



# Restrepo

**Director: Sebastian Junger & Tim Hetherington**

**Country: USA**

**Date: 2010**

*Review by Peter Bradshaw, The Guardian, October 2011:*

The shadow of Vietnam, and the Vietnam war movie, is never far away during this outstanding fly-on-the-wall documentary about the US military experience in Afghanistan by the British photographer Tim Hetherington and the American journalist Sebastian Junger, famed for his 1997 non-fiction bestseller *The Perfect Storm*. For one year, Hetherington and Junger accompanied a single platoon on a tour of duty in the dangerous Korangal valley, in which the soldiers – horribly exposed, and with a knowledge of the terrain so far inferior to the enemy's that it was practically blindfold guesswork – had to build a forward outpost to establish their position. This they name Restrepo after one of their popular comrades, Private Juan "Doc" Restrepo, killed at the campaign's outset. This defiant tribute springs from a need to impose their collective identity on this alien and menacing landscape.

The platoon is also required to promote an uneasy hearts-and-minds policy among notionally friendly locals. The soldiers must conduct regular, tense meetings with Afghans, lecturing them about the economic benefits they can bring with supposed transport projects, clearly suspecting every one of them of helping the Taliban, while the locals, though strategically deadpan, clearly resent the Americans. An early sequence shows US military helicopters bringing troops into Afghanistan, then switches to the soldiers' scared, vertiginous point-of-view as they gaze down into the valley in which they will be sitting ducks; it is a very "Nam" moment, and the tension is all but unbearable. You can't help but admire their bravery and that of Hetherington and Junger who have had to keep their nerve and keep filming. The nail-biting sequences are interspersed with interviews conducted after the event, which carry a concealed emotional charge. It is only from these that we can be certain which soldiers have survived.

I was reminded of an essay PJ O'Rourke once wrote about visiting Russia in the 1980s, at the height of the controversy over its invasion of Afghanistan. A Russian teases O'Rourke about his country's recent history: "Vietnam – too bad!" O'Rourke replies crisply: "Land war in Asia very bad – and some countries do not learn from an example!" These soldiers' Asian land war is wearing them down quickly. The Taliban are all around, able to get frighteningly close to the Americans' position, with impunity. Young soldiers are seeing troops being shot dead in front of their eyes. When Junger and Hetherington interview one of them about this experience, he breaks off mid-speech – and of course we, the audience, expect tears: it is a familiar moment in all types of documentary. But what is happening is more disturbing. The man has broken off in a kind of horror at remembering what he has clearly repressed until this moment. It is a flashback – that cinematic term widely applied to post-traumatic disorder. Restrepo is clearly a movie focused on the Americans' fear and suffering, rather than the Afghans', leaving the judgment up to us. It is a scary, moving and troubling film

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*Review by Zak Gottlieb of twitchfilm.com, June 2010:*

"Restrepo" is a war film unlike any that you have seen before. Partly, because most war films you have seen were probably not documentaries; but mostly, because it plunges you deep into the heart of war in a way that Francis Ford Coppola, Oliver Stone or even Kathryn Bigelow have not come nearly as close to doing. Not just any war, mind you, but the war of the moment, into what is unanimously considered one of the most dangerous regions of the conflict.

Beginning in June 2007, filmmakers Sebastian Junger and Tim Hetherington bunkered down with Second Platoon, making a total of ten trips to the Korengal Valley of eastern Afghanistan on assignment for Vanity Fair and ABC News. Capitalizing on the opportunity, they decided to piece together a documentary from the 150+ hours of footage that they obtained of the company. Upon satisfying their subjects that there would be no political overtones to the finished product, they were trusted enough to be exposed to the full reality of modern warfare in a way that few outside the military could ever hope to be.

The results are both fascinating and unexpected. Interspersed with the in-field footage are candid interviews of the soldiers taken from their base in Italy, which reveal a depth to their personalities that strongly encourages us to identify. Who wouldn't be disgusted, for example, on hearing that one's next posting would be in an area notorious for its high casualty rate, with an infrastructure so skeletal that one would be forced to burn one's own faeces in order not to alert the enemy? On the other hand, there are moments when the soldiers discuss their targets with such an alarming lack of humanism that one is inclined to view them as little more than black-hearted killing machines; until, that is, one recognizes that it is this mind-blocking mechanism that is the very proof of their humanity.

More than anything else, the film succeeds in placing us on the level of the soldiers, and as such, it falls more comfortably under the heading of "necessary viewing" than "entertainment." During their one-year deployment to the remote outpost named after a fallen member of their detachment, their struggles are as much taken up with the fight against long stretches of boredom - or winning the hearts and minds of the local villages - as they are with the detection and elimination of a largely invisible enemy. Indeed, some of the most affecting scenes involve watching the soldiers interact with the village elders, from the weekly "shura" that the captain holds to address their concerns, to the large commotion caused by the inadvertent death of a cow.

None of this is to imply that there is any shortage of combat. When the bullets fly, they do so thick and fast, and many of the worst perils of battle find their way on to the camera. Bravery, in these circumstances, is pared down to its unglamorous essence, as the survival of the unit demands that the fight continue, despite the death of a comrade, or the moral scars left by the taking of innocent lives. The human dimension is never omitted from the equation - it cannot be - and the conclusions one draws as a consequence are often as devastating as they are reassuring. In the same vein as *The Hurt Locker*, for instance, the heat of battle is conveyed as a powerful addiction for many of the soldiers, with one of them even describing it as "crack." One can only imagine how difficult the adjustment back to normal society must be for these men, who have dedicated their lives to fighting for its protection.

Ultimately, it is from this acknowledgement that a documentary like "Restrepo" draws its power. Unlike the mediated versions of war that we experience on the news or in Hollywood movies, this is war as it actually occurs: we are not permitted to flinch, or to avoid thinking about the sacrifices involved, when our leaders make the weighty decision to march our soldiers into battle.