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Film Comes to the Defense of Embattled School

By Steve Vogel
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As it is for many soldiers, being injured in Iraq was a life-changing experience for Army 2nd Lt. Christian Labra.

Labra, a West Point graduate, was an artillery officer with the 1st Armored Division when both legs and his pelvis were broken in a combat-related accident in 2003.

Recuperating at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany, Labra began tagging along as his doctor treated the steady stream of wounded soldiers flowing back from Iraq and Afghanistan. Watching the care given to fellow soldiers was a powerful experience.

"One day the doctor said, 'Hey, have you ever thought of medical school?' " Labra recalled.

Labra had planned to study law and join the Army's Judge Advocate General's Corps. Instead, he recently finished his first year at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences in Bethesda, the nation's only military medical school. "My doctor was a USU grad, and the care I had was so good I decided I wanted to be a doctor," he said.

The university is featured prominently in a new documentary film about military medicine, "Fighting for



Terry Sanders, above, director of the new documentary "Fighting for Life," with executive producer Tammy Alvarez, president of Friends of USU.

Life," by award-winning director Terry Sanders. The film premiered in May at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum in Washington and is scheduled for general release in October.

The film shows students receiving rigorous training and education at the university. It depicts military doctors and nurses treating wounded soldiers in the battlefield environment of Iraq, then follows them through treatment -- including at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington and the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda.

"The film was to explore why, in spite of the school's great value, excellence and reputation, Congress and the Department of Defense kept trying to close it," Sanders said.

Critics of the university have questioned whether the money spent operating it could better be used to send the students to civilian medical schools.

Sanders said the war in Iraq expanded the scope of the film. "It became an odyssey into the world of military medicine," he told the audience at the premiere in May.

Students and faculty members at the university attended a special screening there. Some students grumbled about having to go see a movie in the midst of exam preparations, Labra said, but when the film ended, no one wanted to leave.

"Everyone was riveted through the whole thing," Labra said. "We're right in the midst of what they're trying to describe."

For Labra, the film was an affirmation of his decision to become an Army doctor.

"What was really powerful was seeing doctors in the midst of these emotional experiences," Labra said. "It was a reminder to a lot of people of why we're going through with what we're doing at the school."

U.S. Public Health Service Ensign Keren Arkin, 32, a university student featured in the film, attended the screening with her family and classmates. "It made us quite proud, because the school is not well known in the outside world," said Arkin, who graduated from Centennial High School in Howard County.

Army Lt. Col. Cliff Lutz, an alumnus of the university and an Army emergency physician who serves on the faculty of its Department of Military and

Emergency Medicine, said the film accurately depicts the university's unique mission of training medical professionals to care for those in harm's way.

"It's the only one in the country," he said. "There's nothing else like it."

When Lutz graduated from the university in 1993, he and others in his class did not know whether they would have to put their training to use on soldiers injured in combat. "Now it's inevitable," Lutz said. "They know they're going to use it."

Beginning next week, students will be immersed in the university's annual field exercises at Fort Indiantown Gap, Pa. -- rigorous training, depicted in the film, in which the students are exposed to simulated and stressful combat conditions.

"It's probably one of the

most physically challenging things they do," said Lutz. "It's the closest situation we can give them to the chaos of war. We'll overwhelm them and take them out of their comfort zone."

Labra, who will be participating in the training, remains buoyed by his new career choice, despite the rigors of life at the university. "There's a much grander purpose beyond the education," he said. "Whether the war is right or wrong, what I love about the profession is they're trying to give the best care for people."

Military Matters is published twice each month in the Extras. Steve Vogel may be reached at vogels@washpost.com.