



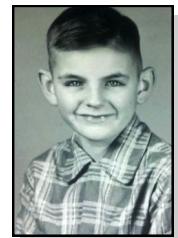
## Spc. Donald Stiles Bridge Dedication April 16



A young man from Coudersport who lost his life in the Vietnam War will have a local bridge named in his honor during a dedication ceremony at 11 am on Thursday, April 16. Members of the Pennsylvania General Assembly unanimously approved legislation renaming the Rt. 872 bridge near American Legion Post 192 in east Coudersport as the Specialist Donald Stiles Memorial Bridge.

Potter County Honor Guard will accord military honors. Among speakers will be State Senator Joe Scarnati, State Representative Martin Causer, Potter County Commissioner Paul Heimel, and Potter County Veterans Affairs Director Will Worthington. The public is encouraged to attend. All nine Vietnam War casualties from Potter County have now been memorialized with a bridge named in their honor.

A native of the Rubbertown section of north Coudersport, Donald L. "Donnie" Stiles was the community's first fatality in Vietnam. He was raised by his grandparents, Edward and Belle Austin Stiles, after his mother Vivian Stiles died when Donnie was less than two years old. Friends in the Rubbertown neighborhood recall that Stiles was one of the boys who enjoyed playing army. Among the other regulars was his good friend, Bruce Maynard, who also lost his life in the Vietnam War.



Stiles enlisted in the U.S. Army at age 17. He underwent basic training at Fort Dix, N.J., and special infantry training in Texas. Donnie married the former Linda Ruggiero. The two had met at Fort Dix. Soon after the wedding, he was deployed to Vietnam as an atomic demolition munitions specialist, serving with A Battery, 1st Battalion, 7th Artillery, 1st Infantry Division. Specialist Stiles was killed in action in Binh Duong Province, South Vietnam, on April 2, 1968, after taking another soldier's place on a mission and being hit by bomb fragments from a land mine.



A special keepsake program will be distributed during the April 16 dedication ceremony. Organizers are hoping for a large turnout to participate in this long-overdue memorial to a fallen soldier.

## Healing Waters: Medal of Honor winner coming

God's Country Chapter of Trout Unlimited will host a special guest for its eighth annual Project Healing Waters Fly Fishing event May 19-22. Sgt. Gary Beikirch, Medal of Honor recipient and former Army special forces medic from the Vietnam War, will join the volunteers who will be hosting a visit by 15 disabled veterans seeking the special therapy and camaraderie provided in Potter County. Following his military service, Beikirch directed a veterans outreach center in Rochester, N.Y. He now serves as chaplain of the Congressional Medal of Honor Society.



Sgt. Gary Beikirch

TU members are working with community partners and other volunteers to make this year's event a memorable occasion, in honor of all veterans of the Vietnam War. It recognizes the 40th anniversary of the war's conclusion. Vietnam veterans as well as members of the public will be invited to participate in a 40-mile procession through Potter County on Tuesday, May 19, and other activities to be announced. The veterans will depart from Dave's Diner on Rt. 417 in Ceres, N.Y., and travel on Rt. 44 south through Shinglehouse to Coudersport, then to Ladona and Austin. Portions of this year's Project Healing Waters event will be hosted by Big Moore's Run Fish and Game Preserve. TU volunteers will provide fly-fishing instruction, equipment and guide services. About half of the visitors will be Vietnam veterans from across the country. The others will come from the VA medical centers in Erie, Bath, Pittsburgh and Buffalo.



Tax-deductible donations to help offset the costs are being accepted at: God's Country Chapter TU, Project Healing Waters, Box 702, Coudersport PA 16915.

## Services expanded at Potter County VA Medical Clinic



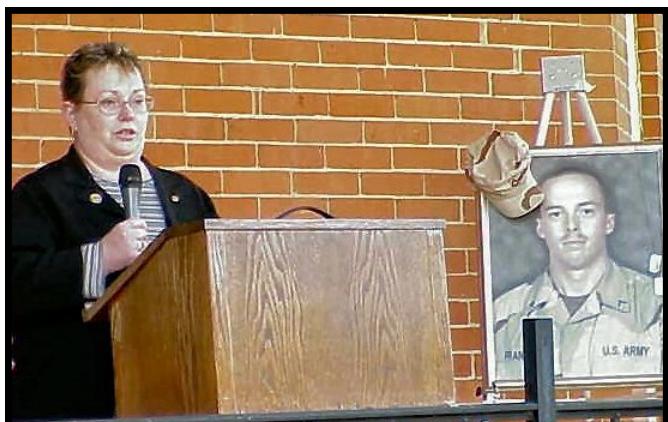
Bath VA Medical Center and the Potter County Commissioners continue to partner for expanded services at the Potter County VA Medical Clinic. It's located in a county-owned building just off Rt. 872 in the Mapleview area. Potter County and Bath VA recently extended contractual arrangements through 2018. The center is open each Monday and Thursday from 8 am to 4:30 pm. The Potter County clinic has been integrated into the medical center's high-technology computer and phone systems, which increases capabilities for tele-health (including tele-mental health) services and computer connections.

**As a result of the technology changes, there are new telephone numbers for the Coudersport clinic: 607-664-4670 or 1-877-845-3247, extension 44670.**



The clinic is staffed by a nurse practitioner, registered nurse and licensed practical nurse to process new enrollments, update patient information, conduct screenings and deliver primary care and/or referrals. Many of the services that had previously been available to veterans only at larger VA medical centers are provided at the Potter County facility. Specialty services beyond primary care remain available at the Bath center. Eligible veterans who have not enrolled for medical care through the VA may contact Potter County Veterans Affairs Director Will Worthington at 814-274-8290, ext. 210.

## Remembering Mike Franklin: ten years later



Tina Franklin discusses the life of her son, Spc. Mike Franklin, at a dedication ceremony for the bridge that's named in his memory in Coudersport's East Second Street.

American Legion Post 192 marked the tenth anniversary of the day a Coudersport soldier was killed by an improvised explosive device near his screening area in Ramadi, Iraq. Post 192 held a chicken and biscuit dinner and donated proceeds to the LEEK Hunting and Mountain Preserve in Oswayo, not far from where Specialist Mike Franklin is buried in the Wells Cemetery. The wounds in their hearts will never heal, but members of Spc. Franklin's family copes with the pain through pride in his service and by living their lives in a way he would insist upon. "Our lives were forever altered," said his mother, Tina Franklin. "The war came home to Coudersport that day."

Spc. Franklin, who was a month shy of his 23<sup>rd</sup> birthday, was not scheduled to be on duty during that shift on March 7, 2005. But he unselfishly agreed to stand in so a friend could take a shower before replacing him. The checkpoint he was patrolling was established to trap guerrilla fighters through a dusk-to-dawn curfew. Similar operations were taking place in other towns in western Iraq, which was seeing heavy guerrilla fighting. A car had stalled and couldn't be restarted. Just as Mike and another soldier, Sgt. Andrew Bossert of Fountain City, Wisc., were about to begin searching the car in greater detail, it exploded. "It was a remote-activated detonation," explained his father, Bill Franklin. "The guys never had a chance to defuse it or do anything. Everything was being watched from a distance."

Franklin was inspired to join the Army by the example of his uncle, Michael Martin, a master sergeant and instructor who had been a ranger with the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne. Specialist Franklin was serving in South Korea when he volunteered for assignment to the war zone.



After his death, Tina became involved with the work of Gold Star Mothers, an organization of mothers who have lost a son or daughter in battle. She has made multiple trips to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., to visit injured service members. She has also met with families of other war casualties and contacted members of Congress to support the U.S. military in the fight against terrorism. Tina suggests that those who wish to honor soldiers who have fallen in war consider service to others through community organizations, churches or government agencies.



Wreaths were hung on the Spc. Mike Franklin Memorial Bridge marking the 10th anniversary of his death.

## Supporting County Veterans' Services Officers

A resolution that was introduced by Potter County has been adopted by the National Association of Counties (NACo) and now moves to the U.S. Congress for consideration. The measure calls on the federal government to provide funding for a portion of county-based directors of veterans' affairs expenses. It was drafted by Commissioner Paul Heimel, vice chairman of NACo's Veteran and Military Service Committee, and Potter County Veterans Affairs Director Will Worthington.



In testimony to NACo, Commissioner Heimel said, "Historically, we as a nation have not done well by our veterans. Many county governments have taken it upon themselves to shoulder some of that responsibility out of a sense of commitment to our veterans. What our resolution calls for is some financial support for those services from the same federal government that is ultimately responsible for them."

Federal financial input would cover general operations of the county director of veterans' affairs department, from staffing expenses to direct service for veterans. These could include transportation, assistance for those veterans with special needs, hands-on navigation of the VA bureaucracy, veterans' recognition events, assistance with funeral expenses, flags and markers for decoration of veterans' graves, veterans' service officer training and more.

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## New VA Secretary: 'We are making progress'



Robert A. McDonald, Secretary of the embattled U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs, reports that the agency is making progress after many of its shortcomings were exposed in 2014. "We are making fundamental changes. In terms of leadership, we have terminated about 960 employees since I've been Secretary," McDonald said. "We have 100 senior leaders who are under investigation and, based on feedback we are soliciting, some of them could also be gone. So we're holding people accountable."

He said he recognized that the stakes are high and the VA's performance affects millions of lives. "We are a huge organization," McDonald pointed out. "We are a health care system. We are one of the largest businesses in this country. We have a budget which is nearly \$170 billion, and we run more than 150 hospitals." Since the launch of the national "My VA" initiative, wait times for medical services are down by 18 percent nationally and the backlog of disability claims is down by 61 percent. Homelessness is down 33 percent. "We're making progress," McDonald said. "We're not where we need to be yet, but we are going in the right direction."

**Potter County Veterans News** is a publication of the Potter County Veterans Affairs Department. Copies are available for download from the county's website, [pottercountypa.net](http://pottercountypa.net). For more information, contact Paul Heimel at 814.274.8290, Ext. 203.