

My Dead Friend Zoe: “Imperial Storm Troopers tricked into modern colonialism” and their fate

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8 September 2025

Kyle Hausmann-Stokes, who served five years as a paratrooper in the Iraq War, wrote and directed *My Dead Friend Zoe*, a dark comedy about Afghan and Vietnam War veterans.

The premise of the film is that Merit Charles (Sonequa Martin-Green), who survived the war in Afghanistan, is regularly visited by and speaks to the ghost of her former fellow soldier, Zoe Ramirez (Natalie Morales). Merit and Zoe were great friends and relied upon one another while in Afghanistan.

In the present, Merit is at loose ends, confused, flailing about. At her job in a warehouse, she caused a near deadly accident and has been ordered by the court to attend a self-help group for veterans, led by Dr. Cole (Morgan Freeman). He refuses to sign her paperwork unless she opens up about her war trauma. Zoe, whom of course no one but Merit can see, is a sardonic, genially mocking presence and commentator on her old friend’s life and hard times.

Meanwhile, Merit learns from her mother Kris (Gloria Reuben) that her recently widowed grandfather Dale (Ed Harris), who spent decades in the military, has wandered off from the remote cabin in Oregon where he lives and has been found on the side of a highway (“He didn’t seem to know where he was”), obviously suffering from incipient mental difficulties. Merit initially attempts to rid herself of her responsibility in regard to her grandfather, but she eventually moves in to the cabin for a time and re-establishes their relationship, which has been strained for years.

Kris and Merit begin to organize moving Dale to a retirement home, without letting him know their intentions. The phantom Zoe goads Merit about the secrecy:

Why don’t you tell him [Dale] about your big plans for him instead? How you’re going to take him away from his home, his boat and his birds, and stick him in a septuagenarian purgatory where he’ll die confused and alone.

When the older man learns of his daughter and granddaughter’s efforts, he denounces the latter as a “traitor.”

Through flashbacks, we learn more about Merit and Zoe’s experiences in Afghanistan. A tension exists between them based on Zoe’s feeling that her college-educated friend has a future

“after this” (the Afghanistan war), but she does not. “Not everybody has a happy fuckin’ home to go back to, Merit.”

When Zoe recklessly leaves the US base and exposes herself to potential sniper fire at one point, Merit demands to know, “Why are you acting like your life doesn’t mean anything?” Zoe replies that her life *doesn’t*, in fact, mean anything, to which her friend then responds,

—Zoe, you’re so big and your whole life is ahead of you and you don’t even see it.

—What life?

—We’ll make it work. We will make it work. Okay? After the Army. We’ll figure it out.

Merit’s dejected state in the present is bound up with the fact that she failed to carry through on this pledge, leading, she believes, to tragedy.

There are relatively plausible and recognizable situations and characters in *My Dead Friend Zoe* and generally talented performers. However, the issues raised are dealt with in such a superficial fashion, meant to flesh out certain of the writer-director’s notions and “prescriptions,” that Hausmann-Stokes’ film fails to move strongly or illuminate the conditions in a meaningful manner. It never sheds an air of conventionality and predictability. The images are listless, not sharp or purposeful. The film remains largely on the surface.

These flaws flow from the greatest and most glaring weakness, concentrated in the creators’ conviction that they can tellingly present the lives and fate of military personnel without giving *any serious thought* to the nature of the conflicts in which those individuals saw action. This is not a neutral stance here (“We support the troops, not the wars”), as it never is. This type of “support” for the rank-and-file soldiers can’t be walled off from confronting the concrete social role and vast, world-historic crimes of the American military.

In any event, *My Dead Friend Zoe*, as it unfolds, gradually drops its anti-establishment pretenses and becomes an uncritical and unhealthy endorsement of the US armed forces, the principal source of violence and terror on the planet for decades, and their

supposedly honorable traditions.

It is difficult to imagine that any thinking writer or director, for example, would have dared to make a film in the 1940s-1970s about a Wehrmacht veteran of World War II without a reference to what the German military did during its murderous operations. But, changing what needs to be changed, this is precisely what numerous American filmmakers (and not only American) attempt to do in our day. Such works are inherently dishonest and, inevitably, unconvincing. At one level or another, the writers and directors know they are hiding something.

There are two fleeting references in *My Dead Friend Zoe* to the Afghanistan-Iraq wars. Early in the film, Zoe, bored and irritated by the group therapy session that Merit is court-mandated to attend, observes:

Didn't we join the most powerful military of all time, did we survive the dumbest wars of all time, just to sit here broken and all "Kumbaya" and, "Oh, gee, my feelings"?

Toward the end, in a scene set in Afghanistan, a discussion between the two women about whether Zoe should re-enlist or not, she asks rhetorically:

Aren't you the one that calls us Imperial Storm Troopers tricked into modern colonialism?

Two sentences, one of them a scoffing question that goes unanswered. That is the sum total of the analysis in *My Dead Friend Zoe* of the 20-year war in Afghanistan, which wrecked an already devastated, impoverished society, and left it starving and bleeding from every pore. One source writes:

The American war in Afghanistan incurred staggering costs—for the United States, Afghans and others—over two decades. The U.S. government spent \$2.3 trillion, and the war led to the deaths of 2,324 U.S. military personnel, 3,917 U.S. contractors and 1,144 allied troops. For Afghans, the statistics are nearly unimaginable: 70,000 Afghan military and police deaths, 46,319 Afghan civilians (although that is likely a significant underestimation) and some 53,000 opposition fighters killed. Almost 67,000 other people were killed in Pakistan in relation to the Afghan war [for a total of 236, 319 deaths].

The full extent of the indirect costs is greater still, considering injuries and illnesses, displacement, war widows and orphans, malnutrition, destruction of infrastructure and environmental degradation due to the war. (United States Institute of Peace)

titles, pointing out, among other things, that since 9/11 a total of 127,000 American veterans have died by suicide, a figure 18 times greater than the number of US soldiers killed in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. Seven out of 10 of them have used guns.

The hundreds of thousands of dead or wounded Afghans go entirely unnoticed in the final titles, as they do in the body of the drama itself. No one utters the word "Afghan" even once.

The absence of any concern with "modern colonialism" and the catastrophic consequences of US involvement in Afghanistan—in fact, over the course of more than four decades—is not simply a false political and human choice. It renders impossible, in fact, a penetrating understanding of the American characters' own tribulations, including the phenomenon of widespread mental distress and suicide among veterans, who are also imperialism's victims.

In the wake of the suicide of US Air Force serviceman Aaron Bushnell in February 2024, WSWs International Editorial Board Chairman David North observed in a public lecture that

Soldiers and veterans comprise a significant segment of the victims of suicide in the United States. The substantial rise of suicides among soldiers has been clearly related to this country's continuous involvement in wars. A study released in 2014 showed that "the suicide rate rose from 12.1 to 18.1 to 24.5 per 100,000 person-years of active duty in the years 2004-05, 2006-07, and 2008-09, respectively."

In assessing the cause of suicides in the Air Force, the 2013 study in the *Journal of Affective Disorders* noted that "only one quarter of active Air Force personnel who die by suicide have ever deployed to a combat zone, and less than 7% have directly experienced combat." However, the report did find a "sense of regret or remorse or 'feeling bad about what I did'" was related to suicidal impulses among Air Force personnel.

Hausmann-Stokes deliberately breaks any connection between the nature of the Afghanistan war and suicide through sleight of hand, turning the tragedy into a mere matter of personal betrayal.

The general refusal to confront the terrible legacy of serving in an imperialist war, where soldiers, whatever their level of social awareness, certainly recognize themselves to be hated and reviled as foreign invaders and oppressors, pervades and undermines *My Dead Friend Zoe* from beginning to end.



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Hausmann-Stokes concludes his film with a series of fact-filled