

United States Senate

January 22, 2024

The Honorable Denis R. McDonough
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough,

I write today in regard to disheartening reports from Montana veterans and their families that medallions honoring those who served in the prestigious First Special Service Force (FSSF) were removed from headstones in Veterans Affairs (VA) cemeteries across Montana. While this guidance from VA's National Cemetery Administration (NCA) for the removal might seem harmless to bureaucrats in Washington, D.C., these medallions are not simply a symbol of what once was, they are a representation of the sacrifice, service, and skill demonstrated by those who were selected to serve in one of the nation's first modern special operations units. I urge you to reverse this misguided and unnecessary action.

Known as the Devil's Brigade or Black Devils by U.S. enemies and allies alike, the FSSF were organized in 1942 and trained at Fort William Henry Harrison near Helena, Montana. The men of the FSSF would go on to fight courageously in campaigns across the European theatre during World War II. Due to the unit's garrison at Fort Harrison, many of the original FSSF members would return to Helena following the war to marry and start families, businesses and even careers in the Montana National Guard. Many of those brave service members who are no longer with us are now buried in Montana at various VA cemeteries.

For years, the Montanans who served in the FSSF and were buried at VA cemeteries in Montana were remembered for their special service with a medallion located on their headstone. However, now, the NCA – citing “long standing” official policy that medallions are prohibited on VA purchased headstones – has ordered the removal of these symbolic medallions. The reasoning for this, as stated by the NCA directive¹, is that such medallions would prevent preserving the appearance and facilitating the maintenance of said headstones. I, like many of Montana's veterans and their families, find it outrageous that a small medallion would in any way diminish the appearance of a headstone or prevent maintenance. The application of this NCA directive reeks of bureaucratic excess that does nothing but cause more issues than it fixes.

¹ NCA Directive 3425, para 5a states to preserve the appearance and facilitate maintenance of government-furnished headstones and markers any object placed on or attached to headstones, markers, or niche covers is prohibited.

United States Senate

Thus, I request that you rescind the current directive requiring the removal of these medallions. Additionally, in order to provide transparency to the many veterans demanding answers as to why service members headstones were defaced, I request that the National Cemetery Administration provide a briefing to Congress as to why this directive was given, why it appears to be selectively enforced, and what concrete steps will be taken to ensure such action does not occur again. Thank you for your attention to this matter and I look forward to your prompt response.

Sincerely,



Steve Daines
United States Senator