

United States Senate

April 15, 2024

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden,

I write to recommend former United States Army Captain, Diane Carlson Evans of Helena, Montana, as a candidate for the Presidential Medal of Freedom in recognition of both her wartime and peacetime contributions to our country. Ms. Evans distinguished herself as an Army nurse from 1966-1972 and is the Founder of the Vietnam Women's Memorial Foundation, formerly the Vietnam Women's Memorial Project, responsible for the only memorial to military women on the National Mall.

From 1968 to 1969 – during the height of the Vietnam War – Ms. Evans served as a nurse in Vung Tau and Pleiku. In 1969, she was the head nurse of the Pleiku Evacuation Hospital located near a radio tower and under near-constant attack. She has many stories of providing care and companionship to those recovering and those who would spend their final hours in the hospital. Ms. Evans is one of 10,000 United States military women volunteers who served in-country during the Vietnam War. Most of these women, approximately 90 percent, were nurses and most of the nurses were women. In total, 265,000 women served around the world during the Vietnam era.

After the war, Ms. Evans struggled significantly with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This was an especially isolating period as many in our country disparaged the service of Vietnam veterans by challenging their roles during the war right along with the United States' involvement in war. More than 10 years after her separation from service, when PTSD symptoms were triggered by a visit to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, she contacted a Vet Center and was unsure if she would even be considered a veteran and eligible for mental health services. Facing challenges with her own service during the war, she knew the importance of providing a space for recognition of the sacrifices veterans like her made during the war and the ongoing impacts their service had on their lives.

In 1984, Ms. Evans founded the Vietnam Women's Memorial Project with the goal of securing Vietnam women veterans a place of honor in Washington, DC. Starting with her local American Legion Post and building from there, she spent 10 years lobbying Congress, the Commission of Fine Arts – which has authority over site and design of new memorials on National Mall – and the public on the importance of the memorial she envisioned. Many Vietnam veterans already represented on the mall in the statue of the Three Servicemen actively supported her efforts, crediting nurses and thereby women servicemembers with their survival in Vietnam and ability to return home.

Even after the memorial and its site on the mall were approved, Ms. Evans still had to raise private funds for the sculpture as the legislation that permitted it restricted the United States government from paying for it. As a direct result of her efforts, the Vietnam Women's Memorial was dedicated on November 11, 1993. This memorial illustrates the contributions of women and nurses in the Vietnam War and created an essential space for healing and reflection, not just for those who served in those roles but also those who survived because of them.

As the senior Senator from Montana and Chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, I urge you to honor Diane Carlson Evans' work with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. She put her life on the line in service to her country and saved countless others as part of that service. And even after that commitment was fulfilled, she dedicated her civilian life to serving and honoring her fellow women veterans. She saw the importance of remembrance that others did not yet share in a time when veterans were still synonymous with a war largely opposed by the American public. She knew the necessity of representation in these memorials, not just for future generations to know the sacrifices made during war, but also for those who survived to make it home and those left behind. Thank you for your consideration of this well-earned honor for a deserving veteran.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jon Tester", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jon Tester
United States Senator