

Wasilla: City with a (purple) heart By GREG JOHNSON Frontiersman.com

Posted on July 7, 2012

WASILLA — It's an exclusive club that boasts a reluctant membership. Most pray they never become eligible for entry, while those who do are proud for the honor.

They're Purple Heart Medal recipients.

Now those who have been wounded in combat defending freedom and the United States will know they're welcome in Wasilla.

That's the message city council and Mayor Verne Rupright sent recently when Wasilla became Alaska's first Purple Heart City, a designation certified by the Military Order of the Purple Heart, a national service organization charged by Congress in 1958 to recognize Purple Heart recipients and their families.

Locally, Ken Ross is the MOPH commander for Chapter 663. The Wasilla resident is a former U.S. Marine and said he's proud his city is the state's first to receive the designation.

"I'm glad the mayor did it. It's recognition for those who are combat wounded," Ross said. "I know what they're going through and I know what I'm going through."

Rupright said the city has already ordered road signs proclaiming Wasilla the "First Alaska Purple Heart City." As a veteran, Rupright said he knows many Purple Heart recipients. Being a Purple Heart City lets veterans know that in Wasilla they're remembered and appreciated.

"I'm behind this 100 percent," he said. "They picked Wasilla because we have so many veterans and we have the beautiful honor garden. I was honored to get behind it. It shows we recognize your time, your service and your sacrifice. We hold these things to be self-evident and dear to our hearts. ... We care. We give a damn. That (message) is huge to me and I think it's huge to most people."

For James Hastings, he said seeing that sign will be emotional. Retired military himself, Hastings is now the local director for Alaska's Healing Hearts. Those who have Purple Hearts need to be acknowledged for their sacrifices, he said.

“It’s the only club in the world that doesn’t have an invitation list,” he said of medal recipients. “This is one you’re forced into, and most people don’t want to be in it.”

Attending a rodeo in southern Alaska through Alaska’s Healing Hearts, Hastings said a curious little boy came up to him and asked, “How do you get a Purple Heart?”

The Purple Heart designation for municipalities is a growing trend. On the heels of Wasilla’s proclamation, the Mat-Su Borough last week became the first in the state to become a Purple Heart Borough, Mat-Su Borough Mayor Larry DeVilbiss said.

“The city of Wasilla took the lead on that, and I’ve got to thank Mr. Ross and Mayor Rupright for drawing it to our attention,” DeVilbiss said. “I’m always glad to honor the people who have given for our freedom. This borough is very patriotic. We’re very willing to sacrifice for our values. It would be a sad day if it went back to what our Vietnam vets had to endure (upon returning from the war).”

Wasilla apparently unleashed a wave of appreciation for Purple Heart recipients, Ross said. Along with the borough’s designation, the cities of Palmer and Houston also have similar proclamations on their agendas this month. The next step from there is a push for the Legislature to pass a bill proclaiming Alaska a Purple Heart State. Currently, only California has that designation.

For at least with one Valley lawmaker, that won’t be a hard sell. In a statement, Sen. Linda Menard says she’s pleased with the measures Wasilla and the borough have taken.

“I’m so proud that the city of Wasilla has become the first Purple Heart City in the state of Alaska, and that our Mat-Su Borough will be the first in our state to become a Purple Heart Borough,” she said. “It is only fitting and right to honor those distinguished men and women who have sacrificed for our country with this designation.”

Contact reporter Greg Johnson at greg.johnson@frontiersman.com or 352-2269.