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NEWS RELEASE

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Lt. Ross Bales and the “Potato Peeler Kids”
by Senator Larry Craig

Veterans Day has always been an important day for me, because it provides an opportunity to thank veterans, and remind others to do so as well, for their service and sacrifice to our great nation. The last few years though, Veterans Day has taken on an even greater significance for me, now that I am the chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans’ Affairs.

I have always had a tremendous faith in the spirit of our nation and our people. Since becoming chairman, however, I’ve heard new stories almost constantly, that only reinforce and build on that faith. The caliber of our men and women in uniform never ceases to amaze me and remind me how blessed we are to live in the greatest nation on Earth.

One such story will always stick out in my mind. It is the story of 1st Lieutenant Ross C. Bales, a sharp young B-17 pilot from Caldwell, Idaho. I learned about him when I traveled to a number of U.S. cemeteries in Europe and North Africa earlier this year for the Memorial Day holiday. No one could tell me for sure when, or if, Members of Congress ever had gone to see whether the graves of our brave soldiers and marines who died over there were being cared for properly. The delegation I led was very pleased to see they were.

Lieutenant Bales’ name was engraved on a wall in a cemetery in the Netherlands that paid tribute to Americans who died in World War II, but whose remains were never recovered. Bales flew a total of 35 missions over Europe, an extraordinary feat, considering the high mortality rate of B-17 pilots during the war.

Bales named his first plane the “Idaho Potato Peeler,” in honor of our state’s most famous commodity. It flew well, but after a particularly tough mission, Bales was forced to make a wheels-up belly landing at Chipping Warden, England, in January, 1943. Bales and his crew survived with no injuries.

Undaunted, and with a new plane dubbed “Potato Peeler Kids,” Bales and his crew soon returned to the skies. But on May 14, 1943, on a mission to Kiel, Germany, Bales and his crew were shot down, last seen going down in a spin and crashing into the North Sea. There were no survivors.

What drives a person like Bales to join the military, to lay his or her life down for the benefit of those of us who live on? They are driven by the same qualities that live in our troops serving in

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Afghanistan, Iraq, and all over the world today: patriotism, selflessness and a sense of duty to protect our ideals and our people.

I've met with many of them on the ground, in both Afghanistan and Iraq. While in Iraq last year with Secretary of Veterans Affairs Jim Nicholson, we met with members of Idaho's 116th Cavalry Brigade. I was taken aback by the emotional response of soldiers. One even said, with tears in his eyes, "I didn't think you'd come." You see, I'd made a promise to visit Idaho's troops when I had met with them before they left. That heartfelt thanks told me something – our heroes want to know that we appreciate them. I certainly do. I think every American does.

Having spoken with many veterans, I know they don't view themselves as heroes. If you served in the U.S. armed forces, whether in a time of peace or a time of war, I respectfully disagree; you are a hero. By your service, you helped keep America safe, secure and strong. I thank you for securing the gift of liberty for all of us.

This Veterans Day, I encourage you to thank a veteran for serving our country. Please don't assume they have been thanked before. If they have, one more "thanks" never hurts a hero.