



presents

GUNNER PALACE

A film by
Michael Tucker and Petra Epperlein

USA / 85 Minutes

www.gunnerpalace.com

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GUNNER PALACE

BRIEF SYNOPSIS

GUNNER PALACE reveals the complex realities of the situation in Iraq not seen on the nightly news. Told first-hand by our troops, 'Gunner Palace' presents a thought provoking portrait of a dangerous and chaotic war that is personal, highly emotional, sometimes disturbing, surprisingly amusing ... and thoroughly fascinating.

Filmmaker Michael Tucker, who lived with 2/3 Field Artillery, a.k.a. "The Gunners" for two months, captures the lives and humanity of these soldiers whose barracks are the bombed-out pleasure palace of Uday Hussein (nicknamed Gunner Palace), situated in the heart of the most volatile section of Baghdad. With total access to all operations and activities, Tucker's insider footage provides a rare look at the day-to-day lives of these soldiers on the ground -- whether swimming in Uday's pool and playing golf on his putting green or executing raids on suspected terrorists, enduring roadside bombs, mortar attacks, RPGs and snipers.

GUNNER PALACE

SYNOPSIS

“For y’all this is just a show but, we live in this movie.”

SPC Richmond Shaw,
Soldier Baghdad 2004

GUNNER PALACE is a unique portrait of the fragmented, chaotic and stress-filled existence of American soldiers at war in Iraq. Filmmaker Michael Tucker captured the lives of the members of the 2/3 Field Artillery AKA the “Gunners”, whose living headquarters are housed in Uday Hussein’s Azimiya Palace, situated in the middle of Adhamiya, the most volatile area in Baghdad.

Four months after President Bush declared the end of “major combat operations,” this troop of US soldiers continues to live and die through what they jokingly call “minor combat.” Their residence, a bombed out palace complete with swimming pool and putting green, provides a surreal backdrop to their stories. Tucker filmed the troops over two one-month periods, slowly gaining their trust while he lived with them in the once royal residence now fondly known as “Gunner Palace.”

The soldiers of “Gunner Palace” live in a world apart from the war seen on the nightly news. For them, war has become a constant in their lives - each day is just another day closer to returning home. For these young soldiers, the war isn’t about oil, weapons of mass destruction, George Bush, Donald Rumsfeld or the War on Terror. It’s about survival - plain and simple.

During the day, the “Gunners” roll out on patrol to face an indifferent population. At night, they go on raids. And daily, they suffer attacks from mortars, roadside bombs, RPGs (rocket propelled grenades) and snipers. Often they find themselves tending the wounded, caring for the orphaned or suffering the loss of their own. A good day at “Gunner Palace” is one where nothing happens.

The soldiers confront the realities of death and loss when, just after Tucker finished filming in November 2003, a roadside bomb kills a young “Gunner” officer. Just before Christmas that same year, the troop is featured on the cover and in the pages of *Time Magazine* to represent the American soldier as *Time*’s “Person of the Year.” The next day, after the magazine hits newsstands, the unit loses two more members to another roadside bomb. These deaths too often fall far from the headlines.

It is not the violence of war that defines this thought-provoking documentary feature, but rather the soldiers’ individual and personal responses to war: Sgt. Nick Moncrief, a young squad leader with two kids and a wife, breaks into a freestyle rap in front of the palace after an attack; SPC Stuart Wilf, who joined the army at 17, spends his nights with his guitar by the palace gate; their commander, LTC Bill Rabena, thinks the palace is an “adult’s paradise;” and one of the only female soldiers, SPC Billie Grimes, calmly tells of her experience as a combat medic.

With total access to all unit operations and activities, captured in his own distinct verite style, filmmaker Tucker provides a rare series of intimate “snapshots” that reveal the complex realities of a war that has to be seen to be understood.

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DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I arrived in Baghdad for the first time in May 2003, just after the declared end of “Major Combat.” During two visits that summer, I witnessed the slow rise of what US soldiers jokingly defined as “Minor Combat:” random firefights, snipers, roadside bombs and rocket attacks. By the end of summer, dozens of Americans were dead, the enemy had yet to be identified, and the focus of the occupation shifted from reconstruction to offensive operations. For the people living in the middle of it, the war was anything but over, but at home, the war and its human costs were absent from front pages.

Talking to American soldiers during that summer, many expressed frustration that folks at home, accustomed to quick televised victories, had simply lost interest in the war or had changed the channel to the more entertaining reality of “Survivor” and “American Idol.” Thirty years after Vietnam, it was apparent that the average American had no tangible connection to the war, no matter what their views were on it. With the All Volunteer Army, there was no fear of being drafted. Instead, a tiny sliver of a society was fighting and dying. Their families were hoping, praying and mourning, while much of the country remained untouched by the realities of war and the ongoing suffering in Iraq.

I walked into “Gunner Palace” in September 2003 with a simple desire to tell the soldiers’ story - what we didn’t see on the news. I knew that the unit, 2/3 FA, was working in the most volatile sector of Baghdad, Adhamiya, a hotbed of insurgent activity and the last place Saddam Hussein was seen alive. I also knew that the unit lived in a bombed-out palace, formerly owned by Uday Hussein, complete with a swimming pool. It seemed like the perfect location to capture the contrasts of Baghdad. With little formality, I was bunked with a group of young soldiers—mere inches between our bunks—and I began capturing uninhibited glimpses of their daily lives.

I could have followed one soldier around recording every hiccup of his existence, but it quickly became clear that doing so wouldn’t convey the diversity of experiences and opinions. The 400 soldiers housed in the palace were also 400 individuals – “America in uniform:” a complex mosaic of personalities and perspectives that demanded to be explored.

At times, it didn’t feel like we were making a war documentary. Rather it was like a fictional movie - driven largely by the cinema of war. For the older guys it was like being in the film *M*A*S*H*. They brought aloha shirts for poolside BBQs. For others it was *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket*. You could see it in the way they rode in their HUMVEES. One foot hanging out the door and helicopters with wheels. For the teenagers, it was *Jackass Goes to War*. However, no matter how much they projected pop icons into their lives, you could see that they were defining their own experience.

The reality for these soldiers was stranger than any fiction, and they knew it. In tune with the surreal, the soldiers began to express themselves in freestyle fashion: raps were spit out that distilled their emotions with a clarity that no interview could capture; one soldier spent two weeks writing spoken word poems; and another asked me to bring him a guitar amplifier when I returned to Baghdad the second time, so that he could express himself through his electric guitar.

(more)

For me, it seemed that these soldiers were driven to speak to the audience, to tell their story uninhibited. One day, while recording a freestyle rap, a young soldier looked at the camera, charged his weapon and said, "For y'all this is just a show, but we live in this movie." That became the essence of the film. Here was a war that had to be seen in order to be understood, and the soldiers' reality was so different from what we, or I, had ever thought. And, I was fortunate to capture this uniqueness on film.

When editing "Gunner Palace," we tried to stay true to their experience, *their movie*. I spent 60 days with them in Baghdad—a snapshot of the 410 days they spent in Iraq. Through the editing, we tried to keep the experience chronological (it is largely as it happened). But in doing so, we fought against all sorts of preconceptions and definitions of this war. Oddly, people who hadn't been *there* carried more strongly honed opinions than those in the middle of it. From the outside, the tendency was to tidy up something that is by nature essentially chaotic, confusing and messy. By staying true to the order of events, we wanted to express what the soldiers experienced. To the soldiers, it doesn't matter what the date is. It's "just another day in Baghdad"—another mark on the wall. A day where nothing happens is considered a good day. The banal is punctuated by the extreme; the contrast defined not by black and white, but by a palette of grays.

The first month I spent with 2/3, I rolled with them constantly. I hopped into any vehicle leaving the gate. I was anxious. The camera was always recording. My biggest fear was to miss something. In many ways, I went trolling for contact. I assumed that violence defined the experience and I focused on it. I captured what I *thought* was the film and went home.

Three weeks later, the first 2/3 soldier was killed by an IED. A month later, two more were killed along with an interpreter. On Christmas Eve, a senior NCO I had filmed at a party was killed by a massive IED. Over the next weeks, I spent every morning looking at the casualty lists online hoping not to see a name that I knew.

When I returned to the soldiers the second time, I carried with me a newfound understanding that war is defined by suffering. The father of one of the fallen soldiers told me, "Let me tell you how I can be so against this war, and so for my son." Those words guided the rest of the film. I spent less time shooting and more time listening to these young soldiers and paying attention to their unique experiences and responses to this war. Hearing an explosion at night, I didn't reach for my camera immediately, instead, I thought of who was out there and just hoped they would make it back to the gate.

Some never made it back. During the production year of "Gunner Palace," the following soldiers and Iraqi nationals connected to 2/3 Field Artillery were killed.

LT Ben Colgan (HHB)	Killed by an IED during an attack
PFC Stuart Moore (Alpha Bty)	Killed by an IED while on patrol
LT Matt Saltz (Alpha Bty)	Killed by an IED while on patrol
Nasir (Alpha Bty)	Killed by an IED while on patrol
CSM Eric Cooke (1 st Brigade)	Killed by an IED during an operation
Mohammed Saddam (Charlie Bty)	Reportedly gunned down in Adhamiya
SGT David McKeever (Bravo Bty)	Killed by an RPG
Sheik Sabah Naji (Adhamiya DAC)	Assassinated

GUNNER PALACE is not my movie. It is for the soldiers, their loved ones and their families. This is their movie, their experience. This is for them.

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QUOTES

"If you see any politicians be sure to let them know that while they're sitting around their dinner tables with their families talking about how hard the war is on them, we're here under attack nearly 24 hours a day. Dodging RPG's and fighting not just for a better Iraq but just to stay alive."

-Spc. Stuart Wilf 2/3 FA - Iraq War Veteran

"This film will fill in some gaps for those who really want to know about the war in Iraq--and the others that think they know what war is. Armchair critics only tell tales of glory; we tell you our own reality in respect to our fellow soldiers and fallen comrades.....GUNNERS! "

-Sgt. Robert Beatty 2/3 FA - Iraq War Veteran

"This is the war as seen through our eyes, not the eyes of a news camera or a politician. 'Gunner Palace' is as real as it gets."

-Capt. Jon Powers 2/3 FA - Iraq War Veteran

"The most truthful and important film about the war in Iraq we have seen yet. It tells the story of the troops in the best way possible--by letting them tell it themselves. No b.s. No politics. 'Gunner Palace' shows how it really is for soldiers and lays it all out on the table for the viewer to make his or her own conclusion"

-Paul Rieckhoff, Iraq War Veteran & Exec. Dir. of Operation Truth.

GUNNER PALACE

GLOSSARY OF WAR TERMS

Aid Station	Battalion Emergency Hospital
Blacklist	The list of the most high level/high profile people wanted by the Coalition.
BIAP	Baghdad International Airport—home of the PX and Burger King.
Breach Team	The team, or stack, that enters a house, often taking down the door.
Cordon and Search	Large scale operations where whole neighborhoods are closed off and searched for weapons.
DAC	District Advisory Council—community government
D Cell	Detention cell, detainee pit
FOB	Forward Operating Base
Gunner	The Battalion nickname is the Gunners, being artillery.
Haji	Soldier slang for Iraqi. In Arabic, it means pilgrim. Often used semi-correctly to mean friend.
Hooch	Living quarters.
ICDC	Iraqi Civil Defense Corps
IP	Iraqi Police
IED	Improvised Explosive Device. A roadside bomb.
KIA	Killed in Action
Kiowa	Small Observation Helicopter
Love Shack	A pumpkin shaped building on the palace grounds where the Commander lived.
M203	An M-16 with a grenade launcher slung under the barrel.

(more)

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M4	The replacement for the outdated M-16. Essentially a shorter version of the M-16 that is easy to handle when clearing houses and riding in vehicles. In short supply at 2/3.
MK19	A belt fed grenade launcher mounted on vehicles.
MRE	Meal Ready to Eat
ODA	Operational Detachment Alpha—A US Army Special Forces Team. One operated routinely with 2/3 in Baghdad.
PSYOP	Psychological Operations. In this case, usually missions involved the dissemination of Arabic print materials. PSYOPS vehicles, equipped with massive speakers, often play music while rolling.
RPG	A Russian made Rocket Propelled Grenade fired from the shoulder.
Sandbag	To sandbag someone is to put a bag over their head during detention and transfer.
SAW	Squad Automatic Weapon. A 5.56 mm belt fed machine gun.
TOC	Tactical Operations Center
WIA	Wounded in Action—4 dozen 2/3 soldiers were wounded during their tour.
Zip Strips	The white plastic handcuffs that all soldiers carry. Also known as flexi-cuffs.

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THE POETRY OF SPECIALIST RICHMOND SHAW

Richmond Shaw #1

And the tears start flowing when they called out roll

and you really expect us to keep it all under control?

I mean, what could you tell a man who just saw his two friends die right before his eyes

--except sip on his gin.

Trying to drown out his hurt and pain in a sea full of sorrow, living only for the day is the motto we follow.

Richmond Shaw #2

I speak that real flow after ringing alarms

This country needs us way more than when we needed Saddam

We start out our day by readjusting our sights

and checking out the damage that happened from mortars last night.

Yeah, I think the ICDC starting to snitch

Telling what goes where and which places to hit

If they prove me otherwise, no intent to be shady

I blame it on this war that made me paranoid and crazy.

But, this aint fact only theory and my statements

About the struggle stress and pain every day we facing

Trials and tribulations daily we do

And not always life's pains wash away in our pool

When we take a dip, we try to stick to the script

But when those guns start blazing and our friends get hit

That's when our hearts start racing and our stomachs get whoozy.

Cuz for y'all this is just a show, but we live in this movie.

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THE POETRY OF SPECIALIST RICHMOND SHAW - CONTINUED

Richmond Shaw #3

We've worn clothes a week in a row
This ain't a thug thing
It's cuz we're at war
Dark colors to cover mudstains
The world's weight **is** starting to weaken our back
Considered a ravenous beast if we just launch an attack
Lose lose situation we facing
Anticipation and hating
Although we're haunted by Satan
We're frustration abating
The situation we facing
Not only follow but chasing
Those moving with hatred
That's why we feel so neglected
I'm protecting **life** from in the present
No need to like this, but please respect it.
This is life.

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Freestyle Lyrics from Gunner Palace Soldiers

Moncrief

Sometimes I just stay in the zone
Contemplating and praying to God that I get a chance to come home
Did you ever get to lay in the prone
Receiving enemy fire while slugs barely missing your dome
I noticed that my face is aging so quickly
Cuz I've seen more than your average man in his fifties
I'm 24 now
Got two kids and a wife
Having visions of them picturing me up out of they life
This is real life homey
And it just so deep
It's so deep when you through long weeks with no sleep
IEDs be going off while we out on patrol
Scrap metal be ripping through your fucking skin and your bones
Got a soldier now and he's trying to put up a fight
But you really knowing he's taken the last breathes of his life.

Drummond #1

Here it is
2003
They got us out here in Baghdad life is hard
Got us pulling fucking 2 hours of guard
Then they upped it up to 8 between 12
I really don't give a fuck I think I'm stuck in hell
I'd rather be there instead of jail

GUNNER PALACE

CREW CREDIT LIST

A NOMADOS FILMS PRODUCTION

Directed by: Michael Tucker and Petra Epperlein

Produced by: Michael Tucker and Petra Epperlein

Photography: Michael Tucker

Editing: Petra Epperlein, Michael Tucker

Sound Editing: Michael Tucker

Sound Mix: Chris Müller

Harmonic Beats: Robert Cimino

Freestyle Rap: Bryant Davis, Nick Moncrief, Richmond Shaw,
Devon Dixon, Javorn Drummond, Terry Taylor, Elliot Lovett

Guitar: Stuart Wilf

Music:

The Washington Post March
Composed by John Philip Sousa
Performed by Robert Cimino

Ride of the Valkyries
Composed by Richard Wagner
Performed by Robert Cimino

My Girl
Written by William "Smokey" Robinson
Performed by the 1st Armored Division Rock Band

GUNNER PALACE

FILMMAKERS BIOS

NOMADOS FILMS

GUNNER PALACE co-director and co-producer Michael Tucker was born in Honolulu, Hawaii in 1966 and worked for two years as a commercial fisherman in Alaska until an accident on a factory trawler led him to pick up his first camera.

GUNNER PALACE co-director and co-producer Petra Epperlein was born in Karl Marx Stadt, GDR in 1966. After two years of work as a bricklayer, Epperlein studied architecture in Dresden where after receiving her diploma in 1991, she headed west to America.

Epperlein and Tucker met in New York in 1994, where she was pursuing architecture and he was developing a television series called "The End of the World."

In 1995, they relocated to Berlin for the birth of their daughter. They then launched Nomados Films, a production company which focuses on humanitarian issue reportage. Between 1995 and 1997 they produced media for humanitarian groups in Vietnam, The Philippines, Bosnia and Croatia.

In 1997, Tucker and Epperlein produced the short film "The Last Cowboy," one of the first films to be shot on the new DV format and the first film to be designed specifically for DVD. The film brought their two world views together; telling the story of an East German raised on Karl May-inspired *Indianer* films who dreams of the American West. They followed up that same year with "Jack the Tourist," a short film that transported them to Havana where they traced the footsteps of an aging traveler.

In 1998, they founded the *EUROPEAN DVD LAB* in Babelsberg - an accidental offspring of their early work with DVD. The *EUROPEAN DVD LAB* quickly grew into one of the largest DVD facilities in Europe. They authored and produced more than 200 DVD projects before deciding to take a sabbatical in Andalusia in 2000.

In 2001, back in Berlin, they started work on *Nomados*, a multi-platform series for children that took them to Australia and Africa to capture the extraordinary lives of seemingly ordinary people.

In 2003, the outbreak of the war in Iraq pulled Tucker to Baghdad, where he followed an armored car salesman making sales calls for the road movie, "Ali Baba and the Merchant of Baghdad." While filming "Ali Baba," Tucker took interest in the story of US soldiers deployed in Baghdad and began to work on "Gunner Palace" in August 2003. "Gunner Palace" is Nomados Films' first documentary feature.

In the field, Epperlein does sound; Tucker does camera. In the studio, they share editing tasks.

Filmography:

The Last Cowboy, 17 minutes, DVD, 1997
Jack the Tourist, 21 minutes, 1998
Nomados, Series, work-in-progress
Ali Baba and the Merchant of Baghdad, 47 minutes, 2003
Gunner Palace, 85 minutes, 2004

About Mongrel Media

Mongrel Media (www.mongrelmedia.com) is an independent film distribution company that acquires and brings the best in world cinema to Canadian audiences.

Since its inception in 1994, Mongrel has distinguished itself through a tasteful and innovative catalogue of films, supporting visionary filmmakers and delivering their films to the widest audience possible –in theatres, on DVD/video and on television.

Mongrel consistently selects and distributes critically celebrated films, like Abbas Kiarostami's Palme d'Or winner A TASTE OF CHERRY and Almodovar's recent BAD EDUCATION, and has built a reputation for delivering break-out successes like the provocative documentary THE CORPORATION.

Mongrel currently distributes over two hundred titles in Canada.