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NEWS

VIDEO: 'Our Vietnam Generation'

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Documentary premieres at Fox Theatre.

DETROIT — Perhaps as many as 3,500 people attended the premiere of producer Keith Famie's new documentary, "Our Vietnam Generation," at the Fox Theatre Friday night.

Uniformed men and women currently in the military represented many ranks. Thousands of veterans wore the colors and "uniforms" of many veterans service organizations and patriotic motorcycle organizations.

Veterans of the U.S. Air Force, Army, Coast Guard, Navy, Marines, National Guard and Reserves stood when the 126th Army Band of the Michigan National Guard played the anthem of each branch.



Keith Famie, left, films Randy McConnell, who has more Purple Hearts than any other living veteran, at The Wall That Heals. (Photo courtesy of Keith Famie and Visionalist Entertainment Inc.)

During the gala evening, vets ranging from Operation Iraqi Freedom-Operation Enduring Freedom to World War II, and ROTC students wished the Vietnam vets a “welcome home.”

Over the past two years, Famie interviewed dozens of Vietnam vets and people who had non-military roles in the war, and his editor somehow condensed 110 hours of interviews down to a 110-minute documentary. Pilots who became professors, the officers who became public servants, the corpsmen who became doctors and firefighters, and a dozen more had their say on camera about how the war shaped their lives.

PBS will air the film locally on Feb. 21, and copies on DVD can be purchased from www.ourvietnamgeneration.com.

The project started when Famie happened to drive by a Novi cemetery and had a chance meeting with the Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 154 color guard. They said they were there holding a 24-hour vigil, as they had for more than 20 years, at a monument to the state’s service members missing in Southeast Asia.



“I said a vigil for what?” Famie said.

“For the government to account for about 1,700 still missing in action,” was the answer.

It was his introduction to the Vietnam vets’ vow to keep the issue of our MIAs in the political and public eye. Adrian Cronauer, played by Robin Williams in “Good Morning Vietnam,” said that such advocacy by Vietnam vets changed this country’s military and political efforts on behalf of today’s missing in action and those known to be taken prisoner.

“I went home and got my camera and started shooting,” Famie said. “What I learned about Vietnam vets is that they are really humble guys. I was also surprised to see how unconditionally caring these guys are, while asking for very little in return.

“They are skeptical by nature and they are not trusting, for good reason. The biggest thing I learned was that they have this brotherhood. It’s a very tight-knit group of guys, a very personal club to be part of. I’ve seen Pat Daniels (VVA Chapter 154 president) do it. Someone introduces himself as a Vietnam veteran and Pat has a list of questions. It’s a trust thing.

“They have to prove they aren’t wannabees — people who say they were in Vietnam when they really weren’t. They take that stuff really serious, like a badge of honor, but once they pass the hurdle, they truly become part of the family. The challenging part (for me) was to develop a level of respect and trust for them to open up and talk,” Famie said.

“I got e-mail from all over the country from people who are linked by that experience, and by ‘The Wall.’”

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is still the most-visited monument on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. The Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial Fund that maintains it has a traveling version called “The Wall That Heals.”

A Clinton Township presentation of “The Wall That Heals” was in the film.

“It’s hard to understand the psychological impact ‘The Wall’ has on people. Our society as a whole can’t understand it,” Famie said.

“The media has been great about promoting the film. That in itself is a great change. Some very positive stuff has come out on the Vietnam vet showing what they have accomplished in their lives. They say that their experience made them the person they are today — ‘I’m the police officer, the fireman, I’m drawn to public service because of what I went through over there,’” Famie said.

John Colone, mayor of Hell, Mich., was shot five times, examined by a medic who thought he was dead, and placed in a body bag.

“John said he wouldn’t change anything if he had to do all over again. How do you even wrap your head around that?” Famie said.

David J. “Doc” Maloney, a former corpsman, wrote the book “Purple Hearts and Broken Hearts.” In the film, he speaks about how warning labels were removed from chemical drums that the contents were dangerous to humans.

“He has documents that showed that the chemicals should not have been used,” Famie said.

Exposure to Agent Orange has been proven to cause a variety of serious and deadly health problems and the government now compensates veterans for many of them.

One veteran who is a cancer survivor looked at the issue in a different way and said chemical defoliants protected him while in Vietnam by keeping the enemy at bay, and that he may have had 40 more years of life because they sprayed.

‘Digger’ Odell

It must have been difficult for Famie to reduce two or three hours of Donald E. “Digger” Odell’s story down its small segment. The story of his U.S. Air Force pilot career, years as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam for five and a half years could make an entire movie.

“I didn’t know how much of that interview would make it into the film,” Odell, of Harrison Township, said. “I thought it might be just one flash. I give him (Famie) a lot credit because, in days past, guys who went to Vietnam were not heroes. There was no welcome home because it was an ‘unpopular’ war. We did receive a homecoming as prisoners of war, but the others were spat upon and could not wear their uniforms off base.

“We were told by our government to go over there. I think we deserve the recognition for trying to help people survive in a democracy rather than under communism,” Odell said.

He said orders would come from “the whiz kids in Washington” to bomb targets that had already been bombed. The North Vietnamese quickly learned U.S. planes would be back, and they were waiting for them with anti-aircraft weapons.

“All we had to do was take out their dikes and they’d be fanny-deep in water and it would have been over. But it was ‘you can’t bomb this and you can’t bomb that.’ It wasn’t the military that lost the war. We didn’t lose. Even McNamara later admitted to Washington’s mistakes that worked against the military.

“If you’re not going to play the game to win, don’t play; don’t mess with it. We were bombing rubble. The military targets, the railways, were no longer there. We’d be sent back and then they’d be waiting for us.

“That day I went down, only one other guy made it out,” he said.

Flying out of a U.S. base in Korat, Thailand, his F-105D Thunderchief — or “Thuds” as they were known — was hit, uncontrollable because his instruments went out. He tumbled. The plane split in half behind the cockpit after hitting another F-105.

“My vertical stabilizer hit his external tank. There was a big ball of fire. Much later, I jokingly said that I didn’t get credit for the kill. That guy was on his 98th mission.”

Odell ejected at low altitude and was “turned in” as killed in action. But a couple of weeks later, Odell’s former wife, home with their four children, was told that his status had been changed to missing in action since the military lacked proof in the form of a body.

Two years after he was captured, his former wife received a short note from him.

“My handwriting was so bad because of my injuries that they had a handwriting expert compare the note with a previous letter I had written home and confirm that it was my writing,” he said.

Fonda hatred

There is almost universal hatred of actor Jane Fonda among Vietnam veterans.

“We didn’t know about the antiwar movement and here came Jane Fonda sympathizing with them (their captors). She was on the camp radio transmitting to the prisoners, and transmitting to our troops in South Vietnam: ‘Lay down your weapons; you’re wrong.’ If that had happened in any other war she would have been tried for treason. I have no respect whatsoever for her. I wouldn’t pull her out of a ditch. She brought a lot of harm and hurt to the prisoners.

“We were forced to go before her. We learned quick what she was doing over there, but you didn’t have a choice. Either you do what they say or you are going to be tortured. When we got released and got back, we pushed to have her tried but the attitude was that there had been enough hurt and the government wanted the whole thing to die. They didn’t want to keep anything about Vietnam in the limelight.”

Odell belongs to the Vietnam Prisoners of War group, or the Nam POWs.

“It’s for camaraderie among ourselves,” he said. “We’ve become so close to each other. That guy who was living in that cell with you for all those years shared your mental pressure and your physical pressure.

“Maybe one day you say you are ready to give up and quit. The other guy is responsible for pulling you up and out of it. You know how many times he chewed his food, how many times he went to the bathroom. You knew everything about him and he knew everything about you. It was all about ‘I’m going to make sure you keep going because you are going to get out of there someday.’

“There was a lot of pressure about how long we were going to be there. They tried and executed some and said others would get 20 years. They planted those seeds of doubt in your mind that you’d ever get out. They came and rattled those keys and you knew you were going to get your butt kicked,” Odell said.

“Vietnam knew they were not a big power. They said ‘we can’t bomb the United States but we have this one avenue to deny your wife and children and friends the knowledge that you are alive.’ They said they were going to make them suffer by never releasing our names unless it was someone like John McCain whose father was a four-star admiral,” Odell said.

Odell said he knew of McCain and that McCain refused early release, but said they were never in the same prison camp.

“We never had anything to read or write on so you told your life history to that other prisoner and he did the same to you. One of things that sustained us as Americans was a sense of humor. You can find something to laugh about even through the brutality. Sometimes it was laughing at yourself or your cell mate. Some funny things did happen. You couldn’t go hide in a corner. You had to help each other realize you had no control over your captivity, but you can help each other.

“We’d talk about every hunting and fishing trip we ever had and you’d know more about him than you ever knew about your own wife. If he tells you a joke, you laugh even if he told you the same joke a couple years ago.

“We didn’t have control of our physical being, but we did of our mental being. We built things in our minds like condos and apartments. We had nothing to write with and if we wrote on the cement floor we would have had to use water to erase it and water was too precious. There was a medal of honor recipient next to me who was in construction,” he said.

Odell said they would learn all they could from him about building specs.

“We’d even try to determine what the return on our investments would be,” Odell said.

Odell sustained a broken cervical vertebra (C-4) when he was hit with a rifle butt when he was first captured and interrogated. It was an injury that could have resulted in a Christopher Reeve-level of disability.

“They did it trying to get me to sign a confession document and admit to being a war criminal. My Vietnamese interrogator realized he inflicted major damage and it paralyzed me for a period of time.

“At first I was in solitary for about a week to 10 days. There were at least eight days of interrogation. My captor, he was like a medic, had to feed me because I could not feed myself. It was degrading to them. They didn’t like having to feed me. I’m the enemy.”

‘Camp America’

“They took us to a dungeon camp on the outskirts of Hanoi called “the zoo.” We later changed it to ‘Camp America.’ I was with two or three other prisoners in that cell. If it had not been for them, I probably would not have made it. Talk about fate. The weird thing was that I was with Bob Barnett who was a physical therapist. He worked with me and had me walking in six months. He would not leave me alone. I almost hated him. I’d say give me a rest and he’d say no way. He’d be working my arms and legs. I’m still in touch with him. I see him at reunions and we talk occasionally.”

After he got home, in one way he was no different from any other veteran. Even as a well-known POW, Odell had the same hassles with getting veterans disability compensation. He had to persevere through the legal system for that ordeal, on top of what he went through in Vietnam.

He wore a neck brace for awhile. Today, at age 76, he has cervical spondylosis, which is abnormal wear on the bones in his neck, and calcium deposits. There is surgery available that may make it better, but also may make it worse, so Odell does not opt for surgery.

After he retired from the Air Force, he worked at various jobs, including public affairs at Selfridge ANG base.

“I am very happy with my life. If I died today I would have no regrets. I’ve done everything in my life that I’ve wanted do. I wouldn’t want anybody crying for me at a wake. I’d want them to drink cocktails and have a good time. If I had to live life over, I would be a fighter pilot again. There’s nothing else I would be. Some made it. Some didn’t. I’m luckier than a lot of them and I have a lot to be thankful for.

“I thought the film was very well done, a little long and drawn out toward the end maybe, but then I’m not a producer-director,” Odell said after attending the film premiere. “I thought what they showed in the final version about myself was enough; there was no need to elongate my experience more than they did in there. They covered how I was shot down and the initial interrogation and all that.”

Odell is married to his second wife, Susie, and they have a son who is 10 years old. They live in Harrison Township.

“Now I’m retired and I stay busy I can’t just sit still,” Odell said.

One of his winter activities is snowmobiling around the state raising money for Special Olympics with Wertz Warriors. He said the group has raised \$8.5 million in the past 29 years.

Odell has received about 800 of the POW/MIA bracelets that bear his name from people who vowed to wear them until he was repatriated.

“We didn’t know about them until somebody new who was shot down told us about them. That really helped us. The Vietnamese didn’t place value on human life as we do. They couldn’t believe Americans were worrying about three or 400 people that way. It made them realize they had something the U.S. wanted back and it helped change the treatment we got. It went from brutal to rather sustainable.”

The awareness the bracelets helped create changed that treatment by 1971 or 1972.

“It made them go ‘we got something we can barter with.’ Up until then they didn’t care if we lived or died. They needed us for leverage,” he said.

“I thought it was appropriate to leave the comments in there by vets who talked about coming back and being spat upon and that it wasn’t a military-run war. The politicians controlled it, not military tactics or strategists. I think that was important to say, because of how it affected the outcome,” Odell said.

Revisiting Vietnam

Mark Spooner, of Harrison Township, was featured in the film when he took a trip back to Vietnam and visited “Hill 41” where a particularly brutal battle took place for him and his fellow Marines.

“The country of Vietnam is a beautiful place having traveled there twice now in 1997 and this last year. The war that took place there has turned a country’s name into a negative feeling,” Famie said. “It’s silly how little people know about Agent Orange — and napalm — it’s so often confused. I got the Agent Orange thing down now.”

“It was something that had to be said,” Spooner said of the documentary. “Famie told everyone’s story -- the neighbor down the block, the guy or woman next door. There had been such a negative image of the Vietnam vet in general. It highlighted who came back and did well. It rambled a bit, but always came back to the point that Vietnam vets are proud of their service.

Spooner took well wishes from patients at Children’s Hospital of Michigan to patients in a children’s hospital in Vietnam and brought back drawings from the Vietnamese children to the American children.

“The children over there were really happy little geeks to see what the kids in America did for them. A young lady who made a ‘never give up’ drawing summed it up by saying that people around the world are pretty much alike. I think that was insightful on her part,” he said.

“The event at the Fox was a classy event, like a homecoming to a certain extent. All these people showed up, vets and their supporters, family and friends; everybody appeared to be very friendly and together I thought it was quite impressive. That film was educational; that’s my overall impression.

“I felt the theme was that Vietnam vets like each other and they’ve always got a brother or sister in each other. When I see another Marine, that’s a given. I felt the same connectiveness last night,” he said the day after the premiere. “Whatever negative or positive experiences we have ties everyone together.

“It was different in World War II. They had a lot of support. The whole country was behind them. We didn’t have that yet we made those extraordinary contributions to each other to promote the healing process. We did that. No one did that for us.”

Mike Bowen goes by the moniker “Flagman.” He does his running while carrying the POW/MIA flag symbolizing the still more than 1,700 unaccounted-for Americans in Southeast Asia.

“Flagman is incredible. He has run all these miles, turned his personal life around. He talked about that in the film. Then, take Vietnam Veteran of America) Chapter 154’s traveling wall. That’s an extraordinary piece of work,” Spooner said.

Pat Daniels, of Eastpointe, was recorded telling the story of the Michigan Vietnam Traveling Memorial in the documentary and how his crew takes it around the state. It bears the names of the 2,654 Michigan casualties of Vietnam, accompanied by biographical books for each person on the memorial. The monument was displayed at the premiere.

The film touched on the subject of Agent Orange and the medical problems it has caused to Vietnam veterans.

“Nobody wanted to touch the POW or the Agent Orange issues so we had to bring them to people’s attention ourselves,” Spooner said. “I remember when we started (VVA) Chapter 9. We had so many guys in their 30s dying of these weird cancers. They were healthy in their 20s and passing away a decade later. We had close to 2,000 members back then. It seemed like someone was passing away once a month from our chapter alone.”

Long time coming

“I can’t imagine how the film editor can take more than a hundred hours of film and break it down to look like that,” said Pat Daniels, who was one of the onstage speakers and presenters.

“God bless Keith Famie and (co-executive producer) Bob Gillette. They said the premiere was going to be a long night, but it was a long time coming. I thought the movie was a wonderful perspective on what the Vietnam vet is doing now and all about the good things happening.

“My son was there and he was waiting for me at the backstage door after the candlelight ceremony and gave me a big hug and told me something he’d never said before. He said thank you. I think that he now has a better understanding of what makes his father tick.”

Following the premiere, Daniels and his crew moved the traveling memorial from the Fox to the Detroit Historical Museum, where it will be until Feb. 13.

“There are a lot of Detroit names on that memorial. Maybe we will get more pictures for the biographical books because we are setting it up in the city,” he said.

“A young lady in her Navy uniform wanted to introduce her dad to me. He was also a Navy veteran. He’s one of those guys who didn’t get out and do veterans stuff. I gave him a hug and welcomed him home. And we passed out several of our medals of appreciation to Iraq and Afghanistan vets.

“I hope that all of our Vietnam brothers and sisters got a little healing and walked out of the Fox with a little more pride in their step,” Daniels said.

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