

‘Impact is Forever’

Thailand Post sponsors production about letters at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial

May 15, 2022

VFW Post 12074 in Chiang Mai, Thailand, is a sponsor of the Gate Theater’s production of *SHRAPNEL IN THE HEART*, Sunday, May 29.

When Gate Theater Founder and Artistic Director Stephan Turner announced the production of *SHRAPNEL*, Post 12074 approved annual financial sponsorship of the Gate Theater and a unique sponsorship of *SHRAPNEL IN THE HEART*.

The play is based on Laura Palmer’s book *SHRAPNEL IN THE HEART: Letters and Remembrances from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial*.

The unconventional design of the memorial was not immediately popular with Vietnam vets. The black granite panels sunk into the landscape were described by some as a “black slash of shame.”

However, as time passed, opinions softened. When vets started seeing the names of their comrades carved in the highly reflective black stone, they too began to reflect. The bodies of their buddies were buried elsewhere, but their spirits seemed to live in those somber walls.

The living, the survivors, began speaking to those who did not return to the world. They started writing letters that spoke of sorrow; that apologized for not being able to save a friend dying in their arms; that remembered the good times; that shared a long-lost laugh. Their letters were placed tenderly and reflectively at the base of the wall below a friend’s name.

Gold Star Family members began visiting their sons, brothers, husbands, and fathers whose names etched in the wall represented a future lost. Their emotions ran the gamut: sorrow, confusion, anger, acceptance, and nostalgia as they shared memories of good times with a spirit living within the black stone wall. These letters were left there by the thousands.

The National Park Service collected the letters at the end of each day. *SHRAPNEL IN THE*

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HEART is based on just a few of those letters.

Post 12074 Quartermaster Roy Mark auditioned and was given a part in the stage production. Mark is a Vietnam Veteran and Gold Star Family member.

Post Trustee Kristine Gould eagerly volunteered when a cast member dropped out, citing the trauma of the content.

SHRAPNEL Director Claire Gordon has completely changed her opinion of the U.S. military. From East London, her knowledge of the Vietnam War was from Hollywood's war films showing soldiers pillaging and their lack of integrity.

However, seeing the cast deliver those letters has made her think more sympathetically about American soldiers and their families.

"People need to hear these stories because it's not over," Gordon said. "The impact is forever."

SHRAPNEL IN THE HEART will be staged at Kad Studio Theater in Chiang Mai. The single matinee performance will be on the Sunday before Memorial Day. The VFW will be well-represented on stage and in the audience by Post members wearing their distinctive uniforms.

In addition, the Post will staff a reception table in the theater's foyer before and after the play as well as during the intermission. Theatergoers will learn about the work of the VFW.

This VFW Checkpoint article was written by VFW Post 12074 Quartermaster Roy Mark.