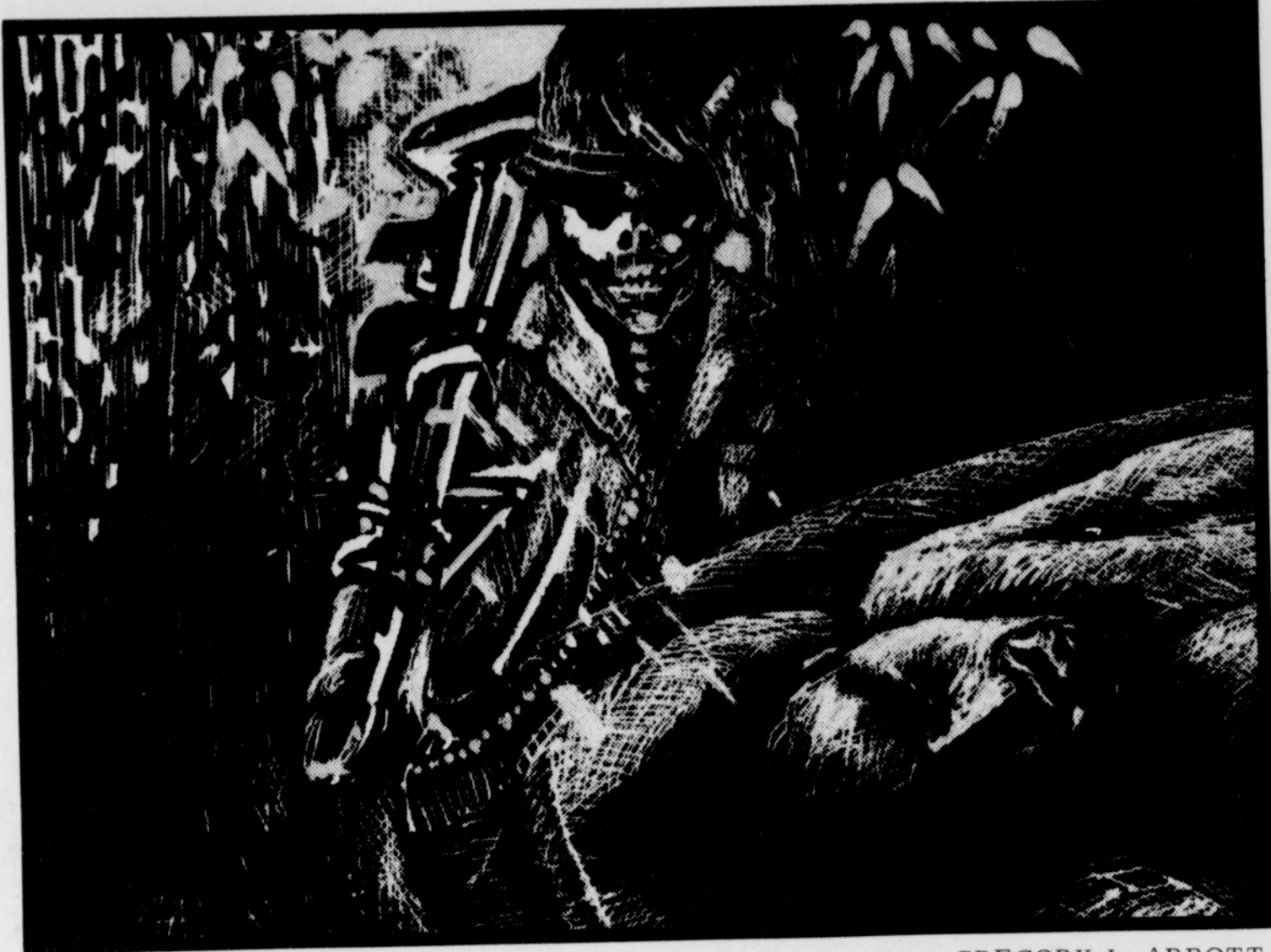




GREGORY L. ABBOTT

PLATOON

"I THINK THAT THROUGH THIS AWARD YOU ARE REALLY ACKNOWLEDGING THE VIET NAM VETERAN, AND I THINK WHAT YOU'RE SAYING IS THAT FOR THE FIRST TIME YOU REALLY UNDERSTAND WHAT HAPPENED OVER THERE, AND I THINK WHAT YOU'RE SAYING IS THAT IT SHOULD NEVER EVER IN OUR LIFETIMES HAPPEN AGAIN."

— OLIVER STONE, WRITER AND PRODUCER OF "PLATOON,"
FROM HIS ACADEMY AWARD ACCEPTANCE SPEECH.

I spent a year in Viet Nam as a Marine up around the DMZ, most of the time with infantry and reconnaissance outfits. I watched the movie "Platoon" when it came to Astoria a few weeks ago. I sat through it quietly, as still as a lizard on a rock. I wished to feel no emotion or surprise and tried to keep constantly in mind that I was merely watching a movie, a script with actors. I did not have to fall to the floor when the shooting started or participate in any of the killing and dying. I could leave my seat at any time and go out into the lobby for popcorn or a coke.

I wanted to see "Platoon" because I was drawn almost irresistibly to the war in which I spent such a brief time but which has remained with me since, not in the past but always in the present. I wished to see "Platoon" also because it is a big picture mainline film that has made such an impression on the American perception of the Viet Nam War it has already become part of the war's history.

"Platoon" is a grunt's-eye view of the war. It reaches no farther than the narrow, uninformed butchery of an infantry platoon's daily routine at war. It provides no more information for the viewer to comprehend what is occurring than the soldiers are aware of. Combat is confusion and disintegration. Surviving is every soldier's main interest. The war's political purposes are of no use to them. Out of fear they murder in anger and destroy villages. Combat soldiers live in the now; in the next instant they are dead, wounded or inexplicably unscathed, until the next shot or explosion.

Toward the end of "Platoon" I double-imaged its story with memories of my own. Only twice did tears sneak into my eyes: when the platoon torched a village after murdering a few of its inhabitants, my experience in several villages I visited; and at a soldier's response to imminent attack by North Vietnamese. His helpless terror at knowing that in only moments with no chance of escape he would fight savagely and perhaps unsuccessfully for his life filled me with dread. When a Black member of the platoon said that life was sweet after war, I remembered my singleminded desire to survive. Future torment and problems of readjustment were a small price to pay for life. A friend who was wounded in Viet Nam and killed in a motorcycle accident in Portland used to say that anyone who lived through a war should not have to die.

After the movie was over people streamed into the lobby grimaced and somberly quiet. A woman who knew that I had been in Viet Nam put her arms around me and quite suddenly burst into tears and walked quickly away. A man looked at me helplessly, unable to say anything. A large solid man, a good friend who had resisted the war, put a hand on my shoulder and said sadly, "I'm sorry, man." Others who knew me nodded solemnly as they passed out into the street. Most of them were about my age, aging members of the Viet Nam generation, but among

them were those young enough to be Reagan bait. Their expressions were blank, as if they had been somewhat de-Ramboed, soberly moved by their first glimpse of what war might really be like.

I am not sure if I should add "Platoon" to my Viet Nam experience. Yet it is through this movie that people are relating to me as a veteran of the war. They talk to me anxiously, sadly or out of curiosity, which I find surprising after so many years of almost everybody avoiding discussion or thought about it. The question I am most asked is if the movie is real: Was it really like that? A woman asked if the characters in a faceless army were so sharply defined. I was surprised by the question. My friends in Viet Nam were among the most individualistic I have known. Living routinely on the edge of terror and death has a habit of bringing out inner feelings and eccentricities.

I am asked if I was affected by "Platoon." I reply that I went home after watching the movie, dug a hole outside my house and slept in it. Reflexes, of course, outlast their necessity as if suspecting everything afterward is illusion. Since I have been back from the war I have dropped on my belly in city intersections and other places when cars or trucks backfire or firecrackers erupt. Once I threw a woman down on a sidewalk when my foot brushed something I mistook for a booby-trap tripwire. I might walk on a spring day in an open field admiring its budding trees and smelling the flowers. A moment later an army helicopter might fly over and I will be back in the war, looking intently for armed enemies among the trees and bushes. My dreams of Viet Nam are about being forced back into the war a second time.

As well intended as the response to the movie seems to be, in particular the sympathy toward the war's veterans, it is about twenty years too late. Facing up to Viet Nam a dozen years after the war ended will not alter the fates of millions whose lives might have been preserved if the people of the United States had acted sooner to stop the killing. The Vietnamese are accorded sympathy in the movie but I have experienced little response to what they suffered in conversations about "Platoon." Concern is shown about the horror Americans underwent but very little about the horror we caused.

Twelve years after Viet Nam we are a nation obsessed with military power. We forget the bankruptcy of conducting our business in the world with arrogance and malice. Our own political liberties degenerate when we give power to generals and clerics. It is difficult to not laugh at the pious imposters who request our wealth and children for the abyss of military supremacy. The brother of the American soldier killed in El Salvador said that it was unfair he died from a mortar explosion instead of being allowed to shoot it out with his attackers. Such an absurd remark, fertile only in an era that forgets the horror of twentieth century warfare in which weapons sear, shatter and hammer brains, bodies, trees and rocks into pudding, yet ironically poignant in a nuclear age.

Chuck Norris, a movie actor who has profited enormously from distorting war in the same comic book fashion as Sylvester Stallone in his "Rambo" movies, criticized "Platoon" for its realism, claiming that America needed heroes. Perhaps these actors, who furl their fables in patriotism, should be made responsible for the tragedies they help set in motion. We who returned from Viet Nam should have sued John Wayne.

At the end of "Platoon" I stared at the smaltzy technique of flashing the faces of the actors on the screen. I looked at them as if they were my old friends and that this was the last time I would see them. I left the theater thinking about what the announcer of the old "Naked City" television series used to say at the end of every episode. There are a million stories in a war. "Platoon" is one of them.

— MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

**Anchor
Graphics**

325-5841

439 - 30th
Astoria, Oregon

Serving the North Coast for over 35 years

Commercial Printers
Typesetting • Layout & Design

BROCHURES • BOOKLETS • BUSINESS CARDS
LETTERHEADS • ENVELOPES • CUSTOM FORMS
RESUMES • LABELS • PROGRAMS • MENUS
INVITATIONS • POSTERS • ADVERTISEMENTS
RUBBER STAMPS • COPIES • PMTS
NEGS • FOIL STAMPING • EMBOSsing
NUMBERING • FOLDING • COLLATING
BINDING • HOLE DRILLING • PADDING

