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Macomb Daily staff photo by Ray J. Skowronek

**Mark Spooner and his daughter, Jennifer, look over a photo album of their years in the military prior to leaving last week for Vietnam.**

## Veteran going back to Vietnam

He's a storyteller for film describing indifferent treatment for war heroes

**By Linda May**

Macomb Daily Special Writer

The first time Mark Spooner went to Vietnam in 1967, he didn't think he would come home alive.

The former U.S. Marine has no such qualms about the trip he is making there this year. In fact, he is even taking his daughter with him.

"I thought going to Vietnam back then was an adventure, but from the first day, I never thought I was going to make it back," Spooner said. "I have the same kind of adventurous feelings now, but I'm looking forward to going and I'm nervous, but convinced I'm going to come back OK."

Mark Spooner is one of the storytellers in a documentary

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# VIETNAM: He'll make trip with his daughter Jennifer, also a former Marine

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in production called "Our Vietnam Generation." As part of the film, he is making the return trip to Vietnam with his daughter, Jennifer Spooner, who like her dad is a former U.S. Marine.

The film is a Keith Famie project that chronicles the Vietnam War, seeing it through the eyes of those who fulfilled their roles in the military and who returned to a less-than-welcoming citizenry.

Famie began his career as a chef at Oakland County restaurants. He was at Les Auteur an American Bistro in Royal Oak when "Food & Wine Magazine" named him one of the best new 10 chefs of the year in 1989, and then "Esquire" magazine named Les Auteur one of the best new restaurants in the country.

Famie and The Food Network on cable TV created "Keith Famie's Adventures" in which he traveled around the world showcasing local cuisine and cultures. After being involved in multiple television productions, and being a contestant in "Survivor II: The Australian Outback," he founded Visionalist Entertainment Productions, a multimedia entertainment company covering both his chef endeavors and other projects.

He did a series of documentaries about the Greek, Polish, Italian and Arab-American ethnic communities in metro Detroit that aired on local TV. The DVDs are sold on Amazon.com and elsewhere.

"The film will be shown twice in December on WDIV-TV Channel 4, the dates to be determined," Famie said about "Our Vietnam Generation."

"Much like we did for 'Detroit: Our Greatest Generation' (about World War II veterans), we're planning for one to be in prime time and the other on Christmas Day. If we are able to raise enough funds to support it, we will host the premiere event at The Fox (Theatre) the first part of December. We will have a DVD, but details for how it will be distributed are still being worked out," he said.

## Lack of respect

Famie's newest film addresses the fact that Americans who were deeply divided on the Vietnam War did not show respect or gratitude for the soldiers, many of whom were drafted and ordered to fight.

Spooner of Harrison Township belongs to Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 9.

"VVA is a more political organization because of our experiences. The issues of our homecoming, Agent Orange, and the POW-MIAs are why we formed. There was not the right amount of veterans' benefits available when I got back from Vietnam, especially when it came to schooling," Spooner said.

Vietnam vets can now get compensation for a variety of cancers, Type II diabetes, and other conditions that are presumed to have been caused by their exposure to herbicides generally known as Agent Orange.

Vietnam vets believe that research is warranted to determine if their children and grandchildren may have inherited various problems because of Agent Orange. Many veterans are convinced there is a connection.

The U.S. government admits Agent Orange causes spina bifida in the offspring of male vets and specific conditions in female vets. So Spooner and his daughter will take part in an exchange of handmade cards and greetings between children being treated at Children's Hospital of Michi-

gan and child patients in a hospital in Hanoi.

Spooner and his daughter left Friday and are scheduled to return March 7.

"It's quite an ambitious itinerary," he said.

First they fly into Beijing, then go to Hanoi, Hue, Danang, the A Shau Valley, Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), then back to Hanoi.

## War experience

Some people are familiar with what historians refer to as the Battle of A Shau Valley in 1966. It was still a hotbed in 1967 and 1968 when Spooner was there on Hill 10 and Hill 41. Hollywood produced a movie that depicted 1969 events at Hamburger Hill.

Spooner was a forward observer, a "mortarman," with H&S Company (headquarters and support) attached to Delta Company of the 1st Battalion 7th Marines.

"Hill 41, Hill 10 and Hill 22 were part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail," he said. "Rockets were being brought through the A Shau all the time. Ours was a search-and-destroy mission to stop any rockets from hitting Danang.

"I don't have any solid expectations about the trip," he said. "I really never planned this (going back). It sort of just came about. If nothing else, I get to see what the country looks like now. I remember when I got there it was a beautiful-looking country and it's got to be a lot better now. I'll just play it by ear.

"I can rationalize that the war is over and life goes on. When I was in my 30s I started having flashbacks," he said.

He participated in group counseling where he said he learned about post traumatic stress disorder.

"I had pretty much put away

the things that happened, but it depends on what stresses are going on in your life and the thoughts can come back and not on a real conscious level. Once you get the stress under control, you can compartmentalize it again," he said.

He has had successful careers in sales and manufacturing and he owned his own bar-restaurant for nearly a decade. He now works for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Jennifer Spooner is his and his wife Irene's only child.

Spooner said he was surprised when his daughter joined the U.S. Marine Corps right after she graduated from law school. She even overcame a physical injury and passed the medical exam in order to stay in the Corps.

She served one year in Iraq working as a judge advocate (military attorney) handling convoluted and complicated cases which brought her recognition from the Corps and the U.S. government, and acclaim from the military press.

On a visit with Jennifer Spooner and her husband and daughter on Okinawa, Mark Spooner learned the details of a combat situation she experienced. She was the officer-of-the-day during an attack on a convoy in which seven American soldiers were killed.

"Her story surprised me about what kind of experiences even the lawyers can have," he said.

"Ever since our embassy was bombed in Lebanon in 1983, the Marines have been training women in combat, so she knows how to handle weapons. The Corps did real well in training her and preparing her. You can never be too prepared for that kind of horrid situation."



## Shared experiences

Jennifer Spooner, who lives in Virginia, was a Marine from 1999 to 2006 and left the Corps as a captain.

"My experience as a Marine officer helped me understand and relate to all Marines because of our strong shared history. In terms of my Dad's particular combat experience in Vietnam, I could imagine the physical demands of the terrain and climate as well as the psychological demands of fighting an insurgency.

"I think my Dad will be excited at remembering some of the good times, such as the camaraderie with his friends or the beauty of the places. I'm sure he will be sad too at the loss of life and opportunity on both sides of the conflict," she said.

"However, I think that he has accepted, or come to live with, his experience in Vietnam. My dad is definitely not the 'victim' type and has tried to resolve his feelings about Vietnam throughout his life, however archaic and unproductive those ways were before the advances in the treatment of PTSD for my generation."

The next part of the film experience for Spooner will be in June when Famie's production company films helicopters flying over crowds of Vietnam veterans awaiting them on Belle Isle.

The nonprofit "American Huey 369's" flying museum preserves Bell UH-1H U.S. Army helicopters known as Hueys. The group will provide choppers for the flight scene over the Detroit River which opens the documentary.

## Welcome home

"My intention of this film is to allow our Vietnam veterans to feel thanked and welcomed home once and for all for the service they gave to our country," Famie said. "The film will also document how the Vietnam War has affected many lives to this day through the various mental and emotional, as well as physical scars they have endured, not to mention how so many of them and their families have been affected by Agent Orange. The bright side is that Vietnam veterans as a group are a

strong force and have become the caregivers of our Greatest Generation and the guardians of our current soldiers in Iraq."

Spooner is looking forward to the Huey scenes.

"That's kind of cool," he said. "I'm going to fly by and land as part of a 'welcome home' thing."

American House founder Bob Gillette committed his support to "Our Vietnam Generation" as one of the title presenting sponsors.

"It was a different kind of battle these people were fighting," Gillette said. "The people fighting in Vietnam were not given the hero's welcome like our World War II veterans. This film is our opportunity to do now what we should have done then."

Other support comes from Terry Desmond of A.J. Desmond Funeral Homes, Joe Vicari of Andiamo Restaurant Group Inc., DS Properties, Lakeshore Engineering Services, television station WDIV, radio station WJR 760, and HOUR Detroit Magazine.

**The film's Web site is: [generation.com](http://generation.com) www.ourvietnamgeneration.com.**