

A War (2015)

Rated R. Running time: 1 hour 55 min.

Our content ratings: Violence 1; Language 2; Sex/Nudity 3.

Our star rating (1-5): 5

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;

*and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and
to love kindness,*

and to walk humbly with your God?.

Micah 6:8

This Oscar contender from Denmark serves as a good reminder that it is not just American families that are disrupted by the war in Afghanistan. Denmark and other European nations also contribute soldiers to help keep the peace there. However Commander Klaus Michael Petersen and his men are finding this an almost impossible task, given the fact that when they return to their fortified camps at night, the Taliban slip into the villages to terrify the natives.

Even during the daytime patrolling the area is dangerous, as we see when one soldier steps on an IED and has his legs blown off. He dies before the medevac helicopter can arrive. Claus tells his dispirited men, who are questioning the patrols as "useless," that it is important to show the villagers that they are present and care for them. He then says he will go with them the next day.

Back home in Denmark we see that Maria (Tuva Novotny), Claus's wife, also faces difficulties, all three of their children disturbed by the long absence of their father. Middle child Julius (Adam Chessa) is especially a hand full, getting into

fights at school and refusing to obey his mother at times. The daily brief phone conversations with husband/father are no substitute for his presence.

We see the soldiers trying to help the civilians, such as giving medical care to the daughter of a villager whose arm has been terribly burned. At another moment several of the soldiers lie hidden, waiting for the terrorist who had planted a remote control IED on the road to come back to it. Getting him proves complicated when he does arrive on his motorbike because he picks up a boy playing nearby. The sniper must wait in the hope that he will put the child down before he is out of range.

Claus must make some life and death decisions, which can have unintended consequences. The first is to say "No" to the family whose daughter they had helped. The father and his family come to the camp to tell Claus that the Taliban have threatened to kill them because he had sought the help of the Danes. Claus, through his interpreter, says that they cannot allow civilians to stay in the camp, but that he will come to the village to protect them the next day. The man pleads, refusing to leave, so that the soldiers have almost to carry the family out. The next day when Claus leads his men into the village, they find the whole family shot dead. The murdered girl's protruding foot from beneath the blanket especially catches the Commander's attention.

Almost as soon as they come out of the house the soldiers find themselves under attack by the Taliban. The hand-held camera adds to the feeling that the viewer is immersed in the action as the men take cover and frantically peek their heads up to discover the sources of the shots—and soon the grenades. At first no one can tell. Then a soldier is shot in the neck. Claus immediately calls for medical help, but the area is too dangerous for it to land. Then, when he learns that the fire is coming from one of the village compounds, he calls for an air strike. Does he have a PID (Positive Identification) for

what is normally a civilian structure, the HQ operator demands? He does not really know, but with the life of his soldier slipping away, Claus says that he does have PID. The building is quickly destroyed from the air, and the wounded soldier is whisked away by helicopter. The scene in which the man, recovering in a hospital, sends his thanks via a humorous Internet video is a very moving one of soldierly camaraderie.

Soon, however, officials visit the camp informing Claus that 11 civilians were killed in the air strike. He is to leave immediately for the return to Denmark to stand trial for killing the civilians. His family, initially overjoyed at his return, now has to face the fact that he might be taken from them for an even longer period if he is convicted. The last anxiety-ridden third of the film is set in a courtroom where Maria and a number of the men who served under Claus have to watch as the prosecutor makes a compelling case that this brave and compassionate soldier is guilty of war crimes.

Written and directed by Tobias Lindholm, who scripted one of my favorite films of 2012, *The Hunt*, raises far more moral issues than such war films as *The Sniper*. We see how difficult, even with the best of intentions, it is to “to do justice” amidst the fog of war. It is good that the filmmaker reveals the concern that the rules of engagement for protecting civilians is being observed by a Western nation. Klaus also is shown caring about them—indeed earlier he tells his men that their mission is not to kill but to protect the villagers. He also is a man of conscience, wanting to tell the truth about what happened in the village, even though it could prove costly for him. This compelling morality play was deservedly up for an Oscar. It did not win the golden statue, but it is pure gold as cinema, and will certainly win your heart.

This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the March 2015 issue of VP.