

Soldiers at work

by [John Petrakis](#) in the [March 13, 2002](#) issue

It has been over a quarter century since the last American body bag was airlifted out of Vietnam, and after a series of disturbing, castigating and sometimes surreal movies about that reviled war, Hollywood clearly feels that the coast is clear to present a Vietnam combat film that adheres more closely to the old rules of the genre. Veteran filmgoers will recognize the elements: The impossibly stoic and brave commanding officer who is tough on his men, but would walk barefoot over hot coals for them. The racially mixed company of soldiers who overlook their differences to become a lean, mean fighting machine. The "been there, done that" sergeant who rides the grunts for their own good. The raw recruit who is the first to die. The supposedly dispassionate observer who ends up joining or at least supporting the soldiers. And, of course, the families back home, especially the wives, who wait patiently for their men to return with their shields or on them.

We Were Soldiers contains all these requisite elements and then some as it re-creates the first significant battle between U.S. and North Vietnamese troops in late 1965. Four hundred American troops arrived in Ia Drang in the Central Highlands to find 2,000 North Vietnamese troops lying in wait. The film is based on a 1992 book by Hal Moore, the lieutenant colonel in charge during the battle, and Joe Galloway, who was the UPI reporter-photographer covering the action.

Mel Gibson plays Lieutenant Colonel Moore with a steely gaze and half-cocked grin, suggesting that beneath his tough exterior beats a heart of gold. Gibson's performance is sure to draw comparison's with John Wayne, especially in such seminal combat films as *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949) and *The Flying Leathernecks* (1951). But the more relevant comparison is to Wayne's performances in John Ford's "Cavalry Trilogy"--*Fort Apache* (1948), *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949) and *Rio Grande* (1950). In those films about battles against the Indians, the hero's qualities transcend the rightness or wrongness of the cause.

Ford, a war veteran himself, believed that heroism is a quality of character and that it can be even more pronounced when the conflict is morally dubious, since it is all

the harder for the leader to toe the line and be loyal to his troops and his country.

Lieutenant Colonel Moore is perfectly aware that he is being sent into the valley of death. He is severely outnumbered; his troops are young, inexperienced and, in some cases, naïve (weaned, no doubt, on a steady diet of John Wayne movies); and he is fighting on the enemy's home turf, where it has the physical and in many ways the moral high ground. (One of the best things about the film is the way it occasionally cuts to the point of view of the Vietnamese soldiers, making it clear that they were just as worried about family and comrades.)

To bolster the point, the film starts with a flashback to the massacre of a French battalion during the French-Indochinese war of the 1950s, the aborted conflict that left the door open for the U.S. to enter Vietnam a few years later. Moore, a military historian, is acutely aware of that debacle, just as he is aware that he is in charge of the 1st Battalion of the 7th Cavalry, the same battalion that Custer led into Little Big Horn.

Randall Wallace, who directed and wrote the screen adaptation, also wrote *Braveheart* (1995), which also dealt with courage, honor and sacrifice. (It is of interest to note that Wallace studied in a seminary as a young man.) As a piece of cinema, *We Were Soldiers* is wildly uneven. When it is weak, especially in the early expository sections, it can be painfully so, but when it is strong, notably during the battle sequences where veteran cinematographer Dean Semler is able to strut his stuff, it is often overwhelmingly powerful.

We Were Soldiers cannot and should not revise the nation's view of the Vietnam war, but it does redefine the meaning of heroism during that chaotic political period. The real battle isn't against the enemy, the film seems to be saying, as much as it is within the person in charge, the one who must decide for himself and his men the right thing to do during very wrong times.