

New Bay Area Docs Shine Part III

The 2008 POV Season

by David L. Brown

THE BAY AREA DOCUMENTARY COMMUNITY is powerfully represented in this year's *POV* season on PBS, as the prestigious Emmy-winning series airs three superb social issue docs and one of the finest biographical music docs ever made – all from Bay Area documentarians.

This month we cover *Soldiers of Conscience* (airing October 16) from Gary Weimberg and Catherine Ryan. (Previously we covered Robert Elfstrom's 1969 vérité classic, *Johnny Cash: the Man, His World, His Music*; *The Judge and the General* from Elizabeth Farnsworth and Patricio Lanfranco; and *Freedom Machines* from Jamie Stobie and Janet Cole.)

To kill or not to kill?

Soldiers of Conscience, produced and directed by Gary Weimberg and Catherine Ryan, and narrated by Peter Coyote, is another powerful, well-crafted film that depicts personal transformation. It weaves the stories of eight US soldiers – four sincere war-fighters and four sincere conscientious objectors – who face the most difficult decision of their lives: to kill or not to kill. Made with official



photo Kevin O'Brien

Soldiers break the taboo against talking in Soldiers of Conscience

permission of the US Army, the film allows a variety of soldiers to speak intimately about killing and what it means to them, a subject that is rarely explored in documentaries.

From West Point grads to drill sergeants, from Abu Ghraib interrogators to low-ranking reservists-mechanics, the soldiers break the taboo of talking about the subject of killing. The filmmakers ask: When is it right to kill? Is war inevitable? What is your duty to your nation? To God? To your fellow soldiers? To your conscience?

Within the film's first five minutes, a US Army sergeant describes "the demons" that haunt him ever since he killed a 10-year-old grenade-throwing Iraqi boy. At Ft. Jackson, we see and hear the bloodcurdling chant of "kill, kill, kill without mercy!" as new recruits are trained to overcome their aversion

to killing. At a Penn State ROTC class, we learn the startling US Army statistic from WWII: among US soldiers who were under fire in combat, with their own lives at risk, 75% chose not to try to kill the enemy.

Beautifully shot in high definition by Kevin O'Brien, and well-edited by Weimberg and Josh Peterson, *Soldiers of Conscience* follows the emotional and spiritual transformation of four soldiers as they decide not to kill and to become conscientious objectors. Two go to prison: Camilo Mejia, the first combat veteran to come back from Iraq and publicly refuse to return; and Kevin Benderman, a 10-year veteran Army sergeant from Tennessee. The other two, guided by their faith, receive honorable discharges: Joshua Casteel, an evangelical Christian; and Aidan Delgado, a Buddhist.

The majority perspective on war is

voiced by combat veterans – Major Peter Kilner and three Fort Jackson drill sergeants. Major Kilner, a West Point professor of ethics and former 82nd Airborne infantry commander, combines his real-world military leadership experience with graduate training in philosophy to articulate the need for the strong to protect the weak, the moral justification of war, and the appropriate use of lethal force.

Soldiers of Conscience is remarkably balanced, fair and respectful to all viewpoints about this controversial subject. The graphic Iraqi war footage is more disturbing than most of the US media coverage and would seem to represent an anti-war perspective. This would hardly be surprising for a Bay Area doc. What is surprising and impressive is the respect Weimberg and Ryan afford to both sides, not in the least betraying the trust that permitted the film – with US Army cooperation – to be made. The film seems to argue that most soldiers have a conscience. Why is it that some lose their conscience temporarily in places like Abu Ghraib and My Lai?

These exemplary documentaries remind me, once again, how proud I am to be an active member of the Bay Area documentary community. Tune in to PBS for POV: www.kqed.org.

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