



March 6, 2008

Fighting for Life

(Documentary) A Truly Indie release of an American Film Foundation presentation. Produced by Terry Sanders. Executive producer, Tammy Alvarez. Co-producer, Jennifer Glos. Directed by Terry Sanders. Written by Sanders, Christine Wisner.

With: Crystal Davis, David Welling, Daniel Inouye.

By JOHN ANDERSON

The only people who seem immune to the politics of the Iraq War are also at its epicenter: the doctors and nurses who mend and tend to the wounded, and who provide the heart and soul of Terry Sanders' "Fighting for Life." Docu about combat medicine is getting a limited theatrical release and will likely follow the route of most Iraq War-themed cinema, onto the scrap heap of theatrical -- which doesn't make it any less of a film, but may make us less as an audience.

"Fighting for Life" apparently was originated by Sanders as a profile of the Maryland-based Uniformed Services U. of the Health Sciences, from which, the film tells us, 25% of active-duty physicians have graduated. It has also come under consistent attack by budget-cutting congressmen more concerned with the spoils of war than its casualties.

Having witnessed the work done in the field, Sanders broadened the movie's scope to include combat hospitals, rehabilitative units and, inevitably, the horrendous physical damage. What's onscreen is among the most disturbing footage to come out of the Iraq cinema experience: The squeamish might find the USU cadaver scenes even more disturbing than the images of soldiers' injuries. But the footage makes a profound point about what kind of person can practice this kind of medicine at all, much less do it in a war zone.

Sanders and his crew probe relentlessly with their cameras, never recoiling from the most horrendous, bone-revealing injury, or from the long road of pain and disability ahead for most of the very young people on stretchers, or from the older but unjaded medical teams around them. Pic makes it clear how much recovery is going to be needed for everyone, and not just the legless, armless combat vets.

"Fighting for Life" is briskly paced, and there's often a palpable, appropriate sense of disorientation parlayed through the roaming p.o.v., which can often leave a viewer wondering what exactly he or she is looking at -- did that used to be a leg? It's an artistic decision and a correct one, because as much as one might like to, it's very tough to look away.

The film makes the most of the seemingly unlimited access provided by USU, whose administration was probably aware of just how valuable such exposure could be for their institution. Production values, especially the HD camerawork, are tops.

Camera (color, HD), Erik Daarstad, Buddy Squires; editors, Brian Johnson, Anne Stein; music, Scott Michael Ford; sound, Samuel Lehmer; assistant director, Brittany Sanders. Reviewed on DVD, Los Angeles, March 4, 2008. Running time: 89 MIN.