Men at War: Early Lessons at "The Town"

Professor John P. Bakke

Last spring I finally got the courage to teach a seminar in rhetoric and popular war films, especially those made during or shortly after World War II. As the bombing of Pearl Harbor is my earliest memory, I was literally weaned on such movies and made no distinction between what I saw on the screen and the war itself. Like Jeanine Basinger confesses in the introduction to her admirable study of World War II combat films, I expected the enemy in my backyard everyday. Why? In her words, "I went to the movies. . .and God knows, there they were."[1] Oh, I remember blackouts, shortages, and rationing. And I remember neighbors going to war and occasional talk of someone not coming home. But those memories are no more real to me than those black and white images I saw in the Town Theatre in Waukon, Iowa.

I never had any interest in the history of any war. I don't care if there was or was not a "Tanaka Plan." I don't care what the real turning point was in "The Battle of the Bulge" or even if Der Feuhrer is alive and well and living in Argentina. I care about war "films" because I learned from them values, senses of right and wrong, and notions about patriotism and freedom and courage and manliness. They placed images in my head of strange looking people from such far away places as Brooklyn and Tennessee, England and France, and, oh yes, from Germany and Japan. In simplest terms, I learned the lessons that World War II films had to teach and it is the manner in which those lessons were taught that continues to fascinate me. These unique specimens of rhetorical art represent the finest and most sincere efforts of propagandistic expression by many of the most creative people in Hollywood during a time of real international crises.

Viewed as rhetoric, war movies function as either rhetorical history or historical rhetoric. If they are made after a war and offer some justification or critique of that experience as word to the wise, they are rhetorical history (rhetoric in the guise of history). Films like **Battleground** and **Halls of Montezuma** comment on World War II. the **Bridges at Toko-Ri** and **Pork Chop Hill** do the same for the Korean conflict, and the contemporary "Rambo" makes it apparent that we could have "won" in Viet Nam if only we had turned "our boys" loose.[2] Such films shape history to a point of view and invent whatever is necessary to fill in the blanks. Movies made during wars, on the other hand, while also inventive, present rhetoric in the guise of truth and are structured to inspire qualities necessary to persevere in war and to accept as necessary the sacrifices already made. They remain as a repository of the real feelings and images of a people caught up in events deeply affecting their lives. Created as rhetoric, they remain authentic history of their times - a history of what deeply affected people like me.

The first lesson I understood was that killing for your country was praiseworthy if God was on you side. Although Bob Dylan would later question that presumption, boxing champion Joe Louis had no such doubts in the film, **This is the Army**. He says to Gerorge Murphy, "All I know is that I'm in Uncle Sam's army and we are on God's side."[3]

The best teacher of that lesson was Gary Cooper as Sergeant Alvin York. In **Sergeant York**, made just before Pearl Harbor, York, born again to a life of Christian pacifism, confronts the conflict between God and Caesar, finally deciding that killing to save lives was O.K. with the Lord. The scene with York sitting on a mountain, his dog at his side, wind and light combining to direct his eye to the proper passage of scripture, remains a classic image in the history of filmic rhetoric.[4]

Like **Sergeant York**, war films often cast clergymen in important roles. "We got our chaplains. What we need is killers," said the recruiting officer in **Gung Ho**.[5] Men of God like Pat O'Brien in **The Fighting 69th** and Preston Foster in **Guadalcanal Diary** made it clear that there was no room in war for "turning the other cheek." When the time was right they too could do their duty.[6]

The Norwegian pastor in **Edge of Darkness**, convinced that violence was against the will of God, speaks against armed resistance against the Nazi occupiers. but as resistance leaders are being forced to dig their own mass graves, the pastor finally appears in the church belfry in full clergical garb and calmly sub-machine guns rows of Germans, as the masses advance singing "A Mighty Fortress is our God."[7]

Both during the war and after, Americans spoke openly and often against the practice of Japanese "kamikazes," or suicide pilots, but, at the same time, we were teaching the lesson that giving your life for your country was the highest form of patriotism. World War II films thus are filled with scenes of people making the ultimate sacrifice. Moreover, films like **Wake Island**, **Bataan**, and **Sahara** were made at the time when America was suffering setbacks and desperately needed time to prepare for an all-out war effort. Humphrey Bogart's speech to his little band of soldiers in **Sahara** essentialized the national messages, "Dig in and hold on!"[8]

Audiences who watched **Wake Island** and **Bataan** knew they were watching stories of islands actually taken by the Japanese. **Bataan** depicted that defeat as the story of thirteen people who stayed behind the evacuating troops to delay the enemy. One by one they meet their Maker, none more heroically than George Murphy, who, fatally wounded, dives his plane into a vital bridge. This act of patriotism beyond the call of duty inspires the group's conscientious objector, who, ill with malaria, finally assaults the enemy with hand grenades.

Before the film's heroic last stand, **Bataan**'s central character comforts one of his men who has realized none will survive their assignment with the words that it does not matter where one dies as long as one dies for freedom. Heady stuff for a wide-eyed youngster in a movie theatre in Iowa. Then the hero and role model, Robert Taylor, digs his own grave and uses it, as long as he can, for his last fox hole. Also, heady stuff.

The lessons learned about our enemies from World War II movies were exactly what one might expect and a little more so. We learned that the Germans were stupid and cruel, dedicated to the false notion that they were a super race and to the false principle that might makes right and that only the strong should survive. While not all Germans were depicted as equally evil, the lesson was still clear. Judith Anderson, a captive Norwegian in **Edge of Darkness**, showed us how to treat good Germans, at least in times of war. What did she do to the German she could not help loving? With a tear in her eye, she shot him!

Of the many refutations of self-professed German superiority, my two favorites are from **Tarzan Triumphs** and **Pimpernel Smith**. In the first, Tarzan lures a Nazi officer into a pit with a lion to be devoured according to the true law of "Social Darwinism," the law of the jungle. Shortly thereafter Cheetah chatters into a microphone and is mistaken for Hitler by the Germans who hear him.[9] Not very "heady," but good fun nonetheless.

There is also plenty of "fun" in **Pimpernel Smith**, which remains an eloquent and final testimony to the values and patriotism of Leslie Howard. Based on **The Scarlet Pimpernel**, in which Howard had also starred, **Pimpernel Smith** tells the story of an effete elitist Archeologist, Professor Horatio Smith, who constantly outwits boorish Germans to rescue great artists and intellectuals from the Nazi concentration camps.[10]

During the course of the action, the protagonist, Professor Smith, confronts the antagonist, the slovenly, corpulent, tasteless, and witless General von Graum, played, British accent and all, by Francis Sullivan. Various cat and mouse games ensue, all relating to their contrasting feelings about cultural superiority. They spar over whether Shakespeare was English or German and whether or not "Twas Brillig" makes any sense, but, in the final analysis, it comes down to Von Graum's gun versus Smith's wit and eloquence. It is no cosntest as the slight Professor foretells to Von Graum the impending German nightmare in a way that can now strike only as prophecy and truth. As his final "parting shot," Smith tells Von Graum that a discovered relic proved conclusively that the notion of an ancient Aryan civilization was a myth. "You will never rule the world because you are doomed," says the Professor. "All of you who have demoralized a nation are doomed. Tonight you will take the first step on a road on which there is no turning back. You will have to go on and on from one madness to another, leaving behind you misery and hatred. And still you will have to go on because you will find no horizon and see no dawn until at last you are lost and destroyed. You are doomed, Captain of Murderers, and one day sooner or later you will remember my words."

In World War II films the Japanese were depicted as hypocritical savages, who had knifed us in the back at Pearl Harbor and who had no regard for the civility of war in any manner whatsoever. In **Wake Island**, they shot an unarmed American flyer who was parachuting from his downed plane. In **Destination Tokyo**, a downed Japanese flyer, in a perfect "Pearl Harbor metaphor," knifes in the back the American seaman who is trying to pull him to safety.[11] And so on and so on.

Of all such depictions, I recall most vividly the scene in **Guadalcanal Diary** where veteran Lloyd Nolan tells the youthful Richard Jaeckle that he will get used to killing. Besides, he added, Japs aren't "people." Jaeckle learned quickly. He pretended to be dead in order to fool the Japanese. Then, as they walked past him, he shot them in the back, saying "That's what you taught me, Tojo." Small wonder "Town" audiences stood and cheered for speeches delivered respectively by Dana Andrews in **The Purple Heart** and by Henry Hull in **Operation Burma**

As the leader of captured flyers accused of bombing Japanese civilians, Andrews has watched his men endure torture and humiliation and finally choose death rather than cooperate with the enemy. Finally speaking his mind, at the conclusion of **Purple Heart**, Andrews warns his captors that they have underestimated the depth of American indignation against those who wanted and started the war, a feeling, he said, so strong that it would prompt the Americans to blow the "dirty little empire" of the Japanese off "the face of the earth." He says that American flyers would come by day and by night. "They'll blacken your skies and burn your cities to the ground until you get down on your knees and beg for mercy."[12]

In **Operation Burma**, in one of the most repulsive scenes of World War II films, Errol Flynn discovers his best friend horribly mutilated. We see only a portion of a bloody trouser, then watch Flynn's face as he hears his friend's weak and pleading voice begging him to kill him. When he mercifully dies, Flynn says, "Syd, I never thought I'd be glad to see you dead." Hull is less restrained. "I thought I've seen or read about everything one man can do to another," he shouts, "from the torture chambers of the middle ages to the gang wars and lynchings of today. But this - this is different. This was done by people who claim to be civilized. Civilized! They're degenerate, moral idiots. Stinking little savages! Wipe them out I say. Wipe them off the face of the earth."[13] Were we killing to save lives, like Sergeant York, at Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Or were we vengefully administering genocide to a sub-human population? In Waukon, at "The Town," it was six of one and a half dozen of the other.

Wheras much of what I learned at that time about war was relevant to a particular war in which I was too young to engage, I could not help feeling that I was never going to "grow up" until I had confronted and passed through the "combat experience." Basinger takes the position that the "powerful and dark films about war" taught her that

"war is a terrible thing" and, thus, she concludes, "The best anti-war film has always been the war film."[14] I cannot agree.

I viewed the "war film" from a "male perspective," unconscious as that perspective may have been. I viewed the films as someone who would be expected to put on a uniform and take up arms for his country, not as someone who might be expected to keep the home fires burning or send my sweetheart off to war. I thus identified with Robert Walker as he boarded the troop train in **Since You Went Away**, not with Jennifer Jones when she received the news of his death in combat. I retained admiration, of course, for such brave females as Greer Garson as "Mrs. Miniver" and Claudette Colbert and Jennifer Jones in **Since You Went Away**. I recall the stoicism of Selena Royale in **The Fighting Sullivans** when she got the news that all five of her sons went down on the same ship. And I remember the combat heroism of Veronica Lake and the other nurses in **So Proudly We Hail**. I can understand why females might see the war films' depiction of "war as hell" as anti-war.[15] All that missed the point though, as far as I was concerned. War indeed may be hell, but hell was something that perhaps must be confronted before one reached full manhood and went to where that "Star Spangled Banner" was waving.[16] Thus war films to me were a preparation for what I thought was an inevitable confrontation-a confrontation I was taught to welcome. As such, all these films were pro-war. They taught me that killing could be moral and that dying for my country was the highest expression of patriotism. How could such lessons be anti-war?

Almost all soldiers in World War II films were "grown-ups," but in most of these pictures there was at least one "kid" with whom I could identify. Whether Robert Walker in **Bataan**, Farley Granger in **The Purple Heart**, or Richard Jaeckel in **Guadalcanal Diary**, the kids could not reach manhood until they had successfully confronted both the enemy and their own fears. Walker died a "man" after he finally "got his Jap" and Granger, after holding up under torture, walked proudly to his death. Jaeckle's reward for surviving the battle of Guadalcanal? He sprouted a whisker.

The connection between the military experience and the male rite of passage was more explicitly pronounced in post World War II films, like **Sands of Iwo Jima**, [17] where there were more kids than grown-ups and where the films began in training camps instead of combat zones and had professional sergeants such as John Wayne and James Whitmore and Richard Widmark as the midwife heroes entrusted with transmitting to the "boys" the proper lessons of the culture. I knew to what extent my mind had been affected by them while recently rewatching a scene from **Battle Cry** which I had digested uncritically in 1955. In that scene, the Colonel, Van Heflin, put his career on the line to get "his boys" the chance to "hit a beach" first to prove themselves before the war was over.[18] What was it the great patriot said? "Give me 'manhood' or give me death?" Or something like that?

In the film **Bridges at Toko Ri**, the Admiral, Frederic March, tells his favorite pilot, William Holden, that one cannot choose one's war , that one must fight when called upon no matter if things made sense or not. As March predicted, Holden lays aside his doubts and does his "job" before dying alone in a ditch in Korea, far away from friends and family. After hearing of Holden's death, March solemnly watches planes taking off for more combat and pays eloquent tribute to Holden's memory by asking, "Where do we get such men?" If I had known in 1955 what I now sense is true, I would have raised my hand. And when I had been recognized by my teacher, Professor March, I would have proudly answered: "From right here in the 'Town.' From right here in Waukon, Iowa."[19]

Notes

[1] Jeanine Basinger. **The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre**. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, p.x.

[2] **Battleground** (Directed by William Wellman. Screenplay by Harry Brown and James Edward Grant, based on a story by Brown. MGM, 1949) endorses the need for military preparedness in light of the dangers of fascism. **Halls of Montezuma** (Directed by Lewis Milestone. Screenplay by Michael Blankfort. 20th Century-Fox, 1951) supports American involvement in world affairs. **The Bridges at Toko Ri** (Directed by Mark Robson. Screenplay by Valentine Davies, based on the novel by James Michener. Paramount, 1955) and **Pork Chop Hill** (Directed by Lewis Milestone. Screenplay by James Webb. United Artists, 1959) give expression to "The Domino Theory." Taken as a whole, such films articulate the premises of the national mind-set that made the United States predisposed toward involvement in Southeast Asia.

[3] In *With God on Our Side*, Bob Dylan reveals that his attitudes toward war and particular wars had been shaped by the manner through which he had been taught and by the manner through which he had uncritically learned justifications for questionable war policies.

This is the Army Directed by Michael Curtiz. Screenplay by Casey Robinson and Captian Claude Binyon, based on a stage show by Irving Berlin. Warner Brothers, 1943.

[4] **Sergeant York**. Directed by Howard Hawks. Screenplay by Abem Finkel, Harry Chandlee, Howard Koch and John Huston, based on the diary of Sergeant Alvin C. York. Warner Brothers, 1941.

[5] **Gung Ho!** Directed by Ray Enright. Screenplay by Lucien Hubbard, based on the story by Captain W.S. LeFrancois. Additional dialogue by Joseph Hoffman. Republic, 1943.

[6] **The Fighting 69th**. Directed by William Keigthley. Screenplay by Norman Reilly Raine, Fred Niblo, Jr. and Dean Franklin. Warner Brothers, 1940.

Guadalcanal Diary. Directed by Lewis Seiler. Screenplay by Lamar Trotti; adaptation by Jerry Cady, based on the book by Richard Tregaskis. 20th Century-Fox, 1943.

[7] **Edge of Darkness**. Directed by Lewis Milestone. Screenplay by Robert Rossen, based on the novel by William Woods. Warner Brothers, 1943.

[8] **Wake Island**. Directed by John Farrow. Screenplay by W.R. Burnett and Frank Butler, from the records of the USMC. Paramount, 1942.

Bataan. Directed by Tay Garnett. Screenplay by Robert D. Andrews. MGM, 1943.

Sahara. Directed by Zoltan Korda. Screenplay by John Howard Lawson and Korda, adapted by James O'Hanlon from a story by Philip MacDonald based on an incident in the Soviet photoplay, *The Thirteen*. Columbia, 1943. In his speech, Bogart asks: "Why Bataan? Why Correigador?" He answers: "Maybe they were all nuts. but there's one thing they did do. They delayed the enemy until we got strong enough to hit him harder than he was hitting us. I ain't no general, but it seems to me that's one way to win."

[9] **Tarzan Triumphs**. Directed by William Thiele. Screenplay by Ray Chanslor and Carroll Young, based on a story by Carroll Young. RKO, 1943. In the film, Tarzan declares war on the Nazi's after his son, Boy, is captured. During the course of the film, both Boy and chimpanzee Cheetah shoot Nazis.

[10] **Pimpernel Smith**. Produced and directed by Leslie Howard. Screenplay by Natole DeGrunwald, based on an original story by A.B. MacDonell and Wolfgang Wilhelm. British National Films, 1941. If one seeks eloquence in World War II films, one should begin with Charlie Chaplin's speech at the conclusion of **The Great Dictator** (written, produced, and directed by Charlie Chaplin. United Artists, 1940.) Chaplin plays the duel role of a Jewish barber who is mistaken for Hynkel, the Great Dictator, and, in such a mistaken identity, addresses a Nazi rally with a plea for peace and a recognition by the peoples of the whole world of their common humanity.

[11] **Destination Tokyo**. Directed by Delmer Daves. Screenplay by Daves and Albert Maltz, based on an original story by Steve Fisher. Warner Brothers, 1943.

[12] **The Purple Heart**. Directed by Lewis Milestone. Screenplay by Jerome Cady, from a story by Melville, Crossman. 20th Century-Fox, 1944. Melville Crossman was producer Darryl Zanuck's pseudonym.

[13] **Operation Burma**. Directed by Raoul Walsh. Screenplay by Ranald MacDougall and Lester Cole, based on a story by Alvah Bessie. Warner Brothers, 1945. In The Star-Spangled Screen, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1985, pp. 226-228), Bernard F. Dick notes that the "Hull speech" was created by MacDougall who changed Cole's draft from "There's nothing Japanese about torture. You'll find it wherever you find fascists. There are even people who call themselves Americans who'd do it too." Leftists Cole and Bessie protested the altered version, but producer Jerry Wald went with MacDougall.

[14] **Basinger**, p.x.

[15] **Mrs. Miniver**. Directed by William Wyler. Screenplay by Arthur Wimperis, George Froeschel, James Hilton and Claudine West, based on the book by Jan Struther. MGM, 1942.

Since You Went Away. Directed by John Cromwell. Screenplay by David O. Selznick, based on the book by Margaret Buell Wilder. United Artists, 1944.

The Fighting Sullivans. Directed by Lloyd Bacon. Screenplay by Mary C. McCall, from a story by Edward Doherty and Jules Schermer. 20th Century-Fox, 1944. The Sullivans lived in Waterloo, Iowa, ninety miles down the road from Waukon.

So Proudly We Hail. Directed by Mark Sandrich. Screenplay by Allan Scott. Paramount, 1943.

Dick thoughtfully discusses the role of women in World War II films (pp. 173-187) and **Basinger** gives special treatment to the "combat film" as a variation of the "women's film" (pp. 223-245).

[16] Elton Britt's popular World War II country song, "There's a Star-Spangled Banner Waving Somewhere," tells of a crippled boy who is not allowed to join the army and therefore is denied his rite of passage to the special heaven for heroes, the place where the Star-Spangled Banner waves forever. The boy claims he can fight in spite of his handicap and, one senses, if his plea is disallowed, he will always remain "crippled" or something less than a man.

[17] **The Sands of Iwo Jima**. Directed by Allan Dwan. Screenplay by Harry Brown and James Grant. Republic, 1949.

[18] **Battle Cry**. Directed by Raoul Walsh. Screenplay by Leon Uris, based on his novel. Warner Brothers, 1955.

[19] I do not mean to imply that the whole cause of the socialization of attitudes toward war can be attributed to "The Town" or the "movies." World War II films, by and large, were products of the society in general and the messages therein were reinforcing the prevailing attitudes of the times. So were families, churches, and schools, The "lessons" taught through World War II films thus had many schoolrooms, but in "The Town," especially for youngsters like myself, they were taught so well.