

Flags of Our Fathers. Directed by Clint Eastwood. Produced—it's worth noting—by Steven Spielberg, who's appointed himself Custodian of World War II (and Moral Tutor to the Planet: *Private Ryan*, *Band of Brothers*, *Schindler*) and written by William Broyles (go-to guy for Rhodes Scholar, former Marine cachet on this kinda thing: to his credit and to our relief, he does not put words—read: hamfisted Hollywood *kerygma*—on the lips of his dying Marines, a small dignity but significant). Starring Ryan Phillippe, Jesse Bradford, Adam Beach, Barry Pepper.

Two heraldic American icons: the flag on Iwo Jima and the crag on Clint Eastwood. This flick is like Mel Gibson's *Passion of Christ*: wouldn't have to be much of a movie for its sacral nature to override cavilling objections of pusillanimous critics. It's more a *visualization* than a movie, though, but workmanlike and worth the watch ...*one time*, taken the above *caveat* (Latin for "No, squirrel, *Platoon* is *not* the same as being in Vietnam, Republic of").

And courage is *not* the same as heroism. Nor either one the same as valor. Courage is a simple enough—if rare—virtue: stand up for a buddy; keep your promise to a mate (and I don't mean the "love," "honor," "obey" one... that's too easy); talk straight to the boss; show up for work when you're sick or heartbroken; suck up your sillyass resentment and treat that customer humanly. Flockin' civilians might try some of that stuff, by the way. Heroism, howsomever, is a *little* more complicated though there's still nothing inherently *martial* about it: guy jumps in the icewater to fish out the stewardess from 14th Street Bridge crash; firemen and cops in the ruins of Trade Towers. Valor, though, takes a soldier: guy who hunches over to lug that service rifle forward into the darkness... and his bud the medic who right beside him totes the aidbag. Close with the enemy. Joe Rosenthal didn't do that, Lord love him. Neither did that overweight, hirsute phony Hemingway. Soldiers don't talk about "heroes" or "heroism." "Heroism" is the key word for the *lowest* of the combat decorations. The Bronze Star, for instance, requires "Valor"; the Silver Star "Gallantry"; the Medal of Honor "Intrepidity." "Uncommon valor," (they say) Nimitz said, "was the common virtue." We think somehow we can participate in that aura, share that nimbus with those guys by mooing over monuments (like the Black Wall on the Mall or Eighth and I) and making movies. Want to "honor" the guys who died, who die for you? Live a life of labor and joy and spirit. You'll find that a handful, citizen.

Well, we know already how this one's gonna come out. 23 February 1945. Holland M. "Howlin' Mad" Smith throws three Marine divisions at four miles of volcanic soot defended by Japanese three-star Tagadimi Kuribayashi (variously spelt). The Marines splash ashore and stumble up a mountain, *the* mountain on the south end of the island where first one platoon plants one flag, then a second platoon another, hence the plural "Flags" in the film title, I'm guessing. Both moments get photographed and both details identified. For posterity. Then forgot. Posterity never knows squat. Guys in the fight don't care about posterity; for them, the flag up there means they're nearer to closing out the battle and debarking that scab on the Pacific. Photograph of the six guys raising the *second* flag, though, makes it back to Dee-troit where cynical, cee-gar-chomping suits have discovered there's no money left to pay for the rest of the war. To Clint's credit, he

does allow these agents of the Republic a modicum (Latin for “not flockin’ much”) of dignity where to lodge, suggesting that in the end the money-changers are decently motivated and that War is—like, whoa!—complicated and us dumbos should appreciate logistics and finance and administration.

The backroom guys determine to exploit the “boys” from the flag-raising for fund-raising (Sadly for Clint, this soldiers vs. folks back home stuff has been done *before* ...and better: *Kiss Them for Me* with Cary Grant and Jayne—whoa!—Mansfield; *The Outsider* starring Tony Curtis, painted with shoepolish to look Pima; *Sergeant York* with Gary Cooper, which see) and so begins a second Calvary for the three survivors of the scene atop Mount Suribachi: Corpsman John Bradley (Ryan Philippe, temporarily shedding his prettyboy halo to look plain old vanilla American if briefly; René Gagnon—variously pronounced and played by Jesse Bradford—who apparently was a bit of a hustler and never quite translated his moment into civilian security, dying as a janitor *sommeres* you never heard of in New Hampshire; Ira Hamilton Hayes, the “chief” as dumbo racist idiot racist civilians did I say racist? backhomers call half from misguided affection, half from loutish ignorance the former—and soon to be again—reservation Indian who—was he headed this way before this durance in combat?—can never forget his buds who didn’t make it off the island (they buried the guys right there) and can never forgive himself because he *does* make it off.

So what’s the message? Civilians send these guys out in the name of the Common Weal to kill or be killed (or both) for their sake. Yet when they come back, after a brief flurry of adulation, the busy commerce of the Republic finds no time, no place for these guys *unless* they forget or suppress what they’ve done at the Nation’s behest. Gagnon dies pushing a broom; Hayes in a pigsty. Doc only makes it, as they remind us several times, because “he never talks about it.”

Though it’s not that good as a movie, *Flags* is um, er... *useful* as a um, er... *document*. It’s filmed through some kind of filter that leaches from the battle scenes most of their color, bathes them in a sepia wash that seems to suggest the fog of memory swirling around these kids. Likewise, many of the scenes Clint orchestrates mirror actual photos from the battle and subsequent: the tying of the flag to that hunk of pipe; the plaster of Paris mockup of the mountain; the overcoat Gagnon wears to the Eighth and I inauguration. Adam Beach (who plays Hayes, with just the right level of repressed fire, if you ask me, the real star of this thing, its tragic “hero,” to use the word in its other acceptation) and Bradford (Gagnon) are dead ringers for the real guys. Clint folds the tale between a seizure that strikes the now-elderly Bradley (“Where is he?”) and his (temporary) recovery in a hospital bed while his son looks on (he’s the “he”), using voiceover (always risky) and intercutting interviews with what look like real veterans of the battle (the ones who can’t act...another attribute of the soldier) and narrative/analysis/message (in case you couldn’t figure it out, you dummy) by an actor playing Rosenthal, who checked out this year and who, always ill at ease with *his* notoriety in the affair, probably said all that need be said: “I took the photograph. The Marines took the hill.”

