

'OUR VIETNAM GENERATION' PREMIERE



Photos by KIMBERLY P. MITCHELL/Detroit Free Press

126 Army Band of the Michigan National Guard greets attendees as they arrive at the Fox Theatre on Friday night for the premiere of "Our Vietnam Generation," a documentary by Michigan director Keith Famie.

'I THINK IT'S ABOUT TIME, WAY OVERDUE'

An emotional night for estimated 3,000

By **JULIE HINDS**
FREE PRESS MOVIE WRITER

During the first few minutes of the screening of "Our Vietnam Generation" at the Fox Theatre on Friday night, there were clips of people from Michigan saying firmly, clearly and proudly that they were Vietnam veterans.

"I am a Vietnam veteran!" yelled a man near the back of the main floor, joining those on-screen.

That was the mood at the premiere of director Keith Famie's new movie, which pays tribute to the men and women who served in that divisive war. The event brought a crowd of thousands to downtown Detroit for an evening that felt like a family reunion.

As the movie played, Tim Heath of Roseville gave his early review: "I think it's about time, way overdue," said the 65-year-old Vietnam veteran.

His fiancée, Sue Kurth of Clinton Township, said she was filled with gratitude while seeing the film. "I'm just really proud to be engaged to him, I'm proud of his service, I'm proud of all the people who gave so much to the rest of us."

The event's emcee, Paul W. Smith of WJR-AM (760), told the crowd that more than 3,000 people were there to see the 110-minute film, which was edited down from the approximately 110 hours of footage that Famie shot over about 16 months.

Before the movie started, there was a sense of a welcome-home celebration at the Fox, where the 126 Army Band of the Michigan National Guard played outside the front doors as the attendees arrived.

But there was a somberness, too. Inside, vets and their friends and family paused by the Michigan Vietnam Veterans Traveling Memorial to look at the names of the state's



Gary Monger, 60, of Royal Oak looks for the names of friends on the Michigan Vietnam Veterans Traveling Memorial, which was on display at the Fox Theatre.

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2,654 casualties.

For many, the evening was a roller coaster of emotions. "I think about Vietnam my whole life, every day," said John Prudhomme, 64, of Clawson, who was wearing the Purple Heart he received for his Vietnam service.

And it was a night to heal some of the scars of those who returned home to protests, not words of thanks.

"We probably (would have) appreciated it a lot more if we got it when we first got home, but, hey, better late than never," said veteran Larry Gaughan, 68, of Sterling Heights.

During the program that preceded the film, there were

comments from Famie and other dignitaries, including Capt. Ivan Castro, the only blind Special Forces officer currently on active duty.

At one point, the stage was filled with the Cornerstone Middle School Concert Choir and the 126 Army Band as local singer Stewart Francke led a performance of the songs of different branches of the military.

And for the veterans who were there, it was a night of homecoming.

"Any time Vietnam veterans get together, it feels like that," said Elizabeth Allen, who appears in the film and was an Army nurse in Pleiku at the time of the Tet Offensive.

A slightly shorter version of "Our Vietnam Generation" will air at 9 p.m. Feb. 21 on WTVS-TV (Channel 56).