

*Congressman Jeff Fortenberry honored the life of Master-at-Arms Petty Officer First Class John Douangdara at a memorial service September 25, 2011 in South Sioux City, Neb. Below are his remarks:*

"Today we honor the life and celebrate the memory of an extraordinary young man, Master-at-Arms Petty Officer First Class John Douangdara. We come together as family members, friends, fellow service members, and those who may not have known John personally but are compelled nonetheless to pay respect to his memory and honor his sacrifice on our behalf.

I never had the pleasure of meeting John. By all accounts, he was a remarkable person. While his senior classmates at South Sioux City High were readying themselves for college and life beyond high school, John was doing what he needed to do to graduate early so he could enlist in the U.S. Navy.

With uncommon drive and commitment to service, he excelled in military life. His skill was noted early and he was positioned for elite service. He loved the work and he served humbly and selflessly, serving five tours of duty in the Middle East.

His tragic loss – and the loss of the 37 others with him on the downed Chinook helicopter – is a reminder of the grave seriousness and complexity of our military's work. Every day in corners of the world most of us will never come to see, people like John are going about their jobs, carrying out their efforts in the face of dangers most of us will never know. Our country can only be as strong as these Americans' willingness to serve, only as secure as their commitment to our safety.

Two weeks ago, at a ceremonial remembrance on the tenth anniversary of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks against America, I was asked to reflect on what has kept America united over the last decade. I spoke of the great spirit and sacrifice of those Americans, many like John who joined the military in the period following 9-11, who risked their lives for their fellow citizens and gave all – more than 6,200 Americans have died in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other battlefields. With all the challenges and adversaries that confront us still today, it is this spirit of selflessness and duty that continue to sustain us as a nation.

To John's family, his parents and siblings, I thank you. You gave him life. You nurtured him. You formed him. And you saw him off as he left to serve his country. John's life of devoted service to his nation is a testament to the love and support you provided. I'm grateful that you chose to make America your new home, in the wake of Communist oppression in Laos. You came here for the chance of a better life. And Your son – a first generation American – died fighting for his country.

I also would like to acknowledge the community of South Sioux City for its outpouring of support for the Douangdara family and its efforts to honor John's life.

Upon a visit to wounded soldiers at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, I noticed a sign hanging on one young man's wall. It said: America - the home of the free because of the brave. John was an American. He was a warrior. He was brave. Now he is free.

While the sting of his loss remains powerful, his memory will remain close in our hearts. On behalf of a grateful nation, we salute and honor the sacrifice of Master at Arms, Petty Officer First Class John Douangdara.

May God grant him eternal rest, and may the perpetual light shine upon him."