

Toronto International Film Festival 2009—Part 2

“The Iraq war poisoned the water—you can’t undo that, it’s there forever”

By David Walsh
3 October 2009

This is the second of a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto film festival (September 10-19).

Michael Tucker and Petra Epperlein have directed at least three remarkable documentaries about the US invasion of Iraq and its consequences: (*Gunner Palace* (2004), *The Prisoner or: How I Planned to Kill Tony Blair* (2006), and now, *How To Fold a Flag*. (I haven’t seen the fourth, *Bulletproof Salesman* (2008)).

There are internal links between the films. In *Gunner Palace* An uncensored look at America’s young soldiers in Iraq), Tucker (born in Honolulu in 1966) and Epperlein (born in Karl Marx Stadt in East Germany, also in 1966) filmed members of the US Army’s 2nd Battalion, 3rd Field Artillery Regiment, billeted in one of the late Uday Hussein’s palaces, as they went about their brutal business of patrolling Baghdad’s streets.

One of the Iraqis arrested during a raid by that unit during the course of filming *Gunner Palace*, and eventually incarcerated in Abu Ghraib prison, journalist Yunis Khatayer Abbas, became the central figure in the ironically titled, *The Prisoner or: How I Planned to Kill Tony Blair* (“I am not terrorist or monster. I am not Dracula. I am not a monkey or cow. I am a man”).

In *How To Fold a Flag*, the filmmaking team treats the fate of four members of the original unit, now back in the US. It is an occasionally devastating film that speaks to the horror of the Iraq war, as well as to its ultimately politically destabilizing and radicalizing character.

Two of the Iraq war veterans absorb most of our interest.

African-American Javorn Drummond lives outside Fayetteville, North Carolina—near Fort Bragg, a major US army base. The film’s opening shots take in his miserable living conditions. He works in a hog processing plant and attends a local college. The filmmakers note that in early 2008 Drummond had sent them a note, “imploing us to visit him at home ... to see ‘how I live.’”

Drummond and his friends make no effort to conceal their bitterness over the war. In an early scene, a young woman, Regina, asks, in regard to Drummond, “What did he benefit? Nothing.” Javorn himself comments, “I didn’t choose to go war ... Young kids are dying ... How is the war relevant? We die for nothing.”

The film’s production notes tell us about Drummond’s harsh life: “He never knew his father. When he was six, his grandfather took him from his chronically ill mother in the Bronx and brought him to Fayetteville, North Carolina to live with his aunts. They lived in a shack without potable water near the fields where his great grandmother picked cotton 80 years ago. ... By the time he was 19, he was kicking in doors in Baghdad.

“He hated the army. He hated his superiors. Most of all he hated the fact that even when he left the army nothing had changed. His first few weeks

home from the war, he was brutally beaten by policemen at a football game. In court, even with his eyes swollen shut, the judge told him to write an apology to the officers who beat him.”

“In July 2008, he learned that his mother was dying of terminal cancer in New York City, so he traveled north to help her. When he arrived, he found his mother at the mercy of an indifferent system.”

Drummond is smart, and angry. What is normal?, he asks, looking up the word in a thick dictionary. Whatever it is, he’s never had it. His visits with his dying mother are painful. “Be a good man,” she tells him, before dying in 2008.

Iraq war veteran Michael Goss is a suffering human being. In 2003 while manning a checkpoint in Baghdad he opened fire, along with other US soldiers, on an approaching vehicle. The back seat, he later told a superior, was “full of dead kids.”

Unlike some, to his credit, Goss could not get over the atrocity. During his second tour in Iraq, as the press notes explain, Goss “fell into depression and went to mental health where the psychiatrist asked him about his tour in 2003 and started scratching at old wounds. Mirvet [one of the “dead kids”] came back. Within a few weeks he was on suicide watch. He was put on four different medications, but she wouldn’t go away.

“He’s not sure why he did it, but after they took his weapon away, he cut a video featuring a beheading he found online along with pictures of his wife and kids at a BBQ. He posted it online, thinking it was a good way of saying ‘help.’ CID [Criminal Investigation Division] thought differently. They raided his house at Ft. Hood and they arrested him at Taji—sure that he had done the beheading. Even when they figured it out, even when the shrink wrote a comment on his chart that said ‘soldier can have weapon,’ they chaptered him out of the army and gave him ten days to clear Ft. Hood. He slept with his wife and four kids in the car. She left him not long after.”

Goss now makes a living in cage fighting, the brutal gladiatorial competition, in Texas and Louisiana. “The most important part of me died out there in Iraq,” he says. “The army expects you to switch over to normal, whatever that means, ‘normal.’” The sequences in which he appears are perhaps the film’s most affecting.

A third veteran of the “Gunner Palace” unit, Jon Powers, makes an effort to win the Democratic nomination for a congressional seat in western New York state, on a platform vaguely critical of the war, but loses out to a wealthier opponent.

A fourth, Stuart Wilf, who figured prominently in *Gunner Palace*, now works in a convenience store and performs in a heavy metal band. The production notes explain that “Four years later, he [Wilf] doesn’t talk about the war much. He stands out, especially in a town [Colorado Springs, Colorado] of big churches, Rev. Dobson, family values and a sea

of yellow ribbon magnets.” His younger brother joined the army shortly after Stuart returned from Iraq; after a tour in Iraq, he’s preparing to deploy to Afghanistan. “Becky, their mother, is sick with worry.”

In another deeply moving moment, Pat Colgan talks about her son Ben, who died in November 2003 in Baghdad. He had told his parents it would be a “quick war.” She quietly tells the filmmakers, speaking of the Bush crowd, “I’m angry, at what they were allowed to get away with.”

The inclusion of Powers, a would-be Democratic congressman, and a brief scene of a rally for Barack Obama, presumably provide some clue as to the filmmakers’ political sentiments. Although in our conversation at the film festival, Tucker acknowledged that hopes in Obama might have been an “illusion.”

During a question and answer session following one of the public screenings of *How To Fold a Flag* in Toronto, an audience member noted the hopes that millions had had in Obama, pointed to the new administration’s escalation of the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and asked the filmmakers what the world’s population to do now? Tucker and Epperlein had difficulty answering the question.

This dilemma points to the objective reality that there is no way to end the neo-colonial wars in the Middle East and Central Asia, or prevent those now being planned, within the existing political framework—the entire American establishment is committed to the drive for global dominance.

How To Fold a Flag treats the way things are in the US. Not much is added. The film is proof that the truth can be told about war, poverty, social inequality. Filmmakers need eyes, brains, a heart. Why aren’t more of them making such films? It seems elementary. This is not the final word in filmmaking, but it is honest, moving, convincing.

A conversation with the filmmakers

I spoke to Michael Tucker and Petra Epperlein in Toronto. I first congratulated them on the work. We began talking about how the filmmakers had determined on which Iraq war veterans they would focus.

David Walsh: What about Stuart Wilf?

Michael Tucker: He’s a very interesting young guy, he’s pretty exceptional, the way he processes the world. He has this mom who has three sons in the military.

DW: Yes, it seems unlikely for some reason. Neither he nor his mother seem gung-ho about the military.

MT: He got into some trouble. What does he say in the film? He was given three options: death, the sheriff, or the army. And this was before September 11, it seemed as though he needed to go some place and get straightened out, or whatever. At the time no one was thinking about the possibility of war. Of course now anyone joining the military understands the consequence of war, and goes in willingly, more or less.

DW: Apparently the military is having a less difficult time at the moment because of the economic crisis.

MT: People have said that. But it’s interesting within the world that Wilf comes from in Colorado, for a lot of young men, the military is still something they want to do. Something they want to experience. I think with the war, some of them want it all the more, it breaks the boredom.

Petra Epperlein: Jon Powers had done press with us for *Gunner Palace*, and basically his whole political opportunity came from that film, so ...

DW: He toured with you for that film?

MT: He toured with us, and then via that film he started getting contacts in the Democratic Party campaign world, and he was encouraged to run.

Michael Goss of course had stayed in touch. You know, at some point he was suicidal. We were in pretty regular contact with him, and we learned that he had started cage fighting. It was pretty irresistible.

DW: He wrote to you, indicating that he was suicidal?

MT: He wrote Jon and me essentially a suicide note. Jon managed to find him some help, through another soldier’s mother, in the form of a

priest, which was all he could find in the emergency circumstances.

DW: Did the conditions that Javorn Drummond was living in, in or near Fayetteville, surprise or shock you?

MT: I wouldn’t say ‘surprise.’ But when you look at how he lives, it doesn’t jibe with our ‘reality television’ version of ourselves, of American life. But this is the real thing. People sometimes get documentary confused with reality television.

We are not very good in America at looking at ourselves any more. We’re really good at hiding parts of our life. I recently saw this episode of “Extreme Makeover.” There was an incredibly poor family, their old house was torn down, they got one of these “McMansions,” a huge, garish house, a new Ford Explorer—that’s the dream. The woman is earning no money and has no means to support the lifestyle, but that’s the dream ...

DW: It was significant that scenes of war and scenes of life here are in that film. As you say, those kinds of scenes don’t appear very much in film or television. That could be Flint, or Pontiac, Michigan ...

MT: One of the soldiers in the unit was a kid from Pontiac, we originally shot him for this film, but it didn’t work out. We’re almost numb to what we see in this country.

DW: I think films like yours make us less numb.

PE: Well, if so, that’s a good thing.

DW: What about the psychological, emotional consequences of war? You have four people who are deeply traumatized. You had Timothy McVeigh from the first Gulf War. What are some of the consequences you worry about in terms of this war?

MT: Everyone deals with it differently. One thing about the film, it doesn’t categorize people, as though everyone was experiencing the same thing. One of the most important things is the sense of loss. Loss of friends, family, whatever innocence there was. That’s where the title comes from, and why you end up in a kitchen with a mother who lost her son. Nothing will ever make it right. You could argue day and night about whether the war was wrong, or whatever, but when you look at the consequences ...

DW: All the mothers are there in the film, I noticed.

MT: The mothers are important.

PE: Javorn Drummond says you come back to what you left, the life you left. So nothing has changed. These guys come from such different social structures, obviously the war has an effect, how you deal with everyday experience.

MT: The psychological part is complicated. You mentioned the Gulf War, but this war is so much longer, eight years of continual war in Afghanistan, six in Iraq. We have to abandon some of our stereotypical ideas about PTSD [Posttraumatic stress disorder], but what about the pure exposure to violence ...!

Michael Goss said it best, you’re in an environment where you’re constantly afraid, afraid for your life—he did two tours, others have now done three or four, what does that do to you? We have to completely rewrite the definition of PTSD.

DW: I agree it would be wrong to draw stereotypical conclusions, because veterans can draw all sorts of conclusions, including political and social ones. We fight for that.

Nonetheless, there are some very damaged people as a result of this war. There was a report in the press about ten Iraq veterans at Fort Carson in Colorado, accused or convicted of murder and manslaughter, rape.

MT: That’s where Stuart Wilf lives. We try to be careful about it. One of our larger audiences is a military audience, we want to capture what people are going through, and not just make assumptions, because every unit is different. Places like Carson, those guys had deployed in the most severe fighting. We wanted to show people in a process of recovery. Like Michael Goss. What are people doing for themselves to be better? We wanted to show people fighting, for what should be theirs, a normal life

DW: A war like this, like Vietnam, has consequences for a society. They're inescapable. Of course there are global consequences, but also for the society here. Things don't go on as usual.

MT: We wanted to avoid revisionist impulses, which both the left and the right have done. The right has appropriated the Vietnam war, 'We could have won, if they had let us really fight it,' etc. At the same time, we wanted to capture the situation as accurately as possible, as an expression of the times—what are people feeling and thinking and doing? So you could look back years later, and say, that was happening then.

PE: Yes, these guys coming back from war, it's true, there is a consequence for society. We know what happened in Germany, of course. I think a lot of Americans don't want to see the consequences, they look at the veterans as if they had nothing to do with them. That's a tragedy, the refusal to deal with it.

MT: The complete disconnect from the war is a big problem. 'Oh, there's some war mysteriously raging somewhere, that really doesn't have anything to do with me. No one calls on me to do anything about it, it doesn't touch my personal life in any way ... I'm oblivious that my taxes go to it, that my vote may influence it.' It's become this permanent thing, the long war, it goes on and on.

DW: Yes, there are certainly people walking around, thinking, 'I have a feeling something horrible is going on and I don't want to know,' but the media has played a major role, politics has played a role, in covering up the truth, in lying.

There is an effort to keep the Iraq war out of the media, to pretend that nothing is going on, and the population suffers from that too.

MT: The reporting is reduced to mere minutes a week.

DW: Except Afghanistan prevents them from doing that, because that's another catastrophe in the making.

You say you can discuss the rights and wrongs of the war, but your film, whether that was your intention or not, says something horrible is going on, for the Iraqis, for the Americans, for everyone.

MT: I've had no difficulty from the beginning in opposing it. The week before the war started we were with a half-million Germans on the streets of Berlin. The fact that now it has fallen off the map ... this completely unnecessary war has put massive strain on people, has ruined people's lives, has killed, turned things upside down—the war poisoned the water, you can't undo that, it's there forever.

PE: A completely unnecessary war.

DW: Unnecessary for us, but apparently some people didn't feel it was unnecessary ...

MT: Of course, for some people it was essential. I think there's an illusion that it was a Republican war. It's like this is the way America is.

DW: That's not fair to the population. They didn't make the war.

MT: The public mindset was there.

DW: There were mass demonstrations against the war. Not just in Berlin and London, but in New York too. That didn't have the slightest impact on either party.

MT: One of my favorite sequences involves the Obama inauguration, because it shows that people still hope that things can be more just, that things can be better. But at the same time you wonder whether it's just an illusion. Something we just want to believe.

DW: In my opinion, the belief that Obama would do something about the wars was an illusion to begin with, because these are colonial wars, and the entire American ruling elite is behind them. Democrats and Republicans.

MT: We have this kind of kindergarten way of voting. Change is possible, but people are lazy. There's no sense that we're all in this together.

DW: There is going to be a change, but it's not going to come through Obama. This war has had enormous consequences, which we don't fully understand yet, and your film is part of it, your films speak to the truth

about the situation, and that's extraordinary, whatever we disagree about.

Why are you not going to make another war film, as you told the audience at the public screening? Are you burned out?

MT: It's complicated. I think for us, truthfully, there are so many films out there. I was close to Javorn, to his mother, I really felt angry about the situation ... how is that possible? Can people be so cold that they will let their neighbors die? A young soldier who fought for his country, and he can't do anything for his mother? There's this cycle that can't be broken ... racism is alive, poverty ...

PE: These stories more or less came to us, so we can never say this is our last one. When we began the first one, our daughter was eight years old, she's 14 now. My god, all of her childhood she has spent with her parents making films about war. Think about it. So ...

DW: So you're going to make a film more directly focused on social life in America?

MT: I think there are so many stories. I told someone here we would have liked to make a film about Detroit.

DW: It needs to be done.

MT: There is unbelievable stuff going on.

DW: I hope you do that film.

To be continued

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