

## Purple Heart Resolution

*June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

I'm opening this Board Meeting with an overview of the issue of the Purple Heart resolution. We have heard a range of thoughts on the topic of the Purple Heart resolution and we have incorporated public input into the current resolution on the agenda for this evening. The resolution as it stands today is the one we will vote on. I am not going to call on further public comment on this issue. I think, as a community, much has been said already on this topic. Further public comment won't change minds and won't bring further light to this issue.

I would like to review how we came to this point so it is clear exactly how this process unfolded.

On December 4<sup>th</sup> of last year, Richie Pecci, who is president of the American Legion, emailed me saying that he had heard that Irvington had passed a Purple Heart resolution and would the Village consider passing one like it. I responded the next day that it sounded like a great idea and should be done in conjunction with either Veteran's Day or Memorial Day. Richie liked that idea and thought that Veteran's Day was a good choice. A few months later, toward the end of March of this year, Richie emailed me again and asked whether it could be done on Memorial Day instead. We exchanged some more emails and I forwarded the nature of the request and an example of the signage to the Board of Trustees, and scheduled it as a Board discussion item for the first meeting in May. Around then, I ran into Richie at Maud's and mentioned he would make life easier on me if he provided the text of the proposed resolution, which he did prior to the May 2<sup>nd</sup> meeting. The Board discussed the resolution at the May 2<sup>nd</sup> Board meeting: Richie got up and gave a little background on the issue, and we agreed as a Board to move forward with the resolution at the next meeting on May 16<sup>th</sup> so this would be done in time for Memorial Day. The Board did not view the issue as particularly controversial and it seemed fitting with the Memorial Day festivities. The veterans went off and ordered four signs and we were set for the next meeting.

As is our usual practice, we posted an agenda for the May 16<sup>th</sup> meeting along with the text of the associated resolutions, several days before the meeting on Friday, May 12<sup>th</sup>.

The Monday before the meeting, we received two emails expressing concern about the resolution. On Tuesday, the day of the meeting, we received six more emails during the day. The emails ask for a delay in a vote on the resolution since the community had not been adequately informed and the writers felt that this was an important issue that required further input. The fact is that when you hear from several people you haven't heard from before on a topic, it typically means that there is broader support for that point of view, because most people don't go through the effort of writing an email - a creative effort distinct from signing an on-line petition that takes less than a minute of effort - and when you hear from eight, it typically means there's a lot who may feel that way. This is not the first time people have become aware of an issue at the last minute, and it won't be the last, I am certain. We live in a world that is a complete gusher of news and information and email, and people often don't pay attention until the last moment. It's easy to say that it is on people to stay informed, but that

doesn't always happen. It is certainly on us to consider when people ask to be heard, even last minute, and that is what we chose to do in this case by temporarily tabling the resolution. I recognized at that moment how disappointing this would be to the veterans since the delay meant that this would not happen by Memorial Day – and Richie and his colleagues had been so sure of passage given the Board's assurances that they did not even attend that May 16<sup>th</sup> meeting.

People have complained that “only” eight emails stopped this process. Let me point out that only one email, from Richie Pecci, initiated this process in the first place. And only four vets showed up that meeting in May to push for it. But it was in our judgment that these four in number represented a larger constituency and honoring them didn't require an extensive polling of the community but rather quick action. The same applied when it came to those 8 emails from people with concerns. We knew there was a larger constituency concerned about this issue – and we honored the process of representative government where we try in our own limited way to listen to various voices to resolve concerns raised while addressing the issue at hand. We don't do this on all issues, and you may not always agree with what we do up here, but I would argue in this case that it worked out exactly as it should have here.

I called Richie the day after the meeting and asked for time with him. It wasn't the easiest call to make – I felt I had disappointed Richie, who I consider a friend, and the veterans. I also knew when I called Richie that the Board was going to do our best to get a resolution passed, and it was only a question of making that resolution better representative of this Village. The wording of the resolution was not sacred text handed down by some entity: Richie borrowed it from elsewhere. We're not Irvington or any other municipality that have already passed similar resolutions - we're Hastings - and changing the words to make it ours was our obligation to find a way through the concerns raised.

Richie and I met the next day at Maud's over dinner. I told him he would have an edited resolution in a few days. I then proceeded to make edits to the original resolution to address the concerns voiced, while keeping the core intent of the resolution to honor veterans intact. I then passed the draft around to the Board to ensure they were comfortable with my edits. Trustee Lemons provided some edits back, most of which I accepted, and the final version went back to Richie by Monday. He placed it before the American Legion and VFW in a meeting held on Wednesday. With the deletion of two words, they were fine with the Board's language.

It's worth discussing those two words because they were important to several people who raised concerns about the original resolution. Several had said they were upset that the Purple Heart does not cover all injuries suffered in war – specifically Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome, as well as others. So, my edited resolution had spoken of honoring those who had suffered “injuries, physical or psychological”, to honor everyone. The veterans asked that the words “or psychological” be deleted because it isn't currently covered by the Purple Heart medal, and would also beg the question of why other injuries not currently covered by the Purple Heart were not included. That was a point very well taken. However, Richie indicated that veterans entirely understood why we sought to make that point and a number of the vets indicated that they would co-sign a letter with the Village asking that the Purple Heart medal be broadened to

cover those injuries. That seemed a very elegant and satisfying outcome and we look forward to co-signing that letter.

The next morning, I posted the new resolution to the website and sought public comment on that. We have received two or three emails in response to the language of the new resolution. Nothing we have heard has made us consider changing the current form we are about to vote on. That same day, CBS News showed up on our doorstep. Though I made the reporter aware that we had come to an accord on a resolution, that did not make its way into their or Fox News' story.

I must also mention also the issue of the signs. I told Richie over dinner that night that I had, upon reflection, serious reservations about locating the signs at the entryways of the Village. My concern was primarily rooted in the precedent set: once the Village chooses to identify itself at its gateways as one thing, it opens us up to potentially endless debates of how else we should identify – and also lessens our ability to say “no” to other causes equally worthy or less so. We have had that experience in our Village square: once a manger and a menorah were permitted, a precedent had been set. It becomes more difficult – some could argue constitutionally impossible – to say no to others. And so the Festivus pole followed. This is Hastings. I know what is likely to follow placement of those signs – and we have too much real Village business on our agenda to devolve into an on-going debate about how we should represent ourselves as a village via signage. Those debates would only serve to divide us without purpose. So I suggested to Richie a number of places those signs could be placed within the Village that would honor the Vets and not set this precedent. We need to finish working through that discussion, and I am certain that it will proceed as civilly and in good faith as every discussion I have had with Richie, the veterans, and with most people in this Village on most issues.

Which leads to a final point, and one that I have addressed in the past. What happened during the course of the past three weeks between Richie, myself, the Board and those who chose to engage us in person on the street or by email was done with respect and with affection for this village. The outcome, we believe, satisfies the vast majority of people with an opinion on this issue. What happened on social media, not so much. I don't know what it is that possesses some people behind a keyboard in the safety of their home, but the things some people said. We had resolved this issue in a matter of days, and yet it sputtered on, angry and divisive for another two weeks.

I want to address some of the themes that emerged and what I think this issue did and did not involve.

It did not involve, and we did not intend to make it, a re-litigation of the controversies around Vietnam or Iraq or any other conflict after World War Two. I will leave it to the graduate school seminars to determine what is or is not a just war but that isn't the issue here. Our men and women in uniform answered the call to service, and where they were sent and for why is not ours to sort out here in this room or in this resolution. They suffered injury and death in that call, and this resolution is simply meant to honor that.

This issue does not involve patriotism, or who is the “better” American or who respects or disrespects the veterans. It was about specific words and symbolism that some felt uneasy with – and that’s it. Turning this into a patriotism test is just second-rate bullying for which I personally have no patience.

It has nothing to do with the Military Order of the Purple Heart or their fund-raising arm. We were not asked to do this by that order, and neither were the veterans. We are not providing our resolution or a payment to that Order, and the language does not intend to endorse anything other than what we intended.

And finally, it was not about new Hastings or old Hastings or social issues or any other things that some choose to try to divide us. I’ve been here longer than more than half the village has, and I’ve also been here in a wink of an eye compared to some whose family names can be found on the very monuments that adorn our village spaces. By now I know this much. Hastings is up on those monuments – with scores killed in wars of the last one hundred years. Hastings is in that Memorial Day Parade we recently held, one of the best around, with a great parade and a moving service. But Hastings is also where anti-government riots ripped through the factories a hundred years ago with several killed and many wounded. Hastings was home to Abel Meeropol, who sheltered the Rosenberg’s children after their execution and Fred Danback who blew the whistle on Anaconda’s pollution and home to civil rights pioneer Kenneth Clark and so many others. Hastings has a proud tradition of people here who have fearlessly stood up and exercised their constitutional right to be heard, even when the rest of us didn’t want to hear it. They are a part of the proud and shining thread through most of Hasting’s history, and we do the Village a disservice to ignore it. Those who stand up on this issue are new to the Village, and they have been born here. But they are always welcome in this community, as discomfiting as their words can be. For one of the things that unites us all, the binding fabric, is the Constitution that gives us the right to speak up. Those veterans who earned their purple hearts did so in service to a country built in part on that ideal and we honor them by respecting those ideals.

Finally, I want to close on the positive that has come from this public discussion. We have received many emails on all sides of this issue, and several heartfelt ones have really stood out. One summarized the sentiment behind the Purple Heart resolution without ever referencing it even once. Bill Finkleday, who has contributed tremendously to this village, wrote us the following, and I quote:

I would like to bring to your attention a Hastings resident, Marine Bert D. Corcoran, who was killed in the bombing of October 23, 1982 at the airport in Beirut, Lebanon. There were no yellow ribbons for Bert, no hometown turned out to honor his sacrifice, no memorial erected, Hasting's first victim of terrorism was 20 years old when he died. His family had moved to Katonah after Bert joined the Marines but he was a Hastings kid through and through. Three of his friends and I followed the hearse to the Long Island National Cemetery that sad day. Please include Bert in your memory - he was a tall redheaded Irishman that made the supreme sacrifice for Hastings and his country.

I close on that note, and in memory of Bert, I call for a motion to pass this resolution.