



## Operation Homecoming

Director: Richard E. Robbins

Documentary

Rated: Not Rated

81 minutes **February 8th, 2007**

The stories and poems comprising the simple, artful documentary *Operation Homecoming* were assembled as part of a National Endowment Of The Arts program to collect the writings of soldiers serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. Just hearing their words read aloud has a bracing effect, mainly because those voices are rarely heard over the din of political stump speeches or the gasbags on talk radio or cable news networks. The question is, what makes this a movie? Wouldn't a well-edited anthology of these pieces paint all the necessarily vivid pictures on their own? Remarkably, director Richard E. Robbins appears to have taken such doubts to heart, because each of the 11 passages featured in the film attempts a different stylistic approach, and not one could be labeled a typical staged reenactment. Though it doesn't quite stretch to the artistic lengths of *Thirty Two Short Films About Glenn Gould*, *Operation Homecoming* provides enough visual support to bring these writings to life.

Pushed through by a voice cast of celebrity narrators—Robert Duvall, Beau Bridges, Josh Lucas, Aaron Eckhart, and Blair Underwood, among others—the featured selections cover a range of styles (short stories, poems, letters, et al.) and experiences, from ground-level skirmishes to MedEvac airlifts to escorting bodies back home. There's even a bleakly comic sequence about the excruciating grind of life in the tents, with the same bad breakfast every day, the desert sand embedded in every pore, and latrines so foul that the author felt like immolating himself to get the filth off his body. Offering support for the soldiers' testimonials are author-veterans from other wars, such as Tobias Wolff, Tim O'Brien, Anthony Swofford, and John Salter; no matter the specific conflict and no matter their political persuasion, their feelings about warfare are harmonious.

Some passages are more effective than others, and none is better than the one from army specialist Colby Buzzell, who discusses manning a Bradley vehicle through an ambush in Mosul; Robbins tells his tale through a series of comic-book-like graphic sketches. Another beautiful sequence follows a Marine officer who accompanies the body of a fallen private back to his Montana hometown for burial. Robbins' cameras follow in his footsteps, but rather than recreating the event, they move through the empty spaces of the town, the soldiers' school, and the cemetery like ghosts, with no living thing entering the frame. There are a couple of duds, like a hummingbird-fast photo montage to honor the dead, but the cumulative effect of *Operation Homecoming* is to bring to light the soldiers' collective experiences and the enduring nightmares they suffer in our place.