



# The Gulf Wars: existential crisis

## "Same place, same story, different millennia"

Writer and film reviewer Rupert Morgan reflects on war and war films.

On the 1st May, 1945, the German forces surrendered in Italy, effectively ending the Second World War. The man they surrendered to was called General Sir William Morgan. My grandfather. War held no mystery for him – he'd known the absolute horror of the trenches as a young man in World War I and been a part of the Manhattan Project to develop the atomic bomb. He had no regrets, sure that what he had done was right and necessary, and even said that some of the best days of his life had been in the Somme, when the combat was the most bloody and intense.

I do not know if today's soldiers have such moral clarity about our contemporary wars. Certainly the cinematic representation of war has changed from the heroic to the tragic, the entire focus now being on amorality, trauma and the dehumanisation of combatants.

The moral case for the first Iraq War was supposedly impeccable, having been backed by a UN mandate, but *Three Kings*<sup>1</sup> was a film that took a satirical view, effectively saying that it was about economics and oil. George Clooney leads a trio of American soldiers who try to steal a secret cache of gold that Saddam Hussein is supposed to have hidden in a nearby village. They are not liberators or representatives of democracy and freedom, but men motivated by personal gain – in which they represent the USA as a nation. *Three Kings* seemed a modern take on war, but in the past, of course, the promise of riches was always a soldier's primary motive: victorious armies plundered conquered lands. Clooney is an American in Iraq, but he could be a Macedonian in Mesopotamia – same place, same story, different millennia.

*Jarhead*<sup>2</sup> deals with the same war, but focuses on the futility the soldiers feel because it is a combat almost entirely fought from the air. The whole film is suffused with a sense of surreal absurdity – the soldiers are in a featureless desert, with nobody to fight and little sense of why they are there. They come to suffer from a kind of existential crisis whereby they are desperate to kill someone simply to feel their lives have a purpose. *Jarhead* demonstrates the old maxim that war is boredom punctuated by moments of absolute terror, but it also says something important that it is easy to forget – a man joins the army because he wants to experience combat.

This is brilliantly evoked in Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker*<sup>3</sup>, which focuses on a bomb-disposal expert in Baghdad during the second Iraq War. He is a man who knows that each day may be his last and has learned to master his fear. An incredibly tense film, it makes you understand how a soldier can become addicted to the adrenalin that only war can offer, and be unable to return to the safety of civilian life.

I often ask myself if my grandfather, who I knew as a humorous old man who spent his days salmon fishing in Scotland, would recognise the soldiers in these films. I suspect he would. But I think he'd say the wars are not good ones.

Rupert Morgan (2011)

1. David O. Russell (1999)

2. Sam Mendes (2005)

3. Kathryn Bigelow (2008)