



October 2

## **Reel controversies at the Kansas International Film Festival**

BY JON NICCUM

Special to The Star

### **Vestiges of Vietnam**

It isn't so much the subject matter but the implications and eventual revelations that make "Unclaimed" a magnet of controversy.

The 2013 documentary follows Vietnam War veteran Tom Faunce as he tracks down Master Sgt. John Hartley Robertson, a Green Beret shot down over Laos and declared dead in 1968. A man now claiming to be Robertson is currently living in Vietnam.

"The controversy stems from the U.S. government's assertion that John H. Robertson is still classified as killed or missing in action," says "Unclaimed" filmmaker Michael Jorgensen.

"So on one 'side' we have a family and a fellow soldier who have identified and are certain this man to be Robertson, and on the other 'side' we have government agencies who've never contacted the family, won't release fingerprint analysis ... and have been characterized by the Pentagon's own internal report as being 'acutely dysfunctional' and 'inept' and working from incomplete databases 'riddled with inaccurate information.'"

A day after the film screened at this year's Hot Docs fest in Toronto, a report surfaced that claimed Robertson was actually Dang Tan Ngoc, a French Vietnamese citizen with a history of impersonating U.S. Army vets. The report immediately planted doubt about the validity of the story, but Jorgensen claims that is all by design.

“It appears to me and many others that this man claiming to be Robertson — someone suffering from brain trauma and perhaps a bit of dementia now — was always brought to the attention of authorities by someone else, usually a known criminal and fraudster who used him in an attempt to extort money,” he says. “So does that prove him to be a fraud, or is he a victim of fraud? To date, the U.S. government has yet to reach out to John’s sister, Jean, and her family, who are seeking answers to a few key questions.”

Among those questions: Why was the family never told about this man’s existence? How did the government get his sibling’s DNA without their knowledge. Why would the DNA test be kept secret from the family?

This isn’t Jorgensen’s first project that involves the military. He launched his career with an episode of “Nova” called “Battle of the X-Planes” about a competition between Boeing and Lockheed Martin to develop the next level of fighter aircraft. He believes “Unclaimed” can be viewed as pro-military because it is most assuredly pro-soldier.

“We explore this veteran’s sense of obligation to help a complete stranger — a man who could be a fellow soldier — in the very region of the world that brought him so much pain and anguish,” he says. “And whose belief in the two oaths ‘leave no man behind’ and ‘leave no one unloved’ guide his actions through his own doubts and struggles.”

The fundamental theme of the film explores brotherhood, yet it also poses the more difficult question: What is identity?

Jorgensen adds, “I don’t think it will be long before the American public will start demanding accountability and truth from its government regarding the handling of more than 83,000 MIA cases from World War II, Korea and Vietnam,” he says. “If ‘Unclaimed’ can prompt more attention to the POW/MIA issue, then all this controversy is worth it.”

*Screens 7:25 p.m. Oct. 10, followed by a Q&A with Jorgensen via Skype.*