

"PURPLE HEART HIGHWAY"

House Bill 4980 as introduced First Analysis (6-28-01)

Sponsor: Rep. Paul DeWeese
Committee: Transportation

THE APPARENT PROBLEM:

It is appropriate that the state recognize the extraordinary contribution of those who have been injured or mortally wounded in service to our country during times of war. The state's recognition is appropriate for two reasons. First, it allows citizens to honor those among them who demonstrated courage and valor in defense of freedom. Further, the state's recognition makes an ongoing public dialogue possible as it keeps citizens mindful about the horrors of war, and the importance of an unrelenting effort to seek peaceful solutions to social and political problems.

Among the ways that the state can recognize those whose duty to their country extracted a high cost, in terms of physical and emotional well-being because of injuries, is to designate public works in their memory. For example, recently a highway rest area near Perry, Michigan has been named in honor of Purple Heart recipients. To complement the naming of the rest area, legislation has been proposed to name the nearby highway in memory of Purple Heart recipients, as well.

THE CONTENT OF THE BILL:

The bill would create a new act to designate the portion of highway Interstate 69 beginning at the intersection of I-69 east and U.S. 27 north in Clinton county and extending east to exit 105 in Shiawassee county as the "Purple Heart Highway." In addition, the bill would require the state Department of Transportation to erect and maintain suitable markers indicating the name of the highway when enough private contributions had been received to completely pay the cost of erecting the markers.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

The original Purple Heart, designated as the Badge of Military Merit, was established by General George Washington at Newburgh, New York on August 7, 1782 during the Revolutionary War. In General Washington's writings these comments explain his

intent: "The General ever desirous to cherish a virtuous ambition in his soldiers, as well as to foster and encourage every species of Military Merit, directs that whenever any singularly meritorious action is performed, the author of it shall be permitted to wear on his facings over the left breast, the figure of a heart in purple cloth or silk, edged with narrow lace or binding. Not only instances of unusual gallantry, but also of extraordinary fidelity and essential service in any way shall meet with a due reward."

From historical documents, it appears the award was granted to only three men, all of them noncommissioned officers who served with the Connecticut Regiment. Two of the original badges—a purple heart made of cloth and edged with narrow lace or binding, one having lettering embroidered to read "Merit", and both having embroidered leaves—survive in the collections of historical societies in New York and New Hampshire.

The modern Purple Heart medal is a purple heart within a gold border, containing a profile of General George Washington. Above the heart appears a shield of the Washington Coat of Arms (a white shield with two red bars and three red stars in chief) between sprays of green leaves. The reverse consists of a raised bronze heart bearing the words "For Military Merit" below the coat of arms and leaves. The ribbon from which the medal is suspended is purple, edged on both sides in white.

Today, the Purple Heart differs from all other decorations in that an individual is not "recommended" for the decoration. Rather, an individual is entitled to a Purple Heart in specified circumstances and upon meeting certain criteria. Generally, the Purple Heart is awarded when any member of the Armed Forces or any civilian national of the United States, who while serving under competent authority in any capacity with one of the U.S. Armed Services, has been wounded or killed, or who has died or may die after being wounded. The key issue that a commander must consider is the

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degree to which the enemy caused the action. The fact that the proposed recipient was participating in direct or indirect combat operations is a necessary prerequisite, but is not sole justification for award.

After the Revolutionary War the awarding of the Purple Heart for Meritorious Service was discontinued. However, the Purple Heart was re-established by the President of the United States in 1932, and is currently awarded under Executive Orders 11016 and 12464 (issued on April 25, 1962 and February 23, 1984, respectively), as well as Public Law 98-525 adopted on October 19, 1984.

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS:

The House Fiscal Agency notes that the bill has no state or local fiscal impact. (6-26-01)

ARGUMENTS:

For:

The Purple Heart Award, first established by General Washington during the Revolutionary War, is among the highest honors that can be bestowed on those who have risked their lives in service to our country during times of war. This bill enables the citizens of Michigan to express their appreciation for the courage of modern freedom fighters, by allowing public recognition of Purple Heart recipients as it is announced in signs naming a well-traveled portion of the state's busy freeway road system.

Against:

Although recognition of Purple Heart recipients is a worthy and, indeed, laudable aim, this kind of recognition may be unsafe. The proliferation of signs along the highway has increased with time. So, too, has traffic congestion as more vehicles use the road system. The two conditions in combination now provided more distractions for drivers with the result that driver reaction times are slowed, and travel on our roadways is becoming more unsafe. In an effort to curb sign placements in order to ensure driver safety, and also to preserve the natural beauty of the landscape, the Department of Transportation supports an effort to consolidate highway naming processes and procedures, and to limit additional highway sign markers. The proposal is embodied in House Bill 4878, currently pending before the House.

POSITIONS:

Two Purple Heart recipients, one a representative of the Purple Heart recipients national organization, testified in favor of the bill. (6-28-01)

The Department of Transportation does not support the bill. (6-28-01)

Analyst: J. Hunault

■ This analysis was prepared by nonpartisan House staff for use by House members in their deliberations, and does not constitute an official statement of legislative intent.