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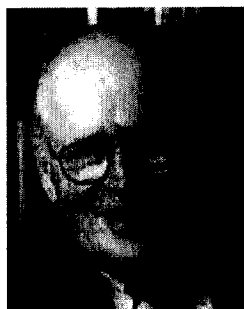
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Reel Life

We Were Soldiers

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The recent war movie "We Were Soldiers," starring Mel Gibson, demonstrates as only Hollywood can the change in American attitudes about Vietnam.

After the war ended in 1975, Hollywood produced a spate of movies critical of American involvement. "The Deer Hunter," which won the Oscar for best picture in 1978 and is said to have rallied Vietnam veterans in support of a memorial that became architect Maya Lin's wall of names in Washington, portrayed the Vietnamese as less than human, smilingly sadistic "gooks." In "Apocalypse Now" (1979) and in "Platoon" (1986) the Vietnamese were phantoms, pitiable victims, or largely invisible.

It would take Hollywood more than 25 years to break the stereotype and show the Vietnamese fighting and dying like soldiers. A lot had to change before this depiction became acceptable to Americans, especially to veterans of the Vietnam War.

It is unreasonable to expect soldiers who fight a war not to hate the enemy, particularly when they lose to men half their size who are less well armed. That hatred fueled the "gook" stereotype.

It was President Clinton, a well-known evader of Vietnam military service, who officially broke the ice. He restored diplomatic relations, made a state visit, and achieved a treaty that gave Vietnam favored trading status.

Since then Vietnam has aggressively courted American tourists, and many who have traveled there are veterans. They come back talking of the beauty of the rice paddies in the countryside and the genuinely warm welcome by Vietnamese people whose land was bombed and defoliated by American planes.

Even Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), a pilot of one of those planes and our best-known prisoner of war, has returned to Vietnam and been greeted warmly by the people, although he has harsh things to say about his captors. McCain does not apologize for calling them "gooks." He has reason to hate; he was tortured until his will was broken (he twice attempted suicide) in the infamous Hanoi Hilton, where he saw other prisoners of war killed. And like other career officers, McCain has declared that we would have won had politicians not tied the hands of the military.

Many other veterans have visited Vietnam, met their former enemies, and are healing the psychic scars on both sides. Such reconciliation has allowed the attitudinal change we see reflected in "We Were Soldiers."

The screenplay is based on the memoir of Lt. Gen. Harold G. Moore (Ret.), written with war correspondent Joseph L. Galloway. Moore, although he shares Sen. McCain's opinions, has returned to Vietnam many times and met with the Vietcong general who opposed him at Ia Drang Valley, the first major battle of the Vietnam War. The former adversaries have shaken hands; have shared memories, maps, and military documents; and have become friends. In keeping with that friendship, the Moore-Galloway book recognizes the courage and heroism on both sides. In acknowledging that valor, "We Were Soldiers Once ... and Young" (New York: Random House, 1992) restores the dignity of the men who fought and died on both sides.

The book is a meticulously documented history of that first battle of Ia Drang Valley, which occurred before the war turned ugly and the reasons for fighting it became obscure. Narrated in isolation from the complex politics of the war, the story of the battle could be admired as much by the John Birch Society as by Vietnam chronicler David Halberstam.

But Moore is a hero to the "Birchers," and they knew what the book omitted: the fact that the general has never forgiven his real enemy—President Lyndon Johnson. In Moore's view, Johnson was "a dove in hawk's clothing" who made it impossible for the United States to win a winnable war.

Even after the bloody battle of Ia Drang, where he lost so many men, Moore told journalists that he expected to clean out the entire valley in a few months. There would be so many failed attempts to accomplish this that American soldiers renamed the area the Valley of Death. And there is no reason to believe that President Johnson caused those failures.

Moore, a 1945 West Point graduate, led a force of paratroopers in the Korean War, in which thousands of lives were saved by helicopters that quickly evacuated the wounded.

In the Army's preparation for Vietnam, Moore played a central role in creating a new paratrooper strategy—to ferry airborne troops into battle positions and then move them out, in addition to rescuing the wounded. Helicopters also were to be armed as gun ships.

As an Army psychiatrist at that time, I had some personal experience with the pilots who were needed to implement this strategy. A steady stream of young soldiers came through my office to be screened for helicopter school. Some in the military had a jaundiced view of helicopters, seeing them as vulnerable targets that make a conspicuous and telling racket. Helicopters are easy targets for automatic weapons, and they have an array of technical limitations. In the view of skeptics, you had to be suicidal to volunteer to fly one into a battle zone.

But the young men I interviewed were not suicidal; it was 1961, and we were not even at war. As it turned out, however, the Army was already deploying helicopters to Vietnam. More than 2,000 eventually would be shot out of the skies there.

Moore and Galloway are not among the skeptics. They are alive today because the helicopters that ferried them into Ia Drang rescued them from the battlefield as the Vietcong closed in for the kill.

The impetus to make their memoir into a film came from writer-director Randall Wallace, who has a black belt in karate and specializes in war films. Wallace had written the screenplay for the Oscar-winning 1995 film "Braveheart," in which Mel Gibson played the 13th-century war hero of Scotland, William Wallace. Randall Wallace is a descendant of that Wallace clan, and the film was an exploration of his roots.

The director subsequently had a career setback with his screenplay for "Pearl Harbor," the Disney blockbuster that bombed. Wallace believes the Disney bosses were trying to ride the wave of success enjoyed by the 1997 epic film "Titanic"—a love story with catastrophe as the backdrop; the studio reworked his original screenplay

disastrously to that formulaic end.

Wallace, a resourceful man, had already made sure he would retain control of "We Were Soldiers." He happened upon the bestseller in an airport bookstore and decided to buy the screen rights with his own money. Eventually he took the project to Mel Gibson, an actor perfectly cast to portray the gung ho Moore.

In ignoring the politics of the Vietnam War, Wallace shrewdly followed the memoir. And in creating a Lt. Col. Moore for the screen, he replaced the man's John Birch politics with religiosity. The on-screen Moore is a devout Catholic who prays with his family and prays for his soldiers as he fulfills his patriotic duty.

He is shown relentlessly training and toughening his troops and bonding with the helicopter pilots who will ferry them. Greg Kinnear plays Maj. Bruce Crandall, the fearless pilot who will save the day. Crandall's strangely appropriate nickname in the film is "Snake Shit."

If one is skeptical about the Army's use of helicopters, there are levels of irony in this film that go far beyond the explicit intention of the screenplay. Wallace makes much of the fact that the Army gave Moore's new heliborne troops the same designation and shoulder patch as Gen. Custer's men—First Battalion, Seventh Cavalry. When Moore's men are surrounded by an overwhelming force at Ia Drang, he thinks of Custer and is determined that history shall not be repeated. The helicopters and Moore's heroism save the day.

In the most improbable scene in the movie, Crandall appears out of nowhere, as if his helicopter had silently reached the battlefield, and surprising the enemy, stops their advance with bursts of machine-gun fire.

The commercial formula of big Hollywood movies requires a virtual reality; you have to believe you are there feeling the adrenaline rush. Wallace gives the audience lots of that, beginning with French troops patrolling the Ia Drang Valley circa 1954. They are in outmoded, slow-moving vehicles and are cursing the war. A hail of bullets halts the string of curses. The convoy has been ambushed, and we see the French soldier who tried to sound the alarm by bugle silenced by a shot in the throat. The French are quickly slaughtered.

A Vietcong soldier asks his officer, "Do we take prisoners?" When he's told no, he shoots a defenseless French soldier. It is already a departure from the stereotype of the treacherous "gook" that this Vietcong soldier even asks. The scene ends with a Vietcong soldier picking up the useless bugle as a war trophy. Despite the gore, this is Wallace at his best, giving the film the feel if not the reality of historical context. The bugle ironically sets the scene for the new helicopter cavalry to come.

Because Wallace ignores politics, his film and the soldiers portrayed in it seem impossibly naive. Moore, as played by Gibson, is teaching his men by example to live and die for each other. He promises them he will be the first to set foot on the battlefield and the last to leave, and he will take everyone with him living or dead.

The animating premise of the film is the Army as the realization of the American melting pot. Black and white, North and South, Christian and Jew—everyone becomes family. The soldiers under Moore's command are shown dying for each other, and it is impossible to question their courage or their tragic sacrifice.

But Moore's competence and the military command in Vietnam can and should be questioned, and this film does not do that. Moore's First Battalion, Seventh Cavalry went looking for Vietcong in Ia Drang and landed in the middle of a force that far outnumbered them. Escaping a massacre was their only victory.

Yes, Wallace's film restores the humanity of the Vietcong, and it gives the Americans who fought and died there the respect they deserve. It has been described as an antiwar film, but it also celebrates the virtues of the naive warrior. Wallace held the film's premiere at West Point, where it got a warm reception.

When it comes to war, naiveté is the greatest sin. And "We Were Soldiers" makes it a virtue.

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