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Office of the Press Secretary

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**Remarks of President Barack Obama - As Prepared for Delivery
Fulfilling America's Responsibility to our Armed Forces
Naval Air Station Jacksonville
Jacksonville, Florida
October 26, 2009**

Hello Naval Air Station Jacksonville.

Thank you, Secretary Mabus, for the introduction and for your service. I know we've got a lot of naval aviators here. And Ray is a former surface warfare officer. But don't hold that against him. Because Ray Mabus is doing a terrific job as Secretary of the Navy.

I want to thank all your outstanding local leaders for welcoming me here today: Admiral Tim Alexander; your C-O, Captain Jack Scorby; and your Command Master Chief, Jeff Hudson. To Chris Scorby and all the spouses with us—you hold our military families together and we honor you, too.

It's great to be here at one of America's finest naval air stations. But we also have folks from Mayport and Kings Bay. We have every service represented—Navy, Army, Air Force, Coast Guard and United States Marines from Blount Island.

Now, military communities like JAX take care of their own—your people, your families. But keeping you strong also takes the civilian community beyond the gate. So we thank Mayor John Peyton and all your great neighbors, the people of Jacksonville, for their incredible support.

Keeping you strong also takes leaders in Congress, like those here today: two great friends of JAX—Representatives Ander Crenshaw and Corrine Brown; and a leader who fights for you as a member of the Armed Services Committee, Senator—and Army veteran—Bill Nelson.

Keeping you strong takes something else—a country that never forgets this simple truth. It's not the remarkable platforms that give the United States our military superiority. Although you have some pretty impressive aircraft here. It's not the

sophisticated technologies that make us the most advanced in the world. Although you do represent the future of naval aviation.

No, we have the finest Navy and military in the world because we have the finest personnel in the world. You are the best-trained, best-prepared, best-led force in history. You – our people – are our most precious resource.

We were reminded of this again, with today's helicopter crashes in Afghanistan. Fourteen Americans gave their lives. And our prayers are with these service members, their civilian colleagues and the families who loved them.

And while no words can ease the ache in their hearts today, may they find some comfort in knowing this: like all those who give their lives in service to America, they were doing their duty and they were doing this nation proud.

They were willing to risk their lives, in this case, to prevent Afghanistan from once again becoming a safe haven for al Qaeda and its extremist allies. And today, they gave their lives to protect ours.

Now, it is our duty, as a nation, to keep their memory alive in our hearts and to carry on their work. To take care of their families. To keep our country safe. To stand up for the values we hold dear and the freedom they defended. That is what they dedicated their lives to. That is what we must do.

So I say to you and all who serve: of all the privileges of serving as President, I have no greater honor than serving as your Commander-in Chief. You inspire me. And I'm here today to deliver a simple message – a message of thanks to you and your families.

By being here, you join a long, unbroken line of service at Jacksonville – naval aviators from World War II to Korea to Vietnam, among them a great patriot named John McCain. You embody that sailor's creed: the "spirit of the Navy and all who have gone before" – Honor, Courage, Commitment.

In recent years, you've been tested like never before. We're a country of more than 300 million Americans. But less than one percent wears the uniform. And that one percent – you and all those in uniform – bear the overwhelming burden of our security.

After months of exercises in the Pacific and stopping narco-traffickers off South America, you – the "Mad Foxes" – joined the recovery of that Air France crash off Brazil.

After hundreds of combat missions over Iraq and Afghanistan...when Somali pirates kidnapped Captain Richard Phillips, you – the "Fighting Tigers" – were first on the

scene. And others among you – the “Nightdippers” – were part of the carrier group that brought our captain home.

You’ve delivered medical care to people around the world, as my wife Michelle saw this summer when she welcomed back to port the Comfort – including those of you from Naval Hospital Jacksonville.

And like thousands of sailors in today’s Navy, you’ve gone ashore to meet the missions of our time, like the “Desert Lions” who served in Iraq.

Today, we also send our thoughts and prayers to all the folks from Jacksonville on the front lines at this very moment: pilots and aircrews around the world, Navy corpsmen on the ground in Afghanistan. And those of you – the “Dusty Dogs” – who’ll deploy next month to the Persian Gulf. You’re going to make us proud.

But there is no service without sacrifice. And though few Americans will every truly understand the sacrifices that you and your family make – day in day out, tour after tour, year after year, I want you to know this.

Your dedication to duty is humbling. Your love of country is inspiring. The American people thank you for your service. We honor you for your sacrifices. And just as you have fulfilled your responsibilities to your nation, your nation will fulfill its responsibilities to you.

That’s the message that I offered to the inspiring Gold Star families I met with a few moments ago – families who have made the ultimate sacrifice and whom we honor. And that’s the message I bring to you and all our forces, families and veterans – around Jacksonville and across America.

You’ve made the most profound commitment a person can make – to dedicate your life to your country. And perhaps give your life for it. So as your commander-in-chief, here’s the commitment I make to you.

To make sure you can meet the missions we ask of you, we’re increasing the defense budget, including spending on the Navy and Marine Corps. This week, I’ll sign that defense authorization bill into law.

To make sure we’re spending our defense dollars wisely, we’re cutting tens of billions of dollars in waste and projects that even the military says it doesn’t need – money better on spent on taking care of you and your families and building the 21st century military that we do need.

To make sure we have the right force structure, we've halted reductions in Navy personnel and increased the size of the Marine Corps. And this year – the first time in the history of the all-volunteer force – the Navy and every component of every branch of the military, Active, Guard and Reserve, met or exceeded their recruiting and retention goals. Yes, that's due in part to tough economic times. But I say it's also a testament to you and everyone who volunteers to serve.

To make sure you're not bearing the burden of our security alone, we're enlisting all elements of our national power – diplomacy, development and a positive vision of American leadership in the world.

And while I will never hesitate to use force to protect the American people or our vital interests, I also promise you this – and this is very important as we consider our next steps in Afghanistan:

I will never rush the solemn decision of sending you into harm's way. I won't risk your lives unless it is absolutely necessary. And if it is necessary, we will back you up. Because you deserve the strategy, the clear mission, the defined goals and the equipment and support you need to get the job done. That's the promise I make to you.

As you meet your missions around the world, we will take care of your families here at home. That's why Michelle has been visiting bases across the country. That's why the Recovery Act is funding projects like improvements to your hospital and a new child development center at Mayport. It's why we're increasing your pay, increasing child care and helping families deal with the stress and separation of war.

Finally, we pledge to be there when you come home. We're improving care for our wounded warriors, especially those with Post-Traumatic Stress and Traumatic Brain Injuries. We're funding the Post-9/11 GI Bill – to give you and your families the chance to pursue your dreams. And we're making the biggest commitment to our veterans – the largest percentage increase in the VA budget – in more than 30 years.

These are the commitments I make to you; the obligations that your country is honor-bound to uphold. Because you've always taken care of America, and America must always take care of you. Always.

You know this. It's the spirit you live by every day. It's the pride – and yes, the anxiety – when you wave goodbye to your loved ones on the tarmac. It's the joy – and relief – when they come home safe. And it's the dignity and respect you show every fallen warrior who comes home to Jacksonville, like the navy aviator you honored two months ago.

Navy Captain Michael Scott Speicher. The kid from Orange Park. Loving husband. Devoted father. Based at Cecil Field not far from here. Then, on the first day of

Operation Desert Storm, he was taken from us. And in the long years that followed, a Navy family and this city would endure the heartache of the unknown.

Through all those years, no one missed Scott more – or fought harder to bring him home – than his wife Joanne. His friend and former Navy pilot Buddy Harris. And their children: Meghan, Michael, Madison and Makenzie. They were among the Gold Star families I met with, and we thank them for being here with us today.

Then, this summer, the news came. After 18 years, after all the dashed hopes, we found him. Scott's remains were finally coming home. The evening news and morning papers told the story of that day. But few told the story of the days that followed.

It's the story of how you greeted the plane upon landing – hundreds of sailors – and escorted his flag-draped casket to your chapel. How Navy honor guards kept constant vigil, through the night, as so many of you passed by to pay your respects. How thousands of you – sailors and civilians – lined the streets of this base as you gave Scott back to the city he loved. That's what you do, not only for Scott, but for all the fallen warriors you bring home.

It's the story of how that procession retraced the steps of Scott's life. Past the Jacksonville veterans memorial that now bears his name. Past the church where he worshiped, the high school where he excelled and Cecil Field where he served.

It's the story of how Jacksonville seemed to come to a standstill as people lined street after street to honor one of their own. Scott's friends and total strangers. Police and firefighters standing at attention. Small children holding American flags. Graying veterans giving a firm salute. And then, as Scott was finally laid to rest, a final fitting tribute – his old squadron roared overhead, high across the sky.

That's the spirit we see here today. You, men and women devoted to each other – and to your country. A proud country devoted to you. And the example you set for us all: that if you can come together – from every corner of America, every color and creed, every background and belief – to take care of each other, to serve together, to succeed together, then so can we. So can America.

Thank you for your service. And thank you for reminding us of the country we can and must always be. God bless you Jacksonville. And God bless the United States of America.

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