The Story of G.I. Joe

By Amy Dunkleberger

Like the soldiers of Company C it so lovingly depicts, "The Story of G.I. Joe" is a masterwork whose sum is far greater than its modest parts. For today's war movie aficionado, the 1945 film offers nothing flashy or aweinspiring. No big stars, no fancy special effects. No happy endings and no tragic lessons. None of the usual components of a great and epic tale. And yet its cinematic power is undeniable. It endures in spite of itself.

"The Story of G.I. Joe," like many contemporary World War II movies, began life in the Pictorial Branch of the Army's Public Relations Department and was designed to serve the war effort in a very specific way. The goal of the project, as explained to the film's independent producer, Lester Cowan, in 1943, was to spotlight the Army's infantry, just as earlier Hollywood films had celebrated the Navy and the Air Corps. Ultimately, however, G.I. Joe deviated from the typical World War II movie thanks to its literary source, the writings of renowned war correspondent and columnist Ernie Pyle.

Initially the Pulitzer-winning Pyle scoffed at Cowan's idea that his newly published book "Here Is Your War" (1943), a compilation of Pyle's columns detailing his time with the U.S. Army in North Africa, could be turned into a credible movie. Promising honesty and integrity, the persistent Cowan, however, eventually convinced Pyle to sign on to the project, then brought in a then-obscure New York writer named Arthur Miller to work with Pyle on the adaptation.

At Pyle's home in New Mexico, the two writers exchanged ideas on how the book could be turned into a screenplay. According to the playwright's autobiography, Miller agreed with Pyle that the combat unit as a whole, not any one soldier, should be the dramatic heart of the story. Miller and Pyle disagreed, however, on the movie's over-arching theme. Miller thought the unit should be emblematic of the war's overall moral imperative, while Pyle simply wanted to showcase the everyday bravery and grit of the foot soldier.

Pyle's vision finally won out, and after completing the first draft of the screenplay, Miller was replaced. Several



Burgess Meredith (left) as Ernie Pyle with two actors portraying war-weary soldiers .

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other writers, including Oscar-nominated Leopold Atlas, Guy Endore and Philip Stevenson, took turns hashing out the characters and expanding the storyline to include the exploits of Company C in Sicily, as depicted in Pyle's next book "Brave Men" (1944).

Cowan, meanwhile, went on the hunt for a director and unleashed his charm offensive on William Wellman, the much-lauded maker of "Wings" (1927), "A Star Is Born" (1937) and "The Ox Bow Incident" (1943). A former World War I flyer, Wellman vigorously rejected Cowan's job offer, as he felt that the infantry had a history of disrespecting fliers and belittling their wartime contributions. Cowan refused to take no for an answer, however, and after persuading Wellman to meet with Pyle in New Mexico, Pyle finally convinced Wellman to direct the picture.

Wellman's no-nonsense style proved ideal for "G.I. Joe." In harmony with Pyle, Wellman understood that the dramatic canvas of the film was not that particular war, fought for this or that cause, but war, plain and simple. Although Cowan initially tried to hire big-name actors for the lead roles, the final casting was appropriately low-key and modest. When cast as Lieutenant Walker, Robert Mitchum was a virtual unknown, while Burgess Meredith, playing Pyle, was known but hardly a star. The rest of the credited players – former boxer Freddie Steele, Wally Cassell, Jimmy Lloyd, Jack Reilly and Bill Murphy – were fresh-faced supporting actors, never destined for top billing.

Perhaps the most inspired, and bittersweet, bit of casting, however, was the inclusion of actual combat veterans as extras and bit players. In his autobiography, Wellman describes the soldiers as "kids, old kids. They had been through the African campaign, the Tunisian business, Sicily, Rome, and now were home but not for long. Next stop, South Pacific." In a motivational talk before filming began, Wellman beseeched the amateur actors to do the beloved Pyle proud and make "this the goddamnedest most honest picture that has ever been made about the doughfoot."

The war-weary soldiers coached the professional actors and helped re-create some of the very same battles they had recently fought overseas. The results are subtle but effective.

In contrast to today's hyper-realistic war movies, "G.I. Joe" seems genteel and almost corny. Even when compared to its grander World War II contemporaries, films like "Thirty Seconds over Tokyo" (1945) and Wellman's own "Thunder Birds" (1942), it stands out for its aesthetic simplicity and emotional veracity.

Following the chronology of the actual battles, the narrative is episodic and impressionistic. No attempt is made to build tension through dramatic manipulation. Instead the film tracks Pyle and a handful of soldiers as they move from battlefield to battlefield, telling their often heartbreaking stories in a series of vignettes. Appropriately Pyle serves as the narrative's connective tissue, commenting on the action with the grace of an admiring insider.

In presenting Pyle's vision, Wellman favored long shots over close-ups, and group shots over individual portraits. Cinematographer Russell Metty, best known for his work on "Spartacus" (1960), created sharp contrasts of black and white to highlight the bombed-out bleakness of the North African and Italian scenery. The film overflows with long shots of soldiers trudging across harsh land-scapes in every sort of inclement weather. Slowly paced scenes of the soldiers' everyday routines, their romances and yearnings, their dreams of home and their fears for the future are interspersed with action-packed battle recreations.

Except for one brief shot of a German POW, the face of the enemy is never shown, an obvious nod to Pyle's devotion to the American soldier, not to the conflict. Only the enemy's instruments of war, its planes, bombs and bullets, are seen. (For added reality, Wellman blended footage from John Huston's 1945 war documentary "San Pietro" into the Sicilian combat scenes.)

Wellman also emphasized the sounds of war – wet boots slogging through mud, the chattering of machine guns, a church bell ringing when struck by a sniper's bullet, the recording of a soldier's infant son, played obsessively on a broken phonograph -- as well as its unnerving silences. Save for the romantic theme song "Linda," used for poignant contrast, the background score by Oscarnominated Louis Applebaum and Ann Ronell, is spare and elegiac.

Wellman and Pyle's cinematic vision paid off critically if not financially. Lauded by reviewers, "The Story of G.I. Joe" landed on the "New York Times" and "Film Daily" "ten best" lists and received four Academy Award nominations, including one for Mitchum, the only Oscar nod of his long career.

Pyle and the soldier actors fared less well. After filming ended, the infantrymen shipped off to the Pacific and only a few lived to see the completed picture. Pyle himself died before the film's release, shot by a sniper on a Japanese island while hunkered next to some of his beloved doughboys. Still today, Pyle stands as the most-revered war correspondent of his time – perhaps of all time – and "The Story of G.I. Joe" still ranks as one of the finest war movies ever made.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

A native of Washington, D.C., Amy Dunkleberger earned a B.A. in English from Reed College and graduate degrees from New York University and the American Film Institute. She was a staff editor and writer for AFI's Catalog of Feature Films and published several educational books on the art of filmmaking and the plays of Arthur Miller. Currently she works as an administrative researcher at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' Margaret Herrick Library in Beverly Hills, California.