

Documentary explores a black man's struggle against war and racism

By Todd Lewan
AP NATIONAL WRITER

NEW YORK — The Purple Heart was waiting for Clarence Fitch the afternoon he came home from Vietnam.

There it was, gold and velvet, glinting in his mother's outstretched palm. A medal in exchange for a wound. One of the few things a black man in the 1960s could hold up to show white America that he was equal, that he was honorable.

Fitch tore it apart and threw the pieces out the window.

Anger, pain, disillusionment with war: That's one side of "Another Brother," a documentary film on a black American who comes of age during the Vietnam era. The film premieres Sunday on PBS at 11 p.m. EDT as part of "Reel New York," a summer festival of works by independent New York-based film and video artists.

There's also anger, pain and disillusionment with another combat zone — the one within 1960s America, a society content to put blacks and whites together on a foreign battlefield but not in school classrooms or leafy, middle-class suburbia.

It's this theme — America's unfinished struggle for integration — that makes "Another Brother" more than just another documentary of the Vietnam generation and draws us to a man who finds meaning through his struggle to recover from the war, a heroin addiction and AIDS.

With photographs, letters, audiotaped interviews and archival footage, filmmaker Tami Gold traces Fitch's rite of passage through the jungles of Vietnam, the back streets of Jersey City, N.J., the field hospitals of Nicaragua and, finally, the hospital room where he dies of AIDS.

"Clarence is of my generation, and my generation has been bookended by two wars — Vietnam and AIDS," says Gold, who produced and directed the 60-minute film. "But Clarence was different in many ways. He found his way out of the fighting.

you hope."

The documentary begins slowly, with Fitch's upbringing in Harlem and Jersey City. The son of a World War II veteran and a telephone operator, he enlists in the Marines a month after taking his 1966 graduation picture in suit and bow tie.

But the veneer of military life loses its shine for Fitch a year later when he comes home on leave. He sees race riots tearing apart Newark and Jersey City — the charred tenements in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty, armored cars patrolling streets, National Guardsmen herding blacks into police vans.

That last image dissolves into one of black Marines shepherding North Vietnamese prisoners into a stockade. "For the first time," he says, "we looked at the enemy not so much as the enemy, but as another minority — brown people."

In the film's portrayal, white soldiers handle clerical tasks, blacks clean latrines. Whites drive jeeps, blacks haul crates. Whites shoot at blacks during camp brawls, blacks segregate themselves. Still, the guilt grows and the horror becomes unavoidable: Soldiers carrying off body bags; a marine with his throat slit, suddenly opening his eyes; fighter jets turning villages to boiling flame.

And then we see Fitch in 1971 on the broken streets of Jersey City. No longer is he the muscled, clear-skinned recruit. He's a heroin junkie now, and the father of a baby girl he never sees; a job quitter, constantly borrowing money he never repays.

But the film doesn't paint Fitch as a martyr or a victim. It shows how he leads a double life, hiding his addiction while working at the Jersey City post office — a catchall for Vietnam vets — and becoming active in the postal workers' union and a New Jersey anti-apartheid chapter.

By 1980, Fitch can no longer live with his heroin habit. He bounces between psychiatric wards, drug rehab clinics and veterans' hospitals, and contemplates suicide. But he finds

redemption in something he lost in Vietnam: His ability to love.

Fitch channels that love to his daughter, Kiwan, now a teen-ager. "I credit her with saving my life," he says.

Now it's his turn to save lives. Fitch debates with four-star generals to keep ROTC recruiting programs out of high schools, gives talks on the horrors of combat to seniors at inner-city schools, and visits Nicaragua during its civil war as a representative of Vietnam Veterans Against the War.

"Another Brother" is poignant without being melodramatic. In one heartbreaking moment, Fitch enters a makeshift field hospital in Nicaragua to see scores of maimed children lying in their bunks. As he approaches one bed, a 13-year-old boy sits up in his cot, left leg ending in a stump wrapped in white gauze, and smiles at his visitor. Gold, who began the documentary after Fitch's death on May 7, 1990, says she hopes it will keep viewers conscious of the casualties of racism and war still struggling to find a place in America today.

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