

FULL BATTLE RATTLE

A Film by
Tony Gerber and Jesse Moss

2008, 85 minutes



FIRST RUN FEATURES

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**{World Premiere, 2008 Berlin Film Festival, Panorama}
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SHORT SYNOPSIS

In California's Mojave Desert, the US Army has built a "virtual Iraq" - a billion dollar urban warfare simulation - and populated it with hundreds of Iraqi role-players.

FULL BATTLE RATTLE follows an Army Battalion through the simulation, as they attempt to quell an insurgency and prevent Medina Wasl, a mock Iraqi village, from slipping into civil war. Comic, surreal and poignant, the film provides a revelatory look at the soul of the American war machine, and, in the battle for Medina Wasl, finds a potent allegory of America's military misadventure in Iraq.

LONG SYNOPSIS

FULL BATTLE RATTLE is the story of a real war and a fake town. In California's Mojave Desert, the US Army has built a "virtual Iraq" - a billion dollar urban warfare simulation – and populated it with hundreds of Iraqi role-players. Army units spend three weeks inside the simulation before deploying to Iraq.

FULL BATTLE RATTLE follows an Army Battalion through the simulation, as they attempt to quell an insurgency and prevent the mock village of Medina Wasl from slipping into civil war.

The story is told from both sides of the conflict, and filtered through a compelling cast of characters, including the Army Colonel who commands the Battalion, the Iraqi exiles who play civilians on the battlefield, and the American soldiers cast as "insurgents." We follow our subjects from the moment they receive their role assignments through their simulated "deaths."

Despite the movie-set contrivances, the stakes and the emotions are very real. As reality and fantasy overlap, the film moves from comic to surreal to poignant. Will the Army improve life in Medina Wasl and win the "hearts and minds" of the people, or will their mistakes propel the town into violent civil war? Does the fate of Medina Wasl reflect the Army's rose-colored vision of success, or suggest that the Army has lost control of their script? And what happens to the "actors" on this stage after the curtain falls and they resume their "real" lives?

Through these intimate stories - of Iraqi exiles fleeing the war (and now "playing" it) and US Soldiers heading into it - FULL BATTLE RATTLE provides a revelatory look at the soul of the American war machine, and, in the battle for Medina Wasl, finds a potent allegory of the Iraq War and the cultural and religious differences that confound America's efforts.

DIRECTORS' STATEMENT

Deciding to Make the Film

In May 2006, we asked the Army for permission to film inside their Iraq Simulation in California's Mojave Desert. Formally known as the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, the simulation had been the subject of several news reports. These reports piqued our curiosity. We learned that the Army had – in order to adapt to the changing nature of the war in Iraq - constructed a number of mock villages in Mojave Desert and populated them with Iraqi American role players. Combat Brigades deploying to Iraq

were sent through the simulation for two weeks and subjected to an immersive training exercise designed to prepare them for the military, cultural, political and humanitarian challenges awaiting them in the real war zone.

On one hand, this effort struck us as a perfectly sensible. On the other hand, there was something disturbingly odd about the exercise. Could war really be simulated? Who were these Iraqi American role players who lived for weeks inside the simulation? Aspects of the simulation seemed utterly fake. Yet the stakes were very real. Soldiers and civilians were dying in Iraq. Could this training save lives? This tension - between the fake and the real - is what drew us to the story as documentary filmmakers. It was our hope that by living inside the simulation we might answer these questions and gain valuable insight into the war itself.

Emboldened by the belief that the best films about war are often the least conventional (Altman's *Mash*, Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*, David O. Russell's *Three Kings*, Peter Davis's *Heart and Minds*), we approached the Army about access.

Access

The Army resisted our initial efforts to film inside the simulation. As independent documentary filmmakers, we were not affiliated with any broadcast network or news agency. After persisting for several months and demonstrating our professional qualifications, we were invited to visit the simulation for two days.

On this initial trip we visited Medina Wasl, one of several Iraqi villages in the simulation, and observed an Army Combat Brigade involved in a role-playing exercise. This was fascinating and utterly surreal. It looked like Iraq (desert). It felt like Iraq (120 degrees). The townsfolk were all Arabic speaking Iraqis. Yet the village looked like a B movie set. Odder still were the American soldiers cast as insurgents lounging around town in dishdashah - a form of traditional Iraqi dress - BBQing hamburgers as if they were relaxing on the front porch of a fraternity house. It was like walking into the middle of the world's largest, most expensive, most complex stage play. And it was immediately apparent to us that the play itself - as enacted by soldiers and role players - could serve the film in two ways: as both the dramatic framework of our story; and as a distorted mirror reflecting - in strange but revealing ways - the many challenges facing America in Iraq.

After returning to New York and reviewing our footage, we immediately approached the Army and requested permission to live inside the simulation for the duration of an entire training rotation - three weeks. This was something no journalist, filmmaker or news organization had ever done before. We proposed that Tony Gerber (Director/Producer) would live with the Army Brigade in training, and that Jesse Moss (Director/Producer) would live in the village of Medina Wasl, a scenario that would allow us to document both sides of this "fake" war. Much to our surprise, the Army agreed to our request. We asked to join the 4-1 Cav (the 4th Brigade of the 1st Cavalry, from Fort Bliss, Texas), during their training rotation in August 2006. On August 7, we moved into the simulation. A written agreement with the Army ensured that we would have complete editorial freedom. Our movements were never monitored, our questions were never screened, and we were able to move freely within the simulated battle-space.

Working in the Field

The major initial challenge was not the working conditions, which, although brutal, were not - we reminded ourselves - nearly as dangerous as those faced by journalists in the real Iraq. (Soldiers and insurgents in the simulation play a sophisticated form of laser-tag. Although soldiers have died in the simulation, casualties are rare.) Rather, the initial challenge to us, as documentary filmmakers, was

finding characters to follow through the simulation. We hit the ground running. And within a few days identified the soldiers and Iraqi role players who would both play key roles in the “drama” and had compelling personal stories.

What made our challenge difficult was not only the number of characters we were actively following, and the improvised nature of the simulation, but the limited production resources available to us. Both of us worked alone in the field, shooting and recording sound. The work was exhausting and overwhelming but exhilarating. During the production we shot 350 hours of footage using the Panasonic DVX100a camera, shooting 24P anamorphic (16:9).

The Story

Full Battle Rattle is the story of a village, Medina Wasl, perched on the brink of civil war. The outcome of this story - the fate of Medina Wasl - was not scripted. Lt. Col. McLaughlin and his soldiers could achieve victory and win the “hearts and minds” of the people, or they could lose, and send the town spiraling downward. It became apparent to us, as we edited the film, that the story of Medina Wasl was a striking allegory of the real Iraq War, mirroring nearly every phase of the conflict, from occupation, through the rise of the insurgency, collateral damage, reconstruction and civil war.

In August 2006, the war was going badly, but some, including President Bush and his war cabinet, remained optimistic. Would the fate of Medina Wasl foretell the future? Or, more modestly, yield curious insight into the military missteps and the cultural and religious differences that confound America’s efforts in Iraq. We choose to let the viewer decide whether the outcome of the simulation (withdrawal) is an accurate indicator of the future.

Full Battle Rattle is also the story of a group of people brought together in an unusual moment in time, in an unusual place. The film, we hope, provides a snapshot of their lives as they undergo profound transformation. For the soldiers of the 5-82 Battalion, war and Iraq (and possibly death) loom on the horizon. For the Iraqi role players, Iraq, their native homeland, recedes into the past (and is destroyed), even as it materializes, in simulated form, in front of them. They are all on the journey to become Americans. Unexpectedly, for Sgt. Paul Greene, who plays an insurgent in Medina Wasl, Iraq is both past, present and future, as he rudely discovers when, near the end of the film, he is deployed a third time.

Finally, Full Battle Rattle offers a glimpse inside the soul of the American war machine, presented in all its surreal, shocking power. There are 13 villages in the simulation, and new ones on the horizon. The Army employs 300 Iraqi American role players to populate these villages. Army Brigades (approximately 3000 soldiers) travel through the simulation nearly every month. And a military city of 15,000 – Fort Irwin – exists to support the operation of the simulation. What was once a cold war training facility, in which tanks battled each other in a simulated Eastern Front, has evolved into a web of villages in which an entire nation has been simulated, with rival tribes, an army of its own, two news networks, a civilian leadership, a court system, an insurgency, a radical Shiite militia, live goats, amputees, and robotic mannequins. The irony was not lost on us that while Iraq disintegrates, a new, ersatz Iraq rises in the desert, 40 miles from Barstow, California.

Point of View

The fact that our film is not an expose makes some viewers uncomfortable. We are politically opposed to the war, but did not make this film with the intent of seeking confirmation for our own political beliefs. We sought to jump down the proverbial rabbit hole in order to better understand how we’ve become mired in Iraq and the consequences for all of us. What we present is - like the war itself - a complex reality; a portrait of real people under extraordinary circumstances. We prefer to think of this point of

view as “humanist.” We do, however, believe that the final tragic outcome of the 5-82 Battalion’s mission in Medina Wasl (the utter destruction of the town) and the Battalion’s subsequent deployment to Iraq reveals a larger truth about the futility of this “forever” war.

Structure

It took approximately 14 months, and the work of 3 extremely talented editors, to edit Full Battle Rattle. We first assembled a rough outline of the key moment in the drama – what we referred to in the edit room as “on stage” events. These were the scripted scenarios - known as injects – devised by military and civilian planners (The Lizard Team) that follow a loose storyline and are designed to test the Brigade. In addition, these events included the Brigade’s un-scripted responses, and attacks initiated by insurgents. Our effort was to show the clear choices confronting Lt. Col McLaughlin, and document how the decisions he and his soldiers made would shape the final outcome of their mission.

Secondly, we focused on events “off-stage” – moments when our key subjects were out of character, and, in a sense, playing themselves. These included interviews, and cinema verite moments.

Lastly, we focused on the material that the audience would need to understand the rules of the simulation – the “rules of the game.” This information was largely provided - through interviews - with Col. Cameron Kramer, Chief of Plans and Operations, at the National Training Center, and Capt. Chris Mugavero, the Officer in Charge of Medina Wasl.

Finding the right balance between these three main elements required a long process of experimentation and calibration. The decision to leave the simulation in the final act of the film and return to Fort Bliss (with Lt. Col. McLaughlin and his soldiers) and San Diego (with our Iraqi role players) was not easy. Yet ultimately we felt it was important, even necessary, to see our subjects in the “real” world, to understand everything that was at stake for them, and bring their stories, in the film, to closure.

Style

The look and feel of the film was important to us. We come from a strong cinema verite tradition, but are comfortable and have worked successfully in narrative fiction and more conventional (interview-based) forms of documentary storytelling. The appeal of this film, in this place, was the opportunity to draw these styles together and create something new and different: to shoot breathless, surprising, and occasionally rough cinema verite; to cover the “on stage” moments in the simulation as, appropriately, a form of fiction; and sit down with our subjects for candid, intense interviews.

We came from different backgrounds as filmmakers but in Full Battle Rattle found the ultimate subject in which we could walk a line between the real and the imagined - a subject in which the distinction between the two is beside the point.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Lt. Col. Robert McLaughlin, the commander of the 5-82 Battalion of the 4th Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, and his aide, **Lt. Ben Freeman**, play pivotal roles in the effort to bring “peace and stability” to the troubled village of Medina Wasl. McLaughlin’s Battalion, based at Fort Bliss, Texas, deploys to Northern Iraq weeks.

Bassam Kalasho is the Deputy Mayor of Medina Wasl, (role name: Ludfri Masour Al-Jabouri). The assassination of the Deputy Mayor’s son by sectarian rivals is the pivotal event in simulation, propelling the village into civil war. At home in San Diego, Kalasho works as a liquor store clerk.

Nagi Moshi, the Deputy Police Chief of Medina Wasl, is an illegal immigrant from Iraq. An asylum applicant, he continues to work in the simulation despite facing deportation to Iraq. He recently moved to Las Vegas, Nevada.

Azhar Cholagh, a shopkeeper in Medina Wasl, is a spirited but peripheral player in the town scenario. A native of Baghdad, she sends the money she earns home to her parents, who are desperately trying to flee Iraq before it disintegrates.

Sgt. Paul Greene, a veteran of two tours in Iraq, is an American soldier charged with playing an insurgent in the simulation. He plays a key role in the effort to de-stabilize the town and attack American forces. After serving in Iraq, he finds adjustment to life in Medina Wasl and cohabitation with Iraqi neighbors to be uneasy.

Sgt. Richard Ramsey is the Army simulation's medical training instructor. He supervises the team of robotic mannequins used to simulate battled casualties. A former Hollywood actor, he also frequently dispenses acting advice to role players.

DIRECTOR BIOGRAPHIES AND FILMOGRAPHIES

Tony Gerber - Producer/Director

Tony Gerber was born in New York City and began his directing career creating films for live theatre. His work has been featured in a number of award-winning productions, including the Broadway musical Rent. His short film, Small Taste of Heaven premiered at Rotterdam and the Sundance film Festival and enabled him to direct his first feature, Side Streets, starring Rosario Dawson, Valeria Golino and Shashi Kapoor. The film was Executive Produced by Ismail Merchant / Merchant Ivory and premiered at the Venice and Sundance film festivals. He is developing the feature film Disobedience, a story of impossible love in the US anti-war movement with producers Killer Films, and Mud, River Stone, from the play by award-winning playwright Lynn Nottage. He collaborated with artist Matthew Barney on his Drawing Restraint 9 (starring Bjork) and Cremaster IV. Gerber is currently in pre-production on a documentary series for National Geographic, shooting in the Democratic Republic of Congo. His previous work in television earned him two Emmy Awards.

Jesse Moss - Producer/Director

Jesse Moss is the founder of Mile End Films(www.mileendfilms.com), a New York based production company. His award winning documentaries include Speedo: A Demolition Derby Love Story, which aired on POV/PBS, and Con Man, which aired on HBO/Cinemax. He is currently working on a series of scripted training films for the Dept. of Veterans Affairs about a new cognitive therapy designed to help Iraq War Vets, and producing Disturbing the Universe, a documentary about the radical lawyer William Kunstler. He is also writing the screenplay adaptation of Con Man, about Ivy League impostor James Hogue, for Paul Giamatti's company Touchy Feely Films. Prior to establishing his own production company, Moss worked as a producer for Barbara Kopple and a speechwriter on Capitol Hill. He has been a fellow of the MacDowell Colony, and was named one of 25 New Faces of Independent Film by Filmmaker Magazine in 2003.

FULL BATTLE RATTLE
SELECTED PRESS

“Coolly ironic. An indelible vision of modern war, a not-so-fun fun-house mirror of the Iraq occupation set in California’s Mojave Desert. The film is freaky, amusing, and sickening in equal measures – part fly-on-the-wall vérité, part multiple-perspective Altmanesque tragicomedy. A catastrophic farce, a let’s-pretend that ends with a mass deployment to hell.” -David Edelstein, NEW YORK MAGAZINE

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“Remarkably thorough and detailed. The film emphasizes the strangeness and complexity of the conflict.” – A.O. Scott, THE NEW YORK TIMES

“Like any documentary about putting on a show, FULL BATTLE RATTLE abounds with mirth-provoking incongruities between the effect aimed for and the means used to achieve it. It’s ‘surreal comedy,’ as more than one reviewer characterized it when it premiered at the Berlin Film Festival. Somehow, though, I don’t much feel like laughing... One of the most complete pictures yet to emerge of how an Iraqi town fragments into civil war.” –Stuart Klawans, THE NATION

“A combat doc once removed from combat and twice mediated by stagecraft, FULL BATTLE RATTLE depicts simulated war in a theme-park reality....One of the many surreal aspects of this fabulously disorienting movie: its representation of an Iraqi heaven that’s an American hell.” –J. Hoberman, VILLAGE VOICE

“No documentary I have seen better portrays the mutual suspicions and resentments of Americans and Iraqis. I still don’t know whether to laugh or cry.” –Richard Woodward, THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

“Just when I thought I had heard everything about the war in Iraq, along comes FULL BATTLE RATTLE... The idea of spending big bucks on a phony war sounds like something out of the Marx Brothers’ DUCK SOUP, but the stakes are, of course, much higher... a stroke of a genius or a very expensive boondoggle.” – V.A. Musetto, THE NEW YORK POST

“Fascinating, surreal, but profoundly humane.” – Joe Williams, ST. LOUIS POST DISPATCH

“One of the most provocative documentaries about the ongoing war in Iraq... Gerber and Moss collected over 350 hours of footage which they’ve whittled down to a fascinating – and quite revealing – 85 minutes. The end result is a remarkable document.” – Ken Fox, TV GUIDE

“Begins as surreal, almost goofball farce... ends on an ambiguous and haunting note, much closer to tragedy.” - ANDREW O’HEHIR, SALON.COM

“An absolute peach. I’m not sure how they’ve been able to get away with this utterly stunning fly-on-wall piece about a “virtual reality Iraq” set up in the Mojave Desert to train American troops. It would be a sublime satire if it wasn’t horribly true. The deadly serious manner in which the American soldiers deal with all this nonsense gives rise to some of the greatest and most surreal comedy I’ve seen. I now know that the occupation of Iraq is utterly doomed.” –James Christopher, THE TIMES OF LONDON

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“Full Battle Rattle is without a doubt the most bizarre film to emerge yet from the current Gulf conflict - an entertaining, often very funny, but ultimately revealing and unsettling film...” –Jonathan Romney, SCREEN INTERNATIONAL

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“The joker in the war-on-terror pack at Berlin was Tony Gerber and Jesse Moss’s Full Battle Rattle. This is a nonfiction movie about the Pentagon’s deployment of fiction. Deep in the Mojave Desert sits the jerry-built village of Medina Wasl. Here war games are acted out to help Iraq-bound regiments rehearse for reality. You would laugh if you didn’t feel you should more properly weep.” - THE FINANCIAL TIMES

“The situation as sketched in Full Battle Rattles produces images that are on one side familiar, on the other strange, but all of them show, without the need of interviews or narration, the distance between the Americans’ intentions and the result for the Iraqis.” - LE MONDE

“The film works on many levels, but its most shining success is showing the war, and rampant militarization in general, as an extremely complicated matter, one that cannot be boiled down to sound-bites and absolutes.” – SPOUT

“A documentary in the purest sense of the word... An excellent piece.” - AIN’T IT COOL NEWS

“Both an involving you-are-there documentary that looks at an unfamiliar subject and a question-raising meditation on the way America deals with Iraq.” - AUSTIN AMERICAN STATESMAN

“A multi-layered allegory for the current situation in Iraq.” - AUSTIN CHRONICLE