

'Platoon' helps Eugene vets deal with Vietnam war

By Mary Courtis

Of the Emerald

Well, come on, all you big, strong men

Uncle Sam's got himself in a jam again,

Way over yonder in Vietnam.

Well, it's one, two, three, four

What the hell are we fighting for?

Don't ask me, I don't give a damn,

Next stop is Vietnam!

And it's five, six, seven, eight

Open up the pearly gates,

Ain't no use to wonder why

Whoopee, we're all gonna die!

— Country Joe McDonald and the Fish

Vietnam.

Why were we there? What were we fighting for? What was it like to be a soldier in the war? These questions continue to haunt us even 20 years later.

Despite the extensive media coverage of the war, most Americans have yet to come to terms with how they feel about it morally and politically. Some people would prefer to forget the war ever happened, while others want to ignore the issues it left unresolved.

This same dilemma also has marked the movies that have been made about the Vietnam experience. "Coming Home," for example, sensitively explored the post-combat experiences and perceptions of veterans and those close to them but failed to give any real feeling for what the fighting was like.

Similarly, "Apocalypse Now" and "The Deer Hunter" explored, in a highly stylized and iconic fashion, under what conditions men will come psychologically unraveled, presenting us with characters who were symbols instead of genuine people.

What was lacking was a film about combat and the daily adjustments to life in the army that was realistic instead of romantic.

"Platoon," the new movie by Academy Award-winning screenwriter and director Oliver Stone, fills this gap.

Hailed as "the first real movie about the Vietnam War," the film focuses on the conflicts and inter-group tensions experienced by men in a particular platoon as they are seen through the eyes of a green recruit, Pvt. Chris Taylor (Charlie Sheen).

Although initially disoriented by the harshness of the war, Chris survives long enough to adjust to the harrowing conditions of combat and learns how to effectively function as a soldier — but not without paying a high price.

He has to see the war for what it is and the men for what they are, including his two mentors, Sgt. Barnes (Tom Berenger), a cold-blooded trooper determined to protect his men and defeat the enemy any way he can, and Sgt. Elias (William Dafoe), a man who manages to do his job and still retain his empathy and a rational perspective.

For most veterans, "Platoon" has served to reaffirm their memories of Vietnam and served as a useful aid to help them explain what they went through during the war to their friends and family.

"The movie may help validate for a lot of veterans their experience — the stress, the anger, the comradery that takes place," said Steven Tice,

a veteran and director of the Veterans' Center in Eugene, in the Feb. 5 issue of The Register-Guard. "There has not been a lot to help them deal with that."

"It shows just how powerful that experience was and how much stress is involved and how war is not what you see on 'Rambo.' Pectoral muscles do not stop rocket-propelled grenades."

Jerry Kamp, another Eugene veteran, agreed.

Movies about Vietnam like "Coming Home" or "The Deer Hunter" are more fantasy than fact, Kamp said. "After watching them, I would end up re-examining my sense of reality and questioning whether I really remembered the war right."

But with "Platoon," it was different, he said. "For the first time, I didn't have to challenge my sense of reality. It was like, 'Oh, we're right there.' The film validated a lot of what I remembered."

One of the best features of the movie is that it presents very realistic conflicts, Kamp said.

"The scenes where the platoon encounters the enemy are very well done," he said. "The Viet Cong were extremely elusive people and could strike suddenly and at any time. The film shows that and also the tense, in-family fighting that goes on between soldiers."

Other film sequences and characters were harder to deal with, Kamp said.

"The first time I saw the film, a lot of stuff came across to me in slow motion," he said. "When they were burning the village, it seemed to last about three-and-a-half hours. Time froze just like it did in actual combat."

Coming to terms with what happened in a battle three or four days afterward was not uncommon in Vietnam, Kamp said.

"Most times we didn't sit back and plan an offensive," he said. "It just happened. There's a tremendous expansion of awareness in intense situations — you go on automatic. So it takes two or three days before the experience begins to sink



Courtesy photo

"Platoon" is regarded as the first "real" movie about the Vietnam war. Eugene-area veterans agree that the movie has helped them validate their Vietnam experience.

in."

The basic plotlessness of the film works well in this respect as the platoon and its members drift randomly from one skirmish to the next without any concrete purpose but to survive.

Much of the power of "Platoon" also rests in the fact that the viewer feels like he or she is participating in the experiences and emotions of the various soldiers rather than just witnessing them.

Some concern has been expressed that the intensity of the film might resurrect more demons than it exorcises for Vietnam veterans. But these claims seem largely exaggerated.

Nationally, organizations geared to working with stressed veterans say the movie has brought in some veterans but nothing approaching the stampede some critics predicted.

People still are lining up across the country to see "Platoon." Within 17 days after its release, the movie had grossed \$11.1 million, and it figures as a

top contender for Oscars with nominations in eight categories, including best picture, best director and best supporting actor.

The film's success also has been a sweet victory for Stone, who had to bargain and compromise for 10 years to get the picture made.

"I can't believe it. I am honestly stunned," Stone is quoted as saying in The Los Angeles Times. "I thought vets and their families would be the base audience. I was just hoping for it to do good business."

Stone also should be commended for not making a movie about heroes and villains, Kamp said.

"Chris represents most of us," he said. "We were young, idealistic and out of our element in Vietnam. We had to learn how to function there and to cope with the meaninglessness. It's hard for a 19-year-old kid to realize that there are no answers out there — just more action, pushing on and doing it all with no real purpose beyond putting in our 365 days."

Kamp also believes Stone did well portraying the funny aspects of military life in the movie as well as its anxieties and dangers.

"There's a lot of black humor in the film," he said. "The shit-burning detail for instance, or the scenes showing some of the men getting drunk or stoned. It brought back those things, too."

Frustration was also a problem for many soldiers, but they were more likely to take it out on each other rather than on the Vietnamese, Kamp said.

"When Barnes put a bullet through the one guy's wife and then threatens his daughter, that was frustration," he said. "He had just lost a couple guys to land mines. But after Barnes and Elias get into it, the frustration the soldiers were feeling dissipated. By the time they began burning the village, they were just doing their job."

Bunny, the character played by Kevin Dillon in the movie, was another story, Kamp said.

Turn to Vets, Page 12

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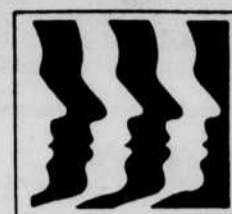
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