



Honoring Our Nation's Heroes

Back when I was growing up in my hometown of Cumming, it was assumed that once you graduated from school, you would join the military and serve your country. When I was a young boy, I watched the Harkins – John, Joe, Jim, Harold, Pete, Gene and Ed – come home from World War II. A few years later, I saw another generation of Harkins suit up for Korea.

I was troubled when, several years ago, I heard that thousands of American veterans had earned medals for their service, but had never received them.

When my time came, I decided to be a Navy pilot. I did five years of service and three in the reserves, and I saw it as the highest honor to wear my country's uniform. In the Navy, I learned about duty, discipline, sacrifice and honor. I also learned one of the most important lessons of my life: never, ever leave a buddy behind.

It's been a few years since I wore my Navy uniform, but in my heart, I still live by the lessons I learned during my military service. That's why, throughout my service to Iowa in the Congress, I've always worked hard to make sure our nation's veterans get the health care, financial support and respect they deserve.

I was troubled when, several years ago, I heard that thousands of American veterans had earned medals for their service, but had never received them. When these veterans tried to track down their medals, they were met with bureaucratic backlogs and red tape.

Our veterans put their lives on the line for our nation. Telling them that they have to wait months, if not years, to receive the medals they earned defending our freedom is simply wrong. That's why I worked to pass bipartisan legislation to peel away the red tape, to end the backlog and get our veterans their medals.

Since then, my staff and I have worked to help hundreds of Iowans receive the medals they or their family members earned to protect freedom. Iowa veterans like Jack Cullens.

In 1943, Jack Cullens married, left for basic training, and later served in Europe with the 82nd Airborne Division's 505th Parachute Infantry. While Jack was overseas his wife, Phyllis, served in the Women's Army Corps (WAC) 3rd Regiment as a surgical nurse stationed at Fort Des Moines, Ft. Hood, and Ft. Knox.

Sadly, Jack Cullens would not live to see the many memorials to our World War II veterans. On October 9, 1944, he gave "the last full measure of his devotion," passing away as a result of wounds received in action. He was laid to rest at the Netherlands American Cemetery in Margraten, the Netherlands.

I recently had the honor of meeting Jack's widow, Phyllis, and presented her with Jack's Purple Heart. Phyllis told me that she had hoped to visit Jack's grave this past year only to see her trip canceled due to the terrorist attacks on September 11th. I hope that Phyllis can soon travel to the Netherlands to visit Jack and to bring him his Purple Heart.

There are so many more veterans just like Jack Cullens: Men and women who left their families and communities – who sacrificed to defend our freedom and protect our values. I honor each and every one of them for their contributions. And I'm going to keep working to make sure they receive the medals they earned. It's a matter of common decency, a matter of simply gratitude – and most important – it's about not leaving our buddies behind.

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For help with obtaining military medals, Iowans can contact any one of Tom Harkin's Iowa offices or e-mail the Senator at Tom_Harkin@harkin.senate.gov