



Do Good. A Conversation with Justin D. Roberts

INTERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Award-winning director and former Army Captain/Chaplain, Justin D. Roberts, discusses his current projects and experiences while in country in Ukraine.

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Justin D. Roberts is an independent film director and producer who holds a Master of Arts in Biblical Studies, and a Master of Arts in Media Arts and Communication. He heads up an upcoming syndicated series called *Do Good* that raises support for humanitarian works, and he has two documentary features—*The Baja Run* and *For God and Country*—in post-production. I met Roberts for the first time in 2009, when my husband served in No Slack battalion (2–327 Infantry battalion) with him.

After nearly a decade of service, Justin D. Roberts resigned his commission in 2015. Three years later in 2018, Roberts released *No Greater Love* (NGL), the first documentary filmed and directed by an active-duty soldier in combat; Roberts himself. While Roberts could never have imagined a documentary would come from his choice to carry a camera and film while on deployment with No Slack battalion, he was able to capture war and the effects of war from a soldier's perspective. No Slack battalion lead three major operations during their 2009–2010 deployment in the Kunar Province. The “Strong Eagle” operations were some of the hardest and most gruesome war operations during Operation Enduring Freedom.

No Greater Love was stated as “One of the best, most powerful documentaries ever made” (Snyder, 2017) by *Movie Guide*. Roberts' work on the documentary earned him 11 awards across the country and United Kingdom, namely the Santini Patriot Spirit Award and Best Military Filmmaker from the G.I. Film Festival. He also screened before the White House and Congress.

Currently in Ukraine, Roberts is working to document and capture the war, the everyday lives of the military and civilians; to find the good people, the heroes, and a light in a dark world.

The interview that follows discusses Roberts' current situation in Ukraine, his current projects underway, and some of his experiences that led to this point.

SC: How are you? What is your current situation like?

JR: There are attacks going on, but it's not really hitting this city yet, (Lviv), but we know this city is going to be targeted. Russian troops have moved up to Belarus and the biggest issue that Russia has right now is all those new weapons that are coming in through the Polish pipeline, through Lviv and so the railways would be targeted and any of the roadways in the city itself, because Russia is just targeting civilians. It's kind of par for the course for them to just send in rockets and missiles into city centers and so if you happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I've done most of my filming. I've got about 80% in the can. I've got 20% to complete, so I have to go back to the Donbas (Figure 1), go get shot out a little bit more, get a little bit more footage, a couple of story elements that I

kind of realized, when I was putting the story structure together. I was just like “oh crap, I gotta go back. I missed an important plot point.” This experience is different than with *No Slack*. I was able to put that film together because I understood. This is the first time that I was working on my story structure that I realized I missed a plot point, and now I have to go and get it. I was like “hmmm, there is something wrong with this writing process.”

SC: Are there any observations you have made in Ukraine that are similar to observations you made while in Afghanistan?

JR: Yeah, the PTSD is just as prevalent. It's like, whenever people are processing trauma, but they don't have time to process it in the midst of the trauma, and it's not like they're exhibiting all the signs of PTSD; they're exhibiting some of it, but they don't have time for it to really set in just yet. It's like whenever the soldiers would get home, that's when all the shit would pop up, that's when it's going bad and the addictions, depression, divorces, fights, anger, and all that kind of stuff would kind of escalate. So there seems to be, and psychologists would know this better than I would, but there's like this midpoint when they're still experiencing the trauma. The PTSD is there, the damage is done, but they don't have time to process it because they're still in the midst of it. So that is where Ukraine is. That is where the military is currently. What's weird is seeing so many civilians going through it.

I know that within American society there's an odd guilt that civilian males experience and you can tell they have guilt when they explain why they never joined the military. I've had this happen to me too many times. When I say I was in the military, they explained why they almost served. I have never explained to a plumber why I did not become a plumber, but I've had plumbers and lawyers and doctors, and all these other kinds of guys explain to me why they didn't become a soldier. So, there is this collective guilt I am seeing with the males here, the ones that wanted to serve, but were not allowed to serve. They're feeling guilty. A lot of the guys who are waiters and have working jobs have some guilt hanging over them. A lot of them are not going to go to the front because they know it's suicide because there are so many mass casualties, between 100 and 1,000 a day. It's a meat grinder. Artillery is a different kind of beast; it's not like small arms.

For the film, I've been tracing small arms, trying to get in small arms fights, and it's been really hard. I've gone up and down the Donbas into the trenches, Mykolaiv, Kharkiv, in the gray zones, and can't find the small arms fights unless Russians are advancing forward. That means that they've pounded everything in that area with artillery to where nothing is left, and then they're moving

into small arms space. So, for me to get into small arms, I literally have to sit in the apocalypse, and I will be able to finish the film if I do that. So, I've been chasing that, but if you're in the wrong grid square, and I've been close to being in the wrong grid square three times, that whole grid square is just deleted; it's just gone, and there's no place to hide. You might be in a trench, and hope and pray you're lucky. But when they hit a barracks, they're all gone.

SC: It's a lot to process. Do you feel the Ukrainian citizens and military have formed a resentment towards the US or other countries due to a lack of direct involvement?

JR: No, they're very grateful to the US for the support that the US has given. They know that their best ally right now is the US, and possibly their most critical ally. The US is the one that's driving other countries to support. This has been an interesting revelation in geopolitics, because understanding before, like Russian propaganda, has been a massive campaign for 40 years. The propaganda machine, pumping in tons and tons of money that escalated after the fall of the Soviet empire. They realized that they could not engage in a direct conflict with us and win, and they couldn't outspend us. They could not build better weapons, but also even if they did play that game, that means it's a nuclear war and everybody loses. So, if you can't win at the game, and even if you did win at the game, everybody would lose. Then why would you play that game?

So, they pivoted over to irregular warfare, start putting in a billion dollars in propaganda, all with the goal of dividing the US from the rest of the world and Britain from the European Union, and so they were successful in both phases, but so much of that was a propaganda campaign too.

Harness the West. I mean, tarnish America and so you had all these countries constantly insulting America, saying bad things about us because they're buying into a lot of the propaganda. But when it comes down to it, the US is the only person who's shown up for this fight. The US is in Poland and Poland is showing up 'cause they know they're next in the chopping block.

France isn't here. Germany is not really here. But the thing is, we also have 100,000 soldiers along the road on the borders. The majority of charity work is US; the majority of dollars is US: the majority of medicine, and weapons, and also the \$40 billion that's coming into Ukraine.

We are the ones who are training Ukraine forces primarily and getting them set-up, and we've been doing that since 2014. They would not have the capacity to win this war without US support, so we are their biggest ally. The Foreign Legion is doing a lot of that work, and a lot of those soldiers are US veterans.

SC: Can you share any experiences or interactions that you've had with other US vets while you've been in Ukraine?

JR: Yeah, thus far, a lot of operators. Especially special forces, though, because it's like they're just used to this kind of work, you know, entering foreign land, and doing this kind of stuff. A lot of them are doing the humanitarian side of the work. They're really good at organizing it, mobilizing, and then also going into dangerous locations to do extractions for people who are in very dangerous locations. I mean women and children, the reason there is such a need for extractions is because they don't have the money to just buy gas and leave.

There is an American concept of "why don't they just leave?" And then somebody explained to me they don't have the money, you know it's that tank of gas, they don't have that. There's also a shortage of gas over here that's crippling, but then also if they leave their crops, then the crops don't come in, and if the crops don't come in, they starve next year. Also, for them Poland is a rich country, so for them to go over there and then just kind of hang out, you know they don't have that money. So they're stuck in the only house that they have, the house that they inherited from their family. They don't have the money to leave.

About a month ago I saw a mom teaching her kid to ride a bike next to a bomb crater and that was a place where a journalist was killed the day before. Bombs were constantly coming in, artillery rounds constantly coming in, and it's just her and her son, and he had a complete smile on his face, she was completely worn out and that is a strange reality to see. So those operators are coming into these kinds of places and extracting those people to get them out.

SC: How long have you been in Ukraine?

JR: Three months and I have four more to go. I'm just finishing the production on the documentary, and I still have a few more weeks to go, and then I have to start production on a TV series. I've got 20 episodes: two seasons worth.

I've got a film coming out that I was hired to direct, which is the most wonderful experience instead of having to produce everything. I love directing. That's really the only thing I want to do. The film is a documentary about military chaplains, that will be coming out this year. I also did another documentary that is currently in post-production about the Baja 1000, which is about a group of combat veterans, guys from Seal Teams, Special Forces, Army Rangers, and Marines, competing in the most dangerous off-road race in the world. But what it's really about is how do you come home from war. How do you go from being a bad-ass sniper a year ago to no longer being in combat.

How do you do that identity pivot? That is what we are seeing guys struggle with the most—that identity shift. So that’s what we talk about in that film, in the midst of an extreme off-road race. But the whole race is a metaphor for this transition.

SC: Do you have a working title for the Ukrainian documentary?

JR: Yes, we’re currently calling it “Live Free,” but that’s probably going to shift at a certain point. You know everything I do is subjective. It’s not an objective documentary about the war, it’s a subjective documentary about war itself, and really almost everything I do is actually not about war, and awfulness, but it’s about love. It always comes back to love.

The way I’m designing it right now, which might shift, but right now the way I’m designing it is it’s a message from the trenches of the Donbass to my daughter about why it’s important for me to be here, because when I left the thing that hit me the hardest in the gut was the way that she was crying, and nothing rips me up more than that. She just has that ability to cut me deeply, but it’s because the way she was crying and she didn’t understand why this was important.

But to me her learning, you know from the lessons of this war, lessons on how to live, that we have to fight evil whenever evil appears, we have to fight to give other people voices, we have to fight for other people’s liberty, and this fight is going to come with every generation. We have to fight tyranny with every generation, and it’s critical that we stand beside those people who are in the midst of that fight and even be willing to give our lives. So we have to learn to live free and be willing to fight and die for that if necessary.

SC: Some people and military personnel think it is rare for chaplains to be on the ground, and in the trenches. How do you feel about this?

JR: Well it’s actually a part of our history. In World War I the highest casualty rate for an MOS [Military Occupation Specialty] was chaplains, and then infantry, and medics. Then in World War II it was infantry, then chaplains, and then medics. Then in Korea we got #3.

It always depends on where that personal chaplain feels his or her calling is.

For me, the reason that I was trying to go out with each platoon (during No Slack deployment) at least once, and be near the front during major operations, was because of the suicides we were experiencing prior to deployment.

We had a suicide my second day on the job, then another a week later, then another one, then another one, and weekly suicidal ideations every single week for the first

six months I was with No Slack. In 2009 No Slack was the most suicidal battalion in the military.

So, my approach was to not do anymore PowerPoint presentations on suicide, but to build up a friendship network with soldiers, and make sure that my cell phone number was in every single one of their phones, and I tried to establish a relationship to where they felt like they could call me if there was a problem. We started focusing conversations on brotherhood and purpose. We did this in a very relaxed fashion, lots of cussing, lots of joking, but getting down to some real core issues.

That only goes so far once we deployed. Randy Wright suggested I go out with each platoon at least once “and do my Chaplain stuff.” That turned out to really be the case because the second I went out on combat operations with the platoon, my counseling load increased. Then it became much more personal counseling. I believe you have to approach the culture that you are trying to work with, and this is a very warrior culture, so you must consider, what do they respect? What do they appreciate? What do they value? Then be willing to do that work. Earn the right to be spoken to. During this time, I wasn’t even thinking about filming or creating a documentary, I just wanted to do anything I could so I wouldn’t have to counsel moms whose sons blew their brains out. That ruptured me and broke my heart. I’ve dealt with a lot, and I’ve done a lot of counseling, but the mother crying from a son who’s killed himself if a different kind of hollow cry. I don’t know how to articulate it, but it haunted me.

The expectation was that since we were suicidal on the front end, and had a traumatic deployment, 18 killed, and 200 purple hearts, that we would have suicides on the back end, but instead we had 0 suicides, and a 70% reduction in suicidal ideations. There was a culture shift—guys were not sneaking to see me, but dudes were bringing in other dudes saying “chap, you got to talk to so and so.”

SC: Do you feel like you’ve brought a part of that with you to Ukraine?

JR: My only job in life is to love people and love God, and that’s all I do. I focus on loving people because I do believe that goes on for eternity. If people are starving, we need to feed them. If people are homeless, we need to give them shelter.

The whole film project and TV series that I’m doing with *Do Good* is focused on telling the story, finding the heroes, and then trying to raise support for those heroes. In every tragedy, there’s a hero somewhere, in every war, in every awful situation. We want to identify those heroes who are doing good and try to mobilize a massive amount of support for them in the darkest places of the world.



Figure 1 Justin D. Roberts walks along a road lined with anti-tank mines in Donbas, Ukraine on July 25th 2022.

AFTERWORD

This interview took place through a Zoom call on July 19, 2022, while Roberts was in Ukraine. The author would like

to thank Justin D. Roberts for his candidness during our interview. Readers can find and follow the work Roberts is doing here:

Instagram: [justin.d.roberts](https://www.instagram.com/justin.d.roberts)

Facebook: Justin Roberts; Do Good (Charity Organization)

No Greater Love: nogreaterlovemovie.com

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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