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# CBS' Vietnam series hopes U.S. is ready

LOS ANGELES

**I**S AMERICA READY to return to Vietnam for an hour of prime time every week? That's what CBS wants to know and obviously the network isn't sure since it has scheduled its ground-breaking Vietnam series for Thursdays at 8 o'clock, opposite "The Cosby Show."

Still, wherever it is on the schedule, "Tour of Duty" is not your run-of-the-mill series. It is being billed as a genuine attempt to recreate the life of American soldiers in Vietnam, a story often lost in the political haze that colored all perceptions of that war.

"I daresay you will have never seen anything like this on television before," is the way executive producer Zev Braun sums it up.

"I think that there has been such a vacuum about Vietnam and the Vietnam experience that all of us, but especially young people, know so little about Vietnam that there is go-

## THE FALL SHOWS *Michael Hill in L.A.*

ing to be a thirst to learn what actually happened," Braun said.

"I think that if we are honest in our depiction that the audiences will appreciate that honesty. They will tune in because of the dramatic content but in the process there will be a certain edification without it being didactic in any way."

Braun promised in press conference here that part of that edification will be a real depiction of the violence of war that will include the deaths of characters you have come to know over the weeks and months. "You'll never know who's going to get it," he said.

That might be the reason that most of the members of the 10-man cast are unknowns. The biggest

name is Terence Knox, who already died on "St. Elsewhere" and was canceled on "All is Forgiven."

"I've read the first four scripts and I don't die in those," Knox said, hoping that his character and the show survive. "I'm hoping I make it through the first season and then we'll see after that."

"I believe our violence is real, our violence is necessary," Braun said, defending CBS' decision to put such a show on at 8 o'clock when many kids might be watching.

"I think young people have come to believe that violence is acceptable because it's not real. I think we have become desensitized to violence. So I think what we're doing is a very healthy thing. We're showing that in a war people get killed, people we care about get killed, our brothers, our fathers, people we know.

"I think it's important for young people to know what war is really about, that it ain't 'Rambo,' and it ain't 'The Terminator,' that in war people die," Braun continued."

That thought was echoed by Robert Muller, who just ended nine years as president of the Vietnam Veterans of America. The leadership of that group screened the pilot of "Tour of Duty" in Washington a couple of weeks ago and gave it a rousing endorsement and so he and the current president, Mary Stout, were included in the press conference.

"I think this program is a much-needed antidote to the 'Rambo' comic strip version of war, and to 'Top Gun' that has kids in high school now thinking that war is all rah-rah military glory," Muller said. "People die. There's nothing glorious about it. There's real pain and suffering and agony."

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# CBS hopes that the nation is ready for its Vietnam series

"What we hope is that people get a close enough idea of what war is like so that they won't be going out and buying G.I. Joe dolls without body bags," Stout said.

"If this series in any way glorifies war, you can have me assassinated," Braun concluded.

Also present at the press conference was Walter Capps, who teaches an immensely popular course on the Vietnam era at the University of California at Santa Barbara. He saw programs like "Tour of Duty," as well as the movies "Platoon" and "Full Metal Jacket," as the beginning of the end for the divisiveness over Vietnam that still plagues the country.

"What I see the country wanting to do now is to heal those divisions," Capps said. "I see 'Rambo' as an artificial healing, sort of healing without coming to terms with it. What I see this series doing is creating the context for a real kind of healing."

This series would clearly not have been on the air had not "Platoon" been a successful movie, though its origins go back many years as CBS programmer Kim Le-masters has wanted to do something about Vietnam for some time.

"I'm sure that the success of 'Platoon' indicated that American audiences are now for the first time ready to deal with the Vietnam experience," Braun said. "For that we owe 'Platoon' a debt of gratitude."

Like "Platoon," "Tour of Duty" will ignore the political battles on the home front—part of what made the Vietnam experience unique—and focus on the life of combat soldiers. Still, Braun said that it would still provide a context for dealing with many of the arguments that racked the nation during the Vietnam era.

"We intend to deal with every issue we know about that existed in

Vietnam, and I think you'll be shocked at some of the issues we're going to deal with," he said.

"These guys came from various walks of life to a crazy place, an absurd place, called Vietnam. As soldiers, these characters, who probably wouldn't come together in our country which was split apart, came together and formed an unlikely alliance.

"It was kind of an enforced democracy. People who otherwise might have been at each other's throats worked together in order to survive. We deal with these grunts. If I'm opposed to the war, I'm not opposed to the kids who fought there.

"They didn't come to change things in Vietnam, they came to do a job. They came to do 365 days and get the hell out of there and that's the story we're telling."

Those 365 days were called the

tour of duty, the one-year assignment to Vietnam. And, in fact, much of the country's ambivalence toward the war is reflected in that concept.

In virtually every other war we fought, our soldiers were committed until we won. Thus winning was the goal because that was the way to get back home. In Vietnam, our soldiers were committed for one year. Thus survival for that year—preferably with as little contact with the enemy as possible—was the goal, because that was the way to get back home.

The best and brightest who got us into that mess looked at it as a task on the bureaucratic flow chart that could be taken care of by these grunts on their tour of duty. It never occurred to them that people were actually dying out there.

Who knows, maybe if the bureaucrats hadn't been raised on John Wayne movies and the "Combat" series, history might have been different. Maybe raising kids on "Tour of Duty" will make them realize the profundity of the decision to go to war.

The pilot shows that the series has that potential if it is done properly. The real problem is that all those kids are going to be watching "Cosby."