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Film focuses on soldiers' experiences

MOVIE REVIEW

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"Only the dead have seen the end of war."

Plato wrote that. It's good stuff, the language pithy and dramatic, the sentiment never truer.

War in all its terrible permutations generates remarkable literature, which of course demands intense conflict to really sing. Those who have fought and survived — and tried to untangle how they managed to do both — have produced reams of memorable words. And they keep coming.

The documentary "Operation Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience" pulls us into the lives of soldiers through their own recollections, scribbled, keyboarded, dictated into compendiums of heartbreak, comedy, meditation and first-hand history that exposes the tragedy and absurdity of war.

Director Richard Robbins conducts interviews with soldiers who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan, and then has actors (Robert Duvall and Aaron Eckhart among them) read from journals, essays and one piece of fiction that the men wrote under the aegis of the National Endowment for the Arts.

The purpose of this worthy project was not to pick at scabs but to divine common threads among soldiers. That, they do. The long stretches of boredom, the gallows humor, the sickening bursts of violence, the spiritual fatigue captured in these urgent texts bear a shimmering familiarity. Indeed, if you listen closely to the stories of these young men, you realize they could just as easily have been written 60 years ago by the now old men interviewed in Ken Burns' WWII chronicle "The War."

That commonality is only reiterated by Robbins's inclusion of interviews with soldiers-turned-authors from WWII through Vietnam who look back on their experiences with the kind of wisdom that only time and distance can endow.

Robbins supplies visuals for each segment in "Operation Homecoming," in styles that fit the individual narratives. The most technically vivid is the memoir "Men in Black" by former marine Colby Buzzell, who describes the ambush of his convoy as it trundles through a hostile city neighborhood. His tale is told in the distinct form of a graphic novel, the words and illustrations creating a horrific tableau where shock and awe has devolved into chaos and confusion.

Another favorite is the heart-rending recollection "Taking Chance" by Lt. Col. Mike Stroble who accompanies the body of 19-year-old Marine Chance Phelps, killed in Iraq, to the small Wyoming town where he'll be buried. Stroble offers sad, telling details of the cross-country journey alongside Chance's coffin, which he volunteered for because "marines don't do missions alone." (The story is being made into a TV movie with Kevin Bacon portraying Stroble.)

Cinema 320 is to be applauded for featuring a slate of superb war-themed documentaries on its schedule, beginning with last season's "Why We Fight," and continuing on to next week's "No End in Sight," a clear-eyed dissection of U.S. military involvement in Iraq.

"Operation Homecoming" is a thoughtful companion piece to the other two, its focus firmly on the people rather than the politics of war. As one soldier ruefully notes, nobody in the heat of battle has the luxury of an agenda. "It's kill or be killed," he says. "It has nothing to do with what you believe."

"Operation Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience" will be shown at 7:30 p.m. tonight and Saturday, and at 1 and

2:35 p.m. Sunday in the Jefferson Academic Center.

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