Jon Ronson Gets Jim Channon's Goat

In this interview Jim Channon speaks out about Ronson, the film and playing the fool.



Strategic designer and artist, retired U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel Jim Channon sits in front of one of his signature vision maps detailing a positive future for planet earth.

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How do you feel about the new movie?
I've always wanted the story of the First Earth Battalion to be told by Hollywood. It's a story of great hope and promise, a mythology meant to start a social movement and to inspire individuals, both military and civilian. The goal is to evolve beyond conflict to a new level of peace making where we can collectively address the social and environmental challenges that create global conflicts in the first place. That's a vision worth working for.

Didn't you spend time in the 1980s in an attempt to sell your story to the studios?
In the 1980s, I was employed by the U.S. Army as a public information officer in Hollywood. I made contacts during that time and after retirement, I pitched a half dozen movie studios in an effort to sell the First Earth Battalion story. Now, thanks to Jon Ronson, some 30 years later, four of the brightest actors in Hollywood have teamed up to make this movie about our small, activist band of army officers. I have to assume Clooney was attracted to this story, both because he was fascinated with the audacity and spirit of these military men who wanted to make a difference in the world and embarrassed by how far the U.S. Military has drifted in certain instances from those ideals in Iraq.

How did Jon Ronson find you?
Ronson showed up on my doorstep in Hawaii five years ago as part of a BBC film crew sent from London to interview me for a series called Crazy Rulers of

the World. I remember Jon as a quiet member of the team who hung out mostly in the background. The series was to focus on how good ideas could go bad when bureaucracies or governments use them in twisted ways. I thought this journalistic point of view was pretty ambitious and I believe they missed the mark. The idea that our 'be all that you can be' inspired ideals of the 1970s were high jacked by the Bush regime is pretty far-fetched. There's simply nothing conspiratorial about the First Earth Battalion and what it stands for. It seems to be dichotomy that peaks people's interest. When the series ran, my website began getting thousands of hits and people started downloading Evolutionary Tactics, the First Earth Battalion manual. I realized then that those who are interested in the truth could find the real story.

When Jon's book, "The Men Who Stare at Goats" came out several years later, I had to deal with similar feelings. Jon got a lot of the details wrong. The account is messy but he's a very clever writer and a great political satirist and in his own way, he's become a Pied Piper for the First Earth Battalion. He delivered the mythology to the world in a very unexpected way. I have a lot to thank him for. More than ten thousand field manuals have been downloaded from my website since Jon's book came out.

Ronson was recently on Comedy Central's Colbert Report. He and Stephen Colbert made great fun of the First Earth Battalion. How did you feel about that?
People ask if I'm upset about myself or other members of the First Earth Battalion being portrayed as fools. I guess it's the ultimate roast. Let's face it, it's often easier to sell an idea more through levity than gravity. I'm all for that. After Jon's appearance on the Colbert Report I received an email from his 11-year old son asking me if he could become a Jedi Warrior and a member of the First Earth Battalion. The kids get it. There's an entire generation that was raised on the cartoon series Captain Planet. Younger generations are not quite so cynical. They believe in the ideals of the First Earth Battalion.

Can you explain the sparkly eyes concept? This particular reference in your Evolutionary Tactics field manual seems to get a lot of play.
Remember, it was the late 1970s and I was hanging out at Esalen Institute on the West Coast of California. It was the hey-day of the new age movement. For the first time people were really connecting with each other. Looking each other in the eye. Then opening their hearts. The heart energy moves through the eyes. Have you ever experienced an eye-gasm? (wink) It's quite something! My motto: Love wins.

So, what did you think when the BBC sent you the screenplay for the movie and discovered Jeff Bridges playing you in his role as Bill Django?
Having had the positive experience with the Ronson charade, I was open to playing the game. I'm dedicated to being a global change agent and by

definition that means I will probably end up with more arrows in my back than medals on my chest.

Bill Django was another impossible contradiction …one minute he carries lambs into combat and the next minute he's handling black money to get hallucinogens for his soldiers? Come on. Black money wasn't even an idea when I was in the army and it is, in fact, a white-collar crime. Me sporting a long-haired braid while in military uniform …outrageous! Screenwriter Peter Straughan's job was to exaggerate the inconsistencies between a warrior and a peacenik and after a few passes at the screenplay I realized that real humor allows the medicine to go down. Peter is a seriously funny writer –pun intended. I just had to trust that the key ideas would percolate inside the laughter.

I've certainly played the fool in front of large military audiences before. The fool's role is to make a big mess of the status quo in order for new ideas to be accepted. It was fascinating to see how Peter created my fool character and then see someone as talented as Jeff Bridges interpret the role.

What really gets my goat is that the shock and awe that happened in Baghdad is now part of the reason it's taking so long for trust to be restored in Iraq and Afghanistan. That's hard on the front line soldiers. As for inconsistency, that's one I hope we shall never see again!

What about Major General Albert Stubblebine? Where does he fit into this picture?

Jon's book begins with an interview with Major General Albert N. Stubblebine, who was a former Commanding General of the United States Army Intelligence. The General is known for his interest in parapsychology and innovation. It was under Stubblebine's command that soldiers were given the permission to explore out of the box thinking and creativity. Remember, we were still facing the Soviets and the possibility of a nuclear confrontation. We needed every level of skill in our arsenal. In his own experiment to defy the laws of physics Stubblebine really did attempt to walk through a wall. Of course this provides for some real slapstick humor in the film. It also provided real permission for his troops to get out of the box for real.

Unfortunately, Jon's account infuriated Stubblebine who now refuses to speak to him. But Stubblebine is a serious and well-respected voice in the military. Google him. You'll find he was interviewed on CNN just after 9-11 and is the highest ranking military officer to question the official version of what happened at the Pentagon that day. As a forensic expert, his job in the military was to investigate just such incidences. In his opinion, there's not a shred of evidence that a plane hit the Pentagon. Now there's a story. Stubblebine is one of the leading voices opposing mandatory vaccination for H1N1, swine flu and a champion for protecting medical freedoms. He's a man

of conscience living in Panama on an environmentally sustainable piece of land much like the one I have in Hawaii.

GO Planet!

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER



Susanne Sims is the author of Healing Vacations in Hawaii, the former Environmental Editor of Honolulu magazine and Founding Director of the New Millennium Institute. Her passion is interviewing maverick minds of the future and interpreting their words -and worlds- to others. Contact: SusanneSims@gmail.com

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