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Operation Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience

(Documentary) An ITVS (Independent Television Service) presentation of a the Documentary Group production. Produced by Richard E. Robbins. Executive producer, Tom Yellin. Co-producers, Adam Hyman, Kristin Lesko. Directed by Richard E. Robbins.

With: Brian Turner, Jack Lewis, Sangjoon Han, Ed Hrivnak, John McCary, Mike Strobl, Colby Buzzell, Tim O'Brien, Joe Haldeman, James Salter, Yusef Komunyakaa, Paul Fussell, Anthony Swofford, Tobias Wolff, Richard Currey.
Readers: Beau Bridges, Robert Duvall, Aaron Eckhart, Blair Underwood.

By [RONNIE SCHEIB](#)

Structured around the poetic, comic and chilling writings of men and women posted in Iraq, Richard Robbins' docu, like "The War Tapes" and other recent attempts to directly channel the experiences of combat soldiers, studiously avoids discussion of the rightness of the conflict. Excerpted interviews with WWII and Vietnam veterans suggest that every war is hell, yet it is the specificity of the Iraq War combatants' reminiscences that makes their writing resonate so profoundly. Poignant docu, opening Feb. 9 at Gotham's Film Forum, should travel further before airing on PBS' "America at the Crossroads."

The 11 central texts, culled from thousands of pages gathered by the National Endowment for the Arts for their similarly titled project, take many forms -- poetry, fiction, letters, journal entries. These evocative accounts of the pain, fear, guilt, boredom and inhumanity of war are movingly voice-overed by actors such as Robert Duvall and Beau Bridges, and illustrated by helmer Robbins in variegated cinematic styles, from seamlessly edited combat footage to cutout animation to fragmentary collage and slow-mo lyricism.

Robbins' visual overlay sometimes synchs perfectly with the narration and other times roughly approximates it, deliberately granting primacy to the word. Even the sometimes uneven quality of the imagery serves to highlight the shattering honesty of these barings of the soul.

The written selections themselves range from the lapidary precision of the professional poet to the folksy humor of the amateur parodist. Penned as an attempt to comprehend or struggle through trauma, the soldiers' poems and missives also

help bear witness for those at home.

Pic was produced by the Documentary Group, founded by core members of Peter Jennings' news team with the same TV journalistic commitment toward "fairness." Yet the sequencing of texts leads to a somewhat hawkish crescendo its creators may not have intended.

Early passages emphasize the moral ambiguity of a war where it is often impossible to tell friend from enemy -- exploring the contradictory feelings of a soldier who detests war but cannot wait for it to begin, or of a rifleman who comes to hate the unarmed civilian in his cross-hairs for forcing him to kill.

But the two last segments (before the pensive coda) constitute a paean to the dead. A long montage, linking hundreds of snapshots of American casualties, accompanies a meditation on one's duty to never give up. That somber, almost reluctant call to arms is followed with a drive through Wyoming landscapes as a lieutenant colonel recalls accompanying the body of a soldier he never knew. Tech credits are pro.

Camera (color, DV, HD), Jason Ellson; editor, Gillian McCarthy; music, Ben Decter; sound, Sam Londe. Reviewed on DVD, New York, Feb. 3, 2007. Running time: 81 MIN.

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