What is the value of freedom?

By Chaplain Allen Vaughan

What is the value of freedom? This past week we celebrated we celebrated the 235th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

The men who signed that historic document knew that there would be a price to pay—indeed, shots had already been fired in Lexington, Concord, and several other locations throughout the colonies.

There was no turning back. Should the colonists lose the war, these men would be tried and executed as traitors. But, they could no longer tolerate the tyranny of the British king. They were willing to pay that ultimate price, if necessary, and indicated their willingness to do so by their signature on the declaration.

What is the value of freedom? Less than a hundred years after the war for independence, the nation was again at war, this time with herself.

Part of the reason for that war was because it was becoming increasingly intolerable for a people of freedom to hold others in slavery simply because of their skin color.

Nearly 525,000 Americans died in that war, the highest American casualty rate of any war in the history of our nation.

What is the value of freedom? In New York harbor stands a statue of a woman, with a torch held high in the air, a gift to our nation from the people of France in 1884. "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. . .," says the plaque on the pedestal.

For generations, people from around the world risked storms and hardship for the opportunity to see that statue and experience the liberty, which she represents as they sailed into New York harbor and a new life in "...the land of the free."

What is the value of freedom? For my own ancestors, it was the poverty of an overcrowded nation and the tyranny of a state church supported by taxpayer monies that caused them to pull up stakes, say goodbye forever to their extended family, and sail off for America. They were glad for the opportunity to do so.

What is the value of freedom? Ask the refugee who came on a raft from Haiti. Or the immigrant fortunate enough to get a seat on an airplane following the fall of Saigon. Or the impoverished peasant who risks crossing a secured boarder in order to gain employment to support his family.

What is the value of freedom? Ask the military veteran who spent time in places like Germany, Okinawa, Korea, or Vietnam, risking their lives in the fight against ideologies like Nazism and Communism that deny people their basic freedoms.

Ask the veteran who has been to Iraq or Afghanistan, fighting the war on terrorism so that our countrymen will never again have to experience a horror like that of September 11, 2001.

For the military veteran, the price paid for freedom may include such things extended time away from family, physical, emotional, and/or spiritual wounds from the battle, and even the ultimate sacrifice of life itself.

What is the value of freedom? Many in our nation do not appreciate the value of freedom, and its associated costs.

We were born in America, we have enjoyed her freedoms and opportunities all of our lives.

We take freedom for granted. But freedom is never free. It always comes with a price tag. Are we willing to pay the price?

Are we willing to pay the price for freedom by being informed, responsible voters?

Many in our nation have concluded that the cost of casting an informed ballot is simply too high, and as a result a minority is electing the leadership of our country.

Are we willing to pay the price for freedom by responsibly paying our taxes, and taxing ourselves at rates that adequately pay for the financial costs of freedom, or are we willing to shift these costs to future generations?

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The Editor asks:

"***Did you know,*** the Lone Sailor is a composite of the U.S. Navy bluejacket, past, present and future? He's called the Lone Sailor, yet he is hardly ever alone, standing there on the broad granite plaza which forms the amphitheater of the Navy Memorial. Visitors to the Memorial are immediately drawn to him to peer into his far seeing eyes, to admire him or size him up, to see if he's as tough or as gentle as he seems. Visitors find that he is all that he seems and probably more.

The founders of the Navy Memorial envisioned this Lone Sailor at 25 years of age at most, a senior second class petty officer who is fast becoming a seagoing veteran. He has done it all – fired his weapons in a dozen wars, weighed anchor from a thousand ports, tracked supplies, doused fires, repelled boarders, typed in quadruplicate and mess-cooked, too. He has made liberty call in great cities and tiny villages, where he played tourist, ambassador, missionary to the poor, adventurer, souvenir shopper and friend to new lands. His shipmates remember him with pride and tell their grandchildren stories, some of which, like him, are seven feet tall.

The bronze statue is the creation of Stanley Bleifeld, the U.S. Navy Memorial's official sculptor, selected by a board of recognized art authorities from a field of 36 sculptors identified in a six month, nationwide search. A native of New York City, Bleifeld maintains a studio at his home in Weston, Connecticut, and also in Pietrasanta, Italy.

Stanley Bleifeld served in the Navy in World War II. Like many other talented artists at the time, he was assigned as an illustrator for Navy training manuals; he never went into battle, but he helped train those who did.

After so long an absence from the Navy, Bleifeld visited the fleet and other Navy activities to help him see anew the Navy Sailor in the sea environment; he further focused his impressions in meetings with the Secretary of the Navy, the Chief of Naval Operations, other senior officer and enlisted personnel, and his patrons - the Navy Memorial Foundation officers, staff and board members. These patrons represented literally hundreds of years of Navy experience and acquaintance with the Lone Sailor.

The process of conceptualization, modeling, sculpting and casting went through five initial images, four different models, and well over a year of work before culminating in the unveiling at the formal dedication of the Memorial on October 13, 1987 – on the anniversary of the Navy's birthday.

The third model of a strong and brash young man leaning over a cleat, although very well received, was passed up in favor of an upright model. However a full casting of this model, dubbed the "Liberty Hound", was subsequently commissioned for the Jacksonville Navy Memorial in Jacksonville, Fla.

As part of the casting process, the bronze for The Lone Sailor was mixed with artifacts from eight U. S. Navy ships, provided by the curator for the Navy in the Naval Historical Center at the Washington Navy Yard. The ships span the Navy's history, yielding small pieces of copper sheeting, spikes, hammock hooks and other fragments from the post-revolutionary frigates Constitution ("Old Ironsides") and Constellation; the steamer Hartford, flagship of Admiral David G. Farragut in the Civil War era; the battleship USS Maine; the iron-hulled steamer and sailing ship USS Ranger; the World War II-era cruiser USS Biloxi and aircraft carrier USS Hancock, and the nuclear-powered submarine USS Seawolf. One last addition was a personal decoration from today's Navy, one given to sailors in war and peace, the National Defense Service Medal. These bits of metal are now part of The Lone Sailor.

Reaction to The Lone Sailor has been gratifying. "He certainly represents us," is the claim heard from nearly every Navy community, active or retired. The Navy Memorial Foundation regularly receives telephone calls or notes from Navy veterans or their families wondering where the foundation obtained their photograph as the model for the statue. The Lone Sailor is impressive to people who have never served in the Navy and powerfully so for those who have served.

'You would want this guy at your battle station when it's not a drill," former Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy Billy C. Sanders says of The Lone Sailor. "He is the classic American Sailor. That statue looks like bronze, but there is plenty of salt, paint, sweat, fuel oil and courage stirred in.'"