

Local

New Vietnam film tells a different story

■ United States' humanitarian efforts are brought to light in movie made by the Pennsylvania Veterans Museum.

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SPRINGFIELD — During and after the Vietnam War, the American public was accustomed to hearing horrific tales of torture and combat from faraway jungles in the East, but few news reports detailed countless humanitarian efforts that American troops spearheaded once they met Vietnam for the first time.

Pennsylvania Veterans Museum Board Chairman and Media Mayor Bob McMahon, among a handful of others at the museum, unveiled for the first time a film that would change all of that.

Titled, "The American Humanitarian Effort; Out takes from Vietnam," the museum's inspiring account of U.S. troops' efforts to bring needed medicine, clothes, food and daily necessities to war-torn Vietnam detailed the side of the Vietnam War that was left out of many documentaries that told its sad story.

Suffering from malnutrition and poor sanitary conditions without proper medical care, the film documents that American troops were so touched by the Vietnamese's plight they launched a massive humanitarian effort that evolved as the war thickened.

Medical helicopter missions, known as dustoffs, rescued 9,000 people by the war's end. When the war officially ended, 2,800 children were transported from Vietnam to the U.S. as part of a massive rescue mission known as Operation Baby Lift. More than 20,000 Vietnamese were transported to refugee camps and later to the U.S. several years after the war.

The film did not, however, mention American presidents or generals involved in the Vietnam War, nor did it delve into the politics that caused it to start, or end.

There was no mention of Agent Orange or the Viet Cong's massive underground tunnel system that claimed

thousands of U.S. soldiers' lives.

The film about Vietnam was actually spearheaded by efforts of Delco natives and men who served as Tuskegee Airmen during World War II, who wanted to share their stories with schoolchildren in the late 1990s.

Since then, several films have followed and the museum is working to encompass the educational pieces into a program that will enter schools across the commonwealth — and across the country.

Several representatives from Texas schools attended the movie's premiere Friday, to contemplate whether it would educate children about Vietnam in Dallas and Houston.

"I hope you agree that this is how history should be told," said McMahon, who suggested that the film unveiled Friday was what high school and middle school children should be taught about when learning about the Vietnam War.

Dan Burkholder, one of the orphans rescued as part of Operation Baby Lift, agreed that his story was one every American child should learn about.

Transported from the An Lac Orphanage in a hand-made basket and blanket, Burkholder was flown to the U.S. and raised by an American family, who gave him a life to live "in a way that my natural mother wanted me to live it," he said.

Burkholder presented one of the women who helped spearhead Operation Baby Lift with the museum's Lifetime of Caring Award on Friday, after the film's unveiling.

Betty Tisdale, a nurse who served in Vietnam, was known as the "Angel of Saigon" to residents and children she helped rescue. She helped fly 219 children to the U.S. — each of whom was adopted within one month. She now heads an organization that provides aid to third-world countries.

Medal of Honor recipient Maj. Gen. Patrick Brady presented the Veterans Humanitarian Award to Carl Bartecchi, a doctor who was immersed in Vietnam dustoffs and set up medical training clinics for Vietnamese doctors, teaching critical care medicine.



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Col. George E. "Bud" Day, center, the most decorated military officer still living, greets U.S. Rep. Joe Sestak, D-7, of Edgmont, and Susan Sestak.

Col. George E. "Bud" Day, the most decorated military officer still living, presented the last award of the evening to former Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Ridge for "excellence in education." McMahon said Ridge was the brainchild for the museum's educational program that now seeks to keep veterans' legacy thriving in classrooms across the U.S.

"The idea was mine, but the execution was left to Bob McMahon," said Ridge, who first came up with the idea when looking at textbooks his children were reading.

"We don't teach about war anymore," he said. "We need to explain to our kids how we have the freedom we have and why it is available to us. ... We need to explain to our kids that America is worth fighting for because it is so unique and different.

"There is no other place like this on the face of the earth."

"The American Humanitarian Effort" was written and produced by Susan L. Sherwood.