

# Movie review: Unclaimed

[o.canada.com/entertainment/movies/movie-review-unclaimed/](https://www.ottawacommunity.ca/entertainment/movies/movie-review-unclaimed/)

## Unclaimed

**Rating: 3½ stars out of five**

**Directed by: Michael Jorgensen**

**Running time: 81 minutes**

• **Sept 18 — Movie review. *Unclaimed*. A chilling and unforgettable story of a man living in Vietnam who says he was a Green Beret abandoned by his own country. The US says the man is a fake, but the filmmakers go so far to extract a tooth to prove the mystery man who towers over the rest of his peers, but can't speak English, was raised in the USA.**

*CAPSULE REVIEW: Unclaimed – Michael Jorgensen unravels a twisted yarn about a U.S. special forces soldier who went missing on a secret mission in Vietnam, only to resurface years later with claims he'd been tortured and reprogrammed. Though this documentary never comes up with a definitive scientific answer about the man's identity, it does paint a haunting portrait of personal loss and the mutable nature of self. Rating: Three and a half stars out of five.*

**By Katherine Monk, Postmedia News.**

Even by the final frames, you can't be sure. But you really want to believe the man claiming to be a U.S. Special Forces agent shot down in Laos during the Vietnam War is telling the truth.

And therein lies the central problem in Michael Jorgensen's documentary: What we want to believe, and what we chose to believe and what we're forced into admitting can turn a straightforward story of mistaken identity into a full-throttle nightmare of non-existence.

According to the U.S. military, Sgt. John Hartley Robertson went missing in action in 1968. He was on a classified mission, flying where U.S. aircraft weren't supposed to go, when his helicopter went down on a hilltop occupied by approximately 1,000 North Vietnamese fighters.

For decades, his family mourned his loss believing there were no leads or

updates in his case when in fact, a man in Vietnam was harassing the U.S. embassy with claims he was John Hartley Robertson, the supposedly M.I.A Green Beret.

Picking up the thread via Tom Faunce, a former soldier who fought in Vietnam, director Michael Jorgensen throws us back in time when the young, idealistic Faunce was a gung-ho G.I. looking to serve his country.

He didn't know Robertson, but when he returned to Vietnam years later and heard about a man who claimed to be a U.S. soldier, he knew he had to investigate – lest any brother be left behind on the field of battle.

The cameras capture their first meeting, and it brings into clear focus the desperate need for mutual redemption. Faunce is still haunted by the ghosts of war, and here's a man claiming to be a walking corpse – a sketchy vestige of a virile fighter – looking to see his family one more time.

It's an odd moment because the proof we crave never comes. The man who calls himself Robertson can speak no English, has sketchy memories of his own childhood, and can not remember his own birthday.

The embassy people say the Robertson case is a standard ruse for people seeking entry into the U.S.

Yet, for Faunce, as well as the surviving members of Robertson's family, writing off one man's life as a desperate ploy for citizenship wasn't acceptable. They wanted to get to the truth of the matter, and with Jorgensen in tow, they attempt to retrace as much of Robertson's life – and death – as possible.

What they piece together is compelling, even if largely un-provable: Robertson was shot down, assumed dead, but taken captive and tortured by the Viet Cong. For years, Robertson was allegedly imprisoned in a tiny bamboo cage and reprogrammed.

A trauma psychologist tells us the loss of language would have been completely normal, especially if he'd been beaten for speaking his native tongue. The shift in his facial features could also be explained by trauma and age.

J

Jorgensen shows us a split screen of the man claiming to be Robertson and an old photo of the real soldier in his glory days. They also find a former friend of Robertson's, a man who served beside him during the war, who believes beyond a shadow of a doubt that this tall, somewhat Caucasian-looking senior is, indeed, Robertson.

There's an undeniable resemblance. But age is a cruel sculptor, and there's always enough doubt to cloud the picture – until the filmmakers pull us into the lab, where we hope to get irrefutable proof of identity.

They pull one of his last remaining teeth in order to find out where he grew up. And according to that test, there's no question he grew up in North America.

Yet, as urgent as that evidence seems to be, it's not a DNA test – and in this era of forensic celebrity, we expect conclusive, scientific proof.

The filmmakers talk about DNA testing, but for some reason, the one piece of data that could prove their whole movie remains missing.

It's an irritation, but it's not enough to destroy the film because Jorgensen seems to understand he's not just making a movie about a lost soldier. He's making a movie about how we cope with loss by readjusting the knobs and dials of identity.

We want to believe, and sometimes, that can be enough. *Unclaimed* explores these dead ends and blank pages with an open mind, so while it can't definitely solve a long-standing mystery, it still paints a haunting picture of the highly subjective, impenetrable human condition.

[kmonk@postmedia.com](mailto:kmonk@postmedia.com)