Growing up, when I thought of America, all I saw was the flag. I saw them outside homes, restaurants, or inside classrooms without really knowing what it meant. My father, who was an immigrant at the time, would tell me how lucky I was to be born in this country. He told me that serving your country was the bravest, most resilient thing anyone could do. When I was a child I watched his naturalization ceremony, waving a tiny American flag in his hand with pride. I watched him take an oath to support and defend the constitution, and something that I had never really thought of finally became clear to me. The freedom I was born with is not guaranteed to everyone in the world. My father would not have been able to become a citizen of the United States without the people who serve and protect our country. Nowadays, I think of the veterans that are around us in our everyday lives. I see more than a uniform or a title. It's the passionate lady you call your American Studies teacher, the choir teacher who somehow doesn't go a day without making his students laugh, or the people surrounding us today. Veterans have taught me that America may not be perfect, but it is worth appreciating due to the freedoms we have, the sacrifices made to protect, and the people who continue to serve.

Many of us take the freedom we have for granted because we've never known life without it. We have the freedom to express who we are. Whether it's by freedom of speech, freedom of religion, or the way you decide to dress. This is part of our ordinary life. When I began to think about people around the world, I realized not everyone is able to live as we do. As of right now, girls and women in Afghanistan face severe restrictions on their daily lives. In North Korea, the government bans all independent media and political opposition. This has made me realize the life I have. I can walk into a classroom and share my opinion. I can practice my

faith and choose who I want to become. Veterans helped me realize that freedom is something to appreciate, not expect.

Veterans also taught me that freedom comes with sacrifice. Behind our freedom are people who have spent years from home–facing danger, and carrying experiences that never leave even long after they return home. The Korean War and Vietnamese War are only two examples of conflicts our veterans and current soldiers have endured. Many veterans return home carrying physical injuries, emotional struggles, or traumatic memories they deal with for the rest of their lives. Sometimes, the person standing next to you in a grocery store or walking through your town has a story to tell. We live the lives we do because of the people who willingly put their lives on the line

Veterans taught me to recognize the people who continue to serve and contribute to America with dedication. Their service extends beyond the battlefield. They continue helping their communities even after their military service ends. People can serve through helping others, volunteering, mentoring, or contributing to their communities. Hearing veterans' experiences made me more aware of the fact that appreciating America was recognizing the people around me who have sacrificed their time and energy for others.

Veterans are in our everyday lives. They have taught me that the American flag I had only seen as a symbol carries freedom, sacrifice, and service. When I think back to my father at his naturalization ceremony, holding that little flag, I understand it all. Veterans helped make that moment possible. They taught me that loving America means appreciating the freedoms we have, remembering the sacrifices made to protect them, and recognizing the people who continue

to serve in ways both big and small. I used to see the flag. Now, I will always think of the people behind it.