



Charlie Sheen, at left, stars in "Platoon," an action-oriented movie about the Vietnam War and the soldiers who fought there.

## 'Platoon' settles for easy action, fails to capture the real Vietnam

By Sean Axmaker  
Of the Emerald

I was less than 12 years old when the Vietnam War ended. Like most people of my generation, what I know of the war comes primarily from television and movies.

The best of the lot have been documentaries, primarily "Hearts and Minds" and "In the Year of the Pig," but few films have attempted to explore the Vietnam experience from the point of view of a foot soldier.

This is the premise of Oliver Stone's critically acclaimed "Platoon" — Vietnam through the eyes of a 17-year-old grunt, a kid thrown into a jungle war where the world as he knows it no longer exists. According to the laudatory notices, this film finally shows what it was really like.

I can't judge the success of that point, obviously, but the total acclaim of "Platoon" escapes me regardless. The film didn't disturb me, nor did it dig into the psyche of its characters. Rather, writer/director Stone lets his characters talk about their experiences instead of showing them, reducing the possibility of a forceful, empathetic recreation to empty, preachy rhetoric.

The central character is Chris Taylor (Charlie Sheen), a young college dropout who volunteers for combat duty because "it's the right thing to do." However, the realities of war

soon jar the idealistic youth, and the numbing brutality begins to deaden his sense of himself and his own moral code.

The battle going on in Taylor's soul is mirrored (not particularly subtly) in the moral battle between the pragmatic but ruthless Sgt. Barnes (Tom Berenger) and the humane Sgt. Elias (Willem Dafoe).

Both fine soldiers, the war has affected the men in opposite ways. Barnes has allowed the brutality to destroy his sense of human decency, but Elias has kept his soul intact.

The battles are sudden and brutal. Booby traps and land mines dot the landscape. Death lurks in the quiet of the night and the still of the jungle. It only takes a nudge to throw some of the soldiers into a destructive, hateful frenzy. It's a thin line between Elias and Barnes.

Or so we surmise from the characters' speeches. What is so maddening about "Platoon" is that it can never show us the experiences, only tell us. Because of that, it simply isn't very compelling or convincing. Even the battle scenes maintain a distance from the action, never placing the viewer in the shoes of the soldiers. In place of immediacy, Stone offers only third-person commentary, giving us little but verbal information to explain it all.

Even more troublesome is the intrusion of the private battle between Elias and Barnes, a plot

that feels contrived every step of the way. Elias is our moral compass, a character to interpret the action and pass judgment on characters, nicely packaging the disturbing elements into a pre-digested bundle we no longer have to grapple with.

"Platoon" keeps throwing up filters and obstructions, allowing the audience to keep some distance from the serious issues and experiences the story provides.

For my money, "Apocalypse Now," for all its allegory and surrealism, is a far better presentation of a state of mind than "Platoon," which trades the genuinely disturbing for easily digested action-oriented melodrama.

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