



Impact Statement

Soomin Ahn, Grade 9

The Heroic Flashback of Hegdahl, 2026

Acrylic on canvas, 20 x 16 inches

Arlington High School, Arlington, MA

Unsung Hero: Douglas Hegdahl

Doug Hegdahl, a hidden hero, rightfully deserves significant recognition for the courage, endurance, and resourcefulness he demonstrated during his military service.

The story of this remarkable, life-saving hero begins with his service as a U.S. Navy sailor during the Vietnam War. While engaged in combat operations, he fell overboard and was subsequently captured by enemy forces. During his captivity, he feigned low intelligence, a ruse he maintained due to his lowly rank. Consequently, his captors deemed him to be no threat to them. He was also notorious among the guards for being labeled as “Incredibly stupid one”. However, this proved to be a fatal error on the part of those who had captured him. Hegdahl had utilized the rhyme scheme of the nursery rhyme “Old McDonald” to memorize, down to the last detail, the names of every prisoner, the dates of their capture, and all other pertinent information regarding them. Thus, upon his release from a Vietnamese prison, he handed over to the U.S. government and military authorities all the information he possessed regarding his fellow inmates, thereby enabling their rescue. His actions left a deep impression on me, particularly in that he saved lives by exercising his intellect rather than engaging in physical combat. Relying solely on his wits to outwit the enemy, he was able to recall detailed information on as many as 254 prisoners. We, too, must always bear in mind the fundamental truth that we should never judge others based merely on their outward appearance.

In my work, I chose to depict Hegdahl not merely in his naval uniform but also clad in prison garb. The formal portrait of Hegdahl, positioned at the center of the painting, symbolically signifies that he is the protagonist of this narrative. Hegdahl, in his prison uniform, exudes an even more intense power, a force born of his self-appointed role as a hero and his utter fearlessness in the face of a death he might well meet within the confines of his prison cell. He presents us with an exemplary model of courage, never displaying a hint of cowardice even when confronted with the menacing threat of a prison guard pointing a gun directly at him. While the guard appears as a symbol of peril, Hegdahl refuses to look back, pressing forward relentlessly. In the background, I have depicted other prisoners reaching out toward freedom, yet held captive, drained of the strength to make their escape. By extending his hand toward them, Hegdahl shares his own strength in an act of salvation for his fellow prisoners.

The materials used in my illustrations are art mediums with a thick texture, such as acrylic paints. I prefer acrylic over lighter-textured mediums, like watercolors, because they lend a more substantial quality to the artwork, making them effective for conveying a sense of strength and

resilience. As layers of paint are built up, the piece acquires greater depth and a three-dimensional quality. To gather reference materials for the project, I scoured every available image I could find regarding Hegdahl and his experiences. Subsequently, I utilized the Procreate app to create a collage-style preliminary sketch, thereby laying the groundwork to embark on the full-scale coloring process.

My work conveys the message that standing up for others need not necessarily take the form of a physical confrontation; it can be just as effectively realized through the application of knowledge. Furthermore, I wish to emphasize that even if one were to lose their way amidst the chaos of battle, it remains possible to discover a means to strike back and save others. I hope that those who view my work will come to realize that, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds, one must never cease fighting until the very end, and that, much like Doug Hegdahl, they will take to heart the truth that they, too, can become heroes in whatever circumstances they may find themselves.