David Cotterrell: CNN : Another Side of War

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Nic Robertson

A short interview conducted by Nic Robertson, within the Wellcome exhibition,War and Medicine, for the CNN : International Correspondents feature programme.

Transcript follows:

SWEENEY: Welcome back. They say a picture is worth 1,000 words, but as one artist discovered, sound can challenge perceptions. Last year, David Cotterrell went to Afghanistan to observe military medical staff in action. What he came back with is a disturbing account of the cost of war. Cotterrell's work is the focus of the new exhibition in London. Our senior international correspondent Nic Robertson recently met the artist.

NIC ROBERTSON, CNN CORRESPONDENT: What are we looking at here?

DAVID COTTERRELL, ARTIST: We're inside a Hercules. It's a C130, which is being fitted or is being equipped to take medical evacuations.

ROBERTSON: We feel like we're inside the C130. What were you trying to achieve?

COTTERRELL: I think we're used to seeing photographs. And some - in some form. We're used to seeing moving images. And we have an acceptance of how to deal with that and also how to separate ourselves from it.

This installation is an attempt to try and through the peripheral vision, through the sound, to ask you maybe to forget your conventional distance from an image and consider maybe that this could be part of your environment as well.

ROBERTSON: And do you think that an exhibit like this will challenge those perceptions of other people successfully?

COTTERRELL: It's - it adds a view which you wouldn't normally see, which may contradict or complement the traditional views that we see of the conflict, of the drama and the - in a way the excitement or the bravado of war.

ROBERTSON: What are some of the traumas that you saw because you spent time in the operating room where casualties were coming in from the battlefield. What did you see there?

COTTERRELL: You - I suppose what hits you first is the frequency of injury that in 20 minutes of my first briefing, I was expecting a kind of gentle lead in for some reason into the experience, but within 20 minutes, the first helicopters were arriving with wounded. You see people coming in with mine strikes, with injuries from shrapnel, from rifle wounds, grenades, rocket propelled grenades. What I saw was there are soldiers arriving covered in dust and filth. They have been brought straight from a battle which is still going on. I saw people coming in with chest wounds and you begin to recognize the ash man chest seals. Kind of a strange adhesive device which has a fluttering kind of appendage to it, which allows the air to escape from the chest cavity in a collapsed lung.

You begin to recognize the amount of blood that's been lost because fill dressing is containing up to a liter of water, of blood. And you begin to understand how doctors are able to view incredibly quickly the level of intensity of the wounds. Patients arrive calm. They have sedated themselves by administering morphine. They may have spent several hours in the battlefield before they've been brought back. Or they may have been brought back seconds from the fire fight.

They don't come in screaming. They come in calm and talking and negotiating with the doctors about what they feel that they allow - they want the doctors to do for them. And.

ROBERTSON: What sort of things did you hear?

COTTERRELL: I heard soldiers in a way kind of deciding - trying to insist that they wouldn't give permission for amputations or to.

ROBERTSON: To have their leg cut off, for example.

COTTERRELL: Yes. And so, in a way, kind of trying to get clarity from the doctor to explain to them what - how serious their injury may be. I suppose the shock was that in contemporary warfare, the way in which warfare's been portrayed, maybe since the Gulf War 1, we begin to think of war as being separate from individual human bodies. And we think of it more in terms of technology.

I mean, the great shock was seeing the effect of hard objects on soft bodies.

ROBERTSON: It sounds as if the whole experience has actually had an incredibly profound effect on you as well?

COTTERRELL: Well I came back with this feeling that war, like every other human experience, is vastly complex. It rides on the moral judgments of individuals. It relies on the complexity of context, which is probably impossible to capture in a moment, even as an eye witness. And I felt it more appropriate for me to somehow describe the confusion, rather than attempting to find a summary or a simple response.

So I came back feeling less clear about my comments about saying whether war is justifiable or not in this area, even though I'd seen more of it than the rest of my life. I came back feeling, in a way, it was appropriate to try and describe the confusion as well as the clarity.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

SWEENEY: Artist and photographer David Cotterrell speaking there to Nic Robertson.