In

In “Flags of Our Fathers”, Clint Eastwood told the story of the Battle for Iwo Jima from the viewpoint of the Americans, during which he managed to take a critical look at what constitutes “a hero”. In the companion piece, “Letters from Iwo Jima”, Eastwood flips the coin and shows us the same battle from the viewpoint of the outnumbered Japanese defenders. And while Eastwood does not make it as obvious of a point as the concept of heroism in “Flags”, he does make us take a critical look at Japan’s concept of “wartime glory” from that period, questioning the psychology of a country where it is considered more important to commit suicide “for honor” than it is to continue fighting your enemies.

It is both inevitable and obvious that the two pictures will be intertwined and compared, but make no mistake; “Letters from Iwo Jima” is a far superior film. With just a few minor exceptions, it is filmed entirely in Japanese with English subtitles, and the only “star” that would be recognizable to American film goers would be Ken Watanabe. Nevertheless, Americans will certainly be able to appreciate the high quality of filmmaking and a topic that transcends nationality; facing almost certain death with duty and dignity. The image that kept going through my mind was “The Alamo” in terms of seeing men who were outnumbered, outgunned, and totally without support. But the difference is that unlike every movie made about that Texas conflict, the enemy (in this case, Americans), are not made out to be the brutal, inhumane barbarians as Santa Anna’s troops have always been portrayed.

The movie’s main focus is on the observations and thoughts of a reluctant lower level soldier

named Saigo, played with surprising skill by Japanese pop singing star Kazunari Ninomiya. Saigo is not a particularly good soldier, but he is not a malcontent either. He was a baker back in Japan, looking forward to the birth of his first child when he was drafted. A kind man with a gentle soul and charming humor, Saigo is not the “banzai” yelling fanatic so often depicted in WWII movies about the Pacific effort. He doesn’t want to die, but is no coward at all; simply a man who would rather live to see his wife and baby if he can, but someone who will still fight bravely for his country and his comrades. Ninomiya’s acting is effortless in a role that could have too easily become caricature, but does not. Every emotion, from simple joy of an unexpected break in a work routine to the horror of seeing comrades dying needlessly comes through clearly on the screen. I don’t know if Ninomiya can speak English, but I would love to see him in another roll...he was that good.

Saigo crosses paths several times with Watanabe’s General Kuribayashi, the supreme commander of the island’s forces. Kuribayashi arrives to find the island woefully defended, and immediately starts making changes that rankle his top officers. He sees no need for throwing away many lives and substantial ordinance by trying to defend the beachhead, knowing the shear numbers of the American invaders and the firepower of their ships would quickly decimate them. Instead, he advocates the digging of tunnels throughout the island so that they can connect their points of defense unobtrusively.

Kuribayashi spent time in America years before the war as a military envoy, so he has a unique perspective of his adversaries. Unfortunately this fact, combined with his military decisions to strategically retreat when necessary rather than throw lives away in suicide frontal attacks, put him at odds with the traditionalists on his staff, who consider him “too Americanized”. Kuribayashi’s military genius is credited for the battle lasting far longer than America thought it would take. With only 20,000 men and no air or sea support, Kuribayashi was able to hold out for over forty days against over 100,000 men along with constant bombing raids and devastating shellings from the American warships. Had he not been hampered by ineffectual second tier leaders and inadequate communications, the loss of American lives would have been much higher.

Watanabe again shows the amazing skills as an actor previously displayed in “The Last Samurai” and “Memoirs of a Geisha”. Kuribayashi accepts the assignment knowing he will not return, and has made painstaking efforts to set his affairs prior to departing. Yet, in poignant letters back to his wife and children, he is more distressed by not being able to finish the work on the kitchen floor of his house than he is concerning him eminent fate. Watanabe easily conveys the many facets of this complicated man; inspired leader, fearless warrior, and

compassionate mentor.

Indeed, most of the sympathetic characters are those that seem to be at odds with the Japanese Bushido code of suicide, which makes me wonder how the movie would be viewed in Japan. I would like to think that it would be perceived favorably, as any rational person should be able to see that it is more honorable to find some way to continue fighting for your country than to just give up. In one harrowing scene, a company Captain has decided that it's hopeless, and orders the troops to "die with honor", resulting in each soldier grabbing a grenade, pulling the ping, banging his helmet with it and then clutching it to his chest as it explodes. Maybe to a Japanese audience the scene might have been a cause for some nationalistic pride, but to me it was simply viewed as a disturbing testament to wasting lives. But then again, that is one of the good things about movies; they can teach us different perspectives. The Japanese culture, even today, emphasizes society as a whole far above the individual, whereas America has always been a culture where the individual's worth has always been valued much more than any other nation.

But Eastwood doesn't fall too far into a level of preaching regarding culture. Later on, there are two other instances of suicide that don't have the same level of pointless squander...and in the context of the moment, the audience can comprehend the validity of their actions with more of an understanding, if not acceptance. Almost all of us have known about the Kamikaze culture of Japanese soldiers from past movies and books. Eastwood helps us to see the real people and the traditions behind the actions. We have heard the numbers before...only 1,000 of the 20,000 Japanese survived the battle. This movie makes those numbers easier to comprehend.

In my review of "Flags of Our Fathers", I stated that the movie would have been much better had they concentrated more on the battle and less on the parading of the survivors across America. "Letters from Iwo Jima" does just that; the movie is almost entirely focused on the island with the exception of a few flashback scenes for character development. This decision makes for much better continuity, and the battle scenes themselves are just as harrowing as anything from the first picture or from "Saving Private Ryan". Despite the bleached out colors and the eloquent storytelling, the bottom line remains that War is Hell...and a damn scary, bloody, gross Hell at that.

One thing that struck me half way through the movie was that Eastwood was not attempting to

editorialize. World War II is, of course, viewed as a “moral war”, as well it should be. Japan committed atrocities beyond imagination during the war; a fact not brought up during this movie. In the movie, brutality existed on both sides, as did kindness, and each trait was shown for each side during the movie. I don’t think Eastwood was intentionally ignoring those other atrocities...rather in his effort to depict the Japanese soldiers as human beings rather than just as bodies on the receiving end of American bullets, he asks us all to remember that in war, people die, and just because they fought for “the other side” that doesn’t make them any less human.

Could that be taken as a political statement given the United States in 2007? Perhaps...perhaps not; I certainly don’t think that Clint was making anything that could be construed as a parallel to Iraq. This was a battle between two armies for an objective of strategic value, not guerrilla warfare popping up sporadically in an area heavily populated with civilians. Instead, I feel Clint has created an excellent movie that respects both sides while breaking it down to the most common denominator of war; the individual men (and women, but not in this film) whose blood is spilled for their country.

It’s not a perfect film. It is quite long (at almost two and a half hours), and the story tends to drag at points with some of the battle scenes becoming muddled and unclear as they run together. But it is a memorable film, one that will be talked about for years to come, and one certainly deserving its Best Picture nomination.

My Rating: Brian Sipe (3 ½ footballs).