



Restrepo Discussion Guide

Director: Sebastian Junger & Tim Hetherington

Year: 2010

Time: 93 min

You might know these directors from:
RESTREPO is Junger's and Hetherington's first feature-length documentary film.

FILM SUMMARY

RESTREPO chronicles the daily lives of U.S. soldiers during their 14-month tour of duty in an especially dangerous part of Afghanistan - the Korangal Valley, also known as "the Valley of Death." Between May 2007 and July 2008, filmmakers Sebastian Junger and Tim Hetherington follow a 15-man platoon into the remote outpost of "Restrepo." It was named in honor of a beloved platoon medic, Juan "Doc" Restrepo, who was killed in action. This U.S. military posting was considered one of the most perilous, and the film seeks to capture the emotional experience of soldiers and to convey the horror, brutality, and disorientation of war. The film doesn't interview generals or diplomats and avoids explicit political discussion and commentary. Instead, RESTREPO reveals the soldier's viewpoint in an extraordinary piece of journalistic, vérité work. The cameras remain in the valley, recording everything from intense firefights and dangerous reconnaissance missions to off-duty exploits and long stretches of tedium and boredom.

Junger is a veteran war correspondent and the author of several books, the most famous being "The Perfect Storm." Hetherington is an experienced war photographer. When the tour was over, Junger and Hetherington interviewed many of the returned soldiers. Far away from the battlefields, the soldiers try to understand what they were doing; they try to make sense of their experiences. This powerful and revelatory film, RESTREPO, gives them the space to do so.

FILM THEMES

RESTREPO was intentionally made to give viewers an opportunity to form their own conclusions about the war in Afghanistan. It is not an attempt to humanize war, but to reveal the humans physically involved in war, and to bring others closer to the reality we all share in.

WAR THROUGH THE EYES OF SOLDIERS

This film prioritizes the experience of soldiers over the political issues of the war in Afghanistan. Their movements, thoughts, and emotions are documented, allowing us to see the combat through their eyes, allowing us to see their fear, their boredom, their courage, and most of all, their humanity. Soldiers in combat grapple with existential questions that most people never ask until they get to the end of their lives.

THE ENJOYMENT OF SERVING

Interviews with the soldiers clearly demonstrate that they suffer from post-traumatic stress. But it's not clear that any of them have regrets about their war experience. In fact, most soldiers end up returning to war zones. "Combat isn't where you might die," wrote Junger. "It's where you find out whether you get to keep on living. Don't underestimate the power of that revelation. Don't underestimate the things young men will wager in order to play that game one more time."

DEHUMANIZATION OF THE ENEMY

We typically think that all people have basic human rights that should not be violated. War, however, makes it difficult for stakeholders to recognize that everyone, even enemy soldiers, are part of a shared human community. Dehumanization is the psychological process of making the enemy seem less than human and hence not worthy of humane treatment. War ethics have their place in international conventions, but the impulse to desecrate the enemy or to cheer at the sight of dead enemies still emerges. Hetherington said that going to war zones really changed him because it helped him realize how interconnected the world is. What happens in one place, to one person, happens everywhere, to everyone.

WAR JOURNALISM

RESTREPO has been applauded for its unvarnished realism. The filmmakers tried to get as close as possible to the soldiers in order to understand their emotional reality. However, Hetherington and Junger recognize their attachment to and identification with the soldiers. Junger said: "Journalistic convention holds that you can't write objectively about people you're close to, but you can't write objectively about people who are shooting at you either." They sought to make a totally objective film so that viewers could form their own conclusions, but in the end, Hetherington admits that documentaries are constructions, as is all journalism.

“Soldiers themselves are reluctant to evaluate the costs of war, but someone must. That evaluation, ongoing and unadulterated by politics, may be the one thing a country absolutely owes the soldiers who defend its borders.”

Sebastian Junger

“Often we see scenes of disaster and forget the people are individuals with stories and lives.”

Tim Hetherington

FILM FACTS:

- Human rights issues have been the main focus of Junger’s overseas reporting since his first trip to Bosnia in 1993. He has reported for Vanity Fair magazine from many war zones across the world. He was trapped in Monrovia during the 2003 Liberian civil war, caught in Sierra Leone during the 2000 civil war, and in 2006, briefly held by oil rebels in the Niger Delta.
- Junger simultaneously wrote dispatches for Vanity Fair, gathered material for his book “War,” and made RESTREPO with Hetherington. Junger is the acclaimed author of the books, “The Perfect Storm” and “War.”
- Hetherington reported on conflict and human rights issues for more than 10 years. He was the only photographer to survive the rebel lines during the 2003 Liberian civil war. His time in Liberia culminated in the film *Liberia: an Uncivil War*, and the book, “Long Story Bit by Bit: Liberia Retold.”
- In 2006, Hetherington partnered with Human Rights Watch to reveal civilian massacres on the Chad-Darfur border. This footage appeared in the documentary film, *The Devil Came on Horseback* (2007). Hetherington worked as a cinematographer for the same film.
- As journalists, Junger and Hetherington had more war experience than any of the soldiers they were surrounded by.
- Seven men died during the Restrepo deployment, including Juan “Doc” Restrepo.
- Each javelin round used in the war cost \$80,000. It’s fired by a guy who doesn’t make that in a year at a guy who doesn’t make that in a lifetime.
- Once, while filming an offensive attack, Hetherington broke his leg. The medic lied, saying it wasn’t broken, because they were four hours away from base and the only way to return was for Hetherington to walk.
- About one-third of the outpost soldiers were re-deployed back to Kunar, Afghanistan.
- The U.S. military closed the Korengal Outpost on April 14, 2010. The valley reverted to Taliban control, but was re-opened by the U.S. in June 2011 because of growing problems with the anti-Afghanistan forces or anti-coalition militia.
- Hetherington was killed on April 20, 2011 while covering the conflict in Libya. Junger paid tribute to his friend by compiling a film called, *Which Way Is The Front Line From Here? The Life and Time of Tim Hetherington* (2013).

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Give others an opportunity to be moved and gain understanding from this story.
2. Read [War](#) by Sebastian Junger, which describes his experience in Korengal Valley in more depth.
3. Support the [Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors](#) or a similar organization in your country, that work with soldiers returning from war conflict.
4. Donate. Make a donation in memory of Tim Hetherington. The Hetherington family has named three charities for which you can make donations: [Milton Margai School for the Blind](#) in Sierra Leone, [Human Rights Watch](#), and the [Committee to Protect Journalists](#).
5. Educate yourself to the events happening in the world. Since we are increasingly disconnected from the conflicts and countries on whom we depend, it’s important to remember that we share this world.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.