



New Film Shines Light on War-Time Medicine

Documentary Screened on Capitol Hill, Just Miles From Military Hospitals With War Wounded

By Lauren Effron
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In a basement room in the Capitol building this week, several members of Congress gathered to take a closer look at some of the unsung heroes of the war in Iraq.

They screened the new documentary feature, "Fighting for Life," which explores the stories of military doctors and staff who work to save lives in Iraq. It also takes a look at those who train the medical specialists who will soon be on the frontlines as well.

This is no "Grey's Anatomy."

The film, by Academy Award-winning filmmaker Terry Sanders, includes disturbing scenes of bodies in various states of damage as they're speeded off helicopters into a tent hospital in Balad, Iraq, some 60 miles outside Baghdad. The chaos unfolds around Sanders as one doctor looks blankly into his camera and describes his job as just "taking care of casualties."

But calmness in the face of horror and chaos doesn't mean the work is taken lightly. "Before this conflict started, this idea of service over self was just words," another doctor said.



Scenes from a field hospital in Balad, Iraq, as portrayed in the new documentary "Fighting for Life." (American Film Foundation)

From Medical School to the Frontlines

The film continually moves back to the medical students at the Uniformed Services University of Health Sciences in Bethesda, Md., watching as they learn the skills for their future job. "Fighting for Life" shows them cutting open cadavers and running through training exercises for "damage control treatment" in wooded obstacle courses, not fully knowing what's to come when they meet real patients and real war.

Sanders said one of his key motivations for making the film was to shine a light on USUHS, the military medical school in Maryland dubbed the "West Point of military medicine." The school has been threatened with closure five times in the past 15 years because of funding challenges. Sanders said he wanted to "make a film that would put it on the map."

Sanders had only one additional motivation for the film: "It's also a reminder -- really a plea -- please, never forget the wounded."

Sanders said he and his crew were careful not to intrude on the medical work they observed, noting that his team never set up lights for filming, using only the light that was available. He admitted that you see "a little bit of blood" in the film, but that his goal was not to be gruesome but to show "just enough to remind you that war is not fun and games."

Star Turn

The second half of "Fighting for Life" follows one soldier, 21-year-old Army Specialist Crystal Davis, on her road to recovery as she tries to "bounce back" from the loss of a leg. Her story begins when she is first wounded and brought into the field hospital in Balad. The camera follows her to Germany and eventually back to Ward 57, the amputee rehabilitation ward at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington. Davis' powerful story becomes the centerpiece of the film.

"This one turned out to be an incredible choice, because she is one of the toughest people I've ever met," director and co-producer Sanders said. "She's so athletic now -- doesn't have any canes, doesn't have a wheelchair."

Sanders said he and his crew had been filming in Iraq for four days when Davis came into the Balad hospital. They had been hoping to follow an injured soldier through the recovery process, but Sanders said there was never any guarantee they would find someone willing to let the cameras so close during such a painful and personal time.

"[Davis] was conscious and able to give her OK for the filming, and I realized 'wow -- this is amazing,' and we should just stick with her," Sanders said, adding that they continued to film her for eight more months.

Congressional Screening Room

The film held powerful messages for the members of Congress in the audience, including Reps. Chris Van Hollen, D-Md., and Joe Wilson, R-S.C.

"I think it's important that people have a very realistic view of Iraq," Van Hollen said. "Regardless of where someone may stand on whether the war was a good or a bad idea in the first place, this kind of film helps really bring that home."

Wilson, who is a veteran with 31 years of military service and has two sons who have served in Iraq, is a strong supporter of saving the military's medical school in Bethesda and keeping the troops in Iraq fully funded by Congress. One of his own sons, Addison, is Navy doctor currently working in a field hospital in Iraq and is a graduate of the USUHS medical program.

As the credits rolled and Bruce Springsteen's "No Surrender" faded away, the lights came back on and the screening room was abuzz with supportive remarks from several congressmen and others in the room. They all wanted to know how they could help the movie reach a wider audience.

One exceptionally emotional moment came when Wilson stood up and announced that he had just received an e-mail message on his BlackBerry from his son, Lt. Addison Wilson, from Iraq. Choking back tears, the congressman

read the message aloud: "I'm doing well. Hope you're having a good day. Much love."

Wilson said he was very pleased with the way the movie turned out. "It is such a tribute to the young people who serve our country. ... It couldn't have been any better."

Medical School With a Mission

Several students from USUHS also attended the screening. Air Force Capt. Danielle Deutschendorf, a member of the class of 2009 who is studying to be a nurse practitioner, said the movie left her "speechless."

"It was very touching, very realistic," Deutschendorf said. "I would like to have my family and friends see the movie so they can understand what we do and why we do it."

Did the film make her nervous about the work she will soon be doing in a combat zone? "This is what we train for," she said. "Personally, I look forward to that."

Her husband, Joe Deutschendorf, a disabled veteran, joined her at the screening and said he thought the film could provide comfort to family members here at home.

"[The film] helps tremendously to understand why we're all going through this. ... It would help people deal," he said.

Another class of 2009 student at the screening, Lt. Stephanie Duffy, has already served in the Navy for 12 years and is studying at USUHS to get her master's in nursing anesthesiology. She said "the reality of it all" was enlightening.

"I know this is what we do and this is my job, so it excites me," Duffy said. But "it does scare you a little bit when you see it all in perspective."