The soldier's return: films of the Vietnam War

Michael James Noreen

Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation

https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd/16165

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Iowa State University Capstones, Theses and Dissertations at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Retrospective Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
The soldier's return: films of the Vietnam War

by

Michael James Noreen

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Literature)

Program of Study Committee:
Charles L.P. Silet, Major Professor
Leland Poague
Hamilton Cravens

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2004
This is to certify that the master's thesis of

Michael James Noreen

has met the requirements of Iowa State University

Major Professor

For the Major Program
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE OF CONTENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1. A CHANGING WAR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2. COMBAT FILMS: <em>THE GREEN BERETS, PLATOON</em>, <em>FULL METAL JACKET</em>, AND <em>HAMBURGER HILL</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3. THE SOLDIER’S RETURN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4. THE WAR STILL REMAINS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANNOTATED FILMOGRAPHY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED/WORKS CONSULTED</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Beginning in the mid-1960s the Vietnam War became, for filmmakers, fertile ground in which to re-establish the war film genre. A new generation of filmmakers discarded the conventions of traditional war films and began producing thought-provoking, questioning, and even anti-war films. While relying on the ideology of the triumphant war hero, an image Hollywood helped to create, Vietnam War films presented a new vision of the war veteran; a vision of a disillusioned, dysfunctional, and even destructive vet. Contrary to many previous war films (especially those dealing with World Wars I and II) that glorified war and portrayed the United States’ military as all-powerful, films dealing with the war in Vietnam often questioned the United States’ involvement in the war and to a greater extent questioned the treatment of returning veterans. Though there are very few war films of the WWII and post-WWII era that deal with the return of veterans, the few that do often demonstrate a stereotypical view of the war vet, presenting them as negatively affected by their service, yet eventually able to overcome their insecurities and to successfully reintegrate into society.

William Wyler’s Academy Award winning 1946 film *The Best Years of Our Lives* exemplifies the negative effects the war had on returning soldiers, but also relies on the ideology of the triumphant war hero, one who struggles with adapting to post-war life in the U.S., but ultimately perseveres.

In the opening scenes of the film the audience is introduced to three service men, all attempting to get a flight back home to Boone City, Air Force Captain Fred Derry (Dana Andrews), Army Sergeant Al Stephenson (Fredric March), and Navy Sailor Homer Parrish (Harold Russell). Each man has served in various places and capacities during the war and
the only physical evidence of trauma in the three men is Homer's hands; in place of his hands Homer wears two metal hooks, the results of injuries sustained during combat. The three soldiers are returning to the U.S. well after the war has ended and they are not showered with the type of stereotypical homecoming celebrations Hollywood often portrays. The three men eventually share a cab ride home from the airport and agree to get together later for a drink. As each man is dropped off, they return to their respective lives and begin to encounter the changes that have occurred while they were away.

In what would become a standard theme in later films, each of the three soldiers in The Best Years of Our Lives experiences a varied level of difficulty with their reintroduction to family and friends, and to society in general. And although the three soldiers encounter numerous roadblocks in their re-assimilation to society, per standard Hollywood practice in the post-WWII years, the soldiers are eventually able to persevere and lead normal, semi well-adjusted lives. In a brief analysis of the film, Martin F. Norden offers that:

The Best Years of Our Lives presents a vet who lost both hands in the war (Harold Russell) as one of three ex-military men who find the road to readjustment a bit rocky although, with the support of family and friends, ultimately maneuverable. Best Years and the other films of its vintage spend considerable time studying the processes by which their Noble Warriors eventually overcome difficulties before getting on with their new day-to-day lives. (218-9)

Norden's assertion that WWII veterans were "Noble Warriors" is a theme that remains constant in many post-WWII war films. Even though the soldiers in The Best Years of Our Lives struggle with adjusting to their new lives, because they are Noble Warriors they
are able to adapt and overcome, thus pacifying audiences and remaining true to the on-screen patriotism of the post-WWII years.

Films of the Vietnam and post-Vietnam era greatly diverge from the on-screen patriotism Hollywood tended to portray in war films following WWII. According to Peter C. Rollins, “Like fiction writers, Hollywood auteurs have experimented with a variety of metaphors to comprehend the war, most of which have failed to satisfy critical audiences” (425). Though many Vietnam War films fail as pieces of critical work, and are merely produced for profit-hungry studios and action-oriented audiences, there are films that provide outstanding critical representations of the Vietnam War and of how the war affected soldiers in combat and veterans returning home. Films like *Platoon, Coming Home, Distant Thunder, Full Metal Jacket*, and a handful of others offer audiences a visual representation of the Vietnam War and the heroism and tragedy American soldiers experienced. Many of these films helped to usher in a new era of Hollywood war films, an era that capitalized on the American ideology of the triumphant war hero and created a new vision of the war veteran.

One category of Vietnam War films stands out as the finest representation of Vietnam veterans and the difficulties they faced when returning to the United States; these films are classified as “coming home” films. The “coming home” genre exemplifies the shift in ideology between pre- and post-Vietnam war films. These films often take into account the numerous societal/cultural changes that occurred during the 1960s and use them as a backdrop for the film. Soldiers who fought in Vietnam were confronted by demonstrators, dissenters, and hostility upon their return to the U.S. and many vets were ill-equipped, and therefore unable, to deal with the changes and the opposition to the war that had occurred at home. Vietnam was not WWII, there was no feeling of national superiority or invincibility,
and veterans were faced with the harsh reality that the war in Vietnam was brutally unpopular and that after fighting for their country, they were shunned. "Coming home" films attempt to portray the plight of returning veterans, to explore the causes for their ostracism, and open a dialogue as to why the United States public was wrong in making many Vietnam veterans social outcasts.

Because of the varied and significant issues surrounding the Vietnam War, it is important to focus on the issues raised in several "coming home" films. This examination will concentrate on how filmmakers portrayed returning Vietnam veterans through their films. In stating one of the many causes for Vietnam veterans' inability to return to society as productive members, Daniel Miller writes: "The government discarded them: it failed to provide the care, money, personnel, and programs required to fulfill its primary responsibilities to those who fought in Vietnam – healing their wounds and assisting their successful reintegration, with dignity, into society" (183). This passage only hints at the abundance of difficulties many veterans faced, but with careful analysis of several "coming home" films it is possible to further dissect the causes for the dysfunction of Vietnam veterans portrayed in film and to reveal how the war changed them.
CHAPTER 2
COMBAT FILMS: THE GREEN BERETS, PLATOON, FULL METAL JACKET, AND HAMBURGER HILL

Before addressing films that deal with the Vietnam veteran returning and attempting re-assimilation to society, it is necessary to discuss the genre of the Vietnam "combat film." Even though these films are often set in Vietnam and deal with the soldiers during combat, they are an integral part of the genre of Vietnam War films. The combat film provides the audience the filmmaker's visual depiction of the war in Vietnam. These films often portray the chaotic, confused, and deadly situations which American troops routinely faced. Understanding what it was like for soldiers "over there" is pivotal to understanding the struggles they faced when returning to the United States, hence it is necessary to discuss combat films and the overall landscape of the film industry's attitudes toward the Vietnam War.

Through the combat film audiences were introduced to the situations, or what the filmmakers perceived as "action," during and in the years following the Vietnam War. Following World War II, pro-war, pro-military films were churned out by Hollywood. The post-war era brought an onslaught of military propaganda films, in which audiences were bombarded with images of the United States' military might and its unquestionable ability to defend itself and destroy the "enemy." These films have roots firmly planted in the American consciousness, and from the end of WWII until the mid-1960s American audiences enjoyed a sense of military comfort portrayed through, at times, absurdly patriotic films.

Often considered a legend in American film, John Wayne was a master at portraying the on-screen sense of military might that many Americans felt during the years following
WWII. Films such as John Ford’s *They Were Expendable* (1945) and Allan Dwan’s *The Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949), among many others, showcased Wayne’s “American” bravado. In 1968 Wayne continued his role as an American patriotic hero with what is often considered the initial entry in the genre of Vietnam War combat films, *The Green Berets* (1968). Though the film deals with the escalating war in Vietnam, it still adheres to WWII cinematic conventions and Michael Anderegg suggests *The Green Berets* was “A World War II combat film in tone and structure…” (24). Anderegg’s assertion is an accurate one. Wayne, who also co-directed the film, follows a tired, predictable formula in *The Green Berets* and ignited a critical backlash with the film. Even though the film was universally panned by critics, “The hullabaloo surrounding the film generated interest in seeing it,” and thus the film did exceedingly well at the box office (Devine 45).

Even with a strong showing at the box office *The Green Berets* has become an example of overly patriotic bad timing. Only six months prior to the release of *The Green Berets* Americans witnessed the Tet Offensive, in which the U.S. military was caught very much off-guard, and this event sent public opinion of the war into a downward spiral. Wayne’s gung-ho portrayal of Colonel Mike Kirby, a Green Beret commander, is overly macho and steeped in stereotypes created in countless Western and WWII films. It was not a film American audiences were willing to believe in; rather it was a film that used a worn-out formula that did not connect with an ever-growing antagonistic audience. As a combat film *The Green Berets* succeeds on only one level, the realistic weaponry, equipment, and personnel the U.S. Army provided for the film at Wayne’s repeated requests. As for the actual combat sequences in the film, they lack the authenticity of later entries into the genre
and rely instead on standard "plot devices like the murder of a little Vietnamese girl, which turns the liberal newspaperman into a supporter of the war" (Auster and Quart 33).

By relying on previously proven storylines and not taking into account Americans' changing attitudes toward the escalating fighting in Vietnam, The Green Berets alienated its audience. Depending entirely on American audiences to fall in line with the tried and true patriotic formula that had been so successful in the past, Wayne created what seems now as a shallow, wartime propaganda film. Tobey C. Herzog, in discussing the failings of The Green Berets, writes:

This film, promoting a patriotic, simplistic view of a complex war, contains clear distinctions between right and wrong, "good guys versus bad guys," and humanitarian acts contrasted with brutal atrocities directed against civilians. Absent, for the most part, is an honest attempt to probe the realities and ironies of war in general and Vietnam in particular. (20)

This passage by Herzog accurately describes what is missing in The Green Berets, and what later filmmakers, such as Oliver Stone, Stanley Kubrick, and John Irvin, would attempt to capitalize on. Many filmmakers would come to realize that the war in Vietnam was not cut and dry or "us versus them." This formula worked for the era immediately following the Second World War, where obvious oppressors were attacking American ideals and personal freedom, but for a war in which the line between good and evil was constantly blurred this formula does not accomplish its "patriotic" goal.

During the late 1980s there was a surge in production of Vietnam War combat films, beginning with Oliver Stone’s semi-autobiographical Platoon (1986) and with Stanley Kubrick’s Full Metal Jacket, and John Irvin’s Hamburger Hill following in 1987. These
three films would come to set the standard for Vietnam War combat films, and that is especially true of Stone’s *Platoon*. Stone’s vision of Vietnam came as both breathtaking and sobering to audiences.

Because of a lack of studio interest Stone was forced to sit on his script for *Platoon* for nearly a decade. When Stone finally put together financing for the film it would become the first in a trilogy of Vietnam films for Stone, including *Born on the 4th of July* (1989) and *Heaven and Earth* (1993). Stone is hailed for his accurate portrayal of combat in Vietnam and especially for creating “the first commercial feature about Vietnam written and directed by a vet” (Haines 91). Stone’s service in the Army during Vietnam lent him instant credibility with audiences and allowed him to produce a “realistic” vision of combat in Vietnam.

The realism Stone injects into *Platoon* comes in the portrayal of the “hump, the physically demanding and often fearful movement through dense jungle” (Haines 92). Harry W. Haines suggests that the accuracy of *Platoon* lies in the “highly detailed” hump scenes, as well as the scenes that occur back at camp, where soldiers “swap stories, eat, brush their teeth, shave, bathe, write letters home, smoke dope, play poker, and burn feces” (92). By incorporating these elements into the film Stone expertly portrays the conditions of the war in Vietnam that many Americans were not familiar with. And as Haines aptly asserts, these scenes “provide *Platoon* with an element of authenticity missing in films like *Rambo* (1982), which rely solely on action” (92).

*Platoon* begins with new-recruit Chris Taylor (Charlie Sheen) walking off of a cargo plane into the world of Vietnam. Taylor is a representation of Stone during his time in Vietnam; young and idealistic, a partially educated volunteer. Throughout the film Taylor
interjects with voice-over commentary of his own thoughts (through letters to his grandmother) about life during the war and meditates on the United States' mission in Vietnam. Taylor must endure the ire of other soldiers, with constant berating for being "fresh-meat." Taylor slowly suffers through the indignant remarks from his fellow soldiers and eventually earns their trust and respect, becoming a "doper" and aligning himself with the drug-using soldiers in the platoon. It is during the scenes where the soldiers are in camp, attempting to escape from the horrors of the day's hump, that Taylor is introduced to the contradictions of the war.

Throughout the platoon there is dissension between two separate camps; the "dopers," who, on a limited scale, question the war and the reasoning behind it, and the "juicers," who are portrayed as gun-toting, killers. Each camp is embodied by one of the two platoon Sergeants, Sgt. Elias (Willem Dafoe) and Sgt. Barnes (Tom Berenger). Elias is the savior-like warrior, intent on serving his country yet questioning why, and soothing the pain with drugs. Barnes is a direct contradiction to Elias, an infallible executioner, intent only on punishing the "enemy," and he fuels his rage through alcohol. Each Sergeant is representative of the men who hold allegiance to him and their ideals; Barnes symbolizes the non-rational, chaotic, and confused themes that pervaded the Vietnam War, whereas Elias symbolizes much of the same, yet is set apart by his innate moral sensibilities and ability to question the reasoning behind the war.

In a scene reminiscent of the My Lai massacre Stone creates the conflict that will become the undoing of Sergeants Elias and Barnes. The platoon, on what was often termed a "zippo" raid by U.S. forces, enters a Vietnamese village looking for suspected Viet Cong forces in hiding (PBS). While searching the village for VC soldiers, Taylor, Bunny (Kevin
Dillon), and O’Neill (John Q. McGinley) stumble across a young boy and his terrified mother. The soldiers sadistically taunt the boy and his mother, and at one point Taylor shoots at the boy’s feet, trying not to succumb to the pressure of his fellow soldiers to “shoot the ‘greasy gooks’” (Devine 248). Seeing that Taylor is unable to kill the boy, Bunny, with a murderous rage, crushes the boy’s head with his rifle. After this violent encounter the soldiers regroup with the rest of the squad, only to find that yet another atrocity is about to be committed by Sgt. Barnes.

Sgt. Barnes is interrogating the village chief and the “babbling and clicking of the agitated wife...lead[s] Barnes to execute her in front of her entire family” (Devine 248-9). This callous disregard for life by Barnes is immediately seized upon by Sgt. Elias as he stumbles upon the scene shouting “Barnes...what the fuck you doing? You ain’t a firing squad, you piece of shit.” Elias tackles Barnes and a melee between the men ensues. The two Sergeants are eventually separated, but the growing hatred between Barnes and Elias is obvious and only further inflamed when Elias reports Barnes’ conduct to their commanding officer, and is blatantly rebuffed. Here, as Jeremy Devine correctly asserts, the “splitting asunder of the platoon can be analogized to hawks and doves, good and evil, and so on” (249). Because the platoon is split between allegiance to Barnes and Elias, the plot reverts to that of The Green Berets, good versus evil. But rather than following the tired stereotypes of past war films Stone instead infuses a sense of morality that other war films so often exclude in favor of action.

In the scene directly following Elias’ confronting the commanding officer about Barnes’ conduct during the raid in the village, Taylor and Elias sit quietly under a tree admiring the stars when Taylor says to Elias “Barnes has got it in for you doesn’t he?” Elias
offers that "Barnes believes in what he’s doing." And in response to Taylor’s question of “do you?” Elias says, “In ’65 yeah, now, no.” “What happened today [the murder of the chief’s wife in the village] is just the beginning, we’re gonna lose this war.” “We’ve been kicking other people’s asses for so long I figured it’s time we got ours kicked.” This blatant acceptance of the United States’ ineptitudes during Vietnam by Elias represents Stone’s interpretation of the war and provides audiences with a necessary critique.

This is a pivotal scene in Platoon and prefaces the battle between Barnes and Elias as a metaphor for good versus evil. In the following sequences (and the climactic moment of the film) the platoon is again on another search and destroy mission, when Sgt. Barnes and Sgt. Elias meet face-to-face, alone in the jungle, and as Elias smiles at Barnes, thinking he is safe, Barnes takes aim and shoots Elias several times, leaving him for dead. As the squad leaves the scene of the fighting Barnes reports to the other soldiers that he saw Elias’ dead body and that they should leave without him. As the helicopters depart from the “hot LZ” Elias emerges from the jungle, wounded, and being chased by Viet Cong soldiers. In a highly stylized sequence Elias is eventually gunned down and Taylor, sitting next to Barnes in the chopper offers the Sergeant a haunting glance.

Even though the theme of good versus evil plays an important role in Platoon, it is the interaction between Sgt. Elias and his men that provides audiences with the critical analysis of the war. By incorporating the daily routines and conversations between the soldiers Stone is able to not only offer a stunning visual image of the combat that occurred in Vietnam, but also to question the need for and outcomes of the war. In Platoon, Stone creates an authentic representation of the Vietnam War, backed by his own credibility as a
soldier. He portrays for the audience the war on various levels that helped many Americans to better understand and appreciate the sacrifice soldiers made in Vietnam.

As Oliver Stone was re-crafting a tired genre with *Platoon*, and beginning to build what would become his powerful influence in American cinema, another well-established and highly acclaimed director set out to create his vision of the Vietnam War. Stanley Kubrick followed Stone’s 1986 release of *Platoon* with his landmark training/combat film *Full Metal Jacket* in 1987. In discussing the acceptance of Kubrick’s work James Howard writes: “There are two distinct schools of thought so far as Kubrick goes – that he is either a cold, pretentious bore whose films may be technically impressive but are equally sterile and inhuman, or else a genius whose style is unmatched by any other film-maker” (Howard 22). Though this is a common critique of Kubrick’s work, it holds particular relevance to Kubrick’s treatment of the Vietnam War. *Full Metal Jacket* is indeed a “cold, sterile, and inhuman” film, yet it is also masterfully intended to be that way. Kubrick attempts to portray for the audience the inhumanity and insanity of the Vietnam War and war itself by creating a film that adheres to themes of violence and destruction that wars produce.

*Full Metal Jacket* opens not in Vietnam, but rather at the U.S. Marine basic training facilities at Parris Island, South Carolina. The opening sequence acquaints the audience with the ritual that all men entering the service must partake in; the shaving of their heads. This ritual symbolizes that the enlisted men are all put at an equal level, or as Gunnery Sergeant Hartman, expertly portrayed by Lee Ermey (a former Marine Drill Instructor), screams at the new arrivals:

Because I am hard you will not like me, but the more you hate me the more you will learn. I am hard, but I am fair. There is no racial bigotry here. I do not look down on
niggers, kikes, wops, or greasers. Here you are all equally worthless. And my orders are to weed out all non-hackers who do not pack the gear to serve in my beloved corp.

Unlike Stone’s Vietnam, where racial and class divisions are often at the heart of conflict within the platoon, Kubrick produces a squad of soldiers meant to ignore outside influences/conflicts and focus solely on becoming “killing machines.” Throughout boot camp the recruits are stripped of their individuality and are taught only to work as a fighting force – intent on destroying the enemy.

By focusing solely on the brutality that occurs during wartime, Kubrick is able to avoid the racial and class distinctions Stone is intent on focusing on. Many critics of Full Metal Jacket would argue that the lack of treatment of many of the pivotal issues surrounding the Vietnam War make the film less realistic and therefore a less than complete representation of the war. Although this point can certainly be argued, and Kubrick’s authenticity is by no means equal to Stone’s, it was not Kubrick’s intention to create a film that delved into the social issues that pervaded the war, but rather to present the atrocities that war creates. For this reason Full Metal Jacket is an exemplary combat film, which, as Sgt. Hartman avows, “weeds out the non-hackers,” and focuses on the sheer brutality of war.

After the audience is jarred with the transition from training camp, Kubrick begins his examination of combat during the Tet Offensive in the city of Hue, through the eyes of Private Joker (Matthew Modine), who is working as a reporter for the military newspaper Stars and Stripes. Because Pvt. Joker shoots the enemy with a camera as opposed to a rifle, Kubrick is able to offer the war through the eyes of someone who is able to remain reasonably impartial (Pvt. Joker wears a peace symbol pinned to his fatigues and has “Born
to Kill” written on his helmet). Joker is an amalgam of the hawks and doves – representing the varying attitudes on both sides.

By making it blatantly clear to the audience that Pvt. Joker is torn between peace and war, Kubrick is able to concentrate on both the physical and mental destruction the soldiers must endure. Howard writes, “Without dwelling on the behaviour of the Marines and on any brutal ill-treatment of the mostly unseen Vietnamese, Kubrick deals, instead, with the dehumanizing process of what military preparations for war do to the minds and sensibilities of young men” (169). By dividing Full Metal Jacket into two distinct sections Kubrick is able to portray the rough treatment the grunts must face in training and how that training translates into their own brutality when in Vietnam. Once in the city of Hue the soldiers are caught in sniper fire and pinned down among the rubble of the city. The soldiers are methodically brought down one-by-one by the sniper, and in the film’s climax, what remains of the small squad finally locates the sniper. The sniper turns out to be woman and she is mortally wounded by the soldiers. As she lies dying, pleading with the soldiers to kill her, Pvt. Joker must make the agonizing decision of whether or not to shoot her. Pvt. Joker eventually shoots the woman, thus making him the “killing machine” that Sgt. Hartman had envisioned for the recruits.

Albert Auster and Leonard Quart note that Full Metal Jacket deals “less with the concrete reality of Vietnam than with the military as an institution that breeds killers and project[s] a vision of all men as potential destroyers and lovers of death” (142). While this is indeed true of Kubrick’s film, Full Metal Jacket provides an anti-war commentary that uses the brutal nature of combat to influence the audience. This film may not cover the Vietnam War on as many levels as Stone’s Platoon, but a probe of drug use and of class and racial
conflicts was not Kubrick's goal. The violent ferocity of both the training camp and combat sequences in this film is enough for Kubrick to accomplish his goal; not to create just an anti-Vietnam film, but rather to create an anti-war film. Kubrick utilizes the backdrop of Vietnam, just as he did with WWI in *Paths of Glory* (1957) and with the growing fear of the cold war in *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), to create a strong anti-war message.

The last of the most relevant combat films is John Irvin's *Hamburger Hill*. While *Hamburger Hill* did not meet with the same critical and box-office success as *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket*, it deserves recognition as an outstanding combat film because of the juxtaposition it creates between the soldiers fighting in Vietnam and their constant discussions about life back home: before, during, and after the war. In summarizing *Hamburger Hill* Jack Hunter offers that:

> It shows a recreation of an actual battle, the assault on Dong Ap Bia, that commenced on May 1st, 1969. For 10 days US troops advance up, then retreat back down, the same hill, slowly gaining ground but losing many dead along the way. Finally, they get to the top, achieving – what? Featuring much interplay between its young, shell-shocked characters and insights into the nature of the conflict. (22-3)

It is the interplay between the soldiers that makes this film such an interesting entry into the Vietnam combat film genre. It not only illustrates the drug use, racial and class divisions, as Stone provides, but also incorporates the gruesome brutality of war Kubrick depends on, while still reminding the audience there is a world the soldiers must return to. In the opening of the film Irvin brilliantly jump cuts between images of combat in Vietnam and the black wall of the Vietnam War Memorial. Immediately the audience is drawn to the casualties of the Vietnam War and the intense fighting that occurred there. This instance also serves as a
union between the war in Vietnam and the dissension back home. It allows Irvin to set up the parallels between the combat sequences and reminiscences of home by the soldiers, and although it is rare for characters in Vietnam combat films to discuss the “nature of the conflict,” it is rarer still to see the soldiers discussing how the war will affect their lives once they return home.

The most telling instance occurs after the third day of fighting for the hill. The much older Sergeant Worcester (Stephen Weber), who has returned to Vietnam for yet another tour of duty after spending time back in the States, reminds the grunts what they can expect when they return home. As one young lieutenant yearns to be back in the United States exclaiming that he wants nothing more than a “corndog with mustard,” Sgt. Worcester paints a bleak image of what the men can expect when they return, when asked “Why do you keep coming back?":

They love everybody back there [the U.S.], cats, dogs, niggers, spics, kikes, wops, micks, greaseballs. They’re real fond of the gooks back home too, if ya’ll can believe that. They love everybody but you. I was medivacked after Dak To, there was a hill, and we were met at Oakland by pretty little things, ya’ know what I mean, they had hair down to their asses, ya’ know. And they had bags…full of dog shit. Well…it don’t mean nothing.

Through this scene Irvin accomplishes what is one of the most impressive representations in the combat film genre: an older Sergeant (in an intense combat situation) recalling the dissension over the war at home and the repercussions it will have for the young soldiers who will eventually, or hopefully, return.
The phrase "It don't mean nothing" recurs throughout *Hamburger Hill* and represents not only the fighting, but also the attitudes of the young soldiers in the film. It is an attitude many soldiers would return to the United States with, but because of a wave of disgust with the war in American society, it is also an attitude those same soldiers would encounter when they returned. Irvin's constant use of the phrase "it don't mean nothing" is a metaphor for the war and for what the soldiers were fighting for. In a theme that frequently arises in combat films, the soldiers become concerned with fighting for each other, rather than for the causes the U.S. has provided them. The men consistently fight, not for freedom or the destruction of communism, but rather to ensure that they (as well as their buddies) stay alive.

When the veterans of the Vietnam War who, like the soldiers in *Hamburger Hill*, had just been trying to stay alive, returned to the United States after facing horrific combat situations, they wound up facing yet another "enemy" in the American public, many of whom did not fully realize the physical and mental intensity of the combat in Vietnam. Vietnam combat films like *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, and *Hamburger Hill* helped to illustrate for the American public what it was like to serve during Vietnam. More than a decade after the war directors like Kubrick, Stone, and Irvin attempted to provide audiences with a semi-realistic vision of the combat that took place during Vietnam, and also to present audiences with an explanation of the realities of combat, with the expectation of creating further dialogue on the war. Even though films about the combat experience in Vietnam are powerful in their ability to help audiences realize the reality of the situations in Vietnam, they are nonetheless "combat" films and often do not take into account the difficulties of re-assimilating to society for the soldier who fought in Vietnam.
CHAPTER 3
THE SOLDIER'S RETURN

By the time major hostilities had ceased and the U.S. military had completely withdrawn from Vietnam in 1975, numerous films about the war had already been produced, though it was not until the years following the withdrawal from Saigon that filmmakers began to address the most pressing issues surrounding the war. The issue that would come to the forefront for many American filmmakers is the perceived problems Vietnam veterans faced upon returning and readjusting to life in the United States. Rick Berg, in addressing early "coming home" films such as *The Born Losers* (1967) and *Welcome Home, Soldier Boys* (1972), writes "The Vietnam veteran has become a transient loser, a marginal, who has toured Hell and returned, not wiser or maturer, but a threat to the American dream" (58). Berg's image of the Vietnam vet as a threat to the "American dream" is an important idea, yet is far too broad of a term to encompass what filmmakers were attempting to portray through Vietnam War "coming home" films. Filmmakers were making "coming home" films in order to tear down the cinematic notion of the triumphant war hero. Instead of a threat to the "American dream," it would be better stated that Vietnam veterans were portrayed as a threat to the United States' military dominance and longstanding vision of a content, well-adjusted war hero. In many "coming home" films returning Vietnam veterans were seen as dysfunctional and as a threat, not only to the "American dream," but rather to the venerable American ideology that soldiers "win wars" and return home to glory. Producers, directors, and actors were creating anti-war films that explored the representation of Vietnam veterans, their reintroduction to society, and the lasting effects of a war that left
them forever changed. These films challenged an established American war ideology and reflected the struggles Vietnam veterans faced when reintegrating with society.

**Coming Home**

In 1978 audiences were presented with two films, Hal Ashby's *Coming Home* and Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter*, which would become huge box-office draws and would bring the Vietnam veteran to the forefront of the collective American consciousness. Although *Coming Home* was certainly not the first war film to directly deal with disabled soldiers returning from war (it plays strongly on the precedents set by *The Best Years of Our Lives*), its title alone would become a part of the American lexicon and its popularity (it received eight Academy Award nominations, including Best Picture and Best Director) proved audiences were eager for images and discussion of the war.

Auster and Quart dismiss *Coming Home* both because of its simplistic conventions, "structured around a good old-fashioned love triangle compounded with a bit of feminism and some Vietnam realities for relevance," and because "*Coming Home* is a liberal and humane film that never quite gets to the heart of Vietnam" (80-1). Even though Auster and Quart are correct in their assertions that *Coming Home* does indeed rely too heavily on a frequently used romantic storyline and that the film never does get to the "heart of Vietnam," there are certainly moments in the film where central Vietnam issues are addressed.

In the beginning of the film the audience is introduced to Sally Hyde (Jane Fonda) and her Marine Captain husband Bob Hyde (Bruce Dern), who is about to ship out for a tour in Vietnam. After her husband leaves Sally takes a volunteer job at the Veteran's Hospital
on base and quickly begins a personal transformation when confronted with the men at the hospital. Sally befriends a paralyzed vet, Luke (Jon Voight), who is struggling with his inability to live his life as he had before the war. Quickly the pair become close friends and eventually become romantically involved. In one of the few moments when *Coming Home* departs from the love story plotline, Luke in a desperate attempt to bring attention to the brutality and failures of the war in Vietnam, chains himself to the Marine base’s front gate, blocking all passage in or out.

This act of protest is in direct response to Luke’s friend and fellow soldier Billy’s (Robert Carradine) death. Billy returned home not with the physical disabilities that plagued Luke, but rather with immense mental instability. Billy is closed off to the rest of the world and his mind is shut down as a direct result of the mental trauma he suffered while serving in Vietnam. Even though Billy has family and friends who surround him and offer him the support he requires, his inability to come to terms with his own demons leads him to commit suicide. With the death of his friend, Luke feels as though the war has not only wronged Billy, but himself as well. In the self-serving act of chaining himself to the base gates, Luke attempts to draw attention to the pointless deaths that the war is causing and tells television reporters:

The reason why I’m here is because a buddy of mine, who’d been in ‘Nam, took his own life today. It’s kind of a funeral service. I’m here because I’m trying to tell people if we want to commit suicide we have plenty of reasons to do it right here at home. You don’t have to go to Vietnam to find a reason for us to kill ourselves. I just don’t think we should be over there.
Ashby uses this blatantly anti-war message to establish the character of Luke as a war protester, a former soldier who was wounded in combat and has come to the realization that the war in Vietnam is not necessary. This scene also serves to make the audience aware of the situation which many wounded Vietnam vets faced. By using the image of the former "All-American" man (who now represents a threat, as evidenced by the men in "dark glasses" who now follow Luke) protesting the war, Ashby intends to promote a sense of sympathy and disillusionment in audiences. Ashby gains this sympathy by portraying Luke as veteran who served in Vietnam and came home paralyzed and then, through his healing process, realizes the injustices and unnecessary death the war is causing. Ashby plays on the sympathies of the audience, anticipating that the audience will associate with, and feel compassion, for Luke. Luke’s growing threat to American ideology is a turning point in the film, illustrating that Vietnam veterans did not receive or feel the “glory” soldiers earned in past wars. Instead, Luke has become a threat to traditional conventions and is representative of crumbling ideals.

After Sally and Luke have formed a relationship based on both of their rapidly changing ideas about the war, Sally’s husband unexpectedly returns from Vietnam after he has been wounded. When Capt. Hyde discovers his wife’s infidelities, he confronts Luke, but only to make him aware that he knows about Luke and Sally, and to share with him the fact that “they” (the men following Luke) had pictures and audiotapes of the two of them together. Hyde leaves in disgust and upon returning home flies into a tirade, threatening Sally with his service rifle. Hyde is not so much upset with Sally as he is with himself for what he did and saw while in Vietnam. As Capt. Hyde is in the height of his angry speech, Luke arrives and diffuses the situation by aligning himself with Capt. Hyde, saying he
understands what's wrong and that Hyde shouldn't "kill anyone here," because he's already
got enough "ghosts to deal with."

The previously described scene leads to the other highly poignant moment in *Coming
Home* that answers the question of whether or not filmmakers portray soldiers as changed by
the war. The scene appears in the ending sequence of the film. In a striking juxtaposition
Ashby alternates between two final scenes. In the first the audience sees Capt. Hyde
receiving a Purple Heart (which he earned by "accidentally" shooting himself in the foot on
the way to the showers). In the second, Luke wheels into a high school gymnasium full of
students, and in front of recruiting officers, tells the students about his experiences in
Vietnam and what they can expect if they enlist. As Luke describes how "you have to grow
up real quick, because all you see around you is a lot of death," Capt. Hyde slowly makes his
way toward the ocean and removes the uniform and ring that once signified his strength, and
in his final act dives into the ocean presumably to end his life.

This finale suggests that both Luke and Hyde have been changed by the war in
Vietnam and not by the society they have returned to. Muse writes:

Luke can preach because he has fully converted to Sally's pacifism and accepts that
what he did [in Vietnam] was wrong. Bob, although subdued, is not yet a convert.
He has continued to battle the contradiction between the warrior ethos he believes in
and the warfare he experienced; the day after his attempt to kill Sally, the Marines
decorate him for his foot wound. To convert he must, like Luke, accept his guilt and
deny the warrior, but he cannot force himself to do so. (98)

Because Luke has accepted his guilt for what he participated in during the war, as Muse aptly
describes it is confirmation that the combat in Vietnam changed Luke and even though the
people surrounding him had changed (due in large part to his paralysis) it was not society or culture that caused Luke’s instability, but rather the war.

Because *Coming Home* came at “a time [when] post-war healing was beginning” it was unnecessary for Ashby to concentrate only on the most powerful notions of the war (Devine 151). Instead Ashby chose to direct his efforts on a film that would not only be exceedingly “watchable” for the American public, but would also allow for a more subdued analysis of the issues dealing with Vietnam.

*The Deer Hunter*

Unlike *Coming Home*, which deals solely with the theme of the “home front,” Michael Cimino’s *The Deer Hunter* provides an extended portrayal of three friends’ lives in a northeastern steel town, their experiences in Vietnam, and finally their return to the United States.

Cimino focuses his narrative on a small group of friends living and working in a Pennsylvania steel town. This group includes the three closest friends that from the outset of the film are bound for Vietnam, Nick (Christopher Walken), Steven (John Savage), and the group’s stoic leader, Michael (Robert De Niro). Michael is a “super-man-warrior committed to a code built on loyalty and grace under pressure” and is “touched with the kind of inarticulate poetic yearnings that place him beyond the intellectual and emotional understanding of his friends” throughout the film, and this allows the audience a very measured connection with De Niro’s character (Auster and Quart 60). Cimino’s depiction of Michael as a hard-edged, infallible character is an unfortunate one. Although it allows Cimino the vantage point with which to create the narrative of the film, De Niro’s character
does a disservice to the Vietnam veteran by portraying him as only capable of survival through the negative means of closing himself off to the world.

Cimino divides *The Deer Hunter* into three distinct acts. In the first act the audience is introduced to the steel town and its inhabitants, mostly Russian immigrants, employed at the steel mill. At the heart of the first act is an “extraordinarily lengthy ethnic wedding sequence” (Auster and Quart 61). Steven is forced into a shotgun wedding with his girlfriend because of her pregnancy, and this occurs only days before he is scheduled to leave for Vietnam. The wedding reception is a drawn out affair, as much a going away celebration for Steven, Nick, and Michael (held at the local V.F.W.), as it is a celebration of Steven’s marriage. In a scene foreshadowing the soon to come time in Vietnam, Michael, Nick, and another friend stand at the bar awaiting their next drink, when a soldier (dressed in uniform) walks in and sits down at the far end of the bar. The men instantly begin a barrage of questions for the soldier, being that they ship out in just a few days, and are greeted with apathetic mumblings of “fuck it.” The men continue to press the soldier for information about life in Vietnam and are repeatedly brushed aside by the soldier’s incoherent ramblings.

This scene illustrates Cimino’s foreshadowing of the events which will soon come to haunt the three friends as they encounter the horrors of Vietnam. Cimino creates a now stereotypical image of the returned Vet, an image of a broken man, disillusioned with himself and the war, and calming/fueling his inner turmoil with alcohol. This is a stock image which film audiences would become accustomed during the decades following the war in Vietnam. Cimino uses this image to contrast with his own characters and to provide a baseline for audiences’ reactions to Steven, Nick, and Michael’s own experiences after fighting in Vietnam.
Act two abruptly throws audiences into the mire of Vietnam. The portion of the film set in Vietnam provides a volatile situation in which Michael is able to confirm his role as leader, as a “superman,” as Auster and Quart describe him, and to save his friends through his amazing power of will. Auster and Quart in their reminiscence of Cimino’s influential Russian roulette sequence state, “In the brilliantly and manipulatively edited Russian roulette scene, which is filled with powerful reaction shots, a heroic, unwavering Michael wills himself and his two friends [Steven and Nick] to freedom as they slaughter their NLF torturers” (60). Through this scene Cimino illustrates not only the creative license he assumed in *The Deer Hunter*, but also that it was necessary to create such a scene so that the audience could be effectively convinced of the horrors that would plague Michael when he returned home. Though later films in the Vietnam genre (*Platoon, First Blood*) would tend to rely on either the “combat” or the “return,” Cimino carefully weaves the two premises together.

As Steven, Nick, and Michael escape and destroy their captors they endure a harrowing flight down river where they are eventually spotted by an American helicopter pilot. During the rescue Nick is separated from Michael and Steven, and Michael begins his mental anguish over losing his friends. Michael has survived the incident without lasting physical harm, Steven’s wounds require the amputation of both his legs and one arm, and Nick (though his whereabouts are unknown to his friends) ends up in an army hospital surrounded by the wounded and dying, dealing with the mental instability his brutal captivity has created.

Like most Hollywood films, *The Deer Hunter* personalizes history, constructing a Vietnam that is a charnal house where good guys struggle with bad ones to survive,
rather than a war determined by social ideology, Cold War politics, and nationalism. There is no hint here that there is anything more to Vietnam than the subjective experience of men like Michael Vronsky or Nick. And the central metaphor of the film, Russian roulette, moves it into still another direction, turning the war into a self-destructive game of chance—probably true for surviving day-to-day combat, but not much of an explanation of the causes of the war. (Auster and Quart 166)

Contrary to Auster and Quart, it is not Cimino’s intention to argue the causes of the War, but rather to argue the effects of it. By using the Russian roulette scene as the instigating metaphor for the film, Cimino is able to establish a theme, even though it is wrought with historical inaccuracies, with which he anticipates audiences will be able to associate. Jeremy Devine accurately describes the Russian roulette sequence as “able to convey the random aspects of combat death associated with war, the questions of luck and fate that haunted combatants and confound survivors” (164). Much like the “ghosts” Capt. Hyde cannot deal with in Coming Home, it is the image of the “haunted” vet that Cimino is portraying to the audience; one who has fought in Vietnam, survived, yet carries the experiences home, where they do not always translate into a positive re-acclimation.

Upon their return to the United States Steven is placed in a Veteran’s Hospital, because he is unable to cope with his physical and mental losses, and Michael, being physically capable, returns to his hometown, but mired in reservation. Michael skips his homecoming party because he is not yet able to “deal” with society and instead checks into a motel, preferring to remain solitary. It is here that Cimino first alerts the audience to Michael’s mental trauma of losing Nick. Even though Nick is still alive (unbeknownst to Michael), Michael is incapable of accepting that his friend was not able to return home and
feels a sense responsibility for Nick's disappearance. This is a powerful representation by
Cimino and provides evidence the war changed Michael. *The Deer Hunter* serves as one of
the prime examples of Vietnam War films that focus on the change the combat in Vietnam
affected in many veterans.

As Michael attempts to readjust to life back home he admits he "feels a lot of
distance" and, though he has not completely alienated himself from his family and friends, he
chooses to remain aloof. Even though Michael does not represent the type of "threat" to
American ideals that Luke does in *Coming Home*, Cimino still makes it clear that Michael is
unable to re-assimilate to society, choosing instead to live as an outsider. Michael’s inability
to readjust to society is evidence of the war’s toll and his insistence on remaining outside of
what was once a very tightly knit community is in direct contradiction of the long-held ideal
that soldiers returned healthy and happy. It is not necessary for Michael to take extreme
actions in opposition of the war; his failure to contentedly readjust is enough to break the
stereotype of the triumphant war hero.

As the film progresses Michael remains distant from everyone except Nick’s former
girlfriend Linda (Meryl Streep). Michael’s sense of guilt for the loss of Nick eventually
transfers to Linda and in an attempt to pacify his own emotionally distraught feelings about
Nick, Michael begins a relationship with Linda. Michael’s feelings of inadequacy and guilt
eventually lead him to return to Vietnam in search of Nick, where he finds out that Nick is
still alive, but has gone AWOL. In having Michael return to Vietnam in search of his friend,
Cimino clearly intends to illustrate it is possible for Michael to overcome his mental and
emotional instabilities, thus creating a sense of optimism in the film. Yet the sense of
optimism is short-lived and Cimino returns to the more common theme of despair and depression with the final scenes of the film.

Michael is able to locate Nick once in Vietnam, only to find him participating in "professional" Russian roulette tournaments. Although historically inaccurate, Cimino returns to the central metaphor of the film in order to re-create Michael, Nick, and Steven’s capture and subsequent torture. In finding Nick in the roulette tournament, Michael realizes the imprisonment by the Viet Cong had a far more intense effect on Nick, than it did on himself and Steven. As the scene plays out Michael attempts to revive Nick’s mental capacities by reminding him of home, their capture, and the reasons why he should return home with him, but by this point Nick is unreachable. Nick is mentally incapacitated and is unable to accept the connections Michael is attempting to make. And in a final act of desperation Michael and Nick sit across the table from each other, passing back and forth a pistol—when Nick loses the game by shooting himself in the head.

Michael then returns home, with Nick’s body, to a somber community. In the final scene of the film, the original group of friends gathers at a local bar following Nick’s funeral and in an ambiguous ending, much like *Coming Home*, the group sings a solemn version of "God Bless America." *The Deer Hunter* is blatantly pessimistic. Cimino tried to create a film dealing with the "entire" Vietnam experience, from home life, to service in Vietnam, and finally the return home and the repercussions Michael faced. Although Cimino does not portray Michael as the "loser" that many other "coming home" films focus on, he is portrayed as mentally and emotionally dysfunctional. Michael’s dysfunction stems from his experiences in Vietnam and his inability to accept the fact that his friend Nick was left behind. The dysfunction Cimino creates in Michael is also in strong contrast to previously
held notions of the war hero and serves to illustrate how the Vietnam War, and its effects, crushed the American war ideology. *The Deer Hunter* is a powerful representation of the Vietnam War and the casualties it created, both in Vietnam and at home, and it provided an image of the Vietnam vet that helped create a stereotypical and disappointing theme that would encompass many “coming home” films that would follow *The Deer Hunter* in later years.

*Some Kind of Hero*

During the early 1980s a more updated version of the “coming home” film was created, a version where the Vietnam vet was allowed to fight for his cause at home instead of in the jungles of Vietnam. In Michael Pressman’s 1981 film *Some Kind of Hero* Richard Pryor offers a comedic portrayal of a returning Vietnam veteran. In this comedy Pressman attempts to provide audiences with a more light-hearted view of the Vietnam War, yet fails at almost every turn. Devine states that “Like most previous attempts at using Vietnam-related humor to soften a serious story, the necessary balance was hard to maintain” in *Some Kind of Hero* (211). The comedy that does occur in the film consists of Pryor’s incessant use of foul language (which Pryor is well known for) and very few, though well implemented, moments of physical comedy. This film is one of the rare attempts at viewing Vietnam through a comedic lens, and other comedic endeavors such as *Air America* (1990) and the Robin Williams vehicle *Good Morning Vietnam* (1987) also failed to capture an emotional response from American audiences and thus failed at the box office. Because the Vietnam War and war in general are often not considered inherently humorous, comedies like *Some Kind of*
Hero tend to fail at the box office even though they often create significant images of the Vietnam War.

Even though Some Kind of Hero falls into the rare and unsuccessful genre of Vietnam War comedies it nonetheless carries with it the many of the same components as other “coming home” films. It can therefore be analyzed as Pressman’s attempt to broach the substantial subject matter of Vietnam by using comedy, and by portraying Cpl. Eddie Keller as dysfunctional Pressman examines the difficulties faced by many returning vets. It also illustrates, through a military injustice and circumstances stemming from the Vietnam War, the shift in American ideals returning vets represented. The film begins with Cpl. Keller (Pryor) as a new recruit slowing creeping through the jungle with his unit. Pryor portrays the terror of the situation quite well and uses comedy as his defense mechanism, questioning his platoon mates with “they’re not really gonna shoot at us are they?” Banter between the obviously petrified soldiers continues until machine gun fire erupts, sending the young soldiers diving for the ground. In the film’s most absurd and irrational moment Keller’s friend Pvt. Kowalski shouts that he’s “gotta take a shit” in the middle of the enemy ambush. Kowalski takes off into the thick of the jungle, drops his pants, and is immediately killed by enemy gunfire. In the process of trying to rescue his friend Keller is taken prisoner and moved to a Viet Cong POW camp.

Keller spends the next three years in the at times brutal, yet very accommodating, POW camp. Keller is provided a bed, blanket, and even a pillow, in his large one man cell and is constantly at odds with the prison guards who repeatedly badger and beat him in attempts to persuade him to sign a “confession.” Keller resists his captors until he is provided with a cellmate who ends up being beaten and locked in “solitary” for weeks.
When the young private is eventually returned to his cell he is near death and Keller offers to sign the confession if the guards will allow his cellmate to be seen by a doctor. Though never directly told whether or not Keller’s cellmate lives or dies, the audience is left with the scene of Keller caring for the injured man and repeating “when we get home we’ll be heroes, there’ll be parades and swimming pools.”

As discussed earlier, this passage represents a theme common among war and post-war films prior to the Vietnam War. Soldiers fighting for the United States in previous wars and conflicts were often presented with a “hero’s welcome” upon their return to the U.S., and Pressman uses this well known theme to heighten the audience’s sense of patriotism as well as to prepare them for what Keller will endure when he returns home. Contrary to many Vietnam “coming home” films, and unlike the scene Sgt. Worcester describes in *Hamburger Hill*, Cpl. Keller is treated to a hero’s welcome when he is finally released from captivity and repatriated to the U.S. Keller learns of his daughter’s birth nine months after he left for Vietnam and even that the “Mets had won the World Series.” After returning to his base and among a myriad of reporters, cameramen, and well wishers Keller gives a speech in which he only states he is “glad to be home,” so glad he ceremoniously kisses the ground.

It is not until Cpl. Keller is alone with his wife in a hotel later the same evening when Keller realizes the realities of what the war has cost him. As Keller and his wife eagerly sip champagne Cpl. Keller’s wife, unable to bear her deception any longer, admits that she is in love with another man. This fact leads to an accumulation of events that occurred while Keller served and was imprisoned in Vietnam, including the loss of his business (taken over by his wife’s new boyfriend), the eventual failure and bankruptcy of the business, the loss of Keller’s entire savings and financial security, and finally Keller learns his mother has had a
severe stroke. At this point in the film, Pressman reminds the audience of the harsh realities many veterans returning from Vietnam often faced.

Once Keller realizes the enormity of the situation, he enters a state of speechless shock. Even though his family has crumbled during his time spent in Vietnam, the harshest and most significant blow to Cpl. Keller is yet to come. After a disheartening visit to his now wheelchair-bound mother who requires 24 hour nursing care (at a cost of $1200 a week), Keller is told by his commanding officer that his military back pay and award bonuses are put on hold indefinitely. The military not releasing the money that is owed to him enrages Keller and he falls into depression when his commanding officer, very reluctantly, explains that signing the “confession” while imprisoned by the Viet Cong is slowing the bureaucracy, which is “throwing up legal roadblock after legal roadblock” (Auster and Quart 95).

Becoming increasingly desperate to help pay for his mother’s medical treatments, Keller tries and fails to receive a bank loan to help support his mother in a scene reminiscent of Best Years of Our Lives. On the table Keller sits at discussing the loan with the bank officer, in plain view, is a sign with the slogan “We Never Say No!” This scene is descriptive of the sentiment toward many returning veterans and the lack of understanding of those who did not fight in Vietnam. Pressman uses this scene to illustrate one of the many obstacles veterans faced and by doing so registers a complaint against the government and its inability to provide for Vietnam vets the way many WWII vets were provided for. This scene also demonstrates the shift between WWII films and Vietnam era film, and that filmmakers dealing with Vietnam were often unwilling to provide audiences with the customary “patriotic” symbolism, like in Best Years of Our Lives when Al Stephenson gives a former soldier a loan without collateral.
As Keller's difficulties at home steadily increase, he has started a relationship with a high-priced prostitute (Margot Kidder). Because he sees no progress in the dispersal of the back pay that is owed to him and in a desperate attempt to provide for his mother, he turns to crime. After being in a bank that was robbed (by other Vietnam vets), Pryor sets out to rob a bank himself. But when an instant opportunity – two men carrying a large sum of bonds – presents itself, Pryor seizes it and steals a suitcase of bonds from the two men, only to find out they are with the mob and very unwilling to part with the bonds. Keller attempts to sell the bonds back to the same men from whom he stole them, but is predictably attacked instead. And in a mere fluke (or standard Hollywood procedure), the “real” criminals are arrested and Keller makes off with the money in what Auster and Quart call a “contrived happy ending” (211).

Even though Some Kind of Hero ends favorably for Cpl. Keller, it is still not free of the representation of Vietnam vets as dysfunctional losers. At every turn in this film Keller is thwarted in his attempts to regain his former life; his wife has left him, his daughter calls another man “daddy,” his mother is sick and in need of funds for medical care, he is unable to secure a bank loan, and he turns to crime. Each of these examples is contrary to the American ideology of the war hero, and as a Vietnam vet unable to reconcile these contradictions, Cpl. Keller becomes a threat to American values. Even though some of the roadblocks are presented by forces beyond Keller’s control, many more are created by his own sense of insecurity stemming from his service in Vietnam. Rather than apply for a job and attempt to get back on his feet, Keller instead decides to use his military training and skill to thuggishly rob two men. Through the image of serviceman turned desperado, Pressman is exploring the obstacles that confronted Vietnam vets and showing that returning
vets were adversely affected by the War, leading them to react (sometimes violently) to the difficulties they faced.

*First Blood*

Another film that represents returning Vietnam vets as dysfunctional, as forever changed by their service in Vietnam, and continues the erosion of the proud war hero archetypes is Ted Kotcheff’s surprise hit *First Blood* (1982). *First Blood* stars the rising action superstar Sylvester Stallone as former Green Beret John Rambo and created the first in what would become a trilogy of successful Rambo films, including *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985) and *Rambo III* (1988). Since its release *First Blood* has been dismissed by film critics as a purely action-driven vehicle for Stallone using the backdrop of Vietnam, while being poorly written and even more poorly acted. Yet even with its obvious shortcomings *First Blood* has managed to find its way into the discussion of significant Vietnam War films. Dismissal of *First Blood* most often occurs because the film “espoused the less overtly political belief that the war was wrong because the soldier was not allowed to win,” therefore the film focused on allowing Rambo to “win” the war he is still fighting by defeating “enemies” at home (Devine 215). Because John Rambo, in *First Blood*, wages a one-man battle against an entire town utilizing his Green Beret training, many critics hold that it focuses so intensely on the “action,” at the expense of war-related issues, that it is only mindless entertainment. This sentiment about *First Blood* is far from accurate. Yes the script has holes and Stallone’s performance is not as resonant as De Niro’s in *The Deer Hunter*, but *First Blood* deals with several issues relevant to the Vietnam War. By depicting Rambo as a disturbed, isolated, and unable to cope Vietnam veteran, Kotcheff is able to
probe many central issues concerning the return of vets from Vietnam and the difficulties they routinely faced.

First Blood opens with a haggard Rambo searching the Pacific Northwest for his former Green Beret squad members. He eventually finds the home of the last remaining squad member thought to be alive, only to be told by his mother that “Delmar’s dead, from cancer, he brought it back from Vietnam.” As an obviously disheartened Rambo walks through a small town he is confronted by the town’s Sheriff (Brian Dennehy) and Sheriff Teasle tells Rambo “wearing that flag and jacket, looking the way you do, you’re just asking for trouble around here, friend.” Teasle then offers Rambo a ride and proceeds to take him just past the city limits, and when Rambo ignores the Sheriff’s warning not to head back to town, he arrests Rambo. As the officers attempt to “clean up” Rambo, he flashes back to a Vietnam POW camp and lashes out at the officers, immediately subduing the entire police station and setting in motion his one man war against the small town Sheriff and his men.

Rambo escapes the town and makes his way into the cold, wet, mountains while being relentlessly pursued by the Sheriff and his deputies. When forced to defend himself Rambo kills one officer and maims all of the others – in a scene reminiscent of the fighting in the jungles of Vietnam. After Sheriff Teasle realizes he is severely outmatched, he returns to town to coordinate with the State Police and National Guard in hopes of catching Rambo the next day. At this point the audience is introduced to Colonel Sam Trautman (Richard Crenna) when Teasle mutters “whatever possessed God in Heaven to make a man like Rambo” and Trautman, materializing from the cold, matter-of-factly replies “God didn’t make Rambo. I made him.” Through this scene Kotcheff is reinforcing the image of the soldier as nothing more than a “killing machine,” an image later used by Kubrick in Full
Metal Jacket and discussed in Chapter 2. By portraying Rambo as nothing more than a “machine” Kotcheff highlights a widely held criticism of the Vietnam War era that returning soldiers were not afforded the proper tools to handle readjustment, it was conceivable for a vet to have a complete mental breakdown. As Neil Jackson writes, “The peacetime function of the trained combat veteran is defined explicitly as somehow contrary to the insular demands of small town American life” (165).

John Rambo’s training and combat experiences in Vietnam are the cause of his instability at home. Although the small town police force and societal indifference toward Rambo, and vets in general, are the inciting incidents that trigger Rambo’s actions, it is chiefly his inability to cope with his wartime experiences that sends him on a violent rampage. Kotcheff makes it clear that while the attitudes toward Vietnam veterans are unsympathetic and even hostile, it is Rambo’s “win at all costs” and “there are no friendly civilians” mentality that drives his rage.

Throughout the remainder of the film Rambo is in a “constant state of isolation and antagonism,” fighting for his life against less-than-experienced “weekend warriors” of the National Guard (Jackson 164). After the National Guard has launched a rocket into the cave where Rambo is hiding they mistakenly assume the Green Beret is dead and in celebratory fashion take pictures of the site. While the town and Sheriff Teasle assume Rambo is dead, he makes his way back into town, crashing through roadblocks and stealing an M-60 machine gun from a commandeered military truck. Rambo then continues his rampage through the town, destroying buildings and cars, with the intent of reaching the police station and murdering Teasle. Once Rambo reaches the police station he opens fire and wreaks havoc on the building. He then enters the building knowing that Sheriff Teasle is hiding on
the roof, and in the climactic moment he shoots Teasle in the leg and is about to kill him when Col. Trautman intervenes, saving Teasle’s life.

As Trautman attempts to convince Rambo to give himself up, stating that “it’s over,” Rambo has a complete mental breakdown and launches into a tirade beginning with the statement that “nothing is over!” In a moment of clarity in the film Rambo’s speech exhibits the symptoms and reasoning behind his volatility:

Nothing is over, nothing! You just don’t turn it off. It wasn’t my war. You asked me. I didn’t ask you. And I did what I had to do to win, but somebody wouldn’t let us win. Then I come back to the world and I see all those maggots at the airport protesting me, spitting, calling me a baby-killer, and all kinds of vile crap. Who are they to protest me? Unless they’ve been me and been there, and know what the hell they’re yelling about. Back there I could fly a gunship, I could drive a tank, I was in charge of million-dollar equipment. Here I can’t even get a job parking cars!

This final monologue by Rambo illustrates the enormous pressure he was under and makes it clear he is unable to function as a productive member of society. Kotcheff uses this speech not only to provide the audience with an explanation of Rambo’s actions, but also to expound upon the futility many vets experienced once they returned home. Unlike the wave of patriotism that often surrounded returning vets in WWII, the Vietnam War has scarred John Rambo; he is incapable of turning off the “killing machine” instinct that the Army has bred into him. Much like Kubrick’s soldiers in Full Metal Jacket he has become what the Army wanted him to be; but whereas Kubrick never explores how his soldiers would deal with a return home, Rambo is plagued by it. The inability of Rambo to effectively control himself is not only used as an explanation for Rambo’s aggressive actions in First Blood, but it is
also an indictment of the military training he received and lack of psychological assistance provided by the military.

Auster and Quart believe *First Blood* is “The ultimate revenge fantasy of every Vietnam vet who was ever humiliated by the homecoming reception he did or did not receive” (93). While this sentiment is certainly a pivotal piece of *First Blood*, the film plays an even more vital role in the genre of “coming home” films. The producers and director Ted Kotcheff realize the power of Rambo’s condition and use it to bring attention to the difficulties in adjustment so many Vietnam veterans faced when they returned from the fighting. *First Blood* and the character of John Rambo created a new vision of the Vietnam vet, one who was dysfunctional, unstable, and unable to cope with the stresses the War caused within him and in turn took out his misery on the “establishment” that he sees as the cause of his dysfunction.

*Distant Thunder*

With the early 1980s there was a surge of Vietnam War films focusing on the veteran as dysfunctional, law breaking, and even, at times, psychotic. *Some Kind of Hero* and *First Blood* are excellent examples of this type of Vietnam War film. These films excelled at creating gripping action sequences and violent characters to criticize the Vietnam War as well as illustrate the harsh realities many vets faced when they returned to the U.S. Beginning with Oliver Stone’s groundbreaking film *Platoon* in 1986, the Vietnam film genre would be altered yet again. Stone opened a flood-gate and numerous “combat” and “coming home” type films began appearing, films previously discussed like *Full Metal Jacket* and *Hamburger Hill*, but also films that took a mellowed, less antagonistic view of the war in
Vietnam yet still critiqued the war and the subsequent treatment of vets. Films such as *Distant Thunder* (1988) and *Jacknife* (1989) would focus more on relationships and drama, rather than on action and violence, to provide audiences with a depiction of how Vietnam veterans were dealing with life after the war as dysfunctional rather than celebrated heroes.

Director Rick Rosenthal would also choose the Pacific Northwest to set the story of dysfunctional Vietnam veteran Mark Lambert (John Lithgow). The film opens with a familiar Vietnam jungle scene. Lambert is a part of an elite squad, much like John Rambo, on a dangerous night mission, when they are suddenly attacked and very much out numbered. As soldiers drop dead all around Lambert, the Viet Cong give chase and with his wounded buddy in tow, Lambert stumbles into a river and tries to keep his injured friend quiet. The film then returns to the present day in the mountains of Washington State where a group of outcast Vietnam veterans have established a very small community. By incorporating combat footage in the beginning of the film, Rosenthal is able to establish the psychological state of Lambert and his community. During the initial scenes in the vet community Lambert is faced with the imminent death of a fellow vet; a vet who can no longer deal with his mental anguish and has gone to the train tracks to commit suicide. Lambert arrives before the train and attempts to help his friend, but is unable to do so, and the man succeeds in killing himself.

As with the combat footage in the opening of the film, Rosenthal uses this scene to further establish the state of mind of most of the veterans who are living in the mountain community. This scene clearly shows Lambert’s friend, Lewis, as no longer able to deal with daily life as he shouts, after a fight with his wife, “Don’t fuck with me. I don’t want to be fucked with no more.” Even though the initial incident began as a fight with his wife, the
physical image of Lewis clearly represents an estranged veteran. Lewis is wearing an Army issue jacket and wielding a knife to keep Lambert at bay. Through these subtle cues Rosenthal is suggesting that Lewis served in Vietnam and asserting that statements of the “I don’t want to be fucked with no more” sort stem from the treatment he has received at a vet. Also this scene again illustrates the common image of the vet as being harassed upon returning to the U.S., rather than celebrated as a hero.

The audience is then taken to a small town in Illinois where Lambert’s only son Jack (Ralph Macchio), is preparing for his high school graduation. The high school senior lives with only his mother and the two are discussing post-graduation plans when his mother hands him a letter, saying it is from his father, whom he has not seen since he was a young child. The father/son relationship is at the heart of Distant Thunder and Lambert expresses, through the letter, his feelings of regret at not seeing his son graduate and for never being a part of his life. In the letter Lambert also states he wants his son to come and visit him in Washington and Jack and his mother decide that, following graduation, it would be a beneficial for Jack to visit his father.

Shortly after leaving the mountain community, in hopes of finding a job, Lambert finds work with a logging company and is befriended by another employee. Char (Kerrie Keane) helps Lambert to find a small apartment and is willing to listen to him (because she lost a brother in Vietnam) when he expresses his reservations about returning to “normal” life. Rosenthal makes it clear that Lambert has varied feelings of inadequacy and guilt stemming from his service in Vietnam. Lambert is unwilling to communicate with almost anyone other than Char, his social skills are terribly inadequate, and he most certainly suffers
from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as evidenced by his constant state of agitation and jumpiness.

As the film progresses it becomes evident that Lambert is incapable of successfully "reintegrating" into society. Lambert becomes enamored with Char, even though she is married, and is not able to deal with the emotional stress the situation creates for him. Then, as Char’s husband becomes increasingly jealous of her friendship with Lambert, the two men get into a fight at a bar. Because Lambert is a specially trained soldier he severely injures Char’s husband. After this incident Lambert retreats back to the mountain community, the only place where he can feel safe and free from society’s pressures.

Just as Lambert has retreated to his mountain hideaway his son, accompanied by Char, makes his way through the vet camp in order to find Lambert. The camp resembles the jungles of Vietnam with “pungi sticks and such” and represents the altered state of mind many of the men live with. Jack is “captured like a VC infiltrator and threatened in Vietnamese” (Devine 291), and Jack and Char are held prisoner in the camp until Lambert returns from a fishing expedition. The meeting between father and son is poignant as Lambert tries to explain the difficulties of the Vietnam War to his son and why he has never been a father to him. Lambert recalls the war as a difficult time for everyone and when he returned home he was unable to communicate his experiences to Jack’s mother, and rather than destroy all their lives, he left.

After father and son have been reunited, Jack, Lambert, and Char, along with several of Lambert’s fellow vets sit around a campfire drinking and telling stories. As the night wears on Lambert’s fellow vets become increasingly intoxicated and one finally calls out for Lambert to tell the story of Billy Watson. Lambert is clearly unwilling, but under continued
taunts by his fellow vets Lambert relents. Here Rosenthal again uses a flashback to Vietnam to illustrate the violence and chaos Lambert experienced during the war. The audience is taken to the same place and time in Vietnam that opens the film, only the scene is taken to its conclusion instead of abruptly ending. Whereas the opening scene ends with Lambert holding his wounded companion in a dark river, hiding from the enemy – in this flashback a tearful Lambert relates that the wounded soldier would not “be quiet.” And as the Viet Cong closed in on their hiding place, Lambert was forced to kill the man for fear of being discovered. It is a painful moment for all of the vets around the campfire.

The next day, as Jack and Char are about to leave the vet’s mountain community, one of Lambert’s fellow vets “who has totally flipped out and thinks the boy is a VC infiltrator” attacks and shoots Jack (Devine 291). Lambert is forced to defend his son and in the process kills his friend. In a fitting description of Distant Thunder, Jeremy Devine writes that it is “A gentle portrait of pained vets who remain isolated and brutalized [giving] way to yet another clichéd and damaging view of these men as trigger happy nut cases” (292). Even though Distant Thunder does indeed digress to a portrayal of vets as psychotic “killing machines,” Rosenthal takes care to not allow the film to end with this image. In bringing the film full circle Rosenthal takes the audience back to train tracks where Lewis earlier killed himself, but only this time it is Lambert who intends to take his life. Before Lambert is able to go through with the act, Jack appears on the tracks and convinces his father that he cannot kill himself because he still needs a father. And at the last moment both father and son jump to safety.
Jacknife

Following on the heels of Distant Thunder, director David Jones offered audiences another tamer and less violent vision of Vietnam with the character-driven drama Jacknife (1989). Jacknife stars Robert De Niro (Joseph “Megs” Megessey) as a semi-shell shocked veteran who deals with his own painful memories of Vietnam by helping former Army buddy David Flannigan (Ed Harris) reclaim his fragile life. Jacknife focuses on the emotional upheaval the two veterans continue to deal with, and how it affects their daily lives even years after the War has ended. Megs and David each deal with their experiences in Vietnam through different mechanisms, yet they still share the haunting memory of being saved during a firefight by their mutual friend Bobby, who was subsequently killed while rescuing his friends.

David copes with this memory, as has been portrayed in many Vietnam pictures, by drinking. Megs, on the other hand, has quietly learned to deal with the memory of Bobby’s death through the help of a veterans’ support group, even though his rage is still evident. As Eben J. Muse phrases it, “The film treats the War’s effects as an incurable disease; like alcoholism, it is a weakness from which the ex-soldier never fully recovers” (133). Muse’s analogy is justified as it becomes apparent in the film that David is indeed an alcoholic, drinking at all times of day, missing work, and even at times becoming violent toward his sister who shares a house with him. Comparing the effects of the War to an “incurable disease” certainly holds merit, but relating it solely to alcoholism does not approach what is at the center of the film.

Jacknife prominently conveys the theme of friendship, while using other plot devices such as David’s alcoholism and Megs’ blossoming relationship with David’s sister, Martha
(Kathy Baker), to develop the characters and tension within the film. Each man is dealing, or attempting to deal, with the loss of their mutual friend Bobby through various (and in David’s case ineffective) means. David has cut himself off from the rest of society, through alcohol and self-loathing, in a vain attempt to dismiss the lingering effects Bobby’s death has had on him. The only person David communicates with is his sister, Martha, and only in a passing word or drunken stupor. From the outset of the film Harris creates a character that most audiences cannot connect with, as evidenced by Jones’ decision to portray David as a friendless loner who frequently states: “he [Megs] is not my friend.”

The decision to portray David as unredeemable and beyond help follows traditional and predictable story plots common in many films, yet it is the unredeemable quality that makes David’s final willingness to change in the film much more emotionally provocative. After Megs has reentered David’s life, David is no longer able to disguise his emotional struggles. Because David and Megs were saved by Bobby and that act lead to Bobby’s death, David is consumed by guilt and prefers to drown his mental and emotional problems in alcohol. By contrast, Megs appears to be the antithesis of the Vietnam vet as portrayed in other films like *First Blood* and *The Deer Hunter*. Although he is flaky and unsteady at times – Megs is able to hold down a regular job, rent a decent apartment, and seems to be unbothered by the guilt that grips his friend David.

At the outset of the film it seems as though Jones is attempting to create a film in which two former Army buddies, one still suffering and one who is dealing effectively, reconnect to help the first through his lingering emotional difficulties. By the middle of the film, however, the audience is made aware that Megs is still dealing with his own issues surrounding the war, and is just able to manage them more effectively than David. And
though each man is dealing with the readjustment to society in a different way, they are still both representative of a changed ideology. These men are not proud of their war experiences; one must rely on a veterans’ group for constant therapy to remain in control of his rage and the other suppresses his memories through an addiction. And although these actions, though rarely, have been chronicled in war films prior to the Vietnam War “coming home” genre, they tended to be “swept under the rug” and ignored in favor of more popular patriotic sentiments.

Each of the men in *Jacknife* is continually tormented by his experiences in Vietnam, with David receiving the brunt of the trauma. The characters of Megs and David are changed by the Vietnam War. There is never a direct mention or scene dealing with either of the two men and their return from the War, whereas in films like *Coming Home* and *First Blood* it is made particularly clear that the vet endured some type of humiliating experience upon their return to the U.S. Instead of focusing on the change that occurred in the character while in Vietnam, then having society further inflame the sense of change, Jones relies solely on the implicit knowledge that each man was confronted with numerous difficulties upon their return. Jones then focuses on these men at a time when they are no longer concerned with the circumstances of their return but with their continuing guilt about the death of their friend.

Of the type of Vietnam films appearing in the late 1980s, Daniel Miller writes: “In a complete turnaround from the attitude between the late sixties and the early eighties, the culture now celebrates the virtue of Vietnam veterans and, in the process, its own noble efforts to return them to the social fold” (183). It is returning Megs and David to the “social fold” that Jones is most concerned with in *Jacknife*. It is important for Jones to make David
dysfunctional because it allows for a point of connection with the character and by portraying David in this light Jones is able to delve into the issues that generate David’s feelings of guilt.

After David’s feelings of guilt have been thoroughly reawakened by the appearance of his former friend Megs, David becomes completely unable to maintain any type of stability in his life and goes on an alcohol-fueled rebellion. He ignores both his sister Martha and Megs’ pleadings for him to get help. At one point Megs even takes David with him to the veteran’s support group, but David is only disgusted with the situation and storms out. It finally takes the interruption of a school dance (where David’s sister works as a teacher), the destruction of the high school trophy case, and a fistfight with Megs for David to realize he is in need of help. The film ends on an upbeat with Megs and Martha continuing a blossoming relationship and David sitting in a counseling session with the group of vets he had previously stormed away from.

Through Jacknife, Jones signifies a shift from the Vietnam films from the late 70s and early 80s that portrayed veterans as attempting to “get even” with the government because of the instability caused by the Vietnam War to films focused more on the healing of the wounds left by Vietnam. The characters of David and Megs illustrate the Vietnam vet that once would have been angry with the way they were treated after the war, but are now focused on putting back together their fragmented lives.
CHAPTER 4
THE WAR STILL REMAINS

The Vietnam War film has become an essential piece of American cinema. Some of these films have risen to the forefront of culture, garnering numerous Academy Awards, while still others have remained in relative obscurity, but each offers audiences a perspective on the Vietnam War. While combat films like Hamburger Hill, Platoon, The Green Berets, and Full Metal Jacket tend to focus on the horrors of the fighting in Vietnam, it is the “coming home” films that truly represent the Vietnam veteran and the struggles they so often faced, both in Vietnam and at home.

In his book No Victory Parades, Murray Polner chronicles the lives of nine Vietnam veterans, their service in Vietnam, and their return to the United States. Of one soldier, a former Green Beret named Nick D’allesandro, Polner writes:

One of his friends says that Nick, like many other veterans who are convinced they have been used, is in a state of suspended animation, trapped between his contempt for authority and his wish for an approach to life that has meaning. But though he has tried to accept the ordinary routine of daily life, he feels more and more surrounded in a world without hope, and his desire to withdraw increases accordingly. The conflict has shattered his nerves and done violence to his sensibilities. (118)

In the decades following Vietnam this is an image that would appear throughout American films dealing with the war. It is an image of a broken, disillusioned, and dysfunctional veteran permanently altered by service in Vietnam; one who has served his country in a brutal war and returned to the United States unable to readjust to society. The inability for many veterans to readjust to society after serving in Vietnam is most often at the center of
“coming home” films. Filmmakers such as Ashby, Cimino, and Kotcheff would use this image of the struggling veteran to portray the instability and psychological damage many veterans dealt with. Filmmakers would also use the image of the dysfunctional vet to re-conceive the war film genre.

Prior to the Vietnam War, war films were often fervently patriotic focusing on the action of the troops and portraying an “us versus them” mentality. As described in Chapter 1, these patriotic films promoted a powerful sense of national unity in the United States, especially in the years following the Second World War. These films helped to create an American ideology about the war hero, that soldiers returning from war were celebrated as triumphant heroes and were able to successfully reintegrate into the fabric of society. And although not every film portrayed this positive image, as seen in The Best Years of Our Lives, it was not until the Vietnam War and the films that would follow that the “coming home” genre would begin to question the ideology of the returning veteran as a triumphant war hero.

The films discussed in Chapter 3, from Coming Home to Jacknife, illustrate the disillusionment and dysfunction many Vietnam veterans faced upon their return to the United States. The characters in these films suffer from a range of physical ailments and mental instabilities, but they all share the common knowledge of the brutality and chaos of the war in Vietnam. And the filmmakers, by portraying these vets as unable to reintegrate into society, have created a new ideology concerning the war veteran, one of a veteran who is powerfully affected by the viciousness of war and returns to the U.S. not as a triumphant hero, but rather as a social outcast unable to function in society.

Even though this analysis pursues a limited number of Vietnam War films, it represents several of the most pivotal films in the “combat” and “coming home” genres and
how the filmmakers portray returning Vietnam veterans. Of course there are countless other “coming home” films that could be well served with further research. And as seen by Joel Schumacher’s *Tigerland* (2000) and Randall Wallace’s *We Were Soldiers* (2002), the Vietnam War film genre is still viable and filmmakers are capable of producing effective films that deal with the Vietnam War. As long as the pain and disillusionment many people feel about the war in Vietnam remains, the Vietnam War film will remain a viable subject suitable for representations and interpretations of the war, and for portrayals of those who fought in Vietnam.
Annotated Filmography


Three friends return from service in World War II to find their lives forever changed.


A Marine leaves for Vietnam only to be injured and returns to find his wife has been with another man, who was paralyzed and placed in a wheelchair after suffering his own injuries in Vietnam.


A group of friends in a Pennsylvania steel town deal with the realities of the Vietnam War. Three of the friends leave for service; one chooses to remain in Vietnam, one returns home a triple amputee, and one returns with the psychological trauma of leaving his friend in Vietnam.


A group of Vietnam Veterans, unable to adjust to a normal life, take to living in the mountains of the Pacific Northwest. One man searches out his son, only to find that the process is both a physical and mental strain.


A former, decorated Green Beret returns to the U.S., but has trouble readjusting to society. He is picked up for vagrancy by a malevolent sheriff in a small Pacific Northwest town and is driven to destroy the sheriff and his town.


A group of raw recruits train under a merciless Drill Instructor at the Marine training facilities at Parris Island. The new trainees are then thrust into the city of Hue during the 1968 Tet Offensive.

A domineering Colonel takes his men into the jungles of Vietnam to defend a military outpost and kidnap a Viet Cong official.


Raw recruits and toughened veterans must struggle together to reach a strategic hill.


Former soldiers who served together in Vietnam attempt to put their lives back together. One struggles with alcohol, one struggles with rage, and both must deal with the loss of a third friend who died defending them in Vietnam.


A platoon of soldiers is divided in their allegiances between to warring Sergeants while facing fierce combat situations.


A semi-comedic portrayal of the return of a Vietnam veteran who returns to the U.S. only to discover his mother is dying, his wife is with another man, and that the government will not give him his military pay because he signed a confession while imprisoned in a P.O.W. camp.


A thirteen volume documentary, covering many of the most pivotal aspects of the Vietnam War.
Works Cited/Works Consulted


