

Psychology in warfare, for better or worse

A Portland filmmaker looks at the military's foray into mental health treatment in the field

BY DEVAN SCHWARTZ
STAFF WRITER

Jan Haaken is a Portland State University professor, a clinical psychologist and a veteran documentary filmmaker. Her previous films have focused on the fringes of psychology, from war and reparation in Sierra Leone to drag queens as community therapists, to the dilemmas of patients and staff at the Oregon State Hospitals.

In her latest film, "Mind Zone: Therapists Behind the Front Lines," Haaken brings viewers to the U.S. Army base in Kandahar, Afghanistan. Haaken and her crew embedded with the 113th Combat Stress Control Detachment, a mixed group of psychologists and soldiers trained in basic counseling. Haaken explains the two-fold mission of these units as: (1) to prevent and treat mental health and stress issues, and (2) to maintain fighting forces.

Haaken began her focused research at OHSU's VA Medical Center and what followed became "Mind Zone." She expects the film to be released this spring, pending additional funds from a Kickstarter campaign to complete the editing process and "help bring us over the ridge."

Whereas most Americans are familiar with instances of post-traumatic stress disorder paralleling protracted wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Haaken recognizes that few are aware of combat stress control. "I'm interested in how my profession is being used and abused in military settings," says Haaken. "The role of psychology in warfare and the military are a set of controversies. They're debates that have profound impacts."

Devan Schwartz: *How long did you and your team spend in Afghanistan?*

Jan Haaken: Two-and-a-half weeks at Kandahar's central clinic. The detachment left from the Joint Bases Lewis/McChord. We'd been following them in pre-deployment training both as soldiers and in their therapeutic capacities. We filmed the unit they were replacing and were there during the handover process.

D.S.: *What surprised you or subverted your expectations when the filming took place?*

J.H.: I didn't realize what was required in shifting personnel. They take over not only a single job but whole institutions. I really came to respect the soldiers. They're endearing and thoughtful and I was surprised at the level of racial integration. Seeing all these soldiers from different ethnic and racial backgrounds working together, many doing things they're not able to do outside the military.



Filmmaker and clinical psychologist Jan Haaken works on the set of her new film *Mind Zone* in Kandahar, Afghanistan. PHOTO COURTESY OF JAN HAAKEN AND MIND ZONE

We're used to thinking about the military only as conformity to the mission. But people have the ability to try things, including in these combat stress control units and are quite creative. I also felt saddened by that, by how much potential from young people gets converted into the military. There's kind of a socialist ethic, a camaraderie and everyone sharing in a common purpose, which always seems kind of ironic.

D.S.: *How did you select your main interview subjects?*

J.H.: After a lengthy pre-interview process we chose subjects who are interesting to watch and listen to and can hold their place onscreen. We also wanted to represent a range of characters. I pursued the question of the so-called "new military," a different leadership style that could be described as more maternal than patriarchal.

My basic ethic for documentary film work is picking characters I can portray in a respectful way, but also be critical of what they're carrying out, problems that go beyond their best efforts to manage them.

D.S.: *The documentary examines Forward Psychiatry and Resiliency Training – could you explain each of these?*

J.H.: The concept of Forward Psychiatry developed in World War I. The anchoring concept was an acronym, PIE (Proximity,

Immediacy, Expectancy). PIE means you treat people close to their unit and don't pull them out unless you have to. This was found to be effective in reducing evacuations. You provide short-term care and comforting – three hots and a cot. Soldiers leave the world of the father and briefly enter the lap of the mother. You communicate the expectation that they're going to go back and they're going to be fine.

Resiliency Training is newer and spreads psychiatric principles down through the military leadership structure. Non-commissioned officers train to be junior-counselors. They draw on a mix of cognitive behavior principles and psychological principles. It disperses throughout the military principles traditionally carried by trained professionals. It's good in a way that leaders are gaining more interpersonal skills, but given the conditions of the military, and certainly in war zones, many of us question whether this can be invasive or manipulative. I question whether it's a good thing or not. These techniques are not completely benign.

Therapeutic techniques since Freud have stirred concerns about privacy of thoughts and mind. The issue of confidentiality has been an important area of our work, and questioning how institutions make use of our private thoughts and feelings. Your average employer has a right to ask questions about your performance but not

about aspects of your inner world. Partly responding to how many people are psychologically-troubled and harmed by their military experiences, they've become more aggressive in medically-screening people and monitoring the mind. Yet what seems to be progressive is not always as progressive as it looks. It's not just one or the other.

D.S.: *Could you speak briefly about the case of Staff Sergeant Calvin Gibbs and the revelation of so-called "Kill Teams" within the military?*

J.H.: When you put people in an environment that's about killing people it inevitably involves a certain amount of dehumanizing. One concern I had was less about PTSD conditions than overall racism and cynicism that war creates. It should not surprise us that these things accompany war. The military makes some soldiers feel contained and well cared for in ways they may not have experienced. But the military is not an actual family, and if it were, it would certainly be judged to be abusive parents. No good parents put their children in life-threatening situations. But this comes with the territory in sending soldiers to war. This image of the unit as a family can deeply disappoint soldiers who feel the realities of this agreement with the military as they enter war zones.

**REGIONAL
GREEN BUILDING
HOTLINE**
WWW.BUILDGREEN411.COM
503 823 5431
GREENHOTLINE@PORTLANDOREGON.GOV

**LOOKING FOR AN
AFFORDABLE PLACE TO RENT?**
Your online housing search just got easier.
HOUSINGCONNECTIONS.ORG
Thousands of listings • Free service
Includes special needs housing
Call 2-1-1 or 503-802-8562

