# The Big Deal About Freedom

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"What's the big deal about freedom? Most countries are free these days, right? It's not as if it's anything special."

These words were spoken by a teenager. He had no idea how costly freedom is.

It brought to mind a visit I made to the local Post Office. A car with a POW license plate was parked in front, and inside the tiny building, a lone customer, an elderly man, was buying stamps.

"Excuse me, sir," I began, "Is that your POW license plate?"

The gentleman stood up straight, thrust his achy shoulders back with pride and said, "Why, yes, it is."

"May I ask where you served?" I continued.

That's all I said. Before my eyes, this elderly gentleman was transformed into a 19-year-old GI in the Battle of the Bulge. Stories poured out, about being captured and brought to Dresden, Germany during the bombing, and being forced to pile dead bodies onto railroad ties. He told of starvation, and the lice-infested quarters at Slaughterhouse Five where hundreds of GIs, including Kurt Vonnegut, were crowded onto wooden slats that served as beds. He spoke of a buddy who was shot for stealing a can of beans, and another POW who starved to death because he refused to steal. "Hunger and stealing were a way of life," the man explained. "That guy wouldn't do it."

After the war, the GI visited the parents of the young soldier who had starved. "I think it was the hardest thing I ever had to do, to tell parents that their son was dead because he wouldn't steal. He was going to be a minister."

Little was known about Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, so returning POWs were told to forget that the war had ever happened. "One time in a thunderstorm, I drove up on a golf course and tried to push my wife under the seat," the man admitted. During another thunderstorm, he shoved his wife under the bed.

Decades later he joined a group of former POWs. They encouraged him to tell others about his wartime years, and the price he paid for freedom.

As the gentleman told his story, time quietly halted. Two more customers strolled in and quickly realized they were hearing living history, drawn in sharp detail by one who had survived unimaginable deprivations of war.

And so we listened, every one of us in that tiny room, trying to sear into our memories the images of war. We knew that soon, there would be no one left to tell these stories.

I don't know how long I stood there. I do know that when I left the Post Office that day, I was proud to be an American, and thankful for our freedom, and keenly aware that it comes at an extremely high cost.

That's the big deal about freedom.