

Sen. Susan M. Collins
Caribou Memorial Day
May 29, 2017

Thank you, Linda. I am honored to join you on this most solemn day. Veterans, men and women of our armed forces, and families, we who enjoy the blessing of freedom are deeply grateful to you who have given so much to defend it. My thanks to the dedicated members of the Northern Maine Veterans Cemetery Committee and the Madawaska Legion Riders for helping to make this inspiring event possible.

On Memorial Day 14 years ago, we gathered here to dedicate this beautiful final resting place for our heroes. From the generous gift of this land from John and Joyce Noble, to the hard work by our veterans' organizations, and the support of citizens throughout Northern Maine, this place is the work of many hands. Those hands have continued to work together in the years since to bring about many accomplishments, such as the living memorial carillon, the POW/MIA Remembrance Park, and the Avenue of Flags.

But this is no mere construction project. The landscaping and buildings, fine though they are, only hint at the virtues exhibited by the men and women we honor here. Were they a thousand times finer, they still could not fully pay the debt we owe those who put their lives on the line to defend their country and to advance the cause of freedom. The veterans here today, regardless of the time and place of your service, share a common bond. It is a bond forged from courage, duty, and sacrifice.

As we come together today in gratitude, as we look down the rows of the columbarium walls and headstones, the flowers, and the flags, we see our history. It is a history written not by conquerors, but by ordinary men and women who answered the call to defend liberty. It is a history cherished not by a power seeking domination, but by a people seeking peace.

On this day, as we honor the fallen, we also honor those who served and returned home, and those who serve today. One of my greatest privileges as a Senator has been the opportunities I've had to visit our troops overseas, in Korea, in Kosovo, and three times in Iraq and Afghanistan. In them, I see the same courage and compassion that have been the true insignia of America's armed forces throughout our history.

And while we thank our men and women in uniform, we also thank the families – the husbands and wives, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, and mothers and fathers – who endure the separation, the anxiety, and, all too often, the grief that is also part of freedom's price. We owe our veterans and their families our deepest gratitude. As a Senator, I am committed to ensuring that they have the care and the services they have so fully earned through their sacrifices and contributions.

The origins of my commitment are right here in my hometown. One of my earliest childhood memories is of my father, Don Collins, taking me to the Caribou

Memorial Day parade. He would hoist me high upon his shoulders and there, from the best vantage point along the parade route, I would see the hats come off and the hands go over hearts as our Flag went by.

Some years, he would wear his old Army jacket. It was not until many years later that I learned the terrible price he had paid for it – the Battle of the Bulge, the Bronze Star, and two Purple Hearts. That quiet courage, that modest heroism, that desire to do nothing more after conflict's end but to return home to a peaceful and productive civilian life is part of the history we celebrate today. It is a history we see from the shoulders of generations of such Americans.

In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln gave what many regard as the first Memorial Day speech. It was given not on a warm May morning after the Civil War, but on a chilly November afternoon while the war raged on and the outcome remained in doubt. It was given in a place called Gettysburg. His words so eloquently described the obligation those who enjoy the great gift of freedom owe to those who secured it.

Those words are as true today as they were all those years ago: “(T)hat from these honored dead, we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion.”

May God bless you all, and may God bless America.