

Desert One: Barbara Kopple returns to the fold with her Iran hostage crisis film

By David Walsh
21 August 2020

Barbara Kopple's *Desert One*, released in theaters or available to stream today, is a documentary film about the US military's effort in April 1979 to free American embassy staff captured during the 1979 Iranian revolution.

It is a deplorable work, which, while making minor gestures in the direction of Iranian suffering under the US-backed Shah's regime, espouses nauseating pro-military and patriotic sentiments. In particular, it is a cinematic ode to former President Jimmy Carter and US Special Forces.

Kopple came to prominence with *Harlan County, USA* (1976), a documentary film focused on the Brookside Mine strike of 1973 in Harlan County, Kentucky, which pitted 180 coal miners and their families against the giant Duke Power Company (today Duke Energy). She later directed *American Dream* (1990), about the Hormel Food strike of 1985-86, and *Shut Up & Sing!* (2006), on the Dixie Chicks and their criticisms of George W. Bush and the Iraq war.

Kopple's *Desert One* presents Operation Eagle Claw, the Carter administration's plan to rescue the 52 US embassy staff, many of them no doubt CIA agents and spies complicit in the crimes of the Shah's torture regime, as noble and heroic. The press notes begin excitedly: "It has been called 'the most audacious, difficult, complicated, rescue mission ever attempted.' *Desert One* uniquely blends emotion and bravado to tell the incredible tale of America's secret mission to free the hostages of the 1979 Iranian revolution."

Much of the film simply provides a platform for Carter administration officials and former special forces officers and soldiers to wax nostalgic about the operation, which ended in a complete fiasco in the Iranian desert.

Kopple, in her director's statement, writes: "There

was *special* about these soldiers and warriors I came to know making *Desert One*. I was touched to be able to get to know another side of them I had never seen, and it changed me. They got real and surprisingly emotional with me. I will never forget the very personal conversations we had as they sat down to interview, telling me their own piece of a bigger story that clearly matters to them.

"I also experienced one of the most precious moments of my career on this film, sitting down to interview President Jimmy Carter."

Kopple's interviewees include, along with Carter, former Vice President Walter Mondale; former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates; Ted Koppel, the longtime anchor on ABC's "Nightline" (as the WSWS once characterized him, an "insufferable statesman of the airwaves" who was "little more than a conduit for US government and ruling elite propaganda"); Maj. James Q. Roberts, who, according to the film's press notes, spent "three decades working in the office of the Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict which oversees Special Forces command," and other assorted reprobates and professional killers.

A special mention must be made of the appearance in Kopple's film by Maj. William G. Boykin, the Christian Right zealot. Boykin made a foul name for himself in 2003 when, as deputy undersecretary of defense for intelligence, he repeatedly asserted that the Bush administration's "war on terror" was a religious war between Christianity and Islam, while making it clear that he himself answered only to God. There is certainly "something special" about him.

This is the company the former radical, Kopple, now keeps. Another American petty bourgeois "left" has returned to the fold.

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