

PROFILE OF THE WEEK

Bob McMahon

He uses his military experiences to educate Pennsylvania's children.

by Laura Wiseley
Town Talk Reporter

When Bob McMahon was hunkered down in the Vietnamese village of Long Binh in 1968, he had no idea he was helping to shape military strategy that would be used in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2012.

He also had no idea that one day he'd be using what he learned to educate hundreds of thousands of students in Pennsylvania and beyond about the intricacies of war abroad.

"That's what changed my life," said McMahon, Mayor of Media Borough and one of the region's premier experts on military curriculum in state high schools.

"It was the first time I'd ever really been in another country, and I had my own ideas of what people were like that turned out to simply not be true. The people I lived with in Vietnam were just like us – they wanted their kids to have an education, they wanted grandkids, they wanted a life. They just had to have it under very difficult circumstances."

Today, McMahon is one of the founders of the Pennsylvania Veterans Museum, located inside the former National Guard Armory on State Street in Media. He is also one of the founders of Veterans Educating America's Students, a group that has developed a non-partisan curriculum that teaches military history to high school students in Pennsylvania, with an emphasis on how past wars affect the wars of today.

"In order to teach about Iraq and Afghanistan, you have to understand the wars we've fought in the past," McMahon said, noting specifically the U.S. "senior advisor" program that sent him and other soldiers to live among Vietnamese villagers in 1968 and was researched by Gen. David Petraeus in his West Point junior-year thesis, then used again by the general as a strat-

egy in Ramadi in 2007.

"Living in villages, not sitting back and just visiting people – that relationship building really made those plans work," McMahon said. "That's what we want to teach students – how do we understand other cultures in conflict? Why do we fight? What are we doing?"

McMahon himself served in Vietnam in 1968-69, enlisting after graduating from college because his father believed his degree would help him secure a desk job. Instead, he was sent to Long Binh just as the Tet Offensive was breaking out.

"The first night I was there, we were diving into bunkers," he said. "I had no training other than basic training, and I was told that I was going to be a platoon leader. I took that over for five and a half months. We saw our fair share of conflict, obviously, because that was one of the most active areas."

A few months later, superiors told him that he'd be serving in a pilot program as a "senior advisor," living in villages among the Vietnamese people. He later found out that he'd been chosen for the role because he had a college degree.

"Our job was to protect the village," he said. "Whatever they needed or wanted, it was my job to get it. If we got into a fire-fight, it was my job to get on the radio and call for help. I'd say that it was what is known today as counter-insurgency. We were sent there for a reason – because they expected problems there."

McMahon eventually returned home, working for companies like Merrill Lynch and Smith Barney, but the war was never far from his thoughts. He ran for a Media Borough Council seat in 1981 and was elected, he believes, because of his status as a Vietnam veteran.

A few years later, conflict broke out in the Persian Gulf. McMahon was asked to help organize a send-off for American troops.

"I was asked to speak as a representative of media, and I made a statement that when the troops came home, the Vietnam veterans should be the ones to welcome them home," he said. "Little did I know, I'd wind up taking charge of organizing welcome-homes for the rest of the year."

From those welcome-home activities, more events were hatched. There are the Veterans' Day parades in Media. There are Memorial Day parades. In 1991, there was a huge Fourth of July Welcome Home celebration in Philadelphia, with 325,000 people in attendance. By that point, McMahon was Media's Mayor and he had plenty more he wanted to do.

He became chairman of the Veterans' Legacy Project, which organizes the now frequent veteran-themed parades. He also became the chairman of the Iraq-Vietnam Advisors, which eventually folded into McMahon's newly-founded organization called the Veterans National Education Program. It's that group that now brings military curriculum to high school students across the state, and is in fact the only social studies curriculum endorsed by PAIUNet, a network for Pennsylvania educators.

"We're now endorsed by elected officials, educators and veterans groups from around the state," he said. "We have to be neutral, because if we're not, we lose our credibility. Our curriculum teaches students the history of these conflicts, but allows them to make up their own minds about them. The things we ask are open-ended: 'Should we have left Iraq in 2011?' 'Should we have



Media Mayor and combat veteran Bob McMahon

an embassy in Yemen?" It encourages the students to look at these issues even more closely."

The group uses self-made videos to enhance its curriculum. This month, it is featuring a 37-minute educational film, "On Freedom's Wings, Bound for Glory," about the Tuskegee Airmen, starring several of the airmen themselves, including the late Luther Smith of Villanova. The film eventually started a push to award the airmen with the Congressional Gold Medal, and McMahon, Smith and 309 of the original Tuskegee Airmen traveled to Washington, D.C. in 2007 to receive the award.

"We had full access to everything," McMahon remembers. "We had our photo taken with President Bush and (Speaker of the House) Nancy Pelosi, which was a real thrill. We visited then-Senator Obama's office. A lot came from it."

Four minutes from the awards ceremony are now featured at the end of the group's documentary.

"You can see how thrilled everyone is," McMahon said. "It's very emotional."

Next month, the group plans to feature its documentary, "Women in the Military," in honor of Women's History Month. The film spotlights the contributions of the 2.5 million women who have served U.S. military efforts from the Revolutionary War until today.

Even with all he's accomplished, McMahon has no plans to stop bringing the true tales of American military efforts to her young people.

"Students need to learn about those who have served and what they went through," he said. "For example, the Tuskegee Airmen had to fight a war abroad and a war at home. The bombers they were escorting were initially none too happy serving alongside black military men, but they came to revere them because of their discipline and dedication. A lot of the lessons we can learn from our military are character-building, and their stories need to be shared."



Bob McMahon (l) and a Vietnamese soldier display a flag in Vietnam in 1968