

'Fighting for Life' Shows Real Blood, And Real Guts

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Most documentaries about the Iraq war have sought to investigate, expose, critique and provoke. "Fighting for Life" bucks that trend. Rather than join the polemical free-for-all of the past five years, filmmaker Terry Sanders has chosen to take viewers on a riveting, often painfully graphic journey through the extraordinary efforts of military physicians, nurses and medical aides who receive their training at the elite Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences in Bethesda. As one of the film's subjects astutely observes, issues of life and death on the battlefield transcend politics.



With great power and sensitivity, "Fighting for Life" shows the rush to save the wounded in Iraq. (Truly Indie)

That doesn't mean that "Fighting for Life" doesn't have an agenda. It was co-produced by a nonprofit group that promotes the university, which over its 35-year history has occasionally faced threats it would be cut from the Pentagon budget. But if "Fighting for Life" is propaganda, it's the best kind, largely avoiding blatant editorialization and instead focusing on simple human drama. The result is a film that qualifies as essential viewing when partisan rhetoric and administration spin too often obscure the war's human cost.

Founded in 1972, the school features special in-depth exercises in treating injuries on the battlefield, complete with blood squibs and fake wounds that would make Wes Craven quake.

Sanders follows the school's Class of 2010 as they learn the ropes, but the real action of "Fighting for Life" occurs with alums in Iraq. Sanders takes his camera into the "M*A*S*H"-like field centers where soldiers arrive with unspeakable injuries from roadside bombs (mostly trauma to the head and extremities). In 48 hours or less, they fly to a hospital in Germany, then finally to Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

Sanders ("Maya Lin: A Strong Clear Vision") never flinches in showing the blood, viscera and immense suffering that too often remains on the cutting-room floor in the journalistic media. (It's tempting to suggest that the teenagers who have made the "Saw" and "Hostel" franchises such hits see "Fighting for Life," if only to get scared straight about the reality behind those films' warped idea of escapist fantasy.)

"Fighting for Life" gets so close to the pain of its subjects that more squeamish viewers will sometimes need to turn away. Gratifyingly, Sanders follows his characters not just with clinical frankness but with deep sensitivity, finally creating an unsettling yet unforgettable portrait of suffering, courage and resilience -- from a badly burned Iraqi toddler to a courageous Army specialist who loses her leg in Iraq and begins to reclaim her life at Walter Reed.

The issue of why these soldiers and civilians have sacrificed so much lingers silently at the edges of "Fighting for Life." One of the film's great strengths is that it trusts viewers to ask -- and answer -- that question for themselves.

Fighting for Life (89 minutes, at Landmark's E Street and Bethesda Row) is not rated. It contains graphic imagery of war injuries and surgery.