

The Patrol was reviewed by Elayne Jude for the UK Defence Forum

Tom Petch, former British Army officer and writer-director-producer of this Helmand-set drama, has a lot of useful friends.

The Patrol, shot in Morocco for pennies, portrays modern soldiering with authenticity you can smell. The small cast spent time in boot camp prior to filming, learning basic drills, how to handle their weapons and themselves.

And what weapons. The kit is genuine; like the uniforms, radios, choppers, armoured vehicles, first aid and medical evacuation protocol, like the acronyms, slang, profanity-laced banter. Petch has clearly called in a few favours. And in place of big budget, we have craft, preparation, attention to detail, relationships. The camaraderie is raw, the class-based tensions between men and officers convincing. Over the course of the shoot the actors, playing captain, lieutenant, reservist, regulars and Marine, fuse into something very much like a military patrol. This authenticity is the film's most immediate strength.

Without any reservation, this film should be seen. One. British film - British independent film - is so rare and precious, it should be cherished as any endangered species. Two. There is very little drama around which is taking on Afghanistan, and almost none of it is British. And drama can go places where documentary may not. Unless it's embedded. And then which master does it serve. Three. It's really bloody good. Dialogue brimming with vitality, conviction performances, a haunting soundtrack from PJ Harvey's award-winning Let England Shake.

There are excellent reviews out there dissecting the action, including these from the The Telegraph and The Guardian.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/10619335/The-Patrol-a-British-look-at-modern-warfare.html>

<http://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/feb/06/the-patrol-review>

My interest is how it strikes and occasionally jars a specialised, defence-savvy audience.

Petch started writing the screenplay in 2007, out of frustration at the way the Afghan campaign was unfolding and a media silent over the policy underpinning it. There was no attempt, he felt, to separate support for the armed forces and support for the war. It was impossible to find a backer for the project. He was told repeatedly that there was no market, no interest. He decided to produce it himself.

It's been a long haul since then, and real life events have not stood still, making the film a tricky watch for those who've kept themselves informed from afar. Quite early on one character asks another if he's a friend of Tony Blair. Tony Blair ??? That's seven years ago, tops. Plenty has changed in the war since then. Equipment shortages and shortcomings, skills gaps and overstretch were issues peaking several years after Blair's departure, but many of these issues are far less critical now than then, in part due to the massive increase in use of UORs, which transformed defence acquisition, enabling critical kit to get out swiftly. In 2007, no-one was talking much about UORs, and it would be several years before the chairman of the Defence Select Committee referred to UORs as 'the New Black'.

On the other hand, the film's troops talk about mentoring the ANA. This may well have been going on in 2006-07; but if so, it was going on rather quietly. I can't recall hearing much about this till maybe 2011 - ie, when a timetable for withdrawal was on the table. So to hear these quite distinct periods in the same breath - the action's set over a few days in 2009, splitting the difference between the Blair/attack phase and the Cameron/withdraw - feels odd, and wrong. And why on earth is there a bootneck among the patrol, apart from providing some good jokes about wearing women's clothes and getting naked ? This is very picky. But no-one is more pedantic about a war movie than the former soldiers who tend to go to see them. And the camp-followers - defence hacks, industry, thinktank researchers, and so on.

What does feel very on the money is the friction in the film between the regulars and the reservist. He's an outsider, not trusted, not integrated. How will that gut reaction change to suit policy, Army 2020 ?

One final grumble ("soldiers grumble, that's what they do, they grumble"). Asked in an interview about the sort of audience he expected, Petch said: 'I knew we would get interest from the guys' audience, the military guys, but I also wanted wives and girlfriends who are going to the cinema to enjoy it, and what's been amazing is we've had some early statistics back and actually the cross over is higher than expected: more women aged 18- 25 liked the film!' (interview with Anoushka Bonwick in Filmmaking Career).

Wives and girlfriends ?

If this film has been made to raise the questions "why did we go there? What did we achieve?", then isn't that the business of every citizen, whatever her gender ?

We don't need to be wives or girlfriends to have an opinion, and a vote.

The Patrol: in cinemas from February 7 2014: out on DVD 21 April 2014

[http://www.amazon.co.uk/Patrol-DVD-Ben-Righton/dp/B00IHK6CB0/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=dvd&ie=UTF8&qid=1394484280&sr=1-1&keywords=the+patrol+2013](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Patrol-DVD-Ben-Righton/dp/B00IHK6CB0/ref=sr_1_1?s=dvd&ie=UTF8&qid=1394484280&sr=1-1&keywords=the+patrol+2013)

Since I watched The Patrol (and wrote this review), The Guardian published a piece on an Army Officer's evidence to the inquest into the death of Lance Corporal Michael Pritchard, a 22 year old British soldier, in 2012 in a friendly fire incident.

Major Richard Streatfield was a commanding officer (A Company, 4 Battalion, The Rifles) for seven months in Sangin, during some of the fiercest fighting. He believes that the training and equipment given to British soldiers, although an improvement on earlier days of the campaign, fell short of what was required. He repents his part in MoD propaganda of the time - "toed the MoD line in reports for the BBC, defending kit he knew to be inadequate" - and deeply regrets

not speaking out earlier.

He describes the system of UORs as "pernicious" and "morally a very, very dubious way to equip the army" because "someone is going to have to have died" before the MoD would agree to spend money on new kit. "That does not mean you have not identified that you need that bit of equipment beforehand".

Streatfeild said poor communications between platoons due to a lack of radios contributed to the death of Pritchard, who was killed by a British sniper. He claims the MoD misled the coroner at a key point in the inquest, and should make a formal apology to Lance Cpl Pritchard's family.(The Patrol criticises the Bowman radio system)

In the light of Streatfield's testimony, described to me privately by a member of the UK Parliament's Defence Select Committee as 'devastating', I feel I have written the film review with the sort of glib ignorance which contributes to this country's tolerance of this absurd and pointless war. I stopped learning anything more about the conditions of warfighting a couple of years ago, and have been overexposed to the good news brigade. A little knowledge, indeed.

I ask you to read the full article here: and when it comes out, Streatfield's book, Honourable Soldiers. There is no end to education.

<http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/mar/14/british-ex-commander-hits-out-inadequate-kit-afghanistan>