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## Film about vet's search for MIA stirs controversy



In this still from the controversial new film "Unclaimed," a man named Dang Tan Ngoc, living in Vietnam, can be seen walking through the trees near his home. The man claims he is John Hartley Robertson, an American soldier listed as killed in action in Vietnam in 1976. The film has pitted Robertson's family against the U.S. government who has said that DNA and fingerprints prove the man is a fraud. The film premieres at the G.I. Film Festival in Washington D.C. on May 12.

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By **Matthew M. Burke**  
Stars and Stripes

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A controversial documentary film making its US premiere at the G.I. Film Festival, examines the possibility that a Special Forces soldier missing since 1968 has been found alive in Vietnam.

"Unclaimed," premiering May 12 in Washington, D.C., follows Vietnam veteran Tom Faunce on his journey to identify a man living in Vietnam who claims to be John Hartley Robertson, an Army Special Forces soldier missing since a helicopter crash over Laos in 1968 and declared dead eight years later. It pits some of Robertson's Army buddies and members of his family against the U.S. government, who claims the man is a fraud.

"What are the chances that a man on the other side of the planet looks like him, sounds like him, has the same mannerisms and knows things [about his life that only Robertson would know]?" director Michael Jorgensen asked while speaking with Stars and Stripes on Thursday from Canada. "If it's not him, what is really going on?"

The film was recently shown at the Hot Docs festival in Toronto and it has ignited a firestorm of criticism and launched a debate over the missing from the war.

"The movie is a lie," wrote one man, identified as Jim Marzo, on the film's Facebook page. "This is an insult to all veterans."

Organizers of the [G.I. Film Festival](#), which includes Stars and Stripes as a sponsor, say they are aware of the controversy.

"Some POW groups and activists strongly believe a man featured in the film claiming to be a POW is a fraud," they said in a statement. "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 GI left behind. Even if he is chasing a myth, we feel his story is compelling and worth telling, as long as it is accompanied by a disclosure to viewers about the controversy surrounding it."

Jorgensen is asking viewers to keep an open mind.

“There’s a lot of misinformation out about this movie,” he told the Huffington Post this week. “I never set out to prove one way or another his identity in this film. My film is not about that.”

In the film, Robertson’s family alleges that the U.S. government has never answered their letters seeking information about the search for the missing soldier, nor contacted them about reported live sightings or updated them on their investigations into the man, who is known in Vietnam as Dang Tan Ngoc. The family says the government has known about the man since at least the early ‘90s.

The government acknowledged that it has investigated and spoken to Dang.

“The Department of Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO) reports that Sgt. 1st Class John H. Robertson, a U.S. serviceman who was lost in the Vietnam War, remains unaccounted for,” according to a DPMO statement released Wednesday. “All claims and alleged live sighting reports related to Robertson have been investigated, and found to be false.”

The 77-minute film begins with Faunce, a Michigan man forever tormented by the horrors he witnessed in Vietnam, finding redemption in humanitarian work and God after struggling with drugs and the law in the years immediately following the war. The film is more than Faunce’s story though, as it details the despicable treatment of veterans upon their return home and their struggles with both survivor’s guilt and post-traumatic stress.

“Why did I make it and so many others didn’t?” Faunce asks. “There’s always that guilt.”

During a humanitarian mission in 2008, Faunce hears about a man in a remote village in Vietnam claiming to be Robertson. He forms a team and enters Vietnam to investigate.

“I needed to meet the man claiming to be John, and if he were an American, find a way to bring him back to the States and reunite him with his family,” Faunce says in the film.

He finds a tall man, who does in fact look like a westerner, and has a striking resemblance to Robertson. The man can’t speak English and is forgetful. He indicates that he is Robertson, and that he jumped from his helicopter before it crashed, even showing scars that he says were sustained the crash.

He recalls being taken prisoner by communist forces and tortured for years in a series of prisons, both above and under ground. The man says after four or five years in captivity, he was put to work in the fields where a local nurse helped him escape and start over under a false identity. They later married and have children, who also looked like westerners.

“My name is John Robertson,” he says through a translator. “I wish my relatives in the States could help me return to visit my family there. I know this is my last chance but I am willing to do anything to prove my identity.”

A doctor is interviewed in the film to discuss the man’s inability to speak English. Calling it “second language syndrome,” the doctor says stress, pressure and injuries could have caused the man to forget his native tongue, and that it wouldn’t be surprising in a case like this.

In the film, Faunce brings Ed Mahoney, a fellow soldier who served and was friends with Robertson, to Vietnam to meet the man. Mahoney positively identifies the man as Robertson despite inconsistencies in the man’s story.

“There’s going to be people who don’t believe us,” Mahoney told Stars and Stripes on Thursday. “They’re entitled to their opinion... It’s not that I wanted it to be John Robertson but I knew it was him. It was immediate recognition.”

The film comes to a dramatic crescendo when Faunce brings the man to Canada to meet with Robertson’s sole surviving sister, Jean Robertson-Holley, who also identifies him as her long lost brother.

“We absolutely never forgot about you,” she tells the man as they cry in each other’s arms. “We remembered you all the time.”

Jorgensen said that Robertson-Holley was so convinced she offered to help the man if he desired it. He replied that meeting with her before his death was enough. He didn’t want money or anything else. Then he returned back to take care of his family in Vietnam.

Further adding to the intrigue, the film indicates that Robertson’s stateside children expressed interest in submitting DNA to find out once and for all if the man is in fact their father, but backed out a week later after speaking with the military. There is no attempt to explain why they changed their minds.

The statement released by DPMO this week said that they have proof the man in Vietnam is a fraud.

“In 2009, the Vietnamese man was interviewed again by U.S. officials, who collected fingerprints and hair samples for analysis,” the DPMO statement said. “The FBI analyzed the fingerprints and they were determined not to match Robertson’s fingerprints on file. The mitochondrial DNA sequences from the hair samples obtained were compared to family reference samples taken from Robertson’s brother and one of his sisters. The Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory determined the DNA sequences from the Vietnamese man did not match either of Robertson’s siblings.”

Roberson’s niece, Gail Metcalf, and her mother said the government never talked to the family, and they would know if DNA was collected. She said they are in the process of performing their own DNA tests to find out once and for all if the man is Robertson.

For his part, Jorgensen hopes the film begins a discussion on how the government deals with and provides information to the families of the missing.

"The government doesn't owe me anything," Jorgensen said. "But certainly they owe the family information on their investigations and live sightings. Those soldiers sacrificed everything for their country. What puzzles me is the exclusion of the next of kin from the discussion the last two decades."

Metcalf agreed.

"Even if we're not related, he's American. If he's not my uncle, who is he?" she said. "We're at peace. We're not asking for anything. We have no angle, but we're willing to be a part of the conversation."

[burke.matt@stripes.com](mailto:burke.matt@stripes.com)

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