

**U.S. Senator Jon Tester
Memorial Day Speech
Laurel, Montana
May 29, 2017**

Thank you Commissioner Pitman for that kind introduction.

I want to recognize Bill Kennedy, Stephen McCollum [MU-CULLEM] and Kevin Johnson for your hard work on this beautiful cemetery.

And welcome to Attorney General Tim Fox, Chairman A.J. Not Afraid, and members of Crow Nation, Northern Cheyenne and representatives from the American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, Marine Corps League, and other Veterans Service Organizations.

Most importantly, thank you to every veteran and service member in attendance for your service and sacrifice.

I know you will all join Sharla and me in keeping our military members and their families in our thoughts and prayers.

So many Montanans have and continue to answer the call to serve when America needs them most.

These courageous men and women know the value of freedom and understand what it means to sacrifice to protect it.

Not only that, each and every one of you should be incredibly proud of your service to your nation. You have each served admirably and in crucial moments in our nation's history.

Native Americans have served at higher rates since 9/11 than anyone. And over 31,000 Native Americans are serving right now. We owe our Crow and Northern Cheyenne veterans a special thank you.

We are here today to honor those who paid the ultimate sacrifice.

I can't think of a better place to honor the men and women who gave their lives than the only nationally recognized veterans' burial ground in Montana.

The Yellowstone County National Cemetery is a testament to the sacrifice of Montana's bravest. It is also a lasting symbol of what we can achieve when we work together.

The collaboration of so many veterans, officials and residents here today made our vision for this cemetery a reality.

Playing taps at the dedication of this cemetery with Burt Gigoux [JI-GOO], almost three years ago to the day, is a humbling moment that will stay with me forever.

We all worked really hard together, putting pressure on the VA to create a place for the fallen, the brave, and their families.

Congress really could learn a thing or two from the way we get things done in Montana.

[JOHN OLSEN]

I'm happy that John Olsen is here with us today. I've had the pleasure of knowing and working with John for years now.

John served honorably in the United States Navy. From 1963 to 1965 he was a part of Project SHAD – a classified project which tested the effects of biological and chemical agents on naval personnel and equipment.

He's fought for decades for the government to recognize his role in Project SHAD. He's still waiting for the health care and benefits that he earned through his service.

I've worked with John to introduce legislation that bears his name and urges the government to declassify the records of Project SHAD so John can use them to apply for disability benefits from the VA.

Together, we are working to make sure veterans who have been exposed to toxins, whether it was a part of a classified project or not, can access the care and benefits they deserve.

[CHOICE]

As John reminds us, taking care of our veterans is a cost of war.

And the care and benefits that we extend to our veterans are just as much a mark of the strength of America's military as the aircraft, weapons and troops that protect us around the world.

And while the challenges at the Department of Veterans Affairs are many, we will keep putting politics aside and working together to make sure that every veteran receives the very best care and assistance from the VA.

And when a VA facility is out of reach, we must ensure that veterans can access care in their community.

That's why I worked with my Republican colleague John McCain to author a bill to cut some of the red tape that veterans face when they use the Choice Program.

Our bipartisan bill was one of the first bills that President Donald Trump signed into law and VA Montana is hard at work to implement these improvements for veterans and providers.

[ACCOUNTABILITY]

While we have more improvements to make, veterans continue to tell me that they want to get their health care from the VA. They like the doctors and nurses that they see there.

I believe many of the people here today would agree with me that the folks at the VA are honest, hard-working people who are passionate about caring for veterans.

But a handful of bad apples continue to give the entire VA a bad name.

So I joined my Republican colleagues Marco Rubio and Johnny Isakson to author a major VA reform bill to hold these folks accountable – while protecting the due process rights of hard working folks to who care for veterans.

Commonsense solutions like our bill will make the VA stronger for Montana veterans. And it shows what you can accomplish when you put politics aside.

Our bill recently cleared a key hurdle and is one step closer to being signed into law.

I look forward to working with every member of Congress to VA employees accountable to veterans.

[DEBORAH SAMPSON ACT]

True accountability, however, is also about giving the VA the tools it needs to serve every veteran who walks in the door, regardless of background, rank, or gender.

Just look around at this cemetery, there are 719 men and women buried on these hallowed grounds, representing folks of every walk of life that call Montana home.

Times have changed since many of these heroes fought and bravely served.

Women are now enlisting to serve our nation at higher rates than ever before, and they're taking on combat roles like never before.

But often, they find that when they return home, their local VA doesn't have the staff or capacity to care for them.

Women veterans are turning to the VA more than ever before for preventative tests to maternity care.

But sometimes they find that their local VA doesn't even have a women's health primary care provider.

Or all they have is a flimsy curtains that separates them in exam rooms from their male counterparts.

That's why I worked with veterans, advocates, and my colleagues to introduce legislation to change the culture at the VA to better serve the growing number of women veterans.

Our bipartisan bill will implement changes at the VA so women feel comfortable going there for care.

It will put locks on exam room doors and improve gender-specific care and peer-to-peer counseling.

Frankly, it's past time to make sure women veterans are receiving the best services and care possible from the VA. Our bill will start making that a reality.

The VA is the nation's largest health care system. I'm proud of the work we've accomplished to cut the bureaucracy and get veterans in to see their doctors faster.

Moving forward, we have more improvements to make at the VA to make it accountable and accessible for every veteran, whether they're going to the VA or turning to their community for care.

And I'm committed to working with the Chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee and every member of Congress to ensure that the Choice Program works the way it was intended to..... the VA can get rid of the dead weight faster..... and to make women veterans more comfortable turning to the VA for care.

[NAMING VA MEDICAL FACILITIES]

On Memorial Day, we are reminded of great Montanans who served our state and nation.

Men like, Dr. Joseph Medicine Crow and Benjamin Charles Steele.

Thanks to the support of the Montana chapters of the American Legion, Disabled American Veterans and the Veterans of Foreign Wars, we introduced bipartisan legislation to rename two Billings veterans clinics after these men of uncommon valor who embody the Montana spirit of service that calls so many of our sons and daughters to serve in our nation's military.

We are also reminded that we must fulfill our commitment to the next generation of soldiers, airmen and sailors.

It's often said that how we treat current and past generations of veterans – veterans like John Olsen, and so many here today – will determine the willingness of tomorrow's young people to serve their country.

Honoring the men and women who serve us is not a partisan issue, it is a bipartisan responsibility. And quite frankly, it is one of the costs of war.

And it is only by putting politics aside to compromise and work together that we can achieve the level of care and benefits that veterans deserve.

I look back on accomplishments and reform that started with a conversation across the aisle – a common cause – a veteran reaching out – and I'm optimistic that together we will make sure that every veteran has the care they need, a safe and warm place to call home, and a fulfilling career and place in their community.

I am committed to getting it done. Veterans deserve no less.

Thank you for this opportunity to honor those who gave their lives for the country they loved and the freedoms they stood for.

God bless our men and women in uniform, past present, and future.

Thank you.

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