

## Ordinary People, Extraordinary Choices

### A Lesson on Courage, Duty, and the Meaning of Heroism

**Grade Level:** 9–12

**Subjects:** Civics, U.S. History, Ethics, Social Studies

**Time Required:** 1 class period (30–50 minutes)

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#### TEACHER INSTRUCTIONS

##### Lesson Overview

This lesson uses a real World War II case study to explore **why ordinary people sometimes make extraordinary choices**. Students examine the actions of a U.S. Army medic during WWII and discuss broader questions about heroism, moral courage, and personal responsibility.

The lesson is discussion-based and works well as:

- A stand-alone ethics lesson
  - A WWII / home-front supplement
  - A character education or civics activity
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##### Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Analyze motivations behind selfless and courageous behavior
  - Evaluate different definitions of “hero”
  - Reflect on how individuals respond to danger and moral choice
  - Participate in respectful, evidence-based discussion
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##### Materials

- Student Narrative (below)
- Student Discussion Response Sheet

- Optional Reflection Assignment
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## **Suggested Procedure**

### **1. Introduction (5 minutes)**

Ask students:

“When you hear the word *hero*, what comes to mind?”

Record a few responses without judgment.

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### **2. Read the Case Study (5–7 minutes)**

Students read the narrative silently or as a guided read-aloud.

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### **3. Small Group Discussion (10–15 minutes)**

Students work in groups of **3–4**, using the response sheet to discuss the questions.

Encourage:

- Multiple viewpoints
  - No “right” answers
  - Respectful disagreement
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### **4. Whole-Class Discussion (Optional, 10 minutes)**

Invite groups to share:

- One insight they agreed on
  - One question they struggled with
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## **Teacher Note**

Some students may say “*I wouldn’t do that*”.

That response is valid and often leads to the **most honest discussions** about fear, responsibility, and human nature.

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## STUDENT CASE STUDY:

### An Ordinary Person in an Extraordinary Moment

During World War II, a young man from rural West Virginia grew up on a small farm. The largest town he had ever visited was a nearby community only a few miles from home.

When the United States entered World War II after the attack on Pearl Harbor, he joined the U.S. Army. He was sent to New York City for training — a place so different from anything he had known that it felt like another world.

He trained as a **combat medic**, a soldier whose job was not to fight, but to save lives on the battlefield.

While being transported overseas, the ship carrying him was sunk. He survived and was sent onward anyway, eventually serving in North Africa and later in the Italian campaign.

During a major battle in 1943, under heavy enemy fire, wounded soldiers were trapped in the open. Three separate times, the medic left the safety of cover, crawled through gunfire, dragged wounded soldiers to safety, and provided emergency medical treatment.

For his actions, he received the **Silver Star**, one of the United States' highest awards for bravery.

Years later, when asked why he risked his life to save people he did not know, he gave a simple answer:

“I was just doing my job.”

This raises an important question:

Was he a hero — or simply an ordinary person who made an extraordinary choice?

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### The official Medal Citation

**The President of the United States of America, authorized by Act of Congress July 9, 1918, takes pleasure in presenting the Silver Star to Private Willard L. Freeman, United States Army, for gallantry in action while serving with the Medical Detachment, 10th Field Artillery Battalion, 3d Infantry Division, in action against the enemy in Sicily, in August 1943. His gallant actions and dedicated devotion to duty, without regard for his own life, were in keeping with the highest traditions of military service and reflect great credit upon himself and the United States Army.**

## STUDENT DISCUSSION RESPONSE SHEET

Group Members: \_\_\_\_\_

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### Question 1

**Why do some individuals choose to put themselves in danger to help people they do not even know?**

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### Question 2

**What makes someone a hero?**

(Check all that apply, then explain.)

- Courage
- Training
- Moral responsibility
- Duty
- Selflessness
- Circumstance
- Choice

Explanation:

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**Question 3**

**Do you see yourself as someone who could make a similar choice in a dangerous situation? Why or why not?**

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**Group Summary Statement**

In one sentence, summarize what your group believes **heroism truly means**:

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**OPTIONAL INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION ASSIGNMENT****Option 1: Short Reflection (Exit Ticket)**

What part of this story stood out to you the most, and why?

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**Option 2: Standard Reflection (1 paragraph)**

Do you agree with the idea that “a hero is an ordinary person doing extraordinary things”? Use examples from the case study to support your answer.

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**Option 3: Extended Reflection (½–1 page)**

Imagine you were placed in a situation where helping others meant risking your own safety. What factors would influence your decision? Be honest.

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