

STRANGE THINGS IN HELL: MOVIES OF “THE GOOD WAR”

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Hype about “The Great Generation” and their “Good War” (World War II, of course) has turned into a multi-million-dollar book and film concession. Films like the laughably unrealistic *Pearl Harbor* and the seemingly realistic *Saving Private Ryan* bask in reverence for a time when issues were supposedly clearer and men were supposedly better. But nostalgia is not a substitute for history; still less is it a substitute for self-knowledge. The present crop of Second World War hype comes from people who’ve never been shot at. We’d do better to trust the testimony of filmmakers who experienced the real thing.

In 1946, shortly after the end of the Second World War, Lewis Milestone, working from a novel by combat veteran Harry Brown, directed a remarkable movie called *A Walk In the Sun*. Milestone was a veteran of the First World War; he’d won 1930’s Academy Award for Best Picture and Best Director for his rendition of Eric Maria Remarque’s great novel of that war, *All Quiet On the Western Front*. But now Milestone did something virtually unheard of at the time: on a shoestring budget, he went outside the system and produced *A Walk In the Sun* independently, free of studio control.

The story is simple: an Army platoon lands on a beach in Italy, walks inland, and captures its objective, a farmhouse manned by German machine-gun units. The actors are all young and (at the time) unknown. When a big-name star is cast, the viewer knows that the star will live at least until the end of the movie -- for a top-billed star may die at or near the end, but not before. But in *A Walk in the Sun* we have no clue who will die, who will crack, who will rise to heroism or fall to cowardice. We invest our attention and affection without knowing what we’ll get back. Thus the film partakes (insofar as a film can) of the terrible uncertainty of war, and the spare story becomes emblematic of the entire conflict.

Milestone’s soldiers are frightened and uncertain and angry. They’re constantly bickering, constantly questioning their orders, constantly smoking. Unable to use outright curses due to censorship, Milestone found ways to indicate how GIs really talked; he used the word “loving” in place of “fucking,” trusting his viewers to supply the accurate usage in their minds. One soldier sarcastically cites the Infantry manual. “What page?” his buddy asks. “I forget the lovin’ page.” “You *better* forget the lovin’ page.” Often the dialogue has the absurdist flavor that war veteran Joseph Heller would make famous in his 1959 novel *Catch-22* -- a combination of Brooklyn banter and *Waiting for Godot*. A soldier says that “two guys” told him there’s a German machine gun up ahead. “Where’s the machine gun?” “They didn’t tell me.” “Who didn’t tell you?” “The two guys.” They’re not trying to be funny. They’re wise-cracking to deal with their fear. They’re not heroes. They’re soldiers. The platoon sergeant cracks, clutches the ground weeping, and will not move forward -- yet no one blames him, no one accuses him of cowardice. “You’re crying ’cause you’re wounded. You don’t have to be bleeding to be wounded. You’ve just had one battle too many. Go ahead, keep crying, we understand.” Their pity for him is as taken-for-granted as the fact that they are doing something they don’t want to do for reasons they no longer understand. A man is shot by a sniper while speaking. His buddy says: “In the middle of a word. And they got him right in the mouth. In the

middle of a word.” Though orders are usually (but not always) followed, there’s little respect for authority. A sergeant tells a private to give an order to another man, but the private replies, “Tell him yourself, you’re wearing the stripes.” The strangest refrain is how, when anybody gets killed, one of the men -- and not always the same one -- will say softly, “Nobody dies.” And somebody else will echo, “Nobody dies.” A crazy statement, flatly contradicting what they’re seeing, but they say it anyway, for no other reason but that one says strange things in Hell.

Battleground (1949) is another film directed by a veteran of the First World War, William A. Wellman, who received the French Crois de Guerre (their Medal of Honor) and five U.S. battle citations. The film depicts the siege at Bastogne during World War Two’s Battle of the Bulge. Again most of the actors are unknown, and again this creates uncertainty as to who will live and die. Like Milestone’s soldiers, Wellman’s bicker, complain, joke, are irreverent toward authority, and smoke constantly. They sing a complaining marching song, universal among GIs at the time, about the civilians (called “Jody”) who are sleeping with their gals back in the States: “Ain’t no use you goin’ home! Jody’s got your gal and gone! Ain’t no use you feelin’ blue! Jody’s got your sister too!” Sarcasically one says, “When I get home just gimme a hot dog and a slice of that pie! Am I gonna kick if I don’t get my job back? No sirree.” They don’t even know where they are. They keep arguing (and taking bets) about whether they’re fighting in Belgium or Luxembourg. Their refrain, when kidding a comrade, is, “He found a home in the Army!” -- a statement which, to them, is the height of lunacy. They’re all scared and they all admit it. When surrounded and fired on, one man’s heroism gets them out of it. He’s wounded in the action. As they’re carrying him back to the field hospital he says, “Just drop me off at the psycho ward. Why did I have to get up and start firing?!” “Good thing somebody did.” “Yeah, well it didn’t have to be me.” Heroism is clearly seen by these men (including the heroes themselves) as an aberration, a fit in which one soul forgets his best interests and performs in a manner he’s almost embarrassed by. One soldier tries to run away from the battle and instead merely runs into another firefight in which he has no choice but to participate -- and, as in *A Walk in the Sun*, he’s not blamed by his comrades. Ambiguity is the order of the day. Everyone is a coward. Everyone is a hero. At the same time. Just by virtue of being there. And no one is there because he wants to be. “I was scared to death,” a soldier says, and another tells him, “You just joined the biggest club in the Army. Everybody’s a member.”

Samuel Fuller saw combat in Africa and Europe with “the big red One,” the Army’s 1st Division. He participated in the D-Day invasion, fought his way across the continent, helped liberate a concentration camp, and was awarded the Silver Star, the Bronze Star, and the Purple Heart. After the war he wrote as well as directed all his films, several of which were about World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. In 1950 he made *The Steel Helmet*, ostensibly about Korea (an as yet unfinished war) but centering around a sergeant who’d been in the Big Red One during the Second World War. The sergeant’s toughness is mere veneer to cover his weakening grasp on sanity; at the height of the action he loses his bearings, loses his mind; up until this moment he’s the most dependable man in the squad, but now he’s walking aimlessly in a daze through the battle, thinking he’s back in World War II, mumbling things no one understands. Fuller is saying in the starkest possible terms that even combat experience is not a dependable guide in combat; like the sergeant in Wellman’s *A Walk in the Sun*, Fuller’s sergeant becomes useless precisely

when he's needed most, and no one blames him for it. The combat veterans Lewis Milestone, William A. Wellman, and Samuel Fuller, all agree that the most commonly felt emotion in war is terror, and what soldiers want most is to escape the terror. (Which would explain why so many veterans were satisfied to sink into the dullness and sameness of the suburbs after the war.)

Almost everyone dies by the film's end, except that the film has no end. Fuller is explicit about this. Instead of "The End," his final title-card reads: "There Is No End To This Story." There's always a war, young men (and civilians) are always going to get chewed up it, and there's nothing you can do about it. No glory. No meaning. No end.

Thirty years after *The Steel Helmet*, Fuller told the story of the war he'd experienced in *The Big Red One*. You would think a 69-year-old man would fondly remember and glorify the most profound experience of his youth. He remembers fondly enough, but he glorifies nothing. As Fuller tells it, he and his squad survived the war by coldly, mercilessly, and nonchalantly putting "wetnose" replacements in the most danger, and mopping up after them. Fuller and his comrades are careful not to learn the names of the wetnoses. "We'd come to look at all replacements as dead men who temporarily had the use of their bodies." Not only does Fuller's squad display no hint of guilt about their behavior; they're even proud of it -- and they make no pretense of hiding their attitude from the doomed replacements. One wetnose gets wounded by a trip-wire mine. The sergeant tells him, "They're not designed to kill you, just to castrate you." Then, with glee: "There it is, I found it!" While the wounded rookie looks on in horror, the veteran sergeant picks up one bloody testicle and throws it away, saying with a sneer, "You can live without it. That's why they gave you two."

Most of *The Steel Helmet* takes place in a temple presided over by an enormous statue of the Buddha, who looks down with an infinitely blank, uncaring gaze; *The Big Red One* begins with a huge crucifix (all that's left of a church) that stands in the middle of a field littered with dead soldiers. The Jesus on the crucifix stares wide-eyed and baffled at the behavior of humanity. Ants crawl in his eye-sockets. So much for the hope of Western civilization. Like Fuller's Buddha in *The Steel Helmet*, Fuller's Jesus in *The Big Red One* is useless on the battlefield except as something to take cover behind -- and it is a German, not an American, who survives a battle by hiding behind the large Cross.

But when Fuller's squad liberates the concentration camp, that same American sergeant who was so cavalier about the loss of an inexperienced soldier's testicle behaves very differently. He sort of adopts an emaciated Jewish boy of about eleven. The boy is baffled and even threatened by the sergeant's kindness, but nevertheless he responds, and the sergeant gives him something to eat and picks up him and carries him on his shoulders. There, on the sergeant's shoulders, the exhausted, horrified, hunger-ravaged boy dies. The narrator relates (as we watch), "He [the sergeant] walked for half an hour before he could bring himself to put the kid down."

Then the sergeant wounds a German soldier, but is told by his squad that Germany has surrendered and the war has been over for hours -- so they frantically tend to the wounded German and save his life. The narrator relates, "Saving that Kraut was the final joke of the whole goddamn war. I mean, we had more in common with him than with all those replacements who got killed whose names we never even knew: we'd all made it through, we were alive." The narrator intends to write about his experience. "I'm gonna dedicate my book to those who shot but didn't get shot. To survive is the only glory in

war, if you know what I mean.”

A Walk in the Sun, *Battleground*, *The Steel Helmet*, and *The Big Red One*, the testimonies of combat veterans, focus on the common foot soldier -- a figure these films portray with great respect but with no glorification. Officers, by contrast, are almost entirely absent in these films; when officers appear, they are usually treated with contempt. The message is clear: those who do most of the fighting and dying are common working men; officers pretend to be in control, but the GIs know that in war no one is in control. In contrast, the next generation of major World War Two films tends to focus on glorified officers. *The Longest Day*, a 1962 epic about D-Day, was such a huge production that it required three (otherwise undistinguished) directors; big-ticket stars like John Wayne, Robert Mitchum, and Henry Fonda, among others, portray the officers, while lesser lights portray infantrymen (who are often used merely as comic relief). The not-so-subliminal message: officers are the really important people on the battlefield. No marquee star dies. No one is a coward, no one cracks up, and almost all who die are nameless extras whom the film makes no effort to connect with emotionally. The audience is allowed a high comfort-level because we *know* all the stars will acquit themselves honorably. *The Longest Day* is an entertaining movie, instructive as to the general strategy of the battle, but it can't be taken seriously as a depiction of war. The same can be said of 1970's *Patton* and 1977's *A Bridge Too Far*. We watch stars portray officers around whom the entire war seems to revolve; we are always aware of "the big picture"; all the "name" stars behave nobly; the outcome is never in doubt. So the audience need never tremble -- neither for themselves, nor for a humanity that seems to be constantly at war.

It would not be until 1998 that two major Hollywood productions again attempted serious portrayals of the GI's experience of World War Two. The most famous, of course, is Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*. Spielberg devotes almost half an hour to the beachhead at D-Day -- a devastating depiction that makes absolutely clear how terrifyingly random is death on the battlefield. Men are torn apart, and do or don't die, not according to what they do but simply according to where they are. Everyone is in a state of shock and dread. Heroism is merely a kind of panic directed at the enemy. The flaw here is that the star is Tom Hanks, playing a captain. Everybody knows *he's* not going to die in the first half hour, so within the film's grotesquely realistic D-Day there is a circle of unreality in which the viewer can find refuge -- if we identify with Tom Hanks and invest him with our concern, then in our imaginations we can make it through the carnage unscathed.

Unlike anybody in a real war, Hanks is protected by Spielberg, that is, by the story. (His death, which of course must be at the very end, will be operatic: he will get to say something which is intended to give purpose to the story. So his death is not at all like the realistic deaths of the film's D-Day, where no one has time to formulate a final meaning.) Once D-Day is over, Hanks' squad is assigned to find and save Private Ryan, whose three brothers have been killed in the same week; the high command has decided that Ryan's family should not lose its last son. From here to the end, the film is mere patriotic melodrama, relying on irony, replete with good guys and bad guys. Again, no sympathetic character behaves badly, and the irony of the story doesn't translate into ambiguity within the souls of the characters. Only a German and an effete American intellectual (who isn't *really* a soldier) display moral failings. The dialogue apes the GI-

speak of *A Walk in the Sun*, *Battleground*, and *The Big Red One*, but without the cheerful irreverence their combat-veteran directors took for granted. To its credit, *Saving Private Ryan* resurrects the GI slogan “FUBAR” -- which stands for, Fucked Up Beyond All Recognition. But the film contradicts the phrase, for its war is turned into a story in which the “recognition,” the meaning, is all too clear: the star surmounts all odds and accomplishes his mission heroically, so even in war all’s right with the world.

Terrence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line* came out the same year as *Saving Private Ryan* but has since been virtually forgotten. Based on combat-veteran James Jones’ novel of his experience on Guadalcanal, Malick’s film is made of far sterner stuff than Spielberg’s. Though studded with stars, Malick plainly cast them to get his film financed; the structure of his film is such that anyone can die at anytime -- there is no safety for the viewer. Amid the chaos of battle, the volatile panic that turns cowardice into heroism and back again, one character named Witt keeps questioning God. “Who are You to live in all these many forms?” And: “What seed, what root did [this evil war] come from? Who’s doin’ this? Who’s killin’ us? Mockin’ us with the sight of what we might have known?” “War doesn’t ennoble men. It turns them into dogs. Poisons the soul.” Because God permits war to exist, Witt loses the will to live *or* die. It’s as though both fates are too much the same to matter to him. He deserts for a while, but not out of cowardice; he performs heroic acts, but does so out of fatalism rather than heroism; the cowardly and the heroic are, for Witt, mere functions of the questions he’s asking of God. He sees others act heroically, and respects that; he sees some behave cowardly, and looks on them with pity; but he sees all, the good and the bad, as caught up in a kind of explosion in which all the participants are flaming bits thrown out of control, part holy and part damned. His final address to God is: “Darkness and light, strife and love, are they the workings of one Mind, the features of the same Face?” It is a terrible and unanswerable question. He ends with one of the most remarkable prayers I have ever heard:

“Look out through my eyes, look out at the things You’ve made.”

What Witt seeks from God is far grander than his own redemption; Witt prays for God to re-evaluate Creation through human eyes. He seeks not Judgment Day, which is the judgment of humanity by God, but rather for God to use the human viewpoint to judge Himself.

As a writer, and as a man who prays, I would prefer to end this essay on that note -- for it is something I too have addressed to God, in my own way and my own words, when confronted with the Reign of Terror we call “history.” But then I think of friends who fought in Vietnam, friends who tell me that the phrase they repeated endlessly there, in response to every horror, was, “It don’t mean nothin’.” A telling double negative. Grammatically, if “it *don’t* mean nothin’” then it does mean something. It’s as though that’s what they were telling each other without admitting it: War must mean something. But is the meaning historical, political, sociological, cultural, spiritual, psychological, archetypal? No answer measures up to, and no prayer is sufficient to address, the repetitive and unfathomable chaos that is war, a chaos that is FUBAR: Fucked Up Beyond All Recognition -- beyond all meaning.

In *A Walk in the Sun*, two soldiers look at the sergeant who’s collapsed into panic:

“What’s eatin’ him?”

“Don’t *you* know?”

As someone who has not experienced combat, I can’t presume to know. The testimony

of films by veterans of modern warfare is practical, irreverent, devoid of glory, and resistant to meaning. A soldier in *Battleground* defines PFC [private first class] as “praying for civilian,” i.e.: praying to be a civilian again. Another soldier in *Battleground* says of a buddy’s behavior: “How do you know what he was thinking? How do you know he was thinking anything at all? Things just happen, and afterwards you try to find out why you acted the way you did.”

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