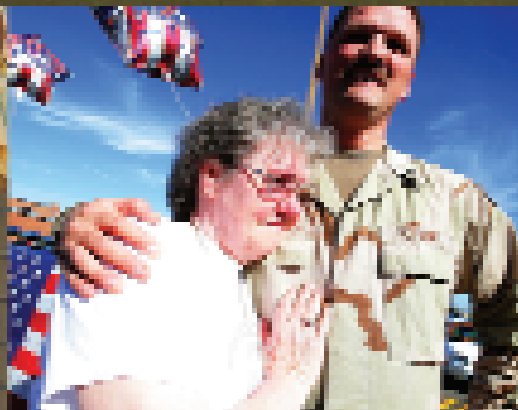




OFF TO WAR

A STORY ABOUT SOLDIERS AND THE FAMILIES THEY LEFT BEHIND



DISCUSSION GUIDE



ACTIVE voice®

LETTER FROM THE FILMMAKERS

Forty percent of the soldiers serving in Iraq last year were reservists and members of the National Guard, with three thousand of those 3000 soldiers coming from the 39th Brigade, based in Arkansas. We grew up in Arkansas, so *Off to War* is a personal story for us. We have friends fighting in Iraq with whom we went to grade school and hung out with in high school. Since we began making this film, 33 soldiers from the 39th Brigade have lost their lives.

The National Guardsmen are part-time citizen soldiers, or at least used to be. Most never expected to be deployed to a combat zone. They didn't sign up for that. But times have changed, of course, since 9/11, and now these Guardsmen must adjust to life as full-time combat soldiers. Their families have no choice but to soldier on without them, waiting, praying that the horrible things they see on the nightly news don't claim the lives of their loved ones.

Off to War will undoubtedly cause people to question their assumptions about war, whatever those assumptions may be, but this film is not political, or at least has no political agenda. When we started out, we were expecting to make a film about a group of soldiers deployed for a post-war peace and stability mission, but it quickly turned into something very different. President Bush had already declared mission accomplished in Iraq, but in April 2004, we rolled into Baghdad and straight into the bloodiest month of the war thus far. As one

soldier says in the film, "We trained for the best, we got the worst."

We spent an entire year in Iraq, the length of their deployment, with the soldiers of the Arkansas National Guard. Simultaneously, we kept up with their families back home, running businesses and raising children alone, sitting through the nearly daily tragic news from Iraq, and dealing with their own fluctuating feelings about the war. From full-scale combat to the heartbreaking return of a critically injured soldier to his family back home, *Off to War* tells the story of a war no one expected to be fighting, through the eyes of the soldiers and families who endured it.

Through these community screenings and forums, we hope that viewers and participants can experience the tremendous sacrifice that these Guardsmen and their families are making while serving in Iraq. "We support our troops" has become a common phrase in America these days; but unless you have a family member or loved one deployed, it is difficult to truly comprehend what going "*Off to War*" really means.

Craig Renaud and Brent Renaud

CRAIG AND BRENT RENAUD

Directors, Producers, Reporters

Craig and Brent Renaud are brothers and filmmakers who were born and raised in Little Rock, Arkansas. Since 1995, they have been working on award-winning documentary film projects in Afghanistan, Cambodia, Bolivia, China, Pakistan and Iraq.



1. INTRODUCTION

In the largest National Guard mobilization since the Korean War, 'citizen-soldiers' across America have been called upon to serve in armed conflict overseas. *Off to War* documents the Arkansas National Guard's deployment in Iraq during 2003-2005, following the conclusion of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Off to War provides a unique perspective on the issues facing those who went to Iraq, as well as those here on the home front. This Discussion and Resource Guide builds on this unprecedented opportunity, by bringing the human face into the forefront of community conversations about the Iraq conflict, our national response to terrorism, and broad questions of war, peace, and security. These conversations can foster open and thoughtful dialogue and help build common ground across divided communities

This Discussion and Resource Guide, in tandem with *Off to War*, can be used in a wide range of contexts, including at-home viewing on the Discovery Times network, high school and university classrooms, and The *Off to War* Community Project forums.

II. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These discussion questions explore the individuals, families and communities portrayed in *Off to War*. The emphasis here is on understanding their experiences and circumstances, as well as our own. Toward this end, the questions focus on the characters as people, not as stereotyped representatives of particular political or cultural viewpoints.

THE QUESTIONS ARE ORGANIZED UNDER FIVE HEADINGS:

- Soldiers and their Families
 - Communities
 - National Guard
 - War in Iraq
 - *Off to War*
- The Discussion Questions are applicable to those viewing one or more full episodes, or the edited compilation of scenes from the first three episodes. The questions are presented in broad terms so that they may be useful to those seeing any version or portion of *Off to War*.
- These questions may be utilized before, during or after screening the video. Many of the questions actually work best if they are discussed after watching the first episode (or excerpts from it), then revisited after seeing the story unfold in subsequent episodes.
- Although the Resources section of this guide dovetails with these questions, the discussion questions do not require specific materials beyond the documentary itself.

II. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONT.

SOLDIERS AND THEIR FAMILIES

- Do the personal and professional lives of the characters onscreen seem familiar to you, or do they seem remote? With whom can you most identify? As we get to know these individuals and families, what personal qualities emerge as they cope with major life changes and stressful, uncertain circumstances?
- What are your first impressions of the main characters in *Off to War*? As you observe their lives, are your initial judgments borne out? How does your own understanding of these individuals evolve as events unfold onscreen?
- *Off to War* is very much a film about families. Considering past and current circumstances, and relationships between family members, what do the various families portrayed have in common with each other, and where do they diverge?
- The soldiers vary widely in age and life experience. How do the soldiers' roles as either parents or children (or both in some cases) play an important part in the story? How does the situation affect not only the soldiers themselves, but also their parents and children?

COMMUNITIES

- How would you characterize the characters' civic and religious beliefs? What is most striking to you—the beliefs they share or the individual differences among them?
- In the opening credits of *Off to War*, there is a brief image of the American and Arkansas flags flying next to each other. The characters are patriotic and proud Americans and Arkansans. How do these overlapping identities reveal themselves and evolve in the course of the characters' experiences?
- Armed conflict involving a major commitment of U.S. Reserve and National Guard units clearly has profound economic and societal effects on communities such as Clarksville. Were you aware of these consequences prior to viewing *Off to War*? How did personal experience or the media shape your understanding?
- Over the long term, how do you think this large-scale activation of National Guard units is likely to change Clarksville and similar communities throughout Arkansas and across America? Is *Off to War* fundamentally a tale of disruption and dislocation, or could the situation offer a silver lining for towns and regions affected by the war?

EPISODE GUIDE

EPISODE ONE

On October 12, 2003, some 2,800 members of the Arkansas National Guard were officially notified they would spend the next year of their lives in Iraq. Fifty-seven of those called to duty were from a town called Clarksville, with a population of approximately 7,000 people. In the first installment of *Off to War*, viewers are introduced to some of these guardsmen, all with the 239th Engineer Company.

EPISODE TWO

The second installment of *Off to War* follows the Arkansas National Guard members during their training and ends with the troops settling into their new home near Baghdad. In Kuwait, the men prepare their vehicles for the three-day convoy to Taji, just north of Baghdad. With a shortage of armored vehicles, they spend their last day hammering plywood to the sides of jeeps to protect them from insurgents. The unit has been warned that the Iraqi insurgents know the newcomers are inexperienced. Their families are fearful that these guardsmen, who work in sales, farming and other non-military jobs, could become the targets of Iraqi militia groups bent upon attacking Americans. Many of these soldiers have never traveled beyond the borders of Arkansas and now face an entire year away from home.

II. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONT.

NATIONAL GUARD

- Why do these men join the National Guard? How do their families view their choice to do so?
- How do the soldiers view the role and status of the National Guard? What do we learn about how their situation compares with that of the “full-time” servicemen and women of the U.S. Army?

THE WAR IN IRAQ

- What do the soldiers (and their families) view as the overall mission in Iraq? What is their understanding of the link between Operation Iraqi Freedom and the September 11th terrorist attacks on New York and Washington?
- Over the course of the 18-month deployment, how is the characters’ morale affected by factors such as:
 - their views on the justness of the cause for which they are fighting, its costs, and its likelihood of success?
 - the contrast between the engineering operations these Guard units traditionally engage in, and the counter-insurgency operations assignments they are called upon to undertake in Iraq?
 - the relatively brief training and inadequate equipment they are given?
- If asked how American citizens can best “support the troops,” how do you think individual soldiers and family members from the documentary might respond? How has viewing (and discussing) *Off to War* affected your understanding of what it means to “support the troops?”

OFF TO WAR

- Does this documentary seem biased? How so? If not, why?
- *Off to War* allows us to be present at both ends of several phone calls and letters between the soldiers and their families. How do you feel about listening in on some of these conversations? What is the filmmakers’ responsibility or obligation when they have such personal access?
- In what way is this documentary similar to or different from reality television programs?
- How might the filmmakers’ documentary style highlight and help us understand our relationship with the characters—our differences, commonalities and connections with the people we meet onscreen?

EPISODE GUIDE

EPISODE THREE

Once in Baghdad, the unit was intended to engage in peace and stability operations, but almost immediately they are forced to conduct combat missions. Meanwhile, their families back home are terrified by the news that Arkansas soldiers are already dying in Iraq. By the end of the first month in Iraq, the Arkansas National Guard has lost eight men and seen many more injured. Among the injured is Sergeant Wayne Irelan, who is wounded during a mortar attack and is shipped home to an uncertain medical fate.

EPISODE FOUR

In Iraq, the Arkansas Guardsmen track and disarm roadside bombs responsible for killing many American troops. Specialists Matt Hertlein and Tommy Erp debate the Abu Ghraib scandal while Cheryl Jackson worries about the effect the scandal will have on the safety of her husband and son in Iraq. Sergeant David Short visits an Iraqi medical clinic that has no anesthesia for its patients. Back in Clarksville, the congregation Sergeant Joe Betts worked so hard to build replaces him as pastor without his consent. The families of the Engineers hold a pig roast at Wal-Mart® to raise money to send to the troops in Iraq. A final surgery reveals that Sergeant Wayne Irelan’s combat wounds are too severe and he will never have full use of his arm again.

III. TIPS FOR FACILITATORS

FACILITATING A GROUP DISCUSSION OF *OFF TO WAR*

In addition to providing an opportunity for individual reflection, *Off to War* can serve as a springboard to increase and deepen community awareness and prompt dialogue around the issues raised by the documentary. A facilitator, using the strategies outlined below, can play a key role in helping people move along that continuum. The Discussion Questions are useful to the facilitator's preparation, as sparks to get a dialogue started, or to help people deepen their thinking. But keep in mind that this is not a textbook. No one is expected to cover all the material in these pages, nor do you need to use discussion prompts in any particular order. Questions are designed for varied audiences and situations; skip over any that seem inappropriate for your event. Let the interests and concerns of your group dictate the flow of the discussion.

There are several ways to incorporate *Off to War* into a public event. You can screen the whole film and then begin your dialogue, or you can view it in segments. For example, you might pause for discussion after specific scenes (as suggested above in the introduction to the Discussion Questions). Or you might ask people to view the film at home before they come to your event. Whatever you choose, know that spaces in which it is safe to discuss these matters are rare. By providing such a space you are giving your community a precious gift.

THE ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR

An experienced facilitator can help ensure that the conversation is productive and rewarding without

asking people to hide feelings of pain, discomfort or frustration. The facilitator's primary job is to establish an encouraging tone that allows people to explore sensitive issues. Your ability to remain calm and neutral, keep people on track, help the group move toward action and model appropriate interaction will contribute significantly to the success of your event and the longevity of its impact. It is important for a facilitator to be involved in planning an event, but it may be difficult to assume the role of host or teacher and also serve as facilitator. In the best circumstances, facilitators remain neutral, focusing on helping others be heard rather than sharing their own perspectives. Unlike a teacher, a facilitator enters the discussion only when needed to help move things forward. Be sure your role in the event is clear.

PLANNING FOR YOUR EVENT

As you think about how to create a safe environment that welcomes open, respectful participation, consider the following:

- Is the event being held in a space where all participants will feel equally comfortable? If possible, convene your event in a neutral place, easily accessible to people who live in different neighborhoods.
- How can you ensure everyone an opportunity to be heard? If the group is large, are there plans to break into small groups or partners, or should attendance be limited? Is the room set up so that people can see and hear one another easily? If you are working with immigrant communities, do you need to provide translators?
- Be knowledgeable. You need not be an expert to facilitate a discussion, but the more you know, the more effective

EPISODE GUIDE

EPISODE FIVE

The Arkansas Guardsmen are called on to help train the Iraqi National Guard as the transfer of sovereignty begins on June 28, 2004. After three months in Iraq, the Engineers begin their first civil military project—helping the Iraqi government build Abu Nuwas Park, known as the “Central Park” of Baghdad. With complaints of shoulder and neck pains, Sergeant Joe Betts is sent back to Fort Hood, Texas, for a physical evaluation. Amy Betts is relieved when the doctor determines that her husband is not fit for duty and recommends three months of physical therapy back in Arkansas. Sergeant Curtis Rohrscheib's wife Shannon enters her final trimester of pregnancy with hope that her husband will arrive home in time for the delivery of their first son.

EPISODE SIX

With Iraqis now in charge of the government, the Arkansas National Guard works alongside the Iraqi security forces on all of their missions. The soldiers become suspicious of corruption, then fall into an ambush and suspect the Iraqi Police. After an intense firefight caught on tape, Sergeants Curtis Rohrscheib and David Short investigate the Iraqi Police for infiltrators. Back home in Arkansas, Sergeant Joe Betts tries to save his marriage and is detailed to answering phones and taking out the trash at the Clarksville Armory while he continues physical therapy. Specialists Matt Hertlein and Tommy Erp return home to Arkansas for two weeks of R&R and tell families and friends of their frustrations with the mission in Iraq. Sergeant Curtis Rohrscheib comes home for the birth of his son Garrett, but then has to say goodbye to his heartbroken family as he returns to Iraq for the remainder of his duty.

III. TIPS FOR FACILITATORS CONT.

you will be at helping the group consider deeper issues. Listings in the Resources section of this Guide can help you prepare.

- Know your group. The issues you will be addressing play out differently in different parts of the country, in rural and urban settings, and for different generations. Think about how those differences are reflected in language, comfort level in public discussions, and prior experience with issues of diversity. Structure your event accordingly.
- Consider working with a co-facilitator. This strategy can broaden perspectives and increase perception. One facilitator may pick up signals from group members that the other facilitator misses.
- Have you identified your own “hot button” issues? Substantive discussions on issues raised by this documentary can trigger intense feelings in us as well as in others. As a facilitator, you may end up being a target or lightning rod for the feelings of people in the room, so give yourself some time to reflect on the issues in the film before your event. That way you are not processing your own emotions and trying to facilitate a discussion at the same time. Before your event, plan how you will respond to possibly offensive comments to avoid having the dialogue shut down or escalate into an argument. Preparation is the key to keeping discussions calm, respectful, and productive.

AT THE EVENT

The strategies below can help you create an atmosphere that encourages people to share their experiences and insights in respectful and productive ways.

BEFORE THE DIALOGUE STARTS

- Set ground rules. You might involve group members in this process by asking people what rules would help them feel safe enough to participate openly. You'll need strategies for how people will take turns or indicate that they want to speak, and how you will prevent one or two people from dominating the discussion.
- You'll also need guidelines for the way people express themselves:

No one may interrupt someone who is speaking; no one may use a “put down” or “slur”; yelling is off limits; people may speak for themselves (“I think. . .”)

but may not generalize for others (“everyone agrees that. . .”).

- Talk about the difference between “dialogue” and “debate.” In a debate, participants try to convince others that they are right. In a dialogue, participants try to understand each other and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and actively listening to each other.
- Be clear about the purpose of the event. In particular, determine to what extent you event should or should not address the myriad policy issues raised by *Off to War*. To keep the group on track, make sure that everyone in the room understands the goals of the event.
- Set realistic goals for your event based on your group's experience and ability.

DURING THE DIALOGUE

- Take care of yourself and group members. When the intensity level rises, pause to let everyone take a deep breath. Similarly, you might plan a moment immediately after viewing the film to allow participants to silently process what they've seen before beginning any discussion.
- Humanize the “other.” Without dismissing or diminishing our real differences, you can help each participant identify something that they have in common with at least one other person from a group that they don't normally interact with. Finding simple common ground can begin the process of breaking through stereotypes. Common interests might include having kids the same age, sharing a hobby, rooting for the same sports team, serving in the military or even something as simple as loving cats or chocolate ice cream.
- Value people's good intentions. Using examples from the film, remind participants that perceptions and opinions can change over time and that individuals can hold contradictory views. Acknowledge that our understanding is always incomplete—just think about the insights you now have that you lacked when younger. If we wait for individuals to prove that they hold all the “right” views before agreeing to engage in dialogue, we'll never start the conversation.

PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

Active Voice (www.activevoice.net) is a team of strategic communication specialists who put powerful media to work for personal and institutional change in communities, workplaces, and campuses across America. Through practical guides, hands-on workshops, stimulating events and key partnerships nationwide, Active Voice moves people from thought to action. By highlighting compelling personal stories and perspectives seldom found in mainstream media, Active Voice offers a much-needed outlet to people across America to speak out, listen up, and take the initiative for positive change.

Discovery Times Channel

(www.discovery.com/times) combines the journalistic authority of The New York Times with the programming excellence of Discovery Communications Inc. to bring viewers provocative, engaging and relevant documentary series and specials about the events and ideas shaping our times. The network has won multiple industry honors for its breakthrough programming, including three Emmys, an Overseas Press Club Award, three National Headliner Awards, a BANFF Rockie Award, an International Documentary Association honor and two AWRIT Gracie Awards. In addition, the network has had films premiere at various film festivals, including the Sundance Film Festival, Tribeca Film Festival, San Francisco International Film Festival, SilverDocs Film Festival and the Tokyo Video Festival. Available to more than 37 million subscribers in the United States, Discovery Times Channel is a joint venture between The New York Times Company (NYSE:NYT) and Discovery Communications, Inc., the leading global real-world media and entertainment company.

Downtown Community TV Center

(www.dctvny.org) is the largest, most honored community media center in the United States. DCTV has won 12 national Emmy Awards, three Columbia-DuPont Citations and every other major award in television. DCTV was in Baghdad during the first Gulf War and conducted an exclusive interview with Saddam Hussein after the war. DCTV has also made many reports about the lives of Iraqi civilians before, during, and after the second Gulf War. DCTV is housed in a landmarked firehouse in New York's Chinatown. Every year DCTV trains hundreds of at risk high schools students (who won two national student Emmys)—disabled producers (Connect TV)—and other New Yorkers. *Off to War* is produced by Brent and Craig Renaud. Jon Alpert is executive producer for DCTV.

New York Times (www.nytimes.com) The New York Times Company (NYSE: NYT), a leading media company with 2003 revenues of \$3.2 billion, includes The New York Times, the International Herald Tribune, The Boston Globe, 16 other newspapers, eight network-affiliated television stations, two New York City radio stations and more than 40 Web sites, including NYTimes.com and Boston.com. For the fourth consecutive year, the Company was ranked No. 1 in the publishing industry in Fortune's 2004 list of America's Most Admired Companies. The Company's core purpose is to enhance society by creating, collecting and distributing high-quality news, information and entertainment.



COMMUNITY PARTNERS

The *Off to War* Community Project began with a series of public conversations in four diverse communities, all directly experiencing the impact of war as a result of the mobilization of the National Guard for active duty in Iraq. Active Voice and Discovery Times gratefully acknowledge the organizations that made these discussions possible:

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