

U.S. Senator Tammy Duckworth: Iraq War Veteran, Purple Heart Recipient, and an Asian American Woman of Many Firsts

By Trish Weaver

Ladda Tammy Duckworth was born in Bangkok, Thailand. Her mother was from the Chiang Mai Province in Northern Thailand, and her father was an American U.S. Army and Marine Corps veteran (making Duckworth a natural-born U.S. citizen). After Tammy attended school in Singapore, Bangkok, and Jakarta, the Duckworth family moved to Honolulu, Hawaii where Tammy attended high school and college. After attaining her Masters in International Affairs at George Washington University, she interrupted her PhD studies to deploy to Iraq.

Duckworth joined the Army ROTC and became a commissioned officer. She chose to fly helicopters because it was one of the few combat jobs then available for women. In 2004, when serving in Iraq as a Blackhawk pilot, the helicopter that Duckworth was co-piloting was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG). Despite losing both of her legs as well as the partial use of her right arm in the attack, Duckworth sought and won a medical waiver that allowed her to continue serving for two more decades. Duckworth received the Purple Heart, as well as other military awards and recognitions.

Following her injury, Duckworth spent the next year recovering at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, where she quickly became an advocate for her fellow soldiers. After she recovered, she became Director of the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs, where she helped create a tax credit for employers that hire Veterans, established a 24/7 Veterans crisis hotline, and developed programs to improve Veterans' access to housing and health care.

In 2009, President Obama appointed Duckworth as an Assistant Secretary of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. There, she coordinated a joint initiative with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to help end veteran homelessness, worked to address the unique challenges faced by female and Native American veterans, and created the Office of Online Communications to improve the VA's accessibility, especially among young veterans.

Duckworth served in the Reserve Forces for 23 years before retiring at the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in 2014. She was elected to the U.S. Senate in 2016 after representing Illinois's Eighth Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives for two terms. In the U.S. House, Duckworth served on the Armed Services Committee and was an advocate for working families and job creation, introducing bills like her bipartisan Friendly Airports for Mothers (FAM) Act to ensure new mothers have access to safe, clean and accessible lactation rooms when traveling through airports (which is now law). She helped lead the passage of the bipartisan Clay Hunt SAV Act, which enhanced efforts to track and reduce veteran suicides. She was also behind the passage of the Troop Talent Act to help returning veterans find jobs in the private sector.

In the U.S. Senate, Duckworth co-founded the Senate's first-ever Environmental Justice Caucus and continues her lifelong mission of advocating for veterans. In 2018, after Duckworth became the first Senator to give birth while serving in office, she sent a message to working families across the country about the value of family-friendly policies by securing a historic rules change that allows Senators to bring their infant children onto the Senate floor.

Duckworth is fluent in Thai and Indonesian. Senator Duckworth, as an Iraq War veteran, Purple Heart recipient, and former Assistant Secretary of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, attained many "firsts:" She was among the first handful of Army women to fly combat missions during Operation Iraqi Freedom; the first disabled female veteran elected to the U.S. Senate; and the first U.S. Senator to give birth while in office. To this day, the Senator volunteers at local food pantries and participates in

community service projects in her free time. Her bravery, leadership and commitment to the community is a great example for us all.