

An uncensored look at America's young soldiers in Iraq

Gunner Palace, directed by Michael Tucker and Petra Epperlein

By Joanne Laurier
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Four months after President Bush declared an end to “major combat operations” in Iraq, in May 2003, American filmmaker Michael Tucker began filming a remarkable documentary about the members of the US Army’s 2nd Battalion, 3rd Field Artillery Regiment. For two months, in the fall and winter of 2003-2004, Tucker was unofficially “embedded” with the Gunners, comprising 400 troops billeted in one of the late Uday Hussein’s palaces in Baghdad. Tucker and his German-born wife, Petra Epperlein, edited 100 hours of footage to craft the 85-minute documentary.

The movie’s tag line reads: “Some war stories will never make the nightly news,” clearly referring to the US media’s self-censorship, misinformation and Pentagon-generated propaganda that passes for coverage of the Iraqi war. One of the most suppressed aspects of the coverage—which Tucker attempts to address—is the plight of the American military rank-and-file.

A newscast airing Donald Rumsfeld’s comments that “Baghdad is bustling with commerce” opens the film, juxtaposed against a very different visual reality in Adhamiya—a largely Sunni section of northern Baghdad. One soldier sarcastically calls what American troops are engaged in as “minor combat,” mocking Bush’s overblown May statement. Homemade bombs and ambushes are endemic.

Gunner Palace’s narration explains that many members of the troop come from small towns “that read like an atlas of forgotten America.” It is clear in the course of the film that the soldiers are primarily young “economic conscripts” caught up in a war they don’t understand and for which they are not prepared.

On the documentary’s web site, Tucker has created an on-line diary chronicling his experiences. In one entry, he writes: “I spent most of my time with the younger soldiers—this film should be called ‘Jackass Goes to War.’ Some of these guys aren’t old enough to legally drink in the

States, yet when they roll, they rule the streets. Some of them never left their home states before they joined the army and now they are here, a world apart from their friends at home.”

Nonetheless, they are forced to engage in criminal activities, which for many, adds to their already considerable confusion. Touring Baghdad, narrator Tucker points to soldiers manhandling an Iraqi teen-ager: “It takes two Humvees and a squadron of soldiers to take a glue-sniffing kid off the streets.” One soldier faces the camera dispassionately, stating that “they really don’t like Americans here.” Bush drones on over the airwaves that he is deferring student loans while soldiers are deployed overseas.

Frequent night raids reveal the fear and outrage of those Iraqis, men, women and children, unfortunate enough to fall into the hands of US forces. With little or no evidence of wrongdoing, blindfolded and bound captives are ominously transferred to Abu Ghraib prison. One of the many instances provided by the film of how the brutality and swinishness of the American military warp the psyche of its rank-and-file occurs when a soldier, floating in the Uday Hussein palace pool, boasts, “I’m the first on my block [at home] to kill.”

In an interview with *greencine.com*, Tucker describes—despite his empathy for the soldiers—his horror at the actions the troops carry out: “I’m trying to show you everything I can. Yes, it makes me a little uncomfortable to go raid a house and there’s a girl in a pink bathrobe that’s the same age as my daughter. That made me really upset. It was like, ‘What are you guys doing?’ And everyone’s pumped up and screaming and later, at the end of the film—in fact it’s the last raid in the film, they’re pretty out of control. I mean like wiping the pavement with people....

“[W]hen you’re out with the military, you sense constantly that resentment [from the Iraqi people]. It’s not just resentment towards the military. It’s resentment to all kinds of things. And it’s really in your face. You saw the

scene with the kids throwing rocks at us. Spitting at us.”

When the Gunners—armed to the teeth in *Terminator*-style gear—are not busting down doors in the neighborhoods, they are futilely attempting to mingle with a hostile population. IEDs (improvized explosive devices) can be anywhere, hidden in the most innocuous objects. A growing popular insurgency leaves most of the regiment with a cynical view regarding the training of Iraqis for the Iraqi Civil Defense Corps. One soldier gripes that anyone who enlists in the ICDC is “only looking for money.”

The young fighters are obviously daunted by what they see around them. Frustrated by the lack of support from the American government, one Gunner creates a comedy routine out of poking fun at the soldiers’ substandard equipment: “Part of our \$87 billion budget provided some secondary armor we put on top of our thin-skinned Humvee.... It will probably slow down the shrapnel so that it stays in your body instead of going clean through.”

In their more thoughtful moments, the soldiers express disturbing sentiments, such as these: “When we first got here the people were waving at us, now they’re shooting at us,” and “I was tore up pretty bad after killing somebody—I have to learn to live with it,” as well as “I don’t feel like [we’re] defending our country anymore—haven’t for a while. I’m 19 years old and I’ve fought a war.” Bewildered teenagers with machine guns are given ludicrous titles like “Intelligence Analyst.”

When they are not under siege, some compose tunes or raps with angry and lonely lyrics. “I’ve seen twice more than the average man in his fifties,” sings one rapper. Others complain about their lack of equipment, play video games and access porn sites on their computers. There is a bit of *Apocalypse Now* to some of the goings-on. Demoralization and disaffection are stamping out what remains of patriotism and a belief in the legitimacy of the Bush administration’s “war on terror.”

Tucker explains in an interview with *Guardian Unlimited* that in the early days of the occupation, soldiers felt they could benefit the local population with school projects and reconstruction. “But over time it changed, especially as they started to take losses and see how complicated it was,” states the director. The soldiers also suffer from the fatigue of working around the clock. “The soldiers seem spent. Too many IEDs. Too many attacks. Too much stress,” writes Tucker in his journal.

“It’s a bunch of 20-year-old kids who just want to survive,” Tucker told the military publication *Stars and Stripes*.

Gunner Palace refutes one of the crudest justifications for suppressing opposition, pushed by both the Republicans and Democrats—that to criticize the war in Iraq is to place the

troops in harm’s way. At the film’s end, Tucker quotes from a letter he received from one of the youngest Gunners featured prominently in the film, Stuart Wilf, informing him that the regiment’s tour of duty had been extended: “If you see any politicians be sure to let them know that while they’re sitting around their dinner tables with their families talking about how hard the war is on them, we’re here under attack nearly 24 hours a day, dodging RPGs and fighting not for a better Iraq, but just to stay alive.”

The last comments recorded in Tucker’s film are some of the most revealing. One soldier tells the filmmakers that “there is no time in history when people get killed...[and] something good come[s] out of it.” Another adds: “There is no rationale for someone’s child dying. This is not worth the death of someone’s family member.” This last Gunner wrote to Tucker in May of 2004: “[W]e’re on our way to Najaf in the next 72 hours. Our unit, which has been here the past year (one year, 2 hours and 25 minutes as of now), will now deploy to one of Iraq’s 3 hot spots to continue to die for Iraq. This isn’t life for me. This life is killing me.”

In early January, *Gunner Palace* received an R rating from the Motion Picture Association of America, meaning it could not be viewed without parental supervision by anyone under 17 years of age—part of the age group likely to be targeted by military recruiters.

The film’s producers successfully appealed the rating, which was changed in March to PG-13. “This new rating will allow the soldiers of the 2/3 to speak directly to the American people. It will also permit those teenagers who are hungry to understand the sacrifice thousands of their peers are making to do so,” stated Tucker.

It also more widely allows a glimpse of the army with which US imperialism intends to dominate the world, revealing a state of affairs that is fraught with difficulties.

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