

The Pacific offers character and emotions but little understanding

The Pacific (2010), HBO miniseries, ten episodes

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HBO has aired seven of the ten episodes of the Tom Hanks and Steven Spielberg production of the miniseries *The Pacific*, which focuses on the Pacific theater during World War II. Based on the books *Helmet for my Pillow*, by Robert Leckie, and *With the Old Breed*, by Eugene B. Sledge, as well as interviews with veterans of the Pacific battles, this latest production carries on the personalized retelling of World War II used by Hanks and Spielberg in the 2001 HBO series *Band of Brothers* and the 1998 movie *Saving Private Ryan*.

The uneven quality of the previous productions is more pronounced in the latest miniseries. The decision to use this familiar style allows the filmmakers to focus on the characters during and after battle, but with uneven results. Coinciding with this approach is the use of close-ups, tracking shots, and classical cutting during battle scenes, forcing the audience to confront the brutalization of war.

But this emotional experience comes at the expense of understanding the underlying dynamics of the war as well as any consideration of the Japanese soldiers against whom the Americans fought. The perspective of *The Pacific's* filmmakers is incapable of an objective rendering of the political driving forces, to the point of delivering a hopelessly biased presentation of the Pacific war.

The miniseries follows three Marines across the Pacific—Pfc. Eugene B. Sledge (Joseph Mazzello), Pfc Robert Leckie (James Badge Dale), and Sgt. John Basilone (Jon Seda). They are enlistees from different backgrounds who are transformed by the war. Raised in a large, working-class Italian family, Sgt John Basilone has an outgoing, do-whatever-is-necessary personality that serves him well in battle, so much so that he receives a Congressional Medal of Honor at Guadalcanal. It's only after he is awarded the medal, and back in the States to use his name and medal to sell war bonds, that he is forced to tamp down a personality that has sometimes gotten him in trouble.

Privates first class Leckie and Sledge undergo more

significant changes, partly due to their backgrounds and partly due to their extended period of duty in the Pacific. Leckie is the writer of the trio, coming from a family as large as Basilone's but cold: when he departs for the Marines, the only family member at the bus station is his father, who sends him off to war with a stiff handshake.

At first sensitive and reserved, Leckie undergoes brutal experiences in war, combined with the wrenching end of a brief but honestly felt affair with a young woman (Stella) during liberty in Australia, culminating in a stay in a naval hospital field hospital for psychiatric observation.

Eugene Sledge is the only son of an aristocratic family with deep ties to the antebellum South, which helps explain his fierce determination to enlist against his medical doctor father's wishes (he had earlier detected a murmur in his young son's heart). As one might suspect, Sledge is at first innocent and idealistic, but after watching a series of incidents, the most graphic and disturbing of which involves a member of his company literally carving the gold out of a dead Japanese soldier's mouth, and engaging in hellish battles, Sledge himself becomes hardened and equally capable of committing atrocities.

Other scenes filmed from the soldiers' perspective successfully depict the terror and inhuman consequences of war—camera shots of beach landings from inside the landing craft and a soldier asleep at the front whose nightmare is so frightening that his screams cannot be suppressed, leaving his comrades with no choice but to kill him out of fear that the noise will alert the Japanese to the American position. Battle scenes featuring extreme close-ups, tracking and reverse-angle shots and classical cutting make the terror and brutality of war all the more emotional and personal to the audience.

But this perspective is often the least valuable for the objective understanding and truthful rendering of any event, war or otherwise, especially in the hands of artists with certain pre-determined outcomes in mind. This is the case

with the filmmakers of *The Pacific*.

Throughout the seven episodes aired thus far, there is a palpable sense that engaging in violence makes men of boys, especially in the cases of Sgt. Basilone and Pfc. Sledge. Furthermore, these characters are taught not to dwell on what they have done, and even to make light of the violence with understated, “Marine” humor.

This is not to deny the fact that such humor acts as a psychological survival mechanism or that close bonding must occur if any group of soldiers is to survive in battle. Nor is it to say that some heroic figure must arise to correct his fellow Marines. In fact, *The Pacific* must be given its due for not stooping to such lows; not one of the characters, even John Basilone, the recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor, wants anything to do with being a hero, and on several occasions they express or exhibit fear of what they are confronting. Pfc. Leckie’s stay in the naval hospital for psychiatric observation does dramatize one consequence of the cost of suppressing the memories of committing violent acts. But one searches in vain for a dramatized unearthing of the reasons for this “rite of passage.”

The rewards of such excavations are to be found in certain works of art, for example, Norman Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead*, but at best, *The Pacific* poses questions but leaves them unexplored. In one scene, Pfc. Leckie and another Marine spend an evening debating the existence of God, an entirely believable and understandable topic for two Marines to argue in the midst of a brutal war. The answer comes in the next scene when the same Marine who argued against God’s existence thanks God for the Navy planes flying over their position. This stale, “atheist in the foxhole” response might be found in any contemporary action film, but its inclusion in a supposedly serious depiction of the war in the Pacific is insulting.

Even more insulting is the miniseries’ revisionist, sometimes downright juvenile political perspective. Each episode begins with a prelude that includes archival footage, brief remarks by Pacific theater veterans, maps of the relevant areas of the Pacific, and voiceover narration by Tom Hanks. The prelude for the opening episode includes a vintage WWII drawing of the Pacific, complete with large arrows spreading out from Japan across the entire Pacific and Tom Hanks’ explaining that up to this point the US had lost every battle and that the Japanese now controlled one of the largest territorial empires in history. There is not even a suggestion of the oil embargo imposed by the Roosevelt administration on the resource-poor island of Japan, which practically guaranteed an attack on the US. One recalls such maps and text (or the voice of a dutiful teacher) from the seventh grade. It is little wonder *Time* magazine recently honored Hanks on its cover as the “history maker” who is

“redefining America’s past.” Yes, but how? And for whom?

The decision to shoot the miniseries battles from a limited, personalized perspective denies the audience any understanding of the larger forces at work, not only underlying the war as a whole, but in terms of the imperatives of military strategy and even battle tactics. Without panoramic or extreme long shots of the beach landings, for example—shots to be found even in many decidedly pro-American war movies—one is not given the opportunity to “step back,” so to speak, from the battle and consider the contending lines, their distance from each other, and how the battle plan is or isn’t working. Most important, one is forced to identify with the side from which the battle is filmed, the American side.

The filmmakers’ one-sided view of the war is most apparent in the almost complete absence of visual contact with the Japanese soldiers. When they do appear, they are little more than pop-up figures at a carnival shooting gallery. The one occasion when a Japanese soldier is seen close-up occurs when a severely wounded member of the Japanese Imperial Guard staggers with sword drawn toward Pfc. Sledge, who shoots his enemy at point blank range, causing him to fall onto the ground next to him. Even this singular encounter with a Japanese soldier is created to establish the American soldier’s ability to regain his humanity; after looking into the Japanese soldier’s eyes, Sledge suddenly watches with revulsion as American soldiers slaughter the Japanese hidden in the underground caves of Peleliu Island.

The Pacific offers a jarring depiction of the brutalization of soldiers during war. However, the intensely subjective perspective and decidedly pro-American bias does nothing to increase one’s understanding of the larger issues at work in the Pacific theater.



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