Ordinary Heroes:
Depictions of Masculinity in World War II Film

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by

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Abstract

Much work has been done investigating the historical accuracy of World War II film, but no work has been done using these films to explore social values. From a mixed film studies and historical perspective, this essay investigates movie images of American soldiers in the European Theater of Operations to analyze changing perceptions of masculinity. An examination of ten films chronologically shows a distinct change from the post-war period to the present in the depiction of American soldiers. Masculinity undergoes a marked change from the film Battleground (1949) to Band of Brothers (2001). These changes coincide with monumental shifts in American culture. Events such as the loss of the Vietnam War dramatically changed perceptions of the Second World War and the men who fought during that time period. The United States had to deal with a loss of masculinity that came with their defeat in Vietnam and that shift is reflected in these films. The soldiers depicted become more skeptical of their leadership and become more uncertain of themselves while simultaneously appearing more emotional. Over time, realistic images became acceptable and, in fact, celebrated as truthful while no less masculine. In more recent years, there is a return to the heroism of the World War II generation, with an added emotionality and dimensionality. Films reveal not only the popular opinions of the men who fought and reflect on the validity of the war, but also show contemporary views of masculinity and warfare. These depictions, in turn, affected the way men perceived themselves and acted in their real-life roles.
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Introduction

Three servicemen—a soldier, a sailor, and a pilot—return to the United States shortly after the end of World War II. The “Great Crusade” has been completed and they are eager to return to their families and their previous lives. The sailor, a very young man who lost his hands, reflects the sacrifices made by American men in the Second World War. He worries that his fiancée will not accept him with his new disability. The pilot returns to find that his prewar job is gone and his wife is no longer in love with him. The soldier returns to a family that does not recognize who he became, but accepts him nonetheless. Despite the difficulties that they face upon return, the men are proud of the service they gave to their country and of the sacrifices they made.¹ *The Best Years of Our Lives*, which won multiple Academy Awards in 1946, ends on a positive note with Homer, the amputee, getting married and all the men, despite their difficulties working their way back into American society. They all still believe in the service and sacrifices they made, and the film sends an overwhelmingly positive message about returning soldiers to the viewing audience.²

*The Best Years of Our Lives* reveals how film is a medium that reflects contemporary social values. Through the lens, directors tell stories of triumph and failure, friendship, love, and loss. Film allows us to celebrate past glories. It also allows directors to display how they perceive certain past events and the people who participated in them. Masculinity in particular is a theme thoroughly explored in film, especially films about World War II. Nowhere is there a site more appropriate for studying masculinity. Men engaged in warfare experience the most extreme

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² Ibid.
human emotions and engage in the most extreme human actions. Warfare forces men to break social norms concerning murder and the theft of personal property, and it intensifies traditional male traits of aggressiveness and emotional disconnection. Most Americans perceive soldiers, particularly those of the World War II generation, as the epitome of idealized masculinity. They sacrificed their lives and won possibly the most well-regarded and well-remembered war in our history. Directors have used these men to demonstrate how contemporary American society viewed masculinity right after the war and across the decades that followed.

World War II films have saturated our society. Since the end of the war, there have been a multitude of films dedicated to the topic of American involvement in the Second World War. From The Best Years of Our Lives in 1946 to Flags of our Fathers in 2006, World War II has been a popular subject in films. Movies have depicted nearly every aspect of the war. Throughout the period after 1945, World War II films promoted specific images of masculinity that were operative in the times when the films were made. The films chosen for analysis in this essay are those about the United States Army fighting in the European theater. These films convey the fighting experiences of the common American soldier and of the enemy combatants who could be humanized because they were similar enough in appearance to their American counterparts.

Depictions of masculinity during World War II in film fall into three distinct periods. In the first period— the twenty years after victory— the image of the idealized male served as a glorification of the recently won war. Through using such masculine figures as John Wayne and Audie Murphy, these films were able to create an image of the stoic, unemotional, unyieldingly loyal, but wholly unrealistic male. With the exception of minority characters, the soldiers in this
period never questioned their duty and always completed their missions. Films in this period include *Battleground* (1949), *To Hell and Back* (1955), and *The Longest Day* (1962).

After the establishment of this idealized, seemingly perfect male, there came the Vietnam era, 1965-1980. In this period, Americans lost a war and in the process suffered a perceived loss of masculinity. Thus, films produced during this period depicted emotional and weak men. No longer were men unquestioningly loyal; instead they routinely defied their commander’s authority. The films were about failed missions like Operation Market Garden and the idolized figures of masculinity, like John Wayne, no longer appeared in starring roles. Films of this period include *The Bridge at Remagen* (1969), *The Slaughterhouse-Five* (1972), *A Bridge Too Far* (1977), and *The Big Red One* (1980).

The modern era— encompassing the last decade— saw not only a renewed interest in film depictions of World War II, but also a new view of masculinity. World War II films became an avenue to show a version of masculinity that was much more realistic. This period saw men as emotional and flawed, but heroic nonetheless. Questioning duty and being openly emotional no longer seemed to be non-masculine traits. Soldiers could voice their opposition to whatever mission they were assigned, but in the end, they found value in it and accomplished their objectives. The films in this period include *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and the television miniseries, *Band of Brothers* (2001).

World War II films range from the establishment of flawless masculinity in the post-war period, to the deconstruction of idealized masculinity in the Vietnam era, to the synthesis of both eras in modern times. Through all of these films, there is clear change in depictions from era to era. Audiences learn through film how their society believes men should behave and exhibit their masculinity. Further, film affects the memory of the audience. After viewing any film based
upon a historical event, audience perception and recollection of that event is forever altered. Directors through their films can change memories of real events and real people to fit into a “framework of the present” making them reflect the values of the contemporary world.³ It is nearly impossible to think, after viewing To Hell and Back, A Bridge Too Far, Saving Private Ryan, or any number of other similar films, that an individual does not recall scenes and depictions from those movies whenever a World War II event is mentioned. World War II film provides a unique glimpse at the values that the United States sought to protect in the greatest conflict of all time.

Chapter 1

The United States had won a hard fought victory. The world rejoiced at the defeat of Nazism and other forms of Fascist imperialism. Around the world, peoples of all nations were eager to return to what ever semblance of normal life they could recover. Soldiers were ready to return to their loved ones and the lives they once led. Families mourned those they had lost, but were comforted in the fact that their sons had died for what was perceived as a noble cause. Most Americans simply wanted to forget the horrors that they had just experienced; they no longer wanted to see the violence and bloodshed that had been all too real for the previous four years. This hope did not last long. After a brief year immediately following the war, people were ready to celebrate the heroics of their soldiers in battle and nowhere was that more evident than in post-war Hollywood. As military film historian Lawrence Suid said in *Stars and Stripes on the Screen*, “Despite protestations that they love peace, most Americans actually love violence…Only in the periods immediately following every war have filmmakers believed audiences would not want to relive recent hostilities.”

The immediate post-war years established a hyper-masculine depiction of the men who fought in World War II. In the films made from 1945-1965, men were impossibly stoic in the face of devastation and rarely questioned their commanders or their mission. This was a reflection of the society of post-war America where Hollywood was eager to glorify the recent victory and to emphasize the strength and masculinity of the men who fought in the Second World. Simultaneously, it provided a demonstration of the martial spirit of the United States and the strength of its fighting forces, establishing it as a powerful counter to the specter of communism creeping across Eastern Europe. Overt masculinity was the way in which Americans

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chose to view their fighting men and Hollywood was able to provide that in a series of box office hits.

The movies of this era show men in an uncritical and positive, yet unrealistic, light. In this period, no man questions his duties nor gets emotional about losing a friend in battle. Men simply did whatever was asked of them without hesitation and without considering the repercussions of their actions or the potentially amoral tasks they had to accomplish. There was no discussion of the morality of warfare, nor at any point did the soldiers inquire why young men were fighting and dying in Europe. The stoic, unemotional male was the norm and those who broke that norm were marginalized characters who were killed because of their perceived irrational emotionality.

In order to establish the masculine character, filmmakers had to find stories and soldiers who would represent their idealized man. The first dramatic film to fictionalize the exploits of American soldiers was *Battleground* in 1949. This film showed the plight of the American paratroopers in Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge. Choosing to show this battle as the first European Theater of Operations confrontation on film sent a clear message to the American public. The paratroopers who fought in Bastogne were referred to as the “Battling Bastards of Bastogne” because of their refusal to surrender despite being under-equipped, under-dressed, and under-fed while facing the onslaught of a superior German force. Their exploits were widely reported and celebrated during the war when they held off repeated German attacks with a small contingent of soldiers.

When the Battle of the Bulge began on December 16, 1944, the American soldiers believed that they would be home by Christmas and assumed that the Germans were nearly defeated. Instead, they found themselves suddenly surrounded by a quarter of a million German
soldiers who hoped to split the American and British armies and force a peace more favorable to the Germans. The Germans, though, encountered an American force that would not surrender despite the fact that soldiers were not equipped with winter clothing and had rapidly diminishing supplies. The paratroopers occupied Bastogne and repelled attack after attack by crack German SS troops and Panzer corps. When asked by the German commanders to surrender or be annihilated, American General McAuliffe simply replied with the now famous response of “Nuts!” which exemplified the defiant American spirit. The stories coming out of Europe from this battle were easily reported and sensationalized. Americans all over the continent devoured the tales of individual heroics, which played well into the belief in American individuality.

From these stories of the paratroopers in Bastogne came the movie Battleground. The film, drawing on the personal experiences of Robert Pirosh, one of the screenwriters, was highly realistic. It opens with a young, fresh replacement soldier trying to integrate himself into his new unit. Though his initial attempts fail, and he is ignored repeatedly, he eventually gains acceptance into his squad. Early in the film, the men travel Bastogne, where they spend one night in a local house before being deployed to the outskirts of the town.

Their night in the house establishes a contrast between masculine and feminine characters that is consistent throughout the period. The woman who lives in the house is a generalized character who appears as a stereotypical female. She is a one-dimensional, undeveloped character, in contrast to the strong male soldiers being deployed around the town. She is ogled,


6 Ibid., 344.

7 Ibid., 349. This exchange between the Germans and Americans is used in every film that shows the Battle of the Bulge as it was a widely popularized anecdote that was not apocryphal.
harassed, and sexualized as an object to fulfill the base needs of the soldiers: housing, warmth, and food. The soldiers steal eggs from her with seemingly no remorse and thus her character further contrasts with theirs as she appears to be the epitome of womanly purity.8

This is consistent with the other movie in this period that has female characters. In To Hell and Back, which is the story of Audie Murphy, America’s most decorated soldier from World War II, women are just as generalized and marginalized as in Battleground. When the soldiers go to a local bar before they are redeployed, there is a woman dancing, singing, and being especially flirtatious with the American soldiers. Her character simply serves the purpose of being a sexual object to satisfy the carnal desires of the male soldiers. Another incident which further illuminates this contrast is when the soldiers go on a weekend pass to Paris. While there, each of the main male characters encounters a woman who is a one-dimensional caricature of all females. These women also come off as deceptive and conniving, as one of the soldiers has his boots stolen by the woman with whom he goes home that evening.9

Murphy himself encounters a female character who is more emotionally developed, but questions why he is fighting and why he does not just take the easy way out. To this, he responds, “It’s hard not to take the easy way out when it’s right there in front of you.”10 Despite this statement, Murphy obviously always makes the hard decisions necessitated by war and never backs down from his obligations. He continually goes above and beyond the call of duty and is justly rewarded for his efforts with numerous medals and promotions.

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8 Battleground, dir. William A. Wellman, 118 min., Warner Brothers, 1949, DVD.

9 To Hell and Back, dir. Jesse Hibbs, 106 min., Universal, 1955, DVD.

10 Ibid.
Just like using the Battle for Bastogne, presenting the story of Audie Murphy helps to establish the idealized masculinity of the post-World War II era. His story needs little exaggeration or fictionalization to make him the epitome of the hyper-masculine male. He had a tough upbringing during the Great Depression, like most of the young men who fought in Europe. His father left the family when Audie was 12, supposedly to try and find work elsewhere and send back paychecks, though this never happened. Murphy was then forced to get a job to support his brothers and sisters. At 16, his mother died, leaving him and his older married sister Corinne to take care of the family. She could not support the entire family and he was too young to become the guardians, so some of his brothers and sisters were forced into foster care.\(^\text{11}\) From this tough upbringing came an incredibly determined young man who exhibited the American spirit of pulling oneself up by the bootstraps and accomplishing great things despite massive obstacles.

His Army career similarly was fraught with difficulties before it even started because he was too small to join the Marine Corps, Navy, and Paratroops. Even after he joined the Army, his commanding officer wanted to reassign him to a non-rifle corps because of his small stature, but he refused any special treatment. Instead, he proved his commander’s concerns wrong by continually displaying self-sacrificing and incredible heroics. Time and again, he risked his own life to save the lives of his fellow soldiers, but never in his memoir, upon which the movie of the same name was based, does he emphasize his own heroics over those of others, displaying tremendous humility and bolstering his status as an idealized male.

The movie, starring Audie Murphy as himself, allowed his heroics to be glorified. At the beginning of the film, his hardscrabble upbringing establishes him as the embodiment of

American masculinity. He hunts for his family’s sustenance and takes on extra jobs in order to provide for his struggling family, never once complaining or worrying about his own well-being. After his mother dies and he hears of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, he is fervent about making his own contribution to the war effort. He is emasculated by the Marines where the recruiter, despite Audie’s obvious desire to enlist, says, “It’ll take more than a letter from your guardian to get you in this outfit, sonny. We separate the men from the boys, but we like to have something to start with. Why don’t you try the Army?” Audie is further humiliated when he tries to enlist in the Navy. He is laughed at by the other men in line, and told by the recruiter, “The Navy makes men out of boys, but you’re too much of a job for us. Why don’t you try the Army?” Even when he does finally join the Army, he is still marginalized, ridiculed, and scorned for his boyish, non-masculine, appearance until the men in his outfit first see him in combat. Despite all of this, throughout the film, he displays unyielding heroism, sacrifice, and humility, establishing himself as an idealized male.

The third movie in the first era also used an actor who can be considered the embodiment of idealized masculinity. John Wayne was the star of many film westerns and nearly always played an overly masculine, heroic character who could be idolized by young men across America. As Lawrence Suid puts it, “America’s glorification of war and the virtue of dying for one’s country [were] ideals at the core of the Wayne image.” Wayne starred in The Longest Day, which is a retelling of the story of June 6, 1944, D-Day. Using Wayne in the movie as a

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12 To Hell and Back.

13 Ibid.

main character sends a specific message to the viewer about masculinity from the start. As Wayne had acted in over 100 films, mostly in starring roles, prior to the release of *The Longest Day* in 1962, he was without question a very familiar masculine character and a strong male role model to most of America.\(^{15}\) Most, if not all of the people going to see the movie immediately associated Wayne with his on screen manly characters. The film also contains other truly iconic masculine figures such as Sean Connery and Henry Fonda to further associate fighting in World War II with being a man.

*The Longest Day* is consistent with the other three films of this period, as the men in it appear as unemotional, unquestioningly loyal soldiers and the film itself is a depiction of a successful battle. Soldiers in the film are extremely excited to enter combat, and have little fear. When they fly over Northern France and the green light comes on in their plane, denoting that it is time to jump, no soldier hesitates at the door, despite the anti-aircraft explosions occurring in the air. Moreover, a soldier says, “Let us go find this here war” in the early morning hours of D-Day, despite the overwhelming number of German soldiers in Northern France waiting to engage the Allies in combat.\(^{16}\) Another soldier, talking about the quickly approaching battle says, “People are going to remember this day long after we are dead and gone. It gives me goose-pimples just thinking about it.”\(^{17}\) These statements and actions help to project the image of the soldier who is ready for combat and does not worry himself with the potential risks, including loss of life.


\(^{16}\) *The Longest Day*, dir. Ken Annakin, et al., 360 min., Twentieth Century Fox, 1962, DVD.

\(^{17}\) Ibid.
Further, death in *The Longest Day* appears in the same way as in the other two films. Men do not have protracted deaths, but instead, they clutch their body wherever we are to believe that they were hit, and fall to the ground. Other soldiers would shake for a moment in place to denote the bullets hitting them, then fall to the ground. Usually, some simplistic statement follows. In *The Longest Day*, a soldier who is shot by a German says, as he falls to the ground holding his stomach, “Two clicks, I heard two clicks,” referring to the click toys paratroopers received to identify one another when they dropped into France in the early morning hours of D-Day.\(^{18}\) There is no crying, no emotionality, and apparently little pain in being shot; death comes quickly.

In contrast to the shortened death speeches, other men make more dramatic speeches as they subscribe to the ideals of heroism and glorify the sacrifices made by those soldiers who died. John Wayne’s character, Lt. Col. Ben Vandervoort, makes a speech when his outnumbered and outgunned squad is trying to hold the town of Ste. Mere-Eglise against a potential German onslaught. In response to a soldier who asks if they are going to surrender the town to the Germans he says, “No damn it! We’re here to take St. Mere-Eglise and we’re going to hold it…We’re gonna hold this town till hell freezes over, if for no other reason, but for them.”\(^{19}\) The “them” refers to the soldiers who were slaughtered when they were shot as they were mistakenly dropped in the middle of the well-fortified town.

The most nuanced and intriguing depictions in this period are those of minority characters. As noted earlier, emotional characters seem marginalized and nowhere is this more evident than with minority characters, which is a sign of the social acceptance, or lack of

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\(^{18}\) Ibid.

\(^{19}\) Ibid.
acceptance, of minorities. While white men in the movies depict idealized masculinity and appear as one-dimensional characters, minorities show the emotional, imperfect male. A number of major characters in *Battleground* and *To Hell and Back* are minorities. Rodrigues, in *Battleground* is, as his name implies, of Portuguese descent. His minority status does not prevent him from being an integral and well respected member of his squad. But he seems irrationally emotional and childlike in a number of scenes, and hence inferior to the more stoic and mature white soldiers. At one point, while the squad is deployed to the woods surrounding Bastogne, Rodrigues becomes excessively excited about the snowfall that had covered the area during the night. He plays like a child in the snow, making and throwing snowballs, screaming about how he has never seen snow before, laughing, and generally carrying on while the other soldiers merely watch this overt display of excitement and emotionality.20

When the squad has to send out a scouting mission, Rodrigues goes with two other soldiers. While they are out, Rodrigues continues to play in the snow until a squad of Germans dressed like American soldiers interrupts their game. The Americans, with the exception of Rodrigues, recognize that they are Germans and quickly leave the area, but not before a hand-to-hand melee ensues. All three of the American soldiers survive the melee, but as they are retreating back to the rest of their squad, other Germans shoot Rodrigues. Instead of accepting assistance by being carried back to their deployment area, the emotional Rodrigues makes the reckless decision of burying himself in the snow beneath a disabled Jeep. The squad later finds him, but it is too late and he has succumbed to his wounds and to the cold.21 Thus, the character

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.
who breaks from the norm of masculine stoicism dies and it appears as though it is because of his emotionality and irrational decision making.

The minority characters Kovak and Chief are similarly marginalized as emotional males in *To Hell and Back*. Kovak is a Polish immigrant, who speaks broken English, and Chief is a Native American who has been given a very general nickname for persons of his heritage. Kovak is intent on keeping his portable stove and mocks the other members of the squad who ask for the hot coffee he makes, telling them that they should have thought of that when they got rid of their stoves. Kovak gets emotional at a few different points in the film, as such characters do in the other films. He becomes irrationally agitated when he sees children begging for cigarettes and chocolate and says, “By George, they no start Hitler’s War, and look what it done to them.”\(^{22}\) This affects him so much that he decides to go back to base instead of spending his evening at the bar with the rest of the squad. He almost fights a fellow squad member who tries to convince him to stay with others and enjoy the night out. And he does not survive.

Chief begins as an even more extreme version of the ideal of the stoic male; he hardly talks and shows absolutely no emotion at all. This all changes after Kovak dies. Chief appears crying and fights with a member of his squad, much like Kovak, when the other soldier finds the stove that Kovak cherished. He pushes the soldier to the ground, grabs the stove and runs outside of the house in which they are staying to bury the stove in remembrance of his fellow minority soldier. Like all emotional males, Chief dies before the end of the movie.\(^{23}\)

The British and the Germans serve as surrogate minorities in *The Longest Day*. They are the emotional outlets in the film, contrasting to the stoic, idealized American counterparts. The

\(^{22}\) *To Hell and Back.*

\(^{23}\) Ibid.
British are depressed characters who lament their losses and the situation they have had to endure for the five years of the war. Two British pilots, at one point, talk about how a friend “got it” over the English Channel and they comment that he was one of the last of the pilots who had survived since the Battle of Britain. The British are also shown singing and laughing on their glider as it approaches the French coast, while other British soldiers are shaking in fear of entering battle. This contrasts to the depictions of the American soldiers flying in their planes to France. These men are silent and contemplative. The Americans in general, up to that point, appear brash and ready to fight.24

The Germans provide a perfect counterpoint to the idealized Americans in The Longest Day. They come across as incompetent buffoons who do not recognize that there is an invasion coming until the enemy soldiers are actually upon them. A German pilot directly challenges the orders of his commander and becomes angry with him. The pilot questions his duty and then hangs up on his superior, something that no American soldier would think of doing in this era. Senior officers especially appear in generalized and stereotypical fashion. At one point they are playing cards, smoking cigars and laughing, despite being told that the invasion of Europe is on its way. In the face of the news of the invasion, the officers will not even wake up Hitler, and once he is awakened, they are told that he is angry about his sleep being interrupted. One of the commanders is so incompetent that he cannot even put his shoes on the right feet. Further, Germans are not respectful of women as the Americans are. One German soldier knocks a woman to the ground and tries to drown her. An American soldier, who is clearly heroic, shoots the German in the nick of time and saves her. 25 This helps to further differentiate the Americans

24 The Longest Day.

25 Ibid.
from their German counterparts, as they are the ones present to protect the purity and innocence of womanhood where the Germans attempt to destroy it.

In the film *Battleground*, a shoeless chaplain, made to suffer like the soldiers, addresses the decimated and demoralized soldiers stuck in Bastogne shortly before they are relieved by Patton’s Third Army. His speech sums up the entire post-war period of World War II filmmaking.

Was this trip necessary? Nobody wanted this war but the Nazis. A great many people tried to deal with them and a lot of them are dead. Millions have died for no other reason except that the Nazis wanted them dead. So, in the final showdown, there was nothing left to do except fight. There’s a great lesson in this. Those of us who have learned it the hard way aren’t going to forget it. We must never again let any force dedicated to a super-race, or a super-idea, or super-anything become strong enough to impose itself upon a free world. We must be smart enough and tough enough in the beginning to put out the fire before it starts spreading. So yes, this trip was necessary.²⁶

This speech underlines the major themes of the depiction of American soldiers in the post-war period. These films showed men how they should act and presented a strong image to counter the rising strength of the Soviet Union. This era established a view of masculinity that uses the characteristics of stoicism, unyielding loyalty, and sacrifice. It serves particularly as the construction of the masculine ideal which would affect the American psyche. Emotionality appears only in marginalized minority characters, who die because of their perceived irrationality. The depictions of minority characters foreshadow how all characters are perceived in the next era.

²⁶ *Battleground.*
Chapter 2

Twenty years after winning World War II, Americans found themselves in the quagmire of Vietnam. Social upheaval, race friction, and rioting against the war inflamed the country. The United States was engaged in an unpopular and seemingly un-winnable war. Believing they lived in a peace loving country, most Americans found the war in Vietnam a contradiction. America, they believed, only went to war to defend itself and the democratic ideals it upheld. Many people saw neither of these reasons in the conflict in Vietnam. With the growing disenchantment about war, Americans finally addressed, in the words of Lawrence Suid, their “long-standing love of the martial spirit and their previously unquestioned respect for the military establishment.”

Films from this era reflect the disenchantment many Americans felt with their government and their military men. No longer were soldiers infallible, stoic, and masculine as they had once been. Now they were openly emotional, a feminine, marginalized, unthinkable trait in the previous era. Soldiers also routinely questioned the orders they were given and there was an undercurrent of mutiny in all the films. Heroism, as well, seemed to be a much more ambiguous quality than before.

The Vietnam War clearly affected films about World War II. The Vietnam War itself was the subject of The Green Berets, a movie starring perennial hero, John Wayne, which was controversial because of its uncritical depiction of American involvement in Vietnam. It received overwhelmingly poor reviews. There were few other films during this era about the contemporary war. After their unsuccessful forays into depicting the conflict in Vietnam, filmmakers returned to the less controversial subject of the Second World War, but with a

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27 Suid, Guts and Glory, 3.
28 Ibid., 256.
different focus. Now, the films received less support from a Department of Defense that was reluctant to contribute to works that would likely cast the military in a negative light. Thus, the films became a little more fictionalized than their victory era counterparts.\(^{29}\) Despite their less than realistic stories and lack of government support, these films still presented a particular view of masculinity, one now less idealized and more critical.

The ambiguity of heroism in this period comes through in the film *The Bridge at Remagen*. This movie opened on June 25, 1969, at the height of the social upheaval created by the war in Vietnam.\(^{30}\) Students held college campuses hostage, anti-war activists rioted in the streets, and young men fought and died in Southeast Asia. America was locked in a battle that it could not possibly win. This was evident especially after the debacle of the Tet Offensive beginning in early 1968, when the Vietcong successfully executed a surprise attack on many American and South Vietnamese strongholds during the lunar new year holiday. Many people in America were not sure whether or not the soldiers and their leadership were morally right and questioned their decision making. They reviled soldiers when they returned home and spat upon and degraded them.

Director John Guillermin reflected these attitudes in *The Bridge at Remagen*, a film centered on the capture of the Ludendorff Bridge, one of the last standing bridges over the Rhine River, in the spring of 1945. The American characters attempting this mission are hardly admirable from the start. The audience sees one of them, Sergeant Angelo, “Angel,” looting from the bodies of dead Germans. When found by his commanding officer, Lieutenant Hartman, they have a terse exchange with each other. The relationship between the two men is clearly

\(^{29}\) Ibid., 257.

\(^{30}\) Suid, *Stars and Stripes on Screen*, 33.
contentious. Angel is sarcastic and has no regard for his superiors or for any authority. Nor does Angel have any regard for the altruistic reasons that the United States entered the war. Instead, when Hartman calls him a pig for taking the personal belongings of the dead Germans, Angel responds, “Everybody makes a profit out of the war, why shouldn’t I? You know your problem Lieutenant? You got no ambition.”31 It is clear through this exchange that, just as Americans in the 1960s were protesting against the authority of the United States government, so too was this American soldier protesting the authority of his commanding officer and the government from which his orders originated.

Lieutenant Hartman seems to have the same contempt for Major Barnes, his own immediate superior. He complains when his men are once again forced to be on the front of the Allied advance. He also criticizes the Major behind his back, saying such things as, “He picks up orders like a dog to a bone.”32 These conversations are vastly different representations from the previous period, as no soldier would have questioned his duties, nor would he have been so outwardly disrespectful to a superior, as these soldiers are.

Crises of authority are major themes of the movies of this era and this is especially evident in The Bridge at Remagen. At a number of points in the film, Lieutenant Hartman fails to make decisions that cost the lives of soldiers in his unit. At one point, Captain Colt, a superior officer whom Hartman actually respects, asks Hartman if he does not like riding point at the front of the advance. Hartman hesitates and responds that, in fact, he does not like riding point. Captain Colt then takes the passenger seat in the Jeep and rides ahead of the advancing soldiers.


32 Ibid.
Shortly thereafter, a landmine explodes under the vehicle killing both the driver and the Captainn. Hartman’s cowardice and unwillingness to take the lead in the advance cost two men their lives. Soldiers in post-war films, such as Audie Murphy, would surely have, and did, sacrifice themselves for others.

Women appear once again in marginalized form in this era, much like in the earlier era. This time though, they are more obviously sexual beings. The only female character in *The Bridge at Remagen* takes off her clothing and offers herself to Lieutenant Hartman saying, “I sleep with you, you have cigarette?” Hartman obviously considers the option of sleeping with this pretty, young French girl, but then Angel bursts into the room and says, “Privileges of rank, eh Lieutenant?” This exchange follows an earlier one when Hartman had denied Angel the opportunity to take advantage of this girl. She had been hiding in the jail which the Americans had commandeered as their quarters. The soldiers had stumbled upon her and were ogling and harassing her until Angel entered and sent them all away so he could have time alone with her. In this interaction, it is unclear what Angel’s intentions are, though he seems eager to sleep with her. When Hartman interrupts the conversation, Angel mumbles under his breath, “You’re a bastard, sir.” To which Hartman replies, “If there ain’t enough for everyone Sergeant, then there ain’t enough for you.” It is clear that neither man has much regard for the woman’s right to decide what to do herself. This also exemplifies the tension between the lower ranks and their superior officers. There is little respect displayed here by Angel for Hartman who outranks him, and Angel does not show much respect to Hartman until the end of the movie.

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33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
Films in this era also demonize the Allied command, especially that of the Americans, and its decisions. This is most notable in the film *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The movie, based on the book of the same name by Kurt Vonnegut, is about the protagonist Billy Pilgrim becoming “unstuck in time” and experiencing the events of his life in a seemingly random order. But it still contains considerable commentary on how the director and writer view American participation in war in general and World War II in particular. Billy Pilgrim is not a model soldier. He opts to become a chaplain so he will not have to carry a gun and constantly hides from combat. He is captured by the Germans and eventually transported to Dresden. There he experiences the firebombing of the city which completely destroyed it between February 13 and February 15, 1945. This action has since been widely criticized, as Dresden was not of any military importance and a large number of civilian refugees were in the city believing it to be safe from bombing. Over 35,000 civilians either suffocated or were burned to death because of the firestorm that engulfed and destroyed the city.

Using the Dresden bombing as the crux of the story, the director attempts to display the negative aspects of war, death and destruction. There is no glory in dropping bombs from tens of thousands of feet onto unsuspecting civilians, many of whom are refugees fleeing from the approaching Soviet Army. Further, the protagonist is no hero at all. He simply experiences these events and plays no role, positive or negative, in how they unfold. It sends a message of a man being a helpless onlooker, experiencing the worst of human actions and the resultant chaos and devastation. Further, Pilgrim is in a prisoner of war camp with two psychopaths, one of whom constantly hopes to gain glory by trying to save Billy’s life and subsequently dies because of it.

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36 *Slaughterhouse-Five*, dir. George Roy Hill, 104 min., Universal, 1972, DVD.

37 Miller, 480.
With his final breath, he blames Billy for his death, and Lazzaro, the other psychopath in their POW camp, promises revenge. By the end of the film, Lazzaro has his revenge and assassinates Billy. Murderous, vengeful soldiers hardly glorify war, and these depictions of the experiences of men in and out of combat could never have made their way onto film in the post-war period. This film as a whole is about the horrors of war with the message that the only result of war is death.

The horrific result of warfare is also a major theme in *A Bridge Too Far*. This film depicts the failed mission called Operation Market Garden in the fall of 1944. The Allied advance had stalled in Belgium, so the Allied leaders planned a risky airborne assault into Holland in hope of capturing a number of bridges into the heart of Germany. This was an effort to try and end the war by Christmas, as the Allies thought that the Germans were on their last legs and could not fight for much longer. The Allies dropped over 35,000 airborne troops into a corridor from Belgium to Arnhem, the largest airdrop ever attempted. At first the U.S. Paratroops were successful, but soon they and the British airborne units were surrounded and destroyed by SS troops when they tried to take the bridge at Arnhem. Their failure was attributed at the time to trying to take “a bridge too far,” which became the name of the film.

There are countless scenes in *A Bridge Too Far* that depict the bloody and destructive aftermath of battles. A wasteland of devastation reveals uprooted, burning trees, charred or bloodied earth, and mangled bodies, as the few survivors limp away from the ruin. Another scene depicts soldiers occupying a civilian’s house. As they walk among the toys and the children of the house, the director focuses on a child’s model train and the blood dripping from a soldier

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38 *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

39 Miller, 329.
onto the white carpet, creating a stark contrast. These same children also appear at the end of the movie, running and playing among the grave markers of all the recently dead soldiers. This is a commentary on how warfare affects the most innocent people, the children. They do not ask for war, cannot influence war, but they are affected by it in unspeakable ways.

_A Bridge Too Far_, much like _The Bridge at Remagen_, displays heroism, but not necessarily on the part of the Americans. The true heroes of the film are the Poles and their leader, Major General Sosabowski. The British and American soldiers marginalize them from the start. Sosabowski has no role in the planning stages of the operation, despite having serious concerns about the mission. His concern is so great that at the end of the meeting approving Operation Market-Garden, he approaches the British commander in front of all the other officers, checks the insignia on the commander’s uniform and says, “Just making sure which side you’re on.” His action in this situation shows how apprehensive he was about a mission that was so dangerous that he thought only the Germans could have crafted it. Also, he shows how questioning duty could have saved lives, whereas that action was demonized and resulted in death in the previous era. He is the only man who questions the mission, even though all of the other leaders have concerns about the value of Operation Market Garden. Because none of the British or American commanders voices apprehension to the ultimate decision makers, many soldiers die and there is no tangible gains for the Allies. As they are forced to retreat and Market Garden falls apart, so too does the Allied goal of having the war over by Christmas.

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41 Ibid.
The Allied command consistently thwarts the attempts by the Poles to be active participants in Operation Market-Garden and allied leaders cancel their drops more than once. When the Poles finally are able to drop into Holland, it is right into an open field in broad daylight and the Germans slaughter them as they fall to the ground. Despite their already heavy casualties, Sosabowski volunteers his men for a rescue mission the British know is going to fail. They cross a river in rubber dinghies that can hardly float in an attempt to return with a squad of British soldiers. This mission ends in tragedy when the Germans notice the movements, ignite a flare, and annihilate the Poles as they sit helpless in the middle of the river.42

Their continual marginalization and rejection by the major Allied armies serve to make the Poles the tragic heroes of the film. Sosabowski even has the most apt line of the film, and possibly of the Vietnam era of World War II filmmaking, when participating in a discussion with the other Allied leaders about why Operation Market Garden failed. He disregards their claims that it was the fog or the poor road conditions leading to Nijmegen. Instead he says, “It doesn’t matter what it was. When one man says to another, ‘I know what we’ll do, today let’s play the war game,’ everyone dies.”43 Sosabowski represents a major shift in the mentality of Americans during their involvement in Vietnam. There is no glory in warfare because it only results in the loss of innocence and death.

*The Big Red One*, released in 1980, also contains similar messages about the destructive and deadly results of warfare. The film opens with a young American soldier in World War I wandering through a field in France. There is a large rotting cross towering over the wasteland with Jesus surveying the carnage. The soldier notices a German wandering towards him and he

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42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.
hides behind the cross, while the German mutters something in his native tongue under his breath. The American jumps out and stabs the German, killing him. The soldier then returns to report to his commanding officer who informs him that the war had been over for four hours and that the German was trying to surrender to him.\textsuperscript{44} This scene raises the question of the difference between killing and murder, the overriding moral quandary of warfare in the film.

The movie then shifts to World War II and the young American soldier has become the sergeant, nicknamed Sarge, for a squad of men. It is apparent that he continued his service in the Army to try and right his perceived wrong when he murdered a German. Multiple times throughout the film, he tells his men, “We don’t murder, we kill,” but it is not apparent that even he believes what he is saying. The difference between murder and killing, according to Sarge, “depends on a piece of paper, a pen, and a watch, because the second the Kaiser picks up that pen and signs that paper then you’ve got to call it quits. Kill all the Huns you can before then, but never after, never.” The fact that the difference between a crime and an acceptable action rests on such a trivial occurrence as the signing of a piece of paper points to the absurdity of war and the absurdity of expecting young men to travel across the ocean and kill other young men. The movie ends with the narrating soldier claiming that “It’s about survivors, those who shot but weren’t shot and surviving is the only glory in war if you know what I mean.”\textsuperscript{45} According to him and the director, there is no such thing as dying for a cause or for a country and surviving is the only thing that can glorify a soldier in war.

The emasculation and feminization of men in the form of homosexuality also is a prominent feature of \textit{The Big Red One}. At the Battle of the Kassarine Pass in Tunisia, the

\textsuperscript{44} \textit{The Big Red One}, dir. Samuel Fuller, 162 min., Warner Brothers, 1980, DVD.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
Sergeant is shot and becomes a prisoner when his men, because of their nerves and impatience, cannot stay hidden and the Germans capture and kill many American soldiers. While in the enemy hospital, Sarge gets assaulted by a German orderly. The German moves in really close to Sarge’s face and whispers into his ear, “How could such a decayed country like America produce such a magnificent soldier like you?” The orderly moves in, kisses the Sergeant on the lips, and says, “You are a beautiful man Sergeant, I adore supermen,” and then kisses him again. By kissing him on the lips, the orderly sexualizes Sarge in much the same way that women are sexualized in these same films, and thus takes away his masculinity.

Another scene in which a man is emasculated, this time physically, is when a replacement soldier trips a landmine. Prior to the explosion, the replacement soldier asks the squad about why the older soldiers are so cold and detached from the new ones. In response, all of the squad talks about how no one wants to make friends with the replacements because they get killed quickly. It is tough for the older soldiers to become friendly with these soldiers because it is tough to continually lose people with whom they become close. When the soldier trips the landmine, he falls to the ground with a flesh wound, though he does not yet realize that his injury is not severe. Instead of comforting him, Sarge kneels next to him and says, “You’ll live Smitty, you did tripwire the mine. They’re not designed to kill you, just to castrate you.” Sarge reaches around underneath Smitty’s body and says “Hey here it is, I found it,” and holds up something bloody. To this, Smitty responds frantically, “That’s my cock! Give it back to me! Give me back my cock!” Sarge looks him in the face and states, “It’s just one of your balls, you can live without it. That’s why they gave you two.” Though he has not actually lost a testicle, he is emasculated in

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.
front of his squad through talk of his own castration. This scene also represents the loss of masculinity and castration of American military might in Vietnam.

As is evident in the prior scene, foul language permeates all of the films of the Vietnam era. Soldiers use an exceedingly sordid vocabulary to describe their situations. As noted above, they talk about their genitals often and use masturbatory humor. When asked if he does everything left-handed, Griff, one of the soldiers in *The Big Red One*, responds, “Yes, except shoot and play with my pecker.”  

Angel in *The Bridge at Remagen* calls his superior officer a bastard multiple times and Lieutenant Hartman tells his superior, “Bullshit!” when the superior claims to be hurt by the loss of another officer. In *A Bridge Too Far*, Sergeant Dohun threatens a medic who is also a superior officer by pointing a gun at him and saying, “Would you look at him please sir right now or I’ll blow your fucking head off.” This coarse language would be unheard of in the victory era of World War II filmmaking because it does not glorify the soldiers involved in warfare. It reduces soldiers to a level of coarseness and simplicity of language that does not venerate them. The use of this language changes context, too. No longer is there a single curse word placed into a motivational speech; now soldiers used any and all terms against individuals, including superior officers.

These changes, coupled together, create a very different view of masculinity and of heroism in the Second World War. Because Americans had now experienced loss in war through the conflict in Vietnam, they began to explore their own values concerning masculinity and exaltation of military values and might. By showing failed missions and soldiers who did not

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48 Ibid.

49 *The Bridge at Remagen*.

50 *A Bridge Too Far*. 
respect their superiors and sometimes openly battled with them, directors explored the societal shift. Americans had lost faith in their fighting spirit and the belief in the inherent altruism with which we engaged in warfare. They had also lost faith in the men placed on the battlefield. Soldiers of the World War II era were no longer unemotional supermen who were unquestioningly loyal. Instead, they were amoral thieves, murderers, and effeminate. They were not without any redeeming qualities though, as most soldiers tried their best to complete the missions assigned. The more damning depictions feature commanders who appear incompetent and out of touch with the soldier on the ground. The films of the Vietnam era ultimately served as a deconstruction of the idealized masculinity established during the post-World War II years so flush with victory.
Chapter 3

Interpretations of World War II changed again at the turn of the century. After the 1980 release of *The Big Red One*, a 17 year hiatus occurred before the appearance of another major motion picture depicting the exploits of American soldiers fighting in the Second World War. This can be partially explained by a fixation on the experience of American soldiers in Vietnam. Films such as *Platoon, Rambo, Apocalypse Now*, and many others explored the American conflict in Vietnam. These films were very critical of the war and did little to glorify the actions of the United States Army and its soldiers. As the 50th anniversaries of the major events of the Second World War rolled around, Americans once again became interested in seeing what the “Greatest Generation——” to use news anchor Tom Brokaw’s phrase——experienced in Europe. Films such as *Saving Private Ryan* and the HBO miniseries *Band of Brothers* attempted to fulfill the desires to depict once more the actions of Americans in World War II. These productions presented a much more realistic depiction of masculinity, as the idealized image of men no longer satisfied viewers. Now, men could be emotional and flawed while still completing their missions, saving lives, and experiencing loss. Soldiers question their duty, but ultimately find a purpose for why young men are fighting and dying in Europe. This modern era of World War II filmmaking is a synthesis of the two preceding eras, as men are not perfect, but they still are heroes.

*Saving Private Ryan* is a fictionalized tale about a small squad of soldiers, led by Captain John Miller, sent on a mission to find and rescue a paratrooper in Northern France after the D-Day invasions. The paratrooper, Private James Ryan, needs rescuing because his four other brothers have died in various places throughout the European Theater of Operations and General George C. Marshall ordered that he be found so that his mother would not lose all of her sons.
The squad sent to find Ryan goes through various stages of acceptance and rejection of this mission as it begins to lose men and to view the task as fruitless. Ultimately, the members of the group find Ryan, who refuses to leave his post, and they all must stand and fight with him so he will join them in returning him home.\textsuperscript{51}

The film opens with a twenty-four minute sequence of violence that is graphic and shockingly gory. No film prior to this comes even close to matching the level of gore displayed in this opening scene. It shows the helplessness and hopelessness that most soldiers must have felt when the ramps to their landing craft lowered on June 6, 1944. The scene centers on Captain Miller as he tries to lead men off of Omaha Beach and out of the slaughter. As the ramps lower, the German machine guns and artillery begin to tear the soldiers apart, even before they are able to exit their landing craft. If men do get out of the craft, they face the danger of drowning because of their heavy equipment and some are shot by bullets ripping through the water as they struggle to fight the current. Men, who are torn open by the barrage of fire, sob and scream for medics and for their mothers. Bodies cover the beach as the blood red waves lap against the mangled corpses. Through this nightmare, Captain Miller must advance his squad to allow others to land on the beach.

Miller himself pauses for a moment to try to comprehend the death and destruction all around him. As he stands still, the sound diminishes from blaring machine guns and screaming to almost nothing as the audiences absorbs the emotional state of shock that he feels. At that point, the intensity of the situation has left him in a frozen state, and he comes back into action only when one of his soldiers begins screaming at him, asking what to do next. Captain Miller’s

\textsuperscript{51} \textit{Saving Private Ryan}, dir. Steven Spielberg, 169 min., Dreamworks Pictures and Paramount Pictures, 1998, DVD.
hesitation would not have occurred in the first era of World War II filmmaking and it would have ended in the death of his entire squad in the Vietnam era. Here, though, Miller collects himself and becomes a decisive leader who opens the first hole in the German defenses. This allows other soldiers and equipment to land and help prepare a beachhead in Normandy. 52 This scene represents an amplification of the level of violence in World War II film to an extreme level never before seen. Many veterans, indeed, say it is the closest any director has come to recreating the hell and horror that they experienced on Omaha Beach.53

Miller at first seems to have the traits of a leader in the first era. He understands the chain of command, makes excellent decisions that minimize loss while still accomplishing the mission, and appears cold and unemotional, traits of leaders from the first era of World War II filmmaking. One of the soldiers, Private Richard Reiben, asks Captain Miller why he does not complain to them. Miller responds, “I don’t gripe to you, there’s a chain of command.” When Reiben asks what how he would respond if Reiben was a major, Miller says, “This is an excellent mission, sir, with an extremely valuable objective, sir, worthy of my best efforts, sir. Moreover, I feel heartfelt sorrow for the mother of Private James Ryan and am willing to lay down the lives of me and my men, especially you Reiben, to ease her suffering.” When Private Adrian Caparzo, the first soldier in the eight man squad to die, is shot because he grabs a little girl from a shelled out building, Miller angrily says, “That’s why we don’t take children.” He expresses no remorse that Caparzo is dead, just anger that he betrayed orders.54 So Miller initially is an idealized masculine character reminiscent of Audie Murphy or John Wayne.

52 Ibid.


54 *Saving Private Ryan*.
In the modern era, it is not enough to be an overtly masculine leader, as this is not realistic. Eventually, the losses become too much for Miller and he slowly reveals his emotionality. After losing Caparzo, the squad camps in a church for the night. As the rest of the men sleep, Miller and his second in command, Sergeant Mike Horvath, discuss their shared experiences. They talk about Vecchio, a soldier who died in North Africa, who used to walk on his hands and sing to entertain the other soldiers. At the end of this story, Miller starts saying Vecchio’s name over and over and it becomes Caparzo. After this exchange, they begin to discuss how many men have been lost under Miller’s command. He talks about how he justifies losing a soldier by claiming, “When they kill one of your men, you tell yourself it was to save two or three or ten others, maybe one hundred. Do you know how many men I’ve lost? Ninety-four, but that means I’ve saved the lives of ten times that many, maybe twenty…That’s how you rationalize the choice between the mission and the men.”55 The death of Caparzo and all the losses during his time in war obviously affect Miller and he reveals this to Sergeant Horvath, though he will not let the rest of the men under his command know it.

Slowly the mission deteriorates and the squad contemplates mutiny. The men lose the most innocent member of their group, the medic Irwin Wade in an attack on a German machine gun nest. Though the soldiers advocate going around the nest, claiming it is not their mission, Miller corrects them saying, “Our mission is to win the war. Should we leave the machine gun next to ambush the next company that comes by?” When they disable the machine gun, Miller decides to blindfold the remaining German and send him in the general direction of the Allied lines instead of shooting him for killing Wade. This sparks a mutiny in the squad, as the Americans felt they had lost too much for a mission that is not worth it. Reiben, especially, will

55 Ibid.
not continue with the mission to save Ryan and questions the decision to not shoot the German prisoner. Sergeant Horvath yells at him to fall in and points his gun into Reiben’s face.

When the situation is escalating and it appears as though Sergeant Horvath will shoot Reiben, Miller reveals everything about his personal life. He relates that he is a school teacher from Pennsylvania. He goes on to say that when he tells that to people at home, they think he seems like a teacher, a person who nurtures and educates young persons instead of leading them to their deaths. Since no one in Europe can recognize that quality now, Miller knows he has changed and says, “Sometimes I wonder if I’ve changed so much, my wife is even going to recognize me whenever it is I get back to her…But if, you know, if going to Remalle, and finding [Ryan] so he can go home, if that earns me the right to get back to my wife, well then, then that's my mission...Just know that every man I kill, the farther away from home I feel.”

Miller diffuses this situation and redeems himself by revealing his emotionality to his squad, while in either of the two previous eras, this would have resulted in his marginalization and death. Here though, it makes him a good leader who knows how to relate to his men and keep them engaged in the mission they are trying to accomplish.

Another way in which Captain Miller achieves connection with his soldiers is through sacrificing himself for their safety. Towards the end of the film, as the remaining members of the original squad finally find Private Ryan and he refuses to leave his post, Sergeant Horvath, the soldier who exhibits the most masculine characteristics, reflects on the encounter:

Part of me thinks the kid's right. He asks what he's done to deserve this. He wants to stay here, fine. Let's leave him and go home. But then another part of me thinks what if by some miracle we stay, and then actually make it out of here. Someday we might look back on this and decide that saving Private Ryan was the one decent thing we were able to do.

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56 Ibid.
to pull out of this whole god-awful, shitty mess. Like you said, Captain, maybe we do that, we all earn the right to go home.  

This echoes what Captain Miller had said earlier to quell the mutiny in the squad, that rescuing Ryan may be the best thing that they could do in war which has thus far dehumanized and changed them. This speech justifies their actions while not glorifying them, unlike motivational speeches of the first era. They are sacrificing themselves for no other purpose than to get home.

In the end, the squad stays in Ramelle and helps to defend the bridge with the paratroopers. Captain Miller takes command and sets up a strong defense against an overwhelming force of Germans trying to recapture the town. When the battle seems lost and many of the soldiers have died, reinforcements arrive and the tank that is tearing apart the American soldiers is bombed by a plane. At this moment, Miller is shot by the German from the machine gun nest that he set free. Private Timothy Upham, who up until this point has been cowardly and avoided battle at all costs, now shoots the German. This shows that doing the right thing does not always work in warfare. Because he did not shoot the German earlier when he was a prisoner, the German comes back and shoots him. This allows Upham to gain redemption in the eyes of the remaining squad, as he had been the one to convince Miller to release the German. With his last breath, Miller calls Ryan to him and says simply, “Earn this.”  

In the modern era, soldiers are not just required to perform their duties in war, but also to live good lives after they return home to honor the sacrifices made for them.

Sacrifice is a major theme that permeates the miniseries *Band of Brothers* as well. *Band of Brothers* tells the story of Easy Company, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne

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57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.
during World War II. Based on the best-selling book of the same name by World War II historian Stephen Ambrose, the miniseries garnered critical acclaim for its gritty and realistic portrayal of the exploits of the famed company. It follows these soldiers from their training for combat both in the United States and in England, through capturing Hitler’s mountaintop retreat. In between, they drop into Normandy on D-Day, fight through Northern France, participate in Operation Market Garden, survive the Battle of the Bulge in Bastogne, and liberate a concentration camp. They experience everything together from poor leadership to loss, to helplessness, to hope that they may actually survive the war. This miniseries was the most expensive production ever on cable and the effort made for quality is evident. 

In Band of Brothers, the audience meets the men of Easy Company and their leader Lieutenant Richard Winters, a leader much like Captain Miller in Saving Private Ryan. They see what the men of Easy Company undergo while under the command of Captain Herbert Sobel. Sobel and Winters differ greatly and create a stark contrast between a poor leader and an excellent leader. Where Winters gains the respect of his men by genuinely caring for them, and gaining their trust in that way, Sobel leads by fear and intimidation, sparking the scorn of his men. Sobel routinely lets his own pettiness and jealousy of Winters get in the way of his leadership, as when he attempts to court martial Winters for disobeying an invented order. When Sobel presents him with the court martial, he offers Winters the opportunity to forgo a trial and just accept punishment. Knowing he has done nothing wrong, Winters says that he wants to go forward with the trial, infuriating Sobel who drops the matter, humiliated.

59 Suid, Stars and Stripes, 282.

60 “Currahee,” Band of Brothers, dir. Phil Alden Robinson, 73 min., HBO, 2001, DVD.
The men of Easy Company try embarrass and remove Sobel at every opportunity. No man wants to follow him into battle and many soldiers talk openly of shooting him as soon as they are in combat. Winters knows that Sobel is incompetent in the field, but understands that Army regulations must be followed and recognizes that he can do nothing about the situation except hope that Sobel will be removed before they enter combat. The non-commissioned officers take a different course of action when they vow to resign their positions if their commander, Colonel Robert Sink, does not remove Sobel. This attempt would not have been depicted in the first era, but does eventually lead to the removal of Sobel. Sobel is not respected because of his unwillingness to allow others to establish themselves as leaders under his command, and he is ultimately transferred.61 Winters, though very demanding, is not unrealistic about what his men can accomplish, never asking them to accomplish what he does not expect of himself and allows leadership to flourish in the men below him.

Lieutenant Winters also sacrifices himself regularly for his men in order to maintain a close connection with them. He leads them personally into battle until he is promoted to a rank that prevents him from doing so. At one point, Winters stands in the middle of a road on which a German machine gun is firing. As bullets spray around him, he yells at the men to continue moving. His willingness to sacrifice his own well-being by standing in the open under gunfire inspires all the other men to stand up and continue the attack.62 In another scene, Winters again shows he would sacrifice himself for his men when he leads them in the Nijmegen Salient after the collapse of Operation Market Garden. Winters realizes his men are in an unprotected ditch in which the Germans could easily flank them, and so he makes the decision to attack, instead of

61 Ibid.

waiting for the Germans to come and slaughter them. Winters leads the advance, running far in front of any other Americans. He surprises and kills many of the Germans before the rest of the squad arrives and routs the rest of an entire German division. Winters’ knowledge of military strategy, coupled with his readiness to put the safety of others before his own, makes him a well respected leader who accomplishes great things in battle.

Though Winters appears at first to be flawless, he is not the idyllic leader of the first era. He, like Captain Miller in Saving Private Ryan, is affected profoundly by the necessity of killing men and losing soldiers under his command. After leading the attack at the Nijmegen Salient, the face of a child-like German that he killed haunts Winters. When he has the opportunity to go to Paris on furlough, he replays the events leading to the shooting of the boyish German in his head and he does not enjoy his weekend. Another time in which Winters shows he is willing to forgo his duty for his men is when Easy Company is in Hagenau, France. The group receives orders to cross the river through town and capture German prisoners. The first attempt succeeds and the squad returns with two enemy combatants while only sustaining one loss. Satisfied with the success, Colonel Sink orders the squad to perform another patrol the next night. Winters knows that his men are burnt out decides to fabricate the mission creating a false report and not actually sending a squad over to try and capture soldiers. He does not believe that the patrol will be successful and feels that the losses they have already suffered are for nothing, as evidenced when he talks about the soldier who died on the first patrol. He says, “No doubt his family would receive a telegram saying he died in an important mission that would help win the war. In fact, Eugene Jackson lost his life on a stretcher in a dank basement… crying out in agony while his

63 “Crossroads,” Band of Brothers, dir. Tom Hanks, 55 min., HBO, 2001, DVD.

64 Ibid.
friends looked on helplessly. He was just one more casualty in a war that was supposed to be all but over.”65 Winters does not follow orders perfectly but only when he knows that a mission is senseless and his men can no longer handle the strain of another night of combat.

Another soldier who redeems his prior fighting ineptitude and cowardice and becomes a good fighting man, like Upham in Saving Private Ryan, is Private Albert Blithe. He starts as a coward who hid in a ditch on D-Day because of his own fear of combat. He is overwhelmed by the violence and the death and cannot function as a soldier. This finally changes when Captain Ronald Speirs, a platoon leader whom everyone fears, tells Blithe, “The only hope you have is to accept that you’re already dead and the sooner you can accept that, the sooner you’ll be able to function as a soldier.” This conversation speaks to the realities of war, that no soldier is effective until he loses hope that he will survive the war. When he has no fear, he will be able to risk himself enough to engage successfully in combat. Recognizing the harsh realities of war makes Blithe a good soldier and he finally scores his first kill. Twenty days later, a small squad is on a scouting mission and needs someone to scout ahead. Blithe, instead of retreating from duty, now volunteers for this dangerous job. As he approaches the house, he is shot in the neck, sacrificing himself for the good of the rest of the squad.66 Blithe and Upham both make up for their past shortcomings as soldiers when they overcome their fear of death, shoot their first Germans and become true soldiers and men.

Another feature of films in this period is soldiers losing hope and purpose, but then finding it and accepting the inherent decency and righteousness with which the United States entered World War II. In Band of Brothers, the soldiers lose hope after serving in Bastogne

65 “The Last Patrol,” Band of Brothers, dir. Tony To, 58 min., HBO, 2001, DVD.

66 Ibid.
during the Battle of the Bulge. Easy Company faces the helplessness that men in war sometimes undergo. They are subjected to constant artillery bombardment from an enemy that they cannot even see, quashing any hope of retaliation. This turns a once idyllic, peaceful forest into a hell of shrapnel and exploding trees. Men cry out in agony as the woods explode around them and they can do nothing about it except cower in their foxholes. They reach the breaking point and are no longer effective as soldiers.67

Soldiers begin to question their purpose for being in Europe fighting against an enemy that was supposed to be all but defeated. Captain Lewis Nixon, an Easy Company commander, questions why he is still losing soldiers to an enemy that is all but defeated. Compounding this is his battle with alcoholism which has begun to rage out of control, as he smashes in the window of a German shop trying to find a certain type of whiskey. Nixon expresses his anger and frustration at the meaningless loss of life, resulting from a worthless parachute mission, to his friend and confidante, recently promoted Major Winters. He then asks what he is supposed to write to the parents of the dead soldiers: that their sons died for nothing and some did not even make it out of the plane transporting them to the drop zone. When Winters responds by telling him to write what they always do, that their sons died as heroes, Nixon snidely asks, “Do you still believe that, Dick?”68

Much like the soldiers of Saving Private Ryan finding purpose in staying and fighting with Ryan and his squad, the soldiers in Band of Brothers find their purpose for fighting when they discover the Landsberg Labor Camp. Here they see what the Germans have been doing to the Jews and gypsies and other “unwanted” people. As the soldiers walk through the camp in

67 “The Breaking Point,” Band of Brothers, dir. David Frankel, 72 min., HBO, 2001, DVD.

68 Ibid.
stunned disbelief, the emaciated prisoners stumble towards them like the living dead. Soldiers cannot comprehend the situation they discover. They begin to give the prisoners their rations, but are told the people are so malnourished that they will eat themselves to death. Private Joseph Leibgott, a Jewish-American soldier, must tell the prisoners that they are going to be kept in Landsberg so doctors can monitor their diet and health. He begins the speech, but cannot finish it as his voices cracks and wavers because it is so unnerving to him and he begins to cry. The emotionality of soldiers in this situation serves not to emasculate them, but to give them a sense of humanity which the Germans lost through the treatment of the Jewish people.

Heroism in the modern era is more complicated than it was previously. It is no longer acceptable to simply have hyper-masculine, flawless characters who never question their duty or lose their sense of purpose. As the Vietnam War became more and more distant, Americans were able to accept soldiers who accomplished their missions and fought valiantly. Emotionality is not simply a trait of minority characters who were expendable and often killed. Having emotions made a soldier an accessible, real, human being. It was part of an ideal of masculinity that could not only be looked up to, but also achieved. In depicting soldiers in this manner, directors are not trying to lessen our respect for the men who fought in World War II; instead, they show us that men can be heroic while still having flaws and not always making the right decisions.

69 Ibid.
Conclusion

World War II film will continue to saturate our society and affect our understanding of and perception of the soldiers who fought in this conflict. Americans crave these films and directors are pleased to oblige since they have the opportunity to tell stories about the “Greatest Generation” and make substantial amounts of money while doing so. As long as these films continue to earn enormous amounts of cash, they will continue to be made and perpetuate specific images of the Army and of soldiers. Using World War II as their subject, directors have explored issues pertinent to their own times. Furthermore, depictions of soldiers of the World War II generation produced in different eras affect how the events of the war are remembered, in the words of theorist Maurice Halbwachs, as “the mind reconstructs its memories under the pressure of society.”

Film has gone through major changes over the past five decades in establishing views of masculinity. Starting in the immediate post-World War II era, audiences saw an idealized view of our participation in the war. Soldiers were unyieldingly heroic, unflinching in completing their duty and nearly unemotional about death and loss. Emotions were the province of minority characters who died at some point in the film, emphasizing their marginalized status. America never did anything to call into question that heroism and the Army had a clear sense of purpose in entering the war in Europe.

As time passed and the Vietnam conflict dominated American society, directors and their audiences lost faith in these traits and beliefs. Soldiers were not altruistic; they looted and murdered with reckless abandon, getting themselves and others killed at the same time.

70 Halbwachs, 51.
Americans in combat experienced loss and became ineffective. Emotionality became the
dominant feature of soldiers and this caused battles to be lost, like Operation Market Garden in *A Bridge Too Far*.

In our own era, it is no longer necessary for soldiers to be portrayed hiding behind the
tough guise established in the post-war era, nor do their emotions and imperfections cause them
to be emasculated and fail as in the Vietnam era. They no longer need to be infallible, overly-
masculine, and have a clear sense of duty to be considered heroes, as audiences can see in the
films of today. Today, we can view World War II soldiers as the vulnerable individuals that they
really were. We see them now as human beings, with faults, imperfections, weaknesses, and as
men who sometimes questioned their orders. Despite these changes, the soldier still appears as a
masculine hero. This is a more positive and realistic image of heroes in that it shows that anyone,
can be heroic as well. People do not need to be superhuman to display heroism.

The collective memory of the United States has been substantially affected by film
depictions of World War II. Audiences today can enjoy a relatively realistic glimpse into the
lives of the men who fought in the war instead of the idealized, less violent version perpetuated
in the immediate post-war period. These depictions help audiences form their own memories and
perceptions of these events, though they did not experience them firsthand, and that is the true
impact of these films.

American soldiers in World War II were ordinary men put into the extraordinary
circumstance of the war to defend democracy. No matter what their faults were in any situation,
they rose to the occasion and became heroes. As time has passed since the end of World War II,
films show these men more as human beings, rather than super-humans as depicted in the past.
But, they are heroes nonetheless, and their sacrifice and courage provides inspiration for us all.
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