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JOHN LITTLE

A Look ‘Between Cultures’

Former USD Student Explored His Roots In Studying Native Americans And The Vietnam War

BY LORETTA SORENSEN
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In pursuit of his master's degree in history, former University of South Dakota student John Little set out to uncover details about the Vietnam War in regards to members of his own Native American tribe at Standing Rock Sioux

Reservation.

Members of the reservation, which is located in North and South Dakota, are part of the Dakota and Lakota nations and are often called Sioux. The term Sioux dates back to the 17th century when the Ojibwa's name for the Lakota and Dakota people, “Nadouwesou,” was shortened by French traders, resulting in the term “Sioux.” Each Sioux division has important cultural, linguistic, territorial and political distinctions. Through his research, Little learned that his people had the highest per-capita rate of military service in nearly every U.S. war.

“My paper, ‘Between Cultures – Sioux Warriors and the Vietnam War,’ was the thesis I developed for my Master's in history,” Little said. “In my research, I reviewed the archived interviews of between 10 and 15 Sioux military veterans that Leonard Bruguier had completed quite a few years ago. I was interested in the experiences of Native Americans in Vietnam because nothing much has ever been written about the topic.”

Bruguier's interviews were conducted at the South Dakota Oral History Center on USD's campus. Several people conducted similar interviews and the Center can provide more detail and access to the interviews.

Among the highlights of Little's findings was the fact that 42,000 Native Americans served in the Vietnam War, including Lakota and Dakota Sioux. He found that no study had ever been conducted regarding the men's Vietnam experiences, casualty rates or enlistment rates. One of the questions he hoped to answer in his research was why so many Native Americans were willing to serve in the military.

“In the interviews of the men, it was interesting to note that many

of them had grandfathers who fought against General George Custer,” Little said. “Some also had relatives who had joined the military during World War II and the Korean War. It seemed that tradition of military service – being involved in war – was influential in their decision about going to war.”

During his research, Little learned that Native Americans served in the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, both sides of the Civil War and all major 20th century battles. In his thesis, Little quoted historian Peter Iverson, who spoke about Native American desire to demonstrate their patriotism.

“Indians debated about fighting for a country that treated Native peoples shamefully (and) those that did enlist frequently spoke to the need to prove Indian patriotism,” Iverson wrote in “We Are Still Here: American Indians in the Twentieth Century.”

Little also found that, unlike other minorities that served in Vietnam, Native Americans often enlisted to fulfill traditional expectations and gain respect from other Native American families and friends. As a once dominant warrior power on the Northern Plains, members of the Sioux tribe made up a large portion of Native American Vietnam service members.

In “Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls,” Tom Holm reported the results of a 1981 survey completed by 170 Native American men that led him to conclude that nearly 80 percent of Native American men who fought in Vietnam volunteered to go.

Sioux-Wichita-Kiowa Vietnam veteran Harold Barse served as a counselor for the Readjustment Counseling Service (RCS) in Oklahoma. It concerned Barse that few Native American Vietnam veterans sought his services. When he reached out to make sure Native American Vietnam veterans were familiar with available Veterans Services, Barse found that family traditions of duty towards country and traditional homelands, as well as gaining respect from fellow Native Americans, were at the heart of the reasons Native Americans volunteered to go to war.

“In the thesis, I explored the tradition of the Sioux, who were



COURTESY PHOTO

Former University of South Dakota student John Little wrote a project that examined the impact of the Vietnam War on soldiers from the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in South Dakota.

predominantly a nomadic hunter-gatherer tribe until they were forced into the current reservation system,” Little said. “I also contrasted the reasons African Americans, Mexican Americans and Native Americans chose to serve. Each ethnic group had a different perspective on war.”

Perhaps another reason Barse saw few Native Americans who needed counseling services is that Native American communities held homecoming ceremonies and traditional rituals and honors for each Native American returning from war. The activities were done according to Native American traditions.

“While many returning Vietnam veterans were referred to as baby killers and were spit on when they came home, Native American reservation communities were proud of the men who served and demonstrated that publicly,” Little said.

Native Americans interviewed by Bruguier about their Vietnam

experiences revealed that the branch of service past family members chose drove choices of those serving in Vietnam. Thomas L. Roubideaux, whose grandfather, father, uncles and older brother served as Army Airborne Rangers in various wars, chose the Army “primarily because it's a family heritage. My ancestors fought against the Army in the Indian Wars. One of my great-grandfathers was a scout with a scout detachment with the Calvary during the early 1890s. My grandfather fought in World War I with Pershing, and my father fought with the Rangers in North Africa and Italy and then in Normandy, where he lost his legs. My uncles fought in Korea as Airborne Rangers and my brother was in the Army. I decided to follow the line and become a Ranger. Go for it you know.”

Yankton Sioux Tony Garcia noted that “... it was kind of an honor and it's an honor when you fight ... for your people. ... Histori-

cally it's part of our culture to be that way.” (“Vietnam Book Project” interview, 2009)

“I think the reason Leonard (Bruguier) was able to get so much information from the men he interviewed is because he, too, was a Vietnam veteran,” Little said. “He went to Vietnam early in the war and didn't see so many anti-war protests when he came back, but he understood his fellow soldiers.”

“One other outcome goal of my research was helping analyze and diminish the 19th and 20th century myths and assumptions about Native Americans created by popular culture and to evaluate several of the many traditional aspects of the Lakota and Dakota people,” Little added. “Hopefully my work presents an ethno-historical record that expands 20th Century cultural understandings.”

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Brothers

From Page 2B

as the combat zone, there are lines drawn every time there is a war. It's for tax uses (regarding combat pay). It's a stupid bureaucratic requirement of the IRS (Internal Revenue Service). This is a bureaucratic nightmare.”

Esola also disputes the federal government's characterization of the incident.

“The DoD said this was an exercise, but it wasn't. You don't get the Vietnam Service Medal for an exercise,” she said. “This was never addressed by the DoD, and the Navy never denied they got the Vietnam Service Medal on June 3, 1969.”

Esola also disputed the official description of the collision's location. “The Navy was told this happened off the coast of Manila (of the Philippines), but it was 200 miles off the coast of Vietnam.”

REMEMBERING THE LOST 74

Meanwhile, the Frank E. Evans Association pushed forward with its Vietnam Wall effort.

When Eunice Sage died in September 2010, a number of Evans survivors and supporters

attended her funeral in Niobrara. The funeral, along with the Evans Association reunions, provided a new spark in pushing for the Lost 74's place on the Wall.

Kraus, a member of the Evans and an eyewitness of the wreck, agreed with Esola's research. They also agreed on the times when names were added to the Vietnam Wall for circumstances far more questionable than the Evans in terms of combat related.

They pointed to examples such as soldiers on leave who died in a plane crash just off Hong Kong or a person who died in Guam of a heart attack. Each episode was about 1,000 miles from Vietnam, they said.

“If you want to go through and get picky about it, we have a lot of them,” Kraus said. “And what about the ones that were friendly fire?”

While Hagel didn't get the names on the wall, he did assist Eunice Sage in one way, Esola said. Hagel intervened when the Veterans Affairs (VA) took away Mrs. Sage's VA survivor benefits for receiving \$6 an hour for washing a neighbor's dishes.

The greatest frustration in researching the Lost 74 issue comes from not receiving any answers from Hagel or other officials, Esola said.

“Sen. Schumer said, ‘If they say the names don't belong on the wall, then give a good reason why,’” she said. “They can't answer that question of why they're not putting the 74 names on the Wall.”

Meanwhile, she hopes growing political pressure brings some answers and closure.

“I sense this isn't going to happen without lawmakers. Having Sen. Schumer on board has been a very powerful addition,” she said. “I think it's only going to be a matter of time, but it's a lower priority than other things going on in this country.”

The Frank E. Evans Association held its annual reunion in late September in Mobile, Alabama. The association has 265 members, with 185 survivors, family and friends registered for this year's reunion.

The association is gearing up for its 50th reunion in 2019, Kraus said. In the meantime, the survivors and other supporters remained dedicated to their fallen brothers and getting their names on the Vietnam Wall, he said.

The Wall contains room for the Lost 74, but the names likely wouldn't be listed as a group, Kraus said.

“Their names wouldn't be together, and we may need to abbreviate some things,” he said. “But we've said having their names on the Wall is the most important thing. The object is that they have their

names on the Wall.”

Esola believes the sheer number of names may be the biggest roadblock to the effort.

“I believe this is a case where there are a lot of names for the addition. I think if you were talking seven names or four names, this would have handled a long time ago,” she said. “I just need 10 minutes with the right person to show them how these names belong on the Vietnam Wall and why the need to contact the DoD or Navy.”

Another roadblock lies in the fact that the Vietnam War still brings bitter memories of an unpopular war and a divided nation, Esola said.

“For whatever reason, we're dealing with the same remnants of a war from 46 or 47 years ago. And now, we're talking about Iran, Syria and ISIS. Our country is on to the next war,” she said. “We can't take care of our veterans and the nitty-gritty things.”

However, those aren't reasons for denying the Lost 74's names on the Vietnam Wall, Esola said. She has dedicated her book's proceeds to continue spreading the message.

“You try to dig up this incident, but (officials) want us to bury it and forget. The Sages say, ‘My family had three sons and the government refuses to address this or answer any of my questions,’” she said.

“By ignoring them, it's a slap in the face of people and their loved

ones. We need more people to know this story. This country needs to honor its war veterans.”

Ernest and Eunice Sage didn't live to see their three sons' names on the Wall. However other family members are carrying forward in the memory of the Sages and their fallen sons.

Linda Vaa of Brookings, who was married to Greg Sage, noted the addition of Schumer to the cause of getting the names on the Vietnam Wall. She also pointed to the importance of attending the annual USS Frank Evans Association reunions to maintain personal bonds and to work for the Lost 74.

“We all believe the ‘American Boys’ book has helped the overall efforts very much,” Vaa said. “It's getting the story out to people who had forgotten the tragedy but now can understand how important it is to correct the wrong.”

The Lost 74 deserve their rightful place on the Vietnam Wall, Vaa said.

“As the years go by, I feel it's very important for the children of the Lost 74 to get to see the names of their fathers and grandfathers on the Wall, where it belongs,” she said. “Eunice Sage didn't get to see her boys' names on the Wall, but it's the dream of my son, my granddaughter and mine.”

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OUR GREATEST WEAKNESS LIES IN GIVING UP. THE MOST CERTAIN WAY TO SUCCEED IS ALWAYS TO TRY JUST ONE MORE TIME.

—THOMAS A. EDISON

