

DVD Select: 'Flags' deserves a respectful salute

by Robert J. Hawkins

As the war dragged on, casualties mounted and victories were few. Back home the rising cost of the war - in lives and resources - stirred calls to end the conflict. America was growing restless, the government was growing bankrupt and the will to fight was fading away.

The war in Iraq?

No. The war with Japan. World War II.

'FLAGS OF OUR FATHERS' - Barry Pepper plays a Marine sergeant and Jason Gray-Standard an officer in Clint Eastwood's war epic 'Flags of Our Fathers.' CNS Photo courtesy of Paramount Pictures. Clint Eastwood must have sensed this eerily similar juncture in history while making his moving war epic "The Flags of Our Fathers" (Paramount, 3 1/2 stars), the story of the battle of Iwo Jima, the iconic flag-raising photo taken there and its impact on the war effort back home.

The photo of five Marines and a Navy corpsman raising the flagpole atop a craggy, body-strewn hill galvanized the populace behind the war effort. It also let government and military opportunists ride the image to victory (and record war bond sales).

The movie most respectfully tells all these stories - the soldiers, the battle, their fallen comrades, the "heroes" who raised the flag, the publicity campaign back home and the tragic ways in which war changes everyone.

"Every jackass likes to think he knows what war is, especially if he's never been there," says a veteran in a voice-over that opens the film. "Most guys I knew would never talk about it."

Add my father to that list. He was a Navy corpsman, like John "Doc" Bradley (Ryan Phillippe) in the movie. He and Bradley shared bunks on the troopship to the Pacific Theater of Operations. My father never spoke about the war and won't go to see war movies.

I better understand that now, after watching "Flags of Our Fathers."

How the real veterans must have laughed or boiled with rage every time a John Wayne movie came out glorifying war - or rather glorifying a sanitized form of war where limbs remained intact and uniforms never got dirty, blood never spilled (even from the wounded and dying) and battles were orderly drives into the face of the enemy.

This is where Eastwood's film is at its most brilliant. War isn't just hell. It is loud, confusing, capricious, chaotic, terrifying, random, bloody, messy. This is how the battle scenes unfold in "Flags of Our Fathers."

A guy right next to you dies. You live. The enemy seems to be shooting from everywhere. And nowhere. Progress isn't marked in ground gained but the fact that you're still breathing. Marines do crazy and heroic things to save the lives of their buddies. Because their buddies would do the same for them.

Iwo Jima was a small island with only one thing of strategic value to Allied forces: It was Japanese soil. It was the first landing of troops on the enemy's own turf. The Marines were met by deeply entrenched Japanese soldiers who fiercely defended their land. It was a vicious battle.

On the fifth day of that 35-day battle, a small deployment of Marines reached the top of Mount Suribachi and planted the American flag. It electrified the Americans below. Lots of photos were taken.

Then came the order to take down that flag and replace it with another. A second set of Marines did the job and Associated Press photographer Joe Rosenthal quickly grabbed the shot that would be seen around the world. It ran on the front page of nearly every newspaper in America.

The military quickly yanked out the flag-raisers - only three of the six were still alive - and brought them home for a promotional tour to sell the war effort, and the war bonds needed to finance it. Doc Bradley was one of those men. The other two were the self-promoting private Rene Gagnon (Jesse Bradford) and American-Indian Ira Hayes (Adam Beach).

All three struggled with the concept of "hero." While their buddies were still fighting and dying on the Pacific Islands they were living in pricey hotels and shaking hands with politicians and Washington brass. They were used, exploited - but for a good cause they were told. Just the same, they were treated callously by those who used them (especially Hayes who suffered one racial slight after another). Eastwood clearly has as much compassion for this trio as he does for the grunts who never got off the beach alive. He glorifies nothing but reveres every life given and served in the cause of war. He pays the fighting soldier the ultimate compliment of being honest and true to the events that occurred. By the movie's end, I wanted to call my own father and tell him how much I loved him and respected him for the part he played in that war. And I wished I could do the same for every man and woman who is serving today, including my brother and niece.

Eastwood's companion film to this, "Letters from Iwo Jima," is in theaters now and tells the story of this fiercely fought battle from the Japanese side. It has been nominated for a best picture, best director, sound and screenplay Oscars. ("Flags of Our Fathers" is nominated for sound and editing Oscars.)

ALSO THIS WEEK

"Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles" (Sony, 3 stars) An aging Japanese fisherman is called to the bedside of his estranged but dying son, a documentary filmmaker, by the son's wife. When the son refuses to see him, the man decides to complete his son's film and travels to China to interview a folk-opera star. The journey is long and filled with discovery. Here's an Asian film with an impressive pedigree. The director is Zhang Yimou ("Raise the Red Lantern," "Hero") and his star is Ken Takakura ("Black Rain"). Cinematographer is Zhao

Xiaoding ("Curse of the Golden Flower," "House of the Flying Daggers"). It all adds up to a fine, moving film.

"Running with Scissors" (Sony, 2 stars) You think your family is dysfunctional? Hang out for a while with the family of Augusten Burroughs (Joseph Cross). His neurotic mother Deirdre (Annette Bening in a wow of a performance) and alcoholic father Norman (Alec Baldwin) are so inept that young Augusten is adopted into the family of his mother's unorthodox shrink (Brian Cox). Based on the memoir of the real Augusten. Other cast members in this chaotic comedy include Evan Rachel Wood, Jill Clayburgh, Joseph Fiennes, Gwyneth Paltrow, Gabrielle Union, Patrick Wilson and Kristin Chenoweth.

"Hollywoodland" (Universal, 2 1/2 stars) This movie was inspired by the death of Superman. I'm referring to the actor George Reeves who played the super hero on television in 104 episodes from 1951 to 1958. The role was enough to typecast him for life, a life shortened by a supposed suicide in 1959. Adrien Brody plays a private eye, looking into the death of Reeves (fine performance by Ben Affleck). Diane Lane is Reeves' lover Toni Mannix and Bob Hoskins is her powerful film mogul husband Eddie.

Also this week: underappreciated romantic comedy "Trust the Man"; direct-to-video Disney sequel "Cinderella III: A Twist in Time"; kids and horses in the remake "Flicka"; disappointing horror remake/sequel "The Grudge 2"; sweet romantic comedy for maturing adults "The Boynton Beach Club"; and the episodic Internet series that grew into a full-blown romantic comedy "Soup of the Day."

IT CAME FROM TV

"Anything But Love" (Fox) Volume 1 of a very smart and funny series starring neurotic Richard Lewis and vivacious Jamie Lee Curtis as co-workers at a magazine who ignore their mutual attraction to save their friendship. There are 28 episodes from the show that ran 1989-92.

"Eddie Murphy Delirious" (Starz Home Entertainment, 1983) Somebody actually counted the number of times the red-leather suited Murphy used the expletive for fornication in this 70-minute stand-up routine: 230.

Also this week: "Mad About You" (Sony, season 3); "Charmed" (Paramount, season 7).

FROM THE VAULTS

"Universal Cinema Classics - Wave 1" Surf this new series of films coming from the vaults of Universal Studios. First titles on DVD are the anti-war epic "All Quiet on the Western Front" (1930); half-brothers duel for the love of Scheherazade in "Arabian Nights" (1942); winner of seven Academy Awards "Going My Way" (1944); and the Olivia de Havilland-Montgomery Clift drama "The Heiress" (1949).

"Here Comes Mr. Jordan" (Sony, 1941) Robert Montgomery is a boxer inadvertently called to heaven 50 years too soon. He's sent back in the body of an older man until a suitable replacement body can be found. But he falls in love with the feisty Evelyn Keyes and tries to thwart the labors of angels (Claude Rains and Edward Everett Horton). James Gleason is a hoot as Montgomery's boxing coach. "Alfred Hitchcock Box Set" (Lionsgate) Early films from the master of mystery include "The Ring" (1927); "The Manxman" (1929); "Murder!" 1930); "The Skin Game" (1931) and "Rich and Strange"(1931).

"Romeo (plus) Juliet" (Fox, 1996) This tenth anniversary edition of Baz Luhrmann's contemporary take on the Bard's classic tale focuses on the hip musical soundtrack that electrified audiences back then. Contains a "jukebox feature" that enables you to go straight to your favorite piece of music. Loads of other new features.

DVD RATINGS

4 stars: Don't miss: rent it/buy it

3 stars: Worth the risk: rent it

2 stars: On the tipping point: if nothing else is available

1 star: Don't bother: wait until it's in the \$1 bin

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