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FILM

U.S. Soldiers' War Crime Gets Hollywood Treatment

'The Kill Team' explores a dark chapter from the conflict in Afghanistan, venturing into riskier territory than major releases 'Lone Survivor' and '12 Strong'



Nat Wolff plays a U.S. soldier in Afghanistan considering whether to blow the whistle on his unit in 'The Kill Team.' PHOTO: A24

By R.T. Watson and Jessica Donati

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While the time U.S. soldiers spend serving in America's wars is rarely glamorous, Hollywood's depiction of it often is.

That's been especially true in the narrow canon of Hollywood films that have explored the war in Afghanistan, a conflict that has been raging since the U.S. invaded after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Nearly every big-screen portrayal of the war has celebrated feats of American bravery, like "Lone Survivor," starring Mark Wahlberg and "12 Strong" with Chris Hemsworth.

And although the war is the longest-running U.S. conflict on foreign soil, "The Kill Team," which independent distributor A24 is releasing in select theaters and on demand Friday, stands out as Hollywood's first cinematic recount of the conflict in the style of the Vietnam War films like

1986's "Platoon." Those movies sought to spotlight the brutality U.S. soldiers sometimes inflicted on innocent civilians during the protracted Southeast Asian conflict.

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A movie like "The Kill Team" is a risky bet. Audiences haven't embraced the few films of the post-9/11 era that question U.S. military behavior. "Redacted," a 2007 Iraq war film by Brian De Palma loosely based on the Mahmudiyah massacre in which American soldiers raped an Iraqi girl and killed her

family, failed to gross even \$100,000, according to Box Office Mojo. The 2017 Netflix film "War Machine," starring Brad Pitt and also based on true events, was critical of the engagement in Afghanistan, but took a decidedly comic approach—one that failed to resonate with viewers and critics.

The based-on-true-events inspiration behind "The Kill Team" involves atrocities committed by a U.S. Army unit that in 2010 executed unarmed Afghan civilians for fun. A military court handed out several prison sentences, with the ringleader in the case and highest-ranking soldier charged sent to prison for life.

The film's writer and director, Dan Krauss, says his film isn't intended as a criticism of American soldiers or the U.S. military, but an opportunity for honest discussion about what happens under a failure in leadership. The antagonist who orchestrates the killings in "The Kill Team" is a character Mr. Krauss hopes audiences empathize with to some degree. (The filmmaker changed the names of the soldiers from the real-life episode.)

"The soldiers that we send into war are young men and women who are vulnerable to influence and can easily lose their moral bearings," Mr. Krauss says. "I think if we're going to talk about the cost of war in terms of blood and treasure, we should also talk about the cost of war in terms of morality."

"The Kill Team" is primarily told from the point of view of its young protagonist, U.S. Army Pvt. Andrew Briggman, played by Nat Wolff. A moral crisis ensues when his new superior, Sgt. Deeks, played by Alexander Skarsgård, convinces soldiers in the unit in joining him in creating manufactured combat opportunities that help to justify the execution of innocent Afghan civilians.

Pvt. Briggman finds himself torn between loyalty to his unit, the fear of the reprisal whistleblowing might bring and uncertainty about his own convictions.



Dan Krauss directs Mr. Wolff in the set of 'The Kill Team.' PHOTO: A24

“The movie really is designed as a walls-closing-in-style thriller where the tension comes not from combat and warfare and explosions and guns, but from the sideways glances of soldiers on the island of security, the FOB [base], in the middle of this desolate landscape,” Mr. Krauss says.

Mr. Krauss was already familiar with the true story behind “The Kill Team.” He directed a 2013 documentary of the same name

that examined the trials and tribulations faced by the real soldier who would later provide the basis for the Pvt. Briggman character.

The new, fictionalized version is unlike other feature films about the war in Afghanistan, including another recently completed movie, Millennium Films’s “The Outpost.” That film stars Orlando Bloom and was directed by military veteran Rod Lurie. It tells the real-life story of 53 U.S. soldiers who in 2009 battled 300 to 400 Taliban fighters at the remote Combat Outpost Keating, near the Afghan border with Pakistan.

The most lucrative movies about the war thus far have followed a similar narrative design by zeroing in on extraordinary tales of heroism and camaraderie.

As economics and logistics are paramount considerations when making a movie, producing a pro-military film that celebrates American soldiers’ grit can be an easier pitch both to financiers and would-be collaborators in the government. “Lone Survivor” and “12 Strong” also showed these types of films might make more fiscal sense, after delivering decent box office results. The movies respectively grossed \$125.1 million and \$45.8 million in the U.S. and Canada. They were widely released by major distributors.

Andrew Bacevich, a retired Army colonel, Vietnam veteran and professor emeritus at Boston University, says the war in Afghanistan appears to have largely vanished from the collective consciousness of many Americans. (The exception has been spikes of interest surrounding President Trump’s occasional discussions of making a deal with the Taliban, he says.)

The number of soldiers deployed and lost to combat perhaps offers insight into how the American consciousness has been affected differently by Afghanistan and Vietnam. About 3.4 million

soldiers went to Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War, and some 58,000 died, according to official counts. The war in Afghanistan has produced more than 2,400 service-member deaths.

Mr. Bacevich doesn't believe the tragic events depicted in "The Kill Team" are anything new. "I have no doubt that probably comparable episodes of misconduct have occurred far more frequently than either we know about or are willing to admit," he says.

Chris Thielenhaus, a platoon leader who served in Iraq at the time of the Mahmudiyah massacre, says Hollywood productions that highlight wrongdoing, when accurate, can power debate about the impact of war and the scars it leaves on those who serve.

"I think you have to draw attention to the dark side of these conflicts," he says. "Otherwise people and policy makers can get lulled into a sense that clean and morally unambiguous wars are possible."

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