

'We Were' bored by Mel's corny 'Vietnam Lite' flick

■ 'We Were Soldiers' has little going for it but good feelings

MOVIE REVIEW

'We Were Soldiers'

★★★★☆

By John Liebhardt
Oregon Daily Emerald

In "We Were Soldiers," Mel Gibson plays Hal Moore, the consummate soldier's soldier. Throughout this two-hour movie, set with one foot in a military training camp and the other squarely in central Vietnam, Gibson is a strong, tough and generous soldier. He looks the camera straight in the eye, gives his men a pat on the back and tells them they're doing just fine.

At home, he's a loving husband and father. He's a man who prays with his boots on and wears his dog tags to bed.

Gibson is fairly convincing as the new-style throwback soldier: Combining John Wayne's butt-kickin' qualities with Josh Hartnett's earnestness.

"We Were Soldiers" is also a throwback film. It juxtaposes the halcyon days of 1965 before the Vietnam war got amped up with the realities of the first major battle between the North Vietnamese Army and U.S. advisors. At home, Gibson's men learn to shoot new machine guns and jump from helicopters (which are also new to the army). The base is the military's version of an all-American suburb,

where cars line the streets, kids run and play and each soldier has a loving, doting wife who worries about the laundry and where to get a good meal around town. During the first half of the film, we are pounded with the symbols of Americana: Baseball, the flag and lots of churches and crosses. If these symbols hit us any harder, they would kill us.

Unlike many other films about Vietnam, "We Were Soldiers" does not bother with the soldier's inherent nihilism. There is no smoking joints, jamming to Jimi Hendrix or popping rounds at an invisible enemy. This move is too corny for that — sort of a Vietnam Lite.

If all of this sounds a bit worn, it is. The movie is overwrought with sentimentality, cardboard characters and one-too-many deathbed scenes where soldiers look into their comrade's eyes and say "I am glad I could die for my country," and "Tell my wife I love her, and my new baby, too."

With so much going against it, we are not left with much empathy or alarm for these characters. Once we figure that people are introduced to have them simply killed off, the audience can only hope that the director disposes of these people in new and inventive ways.

Because director Randall Wallace also wrote "Pearl Harbor," one can immediately notice a strong resemblance between the two war epics. Wallace also tries here to fill a large social canvas, but he fails miserably. We occasionally drop into the lives of the various military composite

characters, and we zoom back as quickly as we came in. We meet Bruce Crandall (Greg Kinnear), the nutty helicopter pilot who lets his men call him "snakeshit." We also meet Jack Geoghegan (played by the wide-eyed Chris Klein from "American Pie"), the college-boy father who Gibson meets in church after Geoghegan's daughter is born. We meet Sergeant Major Basil Plumley (Sam Elliot), who mostly spends the movie calling people "pussies" and shooting his pistol.

We even get to see the enemy — a rarity in Vietnam movies, and a rarity in American war movies until "Pearl Harbor." Wallace gives us glimpses of the North Vietnamese tunnel system, and he gives the North Vietnamese leadership a calm and professional demeanor.

Wallace rightly develops the second half of the movie into a chess match that pits the Vietnamese against Gibson and his can-do attitude. With the North Vietnamese swarming, the Americans can't be saved by the long-range artillery and an early version of napalm.

With all of his good feelings and broad strokes, Wallace must be trying to tell us something. However, other than the obvious "war is bad" or "soldiers are good men," nothing really jumps to mind. Whatever good intentions he and Mel Gibson try to infuse in this film, the audience is left feeling a bit empty. Frankly, they'd like to see some more of the cool explosions.

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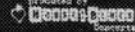



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