

Movies

'The War Tapes' Provides a Soldier's-Eye View of the Days Over There



Critic's Pick

By A. O. SCOTT

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"The War Tapes," winner of the prize for best documentary at the Tribeca Film Festival last month, proceeds from a simple, powerful idea. The filmmakers gave small digital video cameras to members of the New Hampshire Army National Guard shortly before they were deployed to Iraq in early 2004, and invited them to record their experiences over there.

The film that the men shot, supplemented by home-front interviews and images captured by other soldiers, has been edited into a moving, complicated movie that illuminates, with heartbreaking clarity, some of the human actuality of this long, confusing war.

Like Michael Tucker and Petra Epperlein's "Gunner Palace," released last year, and James Longley's "Iraq in Fragments," shown at Sundance in January, "The War Tapes" declines to argue a position, preferring to concentrate on the fine grain of daily life in combat. Whatever your opinion of the war — and however it has changed over the years — this movie is sure to challenge your thinking and disturb your composure. It provides no reassurance, no euphemism, no closure. Given the subject and the circumstances, how could it?

By the end of "The War Tapes," which was directed by Deborah Scranton, you feel remarkably close to the three guardsmen, who represent themselves with a candor occasionally checked by flinty New England reticence. Specialist Mike Moriarty, at 34 the oldest of them, describes himself as a super-patriot and says he was eager to go to Iraq to exact some payback for the 9/11 attacks. By the time he returns home to his wife, two young children and a blue-collar job, his views have changed a little. While his support for the war has not wavered, he notes that he hated every minute he spent in Iraq and would not go back "if they paid me half a million dollars."

Specialist Moriarty disdains the idea that he is fighting a war for oil, but Sgt. Steve Pink insists on it. "This better be about money," he says, and about securing access to Iraqi petroleum. "We're not the Peace Corps."



Type: Documentary

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Rating: NR

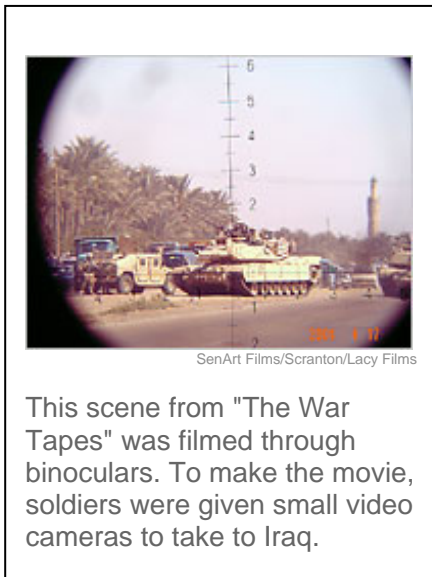
Running Time: 96 Minutes

Starring: Stephen Pink, Mike Moriarty, Zack Bazzi, Lindsay Coletti, Randi Moriarty

Directed by: Deborah Scranton

Sergeant Pink, whose diaries display a restless literary talent, is alive to the absurdity and the horror that surrounds him and aware that what he is living through will mark him forever. Of the three he is the funniest and the angriest, and his swagger can't entirely conceal his sensitivity.

Sgt. Zack Bazzi, a fluent speaker of Arabic and a reader of *The Nation*, loves being a soldier even as he expresses skepticism about the war and frustration at the prejudice and indifference some of his comrades express toward the Iraqis they are both protecting and fighting against. An immigrant from Lebanon (he becomes a citizen after his tour in Iraq is over), Sergeant Bazzi leaves behind a doting mother who can't quite believe that her son, having escaped the Lebanese civil war as a child, has now chosen to risk his life in another Middle East conflict.



This scene from "The War Tapes" was filmed through binoculars. To make the movie, soldiers were given small video cameras to take to Iraq.

Most of "The War Tapes" takes place in 2004, as the insurgency intensifies (and, almost incidentally, the American presidential elections come and go). Stationed in a camp near Baghdad that is among the most frequently attacked targets in the country, the guardsmen are assigned to protect supply convoys, trucks operated by KBR, a subsidiary of Halliburton. It is a hair-raising job, as they speed through chaotic traffic in their armored vehicles, trying to avoid civilian motorists and pedestrians, to say nothing of car bombs, improvised explosive devices and gunfire. Such attacks are frequent and are captured on camera with jarring immediacy.

So is a firefight in Fallujah, where the unit is sent on counter-insurgency operations at one point. The cameras also capture telling details of the Iraqi landscape and its people, and moments of unguarded emotion. The daily routine in Iraq is a roller-coaster of rage, fear, sorrow, loneliness, pride and exhaustion.

"The War Tapes," like most movies of its kind, acknowledges the enormous gap separating those who fight from those who stay home. In some ways the most painful scenes take place after the guardsmen come back and try to negotiate the transition from the grim, violent deserts of Iraq to the comforts and irritations of ordinary American life.

No one else can comprehend what they've been through, certainly not the audience members, who will at least try. Specialist Moriarty complains that nobody really wants to hear his stories, even though someone will occasionally express some polite curiosity. And Sergeant Pink, drinking beer with his girlfriend, muses that people don't really know what to say to him, and that there's nothing they can say that he really wants to hear. But then on second thought, and with some prompting, he admits that there is one sentence he doesn't mind hearing: "I'm glad you're home."