

Jarhead. Directed by Sam Mendes. Starring Jake Gyllenhaal (might wanna look at a name change), Jamie Foxx, Chris Cooper.

First of foot and right of the line. First to fight. First casualty of whore is the troop. Don't think the Marines read the fine print when they signed off on this one. Critics moo, though, about *Jarhead*, assuring us that it "takes no position on the war." Yeah... and my butt is butter, as the French say (and *their* butt is butter!).

I read *Jarhead*. The guy's a crybaby. And illiterate: "Every happy family is happy in the same way; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Substitute "war" for "family," and you have the level of wisdom to which *Jarhead* rises. "Every war is..." Tolstoy by way of Hemingway by way of the kid who puts your groceries in the bag (your bread on the bottom under the can of creamed corn). The scenario they attribute to William Broyles, a real jarhead who wrote *Brothers in Arms* about service in Vietnam, Republic of, then the wordless script for *Cast Away*—which even so woulda been better for fewer words—later *Road to Perdition* where he actually *explains* what Paul Newman and Tom Hanks act! Don't be looking for any bean (or idea) left unpoked up your nose.

The movie, like Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*, follows a vulpine, self-pitying, wannabe intell-ett-chall (who can't hack college, which is—as anyone knows—from out of where we get all our intell-ett-challs from out of) like Matthew Modine's Joker, who's way too sensitive and way too decent to fit among the low forehead types he bunks with in "the Suck." Staff Sergeant Siek (Foxx, with a shaved head, weaving that line between dumbbo lifer, sensitive father figure and more or less pulling it off... by the way, more about "pulling it off" later and no I don't know what kind of name "Siek" is) puzzles like a sow looking at a wristwatch over the kid's copy of Camus'—pronounced "kay-muss," despite what that weenie from Princeton told you—*The Stranger*, which of course "Swoff" (short for "Swofford"... those Marines are hell on surnames, turns out) is, too... a "stranger" in the Corps. Whap! Sorry I hadda do that... but looked as if you wouldn't catch that heavy-duty allusion on account of you were scratching your butt and drinking beer right outten the bottle. Mighta missed, for instance, the Dartmouth guy (teevee series *Over There*—blessedly among the *fides defunctae* now—featured a Cornell guy. Hey... I spent twenty-five years in the infantry, never *saw* an Ivy League graduate) in the Drew Carey glasses who sets his HMMV on fire... then *cries*!

Worser yet... it's a war flick without a war! Even the big "sniper" shot is a bust... oopsy daisy! Sorry. Mostest action you fetch up is ka-blooeey the Irakis set fire to their oil wells and we all get doused with slicky oil (and all those sea otters and grebes and stuff wash up on shore tarred and yucky but pouty lips, high cheekbones, tight jeans coeds from Brandeis bus out there and wash them with Woolite™) while the sand turns black but then white as we scuff trails into it, pallid blood vessels athrob just beneath the earth's flesh, web of illusion across the vasty, inchoate (*in-Kuwait*... urf! urf!)... yeah, right! Hey, Squirrel! It's sand and oil. Same stuff on the underside of your Chevy. Rest of the time, we're in tent city, bored stiff. Thumbnail portraits of American boys: dimwit black guy from inner city; dimwit cracker from Alabama; dimwit delinquent from New Jack City; dimwit Ivy League pansy; dimwit... Who wrote this? Oh... oh... the

Marine Rhodes Scholar did? Oh... Well, maybe if he thumb through *Mill on the Floss* again, he might pick up the quaint Nineteenth Century notion us dimwit lit-rah-choor profs call... a *flockin' story!* There ain't no movie here on account of there ain't no story here. Nor character. Nor war. Nor skin... unless you count Marines.

And we *do* count Marines. Naked. All over the place. More naked—forgive me—and more *often* than I'd like to think my Marines get, too. Anyhow. In the empty windup to the non-war, they hydrate (like drinking water, only military). They clamber in and out of chemical suits. They don protective masks. They zero weapons. They play headbanger music. They watch old war flicks (mighta been a lesson there for guys who made this one: see that *flockin' story* unfold up on the screen?). They um, er... devote a lot of time (and we get to watch) to what Ambrose Bierce calls “ignoble offices about the body.” The kind we build those latrines for. And put doors on them for. Lot of time. Let's just say we fetch up with a new meaning to “manual of arms”... if you catch my drift. “Fist to fight,” so to speak. Ask your mom. Gonna be noses bust and jaws broke—mark my words—as Sailors and Army guys remind Marines of *this* formerly (and happily) submerged aspect of Corps lore in days to come.

Trouble with a flick like this: A small fraction of the population now fights wars on behalf of the mass of the population... for whatever reason. The vast majority, then, of our citizens has no clue what service to the Republic demands. Or who serves Her, for that matter. When those citizens see the artifacts (uniforms, vehicles, guns, naked guys with idiot tattoos sucking bottles of Evian™) plausibly familiar from the newspaper or hear language (hiphop argot, vulgarity, techno-jargon, *sermo militaris*) that sounds plausibly authentic, they think the kerygma, the ticket peddled by one sorehead and his Hollywood dream merchant is... *real*. Teary old vets spilling out of first screenings of *Appocalypse Now*, *Platoon*, *Private Ryan* bleated about how it was “just like being there, man”; four months later, though, when they'd had time to think, they were back-pedaling madly, ashamed that they'd bought into the parallel delusion that soldiers are all dumb and vicious and empty of heart. Yo, Mom. Have a little faith in your kid with the chocolate-chip-cookie suit. Marines didn't do anything to him you didn't.