

Taking Chance

By David J. Danelo

Written by Ross Katz and Michael Strobl. Directed by Ross Katz. Starring Kevin Bacon and Blanche Baker. HBO Films. February 2009.

Hollywood illustrates some military stories distastefully, particularly when politics leaves veracity open to debate. HBO's *Taking Chance*, a tale of devotion to fallen warriors, is not one of them.

This honorable, poignant, and dignified rendering of Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel Michael Strobl's escort of a Marine slain in Iraq pays tribute not only to those who have died in battle, but also to all who bear witness to their final journey home.

It's usually the duty of the casualty assistance calls officer to come face-to-face with a grieving parent and attempt simultaneously to explain death and honor life on a grateful nation's behalf. In 2004, Lieutenant Colonel Strobl (played by Kevin Bacon) paused from churning out personnel reports at Quantico and volunteered to shoulder a

nel) Bacon wrapping up a less-than-eventful twilight tour adds another layer of realism to his present character. No matter how many degrees of separation he may be from the real thing, Kevin Bacon is to Marine officers as Al Pacino is to Sicilian dons.

The journey itself is predictable: we immediately know what happened to then-Private First Class Chance Phelps (his promotion warrant to lance corporal arrived after his death), we know where he is going, and we know the reason. Less certain, however, is Strobl's internal compass, which is what keeps the film inter-

Strobl's reactions to the civilian interactions—most are respectful, others awkward—sustain *Taking Chance's* dramatic thread. Strobl smiles thinly and nods after being upgraded to first class by a teary-eyed flight attendant, then stares down a TSA employee who badgers him about his bag of metal objects (PFC Phelps's personal effects) and his metal-spangled Service Green Alpha uniform jacket. At each stop along the way—Philadelphia, Minneapolis, Billings—pilots, luggage handlers, and travelers place caps and hands over hearts, pausing to pay homage. As the hearse from Rafferty's Funeral Home snakes through the arid mountain passes of Montana into Wyoming, cars and trucks turn on headlights, eventually forming an impromptu funeral procession led by an 18-wheeler.

The film strikes two particular emotional chords. First, Marines love each other. The brotherhood is sometimes distilled into more antiseptic phrases, such as "fierce devotion to duty." The film avoids hollow sentimentality and instead conveys the depth of enduring affection and fraternity that goes with wearing the uniform. More significant, Americans love that Marines love each other. We "support the troops," in part, because all of us—military or civilian—long for human connections of such profundity and self-sacrifice that they would transcend death. The pudgy businessman and spindly cowgirl whose hands cover their hearts affirm as citizens that the Marine who died risked his fate on their behalf. And, rightly, they love him for it.

These are not new notions, but HBO's restrained, exemplary illustration of them makes this a striking film. *Taking Chance* has already been nominated for the Grand Jury Prize at the 2009 Sundance Film Festival; it should also be considered for other awards. Even if it receives no formal recognition, the film deserves praise for depicting the squared-away nobility and solemn grandeur of America's relationship with her Marines. Make no mistake: Lance Corporal Chance Phelps would be proud of this film. ✪



FINAL TRIBUTE Actor Kevin Bacon portrays Lieutenant Colonel Michael Strobl in the HBO Film, *Taking Chance*, which airs 21 February on HBO.

portion of that burden himself. As depicted by Mr. Bacon, Strobl is guilt-stricken that he is neither in the fight nor doing a greater part to support Marines in harm's way.

Recalling the actor's 1992 portrayal of Captain Jack Ross in *A Few Good Men*, viewers may struggle to imagine anyone other than Bacon in this role. The psychological juxtaposition of (Captain) Bacon thundering away at a witness in a courtroom 16 years ago with (Lieutenant Colo-

resting, even engrossing. "What about you? What's your deal?" asks a curly-haired civilian teenager while transporting Strobl from Dover to Philadelphia International Airport. "My deal is . . . complicated," the officer replies. The reverse winds up to be just as true: the young driver had signed up for casualty duty after two of his high school pals were sent to Iraq, yet he struggles to relate to Strobl's passion and enthusiasm for the martial calling.

Mr. Danelo served in Iraq as a Marine captain in 2004. A frequent contributor to *Proceedings*, he is the author of *Blood Stripes: The Grunt's View of the War in Iraq* (Stackpole Books, 2006). Mr. Danelo was wounded near Fallujah three days before Lance Corporal Chance Phelps was killed.