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Documentary Is as Murky as Vietnam Itself Was

By TOM ROSTON

TORONTO — A new documentary strongly suggests that a man who's been living in Vietnam for the last 40 years is a former American prisoner of war, John Hartley Robertson, a Special Forces soldier who was aboard a helicopter that crashed in 1968 in Laos after coming under fire.

But a day after the film, “[Unclaimed](#),” got a standing ovation Tuesday at the Hot Docs film festival here, the Defense Department released a statement saying that the man in the film was a fraud.

By their nature documentaries often deal with murky, complex questions that have few easy answers. But what happens when a filmmaker reaches the end of a project, only to find out that the government is publicly discrediting, in no uncertain terms, the premise of his film? That's the situation confronting the director, Michael Jorgensen, after his film's premiere this week.

The Defense Department said that the man, who goes by the name Dang Tan Ngoc, had been investigated in 2006 and 2009, and that both fingerprint and DNA analysis had determined that he was not Mr. Robertson.

“We felt that it was necessary to correct the record and say that John Hartley Robertson is still unaccounted for,” said Jessica Pierno, a spokeswoman for the Pentagon's Prisoner of War/Missing Personnel Office.

But that's not deterring Mr. Jorgensen, or the subjects of his film.

“It doesn't make me rethink my film,” Mr. Jorgensen said. “The media is hyperfocused on his identity, but this film is not about that. It's about one man's emotional journey.”

Mr. Jorgensen was referring to Tom Faunce, the Vietnam veteran who first suggested he make the documentary. “Unclaimed” follows Mr. Faunce's quest to determine the true identity of Mr. Ngoc. Between showing visits by him to Vietnam, the film reveals Mr. Faunce's unhappy childhood.

On Thursday, Mr. Jorgensen said that Mr. Faunce is “somewhere” in Southeast Asia.

Ed Mahoney served with Mr. Robertson and appears in the film making a positive identification of him. The military's statement hasn't changed his mind, he said.

"It doesn't surprise me," he said. "I don't think the government is telling the truth at all."

Gail Metcalf, whose ailing mother is Mr. Robertson's last living sibling, was in Toronto to support the film, which shows a tearful reunion between sister and supposed brother. "I think he is, because my mom thinks he is," Ms. Metcalf, a retired kindergarten teacher from Alabama, said. "Everyone else can decide for themselves."

(Mr. Robertson's wife and daughters have not made a statement nor did they participate in the documentary. Mr. Robertson's status was officially changed from [missing in action](#) to presumed dead in 1976.)

The film says Mr. Ngoc suffers from memory loss because of brain damage and cannot speak English. In addition to physical resemblances and Mr. Ngoc's statements, Mr. Faunce has a dentist remove one of his molars for an isotope test that, according to the film, reveals he was born in America.

"This test proves you are an American and a veteran and a hero," Mr. Faunce says in the film.

The film does reveal contradictory evidence, like a misstated birth date and a reference to an unnamed government source saying that DNA tests had been completed and that the results were given to Mr. Robertson's family. But the inconsistencies don't impede the film's progress toward the reunion.

Mr. Jorgensen, whose previous films for television include "Hitler's Stealth Fighter" and "Battle of the X-Planes," said that he believed "that that is him." Even so, Mr. Jorgensen said he may change the film's end title card to reflect the Defense Department statement. Ms. Metcalf's family also plans a DNA test, and those results will be mentioned in the film as well, the director said.

"If it's a fraud, it'll be a fraud," Mr. Jorgensen said in an interview here after a screening on Thursday. "I just present the facts. I don't tell the audience the way to think."

American audiences will get a chance to judge for themselves when "Unclaimed" is shown on May 12 at the [GI Film Festival](#) in Arlington, Va. (The film doesn't have an American distributor yet.) In a [statement](#) on the festival's Web site, organizers said they were aware of the controversy but still planned to screen the film, albeit with a note to viewers about the controversy.

“Whether fact or fiction, ‘Unclaimed’ is a fascinating story about a Vietnam veteran, Tom Faunce, who dedicates himself to bringing home someone he believes to be an American G.I. left behind,” the organizers added.

Before the Thursday screening, Ms. Metcalf sat on a bench looking at a page with photographs of the man who claims to be her uncle.

“We just had a lovely experience with a man who my mother thinks is his brother,” she said, marveling at the resemblances. “And if that’s the end of it, they will live out their lives in peace.”

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