

A weak satire sans politics

Buffalo Soldiers, directed by Gregor Jordan

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21 August 2003

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Buffalo Soldiers is a black comedy about life in a US army base in Stuttgart, Germany, at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. It tells the story of Ray Elwood (Joaquin Phoenix), a small-time criminal who deals in stolen military property and drugs.

The film has been criticised for the depiction of American soldiers as brutalised and corrupt, drug dealing and drug-using criminals who are commanded by incompetent officers. It was said that the film was unpatriotic, anti-American and anti-army—none of which is actually true. Nevertheless, it led to repeated postponements of its distribution, so that Jordan's third film *Ned Kelly* opened in Australia, his country of origin, earlier than *Buffalo Soldiers* (see link below). His first film *Two Hands* was released in 1999.

The general release for *Buffalo Soldiers* was originally planned for July 19, 2002. Miramax purchased distribution rights to the movie at the Toronto Film Festival in 2001, just one day before the September 11 terrorist attacks on the US.

Capitulating before the political pressures exerted by the ruling elites in the US, Miramax perceived the changed atmosphere as too difficult a context for its release. The ensuing pro-war and gung-ho political environment, which now has entered the vocabulary as “the war on terrorism,” leading up to the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq, made the distributor agree again and again—in total five times—to postpone the release. It was finally screened last month, first in Europe and then in selected cinemas in Los Angeles and New York on July 25.

Two weeks before the release in the US, Gregor Jordan justified this capitulation in an interview:

“I knew that the film would be pretty tricky to distribute and market at the best of times. It's an anti-

hero story about an unconventional subject. It's also a film that raises issues about the nature of war. I knew it was gonna be affected by September 11, but I had a feeling that a day would come when the film would become topical in a way that it couldn't before.”

He went on to deny the charge that the film was anti-American:

“The fact that certain people are saying the film is somehow unpatriotic is just ridiculous... I don't think the film's particularly political at all. It's actually about something that goes beyond politics, which are the reasons why people want to keep on fighting, and how a lot of people out there really like and want war.”

The story line of the film is rather simplistic. Elwood entered the army by choosing three-years' military service over a six-month prison sentence. He fills his time by engaging in all sorts of criminal activities, using his position as an army supply clerk to procure and sell goods from right under the nose of his superior, Colonel Wallace Berman (Ed Harris). Another moneymaking scheme is cooking morphine into heroin, which he supplies to the drug-dealing chief of military police, Sergeant Saad (Gabriel Mann), who deals it to his fellow soldiers.

Through a freak accident, Elwood and company stumble over weapons worth millions of dollars. In a deal with Elwood's drug supplier, the weapons are traded for 30 kg of morphine, massively more than he has ever processed before.

This is when everything goes wrong. A new top sergeant, Robert Lee (Scott Glenn), a war-loving and sadistic Vietnam veteran, has arrived at the base and gets onto Elwood's case. Elwood dates his daughter Robyn Lee (Anna Paquin) “to mess with the Top's head.” Predictably, Elwood and Robyn Lee fall for each other.

It all ends in carnage.

Based on the novel of the same title by Robert O'Connor, the story—including the depiction of life in the barracks—goes over the top. But according to the director, it is true to reality. In an interview with the BBC, he says, “I think it’s actually surprisingly close. I started doing some research into it when I was writing the script and I’ve got documents which show things like murder rates on US Army bases—there were between 25 and 30 murders a year. And things like accidental deaths—there was between two and three a day. And suicide rates...

“There’s also statistics about how many weapons just went missing during the course of the Cold War. Billions of dollars worth of weapons just disappeared. And drug use—the army in the end had to introduce drug testing to try and stamp it out. If anything, what is depicted in the film is toned down from reality. What really happened was much, much worse”.

Some film critics have described *Buffalo Soldiers* as a dark satire that compares to such classics as *Catch 22* or *Dr. Strangelove*. There is a strong comical element within it, with the humour often derived from the ignorance—politically and socially—of its characters. If there is any satirical content, then it is this. Here you have the soon-to-be only remaining superpower at the height of its triumph—the break own of its ideological arch enemy to the east—represented by a military consisting of soldiers who are indifferent, bored out of their heads, thieving and drug running.

As the TV reports about the events leading to the fall of the Berlin Wall, a group of corrupt Military Police, made high by the morphine cooking, ask each other, “Where’s the Berlin Wall?” “Berlin” one replies. “What country is that in?” another asks. “West Germany.” “Which one are we in?” another asks. “East Germany,” comes the reply. Another hollers out, “No, we’re in the West.” “What’s the difference?” “F—ked if I know,” is the answer.

In the end, *Buffalo Soldiers*’ humour leaves something of a sour aftertaste. I would suggest that this is because Gregor Jordan is partially correct when he says the film is not political, or rather that its politics are shallow and essentially conformist. Nor is it even strongly “anti-war.” There is even a certain element of glorification of war and warlike-men. In the form of voice-overs by Elwood, the film makes comments such

as “War is hell but peace is f—king boring.”

Given that this was the Cold War and the film depicts soldiers for the most part standing around on base, constantly hyped up but with no identifiable enemy in sight, one can see where this may come from. But Jordan seeks to give this a philosophical base.

A quote by Nietzsche—“When there is peace the warlike man attacks himself”—becomes something like the film’s only sustained message. The soldiers with nothing to do destroy themselves—either through drugs, murder or simply sinking into indifference.

There is a suggestion here that war is intrinsic to the human condition. This theme consistently runs through the whole film, and the character of Sergeant Lee manifests it most fully. Near the end of the film, when he is alone with Elwood and about to kill him, Lee confesses that he loved Vietnam, that for him it was “a turkey shoot” and nothing but “fun.”

Jordan, the son of a Vietnam veteran, himself grew up on military bases:

“I grew up with this perception that Vietnam was this terrible, terrible thing that no one wanted to talk about because it was too traumatic for the people who went there,” he says. “But my father—who’s not a nasty, violent, warlike person—didn’t talk about it that way. In fact, if you asked him about Vietnam, it was difficult to get him to shut up about it...”

“If you’re trained to go to war for five years and then you go, then you don’t see war as this terrible thing—my dad didn’t. He saw some horrible things and had friends die, but my guess is that he perceived war as simply something he did.”

He has described the Lee character as the one you want fighting your wars for you: someone who really enjoys warfare and is an extremely formidable soldier, but who, when taken out of the context of war, is a homicidal psychopath. This is not, one must say, the most profound comment on war or soldiering ever made. And unfortunately, *Buffalo Soldiers* does not rise far above such inanities.



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