

Thank You for Your Service: How many victims are there of America's ongoing wars?

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9 November 2017

Written and directed by Jason Hall

Jason Hall's directorial debut, *Thank You for Your Service*, is a drama about three US soldiers returning from the Iraq War and their difficulties adjusting to civilian life.

The film is based on the 2013 non-fiction book of the same title by *Washington Post* reporter David Finkel, who concentrated on veterans of the 2nd Battalion, 16th Infantry Regiment returning to Kansas after a 15-month deployment in Iraq in 2007-2008.

The new movie's greatest failing is its attempt to portray the psychic injuries inflicted on young American soldiers without addressing the character of US imperialism's neo-colonial enterprise in the Middle East. *Thank You for Your Service* takes for granted the just character of that conflict, or at least never raises the issue. In other words, what ought to be considered and criticized before anything else, the drive for global hegemony by the American ruling elite that goes by the name of the "war on terror" and which is responsible for the murderous violence done to Iraqis, Afghans and Americans, is left unexamined. The film is concerned solely with the immediate fate of the US troops.

The storyline is simple enough. Adam Schumann (Miles Teller), the movie's central character, is guilt-ridden for having survived physically intact when others in his platoon were not so lucky. His recurring nightmare involves having dropped another soldier Michael Emory (Scott Haze) on his head, while he was carrying him out of a building during an ambush in Iraq ("I still taste his blood"). Adam is fortunate to be returning to a loving, patient wife (Haley Bennett) and their two small children.

Tausolo "Solo" Aieti (Beulah Koale), an American Samoan, although he too has the support of his (pregnant) wife, wants nothing more than to re-enlist. He credits the military with saving his life, by supposedly giving him some kind of one. Having survived a blast from an Improvised Explosive Device (IED), his brain has been severely traumatized. The last of the lead trio in *Thank You for Your Service* is Will Waller (Joe Cole), who discovers upon his return that his fiancée has emptied their house and taken their daughter, leading him to commit suicide not long after the movie begins.

Reminiscences in bars between the three—later, the

two—revolve around the death in Iraq of a fellow serviceman, James Doster, whose wife (Amy Schumer—playing it straight in an unimpressive performance) only gets the full story of his fate toward the end of the film. Solo soon becomes the patsy of a hard-nosed drug dealer—a veteran of the Persian Gulf War.

Every Iraq war veteran in *Thank You for Your Service* is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in one form or another. The movie's production notes point out that since September 11, 2001, of the two million servicemen and women who have been deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan, or both, "roughly 500,000 have returned with some level of psychological wound."

However, the movie's scope is breathtakingly narrow. We witness the callous treatment of the former soldiers at the hands of the Department of Veterans Affairs bureaucracy, but it does not occur to the filmmakers to make any connection between the brutality of this treatment and the brutality of the war itself. In the end, the American ruling elite, including the military brass, adopts the same hostile attitude toward its "heroes" in uniform as it does toward the populations it is attempting to subdue. The veterans are entirely disposable as soon as they are no longer able or willing to fight, a "drain" on resources and best left to rot.

Hall's *Thank You for Your Service* does not even go through the motions of pretending to have any concern for the Iraqi people, who have suffered horribly for nearly three decades as a result of Washington's geopolitical aims. More than one million Iraqis have died as a result of the actions of the American military, CIA and their allies in one of the greatest crimes of modern history.

The brief scenes in Iraq exist only as the occasion for American soldiers to suffer from atrocities committed by a dark, alien race. ("We never slowed down—we just mowed them down," says Adam without remorse.) Hall has created a group of unconscious beings who never question what they were doing in and to someone else's country. In fact, many US veterans are devastated precisely by what they did to Iraq and the Iraqis, not by what the Iraqis—fighting a foreign invader—did to them.

The list of Iraq and Afghanistan war movies of exceptional quality is not that long, but a number of the better fiction and

documentary works have driven home precisely this last point, including *Of Men and War* (2014, Laurent Bécue-Renard), *Good Kill* (2014, Andrew Niccol), *The Kill Team* (2013, Dan Krauss), *Far from Afghanistan* (2012, the sections directed by Minda Martin and Travis Wilkerson), *How to Fold a Flag* (2009, Michael Tucker and Petra Epperlein), *Battle for Haditha* (2007, Nick Broomfield) and others.

The pedigree of *Thank You for Your Service* is not a good one. Director Hall was the screenwriter for Clint Eastwood's dreadful 2015 movie *American Sniper*, whose promotion was, as the WSWS wrote, "the latest means by which the political and media establishment in the US is pursuing its militaristic agenda." In the press notes for his *Thank You for Your Service*, Hall uncritically refers to the US as an "empire" and describes the soldiers as "warriors." At the very best, he is bowing resignedly to this "imperialist" reality.

Furthermore, basing one's film on the writings of Finkel, a conventional bourgeois journalist formerly "embedded" with the US military in Iraq and supporter of the "war on terror," is a poor starting-point for any serious project.

According to the movie's production notes, it "was during journalist David Finkel's eight-month tenure embedded with the soldiers of the 2-16 Infantry Battalion that he met the man [Adam Schumann] who would largely serve as the bridge between his account of 'over there' [in Iraq] (detailed in *The Good Soldiers*) and 'coming home' (*Thank You for Your Service*)."

Finkel's sympathy for the damaged troops is entirely empty and hypocritical, since he endorses the lies and propaganda that helped get them there in the first place. He would merely like the American military to take a little more care in the conduct of its global warfare, including the treatment of veterans, so that it does not arouse popular indignation and opposition at home.

Tellingly, in US army whistleblower Bradley (now Chelsea) Manning's 2013 personal statement to his court martial, he condemned Finkel for withholding the video that became known as "Collateral Murder" when it was later released by WikiLeaks, showing US gunships sadistically killing a group of Iraqis, including two journalists, in Baghdad in July 2007.

Manning told the court: "In Mr. Finkel's book [*The Good Soldiers*, 2009], he writes about the aerial weapons team attack. As I read an online excerpt in Google Books, I followed Mr. Finkel's account of the event belonging to the video.

"I quickly realize that Mr. Finkel was quoting, I feel in verbatim, the audio communications of the aerial weapons team crew. It is clear to me that Mr. Finkel obtained access and a copy of the video during his tenure as an embedded journalist. I was aghast at Mr. Finkel's portrayal of the incident. Reading his account, one would believe the engagement was somehow justified as 'payback' for an earlier attack that led to the death of a soldier."

Unfortunately, pop star Bruce Springsteen was more than

happy to lend his talents to the production. His new song, "Freedom Cadence," plays during the closing credits. According to the filmmakers "Bruce loved it [the film], [and] watched it twice." *Thank You for Your Service* does make an effort to present the trauma that has permanently injured the delicate fabric of the minds and personalities of young soldiers. Although their social and economic backgrounds are never indicated, one assumes they were plucked from the working class and disenfranchised of Topeka, Kansas, a Midwestern city.

Koale's Solo is effective as a man leading a life in purgatory, unable, despite the presence of wife and infant son, to anchor himself to any meaningful reality. But it becomes tedious to listen to and watch half-men bouncing around like pinballs, the filmmaker never allowing them to express a thought about the wider questions involved. It is also tedious to be exposed to the film's complacent outlook about life in America.

Speaking of which, the movie that comes to mind as a sharp contrast here is William Wyler's *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), about three veterans returning from World War II. That work, made in the aftermath of a conflict that was seen by millions as a legitimate struggle against fascism, exhibited a far more critical spirit in relation to American society and the military itself.

Memorably, Dana Andrews as Fred Derry in Wyler's film wants nothing more than to get out of his uniform and never put it on again. He balks when his status-conscious wife (Virginia Mayo) wants him to dress up like a soldier when they go out at night. As for his medals, Derry tells his father, "Fancy words that don't mean anything. You can throw 'em away." The tone of *The Best Years of Our Lives* is generally democratic, sensitive and thoughtful.

The makers of *Thank You for Your Service* are engaged in a very different and crude kind of effort, covering up the social contradictions in American life and essentially whitewashing a widely *detested* war, while wringing their hands in false-populist style at the fate of a selected few of its victims.



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