



## Korengal Discussion Guide

Director: Sebastian Junger

Year: 2014

Time: 84 min

### You might know this director from:

The Last Patrol (2014)

Which Way Is the Front Line from Here?

The Life and Time of Tim Hetherington (2013)

Restrepo (2010)

## FILM SUMMARY

What is war like? What is it like to live in the most base conditions, with no running water, no phone connection, and no security that your life will be yours in a few hours time? Where *RESTREPO*, the first film in the trilogy by co-directors Sebastian Junger and Tim Hetherington, showed the battlefield through powerful footage, *KORENGAL* addresses the men directly, asking them to peel away their armor and reveal the mysterious psychology of war.

The concept is not altogether new. In the past soldiers have been asked to reflect upon their wartime experiences but usually long after the fact, when the imagination has been granted time to contort reality. *KORENGAL* meets the men in the midst of it, questioning them in their bunks, when they are out on patrols, when they are firing off rounds of ammunition, and when they are whittling away time between gun battles. The men are interviewed again, three months after their time in *Korengal* has come to a close, at their base in Italy. With the memory of fellow soldiers' deaths still hot in their minds, and the sharp pain of what they recently endured a very poignant reality, *KORENGAL* presents the hard cold facts from the mouth of the battered warriors.

Although *RESTREPO*'s co-director Hetherington was killed in Libya soon after the film's release, Junger knew the story they had begun to tell was not complete. Out of the 150 remaining hours of footage they had collected together he created *KORENGAL*. An emotionally charged tale of the psychological implications of active warfare, the second chapter in the trilogy is as heated as it is reflective. By handing the narrative to the soldiers themselves, there is no mincing of facts, no dicing of details, and when Misha Pemble-Belkin states, "You have to accept the fact that you could die at any second," the reality sets in—*KORENGAL* is no drama, it is a pure reflection of the reality of war on one of the toughest, most perilous battlefields recently known to man.

## FILM THEMES

In **KORENGAL** the soldiers featured in **RESTREPO** are given a chance to reflect on their experiences on the battlefield, delving into the psychology of warfare and the unbreakable bonds it fosters.

### **BROTHERHOOD**

The bonds that form on the battlefield are like none other. With life being challenged every day, soldiers in a company become family to one another, the only constant reliable factor in an ever-shifting and frightening world. They create a home together out of the little they have, and form a tightly knit safety net in which every soldier- regardless of race, background, or belief- is protected. The connections the battlefield builds through its hostile environment are like nothing else, something each of these men testifies to with fervent tongue. "You might have your family's blood running through your veins. You didn't shed it with them," declares Kyle Steiner, reminding us that while different, the brotherhood is as strong and powerful as our closest family ties.

### **FEAR**

Staying alive at Korengal, when posted there for a 15-month period, is an uncertain affair. With the possibility of death as genuine threat at all times, fear is a mainstay of war. Even the most hardened soldier admits to being frightened and at times shaken. Most do their best to suppress the feelings, knowing well that to succumb to the fear would be to risk one's life and the lives of their fellow soldiers. Fear possesses a powerful grip and a war-worthy soldier is tested in his capacity to manage fear the emotion. Once the threat is at bay, however, and the imagination is allowed to run wild, it is fear that returns, armed with its debilitating strength.

### **BRAVERY**

What is bravery? Its definition seems to be a shiftable notion, a very different concept if considered in the civilian world versus an active war zone. The soldiers at Restrepo were not thinking of medals or prizes or recognition from higher-ups, but were much more concerned with surviving. Bravery and its many implications seemed so uninteresting to the Battle Company of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, when they were fighting to stay alive and keep their fellow soldiers standing. As a scale of quantifying actions, bravery is an afterthought in an active war zone.

### **BOREDOM VS. ADRENALIN**

War is up and down. And when down time arrives, it is about as down as time could ever get. Confined to a small area, living on top of one another, a whole host of negative emotions introduce themselves. "Sometimes you want to fight so bad just to pass the time," says one of the soldiers. When the bullets crack, however, and death comes knocking, a surge of overpowering adrenaline takes over. The feeling is overwhelming, even wonderful at times, and the notion that a soldier has cheated death once again becomes addictive, making the down times that much more dull and uninspired. The thrill of the battle has a powerful attraction, and the adrenaline is a drug that's hard to kick.

**"I never thought I was going to make it out of the valley alive."**

Misha Pemble-Belkin

**"The terrible thing of war is that you do terrible things and then you have to live with them afterwards. But you'd do them the same if you had to go back. So what do you do? It's an evil thing inside your body."**

Brendan O'Byrne

## FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. Have you seen RESTREPO? If so, how would you compare the two films? If not, would you now like to see the forerunner to KORENGAL?
2. Do you have any experience with the military as a soldier, family member, friend or foe? Have your experiences been positive or negative?
3. Name the five people who are closest to you in life. How did those allegiances form? Would you lay your life on the line for any/all of them?
4. Is war a boy's game? Why were there no women featured in the film? Why are women rarely on the front lines?
5. What are your thoughts on the War in Afghanistan? Having seen the film, were your initial thoughts altered at all?
6. What is your definition of bravery? Were the soldiers in KORENGAL brave? Is it possible to achieve an act of bravery without risking one's life?
7. What do you fear? How do you manage that fear?
8. Do you believe war veterans are treated fairly once they return home? Does the U.S. government have adequate resources in place for helping ex-soldiers adjust back into society?
9. Describe an ideal soldier. Do you feel you would make a good or bad soldier, if put to the test on the battlefield?
10. What were your impressions of the Korengali people, the villagers the U.S. soldiers met? Do you believe they acted in a trustworthy manner?

## NOTES:

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## FILM FACTS:

- Tim Hetherington, who co-directed RESTREPO with Junger, was killed in 2011 while covering the Libyan civil war, mere weeks after attending the Oscar ceremony. A year after Hetherington was killed, Junger decided to look through unused footage the two had captured during their 10 months in Korengal in 2007-08 with a platoon of 30 soldiers. Michael Levine edited both films, and Junger says he could sense Hetherington's presence with him in the editing room.
- Director Sebastian Junger received a BA in Cultural Anthropology, and published three best-selling books: "The Perfect Storm," "Fire," and "A Death in Belmont," before embarking on filmmaking. His first film - RESTREPO - was made while he was on assignment in Afghanistan for Vanity Fair, and in 2010 he published "War."
- Due to the overwhelming support for RESTREPO, Junger was able to self-finance KORENGAL.
- Around 150 hours of footage in Korengal - along with 40 hours of soldier interviews at their base in Italy 3 months after deployment - was used to make both RESTREPO and KORENGAL. Both directors shot with their own cameras, and they had unlimited access to the soldiers and all areas, only being restricted from filming the wounded or dead. They each made 5 trips to the region lasting around one month each.
- Junger co-owns NYC bar and restaurant The Half-King, along with two fellow writers.
- Korengal Valley, located in northeastern Afghanistan, is home to the Pashayi people, who live in 12 or so villages in the region. As the valley is densely pine-forested, the majority of area income comes from forestry and timber sales.
- Afghanistan, a landlocked country in South and Central Asia, is bordered by Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and China and is about the size of the U.S. state of Texas. As of 2014, there were an estimated 32 million Afghans, with over 99% of the population practicing Islam. The country is rich in mineral deposits, which could be worth up to \$3 trillion. The country is, however, one of the most poor in the world due to decades of war.
- The War in Afghanistan - referred to by the U.S. military as Operation Enduring Freedom - was launched in October 2001 by U.S. and U.K. forces. The U.S. ceased combat missions in December 2014, when NATO held a ceremony in Kabul - but the U.S. remained in the region fighting Islamic militants under the name Operation Freedom's Sentinel. Over 20,000 Afghan civilians and around 4,000 coalition forces have lost their lives in the war.
- The U.S. Military consists of an Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps. In 2014 alone, the U.S. spent \$640 billion on its military.
- The 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team was the group represented in KORENGAL.

## WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Consider** participating in The Wounded Warrior Project's Believe in Heroes campaign. They work to help wounded veterans find their place in society once they have returned from the battlefield.
2. **Support**, like director Junger, the TAPS, [Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors](#), which offers support to those who have lost a loved one in combat. There are many ways to volunteer or donate to their mission.
3. **Watch** the other two films in the trilogy: [RESTREPO](#) and [THE LAST PATROL](#), as well as WHICH WAY IS THE FRONT LINE FROM HERE? THE LIFE AND TIME OF TIM HETHERINGTON.
4. **Visit** [Save the Children's](#) website, the organization is actively providing humanitarian aid to children affected by the War in Afghanistan by offering education, fighting malnutrition, and more.

## 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.**