NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Soliders ask fundamental question: To kill or not to kill

Claire Schaeffer-Duffy | Oct. 21, 2008

A review

?Soldiers of Conscience,? the latest documentary by husband and wife filmmakers Gary Weimberg and Catherine Ryan, looks at how individual combatants grapple with war?s fundamental question ? to kill or not to kill. Made in cooperation with the U.S. Army, the film profiles eight American soldiers, four who become conscientious objectors and four who believe in the duty to kill when necessary. All wrestle with the morality of killing, not as an abstraction but as soldiers experience it. Interspersed with the soldier?s narratives are images of casualties from the Iraq war not seen on our nightly news and some intriguing background on conscientious objection.

The film?s focus makes ?Soldiers of Conscience? accessible to pacifists and warriors alike. The soldiers? candid and deeply personal reflections remind us that in war human beings make choices they must live with the rest of their lives.

Early in the film, we learn a little-known stat from a U.S. Army study conducted during World War II: Less than 25 percent of US soldiers fired on their enemies, even when under attack. To overcome this inhibition toward the taking of human life, the military developed a technique known as ?reflexive fire training.? Disturbing footage of combat training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, provides a glimpse of what this conditioning entails. Fresh-faced recruits gun down tin silhouettes of humans and shout ?Kill! Kill! Kill without mercy!? While such ?training? has dramatically increased soldiers? firing rates in combat (upwards to 90 percent in Vietnam), it has not freed them from the burden of conscience, as evidenced in the revealing reflections of the eight men featured in the film.

Watch the trailer

Two of the conscientious objectors, Joshua Casteel, an Evangelical Christian, and Aidan Delgado, a Buddhist, are given honorable discharges for their refusal to kill. But the military imprisons Camilo Mejia, the first Iraq combat veteran to publicly refuse to return to war, and Kevin Benderman, a 10-year Army sergeant from Tennessee. All four eloquently describe their transformation from willing enlistee to refusenik. Delgado encounters Iraqi prisoners of war, who look just like the men in his own unit ?but with brown skin,? and the fighting spirit ?bleeds? out of him. The war?s devastating affects on civilians, leads Benderman to ask, ?Why are we even doing this anymore??

The awful but necessary choice of war can be a moral imperative when the weak need protecting and human rights are violated, argues Major Peter Kilner, a West Point ethics professor and former 82nd Airborne Infantry Commander. For drill sergeant Jaime Isom, pulling the trigger in battle has little to do with God or country; it?s about ?defending the man to the left and right of you.? Isom admits to killing a 10-year Iraqi boy who held a grenade that would have killed his men. ?I got no regrets,? he says, ?but looking back at it, that?s when the demons come back. That?s when it haunts us.?

The candor of these soldiers evokes questions that haunt us. What are we asking of those ordered to kill on our behalf?

The film?s thoughtful interest in the soldier?s perspective is resonating with people who differ on the morality of war. The documentary, which airs on PBS stations this week, has been circulating among churches, peace groups, and VA Hospitals where clinicians are showing excerpts to soldiers struggling with combat trauma. In November, the film will screen at the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies. In January, it will be shown at a major conference for chaplains in the armed forces.

Claire Schaeffer-Duffy lives in Worcester, Mass. and writes frequently for NCR.

Source URL (retrieved on *04/28/2016 - 15:42*): http://ncronline.org/news/soliders-ask-fundamental-question-kill-or-not-kill