

## **Opening State by Medal of Honor Recipient Master Chief Britt Slabinski**

*Committee on Natural Resources, Subcommittee on Federal Lands, U.S. House*

*HR 2717 - The Hershel Woody Williams National Medal of Honor Monument Location Act*

Thursday, July 13, 2023 – 10:00AM

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Good morning.

Thank you to the Chairman and Ranking Member as well as all the members of this committee for your time this morning and for your thoughtful consideration of HR. 2717.

I also want to thank Congressmen Moore and Veasey who are the bipartisan co-sponsors of this important legislation.

It is a privilege to be here today speaking in support of a piece of legislation named for an individual I knew well and admired both for his service in uniform and, more importantly, for all the ways he continued to serve as a private citizen.

From the moment we met, Woody Williams and I shared a special bond. In fact, after he passed and laid in honor right next door in the Capitol as the last Medal of Honor recipient from World War II, his family entrusted me with his Medal of Honor rosette which I proudly wear today.

Wearing this rosette doesn't just remind me of my good friend and his service to our country, it is also a testament to the idea that the Medal of Honor doesn't belong to a person or even a generation. It is a torch passed through time. The values represented by the Medal transcend time and place. Reaching all the way from its creation by President Lincoln 160 years ago until today, the Medal of Honor is a reminder for us all that people can accomplish seemingly impossible things. We all have the potential within us to be extraordinary.

In this same spirit, the Monument we are asking you to provide space for on the National Mall is not a monument to valor or even to the 3,516 individuals who received the Medal of Honor. It is a monument to the enduring values which motivate a citizen soldier to risk their life for those around them, a teacher to talk a student with a gun out of committing a horrible act, a first responder to run into flames instead of away from them, or a young person to stand up for a peer being bullied in the school yard.

The Medal of Honor has never been about those who wear it. In fact, we wear it not for ourselves, but for ALL those we served alongside and most importantly – we wear it for those who never made it home. The Medal of Honor is a symbol, it is the embodiment of the ideals that built our nation it is an aspiration of our still forming more perfect union, and it is a reminder of the responsibility all Americans have to serve one another and a greater good.

Fellow Medal of Honor recipient and United States President Teddy Roosevelt once said, *"The lives of truest heroism are those in which there are no great deeds to look back upon. It is the little things well done that go to make up a truly successful and good life."*

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Woody Williams embodied this. Before Woody created his foundation to honor Gold Star families, most Americans were unfamiliar with the term or the tremendous sacrifice it represents. Today, because of Woody's tireless efforts, there are more than 100 Gold Star Family Memorials around the United States with 100 more planned. These memorials raise awareness for what has been given for our country.

I would be remiss, if I didn't acknowledge that we have some of Woody's family here with us today. (PAUSE)

When President Lincoln created the Medal of Honor in 1861 and awarded the first Medals in 1863, he knew the challenge of keeping our country whole would require incredible sacrifice. He also knew raising the nation's collective gaze to the horizon of things which unite us would be of paramount importance both during the war and after.

There is nothing more uniting than the shared human values represented by the Medal of Honor: courage and sacrifice, commitment and integrity, citizenship and patriotism.

The connections between President Lincoln and the Medal of Honor stretch far beyond the creation of the Medal itself. The work of preserving and protecting our nation has continued at home and abroad for over a century and a half, since the Medal was created, as every generation of Americans have confronted the challenges of our time with the same courage and commitment as Lincoln himself.

The Medal of Honor is the nexus of all this enduring work to keep the American experiment alive. It is an undeniable component of Lincoln's enduring legacy and our American story.

This monument is a way for Lincoln's voice of reason to continue gently whispering into the future admonishing us to focus on the things which unite us and on our shared values. We have requested this Monument be built attached to or within 1,000 feet of the Lincoln Memorial because it will stand humbly and respectfully as a guard over his legacy and the ideals that held our country together. It will also complete an unfinished work.

The original plans for the Lincoln Memorial extended its footprint to the edge of the reflecting pool with two additional components. I believe you have each seen a copy of that century-old plan. For reasons unknown, the final pieces were never built. With work presently underway to improve and preserve the Lincoln Memorial, we believe there is no better time to revisit the original intent and in the most deferential of ways create a lasting physical representation of the bond between Lincoln and the Medal of Honor.

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It was 160 years ago this December Lincoln wrote these words: “Honor to the Soldier and Sailor everywhere who bravely bears his country’s cause. Honor to the citizen who cares for his brother in the field, and serves, as best he can, the same cause...”

Over the course of many years working on this project, we have often been asked how it is possible nothing like it already exists. The only reasonable answer is that America needs it now more than ever.

We live in seemingly divided times. Yet, I am proud to be here in front of a Congress which in 2021 UNANIMOUSLY approved the National Medal of Honor Monument Act. You proved to the nation there are things upon which we can all agree. There are topics which rise to a level of national importance requiring us to set aside partisan differences and be reminded of our shared values and common purpose.

The Medal of Honor has been awarded in every war and conflict since the Civil War. There are recipients from every branch of the military. The Medal is awarded regardless of race, gender, religion, or any other differentiating factor. And while fewer than 4,000 have had the privilege of wearing it, the Medal is worn for the 40 million citizens who have served in the United States Armed Forces over the past 160 years.

More importantly still, the Medal is presented and worn to remind us all – the work of finding common ground, of service above self, and of being a hero to those around us in everyday life never ends.

This monument will be a beacon pointing us all to a purpose above and beyond any divisions of today or tomorrow – reminding us not of valor, but of values: courage and sacrifice, commitment and integrity, citizenship and patriotism.

Thank you.