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'Muse of Fire' Gives Eyewitness Accounts of War

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WASHINGTON, March 15, 2007 – “Muse of Fire,” a film that debuted here last night, uses American troops’ eyewitness accounts and private journals to bring to life the tragedy, pain, horror, death and even the hope and optimism of war.

The documentary, shown at the National Archives, is a frank account of life on the front lines of Iraq and Afghanistan.

“I wanted to show servicemembers who have sacrificed so much for us, not only to humanize them, but to show how they grew personally and how they turned into writers,” film director Lawrence Bridges said at the debut.

Operation Homecoming, a National Endowment for the Arts literary program, served as Bridges’ inspiration. The program brought a network of instructors to 50 writing seminars at 25 domestic and five overseas military bases.

Six thousand troops and their family members wrote their stories and submitted 12,000 pages. A portion of this vast war narrative was edited and anthologized in a 377-page book, “Operation Homecoming: Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Home Front, in the Words of U.S. Troops and Their Families.”

Bridges said his goal was to make a film about how war sparked the troops’ creativity.

“I wanted to explore the military experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, the experience on the home front of spouses and children, and show through those experiences of deep trauma that may never be experienced by average Americans, how you use that in your creative life.”

Writing about traumatic experiences, Bridges said, can be cathartic for the troops.

“When you don’t talk about these things, and you’re not open, it can lead to violence, it can lead to depression, it can lead to a life that isn’t fulfilled,” he said. “I think the power of Operation Homecoming is to give voices to those troops who need to get that out.”

Renowned novelist Jeff Shaara was one of the instructors who worked with the troops and encouraged them to record their narratives.

“Invariably, the first words out of their mouths would be, ‘My story is not very interesting,’” Shaara said. “Then they would tell me what their experience was and I would end up with my mouth hanging open.”

For former Army Sgt. John McCary, who contributed a letter to the program and who now writes for The Wall Street Journal, the desire to write during wartime was “like a flood.”

In the film, McCary shares an anecdote about a young Iraqi man with olive skin and black hair he met while stationed in Anbar province. The young man was known for his oil painting of local landscapes.

“He was an artist who sold his wares on the base,” McCary said. “The piece that I have captured the ghostly, transient nature of a lot of the construction that’s over there. He did it with really minimal materials, and obviously minimal time and resources and it was just gorgeous.

“Of course, it was made all the more poignant by the fact that I never saw him again,” he said. Shortly after McCary befriended the young painter, he stopped appearing at the base.

“I know that he never came back and he was rumored to be dead,” McCary said. “The insurgents at that time made a concerted effort to target people that dealt with American forces. He lived right outside Fallujah; that’s not a good place to be somebody who sells to the Americans.”

With death lurking around every corner, McCary said he felt compelled to record his experience.

“The urge to write when you’re in that situation is overwhelming,” McCary said. “It’s an impetus that you don’t usually feel, and I think it has something to do with your need to communicate your experience to other people.”

While some troops censor the letters they send home, McCary gave his family a choice. “I asked my family right from the start, ‘Do you want the cleaned-up version or do you want the fire hose? And they didn’t even hesitate. They said, ‘I want the fire hose.’”

“I think the subtext there, the unsaid thing is, why would you hold anything back if this might be the last thing you say?” McCary said.

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