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Sculptor Pays Tribute to Troops

By **Samantha L. Quigley / American Forces Press Service**

WASHINGTON, June 1, 2005 - A sculptor moved by the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks unveiled her talent in the Pentagon today as a "welcome home" gesture to servicemembers everywhere.

Sculptor Heather McMahan, who lost five friends in the New York 9/11 attacks, created the art especially for display at the Pentagon branch of the Pentagon Federal Credit Union after receiving favorable comments on a similar piece she paid to have displayed at the Austin, Texas, airport.

The sculptor said that the aftermath of 9/11 was, for her, like living in a war zone. A single mother of four who worked in banking, she decided to move to Austin, Texas, where she could escape the day-to-day devastation. After settling in, she began to realize that the news outside of New York gave just a glancing mention of the developments occurring in and around Ground Zero.

She also was struck at the reaction she received from those outside the New York area when it became known that she had lived through the attacks but lost five friends. The reaction was always, "Oh, I'm so sorry," she said.

This, she thought, wasn't enough acknowledgement for what she had been through.

To top it all off, she said, she felt guilty about living in a place where it was over for her and she was enjoying her freedoms, but servicemembers were still in harm's way.

She said she decided the way she felt must be similar to the way servicemembers feel when they come home from a war zone and people don't really understand what they've been through. Her answer was a personal welcome from her to them.

She created a clay sculpture titled "Welcome Home." It was placed, at her expense, in the Austin airport. The haphazard arrangement of the items in the sculpture is intentional, she noted.

"It's sort of presented to appear as if the boots and the helmet and goggles are just thrown off," McMahan said, the idea being that the soldier who abandoned them so hastily had just received word of pending leave and was in a hurry to be welcomed home.

The reward for her hard work is hundreds of supportive e-mails from passers-by who are touched by the piece. She said the words of thoughts and praise come from servicemembers, their loved ones and those who are moved to do so.

One e-mailer was Army Staff Sgt. Zach Wobler, a paratrooper with the 82nd Airborne Division. The two began a correspondence that lasted until he was killed in action in Mosul, Iraq, on Feb. 6.

It was to him that McMahan dedicated the sculpture that now sits in the front office of the PFCU Pentagon branch.

When James Schenck, PFCU senior vice president and chief administrative officer, saw the sculpture in Austin, he became curious about the piece and the artist. He contacted her, and soon the ball was rolling to get a similar sculpture installed at the Pentagon - and at no to McMahan.



Artist Heather McMahan poses with her sculpture titled "Welcome Home" June 1 at the Pentagon branch of the Pentagon Federal Credit Union. Photo by Scott H. McCleary, courtesy of Pentagon Federal Credit Union



Artist Heather McMahan makes a small adjustment to her sculpture called "Welcome Home," which was unveiled June 1 at the Pentagon branch of the Pentagon Federal Credit Union. McMahan, who lost friends in the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attack in New York, used her talent to show appreciation to troops returning home from war. Photo by Scott H. McCleary, courtesy of Pentagon Federal Credit Union



"(The sculpture) symbolized that American spirit -- the spirit of the soldier," Schenck said. "It was simple, but made a very powerful statement."

The piece installed at the Pentagon, also called "Welcome Home," is slightly different from the one in Austin, mainly by the added web belt to the helmet, goggles and boots.

It's all about honoring and supporting the nation's servicemembers, McMahan said.

"It's not about war being right or wrong. It's about serving your country," she said. "(Servicemembers) chose to serve their country. We are the country; we need to show some appreciation."

"We put this (sculpture) here as a remembrance of our core membership," said Army Col. James Quinn, chairman of the credit union's board of directors at the installation ceremony. "We have 600,000 people ... that we are here to serve. This represents that core, that American soldier, the servicemember who takes care of us, serves overseas and represents our country."



Margaret B. Szeliga, Pentagon Federal Credit Union vice president for brand and marketing (left), joins Jeanette Poston, artist Heather McMahan and Tim Poston at the June 1 unveiling ceremony for McMahan's sculpture titled "Welcome Home," which she dedicated to the memory of Army Staff Sgt. Zach Wobler, the Postons' son, who was killed in action in Iraq. Photo by Scott H. McCleary, courtesy of Pentagon Federal Credit Union



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