

Who Killed Lt. Van Dorn?

Written, Directed, and Produced by Zachary Stauffer

Associate Producer Jason Paladino

Contact: zachary.stauffer@gmail.com or 415-420-3032

Logline: “Who Killed Lt. Van Dorn?” is an intimate portrait of a deadly 2014 Navy helicopter crash that exposes how military, political and business leaders have failed our men and women in uniform.

Short Synopsis: The widow of a Navy helicopter pilot killed in a 2014 training exercise spurs an investigation that uncovers a long history of institutional failings that led to her husband’s death. This poignant picture of a family’s tragedy is also a revelatory inquiry into the murky inner workings of the American defense establishment.

One Paragraph Synopsis: Lt. Wes Van Dorn, a 29-year-old United States Naval Academy graduate and the married father of two young sons, died when the helicopter he was piloting crashed off the coast of Virginia during a 2014 training exercise. Motivated by her grief, his wife Nicole sought an explanation for the cause of the disaster. Her efforts spurred an investigation that uncovered a long history of negligence and institutional failings around the 53E helicopter—the model Van Dorn was piloting when he was killed, and the deadliest aircraft in the US military. Through incisive reporting and interviews with Van Dorn’s colleagues and family, **Who Killed Lt. Van Dorn?** is at once a poignant picture of one family’s tragedy, as well as a revelatory inquiry into the murky inner-workings of the American defense establishment.

Project Description:

It only took fifteen seconds from the time the fire broke out for the helicopter to slam into the frigid Atlantic.

Earlier on that January 2014 morning, the only thing out of the ordinary was the bitter cold. The crew had noticed a problem with the cabin heater during preflight checks, but as usual, they found a workaround. “We’ll make it work,” was a common refrain for those who flew the 53E helicopter, a burly Navy and Marine Corps chopper and one of the oldest in the fleet. By day’s end, pilot Lt. Wes Van Dorn and two others would be dead.

Van Dorn had seen it coming for years.

Van Dorn was a 29-year-old United States Naval Academy graduate and the married father of two young sons when he died in what was supposed to be a run of the mill training exercise. Motivated by her grief, his wife Nicole sought an explanation for the cause of the disaster. Her efforts spurred an investigation that uncovered a long history of negligence and institutional failings around the 53E, the deadliest aircraft in the US military.

As Nicole Van Dorn continued to pursue answers, Dylan Boone, who survived the wreck, wrestles with PTSD. His survivor’s guilt is exacerbated by the fact that there’s no sense of valor when your peers die in a training exercise. Chris Humme, the last mechanic to touch the ill-fated Sea Dragon, says he sports more red, white and blue than is probably healthy. But he’s kicked out of his beloved Navy after blowing the whistle on persistent, shoddy maintenance practices.

Through incisive reporting, interviews and vivid visual storytelling, **Who Killed Lt. Van Dorn?** is at once a poignant picture of one family's tragedy, as well as a revelatory inquiry into the murky inner-workings of the American defense establishment.

Film Website: vandommovie.com

Facebook: facebook.com/vandommovie

Twitter: twitter.com/vandommovie

Instagram: instagram.com/vandommovie

Director Twitter: twitter.com/ZacharyStauffer

Investigative Reporting Program Facebook: facebook.com/ucberkeleyirp

Investigative Reporting Program Twitter: twitter.com/UCBerkeleyIRP

Trailer: <https://vimeo.com/284061744> (no password required)

Downloadable Trailer: <https://vimeo.com/302904035> (password required)

World Premiere: [2018 Mill Valley Film Festival](#)

Awards:

[Gold Audience Award for Active Cinema](#) at the 2018 Mill Valley Film Festival

[Best Documentary](#) at the 2018 Monarch Film Festival

Reviews:

[A “riveting documentary” and one of the Mill Valley Film Festival’s “hidden gems.”](#)

--San Francisco Chronicle, 9/13/18

["An outrage-inducing... blistering exposé."](#)

--The Mercury News, 10/2/18

[“A compelling story of how the dysfunction and greed of the military-industrial complex put US military personnel at risk, often with fatal consequences... Every concerned citizen and every member of Congress should see this film. Lives depend on it.”](#)

--The Nation magazine, 10/12/18

[“It’s breathtaking in scope, but doesn’t forget the small family at its center. It’s a must-see.”](#)

--Monterey County Weekly, 12/6/18

[“A searing indictment of the Pentagon’s business-as-usual attitude that too often lurks behind the deaths of the young men and women wearing their nation’s military uniforms.”](#)

--Pulitzer Prize-winner Mark Thompson for the Project On Government Oversight, 12/12/18

News & Related Coverage:

[“Documentary Raises Questions about Navy Helo Crash that Killed Three”](#)

--WVEC-TV Norfolk, 11/12/18

[“Who Killed Lt. Van Dorn?’ set for Friday Screening in Truckee”](#)

--Sierra Sun, 11/9/18

[“Film covers the tragedy of the Navy's Sea Dragon helicopter deaths”](#)

--The Virginian-Pilot, 11/8/18

[“Documentary Recounts Investigation Into Lt. Wesley Van Dorn's Death”](#)

--KJZZ Radio, 11/8/18

[“Who Killed Lt. Van Dorn?’ Offers an Answer That the Navy and Marine Corps Don't Want to Hear.”](#)

--The Daily Beast, 11/6/18

[“The Navy's Terrible Accident Record Is Now Hidden From Public View”](#)

--Associate Producer Jason Paladino for The Atlantic, 10/8/18

[“New UC Berkeley Documentary Explores Military's Deadliest Aircraft”](#)

--KCBS Radio, 9/27/18

[“Documentary on deadly Navy helicopter by alums Zachary Stauffer and Jason Paladino to premiere at Mill Valley Film Festival”](#)

--UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism, 9/26/18

[“New J-School film examines deadliest military helicopter”](#)

--Berkeley News, 9/6/18

Festival Appearances

2018 Mill Valley Film Festival

2018 Monarch Film Festival

2019 San Luis Obispo Film Festival

Director Bio (short): Zachary Stauffer is a staff producer at UC Berkeley's Investigative Reporting Program and its primary director of photography. **Who Killed Lt. Van Dorn?** is his first feature documentary. Throughout his career, he's contributed to a number of documentary films, many for PBS **Frontline**, including **Money and March Madness** (2011), **Murdoch's Scandal** (2012), and the DuPont award-winning **Rape in the Fields** (2013), and its follow-ups, **Rape on the Night Shift** (2015) and **Trafficked in America** (2018). His short documentary, **A Day Late In Oakland** (2008), about the murder of journalist Chauncey Bailey, was nominated for two IDA awards.

Director Bio (long): Zachary Stauffer is a staff producer at UC Berkeley's Investigative Reporting Program and its primary director of photography. **Who Killed Lt. Van Dorn?**, winner of the Audience Award in Active Cinema at the 2018 Mill Valley Film Festival, is his first feature documentary. Throughout his career, he's contributed to a number of documentary films as a producer or DP, many for PBS **Frontline**, including **Money and March Madness** (2011), **Murdoch's Scandal** (2012), **The Child Cases** (2011), **Post Mortem** (2011), the DuPont award-winning **Rape In The Fields** (2013) and its follow ups **Rape On The Night Shift** (2015) and **Trafficked in America** (2018). His short documentary, **A Day Late In Oakland** (2008), about

the murder of a local journalist, was nominated for two IDA Awards, screened at film festivals across the country and was broadcast on KQED in San Francisco. He began his career at Northern Light Productions in Boston. There he served as co-producer of **The Special: A Story of an American Anthem** (2005), which premiered at the Nashville Film Festival and screened at Silver Docs and other festivals. Stauffer is a graduate of Boston College and the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism, where he is currently a lecturer.

Backstory: Associate Producer Jason Paladino was a student at the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism in 2014 when he got the news: a longtime friend who was serving in the Navy had died in a helicopter crash.

Petty Officer 3rd Class Brian Collins was killed when his MH-53E Sea Dragon helicopter, a Cold War relic used for minesweeping, crashed off the Virginia coast on a training mission. At the funeral in Truckee, California, a small mountain town near Lake Tahoe where the two had grown up, Paladino struck up conversation with Collins's family and fellow sailors about his friend's time in the Navy. Talk turned to safety concerns and the culture in Collins's helicopter squadron. It didn't take long for Paladino to realize that something was wrong, and he set to work as a reporter.

On the other side of the country, another young journalist had also begun digging into the story.

Mike Hixenbaugh became the military reporter at the Virginian-Pilot newspaper in summer 2012. On his first day on the military beat, his editor asked him to file a Freedom of Information Act request for a copy of the investigation into the crash of a 53 in Oman just a couple of days earlier. Hixenbaugh had never heard of the helicopter before. He eventually got the report, secured an interview with the Navy's top helicopter commander on the Atlantic coast and, in late fall 2013, published a story about the wide range of problems with the 53 squadrons. Just two months later, another 53 crashed. This one was right in his paper's backyard, and it killed Collins and the two pilots, Lt. Wes Van Dorn and Lt. Sean Snyder.

Van Dorn's widow, Nicole, happened to read one of Hixenbaugh's stories about a month after the accident. She reached out and told him that she had many of Van Dorn's old files and correspondence about the 53 and happenings at the squadron. Word got out that Nicole was looking for information. People dropped papers on her doorstep and called her out of the blue. She led sources to Hixenbaugh so he could continue to dig further.

Paladino, who was reporting on the accident from afar, struck up a conversation with Hixenbaugh, the only journalist who was giving the 53 anything more than cursory coverage. Rather than compete, the two opened a collaboration between the Virginian-Pilot and the Investigative Reporting Program (IRP), a nonprofit newsroom affiliated with the Berkeley J-school. The collaboration eventually expanded to include the NBC News Investigative Unit. A four-minute story on the Nightly News brought national exposure to the 53 and more sources came forward.

By fall 2015, both Paladino and Hixenbaugh were working as Fellows for the IRP. Staff producer Zachary Stauffer began to weigh in about ways they could expand both new and old material into a film. In December, they were on the road for the first shoot, eager to find out where the Van Dorn story would take them and what it could say about larger questions about the military.

About Investigative Studios: Investigative Studios, Inc. is a nonprofit corporation formed for the purpose of newsgathering, journalism education and media production in support of UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism and its Investigative Reporting Program. "Who Killed Lt. Van Dorn?" is the first independent feature documentary of Investigative Studios.

About The Investigative Reporting Program: The IRP is a professional newsroom and teaching institute at the University of California, Berkeley. We are committed to reporting stories that expose injustice and abuse of power while training the next generation of journalists in the highest standards of our craft.