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The Narrative of Warfare: A Case Study of *Band of Brothers*

As the most modern advancement in storytelling, film has changed the way history is told. Now no longer taught just from textbooks or referenced in other print forms, movies make it possible for the same story to be told the same way across nations. The beauty of a film is that it can bring the past to life and engage the general public in a time long since passed. As cinematography has improved since the first films made just over a hundred years ago, the acceptability of violent images, and time passed since the initial event, historical films have become hotly debated by historians in regards to their worth. Arguably, war films are the most contested. The common argument made by many academics that films often misinterpret or leave out important details of a particular conflict. Although war films are not entirely accurate and leave part of the story, historians devaluing war films is detrimental in the modern era as many modern war films interest civilians in history, brings across the emotions that the soldiers felt during their time in the military, and sometimes it even works to help heal wounds that soldiers never let heal. To examine this concept further, the HBO Mini-Series “Band of Brothers” will be examined in further detail.

However, before that, it is important to understand what exactly constitutes a war film. Since the popularization of the cinema at the turn of the century, the fact that the first half of that century contained the two deadliest wars the modern world had ever seen, war has been and continues to be a popular story to be told. But what constitutes a war film and sets it apart from other genres to garner such disdain from the academic community? According to Tim Dirks, a film critic for more than two decades, fleshes out what he defines as a war film:

War and Anti-War Films often acknowledge the horror and heartbreak of war, letting the actual combat fighting or conflict (against nations or humankind) provide the primary plot or background for the action of the film. Typical elements in the action-oriented war plots include POW camp experiences and

escapes, submarine warfare, espionage, personal heroism, "war is hell" brutalities, air dogfights, tough trench/infantry experiences, or male-bonding buddy adventures during wartime. Themes explored in war films include combat, survivor and escape stories, tales of gallant sacrifice and struggle, studies of the futility and inhumanity of battle, the effects of war on society, and intelligent and profound explorations of the moral and human issues.¹

For such a seemingly straightforward genre of film, the definition exemplifies how historians can easily find fault in war films. Shorter definitions such as Corwin-Fuller Professor of Film Studies and American Studies at Wesleyan University Jeanine Basinger's include only hero, group, and objective. Said group is almost always "an Italian, a Jew, a cynical complainer from Brooklyn, a sharpshooter from the mountains, a midwesterner (nicknamed by his state, "Iowa" or "Dakota"), and a character who must be initiated in some way and/or who will provide a commentary or "explanation" on the action as it."² Such clichés simplifies the actual events that happened and standardizes the actions even if those actions aren't completely accurate. Due to the nature of the media presented, the Hollywood cliché becomes historical fact. For example, John Wayne movies such as *Sands of Iwo Jima*, distorted historical record so that it became part of historical fact instead of historical fiction.³ When looking at complex and multifaceted issues such as war, let alone World War II, it is dangerous to simplify things to such a degree. As a society we have perpetuated the importance and truth of cinema so that "the focus of today's media determines the hub of tomorrow's history."⁴

¹ Dirks, Tim. *FilmSite*. n.d. web. July 7, 2016

² Basinger, Jeanine. "Translating War: The Combat Film Genre and Saving Private Ryan" American Historical Society. October 1998. Web. 14 July 2016.

³ Lenihan, John H. *Review*. *Western Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Winter, 1999), p. 530

⁴ Coyne, Michael. *Review*. *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Aug., 1992), p. 285

With films generally being around two hours or so long, there is no possible way for a war film to include everything to make it accurate. During and immediately after World War II, this is due to Hollywood and the military working together to garner support for the war effort and to make sure that America is remembered in a good light. The bad and the ugly aren't included in that sunny, victory filled picture they wanted to present. The average citizen who watched films in the post war years was inundated with images of patriotism, nationalism, and American superiority. Due to censorship of the time, films offered an amazingly false image of war. There are three generalized reasons for such censorship in mid-century World War II films: the sentimentalizing of relationships made during warfare on the battle front and the home front, propaganda purposes, and the inability to recreate battle scenes to express the real horrors of combat.⁵ To a historian, those three reasons are some of the core problems regarding war films. By focusing on the hero, the storyline then neglects the actual action that happened. In regards to recreating battle scenes, the debate of if there even is a way to portray that to a civilian in true accuracy will be argued by historians till the end of time. Though, generally, soldiers and civilians agree that there is no way to express what battle was actually like on the ground, there are some films that come quite close. One such example would be the opening scene of *Saving Private Ryan* when they are storming the beach. Many soldiers often say that it triggers flashbacks because it captures the emotion, the chaos, and the blood and gore of battle.⁶ Others had physical reactions and fainted at the scene.⁷ While the average civilian and the majority of

⁵ Basinger, Jeanine. "Translating War: The Combat Film Genre and Saving Private Ryan" American Historical Society. October 1998. Web. 14 July 2016.

⁶ Basinger, Jeanine. "Translating War: The Combat Film Genre and Saving Private Ryan" American Historical Society. October 1998. Web. 14 July 2016.

⁷ Poyntz, Nick. *Polychronicon: Brothers in Arms? World War II and popular culture*. Teaching History, No. 119, LANGUAGE (June 2005), pp. 28-29. Web. 20 July 2016

historians have never been in a combat situation, the value of watching a film that is that realistic but perhaps not entirely accurate is worth the artistic changes the director decides to make.

Due to the production limitations and the storyline that is presented, the historical facts are often overlooked or glossed over for the sake of the emotional story. As one historian from the 1970s argues that movies simplify things from battle maps to mixing up equipment so that the film is disjointed and ignores the proper advances in military technology. Additionally, since the actual military tactics are simplified to such a degree, the trend is to dramatize the tactics.⁸ As time has progressed, this has become increasingly less common as there are less restrictions placed on Hollywood in regards to violence and gore but also time has changed the presentation of accurate historical films. As we are now going on seventy years past the end of World War II, there has been more time for gathering and analysis of historical fact. Additional factors that could influence the increasingly more realistic images in war films can be attributed to society's acceptance of violence, current political atmosphere (such as a different war or conflict taking place), spectatorial dynamics, and changes in individual standards of behavior.⁹ Still, as films become increasingly violent and graphic, historians still find issue with modern war films.

In truth, film is forcing its way as a new form of historiography. The current definition of historiography, according to Merriam-Webster dictionary is

1. a: the writing of history; especially: the writing of history based on the critical examination of sources, the selection of particulars from the authentic materials, and the synthesis of particulars into a narrative that will stand the test of critical methods
- b: the principles, theory, and history of historical writing a course in historiography

⁸ Beaumont, Roger A. *Images of War: Films as Documentary History*. *Military Affairs* , Vol. 35, No. 1 (Feb., 1971), pp. 5-7. Web. 20 August 2016

⁹ Slocum, J. David, *Cinema and the Civilizing Process: Rethinking Violence in the World War II Combat Film*. *Cinema Journal* , Vol. 44, No. 3 (Spring, 2005), pp. 35-63. Web. 16 July 2016.

2. the product of historical writing: a body of historical literature¹⁰

When applying historiography to war films, there are some similarities that match the definition while there are certainly some distinctions that can make it hard for some to accept the change. The main part would be all the references to writing such as “historical writing” and “A body of historical literature” that makes it seem like the only valid way of studying history is through text. The part about “particulars from the authentic materials” is the part that truly supports the new addition of film to war historiography. The authentic materials are subject to opinion in a way. No longer does it just have to be the papers of the generals that dictated troop movements or letters that documented conversations between the highest ranking officers. While that is a significant part of any conflict to understand, especially when studying World War II, the soldiers’ perspectives are becoming increasingly valuable as there are so few of those who fought still alive. When looking at what constituted the war, it was the millions of men who went through basic and fought on the ground; not the generals who left the notes and letters who ran the war from behind a desk.

Veteran interviews are a part of history that is references constantly by historians and film makers alike. In Chicago, Illinois the Pritzker Military Museum and Library has dedicated an entire department to recording soldiers of all conflicts recounting their lives and military service. It is called the Holt Oral History Program and their purpose is “to conserve the unique Stories of Service of the Citizen Soldier—not just high ranking officers, recognizable faces from history, or soldiers who have had their stories told already—but every man and woman, from all walks of life, who has served and sacrificed for our country.”¹¹ Now, this archive (which is in the progress of being digitalized and made available online) has over two

¹⁰ Merriam-Webster. *Definition of Historiography*. Web. 17 July 2016

¹¹ *Holt Oral History Program*. Pritzker Military Museum and Library. 2016. Web. 16 May 2016.

hundred different stories of service, ranging from men who fought in the First World War to women who were medics in Afghanistan. This is a gold mine for historians who research warfare. It fits perfectly in traditional historiographical trends among historians. However, that particular archive is full of stories that the average person will never bother to read. Life doesn't allow for a financial accountant with other responsibilities to read hours upon hours of transcripts. What life does allow is maybe a Friday night movie that tells the general story and hits the main points that the soldier emphasized in their oral history.

It is going to be an adjustment for historians to make. As historiography grows to encompass fictional and nonfictional war films to record the history of wars, acceptance of such films in the academic world would bridge the gap between soldiers, civilians, and historians. While there is value in the cold, hard facts that have been documented during World War II by Presidents, Prime Ministers, Generals, and officers, the majority of the war was fought by the enlisted man. Inheritably, the value of a foot soldier's opinion or memory of the war is greater than that of what a historian who never actually fought in the conflict. While there definitely is something to be said for the value of a historian's work in understanding their selected discipline where they will never experience or live in the time they study, there is a part of fighting a war, especially World War II, that necessitates the visual aide of combat and personal narratives. The personal nature of such narratives is what some historians find issue with. One such example is a reference to *Band of Brothers* where Stephen Ambrose wrote (and Steven Spielberg later directed) that Captain Sobel was a "classic chickenshit" and that Lieutenant Winters was the handsome and rugged soldier who could take a German gun single handedly.¹² There is the belief that if this type of stereotype is continued that it would distort the historical accuracy and

¹² Poyntz, Nick. *Polychronicon: Brothers in Arms? World War II and popular culture.*

cause the populace to remember history wrong and “present highly morali[z]ed interpretations of the war”.¹³ However, when looking at the actual story as told by the veterans of the 101st Airborne Division, 506 Airborne Infantry Regiment, Easy Company, the stories that the soldiers told became an moderately accurate film that a number of them praised in their later years in their autobiographies. Looking closely at the mini-series, it becomes clear from the veterans that the value of the film is much greater than historians give it credit for.

Case study of *Band of Brothers*

The ten part mini-series produced by HBO tells the tale of Easy Company from their training in Camp Toccoa, Georgia to Austria where they were stationed when peace was declared. First written as in book form by Stephen Ambrose, a professor of history. The conception of the book began with a group interview about their actions on D-Day in 1988 at a reunion held in New Orleans. Ambrose showed Major Richard Winters the transcript from the interview and he was bothered by inaccuracies and wanted to set the record straight. From there, men came out the woodwork and met with Ambrose who was a neighbor of Easy Company member Walter Gordon.¹⁴ The book was published in 1992 and was popular in the academic but didn't make it big in pop culture. However, when it was made into a ten-part mini-series, it's popularity sky rocketed and left an indelible mark on war film history. But what is the value of *Band of Brothers*? Is it historically accurate? Does it deserve a place in military history? What is the value of it? Due to the amount of research done for the book and additional work done for the film, the responses of the soldiers, and the impact it has had on military history education and interest, the fact that there was some artistic license taken and some events were fictional, *Band*

¹³ *Ibid*

¹⁴ Ambrose, Stephen, *Band of Brothers*. New York: Simon and Schuster. 2001, print. Pg. 309

of Brothers is a viable example that a film's emotional and sensory impact is more valuable than factual and traditional methods of war education and history in the larger picture of society.

The proof for this lies in the actual mini-series, in the additional footage, and in autobiographies that multiple men from Easy Company have written since the release of the film. Beyond just the book as a source, the surviving men from Easy company came in to give additional interviews and give their input when the series was being filmed. The final product masterfully combined the important parts of their combat experience, the relationships they formed, the struggles, the good, and the bad. Part of this phenomenon that they were able to accomplish is due to the fact that the film's run time is seven hundred and five minutes (or nearly twelve hours) but broken up in ten parts that are about the length of a short movie.¹⁵ Within those twelve hours there are impactful scenes that make you laugh, cry, lose all hope in humanity, cringe at the violence, and empathize with the soldiers.

There are undeniably some clichés. In Part 1: Currahee, Captain Sobel is the horrible, incompetent, jerk that everyone hates. Think of every stereotype of the bad commanding officer and Sobel fits it perfectly. In one particularly horrible move, he gives the men a treat dinner of spaghetti before a supposedly 'light' evening. However, that ends when he interrupts their dinner and forces Easy Company to run up Currahee, a hill that is "Thirteen miles up! Thirteen miles down!" on full stomachs.¹⁶ The event was confirmed by Donald Malarkey and he later recounts the event in his autobiography saying, "You'd be halfway through your spaghetti when he'd walk in...and he'd say, "Gear on. We're going up Currahee. Now! Heigh-ho, Silver!"¹⁷ Malarkey was not the only soldier to later comment on the CO's personality and capabilities.

¹⁵ Spielberg, Steven: Director. HBO, 2001

¹⁶ Spielberg, Part 1: Currahee

¹⁷ Malarkey, Don, *Easy Company Soldiers*. New York: St. Martin's Press. 2008. Print. Pg. 41

After that same incident, William Guarnere states that “we were cursing, we wanted to kill him” and describes Sobel as “a tyrant, takes authority to an extreme, the type that would get their ass kicked if the situation was reversed”¹⁸ Even Richard Winters recounts Sobel’s short comings in his own autobiography stating that “what bothered Easy Company’s officers, me included, was not Sobel’s emphasis on strict discipline, but his desire to lead by fear rather than example.”¹⁹ Sobel’s actions left an indelible mark on the soldiers and the references that they make in their books line up in regards to emotion in the film but not always in factual accuracy.

That is just one example of a cliché that garners distain from the twelve-hour film. But the important question is what the men thought of the fictionalization of their lives for popular culture. For those who wrote their memoirs after *Band of Brothers* came out, their responses were generally all positive and supportive of the artistic license that the directors took. While most of them do acknowledge that part of the reason they wrote their memoirs was to clear up some inaccuracies that the film has made about their military service, they are generally appreciative of what the film has done for military history and the awareness it has brought.

Lynn “Buck” Compton was a lieutenant in Easy Company during the war and he was alive for the book and filming of *Band of Brothers*. He comments that when he was on set, when he and some of the other veterans saw a screening of the entire thing, they asked if the soldiers had any suggestions and Compton “Told them a couple of things, little stuff, that they accommodated. One voice-over didn’t seem right to me. They changed it. I don’t remember

¹⁸ Guarnere, William, Edward Heffron, *Brothers in Battle, Best of Friends*. London: Berkley Publishing Group. 2007. Print. Pg. 18.

¹⁹ Winters, Richard, *Beyond Band of Brothers: The War Memoirs of Major Dick Winters*. New York: Penguin Group. 2006. Print. Pg. 26

what it was. All in all, the series took some literary license, but it was okay by me.”²⁰ Compton goes on to recognize that there was a limited scope that the film could cover because it would be impossible to mention all the men in Easy Company (nearly 200) but he feels that “people will take it that we were representative of combat soldiers everywhere”²¹ His last comments on the film are possibly the most insightful to the value of the film and what it does for soldiers in trying to tell their stories to civilians. He says, “It has helped elevate patriotism, pointed out duty to country, and resonated with young people. I’ve had active duty in Iraq tell me they enlisted because they read or watched *Band of Brothers* and were inspired...People sometimes criticize us for exploiting *Band of Brothers* like that, but I’ll exploit the hell out of *Band of Brothers* if it helps our troops in any way.”²² The value of such a response in civilians (or former civilian) is so incredibly valuable in a society where history isn’t always the priority. By bringing the story to life that people can be inspired and understand the soldiers of a different time and war, the importance of such a film shouldn’t be diminished.

Major Winters also comments of *Band of Brothers*. His reception of the film is not as exuberant as Compton’s but he notes a different effect the film had on society. As a soldier, he comments that “it is impossible to convey the horrors of war to someone who has not experience the crucible of combat.”²³ What is special in Winter’s case is that, as essentially the “main” character of *Band of Brothers* many people have written to him and shared their responses to the film with him. Examples are as follows: “I cannot express the gratitude I felt for you and your company while watching the series...it not only gave me a greater appreciation for what your

²⁰ Compton, Lynn. *Call of Duty: My Life Before, During, and the Band of Brothers*. New York: Penguin Group. Print. 2008. Print. Pg. 245

²¹ Ibid, pg. 246

²² Ibid.

²³ Winters, Richard. Pg. 269.

generation did for mine, but also a greater appreciation for the actions of my grandfather, who received two Bronze Stars and Purple Heart at the Battle of the Bulge” and “Major Winter’s story transformed my interpretation of [Veteran’s Day], made me further appreciate soldiers past and present while showing gratitude for our freedom that’s often too simply taken for granted” and most poignantly “[Easy Company] has made me want to be a better human being.”²⁴ This further supports other accounts that the emotional impact speaks louder and can cover more people via film versus traditional history books as all these letters and the major response Maj. Winters received came after the release of the mini-series.

Donald Malarkey found different value from *Band of Brothers*. He writes, “When [the book and movie] came out, it was good for me. Not because of the attention; I didn’t need that, though I’ve enjoyed speaking from time to time to various organizations around the world about my experiences and about leadership. But because it somehow reminded me that what we did was a good thing—and over the years I’d forgotten that.”²⁵ Earlier in the book, he documents his struggles with losing his two best friends in the Battle of the Bulge and how he suffered from alcoholism and PTSD for years after the end of the war. He honestly didn’t even like the film, calling it a bit too Hollywood for his taste and that some men got attention while other men who did more were ignored. But he offers an interesting perspective on what war films can do for the veterans themselves instead of just entertaining the masses. As a soldier who suffered from PTSD, the film has “allowed me to talk about stuff that I hadn’t talked about.”²⁶ Giving that platform that allows those on the outside even the slightest bit of understanding to empathize with soldiers is worth any artistic license a war film takes. By opening up that door for civilians

²⁴ Ibid. pg. 269-21.

²⁵ Malarkey, Don. Pg. 245.

²⁶ Malarkey, Don. Pg. 246.

and even historians to visually see the hardships the men went through, it adds a level of realism that words on paper, no matter how descriptive and true, cannot express to civilians otherwise.

Both Edward Heffron and William Guarnere were involved, or oversaw, a great deal of the production of the series so they were able to offer insights from set and production of the fictionalized version of part of their lives. They were blown away by the dedication of the actors who never broke character the entire time the series was in production, even going so far as having to refer to each other as their character name.²⁷ Both veterans were impressed by the quality and dedication to remain true to their own personalities and speech patterns. One of the actors, in the epilogue elaborates on his dedication to the character. Robin Laing portrayed Heffron and after speaking to the veteran and doing research, he found out that Heffron carried only three things with him through the entire war: his dog tags, rosary, and scapula. From there he demonstrates his dedication to bringing Private Edward Heffron back to life by making a ritual of putting them on to “instill the importance of what I was doing”²⁸ While that is standard acting, the fact that the veterans noted that they were able to identify who was who when looking at the cast is a testament to the dedication of bringing this true story to life and transporting the audience through history.

After the release of the series, both men, like the other veterans, had opinions on the accuracy. Guarnere notes that “What made the movie good was the casting of the men. The casting was excellent...I could tell you where they were in every scene. They added some artistic stuff to the story, but the important stuff was exactly as it was. I think they cursed a little more than we did. But everything was authentic.”²⁹ That is the core of argument. It doesn't

²⁷ Guarnere, William and Edward Heffron. Pg. 264.

²⁸ Ibid. Pg. 277.

²⁹ Guarnere, William and Edward Heffron. Pg. 270.

matter if the accuracy was there across the entire series in everything they did. What mattered was in there and got the story across in the most accurate way possible. Heffron was a little miffed when an anecdote he shared got changed to a different time but, like Guarneri points out, the main emotion was there. An added benefit that also gets to the core of why war movies matter is that “the movie made people want to know more about World War II...if people are learning about history and the importance of freedom, I’ll be happy to lark. Remember, the past a prelude to the future. Teaches you how to go forward.”³⁰

As a narrative, war films are complex and offer many differing opinions. Historians find fault, soldiers find their pasts, and civilians gain their knowledge. The narrative constructed in modern war films is more emotional than completely factual but since there is no way to fully understand what it is like to be in combat, the soldier’s best way to try to get civilians to just barely comprehend their service. That is why historians need to accept the change in how history is told and embrace war films. The emotional message and sensory impact is more accessible and understandable to the general public who hasn’t dedicated their lives to the study of history or has copious amounts of free time to read dissertations on military history and instead watches a two-hour movie. As soldiers from World War II are aging and there are so few left, the important message isn’t in the fact but the emotions that connect with civilians. It is film that bridges soldier and civilian in that connection that facilitates education, awareness, and interest in a subject which is the historian’s overall goal. By taking the narrative with a grain of salt and acknowledging the power it has, I have come to the conclusion that modern World War II films have increased the general knowledge and interest in a subject that is vital to the future of our society.

³⁰ Ibid.

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