

Unclaimed

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Meaghan Baxter



Tom Faunce has not had an easy life. After struggling through a difficult childhood, Faunce spent two years serving in the Vietnam War, and upon returning home, was faced with integrating himself back into a life he did not feel like he belonged in. A battle with drugs landed him in jail, and following his release, Faunce made a vow to turn his life around and dedicate the remainder of his days to helping those in need.

This eventually led Faunce to a search for an American special-forces soldier by the name of John Hartley Robertson, who was presumed dead after his plane was shot down over Laos in 1968. However, Faunce met a man in Southeast Asia who claims to be Robertson. The man, who now goes by Dang Tan Ngoc and speaks Vietnamese, has essentially started a new life overseas. In *Unclaimed*, the documentary from Emmy Award-winning filmmaker Michael Jorgensen, Faunce struggles to prove the man's identity and reunite him with his family half a world away, despite forces within the US government putting obstacles in his path every step of the way.

"He's spent the last nearly four decades travelling around the world to these war-torn nations doing humanitarian work, largely on his own dime, just to help people ... here's a guy who always asks, 'What can I do for you?' He never asks, 'What's in it for me?'" Jorgensen says of Faunce, whose story was pitched to him via an acquaintance.

Joining forces with Ed Mahoney, a soldier who served with and was friends with Robertson, Faunce set out to uncover the man's identity. Ngoc had been interrogated once in 2006, and on May 1, the day after *Unclaimed's* world premiere, the US government sent out a press release stating it had conducted DNA tests with Robertson's siblings in 2009, but his only surviving sister, Jean Roberston-Holley, does not recall any such tests ever being performed. The family is currently conducting their own DNA tests and the results will be released in the near future.

The press release from the US government has led to an eruption of controversy around the film, as the release claims the DNA tests proved Ngoc was not the real Robertson. However, Jorgensen points out the film does not make any concrete claims that the man is who he says he is, and rather, focuses on the story of Faunce and hopes people will approach the film with an open mind, as well as begin to ask more questions regarding the government's handling of the case and lack of information available to Robertson's family.

"It's a lovely story of humanity and, like Tom says in the movie, whether this guy is a real MIA or not, it doesn't matter. He's not a piece of meat. ... I'm going to help him, so I don't care what people say," Jorgensen says, later adding that if Ngoc is the scammer he's been made out to be, he's certainly not a very good one, as most have an endgame and are seeking monetary gain. Ngoc has stated all he wants is see his American family one last time.

"If it turns out that the DNA comes back and it's not him, I truly believe that he believes he is who he says he is and he's an American and this could open the door to find out who his real family is, but the circumstantial evidence is pretty strong ... but either way I think now when people walk away from that movie, it's now a family matter, and that people really need to respect that."

Fri, May 17 – Thu, May 23 Directed by Michael Jorgensen Metro Cinema at the Garneau

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