

Casualties of war

Portrayal of Vietnam vets is slowly changing



"Jarhead," which has been shown most recently on cable television, a Vietnam vet comes aboard a bus of Marines in the middle of a victory parade for Desert Storm.

The Vietnam vet is elated, but appears disheveled and disoriented. The Desert Storm Marines don't quite know what to make of him.

Pop culture generally does not seem to know what to make of the veterans of the Vietnam War. For years, the vets were either portrayed as psychologically tormented lost souls, as in 1978's "The Deer Hunter," morally bankrupt as a result of the war (1989's "Casualties of War)," or avenging killing machines like "Rambo."

These negative portrayals seem to be changing. "We Were Soldiers," a 2002 film starring Mel Gibson, cast the troops in positive, heroic light.

The Vietnam vet is profiled on a new album called "Summer's Voice" by singer-songwriter Arlon Bennett, formerly of Princeton. The vet depicted in the gentle ballad "Bandana Man" is heroic, noble and serene, if maybe a little nomadic. He's a biker who wears red, white, and blue bandanas — "red for the fallen, white for where they've gone, and blue for how he feels."

"I'm moved by the guys on the road," said Bennett, a biker. "They seem to be searching for something. You see them with the MIA flags and the bandanas. They live their life on the road."

Bennett is respectful to the "Bandana Man:"

He came home with honor, came home with pride, Came home with a hollow heart and a hitch in his stride.

Started up that Harley and heard the callin' of the road, I offered up my best salute



Arlon Bennett
Singer-songwriter and former Princeton resident Arlon Bennett gives us a different perspective of Vietnam veterans on his new album, "Summer's Voice."

and watched him go.

"They seem to be that much more alive," Bennett said. "They've seen things that many can't even imagine seeing, so they take life with a little bit of edge to it."

The Vietnam War, like today's Iraq War, was unpopular, and some of the negativity about the war tainted the vets. They were sometimes labeled baby killers, and there is an apocryphal story that vets were spat on upon their return. Today, however, people are seemingly able to distinguish between the job our troops have to do from decisions made by our leaders to send the troops into harm's way.

"They're charged with a job to do, and they have to do it to the best of their ability," Bennett said. "We see it as necessary, and sometimes it's questionable."

Bennett is a co-coordinator of the Princeton Songwriters, a chapter of the Nashville Songwriter's Association, and he's hosting a workshop with songwriter Jason Blume on Saturday at the First Reformed Church in New Brunswick. Bennett then returns to the First Reformed Church on April 7 for a "Summer's Voice" Mine Street Coffeehouse record-release show.

Bennett's work is tuneful and contemplative.

"Growing up, the Vietnam War was on my TV every night," Bennett said. "Those things made an impression on me."