

Vets tell Vietnam tale in their own words (with photo gallery & video)

BY CHRISTOPHER BEHNAN • DAILY PRESS & ARGUS • JANUARY 30, 2011

Pinckney native and businessman John Colone has shared his unusual, near-death experience in the Vietnam War with family, friends and even the Daily Press & Argus.

On Friday, Colone shared the same story with more than 3,000 fellow Vietnam War veterans and supporters in "Our Vietnam Generation," a movie that made its world premiere at the Fox Theatre in downtown Detroit.

The film was made by Michigan native Keith Famie, also a past contestant on CBS' "Survivor."

In the film, Colone explains he was shot five times in the war before his rescue, and only years later learned he had been toe-tagged and



"It means a lot to me." - Vietnam Veteran Mike Omstead (02:28)

"It means a lot to me." - Vietnam Veteran Mike Omstead speaks with livingstondaily.com prior to the opening of the Keith Famie film "Our Vietnam Generation" Friday night at the Fox Theater

placed in a body bag. His wife, Anne, provided an emotional account of waiting for her husband's safe return home while expecting a child.

Prior to Friday's showing, John Colone pointed to upward of 14 Livingston County natives listed on a makeshift memorial wall at the theater's lobby.

"Most of them I knew," he said, somewhat overwhelmed by Friday's celebration.

John Colone is equally reflective in the two-hour-plus film when he's interviewed in front of a traveling replica of the Washington, D.C., memorial wall in Hamburg Township.

"Our Vietnam Generation" includes extensive footage shot in Livingston County, including from the Ride to Remember, Livingston County-based Rolling Thunder Michigan Chapter 5's recent memorial motorcycle ride from Brighton Township to the war memorial fronting the historical Livingston County Courthouse in downtown Howell.



Livingston County veterans joined others from throughout the area Friday at Detroit's Fox Theatre for the premiere of Keith Famie's "Our Vietnam Generation," a documentary movie that chronicles the Vietnam War era through the eyes of the men and women who fought. The film is heavy with Livingston County faces and locations. (Photo by ALAN WARD/DAILY PRESS & ARGUS)

The film also includes an extensive, emotional interview with county Sheriff Bob Bezotte, who served with the U.S. Army. Bezotte discusses a mid-1990s trip to the Vietnam War memorial in Washington, D.C., which he said kept him in tears his entire visit.

The night clearly provided an opportunity for veterans of the Vietnam War — which claimed 58,000-plus American lives, including an estimated 2,600 Michigan casualties — to reconnect.

Highland Township resident Ralph Gapuz, also featured in the film and a Rolling Thunder member, was among several veterans who said Friday's recognition was welcome, but long overdue. Most Vietnam veterans contend they were treated with disdain, including from anti-war protesters, upon returning home.

"We don't ever want to see anyone treated like that again," said Jim Marinelli, president of the county-based Rolling Thunder chapter.

"It was disgusting, the way we were treated," Marinelli added.



Livingston County resident John Colone was able to find familiar names of fellow area Vietnam War-era soldiers on the traveling wall on display, right, Friday in the lobby of the Fox Theatre as part of the premiere of Keith Famie's "Our Vietnam Generation" documentary. Colone is featured prominently in the film. (Photo by ALAN WARD/DAILY PRESS & ARGUS)

Gapuz served in the Army during the Tet Offensive, an intensive effort by North Vietnamese troops to take South Vietnam by force. His unit was inundated with enemy fire day and night while trying to secure an territory.

"We survived by helping each other and knowing what had to be done," he recalled prior to the film's start.

Gapuz said Famie's film gave him an opportunity to share his story and to provide insight to the general public to what the veterans' experienced.

Brighton-area resident Mike Omstead, a former U.S. Marine interviewed in the film, said it's difficult to verbalize let alone make others understand his experiences overseas and after returning home.

"We had a rough time putting it together in our own minds," he explained. Omstead said he's able to divide the "funny" memories from the "crappy" ones he has from the war in his mind, however, and began opening up about his experiences about 10 years ago.

Another Famie production, the short film "One Soldier's Story," was shown prior to "Our Vietnam Generation. The short follows the life and death of an Afghan war soldier from Michigan.

John Colone said the Fox Theatre provided a venue for him to reconnect with several fellow Vietnam War veterans he's met since returning home to Michigan more than three decades ago.

"We just hugged," he said.

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Veteran and Brighton-area resident Mike Omstead attends Friday's premiere of the Keith Famie documentary "Our Vietnam Generation" at the Fox Theatre in Detroit. Omstead, who was interviewed for the movie, said it was "a recognition of things that we never were recognized for before. And it means a lot to me. (It) moved my heart, and it's hard to hold my emotions back." He added: "I'm really glad to have made it home. A lot of my brothers weren't able to." (Photo by ALAN WARD/DAILY PRESS & ARGUS)