

TELEVISION REVIEW

Vietnam War Veterans Bask In Sunlight of Appreciation

By ANITA GATES

In the world of stereotypes that we live in, there isn't usually much of a connection between large groups of leather-jacketed bikers and the search for inner peace and heightened spirituality. That connection, however, is the heart of "Homecoming: A Vietnam Vets Journey," a one-hour documentary to be shown tonight on WLIW in New York.

Every year a few hundred veterans of the Vietnam War rev up motorcycles in California and head cross-country, as a convoy, to their final destination: the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington. Along the way, as Eric Christiansen's surprisingly worthy and eventually touching film about the 2000 trip shows, they encounter a lot of supporters and experience waves of unblocked emotion.

These aren't old men yet, but they're deep enough into middle age to have white beards. Which reminds us that they've been waiting a long time for recognition, three decades since they came home to a thundering silence instead of parades. Bob Trimble, a participant, recalls a relative suggesting a few years ago that he turn on the television because Vietnam veterans were marching in a gulf war parade. "I turned to him and I said, 'It's too late,'" Mr. Trimble recalled. " 'It's too late.' "

Later, when the group has reached Washington, James L. Grainger is almost overwhelmed. "I could not stop crying," he says of his reaction to seeing and touching the names of the dead. "The tears just came rolling out of me, like I was a baby, experiencing something I'd never felt before." His conclusion, and the source of his healing, he says, is that for the first time he realized "they hadn't died for nothing."

It's difficult for anyone to come up with new ways to make the point that war is a horrifying, soul-changing experience, and most of the time "Homecoming" only repeats sad truths that we already know. Occasionally, though, there are new notes.

During a stop at Window Rock, Ariz., in the Navajo Nation, James R. Franklin says that he admires American Indians because they have always dealt humanely with their war veterans. "The first combat operation that a young brave goes on, no matter what happens," he says, whether the young man runs away in



American Public Television

In "Homecoming," Vietnam veterans on bikes cross the country.

HOMECOMING

A Vietnam Vets Journey

WLIW, New York, tonight at 9

Produced, directed, photographed and edited by Eric Christiansen; Peter Kruse and Rob Ibsen, associate producers; music composed and performed by Randy Cobb.

terror or fights and kills, "he is not the same individual that went out that first time." He adds, "And they honor them back into society."

Mr. Grainger makes the point that the transition from battleground to home can be awfully fast. The first day he was back, he says, he started to wash his hands and noticed that "underneath my fingernails I still had red dirt from Vietnam."

The overwhelming reaction of the veterans is one of grateful surprise as flag-waving adults and children line up and cheer them as they pass by. "I'm impressed the way the people, they honk and wave," says Ed Gohn. "Where were they in 1971?"

The group receives support from businesses, too. In Albuquerque, a Harley-Davidson dealer who plays host to them explains: "You can't be of our age and our generation and not have this war or anything that has to do with this war be very powerful for you."

The route provides the film's narrative structure (which it sorely needs), with the group passing through towns like Angel Fire, N.M.; Oakley, Kan.; and Rainelle, W.Va. The men's present-day voices, juxtaposed with photographs of them and their friends as handsome young soldiers, provide the emotional punch. We're a lot better at recognizing heroes than we used to be.

Homecoming: A Vietnam Vets Journey
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