Through the Hollywood Lens: The Vietnam War

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First Lieutenant
4th Battalion, 9th Infantry Regiment
25th Division
Tay Ninh, Vietnam (1969-70)

Welcome!

• Thanks for attending!

• Vietnam veterans in class? (when? where?)
  • Other military veterans?

• Others in class --- where were you in 1969-70?
Course Objectives

- To engage students in an examination and critique of selected Vietnam movies
- To provide students with a first-hand commentary about the Vietnam experience
- To have students reflect on their experiences and perceptions of the Vietnam era
- To build and share a class consensus about the “most authentic” Vietnam movie

Course Resources

- Internet Movie Database (IMDb)
  http://www.imdb.com/
- YouTube (Fandango) “Movie Moments” Clips
  https://www.youtube.com/user/movieclips
- “The Things They Carried” by Tim O’Brien
  Broadway Books, 1998
  (Vietnam veteran with 5/46 Infantry Battalion, 23rd “Americal” Div., 1969-70)
- “Vietnam at 24 Frames A Second” by Jeremy M. Devine
  University of Texas Press, 1999  (available at Swem Library)
Course Calendar

- Three 2-hour sessions: Oct. 1, Oct. 8, and Oct. 15
  - 1:30 PM to 2:20 PM
  - Break at 2:20 PM
  - Resume 2:30 PM to 3:30 PM
- Session #1 = Overview, “Deer Hunter” “Apocalypse Now”
- Session #2 = “Platoon” “Full Metal Jacket” “Hamburger Hill”
- Session #3 = “Born on the Fourth of July” “Forrest Gump” “We Were Soldiers” Course Summary

Caveats

- *Movies are a form of entertainment, not necessarily reality*
- Movie reviews are inherently subjective
- *Lots of other* movies & documentaries (150+) about Vietnam
- *My personal* Vietnam observations and reflections from 1969-70; not necessarily the same for others
- Will attempt to minimize political and moral judgements
- Encourage class interaction, but must be mindful of time
- *Some movie clips used in this course contain graphic language and violence*
Some Vietnam war statistics

- 2,594,000 personnel served within the borders of South Vietnam Jan. 1, 1965 - Mar. 28, 1973
- Hostile deaths: 47,378  Non-hostile deaths: 10,800  Total = 58,202
- Vietnam Vets = 9.7% of their generation
- 25% (648,500) of total forces in country were draftees
- 97% of Vietnam-era veterans were honorably discharged
- 85% of Vietnam Veterans made a successful transition to civilian life

Some Vietnam war statistics

- There is no difference in drug usage between Vietnam Veterans and non-Vietnam Veterans of the same age group (V.A. study)
- 1,713,823 who served in Vietnam were still alive as of August, 1995 (U.S. Census)
- During that same census count, the number of Americans falsely claiming to have served in-country was: 9,492,958
Elements of a unique war

- Most American troops were not professional soldiers, i.e., Vietnam war preceded the “all volunteer” Army era.
- “Unit” versus “individual” replacement rotations (and effect of individual replacements on unit morale and esprit de corps).
- Base Camp ➔ Fire Support Base operations ➔ (= small-unit operations).
- Air mobility, free fire zones, rainy season/dry season, search and destroy, “mad minutes”.

Elements of a unique war

- Non-combatants typically indistinguishable from enemy troops (…and sometimes they were both).
- Jungle environment (mostly, II Corps, III Corps and IV Corps).
- Lack of public support for the war and American troops (anti-war movement).
Terminology – Army organization & size

• **Squad** – 4 to 10 soldiers (Staff Sgt.)
• **Platoon** – 3 to 4 squads: 16 to 40 soldiers (Lieutenant)
• **Company** – 3 to 4 platoons: 100 to 200 soldiers (Captain)
• **Battalion** – 3 to 5 companies: 500 to 600 soldiers (Lt. Col.)
• **Brigade** – 3 or more Battalions: 3,000 to 5,000 soldiers (Colonel)
• **Division** – 3 Brigades: 10,000 to 18,000 soldiers (Maj. General)
• **Corps** – 2 to 5 divisions: 20,000 – 40,000 soldiers (Lt. General)

(Other Army “unit” terms: regiment, squadron, battery, etc.)

Source: [https://www.army.mil/info/organization/unitsandcommands/oud/](https://www.army.mil/info/organization/unitsandcommands/oud/)

My Army Background

• Graduated as 2nd Lieutenant from ROTC program at William & Mary in 1968
• Trained as an Armor Officer at Ft. Knox
• First duty assignment as Military Police Officer at Ft. Dix (759th M.P. Battalion)
• Assigned to RVN in June 1969 as an infantry platoon leader with 4/9 Inf. “Manchus” in Tay Ninh Province
• Served as an infantry platoon leader, support platoon leader, Battalion S4
• Returned home at end of June 1970, continued in Army reserves for 3+ years
Where in Vietnam?

- (...mostly in) Tay Ninh Province
- III Corps, War Zone C
- End of Ho Chi Minh Trail (and re-enter South Vietnam)
- Tay Ninh Base Camp shared by 25th Division and 1st Cav (Cu Chi was home base for 25th Div.)
- Also known as “Rocket City”
- Home of “Cao Dai” religion
- Nui Ba Den (Black Virgin Mountain)
- 25th Div. in Cambodia, May-June 1970, near Krek 🌟

III Corps detail (25th Div. and 1st Cav)
Vietnam Movies (...in this course)

- The Deer Hunter (1978) (Oscar for Best Picture)
- Apocalypse Now (1979) (Nominated for Best Picture)
- Platoon (1986) (Oscar for Best Picture)
- Full Metal Jacket (1987)
- Hamburger Hill (1987)
- Born on the Fourth of July (1989) (Nominated for Best Picture)
- Forrest Gump (1994) (Oscar for Best Picture)
- We Were Soldiers (2002)

Consensus about “...most authentic”?

- For me, the most important criterion is:
  Which film most accurately and faithfully portrays the
day-to-day life of a “grunt” in Vietnam?
- e.g., “The Things They Carried” is an excellent semi-fictional,
literary account of what it was like to be a grunt in Vietnam
- Other criteria (for you) might include:
  - Historical accuracy
  - Most authentic battle scenes
  - Character specific authenticity (e.g., Ron Kovic, LTC Hal Moore)
  - All the films contain some significant aspects of the Vietnam experience
The Deer Hunter (1978)

- Directed by Michael Cimino
- Won 5 Oscars, including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Supporting Actor (Christopher Walken), Best Film Editing, Best Sound
- Nominated for 4 other Oscars
- Vietnam sequences filmed in Thailand
- Deer Hunter trailer
- Bar scene
- Russian dance
- Russian Roulette
- One Last Shot
- God Bless America

What the movie got right

- Spot on depiction of Pennsylvania “steel town,” eastern European ethnic influences, and working class lives
- Strong camaraderie between steel mill friends, and then, brothers in war (i.e., male bonding and friendship)
- The “...thousand-yard stare”
- How the Vietnam war changed the lives of participants (soldiers)
- How the Vietnam war did not change the lives of those who stayed at home (e.g., the steelworkers)
- Brought attention to Vietnam veterans before it was fashionable (preceded the “Wall” by 4 years – Jan Scruggs influenced by the movie)
What the movie got wrong

- NO 14,000 ft., snow-capped mountains in Pennsylvania? (actually filmed in the northern Cascade Range in Washington state)
- Many criticisms about the use of “Russian roulette” theme (a metaphor [?] for the likelihood of death during your tour of duty, and also a metaphor for the “big business” interests of the Vietnam war)
- Portrayed (too many) Vietnam veterans as emotionally disabled, stressed by an intense war experience (…a continuing theme in other Vietnam movies)
- Not much about actual Vietnam events (no specific battles or locations) --- more about universal aspects of “war” on soldiers
- Stereotype of cruel and brutal Vietnamese ethnicity
- Questions? Observations? Comments?

Apocalypse Now (1979)

- Directed by Francis Ford Coppola
- Vietnam adaptation of Joseph Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness”
- Won 2 Oscars (Cinematography and Sound), nominated for 6 other Oscars, including Best Picture
- Vietnam sequences filmed in the Philippines
  - Terminate, with extreme prejudice
  - Ride of the Valkyries
  - The Smell of Napalm In the Morning
  - Suzie Q
  - Do Long Bridge Roach Scene
  - Arrival in Hell
What the movie got right

- Visually stunning movie, visceral images
- The “horror” of war
- “…In this war, things get confused out there.” (LTG Corman)
- Over-the-top battalion commander LTC Bill Kilgore (Robert Duvall) – yes, there were a few like him
- Steaks and beer (and lobster) for unit stand-downs
- “Round eyes” (e.g., Playboy Bunnies) in the most unlikely places
- Effectiveness of M-79 “blooper” in skilled hands
- Brown water Navy also played an important role in Vietnam

What the movie got wrong

- Too much dramatic license with storyline and allegory about journey “up the river” as a descent into an uncivilized hell
- Very unlikely that Col. Kurtz character would have actually existed or would have been the target of an (American) assassination attempt
- Questionable whether LTC Kilgore would have attacked an entire village, especially without any command authorization?
- Air assault on 2nd village lacked any observable support or re-supply for helicopters, ammunition, etc., following first mission (also, too few helicopters for a battalion-sized assault, and no tanks or landing craft?)
- Vietnam geography is a bit confused (i.e., no river into Cambodia from II Corps – II Corps has only surfing beaches on Vietnam coast)
- Questions? Observations? Comments?
Next Week

• Session #2
• “Platoon,” “Full Metal Jacket,” “Hamburger Hill,”

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Thanks for attending!