

Tuesday May 14, 2019

Chairman Perales, Vice Chair Hood, Ranking Member Weinstein, and members of the committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today and express the support of the National Veterans Memorial and Museum, as well as my own personal support, for Senate Bill 77 designating June 12th “Women Veterans’ Day” for the State of Ohio.

My name is Gretchen Klingler, and I come before you not only representing the National Veterans Memorial and Museum, but also representing myself. I am a woman, I was born and raised in Ohio, and I am a Veteran.

On June 16, 2009, I began my first day of basic training in San Antonio, Texas as a new member of the World’s Greatest Air Force. After completing two years of training in the Iraqi dialect of Arabic at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California, I moved forward with my military service as a 1A8X2, Airborne ISR Operator, and was stationed at Hurlburt Field at the Air Force Special Operations Command as a member of the 25th Intelligence Squadron. Following two deployments, one to Afghanistan in 2013, and one in Djibouti and Iraq in 2014, I was honorably discharged on June 15, 2015, and moved back to Ohio to attend The Ohio State University. Less than two weeks ago, my 10-year plan came to a close as I graduated from The Ohio State University with a bachelor’s degree in Anthropology with minors in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and Middle Eastern Studies, and a bachelor’s degree in Arabic. Throughout my time at The Ohio State University, I led the Ohio State Student Veterans of America Chapter, became selected as Ohio State’s first undergraduate Pat Tillman Military Scholar, and became involved with the Hilliard Memorial VFW Post 4931 in Hilliard, Ohio, along

with various other activities. Following graduation, I was thrilled to remain in Central Ohio, having been welcomed onto the team at the National Veterans Memorial and Museum as the Veteran Community Outreach Coordinator.

The National Veterans Memorial and Museum opened here in Columbus, Ohio on Saturday, October 27, 2018, with the distinction of being designated as the National Memorial and Museum for Veterans by Congress. The National Veterans Memorial and Museum is dedicated to honoring Americans' contributions to our country through military service, connecting civilians with Veterans and their experiences, inspiring visitors to serve their community and nation as active engaged citizens, and educating school children about the history and value of service. Women, in addition to men, have served in our military long before we were recognized for our roles, and long before we were officially permitted to serve. Whether we served in supporting or combat positions, Women Veterans have been leaders both in military service and in our civilian lives.

Early in our American history, countless women would accompany their husbands, bringing water for soldiers and to cool the overheated cannons. Although they did not officially serve, they were a part of the cause and often were called to take up arms, such as the case of Margaret Cochran Corbin, whose husband was killed in front of her while manning the cannons during the Revolutionary War. As George Washington retreated from Manhattan, it was she who took her husband's place, and later was the first woman to receive a military pension, all before women could serve in our military.¹

Deborah Sampson served in the Continental Army under the name Robert Shurtleff, and was able to hide her identity as a woman, once digging a musket ball out of her own wound in fear of being identified. The

¹ <https://www.militaryhistoryonline.com/18thcentury/articles/MargaretCochranCorbin.aspx>

National Veterans Memorial and Museum cites that after her unit demobilization, her commander learned of her identity, and because he was impressed with her service, granted her an honorable discharge. How many more women assumed the identities of men out of necessity to serve the country they felt called to protect? How many more women had to hide their sex or their gender to serve a country they loved?

It was only in 1991, 28 years ago, within my lifetime, within *your* lifetimes, that women have been permitted to fly in combat missions. In 1993 women were permitted to serve on combat ships², and in 2015, Defense Secretary Ash B. Carter announced that “...the Pentagon would open all combat jobs to women.”³ Women like Deborah Sampson and many others paved the way for women to serve, openly, in the military, with honor.

Even when our roles were in secret or in support of combat operations, women have always played a role in military service. As a result, our stories are intertwined in the narrative of our nation’s military history, and therefore in the National Veterans Memorial and Museum. Walking through the National Veterans Memorial and Museum, our visitors encounter stories of women who have served in many capacities.

Countless trailblazers have paved the way for women to fight openly and equally, proving time and time again that women deserve to be recognized as contributors in the fight to defend our nation and support our causes. From the WASPs of the Women Airforce Service Pilots in World War II, to Senator Tammy Duckworth, and countless women in between, women have been and will continue to be part of the fabric of our nation’s armed services. However, as these stories have shown, women have also faced special challenges to acknowledging our service.

² https://www.history.org/history/teaching/enewsletter/volume7/images/nov/women_military_timeline.pdf

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/04/us/politics/combat-military-women-ash-carter.html>

Standing among groups of our fellow service members, Women Veterans often are overlooked when “Thank you for your service” is rendered to individuals in the group. While no woman serves to be thanked, it is frustrating that our service is overlooked when so often the service of our male peers is assumed. When among our peers, Women Veterans are often mistaken for partners, girlfriends, or wives of male service members. Although many of us also take on these important supporting roles for service members, it is important to highlight that women serve too.

On June 12, 1948, President Harry S. Truman signed into law the Women’s Armed Services Integration Act, allowing women to become a permanent part of the U.S. military. Designating June 12 as Women Veterans’ Day in Ohio will continue to bring visibility to the service of women in our state. With the sixth largest Veteran population in the country, it is important for Ohio to continue to demonstrate support of Women Veterans. Our great state would take a positive step forward in designating a day to recognize the special barriers and obstacles that Women Veterans have overcome and continue to overcome in service to our nation. For this reason, I and the National Veterans Memorial and Museum enthusiastically support Ohio Senate Bill 77, designating the twelfth day of June as “Women Veterans’ Day.”

Again, I want to express my appreciation to the committee for the opportunity to show the National Veterans Memorial and Museum’s support for this bill, and I will look forward to answering any questions that may you have.