

Through the Hollywood Lens: The Vietnam War



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First Lieutenant
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Tay Ninh, Vietnam (1969-70)

Using Zoom tools - reminder

- Use the menu bar (mouse over bottom/top of screen) to appear
- Use icons to on menu bar open tools (click “on” click “off”)
- Use “chat box” to ask questions or make comments
- Use “participant” list for raising hand or other gestures
- Make the session interactive by using the Zoom tools

Questions or comments from last week?

Cao Dai Temple
Tay Ninh



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
- Storyline: An allegory about the elements of the human psyche, and the struggle to maintain balance and sanity in the horrendous conditions of war. Captain Willard is assigned to assassinate a "mad" Colonel Kurtz and must complete a perilous journey up a river into the wild depths of Vietnam.



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?





Platoon (1986)

- Directed by Oliver Stone
(Vietnam veteran, 3/22 Inf., 25th Div., 1967-68, in Tay Ninh Province)
- 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
- Storyline: A young recruit, Chris Taylor, faces moral crisis when confronted with the horrors of the Vietnam war and the duality of man. Two righteously different Sergeants battle each other, and fight for the soul of Chris Taylor. Chris must make a decision...



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?



Hamburger Hill (1987)

- Directed by John Irvin (filmed a documentary in Vietnam – 1969)
- Screenplay - James Carabatsos (Vietnam veteran with 1st CAV, 1968-69)
- Real Vietnam battle and unit (Hill 937, A Shau Valley, 3/187 Inf., 101st Airborne Div., May 11-20, 1969)
- Vietnam sequences filmed in the Philippines
- Storyline: A true story of a squad of soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division during the brutal 10-day battle for Hill 937 in the A Shau Valley of Vietnam as they try again and again to take the fortified hill held by the North Vietnamese. The frustration, pain, and futility of war is exposed in the interactions among the soldiers.





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



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?





Comments ? Questions?

- You can send text questions through the chat box, OR,
- You can “raise you hand” and we will try an audio/video interaction



Next Week

- Session #3
- “Forrest Gump,” “We Were Soldiers”
- Course summary & wrap-up



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Thanks for attending!

