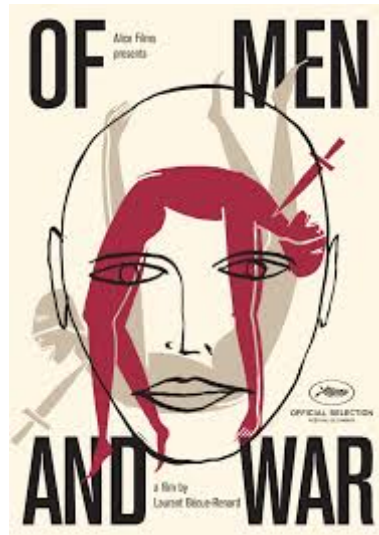


# In Laurent Bécue-Renard's *Of Men and War* War Is Not Tragic But Embarrassing



In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell argued that every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected. There is truth to this. Some soldiers do go to war expecting an exciting adventure. Some don't expect to be killed or even think about their chances of being killed. Some don't dwell on the fact that they have guns and will have to shoot the enemy. But most do. Most are rational actors with the same evidence we all have at our disposal: namely, war involves violence. So why are they so often surprised when the war they go to turns out to be, well, violent?

Though concerned with what happens to soldiers after war, the question of imagined experience versus actual experience haunts Laurent Bécue-Renard's powerful documentary *Of Men and War*. Following several veterans at the Pathway Home, a California facility established to help traumatized veterans find meaning in trauma, Bécue-Renard reveals that the men fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan did not find the experience worse than expected, not exactly—they found it more humiliating than expected.

According to the documented counseling sessions, many of the veterans at the Pathway Home participated in firefights, staunched the bleeding of ruptured bodies, and helped collect dead bodies. That they did these things should surprise no one. I would be hard-pressed to imagine anybody who did not know these things happen when you bring rifles and bombs to a place with a bunch of rifles and bombs. And, not surprisingly, the Pathway veterans tell very few of these traditional wartime stories. Only a few seem particularly upset by the fact that they had to kill an enemy, or lost a battle buddy or even their own combat injuries. This is not to say that these things did not upset them, only that they do not explain why they are at Pathway Home.

The veterans do, though, tell a whole lot of accident stories. One tells the story of how he kicked in a door and broke the neck of a little boy who was about to open the door. One tells about getting a lifelong disability because he jumped from a helicopter five or six feet to the ground and landed wrong. One tells about watching a tanker pull a gun out of the turret and how the tanker blew his own head off. Another tells about leaning into a fridge to get his best friend a Monster energy drink and pulling his M-4 trigger and killing his best friend.

After the release of *American Sniper*, Americans had a national conversation about PTSD (or what passes for a national conversation in America). In the movie version, American Sniper Chris Kyle's decision to kill a child and save American soldiers haunts him. But most soldiers would not be haunted by this. This is a straightforward exchange, a decision that involved conscious volition and a commitment to save fellow soldiers. It is the same logic with which we drone bomb and carpet bomb and drop nuclear bombs on cities—horrible, morally suspect, but (for many) a necessary utilitarian sacrifice that comes with war. Moments like this do not haunt the soldiers at the Pathway Home. In the Pathway Home version, the sniper

would have tried shooting the boy and shot an American soldier or shot the wrong boy or failed to make the shot and all the soldiers died. That's what haunts. Accidents haunt.

Kicking in a door and breaking a child's neck cannot be rationalized. The soldier who did this in *Of Men and War*—an obviously decent and empathetic man—tries to blame it on bad Iraqi parenting. He tries to blame the boy. He tries to blame it on himself. But it can't be explained. It can't be reduced to any schema. It is just stupid and horrible and unfair. The boy is dead and you didn't mean to kill him. That's it. It is a stupid accident. It is humiliating. It sucks. It is impossible to lend meaning to such a moment and such a story because embarrassments like that don't deserve meaning—they resist explication not through their horror but their arbitrary horror.

In "The Chaff," a short story by Brian Van Reet, the narrator describes how what troubles veterans is seldom what most would consider traumatic. Instead, the narrator finds himself overwhelmed in civilian life by a trivial moment, an action and event not especially traumatic. The narrator of Matthew Hefti's novel, *A Hard and Heavy Thing*, obsesses for years over a practical joke involving a pebble—"the stupid, galling, rebarbative, pestilent, abrasive carking rock"—rather than the actual violence the pebble supposedly caused. The opening line of Phil Klay's National Book Award winning *Redeployment*, "We shot dogs," has similar implications. Soldiers go to war to kill humans. Soldiers (and civilians) do not expect to kill dogs. Soldiers remember the dead dogs, not the person of whatever age or gender they had to kill to save friends or because some Captain told them to (the ending of Klay's story suggests the multiple moral ironies inherent in such logic).

From different angles, Van Reet, Hefti, Klay and Bécue-Renard approach the idiosyncratic nature of PTSD—not its horror, not its thousand-yard stare, how war was so much worse than

expected, but its very ridiculousness, the awkward and absurd and pathetically embarrassing nature of war. There is nothing dignified about the denizens of Pathway Home. These veterans do not stare into the abyss. They do not see any heart of darkness. They have no access to some existential truth. They have not returned sadder and wiser men. They are simply lost men stuck on what might not have been, how something as silly as forgetting to un-chamber a round or buckle a seatbelt killed their best friend.

Young men and women do not join the military thinking that it will all be a walk in the park and that war's violence won't affect them. They are not imbeciles. What soldiers do miss is that the violence they will face is often desperately pedestrian, something that could have happened to them back home, which has no meaning other than the fact that it happened. Wrestling with sheer happenstance is not an easy thing to do for civilians. It is even harder to do with several thousand years of war mythology and sentimentalizing telling you that an accident has a larger meaning when it clearly does not. By immersing us in the experience of the men at Pathway Home, Bécue-Renard's provocative documentary wrestles with this disconnect. Let us hope the people who send these young men and women to war start wrestling with it too.