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TRAVERSE CITY — Col. Demas T. Craw was about 4,100 miles from his northern Michigan home when he volunteered to lead a three-man team behind enemy lines on the shores of French Morocco while coastal artillery shells rained down around him.

Craw's actions that day eventually earned him a Medal of Honor, the highest commendation possible for a member of the U.S. military. Now, more than seven decades later, a group of local veterans and leaders hope to rename Traverse City's Veterans Affairs Outpatient Clinic in Craw's honor as a reminder of the sacrifices he made for his country that day — and throughout his life.

County Commissioner Dan Lathrop said the idea for pursuing the VA clinic name change was born after he befriended U.S. Army Lt. Col. Terry Hawn who told him Craw's story.

"He told me about Col. Craw and how he's a totally forgotten local Medal of Honor winner," Lathrop said. "He was born in Long Lake (Township). I thought 'I'd like to honor this man.' We just can't forget these guys."

The date was Nov. 8, 1942 — the Allied invasion of French North Africa during World War II. The mission Craw embarked on that day as he headed inland from the Moroccan coast marked the last time he put his life on the line serving his country.

Craw and his small team planned to find the commander leading local French forces in an effort to negotiate the defenders' surrender as Allied forces invaded. A point-blank machine gun burst from a concealed position killed Craw during the mission, according to his Medal of Honor citation.

But Craw's death that day was not in vain — the surviving members of his party proceeded to successfully negotiate the surrender — and four months later he was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.

Craw was born in 1900 and attended public school in Traverse City, before dropping out of high school during World War I to enlist in the Army. He served in the military in a number of different roles until he joined the U.S. Army Air Corps Reserve, where he reached the rank of colonel.

His niece, Telleene Kate Perkins, still lives in Traverse City. Perkins said she was only 2 years old when Craw died, but she said her mother was very "closely connected" to Craw and very proud of him.

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"How do I know that?" Perkins said. "Because Mom always talked about 'Demas, Demas, Demas, Demas.'" "

Perkins said she remembers one story about "Uncle Demas" stopping by her family's Williamston home before his last deployment overseas. Perkins's mother, during the visit, turned away and Craw took the opportunity to carry Perkins outside, placed her feet in the dirt and returned inside. Then, holding Perkins by the ankles, Craw tracked her muddy footprints across the ceiling as a joke.

Perkins said she can still smell the wool from her uncle's uniform when she thinks about that day. Her mother laughed when she found the footprints, she said.

John Lefler, a Vietnam War veteran and president of the Grand Traverse Area Veterans Coalition, said the group's members and organizations unanimously support the proposal to rename the VA clinic in Craw's honor. Lefler added he was surprised when he learned that many people in the area don't realize a Medal of Honor winner grew up in Traverse City.

"We think this is an outstanding idea," he said. "Our area is very supportive of veterans and the active military. Whenever we have anything like this it is definitely a good thing."

Lathrop and other organizers of an effort to promote awareness of Craw's story started their campaign about six months ago and learned it takes an act of Congress to rename the local VA clinic.

The group is working with Rep. Dan Benishek, R-Crystal Falls, to get the job done. They're also soliciting resolutions of support from local government, and circulating a petition in hopes of collecting 5,000 signatures.

"We're hoping by Veterans Day next year to have this accomplished," Lathrop said.

Hawn said the campaign to rename the clinic is about more than recognizing just Craw. It's also about recognizing the sacrifices and courage of all members of Craw's generation. Hawn estimated that every resident of the then-sparsely populated Traverse City area knew at least one family member who died in World War II.

"It's important that future generations know that kind of courage exists in a lot of people," he said.

Visit www.mohcraw.com

To sign petition located on site.