



MIKE WARKENTIN | FIT TO WATCH? | AUGUST 2016

THE
CrossFit JOURNAL

MOVIE REVIEW: “CITIZEN SOLDIER”

Point-of-view combat footage offers a dramatic look at the National Guard in Afghanistan.





Sgt. Allen Huey of the South Carolina Army National Guard provides security in Orgun District with help from a member of the Afghan National Army.

“It’s jammed again. I hate this thing!”

The same words are likely spoken hourly near printers and copiers in offices all around the world.

In this case, the words were uttered by an American soldier struggling with an Mk 19 grenade launcher mounted to a combat vehicle in Afghanistan.

“Oh, fuck me!” a soldier yells as rocket-propelled grenades explode nearby and rounds whiz past.

The soldiers in the vehicle are waiting for another element to arrive on foot, and they’re sitting ducks with a number of attackers hidden in an adjacent cornfield that can’t conceal regular muzzle flashes.

The scene is truly intense and characteristic of the tension-filled “Citizen Soldier,” which is presented mainly through footage collected by combat photographers and helmet-mounted GoPro cameras. For just over 100 minutes, viewers are essentially given the point of view of a soldier in the Oklahoma Army National Guard 45th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, which was deployed to Afghanistan in 2011.

The film’s opening explains that most of these soldiers train about 40 days a year and have full-time jobs but serve their country nonetheless as part of a rich tradition dating back to 1636 in the pre-United States colonies. Because National Guard units are under the dual control of state and federal governments, deployment overseas is common in times of war.

The film succeeds on the strength of gripping footage, and the stories are well told as video and audio clips are cut together to create a narrative, such as when radio intercepts reveal the enemy is arming while the Americans are approaching through very rugged terrain that leaves them open to ambush.

In another incident, soldiers frantically search for an enemy by peering into dark dwellings, leaving the viewer waiting with bated breath for a sudden flash and a fight.

“There was a saying,
‘There’s no stronger bond than shared
pain.’ Couldn’t be any more true.”
—Capt. Tyler Brown

The film’s challenge is that it’s hard to balance all the dramatic footage with character development that would truly bring home the citizen-soldier aspect. That’s not to say you don’t get to know some of these soldiers to a degree. Tender or light moments in Afghanistan or interviews filmed back in the U.S. offer perspective and fill in some back story, but the wealth and quality of the combat footage is totally immersive and overwhelming. For the majority of the film, war is dramatically laid bare, with the courage, leadership, bravado, fear, panic and confusion of its participants on full display.

It’s borderline impossible to remember a combatant is a motorcycle-riding corrections officer when you can hear and see bullets sending chips of rock into the air while he’s completely exposed to enemies concealed above and around him. The intensity of the engagements is such that you perceive these men only as soldiers: Unstable helmet-cam footage puts you right next to them as they sprint for cover amid staccato bursts of gunfire.

The bookends that remind us the soldiers are also citizens are very necessary because our connections to the men come almost entirely from experiencing their emotions as they take part in a firefight or navigate roads on which any bump might be an IED that will flip the vehicle. I imagine the soldiers themselves feel that same detachment from civilian life when they’re under fire in a foreign land.

Overall, the tension and drama throughout are more than worth the price of admission. “Citizen Soldier” presents a gritty look at the war in Afghanistan and the people who set aside their full-time jobs to fight it. ■

About the Author: Mike Warkentin is the managing editor of the CrossFit Journal and the founder of [CrossFit 204](#).