



There are over 18 million Veterans living in America today. Our great State of Florida is home to many of our nation's veterans, over 1.5 million in fact. We are consistently a top destination for where our nation's brave men and women decide to live when their call to duty is complete. Within our Sunshine State, Okaloosa County is especially important when it comes to our veteran population, leading the country in total share of our local population.

We honor our Veterans here in Okaloosa. We honor their bravery, sacrifice, and commitment to protecting our way of life. I believe we have a special opportunity and story to tell the world about the women who have served our country in uniform since its founding.

Starting with the Revolutionary War, women fought bravely alongside their husbands. One patriot, Margaret Corbin, took over the cannon when her husband died in battle to continue the fight against the Hessian soldiers. Many people are unaware that over 500 women served on both sides of the Civil War. Dressed as men, they were only discovered when wounded and in need of treatment.

Women flew during World War II (WASP) but were not recognized or compensated for their service for many years afterward. Jacqueline Cochran, a native of Northwest Florida was the first woman to break the sound barrier and the first woman during World War II to fly a bomber across the Atlantic Ocean.

And yet, it is very difficult to find statues that honor these brave women in the United States. Most public statues in the United States are of men. Of the estimated 5,193 public statues depicting historic figures on display on street corners and parks throughout the United States, only 394 are of women.

It's past time to honor and elevate these women veterans, and Okaloosa County is in a unique position to do so.

Last week, the Okaloosa County Commission voted unanimously to authorize the use of Tourist Development Council funds to honor Women's Veterans Service in Veterans Park, located on Okaloosa Island. This will be done with a gateway into the park, a fountain and eight to ten life size bronze statues of women who have served our country lining the path as we tell their stories. These stories will be of actual women who have served and represent every branch of the military.

Veterans, men and women alike, have already spoken and written in support of this initiative; once before the Tourist Development Council and twice before the Board of County Commissioners. Those who spoke were passionate about this idea. Some had served and felt it was time to recognize women in uniform.

This is a fitting use of the land on Okaloosa Island which locals will recognize as the old par three golf course. It was originally 35 acres but is now 17 acres as some of the land has been transitioned to commercial and environmental uses.

The County Commission seeks to keep this property as close as possible to Old Florida. Currently the land, which is on the bay side of Okaloosa Island, has a Rookery with 35 nesting Herons, Great Horn Owls and Osprey. The Audubon society uses this property for its bird sightings and this year found over 220 plus species of birds. In the fall Monarch butterflies rest here until they take flight for the final leg of their migration across the Gulf of Mexico.

This project has been supported by the Tourist Development Council, The Defense Support Initiatives Committee and The Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce. Because it is so unique, it is the belief that many will want to travel here to visit it.

Women achieved the right to vote in 1920 in the United States, only 100 years ago. This is a wonderful way for Okaloosa County to recognize the contributions women have made to our nation, especially in an area surrounded by military and their families.

If you wish to donate send your check, made payable to the Eglin Air Force Association, Candace Lovell, President, 210 West Hollywood Blvd., Suite 137, Mary Esther, Florida 32569, designated to the Women's Veterans Monument.