

Iraq taxi to bright side

By Scott Galupo
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When he was working on a National Geographic special about American Indians in the late 1970s, Terry Sanders eventually earned the trust of leery Lakota Sioux tribesmen, who declared the filmmaker "waste" (wash-TAY) or "good."

For his latest documentary, "Fighting for Life," Mr. Sanders had to win over another band of skeptics - the U.S. military.

Mr. Sanders, 76, says the military's suspicion of guys with movie cameras can be summed up in one question: "Are you Michael Moore?"

"You have to work at it. You have to be true to your word. One false note, and you're out," he says of the trust-building process over a late-afternoon drink at the L'Enfant Plaza Hotel.

"Fighting for Life," which opens today at Landmark's E Street Cinema and Bethesda Row, takes no position on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Instead, it spotlights the woefully underpraised world of combat medicine - the medics and nurses who treat wounded soldiers, Marines and airmen.

Mr. Sanders and his crew filmed in and around Baghdad in 2005 and 2006, when conditions there were at their worst. However, that footage is part of a narrative that begins in Bethesda, at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, a military-run institution for medical training and biomedical research.

Up to 25 percent of active-duty combat medics graduated from USU - and the proportion is even higher for physicians in leadership positions at military hospitals.

The school, however, has been on congressional appropriators' chopping block five times in the past 15 years; its closing was, as reported in this newspaper in 1994, seen as part of the Clinton-Gore administration's quest to "reinvent government."

Tammy Alvarez, who, as executive producer, raised money for the film, knew Mr. Sanders through his 1998 documentary "Return With Honor," a chronicle of U.S. fighter pilots, including her husband, Everett Alvarez, who had been shot down and held captive by the North Vietnamese. The Alvarezes' son, Navy Lt. Bryan Alvarez, graduated from USU in 2005.

Hence the "Fighting for Life" project: Mrs. Alvarez thought that if the school could somehow achieve a higher profile - through, say, a movie - talk of shutting it down would cease.

William Winkenwerder, then an assistant secretary of defense for health affairs, paved the way for the film crew to go directly into the Sunni Triangle.

"Fighting for Life" is not gory, but neither does it flinch. There are excruciating scenes of victims of roadside improvised explosive devices (IEDs) who have lost one or more limbs. One such - a 3-year-old Iraqi boy - awakes on a hospital bed and manages a smile that shames you for complaining about rush-hour commutes.

There's also an up-close profile of 21-year-old Army Spc. Crystal Davis, who lost a leg while driving a truck over an IED. From a road in Iraq to a hospital in Germany to the rehabilitation ward at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, she's indomitable.

Now would be the perfect time to share the filmmakers' other hope for "Fighting for Life," beyond its championing of USU: that moviegoers will find it uplifting.

Mr. Sanders is, you can be sure, mindful of the difficult task that is promoting an "Iraq movie." Make that, "Oh, another Iraq movie" - the groan reaction he hears whenever he brings up "Fighting for Life."

"There has been a string of Iraq films, theatrical features as well as documentaries, that have been real downers," he admits.

To brighten its subject matter, the movie's promotional poster sports a pair of blurbs. There's an unsolicited quote from Tom Hanks, who mentioned in an unrelated interview with Rolling Stone film critic Peter Travers that "Fighting for Life" is one place you could go to find modern-day heroes.

PBS personality Robert MacNeil said the film shows "Americans at their best."

For once, poster blurbs are telling the truth.

"Fighting for Life" reveals USU as a last redoubt for medicine as an essentially altruistic profession: Take the healing arts and place them in the context of the military, and you've doubled down on the ethos of service over self.

Added to its portrait of the professionalism of military doctors and nurses is a fascinating, fly-on-the-wall account of advances in combat-medicine technology.

Mr. Sanders' camera, for instance, takes you into the bowels of a cargo jet - a veritable in-flight hospital - that's shuttling wounded men from Iraq to a military hospital in Landstuhl, Germany.

Here, in a nutshell, is a great story. Whereas, in the first Gulf War, there would be 8,000 makeshift hospital beds on the periphery of the battlefield, today there's a fraction of that number: Medical evacuation services have gotten so sophisticated and efficient that soldiers can receive intensive care far from the front lines.

There have been significant leaps, too, in pain control and reconstructive surgery as well as a realization that cases of post-traumatic stress syndrome need to be dealt with immediately.

"The sad truth," Mr. Sanders says, "is that a thing like war leads to innovation."

To paraphrase the title of last year's Oscar-winning documentary about systematic torture of suspects in the war on terrorism, think of "Fighting for Life," as a taxi to the bright side.

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