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OF MEN AND WAR



A Film by Laurent Bécue-Renard

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Of Men and War

*Years after coming home,
a dozen veterans continue to wrestle with demons from the war.
Will group therapy help them find meaning in their trauma
and leave the war behind?*

SYNOPSIS

The warriors in **Of Men and War** have come home to the United States, but their minds remain on the battlefield. Anger consumes them long after their return from the front. Like figures from a Greek tragedy, all have traumatic memories that haunt them to this day.

At The Pathway Home, a first-of-its-kind PTSD therapy center, the film's subjects resolve to end the ongoing destruction of their wellbeing. Their therapist, who is also a Vietnam Vet, helps the young men forge meaning from their trauma. Over years of therapy, the film explores their grueling paths to recovery, as they attempt to make peace with their past, their families and themselves.

MAKING OF MEN AND WAR

The director, Laurent Bécue-Renard, secured exclusive and unprecedented access to the soldiers at The Pathway Home, becoming part of the lives of 12 new veterans and their families. He traced their journeys through 14 months in residential therapy and more than 4 years of the veterans' family life. **Of Men and War** seeks to depict the aftermath of war through the lens of trauma therapy.

Founded by veteran therapist Fred Gusman in Yountville, California, The Pathway Home serves as the primary location for where most of the film takes place. For the duration of production, Bécue-Renard was granted full access to the facility and, over five months, gained the trust of the veterans and recorded everything he could - including their intense trauma therapy sessions.

The therapeutic process allowed soldiers to grasp what happened during war and to understand how those experiences effected who they are today. PTSD can neither be cured nor forgotten, however, in articulating trauma, the warriors can work to find their way forward through the pain.

The camera played a significant role in the soldiers' therapy, as they came to perceive the filming itself as an additional glimmer of hope. Conscious or not, the veterans began to sense that voicing their brutal experiences might uncover deeper meaning. Bécue-Renard's ultimate

hope is that their stories will contribute to a greater public consciousness of the hardships veterans confront long after the war's end.

Bécue-Renard filmed the soldiers speaking for the first time ever about their experiences on the front lines. After each of the protagonists graduated from therapy, he continued detailing their return home to families who suffered through the war alongside their husbands, sons, and fathers.

Over ten years in the making, ***Of Men and War*** offers a unique opportunity for veterans to tell their stories - for themselves, for each other, and for everyone.

VETERANS AND POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have brought over 2.6 million new veterans home to the United States. According to Pentagon estimates, up to a third of combat veterans struggle with war-related posttraumatic stress (PTSD).

Many soldiers return home hoping to turn the page on their war experience. After their service, these young newlyweds and fathers expect good jobs in the civilian world, thanks to their discipline and a G.I. Bill-financed education. Most of them have passed a military psychiatric screening and all seems to be in order.

Something doesn't quite click though. The war resurfaces in nightmares and panic attacks. A sudden noise might trigger a flashback. Other times, all it takes is a disagreement with a spouse or an ambiguous look from a stranger. Then the anger takes over – all that was buried from the war boils up and lashes out.

Newspaper articles abound about young veterans and drug abuse, domestic violence, or suicide. The number of soldiers needing treatment, which has climbed to over half a million, has overwhelmed the US Veterans Administration.

The Pathway Home, however, marks a turning point in these tragic narratives. Founded by Fred Gusman in 2008, The Pathway Home is an independent residential treatment program. A therapist and social worker, Fred pioneered revolutionary post-Vietnam PTSD programs at the Veterans Administration in the late 1970s. Through opening The Pathway Home he developed a program for veterans who might otherwise slip through the cracks.

The men in **Of Men and War** stand for hundreds of their fellow warriors at The Pathway Home as well as the millions of other veterans in the world who continue to battle PTSD.

For more information on The Pathway Home, please visit

www.thepathwayhome.org

INTERVIEW OF THE DIRECTOR BY FILMMAKER CHRISTOPHE LOIZILLON

Christophe Loizillon: Could you give us some background on **Of Men and War**?

Laurent Bécue-Renard: It came out of a reflection on what was left unspoken by my grandfathers. They had died by the time I was born – but they had also staunchly refused to talk about their experiences from the First World War while they were alive. I never had access to what they might have said.

In my first film, **War-Wearied (De guerre lasses)**, I broached this subject with three widows who survived the Bosnian war. In a sense, that film was a portrait of my grandmothers. All the while, the war experiences of my grandfathers continued to haunt me. **Of Men and War** is my way of honoring them.

CL: Your work focuses on what happens after the gunfire and news cameras leave the battlefield. Why is that?

LBR: In war, what lasts longer than the war itself is the “post-war.” It’s a shockwave that affects all of the war’s witnesses, jumping even from generation to generation. We all live with the aftershocks of these conflicts.

The essence of the warzone is inside soldiers heads. As a result, it gets transmitted directly to the family unit once a soldier comes home. Filming therapy for me was not simply a quest to collect testimony about the war. It was a way of acknowledging people who had decided to move forward with their lives. I was interested in the questions these veterans were asking themselves.

CL: Your film is also a portrait of the United States.

LBR: I worked in complete immersion. I plunged into the protagonists’ world for a long time in order to empathize with their situations. I don’t think this kind of work would be possible without great love for one’s protagonists.

I felt like I was depicting a universal archetype – that of Ulysses, the mythical warrior struggling to find his path home.

In making this film about ordinary Americans, I felt a strong sense of empathy for the United States and its people. I didn't want to judge them; rather I sought to understand what these men had endured.

CL: Could an American have made this film?

LBR: As a foreigner, I was outside of any social, civilian, or military class system for these US veterans. I came from afar, from a country the protagonists had never visited. Furthermore, I wasn't there for just five minutes – I spent 14 months in the therapy center and returned several times in the years that followed. I'd come back and they'd be married or have kids and we'd catch up on camera. It was my status as a foreigner that opened up this window into their lives.

It was also the fact that I am the grandson of veterans that brought me closer to my protagonists. I shared this with them, saying that I thought they could help me better grasp my grandfathers' legacy.

They understood, since they had kids of their own; they saw how easily their children were affected by their own war trauma.

CL: You shot *Of Men and War* between 2008 and 2013 – is there a rapport between the chronology of war and the rhythm of the film?

LBR: Processing trauma can take a lifetime. For me, it took ten years between my first idea for *Of Men and War* and its completion. That's a long time. From the beginning of the Iraq war in 2003 to May 2014... The structure of the film is not linear. I wanted to show that for each of the protagonists, time gets distorted. Flashbacks meld with glimpses of a possible future. But maybe that's a reflection of the temporality of war.

CL: What was your experience as a filmmaker on *Of Men and War*?

LBR: Doubt plagued me on a daily basis. Some days I'd leave the therapy room overwhelmed, after having listened to men express immense suffering that was both personal and secondhand, amplified by their comrades' traumatic experiences.

How was I to make meaning out of this mess? How could I communicate it to an audience? I became convinced, though, that from all this mud, I could eke out rays of light. In doing so, I could find meaning for the protagonists in *Of Men and War* as well as for its viewers, who will find their own sense of the stories in the film.

DIRECTOR'S BIO

Laurent Bécue-Renard is a French director and producer. In 1995 and 1996, while living in Sarajevo during the siege, he served as editor-in-chief of the magazine *Sarajevo Online* and published a series of short stories called *The Sarajevo Chronicles*.

After the conflict, he began exploring war's enduring impact on three widows at a rural therapy center. The documentary he wrote, directed, and produced about them, ***War-Wearied (De guerre lasses)***, screened at dozens of festivals and received the Berlin International Film Festival's Peace Film Award, among others.

Shifting focus to young men returning from battles in faraway lands, Bécue-Renard continues to explore war's psychological aftermath with ***Of Men and War***, the second volume of his ***Genealogy of Wrath*** trilogy.