

local news



GETTING TO KNOW  
PAUL MCNEILL

Age: 73

Village: Hemingway

Spouse: Brandy

Moved Here In: 2008

Moved Here From:  
Okeechobee

Favorite Villages Activities: Golf, walking paths with outdoor gym equipment and biking

Bill Mitchell | Daily Sun



VILLAGER BACKSTORY

You might know Paul McNeill as a popular bagpiper in churches and clubs, but what you may not know is that he worked for the United Nations and once was arrested in Sudan for hitting golf balls.



**James  
Dinan**

THE VILLAGES  
DAILY SUN

*Do you know  
someone with an  
interesting backstory  
to tell? Email  
james.dinan@  
thevillagesmedia.com,  
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During Paul McNeill's first career as an international tax lawyer in New York, he came to a realization.

"I simply decided I was only interested in one tax return a year," the Village of Hemingway resident said. "So I wrote to the United Nations secretary-general, asking if I could work for the UN and help in peacekeeping missions."

**M**cNeill was hired by the UN as a lawyer in 1994. His first job was to work in the African country of Somalia, but when the UN withdrew from the country's capital, he was sent to Bosnia-Herzegovina, which was being shelled at the time of his arrival.

"I spent the next 24 years in UN peacekeeping missions, retiring three times and living in 11 countries," he said. "I

lived in Europe, Africa and parts of Asia."

**W**hile involved in peacekeeping, McNeill's real interest was using golf to rebuild civil societies. He led initiatives to teach nationals how to construct and maintain golf courses, then market those courses to diplomats and business leaders to get golf clubs started. In all, McNeill helped launch or revive courses in Rwanda, Afghanistan, Sudan, South Sudan and the former Soviet Republic of Georgia.

"I first started promoting golf when I was in Rwanda after the civil war there," he said. "I wanted to revive an abandoned course there. One way I revitalized it was by taking an engine off a generator, putting it on a tractor, then using the tractor to cut overgrowth and find the tee

boxes and greens."

But working in UN peacekeeping missions took a toll on McNeill's health.

"I had malaria twice, typhoid fever, pneumonia and was medically evaluated after a terrorist attack," he recalled. "Now, I have tinnitus from years of helicopters and bulldozers."

McNeill also found himself being arrested in Sudan for playing golf.

"During the civil war there, I was being interviewed by a TV news crew about teaching golf," he said. "Suddenly, national security officers drove up and arrested me for playing an unauthorized sport. The crew kept filming, and the video was shown on TV."

McNeill learned to play the bagpipes after he and his wife bought a home in The Villages in 2008. And he would use his musical skills while on

peacekeeping missions.

"I was working in Liberia's capital after the country's civil war, and there were many evenings where I would stand near the presidential palace and play Liberia's national anthem on bagpipes," he said. "People would stop their cars, get out and sing along. I was the only bagpiper in the country, and that led to my being invited to play "Amazing Grace" at churches. I played so much music in Liberia that the UN used my photograph on a peacekeeping poster."

**T**oday, McNeill has become an itinerate bagpiper in The Villages, playing in local churches and funeral services in full Scottish regalia. Veterans and the military are important to McNeill, who has played at military funerals at Florida National Cemetery in Bushnell. Families can select

from over 200 tunes that McNeill plays from memory.

"If honor guard details at Bushnell can't provide a real bugler and I'm there to play music for the family, I offer to play taps on bagpipes for the detail commander," he said. "I don't have a count of the number of funerals I've played for at Florida National Cemetery, but the most important one is always the one I'm playing for that day."

**F**or McNeill, playing bagpipes at church is a calling.

"One day it occurred to me that when I go to heaven, I'm going to be asked what I did to make the world a better place," he said. "And I couldn't think of what I'd say back then. Now, I play bagpipe music at churches and funerals. Calls to Christian service come in many ways. That was mine."