

Former 'Nam veteran takes a realistic look at the life of a grunt

Platoon attempts to instruct while it horrifies

By KEN KEOBKE

"Making war for peace is like making love for virginity"

— anti war slogan

The young men that America sent to fight the Vietnamese were far different than those sent to fight the Germans in World War II. The soldiers that John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson sent over when they inherited the French colonial mess in Indochina were more educated and less certain than those before them who were fighting for the freedom of the United States.

Many of these young men didn't return but among those who did were thinkers and artists who documented their experiences in attempts to understand and, perhaps vainly, rationalize them. When they were sent, they were told that they were going as heroes, yet upon their return, many looked upon them as criminals when everyone realized the questionableness of what they were doing.

The Vietnam War is referred to as America's "Livingroom War" because, for the first time in history, the media brought front line action and atrocities live into the homes of people who needed desperately to imagine that they held the moral edge and that the enemy were horrible monsters. What they saw was often something very different: a young naked girl screaming, running away from American soldiers who had just torched her village, and disclosures of the slaughter at My Lai. The most recent example of the

American military's understanding of their mistake in televising Vietnam has been the prohibition of journalists accompanying the invasion of Grenada.

Platoon follows the life of a young soldier from the moment he steps off the plane in Vietnam, fresh from basic training, to his first few weeks of war in the dense brush of the Cambodian jungles. Played by Charlie Sheen, the recruit differs from others in his platoon in that he is the only one who volunteered. His idealism slowly wanes when he is forced to reconcile the immorality of what must be done to win a war when one is not dealing with gentlemen.

Part of what must be done is treating all civilians as if they were the enemy, burning their homes and crops, slaughtering livestock and beating out confessions. In one scene, Sheen pushes around a man he has found hidden in a room beneath the floor of a house. One of the younger more zealous recruits amplifies Sheen's frustrations and beats the man to death with the butt of his rifle. As blood spatters across Sheen's face and clothes we hear the young soldier whoop "Gee, I've never seen brains like that; I've never seen a skull broken open like that!"

The same boy, later discussing why he likes the war, comments that he doesn't have parents telling him what to do and that he can do anything he wants. In a more surreal movie, his mother would have appeared at the edge of the massacre and called him in for dinner.

Other characters include a number of black soldiers who frequently



'NAM'S SEEDY SOLDIERS: The three stars of *Platoon* glare at the enemy. Charlie Sheen flanked by Willem Dafoe (left) and Tom Berenger.

complain that they are sent into the front line of action to do the dirty work. In fact, statistically, black American soldiers were assigned more dangerous duties and suffered significantly more casualties than their white counterparts.

Platoon is being billed as the most realistic depiction of life and death in Vietnam. Because of the brutality and bloodiness of the film, it is also being called a peace film. Sup-

posedly, each member of the audience will walk out of the cinema so completely opposed to war that he will give up war-like thoughts and perhaps even stop killing aliens in video arcades.

Part of this reasoning proceeds from the film's admirable lack of caricature of the Vietnamese soldiers as evil demons out to invade America and rape its women. Rather, the complete focus is on the platoon

itself and how the war slowly destroys them physically, mentally, and most importantly, morally. However, in the end, as the audience flies out of the theatre, the talk is of the blood and the bombs and the killings. Perhaps some think of peace, but one can't help but wonder if *Platoon*, with all its gory thrills, is nothing more than a glorified, thinking man's *Rambo*.

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