

# Anti-war film both right and wrong

Seen on a grand scale, war has sense and purpose. Look, for example, at our relentless fascination with World War II. But when you examine the effects of combat on a small number of men, war appears lunatic and futile. This personalized view of combat is, of course, the bread and butter of all successful anti-war books and films.

The film *Platoon* is the latest entry into the war-is-madness genre. It traces, in staccato style, the destruction of an American infantry platoon during the Vietnam War. We are amply regaled with the horrors of close combat, tunnel fighting, booby traps and ambushes, all done in a reasonably realistic style.

Woven into the story is a rather strained theme of mutual antagonism between the platoon's sergeants. Good guys stand out from bad guys and black soldiers come across as updated caricatures of those kindly spiritual-singing colored folk of Bygone Hollywood days.

In short, a pretty good war movie but hardly the "masterpiece" described by so many gushy reviewers.

Not surprisingly, left-wing groups have fastened onto the film, which by now has assumed cult dimensions, as another useful tool to promote their favorite fantasies about disarmament and the general wickedness of the military. Watching *Platoon*, one's heart may sometimes share such feelings — but that is no reason to shut down the brain. Like all anti-war epics, this film is right but also very wrong.

A hippo in Vietnam or France is not worth any man's life. This is the logic of all anti-war art. But a thousand hippopotamuses are worth a lot of lives. Every war is the sum-

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mation of tens of thousands of little battles between small groups of confused, weary and terrified men. We must remember that each horror scene in *Platoon* is no more than a rerun of Iwo Jima, Dieppe, Verdun or the Somme.

France's famous Marshal Foch was once asked, during World War I, why he never visited the front or toured field hospitals. "If I did," replied Foch, "I would never have been able to order another attack."

War may be individual madness, but unfortunately it makes very good collective sense — as mankind has found down through the centuries.

Provided, naturally, that one wins. There is nothing more pointless, wasteful or stupid than a lost war. Great anti-war art, literature and film more often comes from the losing side. If America had won the Vietnam War, it would have been glorified. Instead, we get bathos, such as *Platoon* or juvenile daydreams like the idiotic *Rambo* films. What we really should be remembering is not the stupidity of war, but the stupidity of the people who lost the war.

American soldiers were sent into an aimless war by presidents John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. They

were forced to fight with one hand tied behind their backs — to avoid civilian casualties and avoid provoking China. Politicians refused to heed the advice or warnings of their military men, so violating almost all the laws of warfare. Robert McNamara, that champion of disaster, was allowed to implement the policy of "gradual escalation" which guaranteed victory to North Vietnam.

Johnson's political fears and McNamara's incredible folly synergized to assure America's defeat. They lacked the resolve to win the war and the guts to stop it. The lives of 55,000 Americans were squandered in a vicious war that was not officially supposed to be a war at all. The public and Congress were routinely deceived. While the world was told Vietnam was a "guerrilla" conflict, American troops were fighting heavy divisions of the invading North Vietnamese Army. When the end came, it was North Vietnamese T-54 tanks and 130mm guns, not pyjama-clad guerrillas, that gave Hanoi victory.

No wonder American GIs in Nam began smoking pot or fragging officers who ordered them into combat. They knew the war was lost and saw no good reason to risk life or limb just to prevent the Democrats from losing office. Their disgust and nihilism, which I remember vividly to this day, had more to do with the stupidity of Washington and its military bureaucracy than the innate futility of war.

These GIs could have fought their way to Hanoi. Instead they had to slink home beaten, disgraced. To paraphrase the London *Times* description of British troops in the bungled Crimean War, they were truly "an army of lions, led by asses."