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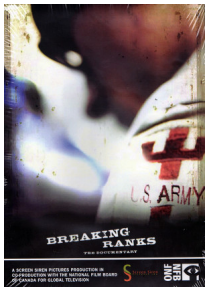

Some people call them "deserters," while others choose the nobler-sounding words "war resisters." The term you use almost certainly betrays how you feel.

But the issue is more complicated than it was 40 years ago. The political climate in Canada has changed since the Vietnam war, and American soldiers who move to Canada today are in legal limbo - and appear increasingly likely to be deported. And with no draft now, those who serve in the United States military volunteered; a decision to renege on that commitment strikes many people as cowardly.

The 2006 documentary *Breaking Ranks*, which will be screened at the Bettendorf Public Library on Monday, aims to challenge that reaction. Produced for Canadian television and directed by Vancouver-based Michelle Mason, the hour-long film tells the stories of four soldiers who fled north rather than continue to serve in the United States military.

During the Vietnam war, of course, tens of thousands of Americans moved to Canada to avoid military service. The number of soldiers who've fled to Canada during the Iraq war is estimated to be in the dozens.

The movie is unabashedly sympathetic to its subjects, and in a phone interview, Mason made no pretense of objectivity. "I'm not a journalist anymore," she said. "I'm a point-of-view documentary filmmaker."

{mp3}mason{/mp3}**Audio interview with Michelle Mason (43 minutes)**

To be clear, *Breaking Ranks* doesn't come from the Michael Moore school of agitation. Mason

is a thoughtful, deliberate filmmaker who can convincingly justify her choices. And she trusts the audience to understand that just because one of her subjects says something doesn't make it true.

"I've just tried to give a fairly wide spectrum of experiences," Mason said. Jeremy Hinzman comes off as thoughtful and principled, Joshua Key is obviously damaged, and Brandon Hughey is sincere. Kyle Snyder - seen wearing some of his Army clothes or a camouflage shirt that reads, "You can't see me" - struck me as problematic and a touch creepy.

Personal reactions affect how much the audience trusts and believes them. At three points in the movie, soldiers tell uncorroborated stories - about "lost" Conscientious Objector paperwork, about a promised signing bonus that was never given, and about an assumed murder in Iraq. I believed the first story, found the second to be a bit naïve, and thought the third was full of holes.

Mason said that representatives of the Pentagon and the military declined to talk to her, but she thinks these stories - whether audiences find them credible or not - are important, because they speak to the soldiers' reasons for leaving. "This is about hearing what they have to say," she said.

Mason said that the lack of a draft doesn't change her perspective. "A soldier's right to their conscience is a human right guaranteed under international law ... and in fact is even in the code of military conduct under the U.S. ... ," she said.

But she acknowledged that the draft *does* make a difference to many people. "People are a lot more sympathetic to someone who was drafted against their will and their conscience ... versus someone who, with all kinds of information, enlisted voluntarily," she said. "What was challenging particularly for a Canadian audience is this notion of an all-volunteer military."

Part of her approach is to use personal stories to demonstrate how volunteer service is often more complicated than wanting to defend one's country. People join the military to support a family, for enlistment bonuses, or for a college education, for example. "It's not always for altruistic reasons that people enlist," Mason said.

It's also important to understand, Mason said, that many soldiers don't know they can file a Conscientious Objector claim. "That's not information that's made readily available to soldiers for obvious reasons," Mason said.

Moreover, very few claims are accepted. Mason's husband (who's from Port Byron) filed a claim that was never processed before he was released (at the tail end of the Cold War) in a troop-reduction action. Then, with the Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors, he worked on 171 Conscientious Objector cases with only one claim recognized. "It's a very hard status to achieve in the United States," she said. A person must be opposed to war in any form to be a Conscientious Objector in the United States.

And if a Contentious Objector claim is rejected, "they don't really have legal recourse in the military," Mason said.

The legal challenge in Canada is getting refugee status. Because the United States is a representative democracy, Canadian courts have thus far assumed that soldiers wouldn't face persecution. Canadian courts have also not allowed soldiers to argue that the war in Iraq is illegal, thus cutting off another potential avenue for relief. Furthermore, even though the House of Commons has twice affirmed a desire to let American soldiers stay in Canada, the administration of Prime Minister Stephen Harper has pursued deportation - to maintain a strong relationship with the United States, Mason said.

All four of *Breaking Ranks*' subjects remain in Canada, although Hinzman is presently awaiting deportation. Two have married Canadians, which might allow them to stay long-term.

Mason said she doesn't believe these people are cowards. "On a rational and legal level, these people have every right to their consciences," she said. "I think a more difficult question is, if

they're standing up for their principles, then why don't they go to prison for them?"

Because it's not narrated, *Breaking Ranks* is frustratingly unclear on several key points, including the punishment for desertion. The movie hints that its subjects could be executed, and then it suggests that at most they'll spend a few years in prison. Technically, deserting the military during a war has a maximum penalty of death, but the recent sentences have generally ranged from eight to 15 months. In our interview, Mason called those punishments "pretty reasonable."

You wouldn't know that perspective from watching *Breaking Ranks*, however. While its sympathies are obvious, it's not didactic. "I tried to make a balanced film, because I think it's a very complex issue," Mason said.

Audiences so far, she added, have generally sided with the soldiers and "give their conscience the benefit of a doubt."

Breaking Ranks *will be screened at 7 p.m. on Monday, June 29, at the Bettendorf Library (2950 Learning Campus Drive), followed by a question-and-answer session with director Michelle Mason.*

For more information on the movie, visit BreakingRanksTheFilm.com . For more information on the War Resisters Support Campaign, visit Resisters.ca .