

Dispatches from Afghanistan's 'Valley of Death'

Photographer Tim Hetherington shares his experiences from
Outpost Restrepo

October 7, 2010



Tim Hetherington

In 2007, the war in Afghanistan ran a distant second to Iraq in competition for the attention of the American public, even though a fierce battle was raging against a resurgent Taliban and an increasingly powerful al Qaeda.

That same year, author Sebastian Junger (*The Perfect Storm*) and acclaimed photographer Tim Hetherington dug in with the soldiers of Battle Company of the 173rd Airborne in the Korengal Valley, a stark, craggy basin of Kunar Province often referred to as "the deadliest place on Earth."

Perhaps "dug in" isn't the right term. The company leaders made a bold decision to go farther into the "Valley of Death" than soldiers on previous rotations. This meant Battle Company soldiers engaged in an average of four to five firefights a day for nearly 14 months.

One of Battle Company's first losses was its spirited medic,

Pfc. Juan Restrepo. To honor their fallen comrade, the soldiers named their new home Outpost Restrepo. The glorified bunker served as a home and a thin line of defense for the soldiers, who formed a close bond under hellish conditions.

The assignment at Restrepo turned out to be a wealth of inspiration for the two civilians. The assignment was originally for a Vanity Fair article on soldiers fighting in the Korengal. Junger interviewed the soldiers and handled the written word while Hetherington captured dozens of rich and expressive photographs.

Hetherington also used his keen eye to capture hours of video footage which was combined with post-deployment interviews of Battle Company soldiers to create the documentary film "Restrepo." The award-winning documentary premiered at the 2010 Sundance Film Festival and went on to earn high praise from critics for its unblinking soldier's eye view of relentless combat.



"Restrepo" received a nationwide theatrical release. It is scheduled for broadcast on the National Geographic Channel this fall and the DVD release is planned for November. For more, visit

<http://restrepothemovie.com/>

Next came Junger's book, War, a visceral and thoughtful meditation on life and death at Restrepo as well as the very nature of man and battle. The book was met with critical acclaim and still holds a spot on various bestseller lists.

And now comes the release of Infidel, an exquisite bound collection of Hetherington's camera work in the Korengal Valley. Infidel captures life for the often weary Battle Company soldiers with an almost surreal intimacy. The book is

now available for sale at stores and through online booksellers.

Hetherington recently sat down with DAV Magazine to talk about Infidel and the life-changing experience at Outpost Restrepo.

DAV: Your time in the Korengal Valley was longer and more intense than many embeds. Were you prepared for this experience by past assignments, or was this something completely different?

Tim Hetherington: I've covered conflicts for over 10 plus years and have been in some pretty demanding situations, but every war has a different dynamic, so it's hard to make comparisons about this one being more or less.

What was certainly different was the amount of time I spent with the guys, about five months in total, all of it in the Korengal Valley during their deployment. Getting to know them, being accepted into the group and sharing experiences with them was a profound experience and one which I will carry for the rest of my life.



That was certainly different. I mean, I was once embedded with a rebel army in Liberia but did not manage to share as much as I did with the men of second platoon.

I definitely didn't expect the experience to be as kinetic as it was. Remember that my colleague Sebastian Junger and I went there in 2007 when the world was firmly focused on Iraq. I thought I was going on a quiet assignment for Vanity Fair, and I expected there would be a lot of walking in the mountains, meeting elders and drinking cups of tea and occasionally

getting shot at.

Nothing prepared me for the reality that the war in Afghanistan was slipping out of control, and by the end of October 2007, about a fifth of all fighting across the entire country was taking place in that six-mile-long valley.

DAV: What was it like to be an artist in the midst of warriors? Did you find yourself or your perception of the American military changing?

Hetherington: You get all types of people in life, and the military is no different. There were a number of guys in the platoon that also had an artistic sensibility: Misha Pemble-Belkin was always drawing, and Vinny Cantu was a great tattoo artist. In fact, that's where the title of my book *Infidel* comes from. Vinny brought a tattoo gun up to the Korengal, and a number of guys had the words "Infidel" inscribed in large letters across their chests. I asked one of them why, and he replied, "Well, it's what the enemy calls us on the radio, so why not?" They wore it like a badge of honor.

This was my first time with American soldiers, and I was really impressed by them. They were a disciplined and tough bunch, but being up at Outpost Restrepo with them was also fun because they all had a great sense of humor. When I did need



to leave the Korengal, I'd always end up missing being there and was constantly wondering what was going on. Also, as a European, I'd had East and West Coast experience of the U.S., but within the platoon there were people from all places and backgrounds, so I was keen to learn a lot more about the U.S.

I guess one of the main things, is that I really expected to be much more heavily controlled by the military in terms of

the work I was making. In fact, we weren't censored at all, and that was important because we've managed to make work that is honest to us and to the soldiers. It's a warts-and-all view of things out there – the good and the bad – but it's also done with a lot of affection. And that really resonates for the civilians back home who don't really understand the experience of what it's like to be a soldier but who don't want to be fed military propaganda.

DAV: How do you think being British colors your perspective of the American soldier? Did this change after your experiences at Restrepo?

Hetherington: I spent eight years living away from the U.K. and haven't been embedded with British troops – so I can't make a military comparison. However, I think Brits are culturally more cynical than Americans – it's in our genes to be pessimistic. Think of all that bad weather and the fact that Britain has already fought wars in Afghanistan. So I'd have these conversations with Sebastian about whether the U.S. was going to succeed building a road through the valley as they had planned. Sebastian was the optimistic American saying that they'd succeed, and I was the pessimistic Brit saying that it wouldn't work.



But as for the soldiers themselves, I liked them from the start and found a common bond. Sometimes I think being a Brit actually helped because I was not part of their society but at the same time a bit of an object of curiosity... I mean they all used

to [give me a hard time], and I'd throw it back at them for being Yanks, which all made us laugh.

DAV: How much are journalists accepted by the military in Afghanistan? At Restrepo? Is it different there than at other

parts of the combat theater because of the intensity and the intimacy of that small firebase?

Hetherington: It's hard for me to make sweeping generalizations, but on the whole I think the U.S. military understands that journalism is important and that trying to censor journalism is really something that we expect from places like China or Iran. The soldiers get this too, and often on Facebook I read postings by soldiers saying that they were fighting to support democratic ideals like freedom of speech. You know, one of the really amazing things about the guys out there is that they also understood that they were fighting for people who opposed the war, and they accepted that. Their tolerance is something society at home would do well to emulate.

Perhaps this was because all that was important was being a good soldier and making sure that you didn't get anyone else, or yourself, killed. I think that being in so much combat in a remote outpost like Outpost Restrepo did have some kind of positive effect on them. I mean, the group bond was incredibly strong. As one soldier said, "There are guys in the platoon that outright hate each other, but they would all die for each other."

So he's talking about a brotherhood rather than a friendship that is particularly profound and which adds a lot of significance and meaning to their lives. It's no wonder they come home and actually miss being "'out there", a fact that most civilians can't get their head around.

DAV: Describe what it is like to view war through a lens? How is it different than, say, a sniper who also sees much of combat through a lens?



Hetherington: I've never been a sniper or carried a weapon in war, so it's hard for me to make a comparison. What I do know is that I would put myself in very dangerous situations when filming or photographing. It's like I have an "off" switch in my head that I hit when I have to go and do something that is dangerous which leaves me able to focus on the job I've got to do. In some ways, I imagine it's a bit like soldiers who are trained to stand up in a firefight and shoot back. They put themselves at risk but are so focused on the job that they can overcome their fear. I remember one time in the Korengal when Tad Donoho was firing a [grenade launcher] from his knees as we were being attacked by insurgents. I was about a foot or so from him also on my knees and filming him.

Later he asked me if I had seen the tracers pass between our heads. I hadn't, but I later returned to the spot where we'd been and saw the trees were completely chewed up. I hadn't noticed it at all because I'd been so consumed with what I was filming. I felt pretty shaken up thinking about it.

DAV: Tell us one story that best sums up the experience of being there in that firebase with those soldiers.

Hetherington: There are so many that it's hard for me to pinpoint something that could be representative. I was on the same combat operation where Sal Giunta earned the Medal of

Honor (he's the first living recipient since Vietnam) for stopping insurgents from dragging away his friend Joshua Brennan during a close quarter ambush. Sal represents the best of Battle Company – tough and humble. He's quick to remind people that other soldiers, including all the guys in First Platoon, were also part of that action. Like I've been saying, it's a big family.

"Restrepo" is showing in theaters nationwide and will be available on DVD in November. Sebastian Junger's War and Tim Hetherington's Infidel are available from bookstores and online retailers.