

HONORING NEBRASKA'S SOLDIERS WHO LOST THEIR LIVES IN COMBAT

Mrs. FISCHER. Mr. President, I rise to continue my tribute to Nebraska's heroes and the current generation of men and women who lost their lives defending our freedom in Iraq and Afghanistan. Each of these Nebraskans has a special story to tell.

CORPORAL ADRIAN ROBLES

Today I will share the story of the life of Marine Cpl Adrian Robles of Scottsbluff, NB. Adrian was known throughout Scottsbluff for his big smile. His older sister Beatriz remembers it this way: "As soon as he smiled, even if you were mad at him, you would stop and have to smile."

Behind that big smile, though, was a tough young man. More than anything, Adrian wanted to be a marine. This longing to serve his country was a point of pride and tradition in Adrian's family. His grandfather, Pedro Torres, served as a fighter pilot in World War II. Pedro's stories of service and adventure inspired Adrian's quest to become a marine, and their bond was a source of joy throughout the family.

As Adrian's father Cesar recalls, "He loved his grandpa so much. He was a hero to him."

When he was 16, Adrian approached his parents and told them he wanted to be a marine. He didn't want to wait. He even prepared a waiver for them to sign, which would have allowed Adrian to join the Corps when he turned 17. While they admired the passion in their young son, Adrian's parents stood firm. They wanted Adrian to focus on completing his high school education.

Deterred but not discouraged, Adrian decided to join the high school soccer team. Soccer became an outlet for him, not only as an athlete but as a way to train and get in shape for the Marines. Adrian graduated from Scottsbluff High School in May of 2005. As expected, he immediately enlisted in the Marine Corps.

In the year that followed, Adrian completed basic training and served a full tour in Iraq by the end of 2007. His determination impressed his fellow marines. GySgt Trent Kuhlhoof served with Adrian during a tour in Iraq. Adrian was the kind of person who naturally bonded with everyone. As Sergeant Kuhlhoof remembers, "It was hard for me to get mad at him—for anything."

Adrian had discovered his calling. He worked toward excellence, and he loved being a marine. A marksman is the centerpiece of every Marine combat team, and Adrian was a good one. By the age of 21, he had earned three Good Conduct Medals, a rare feat in the military.

In the spring of 2008, Cpl Adrian Robles deployed to Afghanistan as part of the 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Division. Their mission was to train local Afghan military forces, but by the fall this changed to a security mission as

tensions rose in the dangerous territory of Helmand Province.

A few months later, on October 22, 2008, Adrian was on patrol when suddenly his vehicle was hit by an improvised explosive device. Corporal Robles was killed instantly. His unit was scheduled to leave Afghanistan 2 months later.

On November 2, 2008, hundreds of friends and neighbors from Scottsbluff lined the streets from the church to the cemetery. An honor guard and horse and carriage team transported the casket to its final resting place.

In a career of 3 short years, Corporal Robles earned three Good Conduct Medals, two Sea Service Deployment Ribbons, the Afghanistan Campaign Medal, the Iraq Campaign Medal, the Global War on Terrorism Service Medal, the National Defense Service Medal, and the Purple Heart.

Adrian's mother Yolanda recalls that his life's passion was to serve his country. She notes that he hated war and knew the dangers, but he loved being a marine. A brave, disciplined, and joyful young man, Adrian lived a short life, but his imprint is felt by the countless people who knew and loved him. Perhaps his devotion is summed up best by the tattoo on his left arm, which read: "Your Freedom. My Life. Without Complaint."

Adrian embodied the strength and determination that Nebraskans are known for all over the world. He lived passionately, and he earned his dream of being a U.S. marine. Cpl Adrian Robles is a hero and I am honored to tell his story.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mrs. FISCHER). The Senator from Alaska.

REMEMBERING JOHN AND ERMA SCHNABEL

Ms. MURKOWSKI. Madam President, we are about to begin the Memorial Day state work period and many of us will be traveling in our home states next week. I am blessed because I am going home to Alaska. Tomorrow I will be in Haines. This is a magnificent community in truly a magnificent State. But when I arrive in Haines, something will be missing, and that is the absence of two of Haines' most prominent citizens—John and Erma Schnabel.

John Schnabel passed in March at the age of 96 years old, and Erma, his wife of 65 years, passed shortly thereafter at the age of 87. John was regarded by his family and the people of Haines as a living legend. If you don't believe that is true, or if you say all of us have living legends in our community, no less of an authority than People Magazine referred to John as a "living legend" in an article which noted his passing. He was not just a local legend. He was known the world over as "Grandpa." He was the patriarch of the Discovery Channel series "Gold Rush: Alaska." But to us Alaskans, he was

simply one of the many exceptional people who populate our exceptional State. John was born in Kansas in 1920. He was the son of a wheat farmer. His father first moved to Alaska to seek a better life away from the Depression. He served in the military during World War II. He was a proud member of the American Legion. He married Erma in 1950 and they raised five kids.

Returning to Haines, John entered the timber business. He owned a lumber mill in town. He was one of the region's first industrialists. He was involved in everything. He operated a hotel, a lumberyard, a hardware store. He built four downtown commercial buildings. He was one of Haines' largest landowners. But changing political attitudes toward timber harvest in Southeast Alaska and the regulations that followed put John out of the timber business. Those powerful forces, however, did not put John down. He placer mined for fun and invested in small businesses. He was the mayor of Haines. He was an outstanding bridge player. He was an avid reader. I understand that David McCullough's biography of Harry Truman was one of his favorites, even though he was a loyal Republican.

It was only after John was recuperating from heart surgery that he entered the mining business in a big way. Think about it, most people rehabilitate from a heart surgery by doing more walking or going to the gym. John Schnabel decided he was going to work a mine. He worked the mine to remain active. He said it was doctor's orders. He did this until 2 years ago. Effectively, until the time he was 94, he was working the mine.

The Discovery Channel folks wandered by and found John Schnabel an interesting man. By 2010, Grandpa was a global celebrity—a reluctant celebrity but a celebrity nonetheless; the star of a reality TV show that ran for six seasons before he passed away.

John and Erma were friends of mine. I respected John's business acumen and his political leadership, but I really respected the relationship he had with Erma. The last time I visited with John and Erma was 2 years ago in August. I was there at the Haines Assisted Living Center. I came in and visited with John. John was talking politics with me and with anybody else who was listening, chatting around the room. Then, he left to go sit in the corner of the dining area, sat next to Erma. He didn't say anything for probably half an hour, 45 minutes. He just sat quietly with her, holding her hand. That really moved me when I saw them. Sixty plus years of marriage and still holding hands. John had always been the builder. Erma was known as the carer. She took care of the family. She took care of the community. Legend has it that there wasn't a person in Haines who had not dined at her table at one time or another.

They are both gone from Haines, but they are certainly together in Heaven.

Alaska is clearly better for their contributions, and I know I will certainly be thinking of them when I visit Haines tomorrow.

VETERANS HEALTH CARE

Ms. MURKOWSKI. Madam President, there are 2 days every year when this Nation focuses special attention on those who served—Memorial Day and Veterans Day. I plan to approach this Memorial Day by expressing gratitude to those who have served and honoring the memory of those who sacrificed their lives for our freedom.

When you serve in the military, supporting your buddy is everything. So as we honor the memory of those lost in action, we know they would want us also to care for their buddies who came home. Advances in military medicine since the Vietnam war have made it possible for many to survive the wounds of war that they would not have otherwise been able to do in earlier conflicts. But these veterans still do not return as they left, and many more return to the scourge of post-traumatic stress disorders.

I will see a lot of veterans this Memorial Day weekend. I would like to be able to tell the veterans of Alaska that their Federal Government is doing right by them, but when it comes to the matter of health care, and particularly the failings we see with the Choice Program, I can't in good conscience tell them things are better in Alaska.

It has been a while since I have been to the floor to speak in relatively bleak terms about the care our veterans receive in Alaska because for some while things had been improving. They had been improving for much of the last 8 years, but now it seems as if this pendulum is swinging the other way.

When I came to the Senate 13 years ago, Alaska veterans who lived someplace other than the metropolitan area of Anchorage or Fairbanks or the Kenai Peninsula really didn't think about the VA health care. Those who lived in those three communities were able to gain their care at the local VA clinic, and it worked for them. But if they didn't live in a community where the VA was located and if they weren't eligible for beneficiary travel, the VA just didn't mean much to them. That was the status quo, and it really didn't show much sign of changing.

Alaskans really began to challenge the status quo during the second Gulf war. Operation Iraqi Freedom resulted in a large-scale deployment of Alaska National Guard members from throughout the State. At one point, 89 different Alaska communities were represented in the Middle East, and it was fully apparent that when these heroes returned home and were released from Active Duty, the VA was not prepared to meet their needs.

When then-VA Secretary Nicholson visited Anchorage in 2006, he heard the message loud and clear from Alaska's

veterans service organization, and that created a groundswell to turn the Alaska VA in a more veteran-centric direction. It wasn't easy.

The familiar slogan that "it doesn't matter who wins an election; the bureaucracy always wins" was a way of life in the Alaska VA health care system, but we developed a pretty strong ally when Secretary Shinseki came on board. During his tenure as Secretary, we saw three significant changes from the status quo.

The first thing that happened was that the VA began contracting with Alaska's tribal health care providers to care for both our Native and non-Native veterans who lived outside the reach of any VA facilities. If you are a veteran living in Bethel, it didn't make any difference if you were Native or non-Native—you could receive care through the tribal health care provider, and they were compensated by the VA at the same encounter rate the Indian Health Service paid them.

The second thing we saw with Secretary Shinseki—I had commissioned an inspector general's inquiry into allegations that the VA was sending our Alaska vets to Seattle and other points even farther than Seattle for care that could be purchased from community providers in Alaska. There were situations where a veteran dealing with cancer and needing radiation or chemotherapy treatment would be sent to Seattle for a series of treatments when that same treatment could be provided in Anchorage or Fairbanks. Secretary Shinseki brought an end to that practice.

Third, the VA hired a creative executive with deep experience in the Alaska health care market to lead the Alaska VA health care system. Even better, the VA senior leadership actually empowered her to do the right things for Alaskan veterans. So when that director began to see waiting lists forming for primary care and behavioral health services in Anchorage, she took the initiative and she enlisted non-VA providers to come in and work with them to solve the problems. We were in a pretty unique situation. We didn't suffer the wait list that veterans in the lower 48 saw because we had somebody who was at the helm, saw the problem, and said: We can be creative; we just need a little bit of flexibility so we can address our veterans' needs.

The model was pretty simple. If a veteran needed to see someone outside the VA, they were placed with that outside provider by VA staff. And those VA staffers who matched the veteran with a local provider actually lived in Alaska. They knew Alaska's geography. They knew it wasn't possible to drive from Bethel to Anchorage. They knew the breadth and limitations on services available within our State.

Also, the bills for services were sent to the VA; they were not sent to the veteran. If for some reason a provider wasn't paid on time, the veterans were insulated. They were protected from collection agency calls.

It wasn't a perfect system and it wasn't without complaints, but on balance this was the best Alaskan veterans were ever treated.

Then came the Phoenix scandal. We hoped that what had happened there—the spotlight that was shown on the VA as a result of a horrible scandal—would not affect the good things we were doing in Alaska.

Two years later, I can tell you that things have changed profoundly and unfortunately, not for the better. The Choice Act seems to have been the catalyst for unraveling the VA reforms in our little corner of the world. Let me explain why.

When we were presented with the Choice Act, I looked at it as having another tool that the VA could use to help expedite care to veterans who couldn't get their care in a timely fashion. If this is another tool in the toolbox, this is going to be good for our vets. But the VA didn't view the Choice Act simply as another tool; they viewed the Choice Act as the single right answer to care outside the VA. To this day, the VA seems to almost resent the fact that a variety of other purchase care programs coexist with the Choice Act, and they worked to undermine them through a hierarchy of care policies that make it impossible for our local VA officials to use community providers with whom they have built these relationships.

That whole unraveling was enough to send our creative, innovative Alaska VA director into retirement, and unfortunately that position has been vacant ever since.

By the way, when veterans asked "What happened here? We had a good system. It was working. What has happened?" the VA talking points said "Blame the Congress. They gave us the Choice Act, and there is nothing we can do about it." That is an entirely disingenuous response given that all of the purchased care authorities that were on the books before the Choice Act remained on the books after the Choice Act became law. The VA had the flexibility before the Choice Act to craft local solutions, and they had the same flexibility to do so after the Choice Act. The decision not to support local flexibility was a deliberate choice, and it was a choice of the bureaucracy, not a choice that was mandated by the Congress.

How has the Choice Act been working out in the State of Alaska? I spend a lot of time back home. I spend a lot of time visiting with our veterans, and I am listening hard. Every now and again, I do hear a veteran say: Yeah, I think things are OK. I think I am getting the care I want. But more often than not, what I am hearing from our vets is that instead of calling it the Choice Act, it is called the "bad Choice Act" or "no choice at all."

For a while, it seemed that the Native partnerships would be subsumed in Choice, and we pushed back on that and we won. But for the veterans who