



Camaraderie carries *Stoploss*

Phillippe almost manages to lead MTV Films' military movie to total victory

filmreview

Stoploss

Directed by Kimberly Peirce
Starring Ryan Phillippe, Joseph Gordon-Levitt, and Channing Tatum

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At first glance, *Stoploss* seems like the next in a growing string of films dedicated to questioning both the Iraq War and the American government's handling of it. After so many bland, heavy-handed flops like *Rendition*, *Redaction*, and *Lions for Lambs*, one begins to wonder why director Kimberly Peirce—whose first movie was the spectacular *Boys Don't Cry*—would dedicate her second outing to a subject with a shoddy record.

The answer is simple: *Stoploss* doesn't really have much to do with Iraq. It doesn't even have a lot to do with its namesake: the "stop-loss" policy which allows for the retention of soldiers in the service beyond

their expected term. Instead, it deals with the human condition, and specifically how fucked up your condition can get when you go to war. Frankly, it should have been called *Shell Shock*.

The story centers on Staff-Sergeant Brandon King (Ryan Phillippe), a young man from a Texas unit recently returned home from a tour in Iraq with his friends Tommy Burgess (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) and Steve Shriver (Channing Tatum). Due to be discharged, King is told that he has been stop-lossed and will be sent back to war in a month. Feeling slighted by the country he risked his life to serve, King goes AWOL and embarks on a road trip across state lines to ask his senator for help.

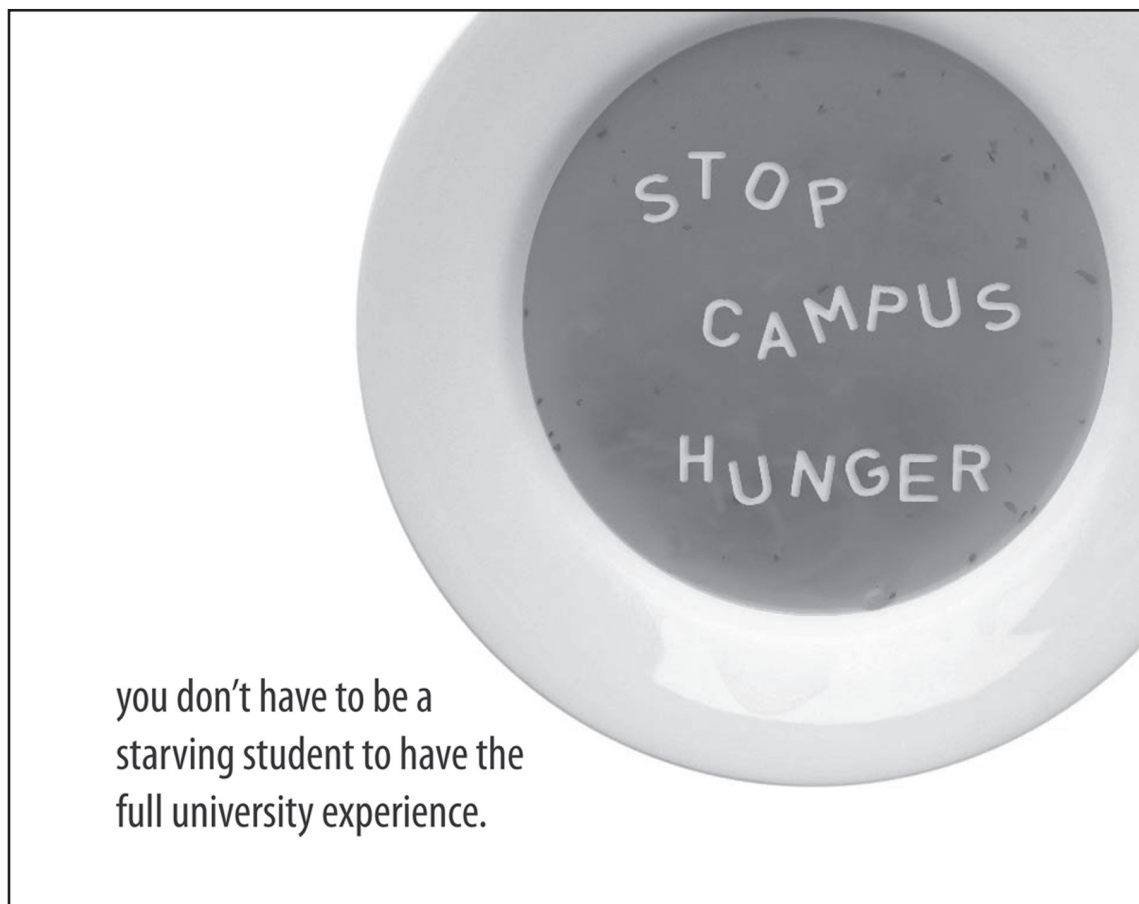
Of course, war takes its toll on every soldier, and King, Shriver, and Burgess each have their own demons to deal with. The camaraderie between these guys feels genuine, and you really believe that without King, they all begin to fall apart. That said, the acting is good, but not perfect. At first I couldn't decide whether it was terrible, or just terribly Texan. And

though it may sound callous to call the portrayal of shell shock through alcoholism, domestic abuse, and hallucinations clichéd, that doesn't mean it any less true.

Phillippe is the only actor who really takes the ball and runs with it: one scene has him sitting at the edge of a pool, when he suddenly sees his dead squad-mate at the bottom of the pool. He dives in to rescue him, only to surface with a towel in his hand. The terror on his face is palpable, and you really sympathize with him.

Stoploss takes a few risks, for better or worse. What separates this film from anti-Iraq-War films before it is that it has balls. It's rare to hear the phrase "Fuck the president!" come seething out of the protagonist's mouth, and even rarer that they mean it.

But sometimes the film's attempt to grow a pair just isn't enough. The end falls a little flat—not enough to kill the whole movie, but enough to question what the point of it all really was. Where Peirce succeeds is in showing how war can bring one group of people so close together and simultaneously tear them apart from everyone else.



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