



# THE KILL TEAM



GRADES 10-12  
CLASSROOM GUIDE

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## TEACHING THE FILM:

**The Kill Team** is a feature documentary about a group of US Soldiers in Afghanistan who lost their moral bearings and murdered innocent civilians. A class screening of the film may provide a jumping off point to foster serious class discussion about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and modern military culture. It will also prompt students to examine their own moral grounding in the context of bullying and peer pressure. Taught in conjunction with this guide, **The Kill Team** will challenge students to think critically about psychology and warfare and facilitate further research into related topics such as moral injury, dehumanization and the human impact of the ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq.

All SFFS Youth Education materials are developed in alignment with California educational standards for media literacy. SFFS Youth Education welcomes feedback and questions on all printed study materials.

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## USING THIS GUIDE

flkdsajfklisdajfkljsadfkjdsak This study guide is intended to flexibly support educators in preparing for and following up on a class screening of **The Kill Team**. Support materials are intended to facilitate

group discussion, individual and collaborative creative exercise, subject-based learning and access to resources for further investigation of material. Educators are encouraged to adapt and abridge the content as necessary to meet their unique learning objectives and circumstances.

## ABOUT THE FILM

**The Kill Team** is a shocking and deeply personal look at the human capacity for atrocity. The film follows private Adam Winfield as he and his family prepare for his military court hearing; Winfield is accused of murder for his role in the killings of innocent Afghan civilians, yet evidence suggests that he tried to avoid and even report the activities of his platoon. Barely 18 years old, Winfield was drawn into the killing through peer pressure, bullying and fear for his own safety. In penetrating interviews with Adam and several convicted members of the platoon, Krauss reconstructs the psychological and moral breakdown that allowed a group of US soldiers to come unhinged. High on propaganda and frustrated by the mundane reality of the soldier's life on the ground, regular people committed unthinkable acts. As they explain the cool logic of the killings and the rush of adrenaline that they sought, it becomes hauntingly clear that this is less a story of a few individuals gone rogue than a cautionary tale of dysfunction in military culture and the incalculable side effects of a long and ambiguous war.



Dan Krauss (USA, 2013)  
79 minutes, Color, English  
Grades 10-12



### Recommended Subject Areas:

Ethics/Religion  
History  
Journalism  
Middle Eastern Studies  
Political Science  
Social Science  
Social Studies

### Key concepts / buzzwords:

Afghanistan	Morality
Army Culture	Peer Pressure
Bullying	War
Dehumanization	War Crimes
Documentary	Whistle-Blowing
Empathy	Violence
Group Mentality	
Masculinity	
Moral Injury	

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### PRE-VIEWING TOPICS AND DISCUSSION:

**The Kill Team** is a difficult film to watch, and students should be prepared before viewing. In addition to its distressing subject matter, the film has some coarse language and disturbing images of maimed bodies.

Before viewing, the class should discuss the history and goals of the US invasion of Afghanistan.

- Engage the students in a journaling exercise to explore their own understandings of the US military and what life is like for US soldiers on the ground in Afghanistan.
- They can later revisit these writings and compare them with what they saw and heard in the film.

Give students this news [article](#) to read that provides a brief yet round summary of the case of the “kill team” and the issues at stake in the film.

- Because the subject matter is so challenging, it may be best to offer students the option to opt out of the film once they have read the article and understand the subject matter. If they are unprepared or sensitive to violence, the film may be frightening.
- Many students, however, will be accustomed to watching stylized violence in their habitual media consumption, and **The Kill Team** can provide a poignant entry to a discussion about media violence and its real life counterpart.

### POST VIEWING DISCUSSION:

#### Characters and Story

- 1) Describe Adam Winfield. What kind of a person is he?
  - Why did he want to join the army in the first place?
  - Can you relate to Adam?
  - What is your reaction to his story?
- 2) Describe Jeremy Morlock and Andrew Holmes. Why did they want to join the army?
  - Where do you think they got their ideas about war before they arrived in Afghanistan?
  - What was daily life like for their platoon?
  - Explain the difference between their expectations and the reality that they experienced on the ground.

How do you think the disconnect between their expectations, their training and the reality on the ground made them feel about their job as soldiers?

- 3) Have you ever been in a situation where the people you're with are doing something that you know to be wrong?
  - What do you think of Adam's statement on chat: “Should I do the right thing and put myself in danger, or just shut up and deal with it?”
  - How did you feel observing Adam's legal process? Do you think that his trial and sentencing were fair?

WHAT EFFECT DO YOU  
 THINK THE KILLING OF  
 INNOCENT CIVILIANS  
 HAS HAD ON THE  
 OVERALL GOALS OF  
 THE US INTERVENTION  
 IN AFGHANISTAN?

- 4) Describe Jeremy Stoner. What is he like as a person?
- Why did he report Gibbs and Morlock?
  - In his interviews, how does Stoner describe the situation in Afghanistan?
  - What is his view of infantry culture?
  - How do Stoner's and the other soldiers' descriptions of life in the military compare to your own ideas about what a soldier's life might be like? Cite examples.

- 5) In some interviews, the guys on **The Kill Team** seem very young; other times, they seem older.
- Who strikes you as mature, and who seems immature?
  - Keeping in mind that many of these soldiers joined the army when they were younger than 20 years old, what effect do you think their experiences had in shaping their sense of self?
  - What struggles do you imagine they will face as they try to process their experiences and move on with their lives?

### Context

- 1) What is the purpose of the war in Afghanistan, as described in mainstream US media?
- What effect do you think the war has on Afghan civilians?

## HOW DO YOU THINK AFGHAN VILLAGERS SEE THE US SOLDIERS?

- How do you think Afghan villagers see the US soldiers?
  - What is the relationship between the soldiers and the villagers?
  - What effect do you think the killing of innocent civilians has had on the overall goals of the US intervention in Afghanistan?
- 2) How did the culture of the army and the structure of the platoon work against Adam's desire to speak out against what he saw?
- What was Adam's father's experience in trying to tell someone about what was going on?
  - Based on what you saw in the film, what is your impression of the military justice system?
- 3) Several times in the film, the soldiers describe the dehumanization of the Afghan people. They say: "He didn't register as a person" and "They're all savages." When they made their kills, the soldiers returned to the compound as "made men," and "they were getting all the applause." In their photos and videos, they are smiling and laughing among the bodies.
- Have you seen other examples of this kind of dehumanization in war? Why do you think it happens?
  - When people from Afghanistan and other countries see this footage, what do you think is their impression of American soldiers? Of American values?
- 4) Describe the myth of the military. What is an honorable soldier and an honorable war?
- How does Adam Winfield's experience put those values into a different light?
    - What does Jeremy Stoner think about the idea of honor in today's military?
    - As a soldier, who are you supposed to kill and why?

## Style and Message/ Reading the Film for Media Literacy

1) The film incorporates home video footage from Adam Winfield's family and from his unit on the ground in Afghanistan.

- Does that footage look different from the imagery that was created specifically for the film?
- What does it add to the story?
- Why do you think the filmmaker chose to bring that footage into the story?

2) The interviews are interwoven with scenes of soldiers in uniform and marching in formation. They raise the flag and salute. Occasionally the camera lingers on a military monument.

- What are you thinking about when you see these images?
- What connotations or contradictions are they meant to invoke?
- Why do you think the filmmaker chose to include these symbols?

3) The film tells an extraordinary story. Do you think it has a deeper message?

- What are your thoughts and feelings after watching **The Kill Team**?
- What do you think the filmmaker wants us to take away from this film?

## POST VIEWING ACTIVITIES:

1) Write a review of **The Kill Team** for an audience of your peers. Who do you think should watch this film, and why? What makes the film important? What techniques does the filmmaker use to engage the audience in this complicated story? Use specific examples.

2) The film shows the experience of the American soldiers in Afghanistan, but, like the soldiers, the film's audience gets a very limited view of Afghan life and culture. Explore the Afghan Culture page on Facebook <http://www.facebook.com/AfghanCulture>. Write a short essay or journal entry on your impressions. What images do you see? What stands out to you?

3) Using the [New York Times interactive timeline](#), as well as additional resources in your school library, write a short report on the history of US involvement in Afghanistan. Why did the war begin and what outcomes does it hope to achieve?

4) Using resources online and in your community, explore the institutions that exist to help veterans transition from military to civilian life. What challenges do soldiers face coming home from foreign wars? What strategies do these institutions use to help soldiers process their experiences and heal from trauma? How does this aspect of the military experience factor into popular ideas about modern warfare? Write a short report on your findings.

Links to begin research:

- Swords to Plowshares <http://www.swords-to-plowshares.org/>
- Combat Paper <http://www.combatpaper.org/about.html>
- Musician Corps <http://www.musiciancorps.org/bringing-music-therapy-bay-area-veterans>

### California Media Literacy Standards Addressed In This Lesson:

- Grades 9 & 10: Standard 1.14 Identify the aesthetic effects of a media presentation and evaluate the techniques used to create them (e.g., compare Shakespeare's *Henry V* with Kenneth Branagh's 1990 film version).
- Grades 11 & 12: Standard 1.14 Analyze the techniques used in media messages for a particular audience and evaluate their effectiveness (e.g., Orson Welles' radio broadcast "War of the Worlds").
- Grades 9 & 10: Standard 1.2 Compare and contrast the ways in which media genres (e.g., televised news, news magazines, documentaries, online information) cover the same event.
- Grades 11 & 12: Standard 1.1 Recognize strategies used by the media to inform, persuade, entertain, and transmit culture (e.g., advertisements; perpetuation of stereotypes; use of visual representations, special effects, language); Standard 1.2 Analyze the impact of the media on the democratic process (e.g., exerting influence on elections, creating images of leaders, shaping attitudes) at the local, state, and national levels; Standard 1.3 Interpret and evaluate the various ways in which events are presented and information is communicated by visual image makers (e.g., graphic artists, documentary filmmakers, illustrators, news photographers).

### Common Core Standards in this Lesson:

- [Reading informational texts 9-10](#)
- [Reading Informational Texts 11-12](#)
- [History and Social Studies 9-10](#)
- [History and Social Studies 11-12](#)

For more information about media literacy standards in your state, visit:

- MediaLiteracy.com: resources for advancing media education, United States Standards for media literacy education.  
<http://www.medialiteracy.com/standards.htm>
- Frank W Baker's guide to State Standards Which Include Elements of Media Literacy.  
[http://frankwbaker.com/state\\_lit.htm](http://frankwbaker.com/state_lit.htm)

## MEDIA LITERACY RESOURCES

### SCREENING WITH MEANING

We live in a world where technology mediates a large portion of human interaction and the exchange of information. Every projected image, every word published on a page or a website, and every sound from a speaker reaches its audience through the medium, through the language of the device. The ability to parse the vast array of media messages is an essential skill for young people, particularly in a mainstream commercial culture that targets youth as a vulnerable, impressionable segment of the American marketplace. Most students already have a keen understanding of the languages different media use and the techniques they employ to inspire particular emotions or reactions, but they often lack the skill or awareness to fully deconstruct the messages they continuously receive.

Analysis of a media message—or any piece of mass media content—can best be accomplished by first identifying its principal characteristics:

- (1) Medium: the physical means by which it is contained and/or delivered
- (2) Author: the person(s) responsible for its creation and dissemination
- (3) Content: the information, emotions, values or ideas it conveys
- (4) Audience: the target audience to whom it is delivered
- (5) Purpose: the objectives of its authors and the effects of its dissemination.

Students who can readily identify these five core characteristics will be equipped to understand the incentives at work behind media messages, as well as their potential consequences. Media literacy education empowers students to become responsible consumers, active citizens and critical thinkers.

### CORE CONCEPTS OF MEDIA ANALYSIS

<b>MEDIUM</b>	<p><b>All Media Is Constructed.</b> How is the message delivered and in what format? What technologies are used to present the message? What visual and auditory elements are used? What expectations do you bring to the content, given its medium and format?</p>
<b>AUTHOR</b>	<p><b>All Media Is Constructed by Someone.</b> Who is delivering the message? Who originally constructed the message? What expectations do you have of the content, given its author(s)?</p>
<b>CONTENT</b>	<p><b>Media Is A Language For Information.</b> What is the subject of the media message? What information, values, emotions or ideas are conveyed by the media content? What tools does the author employ to engage the viewer and evoke a response? To what extent did the content meet your expectations, given the format/author?</p>
<b>AUDIENCE</b>	<p><b>All Media Messages Reach an Audience.</b> Who receives the message? For whom is the message intended? What is the public reaction to the media content and/or its message? What is your reaction to the media content and/or its message? How might others perceive this message differently? Why?</p>
<b>PURPOSE</b>	<p><b>All Media Messages Are Constructed for a Reason.</b> Why was the message constructed? Who benefits from dissemination of the message? How? To what extent does the message achieve its purpose? What effect does the message have on the audience it reaches, if any?</p>

## THE NON-FICTION FILM WHAT IS A DOCUMENTARY?

A documentary is a film whose goal is to capture truth, fact or reality as seen through the lens of the camera. But there are many kinds of documentaries, and not everyone's idea of truth is the same. The Scottish filmmaker John Grierson coined the term "documentary" in 1926 to describe American filmmaker Robert Flaherty's romanticized culture studies, but nonfiction filmmaking dates back to the earliest motion picture reels.

The definition of documentary expanded as filmmakers experimented with technology and the goals of nonfiction. Avant-garde documentarians, like Dziga Vertov in the 1920s, believed that the mechanical eye of the camera gave a truer image of reality than the human eye and pointed his lens at newly industrialized cities. Leni Reifenstahl's propaganda films from Nazi Germany used the nonfiction form to convey a political message, a slanted truth. The international cinema vérité or observational movements of the 1960s attempted to remove authorship from the documentary. The observational filmmaker hovered like a "fly on the wall" watching the world without commentary. Modern documentaries often seek to raise awareness about a social, environmental or political issue, guiding their audiences toward civic participation and activism.

While watching a documentary, it is important to remember the core concepts of media analysis: who made the film, for what audience and why? The nonfiction format can be deceptively subjective, as all filmmaking involves an inherent selection process: in the images that are shot, the music and narration that accompanies them and, most significantly, the way in which they are all edited together. Media literacy means always analyzing a documentary for its message and authorial intent.

## A BRIEF TIMELINE OF THE DOCUMENTARY

**1895** The Lumiere brothers developed the first motion picture film reels, capturing brief, unedited clips of life around them called "actualities" (e.g., *Train Arriving at the Station*)

**1900-1920** Travelogue or "Scenic" films became popular, showcasing exoticised images from around the globe.

**1926** John Grierson coined the term "documentary" to describe Robert Flaherty's romantic nonfiction film, *Moana*.

**1929** Dziga Vertov, with the Soviet Kino-Pravda movement, released the experimental nonfiction film, *Man With a Movie Camera*.

**1935** Leni Reifenstahl released *Triumph of the Will*, the infamous propaganda film that chronicled the 1934 Nazi Party Congress.

**1939** John Grierson collaborated with the Canadian government to form the National Film Board of Canada, with the initial goal of creating Allied propaganda in support of the war.

**1960s** The cinema vérité movement began in Europe, shortly followed by "direct cinema" in the U.S. Portable cameras and sync sound allowed filmmakers to capture intimate footage with minimal intervention.

**1968** The Argentine film, *La Hora de los Hornos (The Hour of the Furnaces)* opened the door to the activist cinema of the 1970s, which used film as a tool to counter capitalist and neo-colonial politics in Latin America.

**1988** The US Congress mandated that the US government support the creation of independent non-commercial media, and the Independent Television Service (ITVS) was founded.

**2000s** The widespread use of digital cameras and editing software made the documentary medium vastly more affordable to independent and amateur filmmakers. Video sharing sites such as YouTube and Vimeo allowed amateur filmmakers to broadcast their work.

**PRESENT DAY** The term "documentary" has come to encompass a wide range of nonfiction cinema. Contemporary filmmakers continue to push the boundaries of truth in film and to explore new avenues and applications for the medium.

## THE MAKING OF A DOCUMENTARY

### Idea, Issue, Story.

Even though they are nonfiction films, most modern documentaries structure their content around a traditional story arc, with a beginning, middle and end, as well as characters, and a conclusion, theme or thesis to impart to the audience. Documentary filmmakers begin their projects with an idea or an issue that they wish to explore more deeply. Through research and planning, they develop a comprehensive plan before they begin shooting.

### The Production Process.

To capture candid moments on film, modern documentary makers often leave the camera running, collecting far more footage than the final film requires. They may do this during interviews or in observational-style encounters with their subjects. To get increased access and an observational aesthetic, documentary makers often use handheld cameras and natural light, rather than staging a more formal filming environment.

### Post-Production and the Documentary.

Because a documentary film relies upon candid footage, a large part of the film's construction occurs in the editing room, where you work with what you've captured. A documentary editor will sift through long interviews just to find a few phrases that will summarize the film's message. To emphasize important points and build the story, some documentaries use a voiceover, an interview or a scripted narrative that brings candid footage together into a coherent statement. An original score can work alongside the voiceover to unify the footage and shape the mood of the film. Audiences

often underestimate the power of sound to generate an emotional response. Many documentaries also use charts, graphs and historical footage to add context and emphasize key points.

### Distribution.

Once a film is completed, the filmmaker needs to help it find its audience. Many documentaries are made independently on small budgets, but what's the point of all your work if no one hears your message? Some documentaries will be released in theaters around the country or get programmed on public or cable TV channels, but most documentary filmmakers will start by submitting their work to film festivals, in hopes of attracting distributors for the theater and television markets. Filmmakers may also make their films available online and use social media to reach their target audience.



## SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES

BBC News article about 'Kill Team' leader Calvin Gibbs' conviction. This is a good article to read before watching the film to introduce the class to the subject.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-15687522>

Rolling Stone Magazine article: **The Kill Team**: How U.S. Soldiers in Afghanistan Murdered Innocent Civilians

<http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/the-kill-team-20110327>

New York Times Timeline: Major Events in the Afghanistan War

<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2011/06/22/world/asia/afghanistan-war-timeline.html>

Facebook page on Afghan Culture: <http://www.facebook.com/AfghanCulture>

Wikileaks release of secret US Military reports on the war in Afghanistan

<http://wikileaks.org/afg/>

The New Yorker article about the "Kill Team" photographs and a query about why we photograph atrocities.

[http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2011/03/the-kill-team-photographs.html#slide\\_ss\\_0=1](http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2011/03/the-kill-team-photographs.html#slide_ss_0=1)

The New Yorker article about torture at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. This is applicable not only because of linkage between the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also because it is another case in which the army persecuted individual soldiers for heinous crimes that may have been more deeply rooted in the larger military culture and chain of command.

[http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/05/10/040510fa\\_fact?currentPage=1](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/05/10/040510fa_fact?currentPage=1)

## ARTICLES AND REVIEWS



### ABOUT THE DIRECTOR

Dan Krauss, Producer/Director

Dan Krauss' first film, *The Death of Kevin Carter*, was nominated for an Academy Award and two Emmy Awards and won prizes from the Tribeca Film Festival, the International Documentary Association and The San Francisco International Film Festival. Working as a director of photography, Krauss has photographed numerous feature documentaries, including: *Inequality for All* (Sundance Film Festival, 2013 – Grand Jury Prize); *Broadway Idiot* (SXSW, 2013); *We Are Legion* (SXSW 2012); *The Most Dangerous Man in America* (Academy Award nomination, 2010); and *Life 2.0* (Sundance Film Festival, 2010). In 2012, Krauss received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and a fellowship from the Sundance Documentary Institute. Krauss earned his Master's Degree from UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism, where he is a lecturer in film and television production.

from <http://www.itvs.org/films/kill-team/filmmaker>

## OVERVIEW. THE KILL TEAM

from <http://www.itvs.org/films/kill-team>

In early 2010, U.S. soldiers in southern Afghanistan — bored, frightened, angry, and primed to explode — intentionally killed civilians, planting weapons on their victims to stage the incidents as “good shoots.” One of the group, the platoon sergeant, collected fingers as trophies. They called themselves “**The Kill Team.**”

Specialist Adam Winfield alerted the military to the killings through his father, but the army failed to act. Soon, Adam's fellow soldiers grew suspicious that he might talk, and they threatened to silence him — permanently.

On May 2, 2010, **The Kill Team** decided to carry out another murder, this time in Adam's presence. In an

instant, Adam was faced with a decision: take a stand and risk his life, or play along and convince his comrades he is no longer a liability. Adam chose the latter.

Weeks later, Adam was flown back to Fort Lewis in Washington State and charged with first degree murder. With extraordinary access to behind-closed-doors proceedings, the film follows Adam's story in two time frames: in the past, as the events in Afghanistan are reconstructed from firsthand accounts of the soldiers most directly involved, and in the present day, as Adam and his family fight for his freedom. The government has condemned Adam as a soldier who chose to ignore his conscience. *United States v. Winfield*, however, draws attention to a more difficult truth: in war, the freedom to follow one's conscience is sometimes a luxury.