

American War Cinema

War in cinema has become a very American and lucrative tradition. Both World War II and Vietnam have garnered a great deal of attention from Hollywood. Being a huge fan of cinema and history, I have watched and purchased as many war movies as I can get my hands on. I don't look to cinema for historical fact, but for entertainment and hopefully a glimpse into the culture surrounding the conflict. Movies are not necessarily made for historical accuracy, but to make and generate revenue. I have watched *Saving Private Ryan* (WWII) and *We Were Soldiers* (Vietnam) multiple times. They both offer good insight when not taken as pure fact, but rather a small glimpse into what war may look like.

When first researching movies, I always reference professional reviews from movie critics and historians. On most sites, *Saving Private Ryan* scores extremely high. The film's opening scene (U.S troops storming the beaches of Normandy) is widely reviewed by critics and veterans as one of the most intense and accurate battle scenes ever depicted on film. Steven Spielberg's WWII film (released in '98), was loaded with a star-studded cast, including Tom Hanks, Edward Burns and Matt Damon. The film went on to win five academy awards, including best director. The film was based on an account written by Steven E. Ambrose, who was also used as a historical consultant.

We Were Soldiers, a film set during the Vietnam War and was released in 2002. The Randall Wallace directed film also had big name actors, including Mel Gibson, Greg Kinnear and Kris Klein. The film was based on one of America's first heated battles in Vietnam in '65, which resulted in producing tales of heroism and tragedy. The movie includes some intense, accurate and very well shot battle scenes and tries to tell the tale of both a soldier and the perspective of the soldier's family. The film was met with mediocre reviews and no Academy Awards.

Obviously both films are biased in the sense that they are American films, made by American's, and covering America's involvement in war. They both offer historical accuracies, but they of course pander to a ticket buying audience. Spielberg's pedigree as a filmmaker certainly helped the popularity of *Saving Private Ryan*, especially post *Schindler's List* success. To his credit, it is a meticulously shot film. Painting the picture of heroes in WWII is much easier to do than painting Vietnam Vet's as heroes.

WWII Vet's are viewed as heroes and referred to as America's greatest generation. The Nazi's provided a universal evil that united the masses in support of war. Vietnam Veterans met a very different world when returning from war. There were no ticker-tape parades, rather anti-war protests on the streets. Many Vietnam War Veterans were treated the opposite of a hero, and even referred to as baby killers. This

public perspective of both wars has been created for decades and further shaped by media.

Although both wars included countless heroic and tragic experiences, it is much easier to pitch a heroic WWII film to the public than it is to pitch a heroic Vietnam film. There are many critically acclaimed and popular Vietnam films, but most of them offer the typical anti-war sentiments that have become so wildly accepted by our culture. Films like *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket* and *Apocalypse Now*, are great examples. I enjoyed the change in perspective regarding the Vietnam War that “*We Were Soldiers*,” provided. Like all wars, the conflict in Vietnam provided stories of both heroism and chaos. A fair balance would offer both extremes.

Without covering all of the perspectives of a conflict, it is impossible to provide a balanced glimpse into war. The nature of war is horrific no matter how you analyze it. I found *Saving Private Ryan* to be a mesmerizing film with great acting, writing and wonderful attention to detail, typical of Spielberg. I found *We Were Soldiers* to be a refreshing glimpse into the Vietnam War that is not typically covered by American media, which also included some very well shot battle scenes. Both movies were overly and understandably patriotic. A certain level of propaganda is to be expected. They capture some of the universal horrors of war via an American lens.

Films like these should not be used as a sole provider of historical knowledge, but rather entertainment, or a new perspective on historical truths you have already researched. With that being said, both films worked hard to provide the sheer terror of war, and the psychic change, which accompanies that experience. Although WWII garners much more positive attention than Vietnam, all wars have their horror stories, scarred vet’s and fierce opposition. Metaphorically speaking, all wars have had their own versions of doves and hawks. I’m not a supporter of war, but I believe that all veterans subjected to the horror of wars should be treated with care and respect. I hope that the international film world continues to explore history, while also attempting to provide historical truths.

EXTRA CREDIT MOVIE REVIEW #1: LAST DAYS OF VIETNAM by Daniel Hovet

In the documentary, which essentially covers the lead up to the evacuation of Saigon in 1975 following the final North Vietnamese Invasion, many of those interviewed state in one way or another, that the abandonment of Vietnam was a great betrayal.

They are right.

I don't just mean because the United States promised South Vietnam that if the North attacked, they would respond with "full force, and yet never did (although that in and of itself would seem to qualify as a betrayal). I mean that after the commitment made to the South Vietnamese, after all the blood, sweat, and tears of the previous decades, finally just "bugging out" and leaving them to fend for themselves because the American people were "tired" is a horrible decision.

However one may have felt about the war initially, South Vietnam came to depend on the United States to help them, especially in the end. That commitment should have been honored; after years of fighting a bloody war to keep South Vietnam its own nation, if running away was the best option, then evacuating those allies in the south who were in danger due to their association with the U.S. should have at least been planned and provided for, rather than just crossing one's fingers and hoping that it wouldn't come to that. This documentary convinced me that whether or not we should have been involved in the war, and however it started, this was *not* the way to end it.

According to the film, upon President Richard Nixon's resignation in August 1974, the North Vietnamese no longer seriously feared retaliation from the U.S. if they were to violate the Paris Peace Accord. Apparently so, since when March 10th, 1975 rolled around, upwards of 160,000 North Vietnamese soldiers invaded the south, supported by tanks, armored vehicles, SA2 missiles to stave off air assault, and terror.

The documentary explains that the south had "ample reason" to fear the North Vietnamese. As Stuart Herrington mentions in his interview, the NVA's "conduct throughout the war had been violent and unforgiving", mentioning specifically the massacre of thousands of men, women, children, and infants at Hue. A master list of examples would be virtually endless. If you worked with or associated with the Americans, or had family members who did, a maelstrom of torture and death was coming your way; 15-16 divisions of it, to be precise, and their main goal was Saigon.

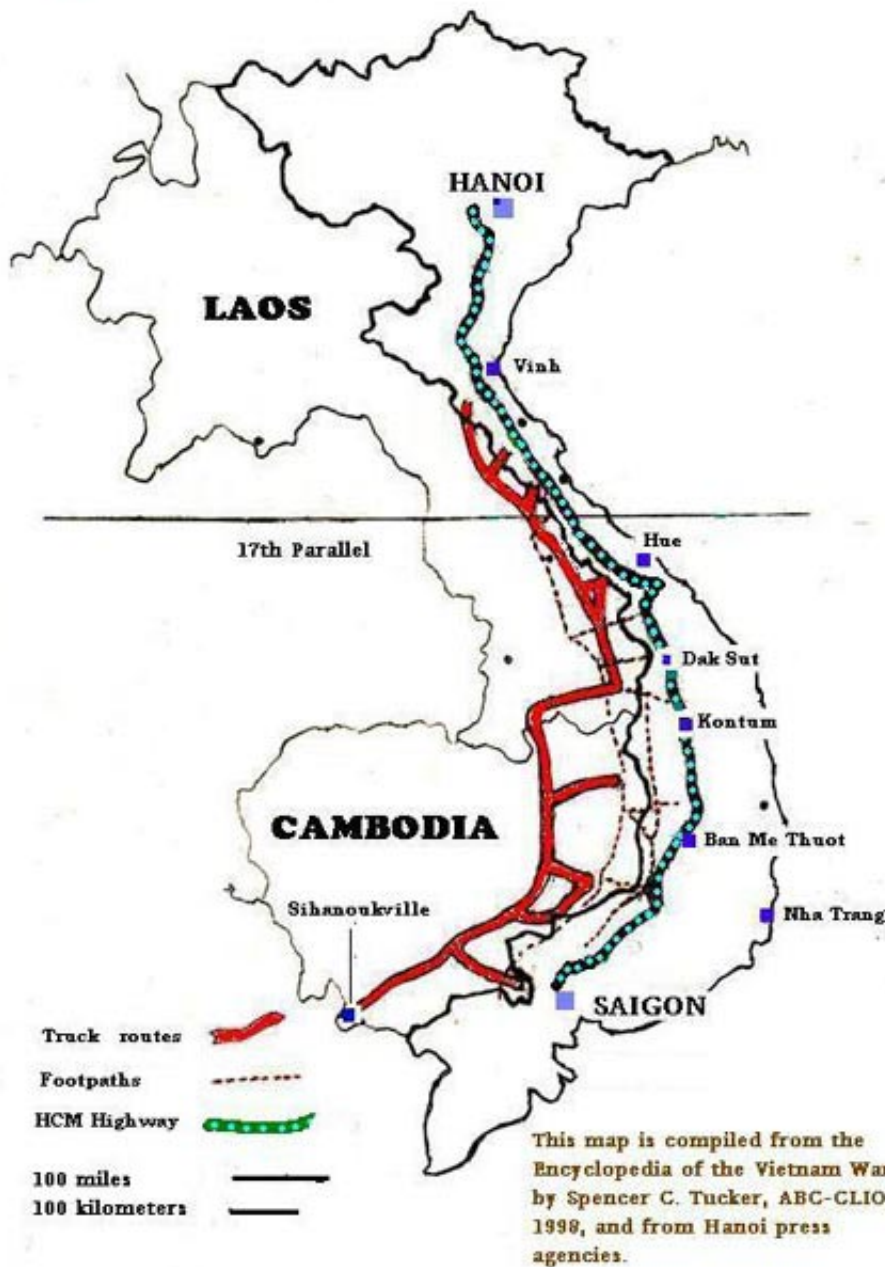
There was no official evacuation plan for the South Vietnamese in mortal risk.

There was a plan for the 6000 Americans to be evacuated; the 3 best options became unfeasible one by one, until finally, on the morning of April 29th, 1975, when the Saigon airport lay in a cratered blaze, the only possibility left was evacuation by helicopter from the U.S. Embassy grounds to the 50 U.S. Navy ships in the South China Sea. Despite Ambassador Graham Martin's efforts to get as many Vietnamese out on these helicopters with the Americans, many were left behind. Many others snuck Vietnamese out in any ways that they could, by helicopter, by plane, by barge and boat down rivers... in the end, 130,000 South Vietnamese made it out, and far too many were left behind.

Hundreds of thousands died in "re-education camps".

Was this simply a victory for Vietnamese nationalism? It certainly wasn't a victory for the South Vietnamese.

But wait a minute now; just what do we mean by “Vietnamese Nationalism”? To the Vietnamese communists, the place we knew as “North Vietnam” and “South Vietnam” were certainly not all there was to it. French Indochina originally comprised of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. To the communists/ “nationalists”, they were part of the goal too. So while “neutrality” was declared for Laos and Cambodia, that didn’t matter to the Vietnamese, or in the end, the Americans either. Consider the maps of the Ho Chi Minh Trail; they crisscross all throughout those two countries, meaning that the long, thin, snaky country of South Vietnam was never more than a few miles away from communist forces and potential incursion, and since invasion of the north was off the table from the start, the fight could never be brought to the Viet Cong; it always was brought to the South. Victory was never a possibility in Vietnam as long as “limited objectives” ruled the day.



So how did the “victory for Vietnamese nationalism” go in other parts of the communist’s Vietnam? I recently read the Associated Press’s article “Ambassador: U.S. handed Cambodia to ‘butcher’ 40 years ago”. It details the very, very often forgot story of the United States evacuation of Cambodia, less than *3 weeks* before the fall of Saigon. There was a last-second evacuation of Americans there too, named Operation Eagle

Pull.



Again, there was no plan for the evacuation of loyal Cambodians. Far, far fewer than the 130,000 South Vietnamese made it out. When the “communist Khmer Rouge guerillas stormed into Phnom Penh[,] they drove its 2 million inhabitants into the countryside at gunpoint, launching one of the bloodiest revolutions of modern times. Nearly 2 million Cambodians- one in every four- would die from executions, starvation and hideous torture”.

The ambassador to Cambodia at the time, John Gunther Dean put it this way:

“I honestly believe we did not do enough. There was something better that could have come out other than a genocide of 1.7 million people,” Dean says, explaining in part why he, a Jew, felt so strongly. “Now you must understand, I was born in Germany and suffered under Nazi oppression, so how could I turn over a people to the butcher?”

Just another communist “revolution”, producing a few more Stalinesque “communist statistics”.

The article continues:

Barry Broman, then a young diplomat, remembers a Cambodian woman who worked upcountry monitoring the war for the embassy who had also refused evacuation.

“One day she said, ‘They are in the city,’ and her contact said ‘OK, time to go.’ She refused. Later she reported, ‘They are in the building,’ and again refused to leave her post. Her last transmission was, ‘They are in the room. Good-bye.’ The line went dead.”

Truly a victory for Vietnamese Nationalism, wouldn't you say?

There is no “good war.” World War 2, if any would be the best war, we were there for a reason. We, with several other countries stepped in to stop a few countries from trying to take over the world. Vietnam on the other hand, was the United States jumping into a conflict we didn’t really need to be in and not making the situation any better. This essay will contrast and compare the two movies I viewed about these conflicts.

In *Saving Private Ryan* we enter at one the bloodiest days in human history, the D-Day invasion of Normandy and the aftermath of one man losing his three brothers. It follows a group of eight men that go searching through France to try and find Private Ryan. Their job is to get him home. The movie itself focuses entirely on the war and what they are going through to find this young private. It really shows what was happening in world war two. The men that were there and just trying to survive and also what war will do to you. When they finally get to the top of Normandy beach after surviving the slaughter that was the storming they get to the German holdouts and use flame throwers to burn them out and one person yells “don’t shoot them, let them burn.” On the other side of this when Captain Miller lets the German soldier go after Wade gets shot he explains “every man that I kill, the farther away from home I feel.” This contrast is very interesting. On one side you have pure hatred for what the Germans did or were doing and you have Captain Miller who is clearly just exhausted. He’s sick of fighting, he’s sick of losing men. He’s done with the whole thing.

We Were Soldiers on the other hand was more about the relationships that were happening than the war itself, besides the beginning of the movie. There is no actual movement by American forces to close to an hour into the movie. The first forty-five or so minutes are spent on character development and storyline development. Though once it gets going it is a story about the first major American altercation in the Vietnam war. Where two thousand North Vietnamese outnumbered some four hundred American troops in combat on what amounted to the size of a football field. The story follows several men in the 1/7th Air Cavalry division. They were trying something that had never been done, dropping men into war from helicopters. It follows the men in this unit as they go into war, and examines their families instead of just what they personally were dealing with.

I think to compare these two wars wouldn’t do either justice. On the surface they were both conflicts to stop a country from invading another, but at the start of Vietnam there was no Pearl Harbor. There wasn’t a massacre that no one saw coming. The Gulf of Tonkin was a means to an end, to get us over there. World War 2 had fighting on six out of the seven continents. Vietnam was pretty much only in and around South East Asia. They also both started in different points in their respective wars. *We Were Soldiers* started at the very first, American, campaign of the war. They were the first ones to really come under fire and a lot of them had no idea what they were going into. In the scene on the ridge where they tune into what’s coming in over the radio from the South Vietnamese and North Vietnamese conflict a lot of the men in the shot look dumbfounded by what they are about to walk into. Whereas in *Saving Private Ryan* those men, by the time they hit Normandy, had been there for a while. They weren’t “green recruits fresh out of basic. They had been fighting for some time, or so you are lead to believe.

Another key difference was how the movies were framed. The backdrop is roughly the same between the two

movies, soldiers going into the unknown in another country to fight because that is what soldier's do. But *We Were Soldiers* is framed in a more movie way. It was written to show the love interest, the conflicts they have about men going, and the aftermath as far as what happens to families. *Saving Private Ryan* is framed in a more documentary way. They don't add in all the "fluff" to make it easier to digest. They didn't need a love interest or to show how families react, aside from the main plot about the other three brothers dying so having to get Ryan home. They jumped in during the conflict and showed the men who were at that point confused and exhausted. When they are going through the dog tags and looking to see if Ryan's was one of them they are laughing, they are so detached from the situation that they couldn't help but joke as they tossed, effectively, dead men between them. That would not have been the case in *We Were Soldiers*. The dead men that they showed were yellow letters that were being hand delivered in a montage by Colonel Moore's and Lieutenant Geoghegan's wives.

While both movies at their core about conflicts that have happened in the past, they both start at different times in those conflicts so it is really hard to compare them. *Saving Private Ryan* accurately showed what that pivotal point in World War 2 was like. The men, the tension, the exhaustion whereas *We Were Soldiers* showed men fresh out of boot camp at the start of a conflict they didn't really understand how to fight. They both are highly regarded movies about their respective wars, and they both show how much of a massacre a situation can be if we don't know what we are walking into. War as they say "is hell" and both of these movies accurately show that point.