The "Remembering Our Fallen" photo exhibit honors fallen soldiers from Nebraska and Iowa.

What makes Nebraska a great place to live is the character of its people. For generations Nebraskans have demonstrated an extraordinary capacity for hard work and perseverance, as well as compassion for those in difficult circumstances.

A new memorial honoring Heartland soldiers who have lost their lives since September 11, 2001, is a powerful reminder of such compassion and respect for life. The memorial, called "Remembering Our Fallen," is a photo exhibit of 98 fallen soldiers from Nebraska and western Iowa. It will be traveling to communities across Nebraska and Iowa over the next 12 months.

In November, the exhibit brought together many of the relatives and friends of these fallen heroes. Nearly 1,000 people gathered for its opening at the Strategic Air and Space Museum near Ashland. As visually powerful as it is emotional, the exhibit features the names, military photos, and personal and family photos of each soldier. There are youthful faces and smiling families, proud portraits of the American soldier.

Keeping these names and faces alive in our memories was the motivation for "Remembering Our Fallen." Evonne Williams, the interim director of the Strategic Air and Space Museum, says she got the idea after reading an Omaha World Herald story about Lonnie Ford, a Pender man whose son Joshua was killed in Iraq in 2006. In the article, Ford explained the grief that endured following the outpouring of community support in the days following Joshua's death.

Williams and her husband, Bill, are no strangers to the military and veterans community in Nebraska. They have spearheaded other efforts to help veterans and their families. Last year, for example, they raised the necessary funds and organized "Honor Flights," which transported World War II veterans from Nebraska to Washington D.C. to view the National WWII Memorial. In creating "Remembering Our Fallen," they contacted the families of the fallen soldiers, gathered information, and collected photographs. The Omaha World Herald also helped in retrieving photographs.

At the exhibit's opening, Evonne Williams said: "The fallen and their families have paid a price that could never be repaid. Please remember to speak the names of those who died. Tell their children stories about them and remind their spouses, their parents, their siblings. Remember them and speak their names. Speak their names."

"Remembering our Fallen" began its travels across Nebraska the first week of January at Keene Library in Fremont, the hometown of U.S. Army Sergeant Philip Svitak, who was the first Nebraskan to die in Afghanistan. From there it has traveled to North Platte and Osceola, and will be in Lincoln at the State Capitol from January 22 to 28. From February 19 to 27, the exhibit will be featured at the Homestead National Monument near Beatrice.

If you are able, please take the opportunity to view this very special tribute. Encourage your family members, friends, and neighbors to see it as well. It is a profoundly meaningful reminder of the preciousness of life and liberty, and the honor and sacrifice of those, our own friends and neighbors, who have given their lives to protect ours.

For a full listing of the exhibit's 2011 Tour Schedule, please visit the website http://www.sasmuseum.com/calendar/
or contact the Strategic Air and Space Museum at 402-944-3100.