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SDDVA Secretary Schneider's Column – "Honoring Service, Sacrifice, and Family Throughout May"

May is a month rich with meaning and significance as we take time to honor and recognize our veterans, their families, and the many individuals who currently contribute to the strength of our military community. Before diving into these important observances, it's only fitting to begin by acknowledging the remarkable mothers in our lives. Their unwavering dedication and love form the foundation for so many of us. On a personal note, I owe my own mother a deep debt of gratitude—and, admittedly, more than a few apologies—for the challenges I put her through. Thanks to her strength and resilience, I like to think I turned out just fine. This month, I encourage everyone to take a moment to say a heartfelt "I love you," and reflect on the gifts, guidance, and support your mother has provided. She deserves every bit of that recognition.

May is also recognized nationally as Month of the Military Caregiver and National Military Appreciation Month (NMAM). While the Month of the Military Caregiver is not a federal holiday, it plays a crucial role in raising awareness of the sacrifices made by both wounded warriors and the dedicated caregivers who support them. These often-unsung heroes embody resilience and devotion, quietly ensuring the well-being of those who have given so much.

National Military Appreciation Month, formally established in 1999 through legislation introduced by the late Senator John McCain, serves as a time for all Americans to reflect on the contributions of service members past and present. While many military-related holidays have evolved into extended weekends with diminished focus on their origins, NMAM reminds us of the significance behind our freedoms. Throughout May, military installations and communities are encouraged to participate in local engagements that foster connection and gratitude between service members and the public.

May 9th is Military Spouse Appreciation Day—a moment to honor the essential role spouses play in the lives of service members. Their steadfast support allows us to meet the demands of military service with focus and confidence. Military spouses are the backbone of our families and communities, often enduring long periods of separation, relocation, and uncertainty with grace. Please take time to recognize and appreciate their ongoing commitment and strength.

May 12–17 marks Armed Forces Appreciation Week, culminating in Armed Forces Day on May 17th. First observed in 1950, Armed Forces Day was created to celebrate the men and women serving in all branches of the military following the unification of the services under the Department of Defense. Though each branch still observes its own individual day, Armed Forces Day symbolizes our collective gratitude to those who serve in the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, and now, the Space Force. As you encounter your fellow service

members this week, take a moment to express your appreciation, offer a word of encouragement, and reflect on the shared bond we all hold.

Finally, May 26th is Memorial Day—a day of solemn remembrance for those who made the ultimate sacrifice in defense of our nation. While many of us may enjoy time with family, barbecues, or community events, let us not lose sight of the true purpose behind this day. The freedoms we cherish were secured through the bravery and loss of those who never returned home. I urge every member of our veteran family and the wider community to look beyond the symbolic gestures and reflect deeply on the cost of our liberty. Share stories, honor the fallen, and pass along their legacy to future generations. In doing so, we preserve not only their memory but the values they fought to protect. I encourage everyone to attend a Memorial Day program within their community. I would also like to extend my sincere gratitude to the communities and service organizations that work diligently to organize and host these meaningful events.

May we continue to grow stronger as individuals, families, and communities through shared reflection, appreciation, and unity.

God bless our current servicemembers, veterans, their families, the great state of South Dakota, and our beloved nation.

Jeremiah J. Schneider, Secretary
South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs