Through the Hollywood Lens: The Vietnam War

Scott A. Langhorst, Ph.D.

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

Questions or comments from last week?

Cao Dai Temple
Tay Ninh
Platoon (1986)

- Won 4 Oscars (Best Picture, Director, Sound, Film Editing) and nominated for 4 other Oscars
- Vietnam sequences filmed in the Philippines
- Sgt. Elias and Sgt. Barnes = battle between good and evil
  - Elias Fights Barnes
  - Underworld Smoke Scene
  - I Am Reality
  - Pecker Hard  Powder Dry
  - Final battle scene
  - Taylor kills Barnes

What the movie got right

- Focused on the “grunt” in the field in Vietnam
- The language of grunts – Vietnam War lingo and idiom
- Two sub-cultures of troops: alcoholics and potheads
- Latrines inside base camp and burning with diesel fuel
- Individual replacement rotation affected unit morale (especially FNG’s)
- The grind of humping all day, and pulling (perimeter) guard duty or ambush duty at night
- Night ambush patrols were particularly stressful and exhausting
- The simultaneous joy and anxiety of being “short” in the ‘Nam
What the movie got wrong

• Too much of a dichotomy between good and evil characters (most soldiers were a little bit of both Sgt. Elias and Sgt. Barnes)

• Opening air arrival --- new troops in Vietnam typically not yet assigned to any unit --- assigned through replacement units like 90th in Long Binh (but Charlie Sheen has 25th Infantry Div. patch already on his shoulder)

• (Mountainous) terrain not like Tay Ninh Province “...somewhere near the Cambodian border” [= generally flat jungle terrain, except for Nui Ba Den]

• Final battle (on Cambodian border) most likely would have been an attack on a fire support base containing artillery, rather than a “battalion perimeter” with just foxholes (Oliver Stone was a real-life participant in attack on FSB Burt in Tay Ninh Province in Jan. 1968 with 3/22 Inf., 25th Div.)

• Questions? Observations? Comments?

Full Metal Jacket (1987)

• Directed by Stanley Kubrick

• Nominated for 1 Oscar (Adapted Screenplay) (Michael Herr – Vietnam War correspondent, author of “Dispatches)

• Vietnam sequences filmed in England

• First half of movie depicts the U.S. Marine boot camp experience at Paris Island - second half depicts 1968 Tet offensive and Battle of Hue

• Opening Scene
• Private Pyle
• Rifle Range
• Me love you long time
• Animal Mother
• Bird is the Word
• Mickey Mouse song

© Scott A. Langhorst, Ph.D.
What the movie got right

• Drill Instructor (R. Lee Ermey) taking care of business
• Boot camp experience is tough both physically and mentally
• Small unit camaraderie and friendships
• Boom-boom girls
• Base Camp (Da Nang?) look and feel
• Battle of Hue somewhat unique in that it was more like a traditional “war,” i.e., urban area, street to street, house to house engagements (as noted by “Cowboy” in TV interview)
• Intrusiveness of TV cameras and reporters in a battle zone

What the movie got wrong

• A real Drill Instructor would not have physically hit recruits (...at least not in public)
• Pvt. Lawrence would not have been able to get live 7.62 mm rounds back from the firing range and into the barracks (...too many checks)
• Wrong boots – in the movie, troops wear stateside black leather boots instead of (Vietnam) jungle boots
• Doubtful whether Marine Colonel would have let Pvt. Joker off so easily about peace symbol button?
• No saluting of officers in a combat operations area
• Vietnamese sniper was an unrealistically good shot (?), especially without a scope
• Questions? Observations? Comments?
Hamburger Hill (1987)

- Directed by John Irvin (filmed a documentary in Vietnam – 1969)
- Screenplay - James Carabatsos (Vietnam veteran with 1st CAV, 1968-69)
- Vietnam sequences filmed in the Philippines
- We Don't Start Fights _ We Finish Them
- We Gotta Get Out of this Place
- It Don't Mean Nothing _ Not a Thing
- My Darling
- Break-Up Letter
- You Haven't Earned the right
- That's Why I'm Here
- Final Push

What the movie got right

- (Technical advisors for the film were participants in the battle)
- Day-to-day life as a grunt in combat
- Sense of frustration and futility with mission and objectives
- The “fog of war” during a battle
- High elephant grass in the bush
- Eagle flight combat insertion
- The language of grunts – Vietnam War lingo and idiom
- Audio tapes/letters from home (sometimes good news, sometime bad news)
- Intrusiveness of reporters and T.V. cameras
- Nothing has changed back in the world – Vietnam far away

© Scott A. Langhorst, Ph.D.
What the movie got wrong

• Improper radio procedure for artillery fire mission ("rounds out" "splash")
• Some troops carrying too much stuff for an (uphill) assault ???
• No visible ordnance on the F-4’s during air strikes (only wing tanks)
• A few chronology errors during the movie timeframe – items/events before they actually happened (e.g., "I feel Like I’m Fixin to Die Rag" Woodstock version prior to song’s actual August, 1969 release date)
• (Error of omission) Did not convey to the movie audience that the actual North Vietnamese Army troop strength on Hill 937 was estimated to be 2 battalions (800 men) of the 29th NVA Regiment
• Questions? Observations? Comments?

Next Week

• Session #3
• “Born on the Fourth of July,” “Forrest Gump,” “We Were Soldiers”
• Course summary & wrap-up
Contact Information

Scott A. Langhorst, Ph.D.

www.linkedin.com/in/scottlanghorst/

3608 Bradinton
Williamsburg, VA 23188
757-254-7983
slanghorst@cox.net
https://sites.google.com/site/langhorstvlms/

Thanks for attending!