

We Were Soldiers: Re-envisioning American Patriotism
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“Such a tragedy. They will think this was their victory. So this will become an American war. And the end will be the same...except for the numbers who will die before we get there.” The words of North Vietnamese Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Huu An, spoken after the battle of Ia Drang, represent the sole instance in which Randall Wallace’s 2002 film *We Were Soldiers* presents any acknowledgement of American defeat in Vietnam. Even so, this quote can also be interpreted as representative of a new breed of American patriotism in the wake of September 11th. The attacks on the World Trade Center were indeed a tragedy, and the destruction and lives lost allowed those responsible to believe themselves victorious. Hence, *We Were Soldiers* timely release date (March 1, 2002) necessitated a non-critical view of American military engagements that still captures the heartbreak that follows the loss of human life. The depiction of the battle of Ia Drang in *We Were Soldiers* represents the early stages of the Vietnam conflict: when morale was high, confidence was high, the soldiers were fresh, and American military technology was intimidating and powerful. The soldiers present themselves as a unified front, each manifesting his own individual motivations to contribute to the collective effort based on shared experience. The film also engenders sentiments that have become embedded in Americana: the relationship of the family unit to patriotic responsibility; acceptable ways of dealing with and approaching grief, and the different forms in which grief manifests itself; the simplification of war, explained only as a means for preserving a way of life; and the role of historiography in the legacy of combat.

We Were Soldiers follows Colonel Hal Moore (Mel Gibson), journalist Joseph Galloway (Barry Pepper), and the men of the 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry as they fight the battle

of Ia Drang, the first major engagement between North Vietnamese and American troops in November of 1965. The story is adapted from the real life memoirs of Moore and Galloway, entitled *We Were Soldier's Once...and Young*, and while the book follows other American military units, the film's limited perspective allows it to provide a more comprehensive exploration of Moore's character. Moore promises his men and their families that he will be the first person onto the battlefield and the last to leave, and that he will leave no man behind, dead or alive. The film also follows Julie Moore (Madeline Stowe), Moore's wife, and many other wives of 1st Battalion soldiers as they anxiously await the return of their husbands. Galloway, who becomes embedded with and actually fights alongside Moore and his men, narrates the four-day battle. Surrounded and heavily outnumbered, the constant support of artillery bombardments, helicopter support provided by Major Snake Crandall (Greg Kinnear), and competent leadership allowed Colonel Moore and his troops to overrun the enemy command post and inflict heavy losses on their North Vietnamese opponents. The North Vietnamese forces are presented as capable, intelligent, and brave, and are only defeated because the American forces were superior, both technologically and tactically.

It is possible that *We Were Soldiers* belongs in the canon of American war films like *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and *Black Hawk Down* (2001), which capture the idea of American triumphalism, a concept that champions the superiority of the American military, in the face of a fierce and powerful enemy. Albert Auster, an associate professor of media studies at Fordham University, describes American triumphalism in film as a “glorification [of war] that comes as a complete reversal from the 1980s and even the late 1990s when no war...was safe from revisionists who...emphasized war's absurdities and atrocities”(98). Though less overt than films of the 1950s due to hyper realistic depictions of war violence,

films like *Saving Private Ryan* glorified war by depicting the triumph of the human spirit, by presenting a war without cowardice, without insanity, and without shame. This, Auster says, “lifted the burden of the Vietnam War from the American military and permitted a much more positive representation of the US armed forces in film”(98). To de-emphasize the hellish characterization given to war after Vietnam, American triumphalism in film flips this idea on its head; by placing a greater emphasis on gore and realism in its depiction of the battle itself, American soldiers seem infinitely more heroic by not being affected by it. John Bodnar, a history professor at the University of Indiana, writes that films like *Saving Private Ryan* and *Black Hawk Down* “preserve the...image of American soldiers as inherently averse to bloodshed and cruelty”(805). These films sought to reinforce, rather than re-envision, what Christopher C. Lovett, a history professor at Emporia State University, calls the “national mythology that ‘America is God’s country’ and ‘America has never lost a war’”(77). In contrast to films like *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, and *Apocalypse Now!*, which explore the loss of innocence that characterized the Vietnam era, the new war films limited the dangers of war to bullets, bombs, and bayonets, which serves to eliminate any psychological factors and place American soldiers and enemy combatants on equal ground. These films honor the sacrifice of soldiers with reverence and solemnity, allowing the only casualties of war to be the loss of life.

Like those films, *We Were Soldiers* mythologizes the American military as a heroic unstoppable machine, a cavalry that always wins the day. This seldom seen connection between superiority and Vietnam represents youth, vitality and innocence that is reminiscent of WWII’s “greatest generation.” By eliminating the consequence of psychological trauma and wartime stress, the film allows itself to paint a positive, honorable portrait of Vietnam

that is not found elsewhere. Additionally, this honor is heightened by the sense of hyperrealism injected into the films, like intense gore and brutal deaths, to which stoicism seems antithetical.

It would be appropriate, therefore, to place *We Were Soldiers* in the category of American triumphalism. It depicts the American military as a well-oiled machine, effortlessly coordinating artillery strikes and air raids while infantry forces repel enemy attacks and combat helicopters carry the wounded to base camp and return with supplies. It recreates the spectacle of war with ample explosions, intense firefights, and fierce close-quarters combat. Though the film provides a definitive end to the fighting at Ia Drang, Moore's memoirs contend that shots were fired until the final moment that he exited the battlefield. Moore also condemns the treatment given to Vietnam by anti-war filmmakers, saying, "Hollywood got it wrong every damned time, whetting twisted political knives on the bones of our dead brothers"(x x). Moore's concern that the dead not be dishonored necessitated a careful adaptation of his story, not trivializing war by making it unrealistic, but also not desecrating the lives lost by turning them into literary devices. Though depicting war casualties with the utmost realism, the deaths are honorable and tragic, nothing like the ironic or humiliating fatalities in *Platoon* or *Apocalypse Now!* The death of 2nd Lieutenant Jack Geoghegan (Chris Klein), the father of a newborn child, as he carries a wounded ally to safety, is presented against a backdrop of sorrowful string music, which serves to eulogize the soldier and honor his devotion to duty. The tragedy, suddenness and randomness of the casualties in *We Were Soldiers* is better seen, as Auster contends, as more "anti-death than anti-war"(98). This sentiment is confirmed in the character of Colonel Hal Moore, who mourns the loss of his soldiers as a parent would mourn a child, saying, "I'll never forgive

myself...that my men died, and I didn't." Carter Malkasian, director of the Small Wars Program at the Center for Naval Analyses, argues that Moore's attitude is characteristic of American military commanders in Vietnam who "were never willing to expend their soldiers' lives"(912) to weaken the enemy. *We Were Soldiers* is one of the few Vietnam films that avoids entirely the psychological effect of war. Faced with seemingly insurmountable odds, the soldiers never hesitate to fire their weapons, never cease to be completely aware of their surroundings, and never forfeit an opportunity to protect a fellow soldier by sacrificing their own lives.

We Were Soldiers, therefore, is a Vietnam film in which the battle presented could be found in any American war. Oliver Stone's *Platoon*, which strove to present the true Vietnam experience, is described by Stone himself as being about "the six inches in front of [the soldier's] face," referring to the dense fog, murky swamps, and claustrophobic jungle found in Vietnam. The fighting in *We Were Soldiers*, in contrast, takes place on open plains, free from tree cover and obstructed visuals, allowing the soldiers to participate in long-range firefights with pinpoint precision. Beyond the environmental barriers to swift victory, Stone also heavily criticizes the delegation of leadership roles that occurred in Vietnam, embodied in *Platoon's* Lieutenant Wolfe, who Milton J. Bates, a professor of English at Marquette University, calls representative of the corporate, rather than warrior, mentality of the American military during Vietnam. "Wolfe is despised because he lacks the manager's competence as well as the warrior's courage," Bates says, and "the platoon suffers several casualties due to his mistakes in map reading"(121). In *We Were Soldiers*, on the other hand, Gibson's Hal Moore is an expert military leader with an impressive educational resume, and his competent leadership and devotion to his battalion, even when the top brass insist he

leave the front lines, instills confidence in the American military hierarchy. Moore is level headed, passionate and calculating, and never seems to lose control of the situation. Moore, as played by Gibson, is described by Michael Wilmington, a Chicago Tribune film critic, as “having an aura about him – perhaps like the one Martin Sheen’s Willard saw around Robert Duvall’s Lt. Kilgore in *Apocalypse Now*” (*Chicago Tribune*). To some extent this is true – both men are given almost mythic qualities – but the defining quality of Lt. Kilgore in *Apocalypse Now* was recklessness; he acted without regard for his own life, the lives of his soldiers, or the lives of the villagers around him, and his character seems to have left the plain of sanity. Moore, on the other hand, is constantly concerned about the consequences of his actions and his orders, and his first priority is always keeping casualty numbers down. Hal Moore reinforces what Auster calls “the celebration of the American intellectual tradition, and the glorification of American GI’s as the world’s greatest fighting men” (98).

We Were Soldiers also elicits a comparison to John Irvin’s 1987 film *Hamburger Hill*, which chronicles the exploits of 101st Airborne as they attempt to take Ap Bia Mountain near the Cambodian border. Both films eschew international politics for an intimate look at what motivates soldiers to answer the call of duty. Though *Hamburger Hill* is considerably more bitter, both films wear the wounds of Vietnam on their respective sleeves, especially those caused by the anti-war sentiment. Also, *We Were Soldiers* and *Hamburger Hill* both make special points to criticize the American press, especially those who never saw combat first hand and passed judgment on the soldiers from the sidelines. Though these factors illustrate the deep hurt caused by what seemed like a world turned against the soldiers, both films portray these factors as paradoxically empowering, forcing the soldiers to rely on each other

both physically and psychologically for support, making heroes (or anti-heroes) out of all of them.

These factors make it tempting to contextualize *We Were Soldiers* in the canon of these other pro-soldier movies, like *Hamburger Hill*, a Vietnam war film that focuses not on the cause for war or the justifications for American involvement but instead on the individual motivations that personify the American soldier. *Hamburger Hill* convincingly argues that war in and of itself is hell. Consequently, both films ask that although the American people may not accept or support war for war's sake, they should honor the brave men who fought and died for the American cause. While *We Were Soldiers* exemplifies American triumphalism through the logistical grandeur of military technology, *Hamburger Hill* approaches this concept from another angle. During the aftermath of the battle, an on screen text graphic says that forty-six American soldiers died trying to take Ap Bia Mountain. In contrast, a total of 633 North Vietnamese soldiers died defending the hill. This discrepancy in casualty figures illustrates the superior training, force, and might of the American soldiers whose greatest adversary was the number of soldiers the enemy was willing to sacrifice for its cause. Both films, though varied in their approach, seek to accomplish what Peter C. Rollins, a Regents Professor at Oklahoma State University, calls “the valorization of the experience of Vietnam veterans”(1255) through depictions of intense, tragic imagery contrasted by irrefutable bravery and machine-like discipline. Though outnumbered, surrounded, and on hostile territory, both Sgt. Frantz in *Hamburger Hill* and Col. Moore in *We Were Soldiers* are superior examples of what the American military can produce.

In championing the bravery and fierce dedication of the American soldier, *We Were Soldiers* dedicates itself to an inherent protectiveness of the experiences of those soldiers.

Rather than allow the legacy of the Vietnam War to tarnish the memory of those who experienced it, it condemns those who chose to editorialize the war without ever taking part in a battle or living through an ambush. This criticism, therefore, is levied at the mainstream press. Often, soon after the last shot was fired in a particular battle, a helicopter would shuttle in members of the press, most of which had were arriving fresh from a base-camp deep behind friendly lines, who would then be allowed to seek interviews from whomever they pleased. In *We Were Soldiers*, after the battle of Ia Drang, a press unit is flown in to interview Hal Moore, who has just lost several of his men to the resilient North Vietnamese. He is asked, “Will this make you take the North Vietnamese more seriously?” and responds with stunned silence. Col. Moore’s response polarizes the two spheres: Moore exemplifies the reverence and intimate loss soldier’s experience at the death of their comrades, while the press is presented as insensitive and story-hungry, not at all humbled by such a great loss of life.

The condemnation of the press shown in *We Were Soldiers* is again reminiscent of *Hamburger Hill*. While *Hamburger Hill* expressly and forcefully lambasts the press for its insensitivity, its expression in *We Were Soldiers* is lessened only by the passage of time, when the wounds of Vietnam have had time to heal. Also, this passive aggressive condemnation is given credibility when viewed in the context of the film’s time period. The battle of Ia Drang took place in 1965, long before the press turned against the war. At this point, everyday Americans had no reason to believe that Vietnam would prove to be so divisive, yet soon after his encounter with the press, Joe Galloway says, “There were no bands, no flags, no honor guards to welcome them home.” The juxtaposition of these two moments is a not so subtle indicator that the press is to blame for the sour public image

associated with the military. Now, thirty years later, the scar left by Vietnam has tainted the entire war, even its more promising early days. In this sense, the inclusion of the press scene is a sign of things to come, a retrospective premonition that shows the early roots of public dissent against the war. Therefore, in both *Hamburger Hill* and *We Were Soldiers*, the press is considered, as Algis Vallunas, a literary journalist and military historian says, “those for whom an American defeat would spell moral victory, even a victory for morality itself.”(70) In this way, the press is vilified, and in *We Were Soldiers* represents an even greater adversary to the soldiers than the North Vietnamese, whom Moore comes to respect and admire for their courage.

It is also possible that *We Were Soldiers* belongs to the category of apolitical war films, like *Three Kings*, which tells the story of several Gulf War marines as they attempt to steal Kuwaiti gold. Rather than rely on pre-established relationships or laboriously developed camaraderie, *Three Kings* shows its protagonists as men motivated by immediacy and urgency and a universal sense of right rather than a sense of moral superiority. Similarly, *We Were Soldiers* presents Colonel Hal Moore (Mel Gibson) and his troops as men who abandon their personal motivations to defend one another, even when they have so much to lose. Both films, though they differ in their approach, evoke a sense of greater good that places the well being of others in front of the soldier’s own, regardless of what may be the smartest tactical decision. In both *Three Kings* and *We Were Soldiers*, there is a strong emphasis on helping the helpless, independent of personal self-interest.

It is valid, therefore, to argue that *We Were Soldiers* is politically ambivalent, unconcerned with logistical reasoning or a greater moral imperative but instead individual motivations that inspire good, like in David O. Russell’s *Three Kings*. In *Three Kings*, a

group of Gulf War American soldiers venture deep behind enemy lines after the US ordered ceasefire in 1991 in a quest to steal Kuwaiti gold from Saddam Hussein's bunkers. Eventually they are forced to modify their ambitions to defend now helpless Iraqi civilians and insurgents against the Iraqi Republican Guard. The soldiers could care less about the Iraqi insurgents based on principle alone, and Sgt. Barlow (Mark Wahlberg) even goes as far as to shoot a surrendering Iraqi soldier even after the ceasefire has been called. Their quest for gold is motivated by and made possible by the ceasefire agreement, because they know they can travel unmolested as long as they keep their gunfire to themselves. It is only when they witness the murder of an unarmed Iraqi civilian woman by a member of the Republican Guard that they are motivated to intervene. Their intervention, which ultimately results in the deaths of several Iraqi military personnel and prohibits the safe passage of Maj. Archie Gates (George Clooney) and his men in their search for gold. Steve Vineberg, a professor at the College of the Holy Cross, argues that "Three Kings" uses the "hormone-crazed young Americans in the Gulf as a starting point and develop[s] a quest story in which the search for illicit riches shifted into a moral imperative to save [lives]" (56). The quest motive expands the moral scope of the film and prohibits a simple condemnation of the Bush administration's orchestration of a ceasefire, and Professor Vineberg's "moral imperative" that he assigns to the soldiers stems from a general reluctance to have the blood of civilians on their hands. Trevor B. McCrisken, a historian and foreign policy scholar, writes that "*Three Kings* raises questions about the legitimacy and morality of the US mission in the Gulf, depicting the moral anxieties faced by...US soldiers as a result of...confused, contradictory impulses concerning American intervention" (189). These "contradictory impulses" epitomize the

soldier's psyche: he is only allowed fleeting moments of scrutiny and internal conflict during the cacophony of war, and is therefore driven by split-second, real time instinctual decisions.

A similar logic can be applied to *We Were Soldiers*. Joe Galloway, who is the film's narrator, emphasizes several times that the soldiers were not motivated by God or country, but instead are bound by the bonds that unite soldiers together in times of crisis. Rather than contextualize the event as it is situated within the Vietnam canon, the elimination of either side's political motivations simplifies the conflict. Instead of fitting into a greater ideological spectrum, the film's characters are motivated by a mutual protectiveness they express towards each other. As members of Sgt. Ernie Savage's platoon as cornered behind enemy lines, Jack Geoghegan forgets his own individual motivations (a wife and a newborn baby at home) and demands of Col. Moore, "Our guys are being killed, sir! You gotta get us in there!" Similarly, at the end of the battle, Moore ignores his own personal motivations (a wife and several children back home) and laments his own longevity, "I'll never forgive myself. That my men died...and I didn't." Also, when Joe Galloway tells Col. Moore that he doesn't know how to chronicle the story of Ia Drang, Moore says, "Well you got to, Joe. You tell the American people what these men did here. You tell him how my troopers died." The film refuses to broaden the scope of its events, and instead focuses on the immediate, in-the-moment consequences, e.g. the death of the men beside them. In this way the film eliminates the pretense of a heightened sense of purpose or good which would likely occur with the polarization of the objectives of the American and North Vietnamese armies. Instead it provides validity to both parties in their limited perspective, a valorization of soldiers themselves. Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Huu An's quote at the end of the film is a requiem for all soldiers, and while he subtly claims victory for the North Vietnamese Army,

he also says that the only difference between the beginning of a war and its end “are the numbers who will die before we get there.” This fact, which he describes as “such a tragedy,” echoes the personal scale on which the film situates the relationship of soldiers.

While elements of all three arguments are applicable to *We Were Soldiers*, the film ultimately takes on a unique classification that is contextualized by its release in the months following the September 11th attacks. It represents a new patriotism, a time where interpersonal boundaries were broken down and bonds were re-established. The focus on the family that resulted from the loss of so many family members allowed Americans to regain some of the innocence lost during the Vietnam War. *We Were Soldiers* eliminates those elements that cheapened the spectrum of bravery and focuses on American purity, a purity not determined or affected by international politics but instead reinforced by family values and the fierce defense of loved ones. These family values are again re-emphasized by the manifestation of those homeward bonds in the form of the military wives, whose grief we are allowed to experience and whose vigilance is reminiscent of those days following the attacks when vigilance was all many had to offer. Additionally, the film's negative portrayal of the press is contrasted in the character of Joe Galloway, an embedded reporter whose bravery recalls the unselfish heroism of the day, especially when faced with death.

While American triumphalism tends to focus on the efficiency of the American military as a whole, the new patriotism that emerged in the wake of September 11th focused more on the family and grassroots Americana, championing the necessity of war to protect this “uniquely American” way of life; it was Communism in Vietnam, and now it is terrorism. Whereas the soldiers in *Saving Private Ryan* and *Black Hawk Down* served to protect the unseen, or only briefly seen, “other” (the wife, the girlfriend, the family), *We*

Were Soldiers spends nearly 45 minutes establishing the soldiers as everyday Americans. They have real, represented families, children, and pregnant wives, which is reinforced by the tagline of the film: “We were soldiers...and fathers, brothers, husbands and sons.” These men very clearly have something to lose, and because of this their deaths become more tragic. One notable example is Jack Geoghegan (Klein), who develops a semi-personal relationship with Colonel Hal Moore, the man who will eventually lead Geoghegan into battle. The two develop a bond because they are both parents: Moore the father of six, Geoghegan the father of a newborn. Geoghegan’s youthfulness, complimented by his idealistic and loving wife (Keri Russell) and newborn child, makes his death an unfortunate loss. Though the tragedy of Geoghegan’s death and the honor with which he dies are indeed representative of American triumphalism, the film brings that death into the post September 11th era by allowing his death to go undiscovered for several days, lost in the rubble of bodies, shrapnel and debris, much like those lost in the destruction of the towers. His death is brought full circle after his body is discovered, identifiable by the hospital identification bracelet for his newborn child, and his wife is notified of his death by Julie Moore. The sudden realization by Barbara Geoghegan that she is now a widowed mother embodies what Moore himself refers to as “the story of the suffering of families whose lives were forever shattered by the death of a father, a son, a husband, a brother in that Valley”(x x). Establishing the secondary roles of these soldiers allows the consequences of war to be localized, as Frank J. Wetta, a professor of history at Galveston College, says, “so that the private motivations and goals of the individual soldier supercede any stated or understood national or public rationales for whatever war is being fought” (861). These private motivations are reflective of the reverence paid to the memory of those killed in the

September 11th attacks; they were all Americans, yes, but they were also parents, children, spouses, and siblings.

The emphasis placed on the lives the soldiers left behind to fight in Vietnam reinforces the post September 11th focus on family and interpersonal relationships. As the soldiers begin to die, the wife of Colonel Moore assumes the responsibility of delivering death notices to the other wives. Harry Haun, a New York Times film critic, describes this focus as one that creates a duality, presenting soldiers “hurled into the hell of combat but also their wives, who went through their own form of hell back home”(10). The main purpose of Mrs. Moore’s assumption of delivery duties was to provide a network of support for the widowed wives, something that would be noticeably absent from their original delivery method (Western Union telegrams delivered by taxi). Constantly plagued by the possibility that one of the notices could be her own, the anxiety expressed by Mrs. Moore and the other military wives is eerily reminiscent of the days following the September 11th attacks; families anxiously awaited news regarding their loved ones, many of whom were missing in the rubble. The women, especially Julie Moore, appear to already be in mourning. Though Moore will ultimately be the only featured soldier’s wife that does not lose her husband, she maintains a more realistic, stoic attitude in preparing herself for his death. This anxiety also facilitated the rise of localized support networks, which allowed people to use their shared experiences to cope and connect. One example of these new support networks was in the creation and exhibition of missing persons posters, created by the family and friends of the missing, after September 11th. Though the literal utility of these posters is questionable (few people featured in missing persons posters were ever found alive), Kevin Jones, a professor of communications at Chapman University, argues that the posters “allowed the searchers to

do as much as possible as a parent, a spouse, a sibling, or a friend to redress the trauma...and to form new relationships with those...who sought to help”(105). Beyond the practical applications of the active search for a lost loved one, it also facilitated communication and what Jones calls “the performance of interpersonal relationships in the absence of a loved one” (105). These support groups were significant because, as Chris Stewart-Amidei, editor of a neuroscience journal, says, “the connections people made and kept were vital to their survival; they became the means by which people coped and were able to look towards the future with some hope”(175). By personalizing the delivery of death notices to the Vietnam war widows, Julie Moore and Barbara Geoghegan helped alleviate some of the feelings of abandonment that accompany the loss of a loved one.

While *Saving Private Ryan* and *Black Hawk Down* appeal to the natural camaraderie that develops between soldiers who serve at the same place and time, *We Were Soldiers* delves deeper into this concept, refusing to accept this “brotherhood” as situational. Journalist Joe Galloway, the narrator of the film, says the men “went to war because their country ordered them to, but in the end...they fought for each other.” A similar treatment was given to the policemen and firefighters, whether or not they survived, who made rescue attempts at the World Trade Center. They went to the towers because it was their job, because their country ordered them to, but the deeper motivation was the bond that held them together. The stories of self-sacrifice and heroism that emerged in the wake of the September 11th attacks confirms Galloway’s assessment. In contrast to the patriotism of the World War II and pre-Vietnam America, when Americans served dutifully in war because it was their patriotic duty and because they felt an inherent closeness with other Americans, E.A. Clarke, a professor at York University, describes *We Were Soldiers* as representative of “the ideology

of entrance into the new millennium[:] American men unite for each other and for the experience which can only be achieved in...training and combat”(19). For these soldiers, for the soldiers depicted in *We Were Soldiers*, and for the police and firefighters who similarly battled insurmountable odds on September 11th, preservation of the American way of life, of those individual motivations they strive to protect, means doing their job and bringing their friends home alive.

Additionally, while *We Were Soldiers* features a similarly negative portrayal of swoop-and-go journalism to that of *Hamburger Hill*, it features an antithetical treatment of embedded journalists, perhaps reflective of its topical release during the first few months of the campaign in Afghanistan after the September 11th attacks, when global newsmen were spending weeks, even years traveling with combat units in order to get a complete picture of the wartime situation. Nir Rosen, a freelance journalist, describes the sentiment of the military on the subject of journalism, “If you want to cover the stuff, you have to know what [that gut fear when faced with a potentially explosive situation] feels like before you can do anybody justice”(46), regardless of what side you’re trying to justify. Embeds often experience firefights from the frontlines without a weapon for protection or thorough survival training, and it stands to reason that they would be more qualified to evaluate the wartime situation from a soldiers perspective. In *We Were Soldiers*, when Sgt. Major Basil Plumley(Sam Elliot) hands Joe Galloway a rifle and says, “You can’t take any pictures from down there, sonny,” Galloway protests, “But sir, I’m a non-combatant.” When Plumley responds “Ain’t no such thing today,” he not only illuminates the severity of the situation but also places a great deal of trust in the untrained journalist. By the very act of allowing himself to be placed in harm’s way armed only with a camera, he earned the right to be there,

to fight and perhaps to die with Col. Moore and his men. Additionally, the juxtaposition of the battle-fatigued Galloway with the fresh faced TV journalists at the end of the film reinforces Moore's confidence that Galloway is the only one qualified to memorialize the battle: Galloway says, "Sir, I don't know how to tell this story," to which Moore replies, "Well, you have to, Joe. You tell the American people what happened here. You tell them how my troopers died." Moore's demand that Galloway write their story illustrates the personal and deep connection the soldiers in Vietnam had with their own legend, a connection that is largely the result of the shattered trust experienced by the larger media's negative portrayal of the war and the men fighting in that war. As Joe Galloway's narrative comes to a close, he elaborates on the negative consequences of the war for the soldiers; "Some had families waiting. For others, their only family would be the men they bled beside. There were no bands, no flags, no Honor Guards to welcome them home." This requiem illustrates Galloway's sorrow for the men he fought beside, and his disappointment in the American people for abandoning their men symbolizes his thorough understanding of the uphill struggle of an American soldier in Vietnam.

In fact, the emphasis with which Col. Moore tells Joe Galloway that he must tell this story is his refusal to allow it to be lost in time. As Galloway says, "These are the true events of November, 1965, the Ia Drang Valley of Vietnam, a place our country does not remember, in a war it does not understand." This desire to not let people forget is not so that those that survived can be remembered as heroes, but so that people will never forget those that died. Much as the missing persons posters helped allow loved ones to "freeze time...and keep hoping, avoid shock, and resist the urge to dwell on the very distinct possibility that the missing person was already dead"(Jones 105), the intense collaborative effort to chronicle the

stories of those who died on September 11th assures that they will not be forgotten. Though print allows a material remembrance of those individuals, the internet contains ever evolving “memory walls” that, taken together, immortalize the dead and provide a more complete account of the days events. Ia Drang and September 11th are events featured in history books and chronologies; the people involved in those events require active effort to not be forgotten.

We Were Soldiers effectively blurs the paradigm between soldier and reporter. By the end of the film, Galloway is no longer characterized as a non-combatant field reporter, but instead transcends the boundaries of classification and is portrayed as someone called to action by what he believes is right. He earns his place among the battle worn and understands the relationship between duty and reality; it was never his duty to pick up a rifle and fire a shot, but as Sgt. Major Plumley told him, he had no choice on that day. A similar reverence is paid to those that experienced first hand the September 11th attacks. On United Flight 93, the hijacked plane presumably headed for Washington, D.C., the passengers on board found themselves in a precarious situation in which death seemed highly possible. As Alasdair Spark and Elizabeth Stuart, professors at the University of Winchester, argue, the passengers were faced with a tri-fold dilemma: “Do we sit passively and hope this all turns out OK? Or do we fight back and strike at them before they strike at us? And what will be the consequences if we do?” (15). This dilemma provokes a hasty and unforeseen circumstance in which the passengers were forced to choose the terms of their own deaths: uncertain but likely death if they sit back and do nothing (the passengers were unaware of their final destination), or a certain yet empowering death that wrenches the balance of control from the hands of their enemies. Joe Galloway faces a similar dilemma on the day he is called into

action. As a non-combatant, passivity is his natural reaction and his best shot at making it through the battle alive. However, as the fighting intensifies, his safety is questionable and his non-combatant status is unlikely to be heeded by the volleys of bullets, mortars, and grenades that do not seem to end. Though Galloway survives the battle, at that moment it seemed as though death was upon him, and like the United Flight 93 passengers, he could accept it passively, or stand and fight and not allow himself to go without a fight. In both situations, this heroism is not motivated by self-preservation, but instead is motivated by each individuals' relationship to others. Spark and Stuart write, "the courage of the crew and passengers of Flight 93 is shown as coming from their refusal to lose faith in each other in the face of terror and their refusal to lose faith in the love of those they left behind"(15). Galloway's transformation is the result of his faith in both Col. Moore and the rest of the soldiers on the battlefield and his refusal to let them down.

To call *We Were Soldiers* representative of American triumphalism in film is to only capture a piece of the picture. By contextualizing the film in its chronological proximity to September 11th, a more thorough examination of the film as a whole emerges. While pre-9/11 war films, especially those of the late 1990s, portrayed the tragedy of war by emphasizing the number of soldiers who died on screen and the grizzly way in which they meet their demise, *We Were Soldiers* allows the viewer to meet the men, their wives, their families and their homes before plunging them into the depth of combat. By adapting the memorial-like progression of Colonel Hal Moore's and Joseph Galloway's own memoir into a sentimental remembrance of the dead, the loss of life portrayed in the film allows Americans in the post September 11th world to share their loss with the soldiers, their wives, and their families. This focus on the family allows the film to characterize the soldiers as

everyday citizens whose lives are transformed by situational necessity. The film also re-envisions American patriotism as being independent of ideological differences, but instead the intersection of personal, instinctual, and moral motivations that align when, as Hal Moore writes, the “world [shrinks] to the man on our left and the man on our right and the enemy all around. We held each other’s lives in our hands and we learned to share our fears, our hopes, our dreams as readily as we shared what little else good came our way”(x v iii). Moore’s sentiments are akin to what can only be imagined occurred inside the towers on September 11th. The world of those inside became infinitely small, and all differences were necessarily cast aside to facilitate a chance for survival.

It is also not entirely accurate to classify *We Were Soldiers* with more bitter portrayals of Vietnam like *Hamburger Hill*. Though the film laments the reception soldiers received upon their return home, it does not taint the honor and sacrifice exhibited by the men throughout the film. Additionally, *We Were Soldiers*’ negative portrayal of the press is handled more passively, frustrated with the way journalist’s commentary colored the conflict but still maintaining the presumption that those commentaries were simply misunderstood. Contextually, after September 11th, the resurgence of embed journalism precipitated an asterisks being attached to *Hamburger Hill*’s sardonic representation of the media.

Journalists like Joe Galloway earn their way by actually being there, experiencing battle first hand and in turn, coming to appreciate and understand the life of the soldier. This is perhaps the greatest difference between *Hamburger Hill* in *We Were Soldiers: Hamburger Hill* blames the anti-war movement and the media for the devolution of the American soldier, while *We Were Soldiers* disempowers that negativity. It exposes the negativity, it identifies the negativity, but it presents it in a way that is empowering. The triumph of the American

spirit was a prevalent theme in the post September 11th era, where the shattered safety of our borders demanded a resilience that proved that the United States would persevere through anything.

Also, to call *We Were Soldiers* a humanist story motivated by immediacy, like *Three Kings*, is to ignore the personal relationships that are developed in the first half of the film. Connections between husbands and wives, fathers and sons, and fathers and daughters are established to stress the motivating factors that raise the stakes for these men. As evidenced after September 11th, where the victims were remembered in their relation to others, *We Were Soldiers* establishes each character as having a unique meaning to each individual person they interact with; they assume the role of father, husband, squadmate, and commander, and these interwoven connections broaden the impact of each character's death, or each character's return home. These relationships prohibit a purely microscopic examination of a soldier's motivations; though Col. Moore says the world becomes infinitely small on the battlefield, this narrow focus is necessary to allow the soldier to maintain his composure and ensure his own survival and ability to protect those he loves.

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