



Vietnam Vets the Stars in Reda Productions' Films

Any war is a mosaic of many individual stories—and those are the stories documentary maker Lou Reda Productions Inc. wants to tell in new films about the Vietnam War. The company, founded in 1978 in Easton, Pennsylvania, has been producing documentaries on military history for the History channel and other TV networks for more than 30 years, beginning with *World War II: The War Chronicles* in 1982.

Recent additions to the company's 100-plus hours of shows include *WWII* in HD, which won an Emmy in 2010, *Vietnam* in HD and *Brothers in War*, a film narrated by Charlie Sheen that tells the story of an infantry company in Vietnam. Reda Productions has more Vietnam films in the works. Scott L. Reda, managing director and son of founder Lou Reda, gives a preview of coming attractions.

What's the biggest Vietnam War project you're working on?

We have a miniseries, tentatively titled *Vietnam: Uncensored*, in development. It is a co-production with Bob Maron of New Epic Entertainment. Bob is also Charlie Sheen's manager. The series focuses on personal films shot by servicemen in-country and at home. It will be co-narrated by Charlie and his father, Martin Sheen. This will be the first time they have collaborated on a Vietnam project—something both have wanted to do since Charlie starred in *Platoon* and Martin starred in *Apocalypse Now*.

Why the word "uncensored" in the title?

The film is a very raw, straightforward look at the war from the soldiers' perspectives. Just an honest look at what they experienced, felt, went through, thought, etc., told in their own words. They can say whatever they want in our interviews—there's no agenda, no politics.



Scott Reda

Have you sold the series to a network?

Charlie Sheen loved doing *Brothers in War*. He fell in love with our show, with the personal stories of the veterans and the whole genre. He was great to work with, his manager is a really great guy, and we all hit it off. Both Charlie and Bob were so impressed with the show they came to us and said, "We would love to do something with you guys." So we put together a series proposal, and now Bob is pitching it for us. His target is a network like HBO or Showtime, and he's pretty confident that he can sell it.

How many episodes would it have?

It's 12 parts, and each episode will focus on a particular theme, time frame or battle. We're going to look at the battles that haven't gotten a lot of press and aren't well-known by most people—the "unnamed" battles, if you will. We'll mention Hamburger Hill, the Tet Offensive and so forth, but we don't want to rehash the battles that have already been looked at over and over again. Our programs also tend to focus on the personal

stories because this "micro" history is just as important as the "big picture" history. And by telling these stories I think we gain a fuller understanding of the war.

Where are your sources for Vietnam film?

We've tapped the National Archives, the Department of Defense, various news organizations like NBC and the BBC and other public sources, but our most cherished collection is home movies—8 mm, Super 8, etc.—that were shot by servicemen and women on their own personal cameras. These films are unique in that they capture a very personal aspect of the war that you just don't find in the "big" sources.

How do you discover historic film that is not stored in government archives or other well-known repositories?

We've spent years working with veterans groups, small museums, personal collectors and anyone else with home movie films. We are constantly asking various groups to publish notices, post them on their websites, email their group members and share on social media. Our goal is to find those films that are tucked away in someone's attic or basement before they get lost, are accidentally thrown out or simply deteriorate too much to use. In recent months we've had really great responses with lots of people coming forward to share their films.

How many Vietnam veterans have given you their films?

Hundreds. Every day we get emails from men and women who have a film to offer. Often they're not even really sure what's on it. I can't tell you how often I've heard, "Well, I haven't looked at it in 40 years." We clean the film, we digitize it and then we return it to the veteran along with a DVD copy. We also have a



Lou Reda Productions films an interview with veteran Steve Hopper for *Brothers in War*.

REDA PRODUCTIONS' VIETNAM WAR SHOWS

- ◆ *Brothers in War*, 2014, National Geographic Channel
- ◆ *Vietnam in HD* (six-part series), 2011, History channel
- ◆ *Vietnam: Homecoming*, 2007, History channel
- ◆ *Unsung Heroes: The Battle of Khe Sanh*, 2002, History channel
- ◆ *Unsung Heroes: Camera Martyrs of Vietnam*, 2001, History channel

couple of Vietnam veterans who assist us with logging the film by watching it and making detailed description notes.

What are you seeing in those films?

Because they were shot by the soldiers themselves, you see the real day-to-day conditions and experiences. There's very little combat, for obvious reasons, but there are great details of everyday life in-country. It's also very compelling to see the faces of these guys and their buddies—see them screwing around on R&R, hanging out together, etc. That really brings home the personal aspect.

Where did the troops get their cameras?

A lot of these guys were in Japan and Australia, where they could purchase cameras. Guys who had cameras in-country would often sell them to other GIs when they left.

How much archival footage does Reda Productions have from its history films, and how much is Vietnam-related?

We have about 15,000 total hours of footage, including about 1,000 hours related to Vietnam. We are supplying Ken Burns' company with a lot of footage for his series on Vietnam [scheduled for the 2016-17 season on PBS].

Any other Vietnam films in the works?

I've been meeting with the Smithsonian Channel for a show about the last few

months of the war. Ideally, the air date would be April 30 of next year—the 40th anniversary of the evacuation of Saigon.

Do you see opportunities for additional Vietnam documentaries?

We're developing two other Vietnam films that I would love to produce. One is titled *The Two Front War: Black America's Fight in Vietnam and at Home*. It explores the experiences of African-American soldiers in Vietnam and the ways in which the war intersected and conflicted with the civil rights movement.

The other film's working title is *The Boys of P-burg: A Small Town During the Vietnam War*. It's about the town I grew up in, Phillipsburg, New Jersey. During the war, P-burg was home to only about 18,000 people. About 300 guys from our township served, and 13 boys from Phillipsburg High School were killed in Vietnam. For a place as small as P-burg, that was incredible.

What would you like viewers to learn about the Vietnam War from your films?

When we did *Vietnam in HD*, I asked one veteran what he would like viewers come to away with, and he said, "Just a better understanding what these men and women went through."

Fifty years from now, people will still be able to debate whether the Vietnam War was right or wrong, but they won't be able to ask Vietnam veterans what it

was actually like. They won't be able to hear firsthand experiences or try to understand what veterans felt about the war and what they were doing at that time.

Unless we make an effort to record their stories now and preserve them for future generations, this part of history will die with the veterans. And with the 50th anniversary coming up, it's good timing too. I think 10 years ago these guys may not have opened up as much. But it's their time now. They want to open up.

It is commonly argued that the U.S. lost the war in Vietnam, despite our battlefield victories. How do you deal with that in films? Wouldn't Americans prefer to see Japan surrendering on the deck of the USS Missouri?

The way things ended in 1975 doesn't negate or tarnish the incredible acts of bravery and sacrifice that individual American men and women put forth during the war. Their personal stories are just as inspiring as the stories of World War II.

I think the more people understand what these guys went through, the more they'll want to see. *Vietnam in HD* and *Brothers in War* both rated very well. I think we'll see more and more programming on Vietnam. H

Vietnam veterans with films they would like to share with Reda Productions can email the company at Vietnam@louredaproductions.com or call 610-258-2957.