

How Every Alaskan Can Support Our Military

By Representative John Harris

I feel compelled to comment on the evolving relationship between Alaskans and the US military, a relationship that began when the stars and stripes were first flown over Sitka following the transfer from Russia in 1867.

I urge every Alaskan to show his or her strong support and appreciation for our military for many reasons. First and foremost, these are the men and women who defend our freedom. They are on the frontlines and they need to be assured that we are behind them 100 percent in the missions to which President Bush has assigned them.

Second, federal military spending in Alaska has been and continues to be a huge part of our economy. Remember that, before our oil wealth happened, the military built and paid for virtually all the infrastructure in Alaska, including roads, harbors, communication systems, and so forth. We do not want that spending to go away.

And third, but certainly not least, the military personnel who come to Alaska become part of Alaska. Many of them make their homes here permanently, raise their families here, and often become involved in local and statewide civic activities. Many apply the leadership skills they have developed in the military to make new and lasting contributions in the civilian world.

As military planners assess the various needs for defense of America, Alaska will continue to play a pivotal role. Most of us are familiar with why this is so – our strategic location on the globe gives ready access to Asia, the North Pacific, Russia and, over the North Pole, Northern Europe. Plus, our open spaces available for training and maneuvers, as well as logistical infrastructure and modern, efficient military installations should all help Alaska maintain its competitive edge.

Clearly, the state's physical attributes have us well positioned to keep a healthy and vibrant military sector going in Alaska. In my view, the real key to make this happen is a positive attitude toward the military held by the people of Alaska and their leaders.

It is imperative that we stand up and support our military. Dozens of times every day each of us is faced with making choices. And as we calculate how each option may be to our advantage or disadvantage, we need to bear in mind how our choices will impact the viability of Alaska as a place where the military can feel at home.

What does this mean? For example, the Air Force will soon make a decision where to base many of its new cargo planes, the C-17, as well as its new F22 Raptor fighter jets. If Alaska is chosen, a public process will take place to support the decision, including at least an environmental assessment, if not an environmental impact statement. Alaskans—by the hundreds—should be positively commenting on these when given the opportunity.

The Army has already converted much of its troop deployment here into an Interim Brigade Combat Team. Defense planners could decide to deploy a second IBCT or perhaps other types of units here, given the facilities and capacity at Ft. Richardson and Ft. Wainwright. If that decision is made, Alaskans should welcome the deployment with open arms, and vocally support it.

Since September 11 and the beginning of the war on terrorism, Americans are giving serious thought to their homeland defenses (including missile defense). We are viewing our obligations as citizens in a new light. As Alaskans, we are ideally situated to take our good relationship with the military and enhance it. As the military evolves its force structure and modernizes its equipment and hardware, we have the excellent opportunity to give them our support.