

USM Veterans' Graduation Recognition Ceremony
Sen. Susan M. Collins
May 5, 2016

Thank you, President Cummings. Trustees, members of the faculty, families, and friends, it is a great pleasure to join you for this wonderful celebration. Colonel Gibson, thank you for your inspiring words and for your service to our country.

Veterans, in just nine days, you will receive the diplomas that mark a glorious new chapter in your lives. Those pieces of paper are powerful symbols of your character. The determination and excellence you demonstrated in the classroom stand on the foundation of the courage and devotion to duty you proved in uniform.

Commencement Day is always a day of celebration. The one here at the University of Southern Maine next week will also be a day of solemn remembrance. The posthumous degree that will be presented to the family of Brent Muehle is a fitting tribute to a decorated Marine who served our country with great distinction. His tragic passing two months ago drew this school and our veterans even closer together.

Nothing defines our veterans more than their commitment to their fellow veterans and those who serve today. Your outreach to the veterans at Togus, observation of RED Fridays to remember the deployed, and support of the Corporal Mark Goyet Memorial Scholarship demonstrate just part of your commitment. Your contributions to the Summit Project are another vital and touching part.

For many students, college is their first solo flight from the nest, the first real step on their journey to self-reliance and individual accomplishment. For you, as veterans, college was the next step, not the first. Your military service enabled you to be well on the way in that journey. You stepped forward to serve our nation and to defend freedom. You trained hard, learned new leadership skills, and became part of the greatest, most effective, and most humane military the world has even known.

Many of you served in harm's way, you mourn your fallen comrades, and console their families. All of you have bequeathed to the generations to come an America that is strong and free.

Now you are doing that which has defined the men and women who have served our country throughout our history: you continue to serve. The education you have earned will enable you to play key roles in strengthening our communities, our State, and our prosperity.

In uniform, you protected the freedom and opportunity that define our American way of life. Now it is your turn to pursue the American Dream as valued employees and entrepreneurs.

Not long ago, *Forbes* magazine published an article on the strengths veterans bring to the workplace in this competitive, global economy. The many business leaders interviewed for the article cited such qualities as discipline combined with initiative, seeing the big picture while

paying attention to detail, success in a diverse environment, a command of the latest technology, the ability to overcome adversity, and, not surprisingly, loyalty.

One quality was mentioned again and again – integrity. The founder of a successful computer security firm put it this way: “You can always trust veterans to do the right thing, even when no one else is watching.”

The challenges of military service instill a spirit of teamwork. The transition from military to civilian life is a challenge that is best met with that same spirit.

The USM is an important part of that team. USM’s Veterans Services is an invaluable resource, working with veterans from the application process through graduation. The entire University is dedicated to welcoming and supporting those who served. The recent selection of USM to the national Peer Advisors for Veteran Education support program acknowledges this school’s exemplary commitment to our veterans.

Another crucial part of that team is your families. They stood by you during your service, they faced the challenges of carrying on with their day-to-day lives, while enduring the pain caused by separation and worry. After your joyous return, they supported you in reaching your educational and life dreams.

America is grateful to you. In addition to our gratitude, we must also repay our debt with health care, rehabilitation services, education, and employment opportunities that you and other veterans have earned by your service to our country. One of my highest priorities as your Senator has always been to support veterans, including fighting for bills, such as the Post 9/11 GI Bill, which expanded the educational benefits that our nation offers to those who have worn our nation’s uniform. We must also protect access to community-based health care, such as the funding for the new clinic in Portland I am working hard to secure, and we must expedite the process for disabled veterans to get the services they need. Ensuring that veterans have the tools they need to successfully transition to their new lives is a top priority.

I am so proud of USM for its decision two years ago to charge in-state tuition rates to all veterans, no matter where they are from. And if you are one of those veterans from out-of-state, I sincerely hope you will consider staying in Maine after you get that precious diploma. Like that old Uncle Sam recruiting poster, Maine needs you.

We repay our debt not only as a society, but also as individuals. We are fortunate to live in a state in which so many have served our nation, and in which so many join together to support them. One has only to look at the Troop Greeters, who have greeted more than a million troops at the Bangor Airport to know how much the people of Maine value our service members. They treat our veterans with similar generosity and a spirit of caring.

One of the greatest honors I have enjoyed while representing Maine in the Senate is the opportunity I’ve had to meet with our troops overseas, in South Korea, Kosovo, and in Afghanistan and Iraq. It has been a particular honor to meet with the sons and daughters of Maine. I see in their faces and hear in their voices the legacy of duty, courage, intelligence, and

compassion that they inherited from those who served in other far-away places in other dangerous times. It is a legacy you have enhanced and that will inspire the generations to come.

Like so many, the gratitude I feel for our veterans is steeped in more than history. It also is personal – I am one of the millions of Americans who have the privilege to call a veteran “Dad.”

I’d like to tell you a bit of his story, not because it is extraordinary, but because it is so typically American.

My father, Don Collins, enlisted in the Reserve Corps as a college freshman in November of 1943 and was called to active duty in the United States Army before the year’s end. He saw action in Europe and fought at the Battle of the Bulge. He earned the Combat Infantry Badge, two Purple Hearts, and the Bronze Star. Sergeant Collins was discharged in January of 1946.

Then he did what truly distinguishes the men and women of America’s armed forces. He came home, gratefully and modestly. He never talked much about his sacrifice and the hardships of war. Instead, he finished his education at the University of Maine through the earliest version of the GI Bill that has benefited so many here; he worked hard raising six children, running a business, and serving his community and his state.

One of my earliest childhood memories is going with my father to the patriotic parades in my hometown of Caribou. He hoisted me high on his shoulders and from the best vantage point along the route, I saw hats go off and hands go over hearts as Caribou paid its respects to our flag and honored our veterans for their service to our country.

His great generation and yours provide all of us with an inspiring view from strong shoulders. From that vantage point, we see that the burden of service must be borne willingly and with modesty. We see that challenges must be met and that threats must be confronted. And we see that we have an obligation to always respect, honor, and support those – our veterans – who make that view possible. May God bless you all, and may God bless America.