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War stories told with simple power

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A soldier looks into the eyes of a man who is trying to kill him and watches the shell casings fly out of the AK-47 as the bullets whiz by his head.

As soon as the soldier's convoy makes it through the gauntlet unscathed, they're ordered to drive back through the same narrow Iraq streets where another ambush awaits and the same man tries to kill the soldier again. Then, when the soldier runs low on ammo, he has to clamber outside the Humvee to get more bullets, and he wonders which Einstein thought it was a good idea to strap the ammunition box to the outside of the vehicle.

It was just one day in Iraq for one soldier who would survive despite the efforts of one man who desperately wanted to kill him, and he would return home and write about what it's like to look into the eyes of his would-be killer.

Profound in their simplicity, poignant in their matter-of-factness, the stories told by the Iraq War veterans in "Operation Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience" are part of a project by the National Endowment of the Arts that encourages veterans to write about their experiences. The 10 essays and one poem in the film were culled from a literary anthology published last year.

The outstanding documentary - showing today through Wednesday at noon and 2 p.m. at the Downer Theatre, 2589 N. Downer Ave. - pieces together stories written by veterans and voiced by actors such as Robert Duvall and Beau Bridges, with images that range from archival video and still photos to animation to, in one heart-rending piece, portraits of fallen American military members.

They're stories of ambushes, of the deaths of innocents and the deaths of combatants, of boredom, of humor, of wrong and right decisions, of losing a buddy, of lying to a soldier whose foot has been blown off, of escorting the body of a young Marine back to his Wyoming home. They're stories of war that resonate with anyone who has ever been in a war zone, and they illustrate beautifully for those who have not seen battle, just what combat can do to a person's soul.

Connecting the stories are interviews with their writers as well as authors who fought in World War II,

Korea, Vietnam and the first Gulf War. More than 1 million Americans have served in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001 and, as the film points out, their words are the start of a new chapter in the long history of writing about war.

Who will be the Iraq War's Wilfred Owen, Ambrose Bierce or Norman Mailer - the veterans who turn the horror before their eyes into words? It could very well be the unassuming people in "Operation Homecoming" who worried unnecessarily that they wouldn't see anything interesting in Iraq.

"Operation Homecoming" is also scheduled to air at 8 p.m. April 16 on WMVS-TV (Channel 10). Journal Sentinel reporter Meg Jones has covered the war in both Iraq and Afghanistan, and has been embedded with Wisconsin troops four times since the war began in 2003.

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