***Thousand-Yard Stare***

**Director’s Statement**

**Judd Ne’eman**

During my regular army service (1954–1957) I served in the *Nahal Mutznakh* (the Airborne *Nahal* battalion of the Paratroopers Brigade). Following my discharge, I volunteered for a reserve infantry officer course (1958), from which I graduated with distinction, later serving as a platoon commander in the Airborne *Nahal* battalion in the reserves. I was assigned to the same reserve paratrooper battalion as a combat physician and battalion aid station commander after receiving my medical degree from the Hebrew University in 1966. This battalion fought in the Six Day War of 1967, subsequent Jordan Valley actions, the War of Attrition (1968–1970), and the 1973 Yom Kippur War. My memories and experiences of the battlefield have preoccupied me ever since. As a result, for years, I have been addicted to the obsessive consumption of movies and television series about war, ultimately leading me to write about the army and create my own war films.

My personal experiences provided fertile material for my work, starting with the Battle of umm-Qatef, during the Six Day War of 1967, for which I was awarded the **Medal of Distinguished Service** for courage.

**The Battle of Umm-Qatef** took place in the central section of the Israel-Egypt border, on the Egyptian Army’s antitank artillery base. The Egyptians had stationed large numbers of antitank guns at the base to obstruct Arik Sharon’s forces from attacking and capturing central Sinai. A paratrooper force, including the battalion aid station I commanded, plus an additional doctor and several medics, were dropped by helicopter across the international border into the central section of the Israel-Egypt frontier, in the sand dunes some 10 kilometers north of the Egyptian base. The paratroopers moved southward toward the base, capturing it in a surprise nighttime attack. After the paratroopers had taken the base, two Egyptian Army trucks appeared on the dirt road, and advanced toward the top of the compound. Fearing that these were Egyptian reinforcements, the battalion commander ordered the bazooka operators to fire at the trucks. The trucks, loaded with ammunition, started exploding, causing heavy paratrooper casualties. Our medical teams, still exposed to the exploding truck and under fire themselves, began performing operations in open fields, providing life-saving first aid to the wounded. **It was for these actions that I was awarded the Medal of Distinguished Service.**

Later, in the Six Day War, my paratrooper battalion was involved in the capture of the Golan Heights. There, I was involved in providing first aid to wounded paratroopers during the capture of Jalabina and Al-Dirbashiyya. During the Yom Kippur War of 1973, as the battle aid station commander in the paratrooper battalion, I took part in offensives in the battle against the Syrian Arab Army in the Golan Heights. During the fighting, we treated wounded Israeli paratroopers as well as wounded Syrian soldiers. Later, the paratrooper battalion served as a garrison force to hold the Syrian enclave that Israel had captured in the Golan Heights. The battalion spent an especially cold winter there, and several soldiers, lacking appropriate clothing to protect them against snowstorms on Mount Hermon, froze to death. The battalion remained garrisoned in occupied Syrian territory for an extended six-month period until other reservists relieved them. Throughout this time, the battalion aid station team served as a battalion clinic.

After the Yom Kippur War (1973), I made the film *Paratroopers* (*Masa Alunkot*) (1976–1977), which reflected my deep connection with army life and the battlefield experience. The film (starring some of Israel’s leading actors today, Gidi Gov, Moni Moshonov, Dov Glickman, Shlomo Bar-Aba, Miki Warshaviak, and Dalik Wollinitz in their debut cinematic roles), is set in a paratrooper company’s bootcamp. It depicts the aspirations of the young recruits to fight on the battlefield, along with the doubts and fears of those actually unsuited to combat service, yet clinging to an ideal of being a paratrooper. All of them experience a yearning to venture onto the battlefield, a place of danger and death, where soldiers kill and are killed, and to escape unscathed.

Memories of the battlefield haunt everyone who has experienced it, and never relinquishing their grip. It is impossible to forget the screams of pain or the expressions on the faces of the wounded as they bleed out and die in the hands of the paramedics and doctors during battle. Usually, death comes as a result of blood loss and the inability to deliver fresh blood supplies to the wounded. The “slaughterhouse” of the combat aid station, the young men with severed limbs, their torn bodies writhing in pain, the gasps of relief after they are given morphine injections, the tattered body parts strewn around, the blood-soaked bandages, the helicopters loaded with stretchers of the dead and wounded, the rows of the fallen lying side by side—all these memories haunt me, and everyone who was there, to this very day. And it is hardly surprising that these horrors of war are seared into our consciousness and allow us no peace.

There were shellshocked soldiers who had become totally disoriented; soldiers who could no longer understand what was happening, who had stopped speaking, who stared around blankly—and we treated them too. Among them were soldiers, who, from stress and fear, had frozen every emotion that they had inside. They could no longer be treated. Combat-shocked, emotions frozen, they had become war machines, all with the same **thousand-yard stare**. Never returning your gaze, they rushed into every dangerous mission and volunteered with a clear mind for every operation on the killing fields. They launched frenzied attacks on enemy combatants and fought to the death.

Combat medical aid station personnel and paratrooper paramedics advance and attack alongside fighting forces. They treat the wounded under fire during battle. Combat medical personnel do not participate in the fighting, yet they are exposed to live fire, falling mortars, flying grenades. They focus entirely on treating the wounded—under fire. They try to provide the right treatment for a wounded soldier writhing in pain and groaning with fear as he sees death staring him in the face. I even remember checking my submachine gun barrel (an Uzi) after the ceasefire in the Yom Kippur War—the barrel was rusty. Combat medical personnel experience the horrors of the battlefield intensely, but they do not fight –and yet even so they come under direct attack. What is more, combat aid station personnel are responsible for retrieving the bodies of the fallen, determining their deaths, and detaching half of the dog tags from their necks to verify their identity. Inside the “slaughterhouse,” six days a week, during the War of Attrition and the Yom Kippur War, an obsession with war and watching war movies took hold and grew within me.

My conversations with friends who fought in the same battles, and with other soldiers who fought in wars, taught me that each of us carries an imprint of our memories of the battlefield that is branded more deeply into our consciousness than any other memory, and that imprint is always both present and not-present, day and night. Flashbacks to the battlefield appear and reappear throughout our lives, until we draw our last breaths. Healing from this emotional wound is perhaps possible only by returning to the battlefield through writing stories and making films, by recreating the hell of war and sharing its viewing with those who were present at those moments—and with those who did not see it for themselves.

A friend who fought in the Yom Kippur War once urged me, “Go make your movie about Kippur [the Yom Kippur War] and put an end to your obsession.” Inspired by his words, I set out to write a feature script about the battles for the Suez Canal fortifications along the Bar Lev Line on the southern front of the Yom Kippur War. Screenwriters Dan Ronen, Moran Ovadia, and I created a fictional story drawing on the events and experiences of soldiers who fought in those battles. The story opens with the battle of the Bar Lev Line and its abandonment, and then shows the protagonists wandering in the desert in search of a missing soldier. The film portrays the soldiers on the battlefield, with all its fear and anxiety, its injuries and acts of heroism, and the bitter partings at the moment of death. In searching for a cinematic model for our screenplay, we drew inspiration from two classic films about World War II: Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan* and Terrence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line*. While the Spielberg film has a typical Hollywood structure, Malick paints a group portrait of the soldiers, combining a non-linear storyline with flashes of fantasy from the protagonists. We chose to situate the storyline of ***Thousand-Yard Stare*** in an intermediate zone between these two models, combining a tight, linear structure with flashes of the protagonist’s imagination, as he gradually develops battle trauma and PTSD, becoming drained of all emotion.

Here in our land of tears, a country glutted with battles and war, where the fighting has gone on for decades, ***Thousand-Yard Stare*** might not be able to fully heal the wound. But viewing this film with soldiers and veterans will certainly be a form of group therapy. We return to the virtual battlefield together…for what? For me, the ever-growing sense one gets on the battlefield of the insignificance of the living body was enough to make a film that, for a fleeting moment at least, creates the illusion that this lost reality can be recreated and resurrected on screen; to bring back the fallen, to give the dead a face and a voice that have been lost forever; to let them be seen one more time.

The friend who spoke to me about my addiction to watching war movies, and who encouraged me to make a film, asked me with a smile, “So, how much will your level of war movie consumption decrease, do you think?” and the answer is that, even if that does not change, at least my ***Thousand-Yard Stare***, my detached and emotionless expression, will be diminished a little—if not forever, then at least during the screening of the film to an audience of those who were not there.