West View Cemetery in Liberty, South Carolina (Find A Grave).

Furman L. Smith served as a United States Army Private in World War II. He was born in Six Mile, South Carolina on May 11, 1925. He was stationed near Lanuvio, Italy. Private Smith's group was far from the enemy, even with two wounded, when they were ambushed by eighty German soldiers. The other members of his group retreated to where the company was stationed, but Private Smith refused to leave the wounded. He hid them in a shelter and faced the enemy alone, and for a time, remarkably well, until he was gunned down, his rifle still in hand, as he attempted to fight off the Germans. Private Smith exhibited courage in his lone stand against eighty Germans, selflessness in his want to protect his comrades, and sacrifice in taking on the enemy alone to protect his wounded companions. His story is one of true courage, selflessness, and sacrifice, and was truly Medal of Honor worthy. May 31, 1944 was the day Private Smith was overcome by German forces. Later Private Smith was awarded the Medal of

Honor for his valiant actions (Hometown Heroes). He was laid to rest at Pleasant Hill Cemetery in Central, South Carolina (Find A Grave).

Private First Class Charles H. Barker was born in Pickens County on April 12, 1935. He served in the United States Army in the Korean War. On June 4, 1953, near Sokkogae, Korea, Private First Class Barker was participating in a screening patrol for the battle of "Pork-chop Outpost." He was instructed to begin firing at an enemy while the platoon moved to another position. When the enemy got over the initial surprise, they began to gain strength. Private First Class Barker was last seen in fierce hand-to-hand combat with the enemy, while the platoon was setting up defense positions. The citation for his Medal of Honor states, "Pfc. Barker's unflinching courage, consummate devotion to duty, and supreme sacrifice enabled the patrol to complete the mission and effect an orderly withdrawal to friendly lines, reflecting lasting glory upon himself and upholding the highest traditions of the military service" (Hometown Heroes). This states that through courage and sacrifice, Private First Class Barker allowed the mission to be a success in what was a famous battle in the Korean War. He was awarded The Congressional Medal of Honor after death and was laid to rest at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Honolulu, Hawaii, a fitting memorial for yet another war hero (Find A Grave).

Lance Corporal James D. Howe served in the Vietnam War in the United States Marine Corps. On May 6, 1970, Howe and two of his companions came under grenade fire on a beach in Vietnam. They moved to a better position to begin returning fire. A grenade landed in their midst, and Howe immediately shouted a warning and smothered it with his body. When it detonated, he was killed. This twenty-one year old from Six Mile, South Carolina had the courage required to throw himself onto a live grenade to save those around him (Hometown

Heroes). This is why he was awarded the Medal of Honor. Lance Corporal Howe was laid to rest in the Liberty Memorial Gardens in Liberty, South Carolina, a hero, who gave his life for his comrades and his country (Find A Grave).

These men were born in the same state, a mere thirty miles apart, and yet in service to their nation were sent all over the world: Philippines, Italy, Korea, and Vietnam. They were all sent different places, but when they reached their destination, their stories become similar. They all laid down their lives for their friends by valiant displays of a selfless courage and sacrifice. These men were not, as Thomas Paine described, "summer soldiers" or "sunshine patriots," but soldiers in the darkest times, seeing things one could not even dream of and giving their lives to save us (Paine 132). Twenty-nine Congressional Medal of Honor medals lay in South Carolina's chest, and of that, about a seventh belong to the thirty-mile stretch of rural Pickens County that I call home.

## Works Cited

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