

Witness to War

Zach Bazzi '07 agreed to film his tour of duty in Iraq

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FILMS

In the middle of a hot night on the outskirts of Baghdad, Sgt. Zack Bazzi rumbles along in an M1114 Humvee. He scans the terrain, studies the shadowy buildings nearest the road, watching for signs of trouble. He is, as always, on hyper-alert. The air is thick with heat and with the smell of dust and grease, metal and exhaust. For now, it is quiet.

It is Nov. 14, 2004, eight months into Bazzi's year-long deployment in Iraq. These patrols are routine now. But he still reviews, over and over again, the scenario he has imagined countless times before: What if my driver takes a bullet? What if my gunner gets hit? He has good men. He wants to bring them back alive. They have become a tight team, rolling through the dark of night and beneath the searing heat of the sun, hour after hour, three Americans on patrol in the Iraqi desert.

Suddenly the silence splinters in a burst of explosions. Bazzi's driver veers toward the chaos. Mortars cascade in screaming arcs of light. The men are shouting, cursing, bellowing as they leap from the truck and plunge into the fray. Bazzi is pumped. This is what he was trained to do. He loves the adrenaline rush, the jolting shock of a firefight.

And right now, he'd like nothing better than to find the insurgents responsible for this particular night of terror--and kill them.



Bazzi is on the ground now running toward the flames. The mortars seem to be coming from behind a wall, but the smoke is so thick it's impossible to tell. Civilians stumble through the streets. Cars burn. Corpses lie in jumbled heaps. Bazzi keeps moving, leveling his machine gun as he nears the wall. He has to decide whether to go in shooting. When he bursts into the courtyard, his gun is pointing directly at a mother and her three children.

For a split second, Bazzi freezes, overcome with both guilt and relief. Then he snaps into action, speaking in Arabic, reassuring the woman that he will not harm her. She is hysterical, screaming, clutching her children. Then, suddenly, she is weeping with joy, hugging him, laughing at the discovery that she can communicate with this American who, only seconds ago, had been ready to shoot. "I've been lucky," says Bazzi of his soldier's life so far. "I haven't made any judgment calls I can't sleep with. But it's tough--very tough."

A soft-spoken 27-year-old UNH senior, Zack Bazzi is usually not inclined to share his war stories. But this spring, he made his film debut--as himself--in a ground-breaking documentary, "The War Tapes," billed as "the first movie shot by soldiers themselves." And suddenly, thousands of people are getting a glimpse of Bazzi's life as a soldier in Iraq.

"It's surreal," he says, "seeing yourself up on a 50-foot screen." But Bazzi is getting used to it. "The War Tapes" won the award for best international documentary at the Tribeca Film Festival in May. And Bazzi has been in the spotlight ever since, doing dozens of interviews, appearing on national television and attending conferences. The film has had screenings in cities across the country. A DVD will be released next year by SenArt Films.



For the most part, critics have been generous in their praise, calling it "the first indispensable Iraq documentary" and commending its vivid portrayal of the war. The biggest buzz surrounding the film, though, has to do with the logistics of its creation: Never before have the soldiers themselves been given cameras. This is a war story told not through edited news footage nor as memoir, but in real time, as bombs are exploding.

Bazzi recalls the day the whole unexpected venture got underway. A member of the New Hampshire National Guard, he was in Fort Dix, N.J., preparing for deployment. One day, a civilian stood up and introduced herself in front of the 180 men in Charlie Company, 3rd of the 172nd Infantry Regiment (Mountain). Director Deborah Scranton started talking about how she wanted to make a film--and she wanted the soldiers themselves to do the storytelling. Some were skeptical: Are you for the war or against it? What are your politics? How do we know you won't twist our words? In the end, 10 soldiers, including Bazzi, signed on to the project.

When they got to Iraq, the soldier-filmmakers mounted their video cameras to gun turrets, dashboards and even to their helmets, using duct tape and ingenuity to record their experiences without interfering with their duties. "It was as simple as turning on the air conditioner," says Bazzi. "All I did was push a button when I got into my Humvee. Then I forgot about it." Meanwhile, the men stayed in touch with Scranton through e-mail and instant messaging. "It was like we were sitting around a virtual campfire," she says, "chatting together in the middle of the night." From her New Hampshire farmhouse, Scranton watched Quicktime files of explosions and ambushes. She talked with soldiers who had just returned from dangerous missions "outside the wire." In some cases, she suggested follow-up interviews when the men were still reeling from harrowing, near-death experiences. Editing final footage--1,000 hours in all--took a full year.

The film has its share of stomach-churning moments--bombs detonating, flesh and blood smeared on the road, an Iraqi woman run down by an American convoy. But part of film's realism comes from its portrayal of the mundane and the tedious. "The overwhelming majority of the time, nothing happens," says Bazzi, describing his days in Iraq. "You're just driving up and down the MSR--that's 'main supply route' in Army lingo-

-on patrol." Not that it isn't nerve wracking. The men are always on edge, looking for abandoned cars, oil tankers, suspicious piles of trash, anything that could be a hiding a deadly explosive. Most of the time, though, it's pretty quiet. "If the film were a totally accurate portrayal," Bazzi jokes, "it would have been 58 minutes of driving through the desert and two minutes of firefight."



Instead, viewers get a tightly edited 97-minute distillation of 16 months of military life-- including departure, tour of duty and homecoming. The film focuses on three men. Specialist Mike Moriarty, 34, is a Harley-Davidson mechanic who signed up for service after 9/11. Married with two children, he calls himself "substantially patriotic." Sgt. Steve Pink, 24, a Cape Cod carpenter, keeps a journal of his war experience. And then there's Bazzi, a Lebanese-American college student who loves politics and travel, speaks Arabic and is, he says, probably one of the few men in the unit who did not vote for Bush.

In keeping with the director's commitment to letting the soldiers tell their own stories, the film offers a decided mix of perspectives about the war. While the men are proud of their service, viewers get an earful about Kellogg Brown & Root, the military contractor that is a subsidiary of Halliburton. The soldiers crack somber jokes about \$28 mess hall plates and supply trucks full of cheesecake, which Bazzi and his colleagues risk their lives to guard. They also debate about money vs. safety, oil vs. democracy, venting their frustrations in moments of surprising candor.

In many ways, Bazzi serves as the moral compass for the film. He describes the insanity of dumping 150,000 troops in the middle of a foreign culture with almost no cultural training. "My language skills were helpful," says Bazzi. "It made me a better soldier and also created understanding for the people we were there to protect." Occasionally, his fluency put him in awkward situations. Like the time an Iraqi man with a sick baby in his arms begged to be allowed to cross the road to reach a hospital. Bazzi's platoon was on guard, their orders were clear, and he had to translate: No one was permitted to cross. The man was desperate. "He wasn't faking," says Bazzi. "It's hard to look these people in the face, and you know they're not insurgents. It's

psychologically taxing." Bazzi pauses, then notes the irony of the situation: "We're bringing you freedom--but you can't cross the road."



Zack Bazzi began life in the midst of a civil war. When fighting erupted in their neighborhood in Lebanon, his mother used to pack her young children into the bathtub and tell them to keep their heads down. He went to sleep to the sound of gunfire. When Bazzi was eight, his family fled to a new life in Watertown, Mass., where Bazzi attended school and no longer lived in fear.

Today, Bazzi's mother throws up her hands when she talks about her son. How can it be that she worked so hard to bring her child to safety and now he volunteers to go to one of the most dangerous places on earth? "For one year, all I can think of is Iraq," she laments in the movie. "I go to sleep...Iraq. I wake up....Iraq." While his mother worries, Bazzi shrugs. "I like to be in the middle of things," he says, with characteristic understatement. "My childhood made me stronger." The only thing he's afraid of is being a bad leader. He says he never contemplates the possibility of his own death. The way he looks at it, the war is a job--a job he loves. "I feel 10 times more alive on deployment," says Bazzi. "It's like life on steroids."



Bazzi often sounds like a poster child for the military when he talks about his life. "All the good things about me, my strongest traits, I attribute to service in the Army," he says. "People say 'Thank you' for my service. But I feel like I've gotten so much." Among other

things, Bazzi's gotten an education; the military is paying for it and he's grateful. "I'm a first-generation immigrant and it's rare that someone in my position would have a chance to go to college." In Fall 2002, with four years in the Army behind him, Bazzi settled into classroom life with students just out of high school. He chuckles at the contrast: "UNH is a bubble," he says. "Life here is designed to be safe and comfortable and happy. Unfortunately, the world is none of these three." Bazzi is the first to admit, though, that college has changed him. It has, he thinks, made him a better soldier. "You need the intellectual as well as the physical," he says. "I like my views to be challenged. If your ideas don't hold up, you get rid of them." Not surprisingly, the film casts Bazzi as the thinking soldier, the warrior who is acutely aware that he is defending his own right to disagree with his government.

Bazzi explains his views with an analogy he picked up in an environmental conservation class. "If you have a field planted with a single crop and a pest attacks, it'll wipe everything out. But if you have a variety of crops, everything is stronger--they can't be wiped out with one pest. What makes our country great is the great variety of opinions that exist within it." Bazzi pauses, then quotes himself, repeating verbatim the closing lines of the film. "I love being a soldier," he says. "The only bad thing about the Army is you can't pick your war."



On a visit to campus last summer, Bazzi heads for a reading room in Dimond Library. Late afternoon sun slants through the high-ceilinged room, cutting patterns across the tables. The total silence seems about as far from a firefight in the desert as one could possibly imagine. Bazzi sits down, takes it all in. "I practically lived here," he says, recalling the semester he spent at UNH just before getting called to Iraq. This fall he plans to finish his degree in international affairs and psychology. When he graduates, he wants to do something with his life that will have an impact and involves travel. On the other hand, if he gets The Call--and he hopes he will--he will head straight back to Iraq. No question. He's done it before. He'll do it again. ~



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