



The War After, a documentary produced by the Rutgers Center for Digital Filmmaking, tells the stories of nine of the nearly 2,000 veterans who have returned from service to enroll at Rutgers. Through interviews, postwar footage, and helmet-cam footage from the front lines, the film highlights the realities facing modern soldiers that make civilian life so difficult.

Photography: Signe Sundberg-Hall

Although they are over a decade old, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are likely the most narrated in history. Every few months a new memoir, novel, film, or study is released. But for all that commentary, the wars haven't resolved themselves into a clear message of experience, and the public remains sympathetic, yet mystified, by the plight of its veterans. The new documentary *The War After*, produced by Dena Seidel, the director of the [Rutgers Center for Digital Filmmaking](#), goes a long way in explaining why this is.

The War After tells the stories of nine of the nearly 2,000 veterans who have returned from service to enroll at Rutgers. Through interviews, postwar footage, and helmet-cam footage from the front lines, the documentary highlights the irreconcilable realities facing modern soldiers that make civilian life so difficult. They are awash, says Seidel, in contradictions.

The veterans, now students, talk about how they hated the war, and how they loved it. They wanted to go home, yet they miss active duty. They felt the war had no clear purpose, yet as individuals they had never felt more purposeful. Service was nothing like they had imagined, but infinitely worse—and better.

Their candid comments echo those of Army reservist Nicole D. Johnson, a graduate student at the School of Environmental and Biological Sciences. “I hated it, but I miss it,” she tells the camera. “Which doesn’t make any sense.”

Or of Seamus McGuinness SAS’14, who was in the Air Force: “I’m in a room with a bunch of 19-year-olds who never left New Jersey. I’m 28. I’ve just gone through some pretty not-normal situations.”

Or of Army helicopter pilot Justin Sasso, a senior at the School of Arts and Sciences, who says of the lost companionship of service, “Where is everybody?”

It took three years, 200 hours of recorded interviews, eight film students, and the invaluable input of Colonel Stephen G. Abel (retired Army), the retiring director of the [Rutgers Office of Veteran and Military Programs and Services](#), to create *The War After*. That was the easy part. The tough part, says Seidel, like so many documentarians, was earning the trust of her subjects.

Initially, the interviews with the nine young veterans were superficial because of their wariness, she says. But for Seidel, who has directed several feature-length documentaries through the center, that simply would not do.

“It couldn’t just be, ‘The military taught me leadership and empowered me,’ or ‘I was really damaged and now I need services.’ That’s not interesting and no one listens to that. The military taught all these people to be leaders and they all came back really damaged. It’s those terrible contradictions.

“We had to keep going back and saying to them, ‘This is your movie. You’re going to represent the veteran experience to the larger public.’”

The film toggles between childhoods, war footage, and scenes of the veterans’ home lives—pushing a daughter on a swing, sitting in class, at work in the Coast Guard—as it uncovers their experiences. Some are parents, some are rich, some

are military kids, some are gay, some are older. Seidel purposely chose a diverse cast to blow the cobwebs off any veteran stereotypes.

By the final moments of the 70-minute documentary, the viewer is aware of how articulate people can be about their own confusions, another seeming contradiction that nevertheless illuminates, with honesty and warmth, the complexities of veterans’ just trying to fit back in. — *Wendy Plump*

The War After will be screened on September 21 and 22 at 7 p.m. at Rutgers Cinema, Livingston Campus, 105 Joyce Kilmer Avenue, Piscataway. For more information, visit thewarafter.rutgers.edu.

Story by Wendy Plump



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