



# IN THE GREY AREA OF EMERGING RISK.

LLOYD'S

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## Sundance film festival

### Shooting history

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#### "September Tapes" is so real that the Defence Department seized its early footage

ABOUT half way through "September Tapes", a fictional documentary set in post-Taliban Afghanistan and one of the more interesting films screened at this month's Sundance film festival, the protagonists get involved in a gun battle with Taliban fighters. No surprises here: as civilian westerners near the Pakistani border they are easy targets. What does come as a shock, though, is the unmistakable sound of live ammunition. To borrow Michael Herr's words, the elephant is right there, sitting on your chest.

Part "Blair Witch Project", part "Apocalypse Now", "September Tapes" tells the story of three people searching for an elusive truth, in this case the whereabouts of Osama bin Laden in the middle of Afghanistan at war. George Calil makes a superb job of playing Don Larson, a gung-ho American journalist deeply affected by the September 11th terrorist attacks. Driven on by a hidden resolve, he drags his cameraman, Sonny, and their American-Afghan translator/guide, Wali (Wali Razaqi) deeper and deeper into the heart of the war between the Northern Alliance and the remnants of al-Qaeda and the Taliban.



Acting for real

Shot using hand-held digital video recorders, the film has the look and feel of a real documentary. Take away the context of the cinema and it would be quite easy to believe the film's conceit that the tapes were found by Northern Alliance troops somewhere near the Afghani-Pakistani border. Harsh sunlight, washed out backgrounds and pixilated edges are part of digital video's aesthetic, and one that is perfectly suited for this film. So much so that the Defence Department deemed it necessary, when the crew returned to the United States, to hold their footage for five months for examination. Even now, Christian Johnston, the director, has yet to recover about eight hours of footage.

Mr Johnston and his film crew's travails in a series of unpredictable locations are matched, deliberately, by the fictional journey of Larson, Wali and Sonny. Warned by the Defence Department that they could not expect American help should they find themselves in a tight situation, the real-life crew came to rely on the benevolence and protection of Kabul's version of Don Corleone, known as Baba Jon, who provided the film-makers not only with the vehicles they needed but also Northern Alliance soldiers, complete with AK-47s and RPGs, to turn Mr Johnston's script into reality.

Some scenes were recreated from the crew's experience. At one Northern Alliance checkpoint, the crew found themselves held up at gunpoint. Only the presence of General Dil Agha, acting in the film as a Northern Alliance commander, defused the situation. This meeting was faithfully re-enacted for the

cameras. Other scenes were more spontaneous: a trip to a gun-dealer's house turned nasty when the dealer misunderstood that Calil and Razaqi, acting out a scripted argument, were playing a role. The film's support actors—Northern Alliance commanders, Razaqi's Afghan cousins, the police and citizens of Kabul—also provide an unscripted but captivating side to the story. One Alliance commander, who said he fought against Mr bin Laden in the Tora Bora caves, makes the claim on-camera that Mr bin Laden escaped alive, but only because he was allowed to by the Americans.

It is not simply authenticity that gives "September Tapes" its dramatic energy. The subtle scripting of the relationship between Larson and Wali takes the film beyond the harsh reality of the war and into the personal. Throughout, Larson records his notes in a digital recorder. Though these do nothing to dispel the viewer's notion that he is angry as well as foolish, they hint at something he is keeping hidden from Wali.

For Wali's part, his loyalty to Larson is constantly challenged by the latter's knack for getting into near desperate situations, this relationship echoed by the larger political drama going on around them. At one point, travelling with an Alliance commander, they narrowly avoid being blown up by an American jet. Later, seemingly without irony, Larson bitterly condemns the September 11th terrorists for their cowardice: real soldiers, he comments in his notes, fight their enemy face to face. As he says this, the camera pans upwards to show an aircraft carving a line across the clear blue sky, a reference to both the double standards of Larson's patriotism and the secret that drives him on.

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