

**War Stories:
Hollywood Rediscovered World War II**

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War Stories

By Richard Salzberg

“Heroism” and “patriotism” are relative terms. As evidence, inquire of the victor of any war. Or, perhaps more to the point, ask the loser.

Or go see a movie.

Because now, for better or worse, contemporary Hollywood seems to have discovered the glamour and glory of “real war,” in this case: World War II. May God bless the producers for any good intended or wrought, and have mercy on them for their purpose in anything less.

Beyond the actions and sacrifices of individuals, due to the necessary exigencies of survival, no national movements which exist in war can be morally defensible. There are few moral alternatives available during wartime, and even in such a clearly defined “good vs. evil” conflict as WW II, the machinations required to win “the good fight” make any more than general information deeply disturbing to the national conscience.

During wartime in our time, that is, the 20th century, movies became an integral part of the necessary culture of propaganda. If not generally among the finest examples of the cinematic arts, such films are certainly among the most powerful. (*Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo* and *The Purple Heart* leap into the frame.)

Inevitably, after conclusions come reflection; and how interesting to note that those “best films” which include the theme of war as a primary subject are those in which not a single shot is fired. (*The Best Years of Our Lives* comes immediately to mind, as does *Paths of Glory* as an exception.) And these films were usually made during periods of peace between armed conflicts.

An old veteran once commented that any movie about war could never be any good because, “Anybody who was there doesn’t want to be reminded. And why would anyone want to see an entertainment about such a thing in the first place?”

If logical, that reasoned, seasoned perception evaporated with the arrival of *Saving Private Ryan* and its attendant commercial success. By most accounts well-intentioned, and definitely well-produced with its budget of however many millions of dollars, there was nevertheless something deeply disturbing about critics gushing about the special effects of the “spectacular” (“if overlong”) battle sequences where death, dismemberment, and carnage (those unavoidable attributes of military victory) were made to look so “real.”

More recently we have *Pearl Harbor*. Despite a myriad of notable constraints, it could be said to be overall a good thing that it was done, if only for the interjection of the term “Pearl” (as in Harbor) back into the challenging lexicon of popular culture, beside such iconic references as “Klingon”, “South Park”, and “so-and-so/Tomb Robber”. Whether or not it is a “good movie” seems already determined by the same critics who adored *Private Ryan*, and they attacked *Pearl Harbor* with a particular ferocity.

So the producers, even if inadvertently and despite what is clearly the primary purpose of mining box office gold, have managed to familiarize another generation with a place and a moment of great import. Never mind that we now know that Pearl Harbor had been set-up by FDR because we had already broken the master Japanese code and could not let them know that we knew an attack was impending – and Roosevelt needed just such a fiery assault on American prestige to galvanize the nation and to finally counter the pervasive “neutrality” movement which had caused us since 1932 to only idly observe the rape of China by Japan, Ethiopia

devastated by Italy, and the conquest of Europe by Germany, and to even ignore the saturation bombings of the civilian centers of “our closest ally” in London and the UK.

That American lives were officially deemed expendable for this purpose on that day in Hawaii, and also in the Philippines (where the casualties were far higher, and the agony would continue for years under brutal Japanese occupation), and that the worthy careers of good, loyal Americans were sacrificed at the altar of political obfuscation, is nothing new and even understandable. But more importantly, that dark aspect of the historic record in no way diminishes the very real heroism of the individuals at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

If a measure of heroism is directly related to degrees of personal sacrifice, then it is indeed the stories of the actions and bravery of individuals which define and inform our national values and perceptions.

Even at its most specific and enlightened, History can never be much more than accurate Mythology; and Technology has decreed that the cinema is a key part of our myth-making, and *Pearl Harbor* is a part of that. But from the moment that war itself is ever made to appear appealing for the profit of the multi-national Hollywood studios, or sold as anything less than the hell on earth that it is, then an immoral act has been committed.

Created images, like knowledge itself, can only be catalytic for further pursuit.

In late 1945 a young man returned to his mother’s house in Portsmouth from the earliest fighting in the Philippines and nearly four years as a POW. At what should have been a tender age he had been a warrior left to his fate against hopeless odds, a prisoner, and a slave laborer for the Japanese government. He went upstairs to his old room and never came down again.

That is an image neither cinematic nor heroic, but that is how it went.

So learn the stories – even at the movies – and tell them; and remember the names of the heroes, and the fallen. And share them.

And never forget that war is hell.

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