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Kyle Hausmann-Stokes Was a Bronze Star Paratrooper in Iraq. Now He Has One of the Hottest Films at SXSW

By **Tatiana Siegel** ▾



Photo by Mike Moriatis



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In August 2001, [Kyle Hausmann-Stokes](#) had just graduated from high school and wanted to escape the confines of his native Wisconsin. So he enlisted in the Army. Then 9/11 happened, and the teen would eventually head to Iraq, where he became a paratrooper. As his three-year enlistment was about to end, he was hit with a stop-loss order, an involuntary extension of active duty.

“I’m crushed. I have these big plans to go to film school,” Hausmann-Stokes remembers. “I get a call one night that the colonel wants to see me in his office. I was known throughout the battalion as the film guy. I was always secretly making films of our airborne jumps and our jungle warfare training. The colonel said, ‘I think you might be destined for something different than going to war with us right now. I’ve made arrangements for you and only you to be exempt from this stop-loss. You’re going to find the best film school in the world, hone your craft and tell the soldier’s story. You’re going to be our voice in Hollywood.’”

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Hausmann-Stokes enrolled in the film school at USC and began his journey toward his feature film debut, the dark comedy “[My Dead Friend Zoe](#).” The semi-autobiographical movie — which stars Sonequa Martin-Green, Natalie Morales, Ed Harris and Morgan Freeman — premieres on March 9 at [SXSW](#), where it lands as perhaps the hottest film title up for grabs, with CAA selling rights. Upping the interest level, “Zoe” happens to have one very famous investor: Kansas City Chiefs tight end Travis Kelce. The movie [marks the first foray into Hollywood producing for the three-time Super Bowl champ](#), whose every move is publicized given that he is dating Taylor Swift.

Though war movies are among the most popular genres, veterans are barely represented in the industry, often leading to one-dimensional characters. Hausmann-Stokes, now 41, joins a small group of players who have served, including Adam Driver, Ron Meyer, Oliver Stone, Clint Eastwood and Freeman.

Hausmann-Stokes says Hollywood rarely gets it right, with Stone’s “Platoon” and HBO’s “Generation Kill” among the exceptions: “We are kind of relegated to the two extremes. We’re either this super-soldier hero kicking down doors doing crazy special operations-type things. Or we’re the broken veteran that’s addicted to pills. Rarely do we see anything in the middle, which is where I think 90% of the military and veterans live.”

With “Zoe,” Hausmann-Stokes aimed to depict that middle. And the film, which he wrote with AJ Bermudez, is very much his story, in which he endured the loss of three of his platoon mates.

However, he changed the action from Iraq to Afghanistan and swapped the protagonist's gender, with "Star Trek: Discovery" actress Martin-Green serving as Hausmann-Stokes' stand-in.

"It's so personal and so close to me. I needed a little bit of distance," says the Grandview-repped writer-director.

For Martin-Green, the director's pitch to her was powerful. He stressed that he wanted to use the film medium to effect change and as a way to give back

"I remember him saying, 'I think from what I've seen of you that you and I are like-minded, so I would love it if you would join me in in doing this,'" she says. "I was pretty blown away by that. I very much am like-minded and very much see this artform as a service. It was like, 'Boom! Let's go. Let's do this.'"

It's a story that has been gestating for nearly half of Hausmann-Stokes' life. And the path to the big screen was fraught with challenges. Halfway through film school, he was deployed to Iraq for the Bush administration's "surge" in 2007. He served as a convoy commander in the airborne infantry, earning a bronze star, then returned to USC feeling disoriented.

"I'm now five years older than my peers, you know, dealing with my own PTSD," he says. "But it really just cemented the colonel's missive to me of telling a soldier's story."

Hausmann-Stokes shot dozens of PSAs for the Veterans Authority and like-minded nonprofits. He put together enough money to shoot a short titled "Merit x Zoe." Richard Silverman, who produced the Zac Efron starrer "We Are Your Friends," saw the short at a screening for veterans, thought it was powerful and introduced the director to Paul Scanlan of Legion M, which crowdsources film investment as it did with the William Shatner doc "You Can Call Me Bill." Hausmann-Stokes already had a feature script, which delves into combat's toll on mental health, ready to go. "And then it was just 100 miles an hour from there."

Harris was the first to sign on as a Vietnam vet and estranged grandfather of Martin-Green's character after receiving a moving personal letter from Hausmann-Stokes. "If this film helps one vet decide to seek help, Kyle will consider it a success," he says. "Working with a director who cares that much, you just want to do the best job you can."

Morales plays the titular deceased Zoe, whose specter shapes the narrative. Freeman, who served in the Air Force for four years in the late '50s, portrays another Vietnam vet, one based on a real-life person who helped Hausmann-Stokes confront his PTSD.

With his lineup in place, the writer-director closed the budget gap with money from Radiant Media Studios' Ray Maiello and Mike Field and Kelce, all of whom used funds generated by federal green energy tax credits to invest in "Zoe."

“It was incredibly surreal to get that news,” says Hausmann-Stokes of Kelce’s involvement. “Travis is supportive of the military and veterans, and when this project came across his team and his desk and they decided to do it in a big part for that reason. It was just really heartwarming and touching, and the amount of added limelight and energy that he’s brought to the project is just going to help it reach a broader audience.”

Which is the biggest priority for Hausmann-Stokes. But he also hopes to change Hollywood minds about how a veteran can contribute.

“I think the industry doesn’t see us veterans as being artistic or creative,” he says. “And that just couldn’t be further from the truth. I mean, look at [Ernest] Hemingway. There’s a great veteran and author. So, I think we’re just trying to change that narrative a little bit.”

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