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At Military Museum, Let Freedom Ring

By Nancy Dunham
Special to The Washington Post
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It might be an exaggeration to say that before Josh Dean of Manassas visited the Freedom Museum, World War II, the Vietnam War and other historic conflicts were basically the stuff of grainy news footage.

But it's fair to say the history was somewhat unfathomable until the 18-year-old, a member of the Navy Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps, went to the museum and met those who had served in the U.S. armed forces, especially those who had been prisoners of war or missing in action.

"The history is definitely there . . . but what really opened my eyes and brought that to life was listening to those who had actually been there and experienced those things," Dean said.

It's easy to overlook the Freedom Museum, housed in a terminal at the Manassas Regional Airport. Although it's part of the Smithsonian Institution's Affiliations program, there are no exterior signs to guide visitors. Yet, just inside the terminal are plentiful displays of military gear, letters, photographs and other memorabilia.

What arguably makes the Freedom Museum more accessible than other, grander galleries is its modest size, which allows visitors to closely examine artifacts and memorabilia.

That's why Vanessa Caceres of Woodbridge opted to visit the museum with her 15-year-old stepson, Gino, who immigrated to the United States from his native Peru three years ago.

"It was very interesting to Gino, because he learned not just about the military but [other aspects of] U.S. history," Caceres said. "I like that it's free and close to home. It's great not to have to drive all the way into D.C. for this type of experience."

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The Freedom Museum
Smithsonian Institution Affiliations Program

Students from Woodbine Christian School explore the Freedom Museum in Manassas, which centers on military history. (Photos By Sarah L. Voisin -- The Washington Post)

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Doug Cavileer, whose extensive military career includes service as a Navy aviator during World War II, joins his wife, Grace, formerly a World War II nurse cadet, as a museum volunteer. When kids, ranging in age from about 7 to 18, test their knowledge during the museum's "treasure hunt," the couple has a chance to share tidbits of history.

"Kids can have a tough time making the connection" between the displays and actual events, said Cavileer, of Manassas. "When we explain to them what happened in a certain photo, that

helps them. . . . They can ask some very interesting questions about how it all ties into al-Qaeda and Iraq."

Museum President Chuck Colgan Jr., of Colgan Air in Manassas (and son of state Sen. Chuck Colgan), said its goals are clear: honor fallen comrades, pay tribute to those who served to protect freedom and give youngsters a sense of history and heritage. The stories are told through the eyes of those who were in conflicts abroad and also honors those who served on the home front.

"Young kids don't know the price of freedom," said Colgan, a Vietnam War veteran. "The museum is there to give young kids a sense of history. . . . I think of this almost like a civic responsibility to make sure all of [those who served] are not unknown soldiers."

A trip to the museum also gives visitors an opportunity to observe an array of commercial and private aircraft as they soak up general aviation knowledge. There are also opportunities for stargazing when celebrities (including Bill Murray and Colin Powell) fly in or dine at Hoppy's Restaurant, an on-site eatery with plenty of kid-friendly food.

The myriad activities in the museum are "a lot of fun," said museum volunteer retired Navy Capt. Jim Porter of Manassas. "The kids learn almost by accident."

The Freedom Museum 10400 Terminal Rd., Manassas Phone: 703-393-0660 Hours: Open daily from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Admission: Free.

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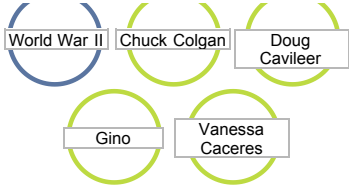
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