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| **For Immediate Release:** | **Contact:**Megan Taylor |
| April 19, 2018 | 202-224-6244 |

**Heller Honors Maj. Stephen Del Bagno, Fallen Air Force Thunderbird Pilot**

 **WASHINGTON**– During a speech on the U.S. Senate floor, U.S. Senator Dean Heller (R-NV) today paid tribute to the life of Maj. Stephen Del Bagno, a U.S. Air Force Thunderbird pilot who was killed on April 4th, 2018 when his F-16 Fighting Falcon crashed at the Nevada Test and Training range. Watch Heller’s speech [**HERE**](https://youtu.be/nyQ3eXCPZP0)**.**“Selfless. Driven. Caring. Mentor. An inspiration. A big dude with an even bigger heart. Brother. Those are words that Major Del Bagno’s fellow Thunderbirds used to describe him,” **said Heller.** “Major Del Bagno’s death is a reminder that we are all forever indebted to the men and women who answer the call to serve this country and stand guard, training and preparing each day for when duty calls. It is a reminder of what they give up and what they risk when they bravely step up to the plate so that we may remain an extraordinary and free nation. These are the people whose character embodies the American spirit. The people who truly humble us and inspire us through their unwavering commitment. The people who represent the very best that this country has to offer.”

[](https://youtu.be/nyQ3eXCPZP0)*Click*[*HERE*](https://youtu.be/nyQ3eXCPZP0)*or the image above to play the clip. \*Media has permission to use this video.*

**Heller’s full remarks as prepared for delivery:**

*Mr. President, I rise today to honor Major Stephen Del Bagno, a U.S. Air Force Thunderbird pilot who was killed on April 4th, 2018 when his F-16 Fighting Falcon crashed at the Nevada Test and Training range, which is north of Nellis Air Force Base.

At just 34, Major Del Bagno’s life was cut too short, but his legacy of leadership, commitment to excellence, and service to our country will be preserved by all of those who had the privilege of knowing him.

I’d like to begin by saying that my wife, Lynne, and I offer our deepest condolences to Major Del Bagno’s family and loved ones. And we join the Thunderbirds, Nellis Air Force Base, and the Nevada community in mourning this heavy loss.

Major Del Bagno grew up in Valencia, California, and he graduated from Utah Valley State University. He received his commission when he graduated from Officer Training School at Maxwell Air Force Base in 2007.

Called “Cajun” – his call sign – by his team, he was in his first season with the Thunderbirds.

The Thunderbirds – also known as “America’s Ambassadors in Blue” – are an elite team of highly experienced fighter pilots.

In fact, only 325 officers have had the honor of wearing the distinguished Thunderbirds patch. They are the best of the best.

In June of 2017, Nellis Air Force Base announced that Major Del Bagno was the first F-35 pilot to serve on the Thunderbirds.

He served as the team’s slot pilot and flew Thunderbird 4.

Brigadier General Leavitt, commander of the 57th Wing at Nellis Air Force Base, called Major Del Bagno an integral part of the team.

In his free time, he enjoyed snowboarding, water sports, and spending time with family.

Major Del Bagno was laid to rest on April 15th, 2018 at a memorial service at his alma mater, Saugus High School, in Santa Clarita, California.

More than 1,000 people attended the memorial and joined together to commemorate his life – a true testament to his impact on the community.

During the service, his friends, family, and fellow wingmen offered loving tributes about his skill, passion for aviation, and pride in being a member of the Air Force.

Ilene Block, a former guidance counselor for the school, told a local television affiliate that Stephen was “always giving back,” and said that he often visited the high school to talk to students about his love for flying. His name will soon be added to a wall of heroes at Saugus High School.

Lieutenant Colonel Kevin Walsh, Thunderbirds Commander, said that Major Del Bagno “lived to fly and inspire the next generation.” He also said that he will be remembered “as a talented fighter pilot and a great friend.”

Selfless. Driven. Caring. Mentor. An inspiration. A big dude with an even bigger heart. Brother. Those are words that Major Del Bagno’s fellow Thunderbirds used to describe him.

In a video tribute from the Thunderbirds, one said, “Cajun – you had this way of immediately making people feel special, interesting, and included. The world needs more of that. And now, your memory is going to inspire all of us to be a little bit more like you. And hopefully we’ll make you proud. We miss you and love you.”

Mr. President, the loss of Major Del Bagno is an enormous tragedy that has struck the heart of the Thunderbirds, Nellis Air Force Base, and every life that he touched.

Major Del Bagno’s death is a reminder that we are all forever indebted to the men and women who answer the call to serve this country and stand guard, training and preparing each day for when duty calls.

It is a reminder of what they give up and what they risk when they bravely step up to the plate so that we may remain an extraordinary and free nation.

And, it is also a reminder of the families – like Del Bagno’s – who have lost a loved one and paid a price beyond measure, they deserve our lasting support.

Mr. President, I urge my colleagues to join me in paying tribute to the life of Major Del Bagno and his unbounding determination that set him apart.

These are the people whose character embodies the American spirit. The people who truly humble us and inspire us through their unwavering commitment. The people who represent the very best that this country has to offer.

I’d like to close with this. In a video honoring Major Del Bagno’s memory, the Thunderbirds talked about how he would spend time teaching kids about flying as a Thunderbird for a day. They said he chose to share his passion with kids.

In that same video, there is footage of Major Del Bagno responding to a question about advice for kids who want to be a pilot in the Air Force.

He talked about the five P’s of success. This is what he said: “Find your passion. Find your purpose. Be persistent in your pursuit. Be personable…so humble, credible, and approachable.

And then it’ll pay off. People are going to tell you no along the way - it’s just a test of your resolve. If you really want it, go out and make that known.”

I am confident that Major Del Bagno’s legacy will inspire the next generation of fighter pilots, as well as Nevadans – and Americans around the country – for decades to come.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.*

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