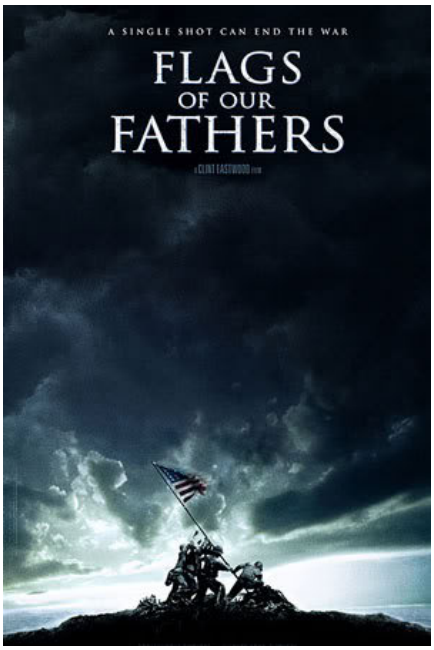
As Mitch points out in his latest review, "Flags Of Our Fathers" has all the pedigree for a timeless classic: An Oscar winning director in Clint Eastwood, an Oscar winning screenwriter in Paul Haggis, one of the industries true legends as a co-producer in Steven Spielberg, and a topic that seems to be a perfect fit for them all, the Battle of Iwo Jima. Did this film live up to the hype? Find out in Mitch's latest ...



This movie has all the pedigree for a timeless classic: An Oscar winning director in Clint Eastwood, an Oscar winning screenwriter in Paul Haggis, one of the industries true legends as a co-producer in Steven Spielberg, and a topic that seems to be a perfect fit for them all, the Battle of Iwo Jima.

But the total is not equal to the sum of the parts. “Flags of Our Fathers” is a good movie; don’t get me wrong on that. It is just not a great one, and therefore can be looked upon as a slight disappointment, as it pales in comparison to two of Spielberg’s recent works regarding WWII; “Saving Private Ryan” and the HBO mini-series “Band of Brothers”.

The story centers around the three immediate survivors of the famous picture of the Marines raising the flag on Iwo Jima (the other three died in battle within the next 21 days after the picture). The picture brought hope to America as a symbol of possible victory in the vicious battle in the Pacific, and the War Department badly needed symbols at that time to push for more bond sales to finance the long war. Navy corpsman John Bradley, and Marines Ira Hayes and Rene Gagnon were ill suited for their roles as celebrity pitch-men. Bradley and Hayes had served honorably, but were not the definitions of “heroes”, while Gagnon was relegated as a runner by his battalion chief due to the fact that he was a very poor soldier, and his participation

in the flag raising was only due to him being the runner who brought the flag up to the top of the secured mountain.

All three dealt with a great deal of survivors' guilt. Most of the men they served with had been killed, but they were whisked away from the battlefield for safekeeping, and were not comfortable with their celebrity status. They also dealt with the guilt of knowing how the War Department downplayed/ignored two facts. One was that the flag they raised was the second one of the day, a larger replacement so that a politician would not confiscate something considered to be "Marine property" in the form of the first flag. The second was that one of the six men in the photo was originally misidentified, but since the names were already released to the press, the men were not allowed to correct the oversight. (This omission was rectified after the war).

Much has been made in recent films regarding the bravery, self-sacrifice, and stoicism of so many of the men who were part of what Tom Brokaw called "The Greatest Generation". This movie follows in that same light, as the men are clearly depicted as being a close-knit group who deeply care for one another, with the exception of the hatred Ira Hayes had towards Rene Gagnon. Eastwood makes no attempt to over-glamorize either of these men, as Gagnon is shown to be an incompetent opportunist looking to exchange his fame for money. Hayes is portrayed as a troubled man battling depression, alcoholism, and the racism that still existed in that time towards Native Americans, a man wanting to be a part of his unit once again, but devastated by both his position as an outsider and the flashbacks of what he had seen.

John Bradley is shown to be quite admirable, on the other hand. He bravely attended his fallen comrades despite being under fire himself, at one time tending to a wounded Marine despite multiple shrapnel wounds in his own legs. Like Hayes, visions of the battles remain etched in his mind forever, although like others of that generation, he kept his deeds to himself, and never discussed them with his family. It was only after his passing in 1994 that his son, James Bradley, set about to research the men and the event, culminating in the book adapted for this movie.

Ryan Phillippe does a surprisingly excellent job in portraying Bradley. The decency and dedication are evident throughout the movie, along with the internal conflict. Barry Pepper, Neal McDonough, Robert Patrick, and Paul Walker (can you believe it?) also stand out in their

smaller roles as Marines. Unfortunately, Adam Beach and Jesse Bradford are not up to the task in their performances as Hayes and Gagnon. Beach's acting is two dimensional at best, and Hayes is only seen as either a pissed off loner or a fall down drunk. But he's one dimension better than Bradford, who plays Gagnon as a 100% re-incarnation of the smart-assed intern he played for a year on "The West Wing". There is no insight into Gagnon's true personality or motivations by Bradford, just a high school drama club level reading of lines.

Something that does work extremely well in this movie are the fantastic battle scenes. After being spoiled from what was seen in "Saving Private Ryan" and "Band of Brothers", I was expecting this to be something special, and it certainly was. Magnificent cinematography of the massive shelling from hundreds of warships hitting the bunkers of Mt. Suribachi, where the Japanese forces and weapons were concentrated, and then later of the horrendous thirty seven day battle itself. Eastwood did a tremendous job of providing points of view of both the fighting men on the ground, and bird's eye views from the mountain top, or from inbound fighter planes. Like the aforementioned Spielberg efforts, the scenes are intense, visceral, and horrifically violent; a realistic rendition of a battle where 60,000 Marines went against 22,000 entrenched Japanese troops vowing to not surrender. The fanaticism of the Japanese was demonstrated in the fact that only a little over 1,000 survived; many dying in hopeless bansai attacks on the Americans or by committing suicide when surrounded. Seven thousand Americans also lost their lives in securing the island and its valuable air strips that were needed as a base for attacks upon Japan itself.

In a somewhat confusing decision, Eastwood has chosen to continually time shift the scenes of the battles with scenes of the war bond tour of the three survivors, disrupting a great deal of the continuity of the film. I was totally entranced whenever the action was centered about the island, but started to grow frustrated the ninth or tenth time he cuts away to show the survivors once again putting on the same pained faces as they went to another rally. Now I can see the reasoning for wanting to do some shifting; as there is only so much intensity viewers can take without catching their breath. And in utilizing these breaks, Eastwood did well to show the progression of the men's reluctance; starting with hesitation, then surprised appreciation when given a standing ovation in Yankee Stadium, to their general fatigue with it all. But the movie would have been much better served with three or four fewer scenes showing Hayes drunk and not wanting to go up on stage.

I probably would have preferred a movie that centered much more upon the battle itself, showing more of the planning and execution of the effort, rather than having the disjointed focusing on one group of men. This type of single-battle viewpoint worked very well in Mel

Gibson's under-appreciated Vietnam War film "We Were Soldiers". However, that was not the point of the book, so I cannot truly fault anyone in that regard. James Bradley wrote the book for us to look at his father and the other men involved and see them not as mythic demigods, but good men who fought and died for each other first and foremost. Yes, they were doing it for their country, but when the bullets started flying, they were not thinking of the high level goals, but instead were able to perform incredible feats of bravery for the man next to them, in front of them, or behind them.

And despite my complaints about the details, the movie very much succeeds in shining a spotlight on this courageous generation who exhibited loyalty, bravery, and sacrifice in a manner that seems to be almost beyond the comprehension of those of us who came after them.

My Rating: Frank Ryan (3 footballs).