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Deborah Scranton



April 8, 2008

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Social Change*

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P.H. Liotta

I want to give you a little bit of a sense of Deborah Scranton as a film maker and why she is so important for this “Courage to Speak” program. A number of months ago, up in Providence, my daughter Gaia and I had dinner with her. She gave us a story, just a line, incredibly sincere but just tossed off, and it went something like this: “I believe the reason we are here is to tell the story of each other’s lives.” The light bulb went off in my head; that’s exactly the human narrative I had intended for “Courage to Speak.”

It’s special to have her here tonight. Every time she sends me an email, she ends with an epigraph from the greatest essayist of the twentieth century who lived in Brooklyn—Maine—and whose name was E.B. White. That epigraph is: “Every morning I wake up both determined to change the world and to have one hell of a good time; sometimes this makes planning the day difficult.” You will find, however, that Deborah Scranton lives up to that epigraph every day she wakes up.

If you have not seen of her work, you must. *Bad Voodoo’s War*, which premiered last Thursday night on PBS *Frontline*, is available to watch on line—including her continuing work with soldiers in Iraq. It’s a remarkable project. I first came across her work in her first documentary film, which was short-listed for the Academy Award, title *The War Tapes*. What’s so remarkable about her skills as director is that she allows real people to tell real on-the-ground narratives through the technique of not embedding herself but by becoming a virtual producer, thus allowing soldiers and Marines to tell their own stories. I can tell you why it’s so powerful for me: Even though I’ve never fired a trigger in

combat, I've been in plenty of war zones when bullets are flying. Though policy makers love to omit this truth, in situations like that soldiers and Marines are far less interested in fighting for a cause and are far more interested in fighting for each other. The crazy, sick, twisted humor and determination and companionship of combat comes out unbelievably, beautifully in her work.

So let me end with that saying, with telling the stories of each other's lives, you're about to find out right now why Deborah Scranton is so gifted in telling the stories of our lives. Please welcome Deborah Scranton.

Deborah Scranton

I'd like to thank you for having me here tonight and I'm happy there's such a good turnout. Thank you for making time in your very busy schedule to come out and say hi. I believe most in conversation, so there'll be no PowerPoint, this will not be an academic lecture. Hopefully, we can talk about what I can share here of what I do as a story teller.

So I'm not horribly redundant, I'm going to ask for a show of hands before I decide what I am going to show. Who has seen *The War Tapes*? Ok, we'll be showing that trailer. How many caught *Bad Voodoo's War*? We'll be showing that trailer, too. Before we do that, I'm going to go back to where I began as a storyteller.

I grew up ninth-generation on a farm in New Hampshire. My ancestors actually came from Prudence Island, not too far from here. There are 732 people in my town and I became compelled by stories when I was a student at Brown University. I was a Classics minor and never had to chance to take Ancient Greek or Latin. I used to be on the U.S. Ski Team, so I went to the training academy

for those missed classes. So I ended up majoring in something called Semiotics, which is the theory of meaning. What was so fascinating to me about Semiotics was in how meaning was constructed. How stories are constructed. What voices get put out there. Who rules or owns the narrative is basically who tells history. If you think of a story as being one hour long, it's actually infinitely wide, because at any point that someone catches your attention you want to know more about that character. How are we able to do that?

I'm going to give you a little bit of where I came from and that will provide points of entry for you, for our later conversation. Ninth-generation New Hampshire farm family, ex U.S. Ski Team, applied to Brown University in the hospital on Demerol. Thank God, it was just an essay; my first line was, "I'm in the hospital with my fifth knee reconstruction and my life as I know it is over. I can no longer be on the U.S. Ski Team and I need to find out who else I am." Thank God Brown let me in. I was looking for that moment which I'm sure all of us have had in our lives, that moment when the universe and time suspends and stops. You have a feeling you're in that groove, whatever the energy is. It took me two years at Brown. I cross registered at RISD in a photography class. I was developing photos and I looked up at the clock and it was seven hours later and I thought, "Thank God, I'm not dead at 19." I've found something else to be besides a ski racer.

In most classes and learning about theory in the academic world, I was an English Literature major and I went down to apply for my honors and at the time I had been an ex-jock. My grades were like B's and C's and a few A's. I was working my way up. The honors class professor asked, "Do you know what you possibly think you have of interest to offer?" They basically turned me down for English Honors. So in true red-headed manner, I burst into tears and started yelling at them and at the same time walked down the street and changed my major to Semiotics. I realized when I was

taking this class, deconstructing James Joyce's *Ulysses* with a lot of other fellow nineteen-year olds, who was I to be thinking that I was better than James Joyce? Yes, I could write the twenty-page papers. For me that was this fulcrum where I realized it's far more difficult to create than it is to deconstruct and criticize. I realized that was a line in the ballroom floor, that as far as I was going, I was going to try and create or I was going to be critical and deconstruct. So, for me, I chose to create. I was a Classics minor; Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were my favorite books. I've been always attracted to the warrior's journey. What does it mean? We're all warriors in our own little way. We all fight our battles and go off on quests and try and make it home.

We have been telling war stories for four and a half years now. [And, by the way, please let me introduce my associate producer, Kate Robertson.] When the *War Tapes* began, it was based on an earlier film I had made on World War II vets in my hometown. [And I realize this narrative is a bit disjointed here.] I was out of school, knew no one in business, my parents were high school teachers, and how do I make this connection? The only business person I knew was somebody I was on the U.S. ski team with who got me the interview. I worked for twelve years on and off in New York for ESPN, CBS covering major sporting events. [I promise this all makes sense eventually.] Which was a multi-camera filming platform. Lots of cameras, me on the headset. Got to be late in my late thirties, got married, went to Europe, had my son, didn't quite work out—son's great—moved back, got divorced, tried to figure out what to do with my life.

So I decided to make a film about the World War II veterans from my hometown. My town in 1940 had 342 people; of those, 46 served. Nine sets of siblings, including a brother and sister. You know those bronze plaques that we all drive by every day? I went and tracked down those that were still alive and made a small film called *Stories from Silence: Witness to War*. It ended up getting aired on New

Hampshire, Maine, and Vermont public television. Based on that, and because some of the guys such as Billy Harold, who had been at the battle of Monte Cassino, a machine gunner who lost his foot, helped him get his Bronze Star and a few other things. So I got to know the New Hampshire National Guard.

Five months later, which was February 12, 2004 my phone rang and it was the Public Affairs Officer for the New Hampshire National Guard. He said, “We are at 56 percent deployment rate. We have nine units. You can have your pick. We want you to tell our story.” That is what will become *The War Tapes*.

I went to sleep. It was four in the morning when I woke up with the idea—and this is where my sports TV work comes back in. What if I could tell the story of war? I knew this was an opportunity. I just spent all this time telling the story of World War II recollection, fifty, sixty year-old recollection. I now had the opportunity to tell their story as it unfolded in real time. My idea was this: Based on my sports background, what if I could virtually embed, give ten, twenty, thirty cameras to one unit? Mount the cameras everywhere on the front lines and film it as it unfolds. So I called the Public Affairs Officer back. He was a Major. I said “Greg, I have an idea.” He was like, “Yes, Deborah?” You have to understand that I was the one who called Greg for a flyover of two F-16s that premiered that first WWII film—which, mind you, we got! He asked, “Do you really believe this is the better way to tell the story? I said “Yes, I do, because if I go in as a journalist, then it’s mine, I’m imposing myself and my voice on what I think war means.” What I wanted to do was to crawl inside the experience, to know what it looked like, felt like, smelled like, to be on the front lines. They had been to Fallujah twice; they had seen a lot. I wanted to see what that story was. So the idea was to do this “virtual imbed.” I picked an infantry unit because as I was school by my

WWII vets, I do know why the sky is blue. Who here knows why the sky is blue? Because God Loves the Infantry.

I picked the only infantry unit in New Hampshire, which was Charlie Company 3, 172nd Mountain Infantry. My caveat for access was that I had to get these guys to volunteer. They were down at Fort Dix, and I flew down there. So you can imagine—the only woman—there are no women in the infantry. Hopped out in front of the one hundred and thirty soldiers and said, “This is my dream, my vision. I want to work with you and tell the story through your eyes.” There were twenty or thirty who were like, “Well, we’ll talk to you some more.” We went to the day room and I got grilled pretty hard. The opening question was “What the f___ do you know about the National Guard?” I started at 1638 Pequot Indian Wars Massachusetts Bay Colony and gave them a thirty-minute answer.

Part of the reason I’m sharing these stories with you is because with all of my talking I’ve given each and every one of you different points of entry with me as a person. So, for those of you who are athletes in this audience, you may have heard I said I used to be on the U.S. Ski Team. So you would know I can talk to her about sports. For those of you who are women and athletes, you could say I know what it’s like to be a jock who’s a girl. I also mentioned that I got married and had a son; we can talk about having kids. I tell war stories; I was a Classics major. I’m trying here to show you part of my process. Those are all points of entry. As a filmmaker, I believe of giving of myself in order to establish trust to get back.

The War Tapes trailer.

That was *The War Tapes*. That was two and a half years of my life to bring that story to film. I'll try to share a ground-level narrative here, most especially where these narratives seem so disconnected in all of our conversations. Take this a starting point: Less than half of one percent of our population knows a Marine, whereas in World War II it was twelve percent. My passion, why I tell stories, is to help bridge that disconnect. So it's not about an "us" and a "them"; it's about "we." That is my primary mission in life. When we were doing the outreach for *The War Tapes*, it actually became difficult *because* we were accepted for the Tribeca Film Festival. You have to submit to *The New York Times* for their review. I was scared because my promise to the soldiers was that I would tell their story wherever it took us, no matter what. There would be no political agenda. They could say whatever they felt. This was not about what I thought or what anyone else involved with the film thought. This was about what they thought, and there was no way I going to let that be derailed.

In our outreach, we knew there was a whole community of military bloggers ("mil bloggers" for short) and the first outreach we did was to those mil bloggers. There are a few really famous ones, such as "Black Five," who lives in Chicago. I got on a plane with a rough cut of my film. Before he published his book, *Blog of War*, "Black Five's" identity was unknown. So basically it was like a spy novel: I sent him an e-mail saying I'd like you to look at the film before it screens and want you to write what you think. What I was afraid of was someone in the media was going to watch the film and say that it's an anti-war film. I didn't want that adjective to be the announcement of my film. I wanted just to tell and amplify their stories. So "Black Five" wrote me back and said, "Ok." I got on the plane to Chicago. He's a former intelligence officer. I had this special number that I had to call; I sent him a photo of me. He came and met me and we went to this Irish bar in downtown Chicago. I brought my \$150 Bose headphones and ordered a pitcher of beer and he watched *The War Tapes*. He loved it. He didn't like some of the complaining, but he respected their honesty.

In that outreach another mil blogger that I got to know was “JP.” “JP” and I became virtual friends for over a year. On April 24, 2007 I got an e-mail from “JP” saying, “I just got called up to go back again. Can you tell my unit’s story?” In this time lapse [I stopped counting because it broke my heart], I can’t tell you how many soldiers wrote me e-mails asking me to tell their story. Before you go and view *Bad Voodoo’s War*, let me share with you... the guys in *The War Tapes*. Twenty-one soldiers filmed *The War Tapes*. When one of them got on the plane, he turned back and said to me, “Please, don’t let us die anonymous.” He let me go and walked off.

So for four and a half years in these stories, what Kate and I are doing, our goal, is not to let them die anonymous. We meant to take them out of the box that you read in the newspaper. They’re not perfect; I’m sure as heck not perfect. It’s not about making a John Wayne movie or a movie about making someone else look bad. It’s a human movie. These are the guys who are there.

This is the trailer for *Bad Voodoo’s War*. When “JP” sent me the email, I was very lucky. I had been trying for over a year to get access to Special Forces. To tell their story is really very important, as we’re encountering the terrain of “irregular warfare.” To be blunt, our concept of war is no longer what war is. It is back to what war was when this country was founded, which is fighting insurgency, not knowing who or where the enemy is. It’s no longer different guys in different color uniforms, meeting at a set place, and whoever wins that wins. That’s just gone.

Bad Voodoo’s War trailer



I often get asked why the soldiers want to do this? Are they out for their own self-promotion? How do we know they're going to tell their own stories? *Bad Voodoo's War* shows two people primarily. It's about a platoon.

The Platoon Leader is Sergeant First Class Toby Nunn. I'm going to play this clip because I think hopefully it will show you why they share their stories. Toby was in Bosnia and got the nickname "Voodoo" because he was trying to calm down a disagreement between a Muslim and a Christian. He was accused of not being impartial. So his response was "I'm no religion. I'm Voodoo, baby." The altercation was more than he let on and the guys in the Platoon knew it, so they named the platoon after him. He's the active platoon leader; he's enlisted, he's not the lieutenant; he's the NCO, Sergeant First Class. When "JP" called me saying, "Tell our story," the first person I knew I had to win over was Toby. The way that happened was that I got a call from Toby saying, "Well, we're down here at Camp Shelby and we got block leave on Monday. [This was Saturday.] We have one night off in New Orleans." An hour and half later, I called him back and said, "I'll meet you in New Orleans." I went down to New Orleans and we talked until two in the morning, which is when we decided we would tell the story.

Some soldiers want to tell their story. What motivated Toby to film these guys for over four hundred hours—and they're still in Iraq—what motivated them to keep filming and to go through hell and high water, was so that you know this story and, God forbid, any other stories like this.

Sergeant FC Toby Nunn clip.

I encourage everyone to go and watch this. It's streaming online. Please leave a comment. This one comment in particular really struck me:

"I want to be honest. Speaking for myself, as what I like to think is a very aware American, I've felt burnt out after years of following the War, reading the books, watching the debates, following the bloggers, staying on the politics, hearing about the contractors, the mistakes, the good, the bad and all the crazy surrounding a six-plus year and hazily defined 'War on Terror.'

"Tonight I caught your show by accident. And I am ashamed. How dare I feel exhausted?"

"Maybe you were reaching out to touch a wholly distracted or vaguely apathetic audience but I want you to know that you found your way to one quietly depleted bystander. And you lit the fire again.

"Stay safe. Stay strong. And stay in touch with all of us. We really do care."

I want you to know that the guys read that and it makes them feel better. So when I talk about bridging a disconnect, this is part of it. These soldiers don't feel like they are going to, God forbid, "die anonymous." Whether we agree with this war or don't agree with it, that's all about electing different people. Soldiers swear to uphold the Constitution of the United States; they do not swear an oath to the administration. My great passion these past four and a half years has been to try to amplify their voices because I felt no one else has really been doing—so that their voices are heard. This isn't about me; it's about them. This is about all of you in the room tonight. I can write Toby and tell him two hundred more people know who Jake was. That means a lot to him.

Q&A Session



Q. I know you are a Brown University grad and that you have served as a Fellow at the Watson Institute for International Studies. Have your students influenced your work?

A. I was a Visiting Fellow at Brown and I taught a seminar on documentary work and social change. My students' final assignment was to create some piece of documentary work. I didn't care if it was photographs, writing, film, anything. I wanted them to go through that process that I alluded to earlier, which is to have the experience of trying to create something versus "owning" it. So many of them did amazing projects. It was wonderful for me. I don't know so much that they taught me, other than it reflected back on me—and nurtured me.

Two women, for example, made a film about rape on campus. If you are raped on the Brown Campus, it doesn't go to the Providence Police—it goes to Brown Security. There's all this stuff that happens. They did this amazing film for their final project. They screened their film at the Cable Car Theatre in Providence.

The soldiers had a saying: “Shoulder to Shoulder, or when the shit really hits the fan, it’s Butt to Butt.” It’s like when you’re really digging in, pushing, you’re in there. So, for me, when I learn from my students, you reach out to all that’s around you. I feel that way for some of them. They have given me more strength to keep going.

Q. You talk about points of entry. I was wondering if you could elaborate on reaching more people with the message that you have? Filmmakers can come up with a message but actually getting it out is very difficult.

A. That’s an excellent question as far as how you disseminate the message and try to inspire more people to make them watch. So I’m going to ask, and I won’t be offended, how many of you are maybe going to go to the Frontline website and watch *Bad Voodoo’s War*?

[Numerous hands go up.] Good . . . that’s an answer in a way. And thank you.

I find points of entry come down to showing up, having an honest spirit and making the effort. When we drove down here today, I did a BBC interview right at the junction of I-95 and I-93. I pulled over in this convertible, met the journalist, and it is going to air tonight at 10—that’s going to go out across the entire BBC. I talk to whomever. I try to spread my message. But I will keep telling the same story and I will not go on a show and twist a little to please someone. If you “Google” me, you will find some not very nice adjectives attached to my name—because I will not say just say “Yes.” I will go toe-to-toe with an interviewer trying to get me to say something—I won’t say it. I have given my word.

The outreach is huge. I am a big believer in the Web. I am a big believer in spreading the message. We were lucky. “MySpace,” which is a social networking site, offered to build me a filmmaker page. We’ve had over two thousand people come to that. I have one on “Face Book,” thanks to a graduate student that I met when I was teaching at Brown. On those sites you can say “share” and send it to your entire email list. I’m a big believer in that, and sometimes it’s hard—the power of truth, the power of story. A good heart will prevail.

Q. What have you learned from the soldiers’ stories that you find is universal to all people?

A. That they are us. They’re me; they’re you. I grew up in a blue collar town. I know these guys. They’re not an “other” to me. For me, the military is four men. The military is a very feminine organization: it’s unit based; it’s based on friendships and relationships. If you look at corporate America, where it’s dog-eat-dog and who’s going to get ahead and leave the others behind and screw them and who cares, it’s completely different. With those guys it’s a squad, it’s a unit, *you* are your weakest link, and no matter what you will never leave a man behind. You will get over and through whatever has to get done. For me, I find the military a place with a lot of love.

Q. I know you said earlier that you didn’t want the documentary to come across as an anti-war film. So my question is how did the government receive the documentary?

A. I don’t know. You’d have to ask the government. When I said that I don’t want it to be perceived as an anti-war documentary, it’s just that I don’t want that label. You have to understand that if you are a member of the military and if the *New York Times* were to review your film and says that it is an “anti-war” film without someone else that they actually trust saying it’s an honest film, they will not

go see that. People see different things in my film. Some see it as anti-war; some have signed up to be in the military. I am who my voice is.

Did the government have a reaction? Generals have seen it, members of the Department of Defense have seen it, people very high up in the military establishment have seen it. Did they personally email me? A few of them did. I'm not going to say who, but it was positive. There are things in my film that will make some people in power nervous because they bitch—because they're soldiers. These are NCOs [Non-commissioned officers], not commissioned officers. They've earned their right to complain. They're sitting there; they haven't had a shower in 4 days. In the ASVs, where the guys in *Bad Voodoo* are in, it's different from the Humvees that the *War Tapes* guys are in. The guy that designed the ASV's did not make enough space to move, so that if you're in your flap jacket and just drank all that Red Bull to stay hydrated, you don't have enough room to pee in a bottle. So they're getting kidney infections, kidney stones. So that's in *Bad Voodoo's War*. Is that going to annoy someone? Yes. From my perspective, if you are really in a position of command or authority, and if you have empathy and love for who is there in your name, you're not going to get so tweaked.

Q. How did you keep you the war content of the film as the soldiers were filming it, the continuity of the film while trying to show them as they were? In other words there were probably scenes of misusing words and violent content and such . . .

A. It's easy. You want the story of their story. It rises to the top. It is what their experience is. The one thing about the Internet—I'm in almost continual contact with them, whether it's texting, phone, IM, e-mail, I hear through them what the story is. I know what the most important thing is,

and if we don't have it on tape, I am your worst freaking nightmare. Ok, it's not on tape, it's really important, you better go f_____ing get it or it's not going to be in the show and I don't have it.

Q. Thank you for your presentation. As I'm seeing it, I can feel myself getting very upset. I don't understand how you can do your work and maintain composure or emotional stability seeing the responses from the embedded information you're getting from our soldiers. How do you do it?

A. I don't have objectivity. I don't believe in objectivity. I believe you bring your history and stories to what you try to do. I guess it goes back to me and my world and the military's world converged. I used to direct a lot of skiing shoots. I was doing a back country skiing shoot in the mountains of Utah. The ski world is a very small world. Everyone on the show I had known since I was seven, nine, twelve years old. The helicopter went down and the Sheriff's office wouldn't send anyone out. I had done a story earlier; there are Special Forces guys up there. At the time I was an "on-air" reporter. When we were getting rescued and the Sheriff's office was telling me they would go out in the morning. I said "I'll have my red-headed ass on the news tonight at eleven, if you don't get that phone call made." In the end, it was Special Forces Black Hawk night recon that came out. All my friends were dead, but they took four passes, repelled down, made sure all my friends were dead and they did not leave them alone on the mountain that night. Now you've heard the story that I told you. When soldiers and Marines give me the "sniff" test, they ask, "Why should we trust you?" My answer is [and I'm sorry], "I will not f_____ you over because you did not leave my friends out to die alone and we went and looked for them. I will not make a John Wayne movie that you're all great, but I will not take and twist you're words no matter who tries to make me."

So I cope because of that day. Because in my heart, it's for those men who went out to look for my friends.