

Interview, Audio: Miles Teller on 'Thank You for Your Service'

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CHICAGO – When Johnny comes marching home again, as the old song goes, we'll give him a hearty welcome then. Most Americans truncate that to the phrase, "Thank You for Your Service," which is the title of a new film featuring Miles Teller, who portrays Iraq War veteran Adam Schumann, and is the directorial debut of Jason Hall.

The film is about the lingering effects of being on a battlefield, and the lack of care given to the soldiers who have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Adam Schumann (Teller) comes home from the Iraq War to his wife and kids, along with a couple other buddies from his unit, Will and Solo (Joe Cole and Beulah Koale). As they try to assimilate back to normalcy, Will takes his own life. This triggers buried war traumas in Adam and Solo, and they lash out in different ways against the battle fatigue and families. The film is a stark reminder that the sacrifices of warriors don't end when the war is over.



Miles Teller in 'Thank You for Your Service'

Photo credit: Universal Pictures

Miles Teller adds another essential and realistic portrayal to his long film resume. He was born in Pennsylvania, and he graduated from the Tisch School of Arts at NYU. Teller made his feature debut opposite Nicole Kidman in "Rabbit Hole" (2010), and began a string of performances that spotlighted his intensity and screen presence. He's appeared in the remake of "Footloose" (2011), "The Spectacular Now" (2013) and a breakout role in "Whiplash" (2014), as a jazz drummer bedeviled by an instructor portrayed by J.K. Simmons. He's also found commercial success in the "Divergent" series, "The Fantastic Four" (2015) and "War Dogs" (2016).

HollywoodChicago.com spoke to Teller, along with first time director Jason Hall (who adapted the "American Sniper" screenplay for Clint

Eastwood and adapted this film) and the real-life veteran Adam Schumann, during a promotional appearance for "Thank You for Your Service."

HollywoodChicago.com: Miles, how did you want to best honor Adam through your portrayal of him. And what secret quirk of his did you pick up that you used in the character?

Miles Teller: I had a quote from a teacher in college that has always stuck with me, 'acting is a hell of a profession until somebody catches you doing it,' and this was some tricky skin to slip into. He had a pretty high rank in the army, coming from a ton of experience, with a lot of hours into his training. He was in charge of his men there, and I met many of them, who both owe their lives to Adam and credit him for making them men. The other side was the trauma, as to what did he see over there?

I'm not trying to interpret PTSD, I was just trying to just get under that skin and imagine, for example, making pancakes for your kids after coming home. I read about those who served, I talked at length to Adam, I had some bad-ass buddies in the military and we had a military advisor, but it was going back to the uniqueness of Adam and that was the most important to me, trying to figure him out.

HollywoodChicago.com: Adam, we've seen many Iraq War films recently, in all types of categories. In what you've seen so far, exception to your own film, which one has gotten it right? For example, did you see 'The Hurt Locker'?

Adam Schumann: Yeah, that one was gross, sorry. There are aspects of it that was correct, but what they got wrong was somebody doing that kind of duty by themselves... which might had been a metaphor, I don't know. One of the Vietnam-era films I like is 'Gardens of Stone' with James Caan.

I've been back since 2007, and before that I was so into movies. That was a way we would separate in Iraq, we would immerse ourselves in films on a 4-inch DVD player, it would take us out of the situation for the moment. But even since I got back, I haven't really watched many movies... it's been SpongeBob and music.

HollywoodChicago.com: Recreating battle and wartime is meticulous production design married with precise filmmaking. What techniques in planning gave you the confidence you needed to re-created effectively?

Jason Hall: I was inspired by the photography of war. There was ton of photography from the Iraq War – like the Magnum photographers – that documented the battlefield comprehensively, and at times created pure art. Early on, I reached out to those photographers to study their work... both what was published and is unpublished. Obviously, when you get on location there are things that you can control and not control, but I planned it meticulously.

HollywoodChicago.com: Miles, you're really an actor's actor, and have experienced virtually every type of modern film set, at all levels of budget. In approaching material, what makes you comfortable on set, and how do you communicate those needs to the production?



Teller: I like having a good scene partner, number one. For example, in this film there was Beulah Koale, who portrayed Solo, and he was doing his first major film. I'm also the type of actor that believes the director has to be in charge. I've been on sets where the actor's ego was the most important thing, and with a director that messes it up. But I don't like a dictator, I want it to be collaborative – the best idea wins.

If I feel respected, and I'm going to give that back. If a director wants to try something, cool, I'll give it back. I also feel like they cast me for a reason, so I'm going to make my mark on it... let me do my thing.

HollywoodChicago.com: Adam, Ken Burn's Vietnam has played out recently, and John Kerry – as a young Vietnam veteran – famous testified before Congress with the key line, "How do you ask a man to be the last man to die in Vietnam? How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?" In your work with Iraq/Afghanistan veterans, do you feel any of that attitude among your colleagues?

Schumann: No, everybody joins for different reasons, and we are stripped of who we were, and built back up to what they wanted us to be. We are suffering together, so the common thread is brotherhood. We would do anything not to let the guy behind us, in front of us or beside us down. If anybody had the foresight to see what would happen ten minutes ahead of time, you'd have a bunch a soldiers scrambling to be the first under that fire, so that their buddy didn't have to go through it.

Hall: That's the film we tried to make, about brotherhood and the relationship that those guys had. We wanted to bring that code back home, to have those relationships of war come back to the civilian environment. It sounds unreal, but that's what those guys are all about, and that's why when they come home they are lonely. They miss that brotherhood, that purpose and knowing that someone has their back, and they in turn have the other guy's back.

HollywoodChicago.com: So Jason, since this is your debut as a director – and you wrote the film – did you ever think, 'what the hell was the screenwriter thinking?' when you finally sat down to plan the film as a director?

Hall: First, I admired the work of the writer. [laughs] I learned more about writing a film by being a director than I learned in ten years of writing before. You realize what you need and what you don't need. There is more that can be said with a camera, that doesn't necessarily need dialogue.

I learned that from Clint Eastwood as well, in adapting 'American Sniper.' I was working with Steven Spielberg, and we had a portion at the end when the main character was at home, that was 25 pages...

In the audio portion of the interview, director Jason Hall continues his Clint Eastwood story and more tales of his work on "American Sniper," Miles Teller talks about "Whiplash" and how it relates to this film, and Iraq veteran Adam Schumann talks about what peace means to him.

"Thank You for Your Service" has a nationwide release on October 27th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Miles Teller, Joe Cole, Keisha Castle Hughes, Beulah Koale and Amy Schumer. Screenplay adapted and directed by Jason Hall. Rated "R"



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