

# You Can't Handle The Truth

Sebastian Junger's new documentary shows war as it really is: mundane and heroless. Will anyone want to watch it?

BY ALEX HORTON

As they empty rifle magazines and machine gun drums into the Korengal Valley, the men of Second Platoon, Battle Company yell and cheer incoherently.

One of the soldiers focuses a camera on a machine gunner and zooms in to capture his barrel spitting torrents of smoke as his rounds pierce the far ridgeline. "That's the shit, dawg!" a soldier yells. The camera swings back to a dirtied American face. The Taliban, dead or alive, are nowhere to be seen.

If *Korengal* was a Hollywood war film, the end of this fight would transition to the next scene, moving the story closer to a bigger battle, where bravery would either save men, or more often, kill them, with a conflation of meaning between the two. But this movie isn't a fictionalized drama nor simply "based on actual events."

*Korengal*, which has opened to a limited run with a national release set for late June, is a documentary, a true story, perhaps too true for American audiences who want to see gunfire raking fictional characters and not the men and women it has sent to Iraq and Afghanistan again and again since 2001.

The wars themselves were experienced by most Americans vicariously through the smaller screen of televisions tuned to cable news, at least for a time. Media outlets have since abandoned their bureaus in Baghdad and Kabul while their audiences found war in the cinema, where stories are only as complicated as a two-hour runtime allows.

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With the comfortable distance of fiction and time from true events, the American appetite for realistic war films is undeniable. *Act of Valor*, a 2012 film that though it was a fictional story, starred real Navy SEALs and topped the box office its opening weekend without a single A-list actor. Last year's

*Lone Survivor*, a Mark Wahlberg film based on the true story of the one Navy SEAL to survive a doomed Afghanistan mission that wiped out the rest of his team, earned nearly \$150 million worldwide.

Both movies took pains to make their action scenes look and feel authentic. *Lone Survivor* is a well-known tragedy repackaged as an action flick, and *Act of Valor* came off as another vapid story of elite American troops saving the world. Neither film brought audiences any closer to understanding the moral turbulence of war, often defined in Iraq and Afghanistan as an instance where soldiers mistake civilians for insurgents in gun battles where, in the end, both are sometimes killed. In *Lone Survivor*, the very real moral dilemma of killing civilians in order to ensure operational security is discussed at length.

"Not killing kids. Not happening," says Luttrell (played by Wahlberg) after the SEAL team debates for minutes onscreen before they make the fateful decision to leave witnesses for the Taliban.

But the deliberation for most troops in that combat zone situation -- at a Baghdad checkpoint or an outpost in Helmand -- is measured in seconds with the same live-or-die consequences. In its depiction in both *Lone Survivor* and *Act of Valor* the bad guys are always known. In a real insurgency, it's nearly impossible to tell until the shooting begins.

In the end, both of these films fall short of showing the internal strife of troops, both in battle and long after they return home from deployment. The audience sees flesh torn apart and comrades killed, but the real struggle -- how troops cope with the violence they both inflict and endure -- is typically clipped from these Hollywood features. And so, the audience is never exposed to the truth of unquiet moments of questioning and moral confusion.

That isn't the case with *Korengal*. The soldiers on the screen describing profound experiences are the same ones shown celebrating dead enemy soldiers and wistfully thinking of home. These men see their friends lose lives and limbs. Brains are rocked, and for some, souls are stained. One veteran, who says he's not religious, reflects on how a higher power would view his deeds. "I started thinking that God hates me," he says back home after the tour. His cynical view is part of the film's larger exploration: What do soldiers contend with after the shooting ends?

*Korengal* is the second film by Sebastian Junger a well-regarded war correspondent who has dedicated his (recent) career to showing the realities of combat without the sheen of Hollywood veneer. His first effort, *Restrepo*, a 2010 documentary he co-created with the late photojournalist Tim Hetherington, followed Battle Company's 2007-2008 deployment in the Korengal Valley, where

20 percent of all combat in Afghanistan took place in its six square miles of mountains and valleys during Battle Company's deployment. All together, 42 American soldiers were killed during operations in the Korengal.

That documentary carried the name of both Second Platoon's outpost and their medic, medic Juan Restrepo, who was killed in action early in their deployment. The film, its very name conveying death, is about what war can take from you -- mostly life, but for many of the soldiers, it took their peace of mind, too.

Even with an Oscar nomination and strong reviews, audiences with a clear penchant for war films largely ignored *Restrepo* -- the film that got them closer to war than any other Hollywood effort. It only drew \$1.3 million dollars in the United States during its entire run. *Lone Survivor* earned 29 times more revenue in its opening weekend alone.

*Korengal* isn't a follow-up or, as some have described it, a story that picks up where *Restrepo* left off. It's the same war at the same outpost told in a new way. Where *Restrepo* focused on loss, *Korengal* shows what war gives soldiers: brotherhood, purpose, and, in some cases, moral skepticism about ill-defined counterinsurgency missions. While being interviewed back at home one soldier says that wishes he could have abducted and beaten the Afghan elders "to make them tell us the truth."

*Korengal* is a study of modern war, which is to say that very little has to do with gunfights or explosions. Rather, it's about people repairing or destroying fragile relationships. Captain Dan Kearney, Battle Company's commander, laments the

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Korengalis in an interview after the deployment.

"They're liars; they didn't want us," he says of the locals caught between American shelling and clandestine Taliban threats. "They didn't want our help."

The truth about all real wars is that they're mostly spent waiting. Second Platoon waits for the next

round to skip into a gun position, or a mortar to fall

onto their outpost. They wait to see if they'll be alive from one moment to the next. In the Valley of Death, combat isn't as destructive on the human mind as the bracing for its inevitable return.

During these long lulls between fighting, they sleep, wrestle, clean weapons, and play guitars. In one jarring scene, a despondent soldier walks the outpost physically grasping at others while babbling and looking into a mirror aimlessly. He has gone from 100 to zero, like a daredevil slamming into a brick wall. Other soldiers spend hours debating who would win a fistfight: George Clooney or Fabio.

And yet, the meaning of Second Platoon's brutal experience is as elusive to the men as it is to the audience. Sterling Jones, one of the soldiers from the platoon, explains how their hearts-and-minds counterinsurgency mission disintegrated on their first day in the Korengal after a soldier was killed almost immediately after their arrival. "When's my turn?" he asks rhetorically in an interview later at home, recalling his frame of mind with one day down, 449 to go in the tour. "How many people are we going to lose by the end of this?"

It's a question of mortality, but also one of mission. On their first day, Second Platoon's primary objective becomes the defense of each other to the death, despite the circular logic of that idea. In a guerilla war, with no clear battles to win, it becomes the most logical objective to achieve.

Given the dangers of the Korengal Valley, where nearly 50 soldiers were killed mostly between 2006 and 2009 in an effort to hold a crucial passageway to Pakistan, it might be bewildering for civilians to understand why troops are at once attracted to, and repelled by, the action of combat.

"War is life multiplied by some number that no one has ever heard of," Junger writes in his book *War*, also based on Battle Company's deployment. That idea makes war films exciting and simplistic, but when it's injected into the bloodstream of a soldier who must contend with that truth for decades after coming home, it becomes a statement moviegoers are not prepared to see or hear.

"I'd rather be there than here," one veteran says after he's returned home. "I'd go back to the Korengal right now."

That unsettling and powerful allure of combat is something Junger clearly wants his civilian audience to understand. But with the release of *Korengal* in 2014, right before the end of combat operations in Afghanistan and with tens of thousands of veterans slated to enter the civilian workforce over the next several years, an emphasis on a combat tale over the much more complex story of reintegration, gives the feeling of a story half told. The interviews we see in *Korengal* are conducted in a dark room; we don't see the soldiers of Second Platoon out in the world, finishing school or struggling to find work. Beyond their occasional downward glances, the effect of battle on these men is not fully realized on screen.

The tagline for *Korengal* is "This is what war feels like," but those feelings last for a combat tour. What civilians must also understand is what comes much later when veterans must navigate the civilian world, sometimes with both visible and invisible injuries.

In a TED talk he gave this year, Junger asked the audience to think about the path of a bullet, and how seemingly little things, like atmospheric pressure or the direction of the wind, can change the trajectory of the round completely during its flight. *Restrepo* and *Korengal* are the rounds leaving the chamber. The next story, perhaps the cap of a trilogy, will tell us where and how the bullets land in a distant valley.

Sterling Jones, the soldier who, at the beginning of their deployment, wondered if he'd be the next one to die, captures the duality of their time in the Korengal Valley -- of both meaning and the absolute absence of it. "Here I am," he says from Afghanistan, exhausted, weighed down in weaponry and sweat. "Fortunately and unfortunately, all at the same time."

Even though Hollywood has yet to capture the true realism of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in one of its blockbusters, the soldiers who appear in *Korengal* must feel like stars. They even contributed their own amateur photos and videos for the documentary.

A soldier in one video calmly sets up a camera during an ambush as another soldier shoots into the distance. After blazing through his ammunition, the first soldier quickly glances back into the lens, his attention focused on the image of combat before the physical motions of it play out.

As viewers, we have to wonder why, when the enemy is presumed to be in sight, does he look away to peer at his camera? The glimpse is over in a second, but it lingers. It's the middle of a gunfight, and the chief concern of this soldier is ensuring that he looks like the other men he has seen in countless movies. Those films are where the great lie of combat has taken hold: that war is over when the guns fall silent. Second Platoon, now home, has learned the war has only really begun.

Courtesy Goldcrest Films

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# To Boldly Go Across the Hexagonal Board

We play the board game in which Starfleet is a bunch of imperialist jerks.

BY MICHAEL PECK

**F**or a civilization that prides itself on being peaceful, the United Federation of Planets has a knack for getting into wars. It has battled Klingons, Romulans, Cardassians, the Dominion, the Borg, plus numerous other alien races and creatures. Gene Roddenberry may have envisioned the 23rd century as a utopia of peace and prosperity, but one has to wonder whether a day passed without some starship captain giving the command: "Fire phasers."

So with the debut of the newest *Trek* film, the aptly named *Star Trek Into Darkness*, with its focus on the question of militarism, it seems appropriate to examine the game in which the Federation is just another empire out to maximize