

King and Country

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Tonight I caught *King and Country* on TCM (it is available on Netflix). Made in 1964, in Britain, and directed by Joseph Losey who had been blacklisted in the US, this is set in WW I, in the British trenches. A young army private, Tom Cordenay, who has been on the front lines for three years, had abandoned his post due to shell shock. He is defended at the courts martial by Dirk Bogarde. (One of my favorite British actors - Leo McKern - puts in an appearance).

The film could have easily been an adoption of a stage play. Filmed in black and white, it catches the stupidity and grinding muddy horror of trench war. It is very well done, though I'm not sure who will enjoy watching it! But if one wants to look back to the trenches of World War I, this is the film. It was out of this war that the War Resisters International was formed.

Restrepo, which I got through Netflix, was made in 2010 by Sebastian Junger and Tim Hetherington (who was killed recently covering another war). What this film does not have going for it is drama, blood, and death. You will see more actual death in any episode of *CSI* or *Law and Order*. What it does have going for it is the rare and terrifying reality that the film was shot during the course of a year in the Korengal Valley in Northeast Afghanistan, at that time regarded as the "deadliest place on earth". No trenches here - just dust. The landing of a helicopter is like a hurricane of pure brown grit billowing into the sky. Aside from catching glimpses of elderly Afghans, with their strangely dyed beards, and their mouths often empty of most of their teeth (in fact, made more dramatic by the sight of the two or three surviving teeth), there are no glimpses of the Taliban - only the sound of bullets coming in.

The film is notable for two things. One is to watch the cracking up of one of the men in the midst of combat. Not wounded, or bloody, just blind with fear, trembling, held up by his comrades, comforting him. You've heard about shellshock and PTS - this is a chance to catch a glimpse of the real thing. The other matter of note is the lingering shots of a few of the men after they have left the valley on leave (the US abandoned the Korengal Valley after all the blood shed to seize it). The men are clean, quiet - and terribly young. One of them admits that none of the sleeping pills he has been given have worked, that he cannot sleep through the night. It is clear that what these men have seen and experienced has wrenched their lives in ways we can imagine, but will never understand.

I make no political comment on the films - there is comment enough here, made more emphatic by knowing that Hetherington died covering war.