

DVD Select: Soldiers endure a world gone postal in 'Letters From Iwo Jima'

by Robert_J_Hawkins

"We soldiers dig. We dig all day. This is the hole that we will fight and die in. Am I digging my own grave?"
- from a letter written by soldier Saigo on Iwo Jima, to his wife in Japan.

'LETTERS FROM IWO JIMA' - Yuki Matsuzaki and Kazunari Ninomiya star in 'Letters From Iwo Jima.' CNS Photo courtesy of DreamWorks Pictures. The humble trench soldier Saigo (Kazunari Ninomiya), an even humbler baker conscripted into the army, is among the wiser heads in the Japanese army in Clint Eastwood's stirring war picture "Letters From Iwo Jima" (Warner Home Video, 4 stars).

"Letters" is the flip-side of the coin. "Flags of Our Fathers" was the other.

The decision to tell the story of the long and bloody World War II battle for the little scrap of sand, scrub and rock in two movies - one from the American soldier perspective and one from the Japanese was brilliant.

"Flags of Our Fathers" debuted first and is available on DVD. A special two-disc edition is being released this week with 90 minutes of bonus material. It tells the story of the 70,000 Marines who fought and eventually won the island and looks closely at the stories of the men who raised the flag atop Mount Suribachi, an iconic moment captured in a photo and seared into the national consciousness.

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 "Letters from Iwo Jima" - nominated for four Academy Awards - has no iconic moment but it is filled with tragic lives and men who met their ends honorably. Perhaps the most honorable is the military commander Gen. Tadamichi Kuribayashi played by the distinguished actor Ken Watanabe.

Kuribayashi was educated at Harvard and shared friendships with American military officers. He knew, too, of the awesome power that America could muster once aroused. His heart is obviously filled with dread as he prepares for the U.S. invasion (which would be the first on actual Japanese soil). No air cover, no reinforcements, no fresh supplies - Kuribayashi endures each setback with stoic reserve.

He knows he will die on this island and that will be the fate for most of his soldiers. He accepts that fate with the bearing of a leader. "For our homeland. Until the very last man," Kuribayashi tells his soldiers. "Our duty is to stop the enemy right here. Do not expect to return home alive."

Saigo doesn't share Kuribayashi's grim determination to fight until the end. He wants no more than to see his wife and newborn child once again. But time and again he serves, following orders to great peril. When his fellow soldiers begin committing hari-kari with grenades, though, Saigo draws a line.

He sees nothing honorable in suicide and believes tactical retreat to fight another day is a wiser course.

As in "Flags of Our Fathers," the fighting in "Letters from Iwo Jima" is starkly realistic and bloody. Nothing is softened for commercial sensitivities.

That's what makes Eastwood's films so vital. Nothing is sugarcoated.

ALSO THIS WEEK

"Fay Grim" (Magnolia, 3 stars) Imagine my shock when I learned that this is a sequel to Hal Hartley's decade old indie film "Henry Fool" (Best Screenplay, Cannes, 1997). Never saw it. And, seriously, it doesn't matter. Parker Posey is the title character, a single mom, struggling to get by with a troubled teen (Liam Aiken). Fay's life is upended when CIA agents (Jeff Goldblum in the lead) come searching for her long-gone garbage-collector husband and his voluminous notebooks, possibly filled with state secrets. Fay begins to realize all those tall tales told by hubby Henry Fool (Thomas Jay Ryan) might have been true. Fay uses her leverage to get her brother and acclaimed Nobel poet Simon Grim (James Urbaniak) out of prison and with the help of publisher Angus James (Chuck Montgomery) they try to find Henry before the global spy community does. Punchy story with choreography you have to see to believe. And Parker Posey is a goddess with brains. The movie is being released simultaneously in theaters and on DVD.

"Mistress of Spices" (Genius, 2 1/2 stars) Speaking of goddesses, Aishwarya Rai is Tilo, something of a virginal nun, committed to the care and delivery of magical spices to people, some of whom only need them for cooking. Her base of operation is across the bridge from San Francisco, possibly in Oakland. All is well until scruffy architect Doug (Dylan McDermott) dumps his motorcycle in front of her shop. Something clicks, and that is trouble. Cute, clever story from Gurinder Chadha and Paul Mayeda Berges (who directed) in which Rai is radiant. McDermott not so much. He comes off unprepared and a bit lecherous, which is all wrong for the role. Great shots of spices though.

"Venus" (Buena Vista, 3 stars) Maurice (Peter O'Toole in an Oscar-nominated role) is a faded actor facing the last chapter of his life and career (He's developed a specialty playing corpses ...) Life changes when he takes Jessie (Jodie Whittaker), the rough-edged niece of a colleague (Leslie Phillips) under his wing. Maurice tries to show her the bigger world of the arts but this is no "My Fair Lady." Though she's 50 years his junior, Maurice still has desires. Might creep out some. I found it kind of encouraging.

"Apocalypto" (Buena Vista, 2 1/2 stars) Mel Gibson has gone from the battle for Scottish independence ("Braveheart") to the rise of Christianity ("Passion of Christ") to the fall of the Mayan civilization - each with a homage in each to the unique role of violence. And, yes, "Apocalypto" has a strong measure of violence. Facing the end, the Mayans come up with what seems like an eerily contemporary platform for survival: "build more temples and offer human sacrifices."

"The Good German" (Warner, 2 1/2 stars) Steven Soderbergh directs a solid cast that includes George Clooney, Tobey Maguire and Cate Blanchett. A solid murder mystery set in post-war Germany that also explores the cost of surviving in the aftermath of war. Ever restlessly experimental, Soderbergh went '40s retro shooting in black and white with old-style lenses and lighting.

"The Italian" (Sony, 3 stars) A 5-year-old Russian orphan, Vanya (Kolya Spiridonov) isn't content to vie for adoption like his peers. He wants to find his real mother. With orphanage officials and police in hot pursuit, little Vanya sets off on a daring journey to find his mother. Reportedly inspired by true events.

"Epic Movie" (Fox, 2 stars) Blockbuster movies take it in the groin, artistically speaking, in yet another broad satirical jab from Hollywood's funnybone. You know the routine: familiar actors vamp and mug through distorted bits from despairingly familiar films - "Pirates of the Caribbean," "Narnia," "Willy Wonka" and "Da Vinci Code" are among the victims. Kal Penn, Jennifer Coolidge, Fred Willard, David Carradine and Crispin Glover are among the perps. Not a belly laugh in the bunch but chuckles here and there.

MORE THRILLS THIS WEEK

Voyeuristic thriller "Alone with Her" with Colin Hanks and Ana Claudia Talancon; a survival thriller "The Hard Easy" with Henry Thomas and David Boreanaz; psychological thriller "Mem-o-re" with Dennis Hopper and Ann-Margaret; and terrifying thriller "Dark Corners" with Thora Birch and Toby Stephens.

Documentaries this week: "Escape to Canada" - the nature of Canada is changing with an influx of AWOL soldiers, legalized marijuana and gay marriage. "Jerry Lee Lewis: Greatest Live Performances" cobbles together interesting performances - Greatest? Pfffft. "Where Is the World Going, Mr. Stiglitz?" in which Nobel economist Joseph Stiglitz explains how the world works.

IT CAME FROM TV

The complete series "Kitchen Confidential" based on memoirs of chef Anthony Bourdain; season one of Family Channel's "Kyle XY"; fifth season of the inventive "Scrubs"; fourth season of once-hot "The OC"; season two of western serial "The Magnificent Seven."

FROM THE VAULTS

The MGM Legends series debuts box sets from two true legends: the dry deadpan Gary Cooper and the expressive chameleon Peter Sellers. "The Gary Cooper Collection" includes four classics, the Westerns "Vera Cruz" (1954) and "The Cowboy and the Lady" (1938), the war drama "The Real Glory" (1939) and romantic drama "The Winning of Barbara Worth" (1926).

Look for four defining titles in "The Peter Sellers Collection" starting with his bumbling French detective "The Pink Panther" (1963), James Bond spoof "Casino Royale" (1967), the trippy pratfall "The Party" (1968) and swinging '60s romp "What's New Pussycat?"

MORE REPACKAGING

"Porky's 'One Size Fits All' Edition" - teen sex comedy is 25 years old. The Carl Reiner comedy "Summer School" is 20 years old. With the follow-up hit "Knocked Up" due in theaters, Universal issues a double-disc edition of "The 40-Year-Old Virgin."

John Wayne would be 100 years old and to celebrate, Warner and Paramount unleash a slew of his titles, the most important of which are "True Grit" and the Howard Hawks masterpiece "Rio Bravo."

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