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Movie Review: 'This is War'

Filmed by Oregon soldiers, this movie gives a different Iraq perspective

By Chad Dryden - cdryden@idahostatesman.com
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In theory, a documentary is supposed to function like a newspaper article, presenting an objective report on a subject of public interest.

But anyone who has seen a documentary in the Michael Moore era knows that most nonfiction filmmakers bring an agenda to the screen.

Director Gary Mortensen bucks the trend with "This is War: Memories of Iraq," which will make its festival debut at the Idaho International Film Festival.

"Documentaries have morphed into political platforms," he said. "To be a good documentary filmmaker, you have to be objective. We were very clear we wanted to make an apolitical film — not an anti-war film or a recruitment film."

"This is War" follows nine Oregon National Guard soldiers into the heart of the Iraq conflict, from the front lines in Fallujah and Najaf to bomb-infested roads outside Baghdad where, as one soldier deadpans, they are "driving around until we get blown up."

"What we wanted to do was take the viewer through what a deployment was like," Mortensen said. "You have a unique insight into what these soldiers see for the first time."

Most of the footage was filmed by the soldiers, who captured the duality of boredom and danger in their daily lives during a yearlong tour beginning in 2004.

The making of "This is War" was not premeditated: The soldiers, unaware they would later star in a documentary, were filming on personal camcorders for family, friends and one another.

Only after their return home did Mortensen and executive producer Scot Laney, founder of the Military/Combat Stock Footage Library in the Portland suburb of Hillsboro, learn of the 40-plus hours of film and 100,000 digital photographs the soldiers had taken.

"None of this was scripted thinking it would be part of a documentary," said Mortensen, the library's president. "In viewing it, we were fascinated."

In particular, the filmmakers were taken by the humor: The soldiers crack jokes under fire and criticize their superiors on camera.

"They're goofing around while bullets are flying around them," Mortensen said. "It's a coping mechanism."

Considering their behavior, one would assume government roadblocks stood in the way of the film being made.

Not so; in fact, the Oregon National Guard offered additional footage and praised the finished work for its honesty.

Which is what Mortensen wanted — a war film from the soldiers' perspective, lacking analysis, slant or Hollywood gloss.

"It's not so much a film about Iraq as it is a film about America and another generation of Americans going out and doing their jobs," he said.

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Watch a trailer for "This is War"

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Go see "This is War"

4:30 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 29, Egyptian Theatre, 700 W. Main St., Boise, \$6 at the door.

7 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 30, The Flicks, 646 Fulton St., Boise. \$8 at the door.



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