

Megan Leavey: Oblivious to Iraqi suffering

By Joanne Laurier
23 June 2017

Directed by Gabriela Cowperthwaite; screenplay by Pamela Gray, Annie Mumolo and Tim Lovstedt

The US is now permanently at war in large parts of the globe, with plans for further bombings, invasions and occupations. American military personnel are active in some 160 foreign countries and territories, with the Pentagon officially acknowledging the existence of 800 bases in 80 countries or so—more than any other nation or empire in history.

Film, television and the American media as a whole function largely to launder the ruthless daily violence and aggression, to render it fit as much as possible for public consumption. On the one hand, they resort to bombast and mythmaking; on the other, they offer the “human interest” story. Gabriela Cowperthwaite’s film, *Megan Leavey*, is one of the latter prettification efforts.

Based on a true story (or elements of one), the movie opens in 2001, in the hamlet of Valley Cottage, New York, some 30 miles north of New York City.

Megan Leavey (Kate Mara) is a young woman in a downward spiral (“After my best friend died, I checked out of life completely.”). Her mother (Edie Falco), divorced from her father (Bradley Whitford) and now living with another man (Will Patton), is sick of her daughter’s floundering (“She’s not gonna sit in my goddamned house and do nothing”). Megan, as she says, has “left this place a thousand times in my mind, but I never actually went anywhere.”

Her deliverance from a dead-end life takes the form of enlistment in the Marines. After boot camp, Megan is assigned to the K9 unit, the military police dog squad, at Camp Pendleton in southern California. Unable to seriously connect with people, she forms a bond with a particularly ferocious German Shepherd named Rex. Corporal Megan and Rex are deployed to Ramadi, Iraq to locate IEDs (improvised explosive devices) and fight the insurgency, i.e., the local

population hostile to the American occupiers.

During this time she has a brief relationship with a human and fellow Marine, Matt (Ramón Rodríguez), who, in the end, can’t compete with the true “love of her life,” Rex. Seriously. There’s also the fact that she’s a New York Yankees fan and he’s a fan of the New York Mets—rival baseball teams.

After she and Rex are injured during a mission, Megan leaves the military, having been awarded a Purple Heart. The remainder of the film depicts Megan’s unrelenting efforts to adopt her canine companion, which eventually takes place through the intercession of Sen. Charles Schumer (Democrat from New York) in 2012.

The filmmakers (and a large portion of the critics) would like to pretend that *Megan Leavey* is merely the story of the unusual devotion between girl and dog. While this may be its major concern, along the way the movie proves a repugnant pro-war piece and glorification of the US military. As far as one can tell, virtually every American serviceman or woman, including Megan, wants nothing less than to wipe out the Iraqi population, who are viewed as savages.

The WSWS wrote in regard to Clint Eastwood’s noxious *American Sniper* (2014): “The American soldiers are obliged, according to the logic of the film, to exterminate great numbers of Iraqis both in self-defense and as some sort of act of public hygiene.” So it is with *Megan Leavey*.

Assisting in this, through no fault of their own, are the four-legged members of the K9 unit, who—we are told—are “not pets. They’re not even dogs anymore. They’re warriors.” In fact, “Corporal Rex” is given an elaborate retirement ceremony at Yankee Stadium!

In rendering the life story of Megan Leavey (born 1983), director Cowperthwaite gives the same weight to the vicissitudes of the relationship between Megan and Rex as she does to the invasion and occupation of

Iraq, a world-historic event. The relationship between young woman and dog blossoms as they participate in the neocolonial subjugation, or attempted subjugation, of the *haji*, that is, the Iraqi population. (*Haji* is a racist term employed by members of the US military throughout the film. It is equivalent to the Vietnamese being called “gooks.”)

In a scene at a Ramadi checkpoint, for example, American military personnel treat every Iraqi, even the children, as though they are facing off with the devil. In another deplorable sequence, the home of an Iraq man is raided, revealing a cache of concealed weapons. How dare this “*haji*” think of challenging the civilizers of an untamed land!

One of the movie’s covert premises is that for American youth the answer to a bleak existence is to join the military and kill defenseless people on the other side of the world. This is a harsh commentary on US society whose implications the filmmakers prefer to ignore. Large sections of a generation of young people face unemployment or miserable wages, poverty, crushing student debt, opioid addiction or police brutality. A certain proportion will inevitably join the military. The overwhelming majority will draw very different conclusions.

In *Megan Leavey*, Cowperthwaite skirts important issues: the real Leavey was also deployed with Rex to Fallujah in 2005. The filmmakers perhaps avoid that episode because Fallujah, reduced to ruins by the American military with thousands of its citizens killed, is the city most symbolic of the murderous consequences of the 2003 invasion. As the WSWS wrote in 2004: “The aim of the US assault is to make Fallujah an example to the rest of Iraq of what will happen to those who oppose the transformation of their country into a US client state. It is the spearhead of an orgy of killing intended to crush and drive underground every voice of opposition.”

Nor does the film care to mention how the K9 unit has been used in places like the infamous Iraqi prison, Abu Ghraib, and the US detention facility in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, to intimidate and torture prisoners in violation of international law.

Cowperthwaite’s previous film, *Blackfish* (2013), was concerned with the exploitation and mistreatment of whales. In *Megan Leavey*, she obsesses about the fate of a German Shepherd, which in her mind

outweighs the US destruction of Iraqi society and the more than one million deaths. What can one say about such people?

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