

Three Genesee County Vietnam veterans recount war experiences and lives since then in upcoming documentary 'Our Vietnam Generation'



Beata Mostafavi | Flint Journal



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GENESEE COUNTY— Randy McConnell was on a football scholarship at the University of Michigan when an injury dashed his dreams, leading the former quarterback to war where he earned seven Purple Hearts — the most of any known Vietnam veteran today.

Retired Flint Fire Department Captain Bruce Harbin was just 19 years old when he was sent to Vietnam, never imagining his exposure to Agent Orange would be blamed for his cancer 28 years later.

In the midst of war, Jeffrey Rector found love, marrying the Vietnamese girl he fell for overseas as a teenager. Decades later, he has one of the hardest jobs in the Army Reserves — burying veterans.



Courtesy Photo

Randy McConnell, a former city of Flint employee, being filmed for documentary "Our Vietnam Generation" at the traveling Vietnam memorial wall at the Clinton Township Civic Center on Sept. 4. McConnell earned seven Purple Hearts, the most of any living Vietnam veteran today.

They have all lost friends. Past demons still haunt them. And they all came home from war only to continue serving their communities.

And as the nation celebrates Veteran's Day Nov.11, nine-time Emmy award filmmaker Keith Famie is preparing to share their stories on the screen.

The three veterans, who all have Genesee County ties, are among dozens of veterans featured in Famie's upcoming documentary "Our Vietnam Generation," which premieres at the Fox Theatre in Detroit Jan. 28.

"They didn't get their welcome home," said Famie, a Novi native who last year won awards for his film highlighting WW2 veterans in Detroit.

"Some never talked about war. Some felt shame for being a part of it. The reality is they are the core of our community. They are our civil engineers, our firemen, our police officers. They were successful after the war. I think it's time they get recognition for what they did."

I never had inner peace

Nearby rows of veteran graves at the Great Lakes National Cemetery in Holly Township, Master Sgt. Rector led a team of olive-uniformed soldiers marching in line during a military funeral rehearsal Friday.

Their white-gloves brushed over white stars in the shivery fall breeze as they practiced draping the American flag over the veteran's casket, then folding it crisply — perfectly.



John Ehike | The Flint Journal

Master Sgt. Jeffrey Rector has since rejoined the Army as a funeral conductor after serving in Vietnam from 1970-71.

For Rector, a Fenton native who coordinates military funerals in the state, each burial is personal.

Especially for the veterans of Vietnam.

Famie's 82-minute Vietnam documentary follows Rector on his journey since serving in the controversial war in 1970. His is a love story, one of anguish, discrimination, service.

"We've all moved forward but when you do some soul-searching you have these little scars and hurts that lead you in the direction you go in your life," said Rector, 59, who now lives in Durand.

And burying fellow veterans sometimes takes him back to the war fields he spent nearly two years in himself.

And there were dark days in Vietnam.

He can still see the face of that higher-ranking soldier who had become one of his closest friends, the one who asked his wife to send Rector flannel pajamas because he was always cold.

And then finding his friend dead, shot and killed by a fellow serviceman who had lost control after being on the influence of drugs.

Just two days later, a package came for the fallen soldier with a picture inside: the man's smiling wife holding their baby born while the new dad was at war.

"That just tore me up. I must have cried for two days," Rector remembers now.

There were more deaths. Days of loading body bags on the helicopters. Being mortared almost every night.

But there was light in all of the grueling months of combat.

The then 18-year-old Rector had visited his uncle who was working as a civilian in South Vietnam, when he spotted a Vietnamese girl hanging her clothes to dry over a balcony. He waved. She waved back.

“She had the most beautiful face. That was it for me,” he said. “I was young and brash and told her I wanted to talk to her more. She told me ‘I don’t like GIs.’”

The couple, now married 38 years, have three children and five grandchildren.

But the beginning days were not so rosy. He, a soldier who had fought in an unpopular war. She, a native of the country.

There were those who cruelly called his wife Ann a “chink.” There was harassment. Their children endured derogatory jokes at school.

Meanwhile, both Rector and his wife still struggled with vicious war flashbacks. He’d wake up to find his wife crying in a corner, not remembering what he had said or done in his sleep to scare her during a night terror.

And she recently started having her own nightmares, like that of the little girl who was shot and killed right behind her during the conflict.

Rector has followed several paths since Vietnam, in and out of the Michigan National Guard and Army Reserves, trying out the tile and marble business and even selling life insurance.

“I never had any inner peace,” he said.

But he somehow found his way back to where it all began in the military.

For the last five years he has served as a funeral honors coordinator in the Army Reserves, performing funerals in Michigan, Ohio and Illinois.

“It’s about being a patriot. I feel it’s my duty,” he said. “This is the last military mission this veteran is on. We want to show them and their families the utmost honor, dignity and respect.”

He also is on call 24/7 as Michigan’s casualty assistance coordinator, which comes with a grim job description: telling families their loved one was killed.

There was that first visit to a young mother in Flint. His duty: to tell her that her husband and her little girl’s daddy would not be coming home from Iraq.

He can still hear the hysteric wail, holding the woman in his arms to take her back into her home.

Another time, he knocked on the door of a father whose son had been killed in Iraq. The father, in the Michigan National Guard himself, was guilt-ridden from encouraging his son to join the military.

After delivering the news, Rector and the chaplain rode in their car silently for a couple of blocks, finally pulling over to cry together.

For peace, he turns to the Bible, prayer and God.

“I cry a lot,” he said. “What can you do?”

“Some people escaped by going into drugs or alcohol,” he added of post-Vietnam life. “I found my way back to the uniform. I went full circle.”

You didn’t talk about Vietnam

After returning home from Vietnam, Harbin hoped to follow in the footsteps of his father, a retired detective lieutenant in the Flint Police Department.

But the Burton resident didn’t have the college requirements so he instead became a Flint firefighter.

The physical effects of war are no match for the emotional pain.

Sitting near a table scattered with black and white photos of his 13-month tour, Harbin surprises himself when stories trigger tears.

Like so many others, the Marine corporal lost close friends, including a warrant officer he had looked up to as a mentor.

But there was no time to grieve at war.

“You just kind of have to deal with death,” he said, teary-eyed. “You have to internalize it and roll on so you can do your job. When you came back, you didn’t talk about Vietnam.”

But it eventually caught up.

“It just comes to surface,” he said. “It follows you and you start thinking back on your life. You don’t know how close you were to dying. It bothers you because you wonder ‘why did I get to come home?’”

Every Memorial Day, he watches the celebrations on television, crying as he listens to stories of fellow veterans.

His wife Marty asks him why he keeps watching it.

“I tell her I don’t want to ever forget,” he said. “You try to be a tough guy and just absorb it all. Then you get older and find out you’re not so tough.”

War was nothing short of horror

McConnell, 63, only recently discovered the stacks of letters he had sent home during his time in Vietnam. His mother kept every single one.

When he first got there in December 1967, he sounds like an optimistic young 21-year-

old hoping to be a hero. But before long, the voice in the notes grow grim, tired, heavy-hearted.

“Between December and May, I’m like two different guys,” said the Harrison Township native who worked for the city of Flint 16 years as the water and distribution and sewer maintenance supervisor. “First you think you’re there to save the world. I had all these ambitions about coming back to play pro ball, go back to college.

“But war was nothing short of horror.”

Just a month after serving overseas, the day after his 21st birthday, McConnell suffered his first war wound, burnt on the stomach from a white phosphorus grenade. That was just the beginning.

Over the next six months, the Army sergeant endured some of the most grueling combat missions. He took bullets in his wrist, chin and chest.

But he refused to go home.

“Every time, if it had just been an inch or two one way or another, it probably would have killed me,” he said. “I must have been one of God’s warriors.

“We were literally fighting for our lives. I had a squad and I just couldn’t, in good conscience, leave them.”

But in May 1968, he was forced into evacuation after a mortar round shattered his lower left leg and severed his Achilles tendon.

He earned seven Purple Starts, two Silver Stars and a Bronze Star with Valor.

In a letter to his parents, his platoon leader, Lt. Kevin Beaton, praised McConnell, saying he didn’t usually write to parents but made an exception because, ‘He is the best I have.’

McConnell later earned the nickname Rooster based on the Alice in Chains song about Vietnam that includes a lyric “Here they come to snuff the rooster ... You know he ain't gonna die.”

But McConnell wasn't even supposed to be at war.

He had dreams of finishing college at one of the nation's most prestigious campuses and going on to play professional football.

He lost his full-ride scholarship at UM after a knee injury his freshman year, so he volunteered for the draft.

The highly-decorated veteran is still haunted by the protesters who caught him off guard when he returned home, literally spitting on him when he arrived at the Detroit airport.

And in 2005, the father of three said he had a mental breakdown, diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder, relying on counseling and the support of his wife of nearly 40 years, Rebecca.

The sounds of helicopters and stench of road kill still trigger flashbacks.

And he blames PTSD for distance with his own children, now making an effort to be closer to his nine grandchildren and three great grandchildren.

“We're losing Vietnam veterans at the rate of 63 each day and their stories are going to be lost forever,” he said. “By making this documentary, Keith is trying to preserve not just the Vietnam veterans but the success of the Vietnam veterans after war. It can be shared with the next generation.”

http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2010/11/three_genesee_county_vietnam_v.html