



Photos courtesy/Ftst Run Features

Co-director/producer Tony Gerber takes a shot for the documentary "Full Battle Rattle" during training at Fort Irwin, California. Part of the base was transformed into 'Medina Wasl,' a mock-Iraqi town where units learn scenarios they are likely to face when they deploy to the Middle East.

'Full Battle Rattle' – Getting Ready for the Real Thing

Documentary film chronicles trainings at Fort Irwin's 'Medina Wasl,'
a mock-Iraqi town populated with Iraqi role players.

By Leslie Rigoulot

While the makers of the documentary *Full Battle Rattle* agree that no one is ever fully prepared for war, the US military has done a great job of giving troops a two-week exercise in the Mojave Desert that is as real as it can be without live ammunition.

Full Battle Rattle is the result of Producer/Directors Tony Gerber and Jesse Moss having unparalleled access to the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, in which is a simulation of an Iraqi town. But this surreal documentary is so much more than just reporting on the training.

In the mock village of Medina Wasl, the Army battalion 82-5 will go through the five scenarios scripted by the simulators designers. Occupation, insurgency, counter-insurgency, civil war and reconstruction are the scenes set and they provide the structure for the film.

But it is the in-between moments, the 'oh shit' look on the faces of the soldiers that get you. In a phone interview Tony Gerber said, "we spoke truths that haven't been told outside the community," the military community. Gerber lived with the Iraqi role players and Moss lived with the battalion. The full three

week rotation netted them 300 hours of footage which was edited to 85 minutes of rapid-fire documentary.

The military hired Iraqis who live in San Diego to live in Medina Wasl for months as troops are readied for deployment. The glimpses of their lives are illuminating. Nagi Moshi entered the US illegally and is hoping for asylum while Azhar Cholagh is studying for her citizenship test. They study the roles that are scripted for them and play out the script while recounting their own escapes from Iraq.

The deputy mayor of Medina Wasl is Bassam Kalasho who works in a liquor store in real life.

The lines between real life and role playing are so blurry that you have to wonder why the military script writers aren't just asking the Iraqis to play themselves.

"The Iraqis live seven months out of the year here and it is the closest they will come to living in the Iraq they left behind," said Gerber. Whether sending money back to relatives in Iraq or cooking traditional foods, the village takes on a life of its own. "The magic of Medina is that we all live in peace here," said the 'deputy mayor' Kahasho. Sunnis might be assigned the role of Shiites or vice versa. They all get along though and that

lesson is not lost on the Iraqis.

But it is the soldiers who are getting ready to deploy who make the simulation into riveting drama. Lt. Ben Freeman walks in with a typical attitude. "We'll go into town and do a little ... 'hi, how you doing?'" he said at the beginning of the exercise.

Lt. Col. Robert McLaughlin, the commander of the 5-82 Battalion of the 4th Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division hopes that the simulation will prepare his troops that it hurts when the simulation architects vividly demonstrate how quickly a situation can move from control to chaos.

"It gives people a sense of control over an uncontrollable situation," said Tony Gerber. "It is much more physically draining than the troops anticipate. The soldiers are onstage constantly whereas the Iraqis get to go out of character."

What is performance and what is real become blurred after the third day in the National Training Center for most of the soldiers according to Gerber.

For Lt. Ben Freeman, an attitude change evolves as he sees how quickly the mood of the village can change. Respect becomes imperative. Lt. Col. McLaughlin's face dissolves with the realization that this is not just an exercise; this is about to become his reality.

"We didn't expect to be as moved as we were at the end, when they were deployed," said Moss. If you have ever been on either side of a deployment, you better expect to be moved.

"Lt. Col. McLaughlin invited us to come to Iraq but we were in the middle of editing, which took a year and half," said Gerber. "We could witness and try to make sense of the war from the Medina Wasl perspective. Observe both vantage points, the complexities of war."

Gerber and Moss invited the 82-5 to the premiere. "But we were aware that five members wouldn't be there, erber said. "They were lost in Iraq. We invited their families and were truly honored that they came. They told us how much the film opened up their world, the soldiers' world for them."

Now they would like to open up that soldiers' world for others.

Medina Wasl is being retrofitted as an Afghan village now, according to Gerber and Moss. **AF**



A hired Iraqi man plays his part during a training exercise at a US Army Checkpoint inside the Army's simulated Iraqi town located at Fort Irwin, in California's Mojave Desert.

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