

Gunner Palace

Our collective vision of the war in Iraq has been an odd mixture of combat rush (during the embedded journalists' period), plodding reconstruction, then both street riots and guerrilla warfare as pockets of religious resistance and insurgents' actions dot our television screens. Such skirmishes are usually punctuated by Washington interviews with politicians, pundits, and participants--usually officers--in the war. Aside from some sequences in *Fahrenheit 9/11*, the war has little figured in our feature films to date, not surprisingly since it is a dangerous place and the outcome is, as yet, so uncertain.

That movie drought has now been broken with *Gunner Place*, a compelling documentary by Michael Butler and Petra Epperlein, and it is unlike anything we have yet witnessed on our Iraqi involvement.

This is a document of the Second Battalion, Third Division of Field Artillery--also known as the "Gunner"--based in one of the most volatile sectors of Baghdad called Adhamiya and living in a bombed-out palace once owned by Saddam Hussein's fearsome son Uday. Tucker literally bedded down with the 400 soldiers in this "Gunner Palace" for two months during the fall of 2003 and early 2004, trying to get a sense of their daily grind--and their daily risks. His film, which he finished and edited with his wife, Petra Epperlein, is mostly a view from the ground up, one not seen, and little heard or read about, in all the massive coverage of this conflict.

Gunner Palace is, in one sense, an eye-opener, because it shows those of us at home--in all its boredom, silliness, tension, and surreal madness--what this protracted semi-combat entails. It is, in another sense, utterly predictable, as it shows so much of what our volunteer army is: profoundly young and unaware of the wider world, green kids trying to make sense out of a scary, alienating environment. The film has no real political agenda; it serves as witness.

So much of the soldiers' time in *Gunner Palace* is making do, flopping in Uday's (handsome) swimming pool, playing video games, listening to AFRTS radio (whose newscasts flit through the soundtrack like reminders of M.A.S.H)--just hanging out during the tedium of no action. This contrasts with the excursions, day and night, of the units as they ride on patrols, do escort runs, scout for suspected insurgents, and try to run down the "bad guys." Knowing the randomness of the city's violence, the prevalence of the dreaded roadside bomb or a flying mortar, we can feel for these kids and understand their ticking off the days until their tour is over.

We should note, if it is not already obvious, that *Gunner Palace* is but one view of grim Baghdad--the U.S. soldier's view. This is not a well-rounded, cross-cultural documentary which shows the intimate worlds of the Iraqi population. The latter are seen much as the soldiers see them, as cowering bodies in a suspect apartment block, or as people with their hands in the air at an outdoor cafe, or as tight-lipped, manacled men bouncing in the back of an army truck. The only Iraqis who speak to the camera--guardedly--are the few translators who work for the American forces. One of those latter, nicknamed "Elvis," turns out later to be providing information to the insurgents, thus justifying all the more the paranoia that runs through the ranks. *Gunner Palace* does not provide heady insights into Iraqi life, though the grim sense of what occupation must be like for many of them is evident when any Second Battalion team raids their space.

Over his time spent with the unit, Tucker understandably tried to form some narrative strands from his material. And he finds that narrative, not in dramatic action sequences or in shooting patrols, but in the individual characters of the Palace. Officers appear such as the commander, Col. Bill Rabena, a decent, well-spoken leader. We also meet briefly Lt. Ben Colgan, who is later killed by a roadside bomb. But it is the enlisted Joes, the basic “ground-pounders,” who are at the core of this film.

Among the memorable ones are Specialist Stuart Wilf, the Palace’s comedian, who joined the army at 17 after a misspent youth and who still doesn’t look like he shaves. Wilf likes to perform before Tucker’s camera, hamming it up with a mop wig or banging away at his guitar. He’s not just comic, however, as when he twangs out a poignant version of the “Star-Spangled Banner” against a dusk-orange Baghdad sky. There is Sgt. Robert Beatty, a hefty, tough army lifer who is charged with training the Iraqi Civil Defense Corps. Looking over his charges, he shows a forthright skepticism about the contribution these men--who signed on for a job, not a commitment--are liable to make to Iraqi security. Note also combat medic Spec. Billie Grimes, a wide-eyed young woman who ends up on the cover of *Time* magazine representing the “Person of the Year.”

Gunner Palace lets our troops speak for themselves (filmmaker/narrator Tucker is never seen and only rarely heard in the documentary), and their speech is often very profane (the filmmakers have been trying to get the film rated “PG-13” rather than “R” to reach a wider audience). Though guarded with bravado and humor at times, these representatives of us in the Middle East are an understandable mix of adolescent humor, guarded bravado, fitful patriotism, and ready cynicism. But these men and women are worth listening to, for us to understand what is being done in our name. Listen, for example, to Spec. Richmond Shaw, who offers several canny hip-hop poems straight at us, reminding his audience that “for y’all this is just a show, but we live in this movie.”

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