

Showtime Independent Films

Presents

A Looking Glass Films Production
In association with Swirl Productions

HOME FRONT

Coming home is half the battle.

A Film by Richard Hankin
Produced by Meredith Lavitt Williams

DVD RELEASE
JUNE 3, 2008

“Indelible...Reminiscent of ‘*The Deer Hunter*’”
Stephen Holden, The New York Times

“Alarminglly valuable”
Top 40 Pick/Best In Show – Tribeca Film Festival
Jessica Winter, Village Voice

“Expertly made...Disturbing and moving”
John Anderson, Daily Variety

“Eye-opening ... Powerful.”
The Hollywood Reporter

“Terrific. A lucid knockout of a movie. Hankin’s directorial virtues include patience, pace and structure, and an eye for external details that reveal inner strength. But, paramount is his ability to see beyond his preconceptions – and thus shake audiences out of theirs.”

Michael Sragow, Baltimore Sun

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Synopsis:

Five years in to the war in Iraq, most media reports about the war focus solely on either the death toll or the political divisions within America. What continues to be overshadowed are the untold stories of the increasing numbers of those severely wounded soldiers who are returning home after serving in combat -- only to start a different battle.

To date, more than 29,000 American troops have been wounded in the war in Iraq. What happens when they come home? For these soldiers, the challenges upon returning home are daunting. The transition to civilian life is filled with physical rehabilitation, emotional difficulties and fractured relationships. When they are flown home, their arrivals are often off-limits to the media, and unlike those killed in action, their names are seldom released.

Each wounded soldier has their own story to tell: why they enlisted; how they were injured; what their hopes were before they were injured; and what the future now holds. Their stories are filled with pride, sorrow, anger, hope and inspiration, and with dignity and humor in the most unlikely of circumstances.

HOME FRONT, a film by Richard Hankin, gives a face and voice to these underrepresented soldiers and their families, told intimately through the Feldbusch family of Western Pennsylvania, and their wounded son, Jeremy.

Soon after the start of the war, 23-year-old Army Ranger Jeremy Feldbusch is hit by a piece of shrapnel that slices into his head just above his right eye and lodges in his brain, leaving him completely blind. Further, he suffers considerable damage to his frontal lobe, impairing his impulse control and making him prone to unpredictable mood swings and seizures.

HOME FRONT captures the human story of Jeremy's return to civilian life in his small hometown, and his subsequent readjustment to family, community -- and most importantly, his new, altered self. The result is an unprecedented and insightful view of how one family copes with events that have changed them forever. A heartbreaking and inspiring true story, **HOME FRONT** gets behind the often-sanitized myth of war to reveal its true complications and costs.

HOME FRONT is directed, produced, written and edited by Richard Hankin and produced by Meredith Lavitt Williams. The film is a Looking Glass Films production in association with Swirl Productions.

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NOTES FROM THE FILMMAKERS

RICHARD HANKIN – Director, Producer, Writer & Editor

HOME FRONT began with a simple question: *What happens when America's wounded come home?* I've long been a fan of the 1946 film "The Best Years of Our Lives," which follows veterans of WW II as they return home to their families. The initial idea for **HOME FRONT** was to do a documentary version of that story, with veterans returning home from the war in Iraq. Who were these men and women behind the statistics? How were they and their families coping with their return?

Soon after I starting researching the subject, I came across a mention of the Wounded Warrior Project, a non-profit group that offers support and assistance to wounded soldiers returning home. I met with the founder of the group, John Melia, a former marine wounded in 1992 outside of Somalia. John mentioned that he was organizing an event in New York City, a public speaking seminar aimed at helping wounded soldiers feel more comfortable telling their stories. He invited me to come and take a look.

That event, in August of 2004, was the beginning of the production phase of **HOME FRONT**. There, I met Jeremy Feldbusch and his mother, Charlene. I was immediately taken by their circumstance and relationship. Until recently, Jeremy had been a highly capable Army Ranger; now his mother accompanied him everywhere, and had to help him with even simple tasks. When it was time for a bathroom break, Charlene led Jeremy into the ladies room – having already learned that it was easier to explain the presence of a blind man in a ladies room than her presence in a men's room.

In September, I drove with my cameraman to Jeremy's house in Blairsville, Pennsylvania. We met Jeremy's two brothers and his father, and started to explore the small town in which the family lived. At this point, I was still thinking that I would follow three separate soldiers over the course of a year, and that Jeremy would be one of them. That plan did not last long. I soon realized that in order to develop a meaningful relationship with the film's subjects, and "dig in" to their day-to-day reality, I was going to have to focus in on one family. Thousands of soldiers had been injured in Iraq. This would be one family's story.

From the beginning, in discussions with the Feldbuschs, I made it clear that I was not out to advance any particular political agenda, but rather wanted to let the family tell their own story, in their own voice. There was a mutual trust and understanding – the issue of wounded soldiers transcended politics. Throughout the entire filmmaking process, I tried to be as unobtrusive as possible, and let the story reveal itself.

One revelation came a couple of months into shooting, when Jeremy mentioned that he was getting excited about his preparations for the upcoming deer-hunting season in Pennsylvania. At the time, I did a double take – a blind man hunting? Ultimately, however, the story of Jeremy

going hunting with his father became a kind of film within a film, as Jeremy and Brace acted out a father-son ritual that neither was willing to give up on account of Jeremy's injury.

As Jeremy continued to recover, he became more involved with the Wounded Warrior Project, traveling to various events and bonding with other wounded soldiers. Ultimately, the group goes to Washington, D.C. to lobby for legislation to ease the incredible financial strain faced by those with serious injuries returning home. Throughout, these soldiers struggle to recover from devastating injuries while at the same time, they are determined to make it easier for those who follow in their footsteps.

In the end, **HOME FRONT** allows room for the audience to decide for themselves on where they stand on the critical issues raised in the film. The strength of the material is that it is "real life" and not a neat fictional package. So the story is rife with nuance, complexity and at times contradiction. Ultimately, though, I am hopeful that viewers will be touched by this one family's struggle and inspired by their love and determination.

MEREDITH LAVITT WILLIAMS – Producer

I left Sundance Institute after a 12-year tenure to produce socially conscious films. I wanted to work on projects similar to the films I had help support through the Sundance Documentary Fund – films that would have a creative approach and make an impact. So, when Richard approached me about producing **HOME FRONT**, it was a natural fit.

I was drawn to the film and to the Feldbusch family immediately. Richard's approach was fresh and unique. There were many filmmakers covering the Iraq war and the soldier's experience, but none of them had come close to portraying what happens when soldiers return home.

In the film, one of our subjects poignantly remarks:

The war does not end when the battles end. The war will go on for many of these guys for their lifetime. It's all a matter of how we deal with these returning vets as a people.

This soldier's statement exemplifies the essence of our film. **HOME FRONT** is not about the war or about politics. It's about the soldier, and what happens when he or she returns and how an American family deals with the aftermath of war. These soldiers and their families have been suddenly forever changed by their injuries, and now they are forced to begin new lives at home.

At the same time, **HOME FRONT** is also about the triumph of the human spirit and how the Feldbusch family, Jeremy in particular, persevere despite his traumatic injuries.

The Feldbusch family is truly a special family. They have all banded together to help Jeremy and each other get through the difficult and trying times of his recovery. Jeremy's mother Charlene is an exceptional woman. As a mother, I was instantly drawn to her strength and honesty. Jeremy and Charlene are inseparable, and the film poignantly illuminates the complexity of their relationship. Mothers everywhere will respond to Charlene's relationship with Jeremy, and her struggle to let go.

The father/son theme is also a powerful narrative thread. Jeremy's father Brace is as inspirational as he is caring and possesses extraordinary patience. Brace encourages Jeremy to participate in life as he had prior to his injury, which reveals his simultaneous denial and acceptance of Jeremy's newfound situation.

HOME FRONT's subtle and reflective style tells two stories: the personal story that Jeremy and his family articulate, and the cinematic story that their actions, reactions and daily lives expose to the camera.

The film is honest to its characters and their point-of-view. Jeremy's moving story, and the larger story of returning home forever changed, resonate long after the end credits roll.

Ultimately, the strength of the film is its humanity. Our decision to focus on one family and one soldier provided us the opportunity to intimately reveal the costs of war in a way that has never quite been seen before. The film is neither pro- nor anti-war -- it transcends politics.

SCOTT ANGER – Director of Photography

The filming of **HOME FRONT** presented its share of challenges and opportunities. Since it is an observational film that takes place deep within the lives of Jeremy Feldbusch and his family, special consideration had to be given to the way we approached the filming.

Although the family was extremely cooperative and helpful, it was decided early on to work as a small crew. Director Richard Hankin would collect sound and I would shoot with a small, digital video camera. We were asking the family to allow us to film the most intimate – and sometimes most private – aspects of their lives, so we felt compelled to keep our presence to a minimum. The small camera and compact equipment allowed us to blend in and record events unobtrusively.

Time is one of the most important requirements in making a film like this. It takes time for trust to be built and for everyone to be at ease with the near-constant presence of the camera. Once that's achieved, people relax and begin to ignore the camera and carry on with their lives. It is at this point when the most honest moments unfold.

The commitment to work on **HOME FRONT** for an extended period of time gave us the opportunity to tell a thorough story. It was a departure from the way I usually work on broadcast documentaries, which are often hurried through production to meet a deadline whether the story has completely unfolded or not. It was refreshing to be able to observe and wait as the story unfolded over the period of a year. Of course, people's lives don't happen on a schedule so it was nice to be able to wait for the little moments or seemingly mundane events that sometimes become important story elements. Images of Jeremy and his family sitting around the living room watching television or making a simple trip to the gas station sometimes yielded revealing moments in the life of the family.

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SUBJECT PROFILES

JEREMY FELDBUSCH

“My first memory after being hit by the shrapnel from the artillery round was waking up in the hospital and hearing my parents, wondering why I was hearing them. I thought I was still in Iraq. I believed I was dreaming. And I came to find out that I wasn’t dreaming.”

A wrestler, football player and high school honors student, Jeremy turned down a chance to attend West Point and instead went to the University of Pittsburgh where he received a degree in biology. After graduating, he joined the Army -- two weeks before the September 11 attacks. Hit by a piece of shrapnel early in the Iraq war, Jeremy suffered a traumatic head injury, and spent over two months recovering at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas. Still very much in the process of recovering, Jeremy acts as a spokesman for the Wounded Warrior Project.

CHARLENE FELDBUSCH – JEREMY’S MOTHER

“There are nights that he doesn’t sleep and I worry about that. I always ask him, ‘Are you having nightmares?’ He tells me ‘no.’ But I know that there are things he’s thinking. It’s a different world for Jeremy.”

After Jeremy was injured, Charlene quit her job so that she could care for him full-time. The relationship between Jeremy and his mother is complicated and co-dependent; Charlene seems to need to take care of Jeremy almost as much as he needs her assistance. Recently, Charlene has discovered a new passion – advocating for people with traumatic brain injuries.

BRACE FELDBUSCH – JEREMY’S FATHER

“Jeremy needs me more, and almost losing him I know how much I need him. When we go out and do things together, maybe I don’t do everything the way he wants and maybe he doesn’t do everything the way I want. But we still can go out and enjoy each other, in different ways, but we’re still father and son.”

A former coal miner who now works at a burial vault company, Brace tries his best to be upbeat and optimistic. At times, he speaks excitedly about experimental surgeries that he feels might one day restore his son’s vision. He also encourages Jeremy to participate in the same father-son activities that they enjoyed before the war, in some ways not accepting that his son is forever changed.

STAFF SERGEANT RYAN KELLY

"I don't really feel that I'm a different person. I think something that most of the soldiers agree with in the hospital is an injury doesn't change who you are. It's the time to define who you're going to be."

In July 2003, Staff Sergeant Ryan Kelly was on his way to a conference about rebuilding Iraqi schools when a roadside bomb struck him. The attack destroyed his right leg below the knee. Kelly attests to receiving excellent medical care at Ward 57, the amputee section of Walter Reed Army Medical Center, but said he quickly realized that the military had no real plan for the injured soldiers. According to him, many had to borrow money or depend on charities just to have relatives visit at Walter Reed. During his year-long recovery, the 25-year-old resident of Prescott Valley, Arizona learned to walk with a prosthetic leg, and conceived the idea behind the recently passed 'Craig's Amendment' - legislation which provides immediate financial support to wounded soldiers so that their families can be by their side as they recover.

Ryan now works part-time for the Wounded Warrior Project and is training to become a commercial helicopter pilot.

SERGEANT HEATH CALHOUN

"You have a choice in everything that you do. I could've chosen to sit on the couch and watch TV and kill the rest of my life out. But there's just so much that's out there to do. And, yeah, I need help with a lot of the stuff that I do, but I chose to live life as much the same as I would've prior to losing my legs."

Sgt. Heath Calhoun of Clarksville, Tennessee lost both legs after an RPG slammed into his Humvee. Calhoun, formerly of the 101st Airborne Division, is determined to bounce back and live a normal life as he continues his recovery at Ft. Campbell and Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D. C.

For support, he has his wife Tiffany and their three small children. But it's been a struggle in more ways than one. Tiffany had to leave her job for nearly six months to be with her husband while he recovered, causing a financial crisis for the family. Heath recently relocated to Roanoke, Virginia, and now works full-time for the Wounded Warrior Project.

JOHN MELIA – FOUNDER, WOUNDED WARRIOR PROJECT

"The war does not end when the battles end. The war will go on for many of these guys for their lifetime. It's all a matter of how we deal with these returning vets as a people."

Former Marine **John Melia** was severely wounded in a helicopter crash off the coast of Somalia in 1992. During the course of the war in Iraq, after seeing how most soldiers arriving from Baghdad or Landstuhl, Germany, landed at Andrews Air Force Base with nothing more than a hospital gown, John founded the Wounded Warrior Project.

The Wounded Warrior Project presents each soldier with a backpack of small comforts like toiletries, clothing and a compact disc player, and provides lodging and airfare for relatives. The project also helps vets during their rehabilitation with education, job counseling and peer support.

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CREW BIOGRAPHIES

RICHARD HANKIN – DIRECTOR/PRODUCER/WRITER/EDITOR

Richard Hankin is an award-winning documentary filmmaker and the founder of Looking Glass Films, an independent production company. Hankin has worked on documentaries for both theatrical distribution and for HBO, PBS, NBC, ABC, and Showtime.

Capturing the Friedmans, which Hankin co-produced and edited, was mentioned on over 150 “Top Ten” lists and won numerous awards, including the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival, and an Emmy. The film was nominated for both an Academy Award and an American Cinema Editor’s Award, and was recently honored by the International Documentary Association as one of the best documentaries of all time.

Hankin has twice served as a Creative Advisor for the Sundance Institute Documentary Editing and Storytelling Lab. He has been invited to speak at numerous film festivals, universities and events, including Columbia University, U.C.L.A., The New School, Maryland Institute College of Art, Rubin Museum of Art, HBO’s Frame-by-Frame Documentary Film Series and the International Documentary Association’s DocuDay. He holds degrees from the University of California, Berkeley and Columbia University.

MEREDITH LAVITT – PRODUCER

Meredith Lavitt is the founder of Swirl Productions, an independent production company focusing on documentary films for the theatrical and broadcast markets.

Lavitt has worked in the documentary field for the last 14 years. She worked for Sundance Institute from 1993 to 2005, most recently as the Associate Director of the Sundance Institute Documentary Film Program. While at Sundance, Lavitt consulted on such films as the Academy Award®-winning *Born Into Brothels*; award-winning *Farmingville*; *Shakespeare Behind Bars*; Indie Spirit nominated *Romantico*; *Garden*; *El Immortal*; *On the Objection Front* and *Al Otro Lado*.

Currently, Lavitt is producing *You Must Remember This* and *Lost City* with Looking Glass Films. She is also producing *Mortified* with filmmaker Eddie Schmidt, and is a consulting producer for *Floating*. Lavitt is also a consultant for Impact Partners. She holds a bachelor’s degree from Brown University.

SCOTT ANGER – DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Scott Anger is an award-winning cinematographer and journalist with more than 20 years experience. His work has been broadcast on PBS, National Public Radio, British Broadcasting Corporation, Australian Broadcasting and Voice of America. Anger has extensive experience

reporting from South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Middle East.

Anger has teamed up with award-winning *Frontline* producer Martin Smith on two documentary films about the impact of the Sept. 11th attacks on America, including *Saudi Time Bomb?*, about the growing tensions between America and its Arabian ally. The film has won a number of awards including television's highest, the Alfred I. DuPont Gold Baton for excellence in journalism.

MAX AVERY LICHTENSTEIN – COMPOSER

Composer Max Avery Lichtenstein began his musical career as a record producer, working with such artists as Mercury Rev, Hopewell, and The Silent League at his Tin Drum Studios just outside New York City. In late 1999, Lichtenstein was asked to compose and record a selection of original music for the feature film *Jesus' Son*. This critically-acclaimed movie introduced his work to the independent film community, leading him to create songs for the Academy Award®-nominated film *Far From Heaven*, and to write critically-acclaimed scores for a number of feature-length projects, including the groundbreaking documentary *Tarnation* and the dark American gothic *The King*.

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Credit List

Crew

Directed, Produced, Written & Edited by Richard Hankin

Produced by Meredith Lavitt Williams

Director of Photography Scott Anger

Original Music by Max Avery Lichtenstein

Associate Editor Paola Gutiérrez-Ortiz

Additional Photography by Antonio Rossi, P.H. O'Brien, Mark Becker, Alan Deutsch

Nina Berman – Still Photography

Music Supervisor Jim Black

Cast

Jeremy Feldbusch

Charlene Feldbusch

Brace Feldbusch

Ryan Kelly

Heath Calhoun

John Melia

Current Statistics For The Severely Wounded

- Over 29,000 American soldiers have been wounded in the war in Iraq.
- One in four wounded soldiers in Vietnam died: In Iraq, because of the improved body armor and medical attention that number is one in 10, but more of the survivors are left with devastating injuries.
- Over 500 members of the US military fighting in Iraq have lost limbs.
- It can take more than a year for veterans' benefits to kick in.
- Traumatic Brain Injury is the “signature injury” of the war in Iraq, accounting for almost 25 percent of combat casualties.