

Of Men and War: Among the countless victims of American imperialist violence

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8 April 2016

Written and directed by Laurent Bécue-Renard

The colossal psychological damage of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) inflicted by the Iraq and Afghanistan wars on US soldiers is addressed in *Of Men and War*, an immersive documentary by French filmmaker Laurent Bécue-Renard.

These brutal, neo-colonial conflicts have created some 2.6 million new veterans, according to the film's production notes. The Defense Department estimates that up to a third of those struggle with war-related PTSD. As startling as those numbers are, one can safely assume that the Pentagon has excellent reasons for downplaying the actual extent of the disaster its actions have produced.

With a running time of 142 minutes, *Of Men and War* (now available online) centers on a group of primarily young, black, white and Latino veterans undergoing treatment at the Pathway Home, a private, non-profit PTSD therapy center for veterans in northern California.

The individuals recount their horrific war experiences on camera. One after another veteran reveals his rage and self-loathing, shattered nervous system and failing coping mechanisms. Close-ups of tearful, anguished faces dissolve into wider views of a room of former soldiers tormented by images of their victims and their comrades who died—and imprisoned in agonizing psychological conditions. A soldier speaks for many when he admits: "I have rage. I'm scared of myself. My wife is afraid of me."

Although Pathway Home staff greet the veterans as "highly skilled war fighters," many of these "war fighters" lack the ability, as one of them puts it, to alter the reality that their psyches are still "stuck in Iraq." Many do not sleep for days on end, they are unable to function socially or control their emotions.

The veterans' names and background information are not disclosed. In *Of Men and War*, the director and crew are invisible and the former soldiers speak with great candor. Clearly, there was a remarkable trust built between the filmmakers and their subjects.

The viewer is almost overwhelmed by the traumatic accounts. One soldier expresses frustration with the three questions frequently asked by civilians—did you kill someone, why did you kill them, and if there was any way not to kill them, would you in retrospect not have done it? The line of inquiry seems to prompt a continuous reliving of his nightmares.

While some of the veterans reveal that they initially saw the Iraqi population as "objects," one tells of his involvement in the killing of two Iraqi men at a checkpoint. Guilty about eliminating family "breadwinners," he and other soldiers attempted to help the families of the slain men. When asked what she would want most, the young daughter of one of the victims replied: "I wish America would get out of here. I hate you."

A medic is haunted by the Iraqi woman from whom he withheld treatment: The "hole [inside him] is so f---ing huge that I've become the hole." One of the youngest in the group tearfully tells of banging down a door of an Iraqi household and accidentally killing a child who was trying to open the door for him.

Another veteran describes "taking out" two teenage Iraqi boys. At the time, he was 22 years old himself. A father of three says: "Half the time, I don't like myself. That's the fear. It's like a monkey on my back. Sometimes he's quiet, sometimes he's not." One soldier accidentally shot his friend during the war: "I just wanted someone to shoot me. I hate myself more than anyone can hate me. Accident or not. Guilt is guilt. Shame is shame."

“We heard the B52s over us,” recalls the medic. “Then the horizon lit up. Couldn’t imagine being on the other side of that. It was bad...” Afterward, “they treated me like a hero. I’m not a hero.” Survival for one African American soldier means “fake it till you make it.” When asked if he would want his children to join the military, another veteran answers, “I hope they don’t.” One emotionally frozen vet came back from the war hating his wife and eventually referring to his newborn as a “little spawn.”

“Saving the guys that didn’t want to live. Not saving the guys who wanted to live ... It would have been a hell of a lot easier to have fallen down over there and not gotten back up,” was a common sentiment articulated in different forms. One soldier, whose wife filed for a restraining order and divorce papers, admits he is dangerous, adding that she has married “a man twice [her] size who is a lethal weapon.” One describes separating mangled bodies, another seeing an Iraqi man’s brain spill out after shooting him, and a third watching his friend disappear “within the confines of a body bag.”

Many teeter on the brink of suicide. One soldier explains “A lot of guys blow their f---ing brains out.” Towards the film’s end, a grieving mother talks to a therapist about her son’s suicide. *Of Men and War* is a difficult film to watch. Naming the war-induced trauma a “stress disorder” is a gross understatement.

Meticulous effort went into producing the documentary. In an interview, director Bécue-Renard explained that he shot “500 hours, a nightmare on paper. We didn’t start editing before therapy was over. Therapy was 14 months, including nine months of shooting, and then for the next four years we did some back and forth to see the guys with their families, while editing at the same time. So the editing lasted over those four years, and full time perhaps two and a half years, the last nine months with two editors at the same time because it’s so much material.

“There are almost 200 sessions that were filmed. I filmed 50 characters all the way through their therapy. Now we have 12 or 14 if you include those that don’t speak but are in the film.” In one of the several heartbreaking moments in the film, a young girl tells her attentive dad that “whatever happened to you, I’ll still love you.”

Of Men and War is the second installment of what

Bécue-Renard calls his “Genealogy of Wrath” trilogy. The first was his 2001 film *Living Afterwards: Words of Women*, made after having spent a year in Bosnia during the war. His aim is to reveal that “the psyche of the family has been cast in war.”

The filmmaker speaks of war, past and present, as if it were an eternal human curse. This perhaps explains why *Of Men and War* is deliberately minimalistic, as the director seeks to fit the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan into his abstract category of *wrath* “passed on from one generation to another.” Never examined in the movie is the concrete social and historical *character* of the wars—reckless, mad neocolonial enterprises perpetrated by the US and European powers for oil and geopolitical advantages.

Nonetheless, Bécue-Renard’s documentary is a unique, disturbing look at the devastating psychological and physical wounds suffered by America’s so-called “warriors.”

The young, mostly working class, soldiers—essentially economic conscripts—who return home after partaking in and witnessing the wanton carnage and the destruction of Iraq and Afghanistan and their peoples are forced to try and pick up the pieces of what were their former selves.

Their advanced state of alienation, self-hatred, despondency and propensity for violence is the product of 15 years of continuous warfare carried out under the fraudulent banner of the “war on terror.” Meanwhile the war criminals in the White House and the Pentagon go scot-free.

This perpetual state of war is not an inevitable part of human nature. But it does account for the deeply desired psychological redress that eludes the soldiers who bare their souls in *Of Men and War*.



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