

# 1. Movies and Memorials

At the most basic level of shared content, prestige combat films—hereafter PCFs—tell stories of US soldiers fighting abroad in actual historical conflicts. (*United 93* [2006] and *Letters from Iwo Jima* [2006] are the exceptions.) Feature films about the American Civil War, which lack a foreign other, and fantasies of American forces at war with imagined enemies (for example the alien invaders of *Independence Day* [1996]) are excluded. Likewise excluded are movies that depict the US military in a fantastical context, such as *Rambo: First Blood, Part Two* (1985), which returns to Vietnam to rescue POWs and, in the words of John Rambo, “win this time,” and *Top Gun* (1986), which elides entirely the dire seriousness that would have attended a dogfight between American F-14s and Communist MiGs in the 1980s and instead celebrates winning, as Christian Appy aptly notes, “a fictional battle in an unknown place against a nameless enemy with no significant cause at stake.”<sup>1</sup> PCF narratives engage seriously with historical fact—in only a few cases by way of highly stylized storytelling—and insert the viewer, assumed to be an adult, into a complex context. As the director Oliver Stone said, hopefully, of *Platoon* (1986) two years after its release: “It became an antidote to *Top Gun* and *Rambo*.”<sup>2</sup>

This complex context, however, is limited in scope. Nearly every PCF represents the battlefield from the point of view of the individual soldier, frequently from the lowest rank: the grunt. Central characters in these films seldom rise above lieutenant (with leading roles in *Saving Private Ryan* [1998], *Band of Brothers* [2001], *We Were Soldiers* [2002], and *Green Zone* [2010] notable exceptions). The PCF is generally not about officers, and never about famous figures of military history—as, for example, were many war films made during the 1960s. Jay Winter has located this larger shift in war films post-1970 as one from “studies of conflict to studies of

combatants.”<sup>3</sup> To borrow the words of the military historian John C. McManus, the PCF typically strives to capture “the very essence of the infantryman’s decidedly personal war.”<sup>4</sup> As Stone said rather precisely of *Platoon*, “I did a white Infantry boy’s view of the war.”<sup>5</sup>

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial marked a radical departure from earlier war memorials in the nation’s capital. Kirk Savage characterizes the Wall, which is sunk below grade, as “almost literally [turning] the neoclassical memorial landscape [of the Lincoln, Washington, and other memorials] upside down.”<sup>6</sup> Many PCFs about Vietnam did the same, redirecting the heroic narratives of the combat film, as forged during and after World War II, toward the telling of a war story that, in the case of Vietnam, ends in failure and defeat, a deeply ambiguous outcome for a nation as accustomed to victory as the United States. As John Hellmann has noted, Vietnam marks “the disruption of the American story.”<sup>7</sup> Katherine Kinney adds, “Vietnam is the traumatic site which violates all images and assumptions of American identity.”<sup>8</sup> Or as Michael Herr put it in his 1977 Vietnam memoir, *Dispatches*—zeroing in on the sense of national shame with not a trace of sentimentality—“There’s nothing so embarrassing as when things go wrong in a war.”<sup>9</sup> Disruption, trauma, and shame are all manifest in most PCFs made after Vietnam—regardless of the war they depict. As David Kieran has argued, “The evolving and contested memory of the American War in Vietnam has shaped Americans’ commemoration of other events in ways that inform their understanding of themselves, the nation, and the global interests and obligations of the United States.”<sup>10</sup> The Hollywood war film was also shaped by the events and outcomes of the Vietnam War: the PCF, especially in its sonic dimensions, offers a rich space to explore how the experience of Vietnam has resonated across American memory.

And the memory these films build is explicitly national. The media scholars Karina Aveyard and Albert Moran have noted, “Watching a film is also about the people with whom the experience is shared, as well as the moment in time and the place in which it occurs.”<sup>11</sup> PCFs are parochial and often occasional: their assumed audience is American (with the exceptions of *Full Metal Jacket* [1987] and *The Thin Red Line* [1998], and perhaps British director Sam Mendes’s *Jarhead* [2005]). Hollywood’s commercially oriented address to a global audience is largely set aside in the PCF subgenre.

War memorials and PCFs alike recognize the sacrifices soldiers make for the nation. The experience of viewing these films—the time spent watching, especially when done collectively in a movie theater—becomes a constituent part of the viewer’s specifically American identity, somewhat like a journey to the Mall in Washington, DC. A majority of PCFs make room

for—spend valuable screen time on—explicitly memorializing sequences. Some, like *Hamburger Hill* (1987), *Saving Private Ryan*, and the Vietnam film *We Were Soldiers*, visit real memorials. *We Were Soldiers*, based closely on the battle of Ia Drang, ends at the Wall. Lieutenant Colonel Harold G. Moore—the officer in command at Ia Drang, played in the film by Mel Gibson—stands before the panel where the names of his soldiers killed in the battle are listed. Their names, familiar by now to the viewer as characters in the film, are shown and a title card pinpoints the location of the American dead at Ia Drang on the Wall, implicitly inviting the audience to go and stand in Moore's—and Gibson's—place. If they cannot, watching *We Were Soldiers* serves as a surrogate act of remembrance.

Other combat films memorialize on-screen the names of fallen soldiers who have yet to be remembered in stone in the nation's capital. The 2001 film *Black Hawk Down*—like *We Were Soldiers*, made before but released after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001—lists the names of the Army Rangers and members of Delta Force who died on a single day in 1993 in Mogadishu, Somalia. *Act of Valor*, a 2012 film starring actual Navy SEALs, closes with a dedication “to the following warriors of Naval Special Warfare who have made the ultimate sacrifice since 9/11.” Sixty names scroll upward while restrained, quiet music plays and an actual Navy SEAL—one of the leading actors in the film, a real soldier who plays a fictional soldier—exits into the sunset. All of the above films, like *Hamburger Hill* though with different motivations, aspire to being a kind of “cinematic headstone.”

Some war films go beyond listing names and add images of the fallen and those who survived. Clint Eastwood's *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006) tells the story of the six flag raisers in the iconic 1945 photo of Marines atop Mount Suribachi on the island of Iwo Jima. During the final credits, the names of the actors who played these men are listed beside photos of the actual men. The HBO limited series *Band of Brothers*, which recounts the combat service of a celebrated unit of paratroopers in Europe during World War II, includes actual veterans of the unit in documentary-style interviews at the start of almost every episode. With even greater impact, *Lone Survivor* (2013), an account of Operation Red Wings in the mountains of Afghanistan, closes with images of the nineteen Navy SEALs and Special Operations aviators who died on a single day in 2005. The images are personal, and in the context of a feature film, uncomfortably intimate.

Films incorporating images of actual soldiers and veterans intensify a common trope in Hollywood combat films reaching back to the beginnings of the genre: films such as *Battleground* (1949) and *To Hell and Back* (1955) enhance their closing credits with a visual roll call of the cast, one final

glimpse of each man in the film's story. Almost all of the combat films about Vietnam made in the 1980s incorporate this old war movie device, as do several later PCFs about other wars.<sup>12</sup> The visual roll call that ends *Platoon* left many Vietnam veterans in tears—a common human-interest story in local newspapers during the film's theatrical release. Other strategies for initiating reflection include didactic titles at the start or close, as well as stretches of reflective music, such as John Williams's "Hymn to the Fallen" in *Saving Private Ryan*.

Almost all of the above strategies for honoring individual fighting men stop the action narrative's forward motion—or put off the film's end—and force the audience to reflect, thereby opening a cinematic space where soldiers and veterans as embodiments of the nation are shown to be worthy of a memorializing moment's pause.

The action-adventure genre has dominated Hollywood's business model since the mid-1970s, around the time the PCF emerged. Indeed, the PCF—with its de rigueur inclusion of violent, frequently spectacular combat action—is without a doubt an action-adventure subgenre. But while standard commercial action films might set ever-higher box-office records, they typically earn low marks, if not utter contempt, from critics and seldom win anything but technical awards at the Oscars. PCFs, by contrast, manage to be both action films and critical successes judged worthy of major awards, recognition that buttresses the subgenre's claim to prestige. This book considers three winners of and seven nominees for the Academy Award for Best Picture, and five winners and five nominees for the Academy Award for Best Director. Four Oscar-nominated original scores are represented as well. Interestingly for this study, PCFs also often win in the sound categories. Six signature PCFs, each definitive for the subgenre in its period, won Best Sound Mixing Oscars: *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Platoon*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Black Hawk Down*, *The Hurt Locker* (2008). This startling pattern suggests the centrality of sound in post-Vietnam combat films. (Before 1977, only two war films won this award: *Patton* [1970] and *Twelve O'Clock High* [1949]). Best Sound Design Oscars—a more occasional award for the early decades of the subgenre—were won by *Saving Private Ryan*, *Letters from Iwo Jima*, *The Hurt Locker*, *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), and *American Sniper* (2014).

PCFs are typically special projects initiated by a director or a producer—less often a writer or actor—working anywhere in the commercial feature industry: inside or outside the studios, at any level of budget, and in the twenty-first century expanding into premium cable television. The cachet

of the creative artist behind a given film necessarily determines the scale of the project. This study finds extravagant and modest films talking to each other aesthetically in startling ways.

Most PCF makers are driven by a desire to represent American soldiers at war in a serious manner that contributes to the larger, ever-changing national conversation around soldiers and veterans. Indeed, evidence for such an effort on the part of producers and directors qualifies as a defining aspect of the subgenre, a crucial element in the process of how these films come to be made and their claims to importance. Preproduction pitches, press packs, publicity, and media discourses consistently present PCFs as more than mere movies. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* titled its review for *Courage Under Fire* (1996) "An Action Flick for Thinking People," aptly characterizing the intent behind PCFs on the whole.<sup>13</sup> Hong Kong action director John Woo was attracted to *Windtalkers* (2002) by the chance to make, as described in the film's press pack, "a character-driven, emotional action drama" that was, in Woo's words, "so emotional, a celebration of the human spirit . . . something different from a generic action film."<sup>14</sup> So, too, most all PCFs, even those offering a kind of negative image of the human spirit (such as *Full Metal Jacket*).

The PCF often springs from a sense of moral urgency, typically in response to veterans and their families. Jim Carabatsos's script for *Hamburger Hill* bounced around Hollywood for years before producer Marcia Nasatir took it up, in part because her son had fought in Vietnam. Nasatir engaged director John Irvin, a documentarian with experience in Vietnam, who noted, "All I can say is the film is a labor of love. It was made out of a great sense of compassion for the kids who fought there."<sup>15</sup> As Carabatsos noted when he was still trying to get *Hamburger Hill* made, "It's for the guys who were there, for their families. I'm hoping maybe some wife [of a veteran] will understand her husband a little better, or some kid will understand his father a little better."<sup>16</sup> *Three Kings's* (1999) writer and director, David O'Russell, was driven to make this Gulf War film by his sense for "veterans' mixed feelings about the end of the war."<sup>17</sup> Director Kathryn Bigelow and writer Mark Boal were motivated to make *The Hurt Locker* by a belief that the Iraq War had been underreported, and hoped to make what one journalist called "a character-based action movie [that] might give people of all political stripes a palpable understanding of life on the front lines."<sup>18</sup> When Bigelow won Best Director at the 2009 Academy Awards, she drew no attention to the moment as a historic first for a woman and instead dedicated the win to American soldiers, men and women, around the world, noting in closing, "May they come home safe." Her statement locates *The Hurt Locker* within historic discourses around the

PCF as a soldier-centered genre, although with the added dimension of a war film about a war still raging.

This rhetoric of moral urgency linked to action filmmaking dates to the earliest PCF to enter production: *Apocalypse Now*. (Finishing the film took so long that three other Vietnam films beat it to theaters.) Director Francis Ford Coppola pitched *Apocalypse Now* in this way to United Artists: "This is a high-quality action-adventure spectacle. . . . It's big and entertaining, mature and interesting."<sup>19</sup> In the press kit, Coppola articulated his goal "to put an audience through an experience—frightening but violent only in proportion with the idea being put across—that will hopefully change them in some small way."<sup>20</sup> And in his introduction for the printed program distributed at *Apocalypse Now*'s premiere showings in 70mm, Coppola stated, "It was my thought that if the American audience could look at the heart of what Vietnam was really like—what it looked like and felt like—then they would be only one small step away from putting it behind them."<sup>21</sup>

Coppola makes an astonishing claim for what a film can do in the public sphere: for him the experience of seeing *Apocalypse Now* could begin to heal the trauma of Vietnam. PCFs have mostly been exercises in catharsis and closure—an affective goal somewhat out of reach for twenty-first-century PCFs depicting ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Steven Spielberg articulated a similar goal for *Saving Private Ryan* in a prerelease interview: "This isn't the kind of movie you see and then go to a bistro and break bread talking about it—you have to go home and deal with it privately. I think the audience leaves the theater with a little bit of what the veterans left that war with, just a fraction."<sup>22</sup> A published collection of online posts about the film on the still-new website America Online suggests that *Saving Private Ryan* worked in much the way Spielberg desired. Posts excerpted in the book *"Now You Know": Reactions after Seeing Saving Private Ryan* (1999) provide insight into the serious work PCFs can do for some viewers in the space of commercial entertainment.

- "[Spielberg] didn't use the tricks of the trade for cheap entertainment, but to help us transcend what we know of our lives."
- "I have never exited a movie theater in my 70 years of viewing movies where you walked in silence, holding back personal tears as you remember the past."
- "I am proud not only that I wept openly many times during the movie, but that my teenage son (a very tough acting kid) said, 'Anyone who doesn't cry at this movie isn't normal.'"

- "I hated war to begin with, but this movie made me have even more contempt for combat. I really believe if it were feasible, that if everyone on the face of the earth today could see this movie, there would be no more wars."
- "Do not dismiss this enlightenment as insubstantial because it's inspired by cinema. . . . This is what cinema is meant to do."<sup>23</sup>

As part of their discourse of catharsis and closure, many PCFs have sparked public conversations going beyond the entertainment press. As one cultural critic noted in 1979, "America is debating itself again on the Vietnam War. One movie has triggered this debate: *The Deer Hunter*."<sup>24</sup> *American Sniper*, a film about the Iraq War made after the war had officially ended, followed much the same trajectory as *The Deer Hunter*, only in a new media environment. Endless discussions on cable news and the Internet turned *American Sniper* into an opportunity to re-prosecute the Iraq War—many analogous to discussions of the Vietnam War initiated by *The Deer Hunter*: both films present a white American warrior killing bloodthirsty foreign others. *Platoon* scored the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek* in articles about how the film presented Vietnam "as it really was." *Saving Private Ryan*, with dueling news magazine covers in the same week, elicited complementary media conversations: a pious discourse about the nation's debt to the so-called "Greatest Generation"; another about the effects of violence in film. It was generally seen as an appropriate use of graphic violence precisely because it served the purpose of educating viewers about the sacrifices of America's soldiers. Here, action-movie violence had a socially uplifting purpose. *Black Hawk Down*, opening in December 2001, emerged without intention as an interpretive football for the larger debate about how to proceed in the immediate post-9/11 era. Director Ridley Scott hoped *Black Hawk Down* would elicit a consideration of the dilemmas of intervention, a newly urgent topic.<sup>25</sup> Members of the group Act Now to Stop War and End Racism, profiled in the *Village Voice*, maintained that the film was "A conspiracy! A dangerous game of footsie between the Pentagon and Hollywood, created only to whet the country's appetite for more war." The article went on to note that this might have been the result of the protestors not having seen the film, which the paper read as "the ultimate FUBAR [World War II slang for "fucked up beyond all recognition," reintroduced to American audiences in *Saving Private Ryan*]. The viewer is more apt to leave the theater with a convincing impression that war is bad, war never works, and US troops should never be in Somalia again."<sup>26</sup> Conservative commentator Nicholas Kristof worried that *Black*



*Hawk Down* was “regrettably, a pretty good movie” that unfortunately taught “1. Nation-building is bloody, costly and futile,” and “2. Casualties are completely unacceptable in American military operations.”<sup>27</sup> Kristof feared that excessive caution in intervening abroad had created the conditions for 9/11. All these competing readings were served by the film’s ambiguous approach to combat and its depiction of an American debacle.

Discourses of authenticity are central to the PCF. Most all these films purport to take the viewer onto the modern battlefield, and their means of doing so have created genre-specific practices, such as preproduction boot camps for actors, and special on-set creative figures, such as military advisors, whether independent or connected to the Pentagon. The Department of Defense has long participated in Hollywood’s depiction of the military, and the PCF proves especially interesting in this regard. Unsurprisingly, many PCFs did not earn Pentagon approval—which can translate into access to military locations (bases), materiel (tanks, helicopters), and personnel (soldiers, pilots). But a good number of PCFs have won Pentagon support, suggesting—as Lawrence Suid has shown—that the US military understands that thematically complex combat films can serve their purposes as well as more one-dimensional movies—that, for example, *Black Hawk Down* or *Lone Survivor*, alike about failed missions, can be just as powerful cultural tools as a full-on fantasy like *Top Gun*.<sup>28</sup>

Another route toward prestige and authenticity involves foregrounding a film’s access to real soldiers and veterans. Historian Stephen Ambrose’s works of popular history, based on more than a thousand oral history interviews with veterans, fundamentally shaped Spielberg’s combat output about Americans fighting in World War II, which encompasses directing (*Saving Private Ryan*), coproducing (*Flags of Our Fathers*, *Letters from Iwo Jima*), and executive producing for cable television (*Band of Brothers*, *The Pacific* [2010]). Ambrose’s influence shows up quite literally in the scripts for *Saving Private Ryan*. Robert Rodat’s original script was a rough-and-ready adventure flick with a happy ending. By the final shooting script, Spielberg had infused the project with Ambrose’s view of the war, summed up in a prescriptive text laying out the intended larger interpretation of on-screen events: “We are watching the true miracle of D-Day taking place: when all the planning failed, when all of the calculations proved wrong, when the whole damn thing fell on its ass . . . it was the common soldier who made it work anyway. They seized the day in dribs and drabs, desperately improvising their way to victory in small rag-tag groups like this one.”<sup>29</sup> Ambrose, the film’s historical consultant, stated unequivocally



in the press book that, while the narrative about saving Private James Ryan was fiction, "The film catches what happened exactly. It is, without question, the most accurate and realistic depiction of war on screen that I have ever seen, not only in terms of the action, but the actors look, act, talk, walk, bitch, argue and love one another exactly as the GIs did in 1944."<sup>30</sup>

Late in his 1997 book *Citizen Soldiers*, Ambrose briefly mentions a group of recent former soldiers who befriended him during his junior high years in Whitewater, Wisconsin. He recalls their scarred bodies seen during shirts-and-skins games of basketball and overnight hunting trips where they told him his first war stories. Writing some fifty years later, Ambrose confessed, "I've been listening ever since. I thought then that these guys were giants. I still do."<sup>31</sup> Ambrose's personal interaction with and sense of awe for the men who, in his view, won World War II was transferred to the actors during the making of *Band of Brothers*. Individual actors corresponded or spoke on the phone with the men they were playing. On one occasion, three surviving members of Easy Company visited the set. The *New York Times* described the scene, where "young actors were being called by the veterans' names," as "a surreal high school reunion without the name tags: older and younger selves meeting and exchanging suspicious but affectionate glances." In line with Ambrose's perspective, one actor characterized *Band of Brothers* as "about a type of man that's no longer created."<sup>32</sup> The theme of generational obligation resounded in the comments of actor Donnie Wahlberg: "I can safely say I speak for 98% of the guys in the show—this role was a two-year payback to the veterans of World War II."<sup>33</sup> Here, performance in a PCF is discursively framed as a faithful act of memorialization attended to by the actors themselves in a state of proper reverence. Media discourse around subsequent PCFs picked up this theme. Meet-the-veterans experiences circulated in the press around *Black Hawk Down*, reportedly shaping individual performances—Tom Sizemore said of his character Lieutenant Colonel Danny McKnight, "He didn't run or duck for cover [during the raid] because he didn't want to show the men under him that he was afraid. So my character doesn't, either"<sup>34</sup>—and creating a climate where "the actors were extremely aware of the need for them to be true to the men they were representing on the big screen."<sup>35</sup> *We Were Soldiers* director Randall Wallace solemnized that film's effort to "be true" by organizing "a service at the Fort Benning chapel for the survivors of the Ia Drang battle and for the cast and crew who would tell their story" the day before shooting commenced.<sup>36</sup>

The PCF strategy of connecting with real soldiers moved on-screen in the twenty-first century. *Black Hawk Down* enjoyed extraordinary cooperation from the military—an investment in men and materiel unlikely to

have been available had the film gone into production just after instead of just before 9/11. Mark Bowden, author of the book *Black Hawk Down*, reported, “Most of the military stunts performed in the film, from flying choppers to roping Rangers, were performed by actual members of those army units—in some instances, soldiers who had fought in the battle [of Mogadishu] themselves.”<sup>37</sup> The practice of using active-duty soldiers or recent veterans who were actually in a depicted conflict intensified in subsequent PCFs about the Iraq War. Recon Marine Rudy Reyes plays himself in *Generation Kill* (2008). Iraq War veterans in generally nonspeaking roles surround star Matt Damon in *Green Zone*. Damon noted, “The whole point of these guys being here is that they show up and are who they really are. That’s not something that a group of actors, even with a long time to work, could pull off as well as a group of veterans.”<sup>38</sup> The four Iraq veterans cast in *Green Zone* “came aboard as actors—mostly background performers—but also served as unofficial military consultants.”<sup>39</sup> The quoted article framed the veterans’ opportunity to replay their military selves in a film as therapeutic. As noted, *Act of Valor* cast actual Navy SEALs in leading and supporting roles. The SEALs, credited by first names only, were effectively ordered to perform. Their rather limited dramatic range constantly reminds the viewer that these are not actors. But while they might lack skill as actors, actual military men do not bring established personas to their parts. This difference comes into focus late in *American Sniper*, when SEAL sniper Chris Kyle—played by Bradley Cooper—listens to a group of wounded veterans discuss their combat experiences. It’s hard to register Cooper as Kyle—and not a handsome movie star—in such a context.<sup>40</sup> *Lone Survivor* offers a strange case where a narrative of memorialization incorporates the cinematic sacrifice of the survivor who lived to tell the tale. Marcus Luttrell, the SEAL who wrote the book, appears several times in the film, moving through the story like a ghost, his presence legible for those who know Luttrell’s face from the photos in his book or from the media. He eats breakfast with the main characters—including actor Mark Wahlberg, who is playing Luttrell—early in the film and delivers his one line. He’s also present at the new-guy ceremony, a key formal transition in the narrative. And Luttrell is on the Chinook helicopter that is shot down with a single RPG (rocket-propelled grenade), an abrupt and emotional moment of loss in the story. The real Luttrell dies symbolically on film with the actors playing the men who died trying to save him in Afghanistan—men whose real faces are seen during the memorializing musical sequence at the film’s close. In the above cases, PCFs offer the viewer the opportunity to behold the actual bodies of military men in action or in symbolic performance.

The goal of authenticity also generally unifies PCFs' visual style. Unlike the enhanced modes of action-adventure cinema discussed by Lisa Purse in *Contemporary Action Cinema* (2011)—where spectators regularly accept and cheer acts of physical prowess only possible in the movies—the rules of the physical world remain in operation over the PCF, which has frequently been marketed under the fraught term *realistic*.<sup>41</sup> Several directors have self-consciously limited their visual vocabularies when making PCFs. Spielberg (as executive producer of *Band of Brothers*) and Sam Mendes (on *Jarhead*) both set aside the use of crane shots, keeping the camera at eye level, constraining the storytelling to a human point of view.<sup>42</sup> Low-budget PCFs of necessity stick to the ground. Action directors with strong visual styles have had difficulty meeting the authenticity demands of the PCF. Woo's *Windtalkers* was criticized for this. Said one critic, "His multicamera slo-mo balletics don't really conjure up the heat of battle; they conjure up other John Woo movies."<sup>43</sup>

The PCF trades on a supposedly invisible, "realistic" visual style—itself a historical construct that changes across the four-decade history of the subgenre. For example, twenty-first-century PCFs draw on multi-camera, handheld documentary film to make this claim. In *Platoon* it was enough to have mud splash on the lens during the opening credits, suggesting a visceral presence for the camera. The special effects arsenal that has increasingly defined Hollywood film over the last four decades is turned to specific ends in the PCF. Purse's discussion of *United 93* applies broadly to the subgenre: "The digital visual effects function as a solution to a number of practical challenges in order to help maintain the sense of cameras capturing events 'as they happen' in a naturalistic, realistic-looking environment. That is, digital imaging interventions allow the [film] to produce the illusion of photographic indexicality."<sup>44</sup> This use of digital effects works at various levels of scale, from simulations of the massed machines of war—breathtaking images of Allied armadas in the water off Iwo Jima in *Flags of Our Fathers* or in the air above Germany in *Red Tails* (2012)—to startlingly intimate moments where characters bleed to death before the viewer's eyes, depicting the effect of bullets on the human body at a graphic level that often leads to an R rather than PG-13 rating. (The sucking chest wound runs across the subgenre as a recurring, always increasingly graphic, bodily trope.) PCFs are, almost by definition, not intended for the twelve-to-seventeen-year-old action cinema demographic. Made for (hopefully) more reflective adults, in these films gravity works, flesh fails, and death matters.

Philip Drake has described the "peculiarities of Hollywood films as cultural goods," noting that the ticket price is the same for all films, and that product

differentiation works differently than with other goods. In the case of films during their theatrical release periods, the price of “admission might buy the social experience of cinemagoing rather than to see a particular film.”<sup>45</sup> PCFs offer an experience in the cinema that activates moviegoers’ sense of themselves as citizens—and, for some, as soldiers (real or prospective) and veterans. The social experience of seeing a PCF has often been profound and, again unusual for action films, has at times cut across the four “quads” that define Hollywood marketing: male/female, under twenty-five/over twenty-five. The multigenerational family pictured in the opening and closing of *Saving Private Ryan* directly mirrors the desired audience for the film itself. (Chapter 3 of this book considers how this priority has shaped PCF dialogue, often moderating crude language presumably so as not to alienate women or older audiences.) Still, PCFs reach out to young men in particular.

Charles Acland writes, “Motion pictures have a life-cycle through which their cultural and economic impact rises and falls” made up of the “range of media forms through which a cultural text travels.”<sup>46</sup> Many PCFs have had long lives, shaping how generations of young men think about war and soldiering. The subgenre’s impact was amplified by the arrival of the VCR in the 1980s. Iraq War veteran Colby Buzzell notes in his 2005 memoir *My War*, “[My generation] grew up watching [movies like *Apocalypse Now*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Platoon*, *Hamburger Hill*, and *Black Hawk Down*] over and over again and can recite word for word countless lines from each, and most of us were probably here in the Army because we watched these movies one too many times.”<sup>47</sup> The PCF is a part of popular military culture, even as the subgenre’s makers continually adjust its representation of the military. The Recon Marines profiled in the 2004 book *Generation Kill* screened *Black Hawk Down* together before deployment and quote to each other from *Platoon*.<sup>48</sup> In his 2003 memoir *Jarhead*, Gulf War veteran Anthony Swofford recalls the pre-deployment “Vietnam War Film Fest” he shared with his Marine buddies and offers a warning of sorts about the various ways these films might be interpreted:

There is talk that many Vietnam films are antiwar, that the message is war is inhumane and look what happens when you train young American men to fight and kill, they turn their fighting and killing everywhere, they ignore their targets and desecrate the entire country, shooting fully automatic, forgetting they were trained to aim. But actually, Vietnam war films are all pro-war, no matter what the supposed message, what Kubrick or Coppola or Stone intended. Mr. and Mrs. Johnson in Omaha or San Francisco or Manhattan will watch the

films and weep and decide once and for all that war is inhumane and terrible, and they will tell their friends at church and their family this, but Corporal Johnson at Camp Pendleton and Sergeant Johnson at Travis Air Force Base and Seaman Johnson at Coronado Naval Stations and Spec 4 Johnson at Fort Bragg and Lance Corporal Swofford at Twentynine Palms Marine Corps Base watch the same films and are excited by them, because the magic brutality of the films celebrates the terrible and despicable beauty of their fighting skills. Fight, rape, war, pillage, burn. Filmic images of death and carnage are pornography for the military man; with film you are stroking his cock, tickling his balls with the pink feather of history, getting him ready for his real First Fuck. It doesn't matter how many Mr. and Mrs. Johnsons are antiwar—the actual killers who know how to use the weapons are not.<sup>49</sup>

Swofford reminds us of the diversity of ways a single film might be seen, and the inherent ambiguity in anything we might call a “serious” war film.

In his 2008 book *War and Film*, James Chapman usefully distinguishes didactic war films, which leave no room for contested readings, from others that are more open to varied readings and responses.<sup>50</sup> PCFs are of the latter type, and music, as will be shown, plays a large role in securing such openness. Still, Chapman warns that either type of war film can be seen as part of what Graham Dawson calls the “pleasure culture of war.”<sup>51</sup> Make no mistake, the PCF—a genre oriented in almost every individual case toward a broad commercial market—sits squarely within the pleasure culture of war. Again, music—even if played in response to tragic, meaningless battlefield losses—is part of the pleasure of that culture.

#### THE FOUR CYCLES OF THE PRESTIGE COMBAT FILM

The PCF subgenre unfolded in four topical cycles of varying intensity and duration, some overlapping chronologically. Three of these cycles—depicting World War II, Vietnam, and US wars of the 1990s—were retrospective in nature, looking back at conflicts that were over, typifying what the historical film scholar Jonathan Stubbs has called “small-scale, historically specific film cycles which emerge from particular commercial contexts and are shaped by larger cultural forces.”<sup>52</sup> The fourth PCF cycle, depicting US wars in the Middle East in the twenty-first century while those wars were ongoing, functions somewhat differently. This especially fraught cycle required filmmakers to respond to a deeply divided national mood and to represent profound changes in the nature and scope of soldiering. How each cycle relates to the figure of the soldier and the veteran is sketched in brief below. Understanding these four cycles proves important, as expressive and

structural sonic strategies discussed in later chapters will often be situated as either typical of a given cycle or as carrying across cycles.

The Vietnam cycle is foundational to all PCFs that follow. Initiated on the production end by *Apocalypse Now*, these ten films collectively defined the PCF as both an exciting action-driven genre with combat scenes and a serious meditation on soldiers and veterans. With its primary focus on the depiction of American soldiers in the thick of combat, the Vietnam PCF embraced both epic, expensive, elite moviemaking and modestly budgeted but thematically earnest films. The subgenre was effectively open to all levels of budget from the start, and most films reached out quite directly to the veteran audience, often in dedicatory titles. While two signature Vietnam PCFs were made by top directors able to set their own course (Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*), most were either low-budget independent productions (*Go Tell the Spartans* [1978], *84 Charlie MoPic* [1989], *Hamburger Hill*) or foreign-financed films the Hollywood studios initially would not touch (*The Boys in Company C* [1978], *The Deer Hunter*, *Platoon*).<sup>53</sup> Only after the success of *Platoon* did one major studio—Columbia—back a final pair of Vietnam PCFs: Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989, made on a grand scale as a follow-up to the decidedly smaller *Platoon*) and Brian De Palma's *Casualties of War* (1989, facilitated by the director's recent hit *The Untouchables* [1987] and the willingness of new Columbia studio president Dawn Steel to fund, in her words, "some movies we have a passion for, respect for").<sup>54</sup> Most all the makers of these films were either directly connected to the Vietnam War—more than a few served in or reported on the war—or lived through the Vietnam era as adults. The 1980s cycle almost completely exhausted Hollywood's interest in Vietnam. Only *We Were Soldiers* has been made since 1989.

The early 1990s saw a lull in PCF production even as US military engagements abroad created new potential subjects for combat films. Hollywood eventually produced three films (*Courage Under Fire*, *Three Kings*, *Jarhead*) about the Gulf War—the 1990–91 mission, known as Operation Desert Storm, to remove the Iraqi army under Saddam Hussein from Kuwait—and one film (*Black Hawk Down*) about the 1993 mission to Somalia, which came to grief on the streets of Mogadishu. The Gulf War films form an odd, chronologically scattered trio that do not cohere beyond their similar historical setting. These films do not reference each other, nor do they explore the high-tech, mediatized nature of the Gulf War. Instead, each takes up questions closer to the ground and more germane to the issues of soldiers and veterans at the heart of the PCF. *Courage Under*

*Fire*—written by Vietnam veteran Patrick Sheane Duncan, writer-director of *84 Charlie MoPic*—is not in the slightest about the Gulf War. Instead, the film, which one critic described as “essentially Vietnam movie maneuvers in sand-colored fatigues,” offers familiar Vietnam tropes: downed choppers, an unseen enemy advancing on an isolated position in the night, the fragging of officers, incidents of friendly fire, and cover ups by the military.<sup>55</sup> The Pentagon refused to cooperate with the production on the grounds that the mutiny at the center of the plot would be “astonishing behavior for the all-volunteer, post-Vietnam Army,” further evidence that the film is, in fact, about the Vietnam-era draftee army.<sup>56</sup> The original *Three Kings* screenplay, titled *Spoils of War*, was a straight-ahead action flick, a revenge plot modeled on *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948).<sup>57</sup> As the *New York Times* reported, in his revisions “the more politically motivated [writer and director David O. Russell] took aim at the cultural stew that spilled American consumer goods all over the desert while everybody tried to determine the point of the war. To him the point of the movie was a failure by the United States to support large segments of the Iraqi population.”<sup>58</sup> Using the PCF to critique specific military and foreign policies has been a very rare approach: the only later film to do so pointedly is director Paul Greengrass’s *Green Zone*. The third Gulf War PCF was made during the Iraq War. Director Sam Mendes’s 2005 film *Jarhead* is based on veteran Anthony Swofford’s best-selling memoir from 2003: both were out of phase with unfolding history. By the time Swofford’s tale was told in print and on film, it was a period piece. The film’s characters show intense frustration that they never get to experience real combat in the hundred-hour Gulf War, and audiences were expected to process this dilemma while (perhaps) following intense and bloody battles in the Iraq War, at its height when *Jarhead* was released to middling business. And as time passes, *Jarhead* feels more and more out of sync. Its plot turns on a pair of scout snipers who never take a shot. *American Sniper* tells the story of a Navy SEAL sniper with the most confirmed kills in American military history—a distinction facilitated by ten years of sustained combat in Iraq. Still, *Jarhead* offers a useful contrast to other post-9/11 depictions of the all-volunteer military. The soldiers in *Jarhead* are misfits, described by an officer as “some weird motherfuckers.” This jars strongly against twenty-first-century trends to present contemporary soldiers in the all-volunteer force as calm, competent professionals.

Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan* and Terrence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line* were released within months of each other in 1998 and together launched a long-running cycle of World War II films. (Curiously, the



American soldier's experience in World War I has gone entirely unrepresented in post-Vietnam cinema.) As Michael Hammond has pointed out, both are "special cases. . . . prestige projects the green light for which was made possible only through the reputation of the film-makers themselves."<sup>59</sup> Both continue, on much less controversial ground, the exceptional practice of *Apocalypse Now*, described by Walter Murch as "a personal film, despite the large budget and the vast canvas of the subject."<sup>60</sup> In the wake of these 1998 entries, the topic of World War II attracted directors Clint Eastwood (*Flags of Our Fathers*, *Letters from Iwo Jima*), John Woo (*Windtalkers*), and Spike Lee (*Miracle at St. Anna* [2008]), as well as producer George Lucas (*Red Tails*) to the PCF. The final three titles, in different ways and to shared failure at the box office, endeavored to insert Native American and African American veterans' stories into Hollywood narratives of World War II, suggesting how PCFs might address the unspoken whiteness informing most films in this cycle. (The interracial dynamics of the Vietnam and Gulf War cycles prove an important aspect of chapter 4's discussion of popular music in the PCF.) The decidedly noncommercial *Letters from Iwo Jima*, perhaps the only entirely foreign-language film ever made by a major Hollywood director and studio, is among the most remarkable members of the subgenre—a testament to the ability of major auteurs to create unusually challenging work within the studio system when the topic is American soldiers and veterans. *Letters from Iwo Jima* complicates the memory of World War II for American audiences by drawing the viewer into the varied experiences of Japanese soldiers.

*Saving Private Ryan* spawned two limited series on HBO—*Band of Brothers* and *The Pacific*—both executive produced on a cinematic scale by Spielberg and actor Tom Hanks, their shared star personas shaped fundamentally by *Saving Private Ryan*'s stature as a cultural event. These limited series—together with the 2008 HBO series *Generation Kill*, about the 2003 invasion of Iraq—share much in the way of narrative, formal, and musical tropes with the feature films at the core of this study. Given the way most Americans watch new (and old) movies in the twenty-first century—at home on a television or on some sort of computer screen—inclusion of these prestige combat cable series in this study makes sense.

As noted above, *Saving Private Ryan*, like *Three Kings*, began as a standard action script that was substantially rewritten by the director into a more ambiguous film. The addition of the old Ryan in the framing scenes set in the present brought this World War II narrative into line with the veteran-centered Vietnam cycle, with the difference that the burden is generational. Indeed, almost the entire World War II cycle is driven by an

intergenerational dynamic, with mostly baby-boomer filmmakers saluting their fathers. All the World War II PCFs—with the notable exceptions of *The Thin Red Line* and *Letters from Iwo Jima*—more or less answer the perennial question “Grandpa, what did you do in the war?” in a complex but ultimately affirmative manner. The American men who fought are revealed as gentle souls, intent on staying alive and supporting their buddies in the hope of making it back home. These are Ambrose’s citizen soldiers who long for peace—not the conflicted draftees of Vietnam, nor the skilled professionals of the Gulf and Iraq War films.<sup>61</sup>

Films made before but released after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, fall into an uneasy reception context. Indeed, the Hollywood studios showed some trepidation about war films in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. For example HBO abruptly discontinued its huge promotional campaign for *Band of Brothers*, the premiere episode of which had aired on September 9. But a noticeable spike in patriotism encouraged accelerated an release of *Black Hawk Down* (from March 2002 to December 2001) and *We Were Soldiers* (from summer to March 2002). Of the latter, Paramount chairwoman Sherry Lansing said, “It’s about the sacrifices that soldiers make so the rest of us can be safe. I think we’re ready for that at any time, but now it’s particularly relevant.”<sup>62</sup> *Black Hawk Down*, presenting urban combat in the Middle East, would prove an important model for the fourth PCF cycle’s depiction of twenty-first-century American soldiers in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere across the globe.

The so-called Global War on Terror (or GWOT), initiated in no uncertain terms by President George W. Bush shortly after 9/11, created new challenges for filmmakers. Unlike the cinematic reaction to Vietnam, which lagged behind the prosecution of the war at a safe distance, Hollywood filmmakers responded to the GWOT while the conflict was going on, in spite of the fact that American audiences showed little to no interest in films about the war—or, by some accounts, in the ongoing war itself. Still, the GWOT PCF beckoned, creating the possibility of making what director Kathryn Bigelow called the “Holy Grail of filmmaking,” defined by the *Los Angeles Times* as “an entertaining genre movie that opens a window into a current event.”<sup>63</sup>

Two successive subcycles of GWOT PCFs dealt differently with the war, with contrasting results at the box office and with the critics. The first subcycle, from 2006 to about 2010, told tales of American military frustration and was marked by tremendous generic innovation and pervasive commercial failure. In a passing 2008 reference, *Variety* christened these films a “toxic genre.”<sup>64</sup> The second subcycle, turning toward the elite Navy SEALs

in the early 2010s, proved more successful commercially while also generating controversy and conversation in the culture at large.

With the exception of the special case of *United 93*, most combat filmmakers in the first GWOT cycle gravitated to the conventional ground war in Iraq, which proved most amenable to existing conventions of the combat film. *Black Hawk Down* provided a model to follow or work against for PCFs set in the urban Middle East such as *Green Zone*, *The Kingdom* (2007), *Redacted* (2007), *Generation Kill*, and *The Hurt Locker*. (The earliest Iraq War combat film, director Sidney J. Furie's independently produced, Canadian-financed *American Soldiers* [2005], was never picked up for theatrical release in the United States but is available on DVD. Furie directed *The Boys in Company C*, the first of the Vietnam PCFs to be released.)

*Green Zone*, *The Kingdom*, and *Redacted* typify the twenty-first-century PCF as a generic hybrid. Paul Greengrass's *Green Zone* explores the search for weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) in post-invasion Iraq by way of a Jason Bourne-style "propulsive, paranoid conspiracy thriller" (as characterized by Universal cochair Donna Langley).<sup>65</sup> Peter Berg's *The Kingdom* crosses the combat genre with the procedural, an ascendant genre in American television at the time, to tell a fictional story of FBI investigators who travel to Saudi Arabia to investigate a massive terrorist bombing of a compound housing American civilian oil company workers. *Green Zone* and *The Kingdom* alike followed *Black Hawk Down*'s innovative continuous-action style that would come to mark much of action cinema in the twenty-first century. The highly controversial *Redacted* by writer-director Brian De Palma—shot in Jordan in two and a half weeks on high-definition video for \$5 million and released on just fifteen screens in the United States despite De Palma winning the Silver Lion for best director at the Venice Film Festival—uses a collage of documentary film styles to tell a tale of American soldiers raping and murdering Iraqi civilians. Both De Palma's PCFs—*Redacted* and *Casualties of War*—reveal a director using the feature film to highlight the potential of American fighting men to perpetrate atrocities, specifically the rape and murder of young women. The very different financing for these two thematically similar films sheds light on the director-driven nature of the subgenre and the varying industrial potential for the PCF to cast "structured doubt on the innocence of American soldiers," a potentially disturbing and unusual extension of the subgenre's expressive remit.<sup>66</sup>

The GWOT dramatically enlarged the potential PCF cast of characters, as intelligence services and domestic agencies, even perhaps civilians, were all involved in the fight. As noted, *The Kingdom* centers on FBI investiga-

tors. *United 93* dramatizes the difficult communications situation between civilian air traffic control and military command on September 11. Indeed, *United 93* sits on the edge of the subgenre, just as the actions of the crew and passengers on United flight 93 have been absorbed into narratives of the GWOT. (Having learned of successful attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, they resisted their hijackers and crashed the plane outside Shanksville, Pennsylvania.) On the first anniversary of 9/11, General Tommy Franks called the events on that plane “the first battle on terrorism.”<sup>67</sup> As such, *United 93* shares with other PCFs the urge to use commercial cinema to memorialize those who lost their lives in service to the nation by re-creating scenes of combat, offering moviegoers the chance to leverage a movie ticket as an act of patriotic remembrance and sympathetic understanding extended toward America’s soldiers, in this unique case civilians anointed as such after the fact.

Among PCFs of any cycle, *In the Valley of Elah* (2007) includes the least amount of combat action. Written and directed by Paul Haggis, it is based on the true story of an Army unit deployed to Iraq who, on their return to the United States, murdered a soldier among their number, then attempted to conceal the crime by chopping his body into pieces and burning the remains.<sup>68</sup> Told through the murdered soldier’s veteran father’s search for the truth, the procedural-like narrative contains a second, combat-centered line. The father hires a computer tech to recover the video and photo files on his son’s damaged cell phone. The restored files give the father (and the viewer) glimpses of combat in Iraq, including the abuse of prisoners, and children killed by American soldiers driving without stopping so as to avoid roadside bombs and ambushes. The conceit of authenticity here—as in *84 Charlie MoPic* and *Redacted*—rests on the notion of found footage. The cultural work of the PCF centers on bringing home the experience of combat in a given war. *In the Valley of Elah*, without a doubt, does this—to troubling ends. The film closes with the image of an American flag flown upside down, a signal of existential distress.

The standout film in the first GWOT cycle, *The Hurt Locker*, centers on explosive ordnance demolition (EOD) teams tasked with defusing the signature weapon of the Iraq War: improvised explosive devices (IEDs). It was highly praised by critics as an innovative action film cutting to the heart of the unique nature of the Iraq War, its central character capturing the first GWOT subcycle’s ambivalence toward the contemporary soldier. Staff Sergeant Will James, played by Jeremy Renner, is a skilled EOD tech tasked with defusing one IED after another, with no end in sight. His emotional opacity and evident satisfaction with this life—James confesses it has

become the only thing he loves—indirectly raises uncomfortable questions about the US military and militarism. The film's epigraph—"The rush of battle is often a potent and lethal addiction, for war is a drug"—comes close to articulating this theme in no uncertain terms. This combat *mise-en-scène* found few willing moviegoers. For all its critical acclaim, *The Hurt Locker* remains the lowest-grossing Best Picture winner in history. Renewal of the PCF in the era of the GWOT required drafting a different professional soldier to embody the ongoing battle in more conventionally heroic and cinematic ways.

The second GWOT cycle kicked off in 2012 with *Act of Valor*, an innovative PCF starring actual Navy SEALs. In his foreword to the novelization of *Act of Valor*, the best-selling military thriller author Tom Clancy states, "Navy SEALs are Olympic athletes that kill people for a living."<sup>69</sup> In other words, the SEALs are natural and authentic action movie stars. Their ascendance in Hollywood combat films reflects a recalibration of PCF narratives to match the nature of the GWOT as prosecuted by the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), which unites Special Forces from all branches of the military and conducts operations across the globe via a mix of high-tech drone warfare and smash-and-grab raids.<sup>70</sup> The journalist Peter Bergen notes, "In the decade after 9/11, JSOC mushroomed from a force of eighteen hundred to four thousand, becoming a small army within the military."<sup>71</sup> With the end of conventional force commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan, JSOC missions continue without abatement. The second GWOT subcycle has drafted the SEALs as Hollywood stand-ins for the entire US military. And while drawing directly on earlier, more ambiguous PCFs about American soldiers overseas, the SEAL Team PCFs have surely contributed to what one critic of the military calls "the semimythic Special Operations Command," which promotes the efficacy of "heavily publicized 'secret' warriors" pursuing high-value targets.<sup>72</sup>

*Black Hawk Down*, centering on a combined mission involving two elite units—Army Rangers and Delta Force—serves as a clear precursor to the SEAL Team cycle. One youthful Ranger even counsels his men, "We're elite—let's act like it," a line unlikely to be heard spoken by one of the seasoned, laconic warriors in the SEAL GWOT cycle. One critic described this sort of soldier as "a world-class expert—superbly trained, heedlessly brave, a figure set very much apart from the rest of us," and by extension fundamentally different from draftees of Vietnam and the citizen soldiers of World War II.<sup>73</sup> Here, Hollywood found heroic, real-life figures whose "sheer professionalism" could obviate any narrative of military failure.<sup>74</sup>

The soldier as professional—cool, controlled, competent—dominates the depiction of SEALs. *Act of Valor* initiates this characterization perhaps of necessity: using real SEALs as leading men limited the emotional range of the characters; music steps in and does heavy work, as shown here in subsequent chapters. The SEALs enter *Zero Dark Thirty* late in the film, after CIA analysts have found Osama bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Passion and sacrifice are on the side of the analysts, whom Bigelow described as "soldiers of a different type, right? And they're not in uniform, and they're not on the front lines, but they're warriors, I guess, is the word I'd use."<sup>75</sup> The expanded cast of *Zero Dark Thirty* expresses what William M. Arkin has called "our wholly transformed hybrid of a military."<sup>76</sup> The SEALs who execute the night mission to kill bin Laden in the film's final reels show minimal emotion.<sup>77</sup>

*Lone Survivor* and *American Sniper*, alike based on memoirs by Navy SEALs, of necessity invest in the emotional lives of the professional warriors at their center. Both films do this while simultaneously departing significantly from the thematic thrust of their respective sources. Neither film adopts the tone of the books, which are, in large part, conservative diatribes against vaguely defined liberals in government and the media. While clearly calibrated to not alienate supporters of the GWOT—and thereby more conservative in their politics than most PCFs—the SEAL Team cycle is sufficiently nuanced to allow resistant readings while advancing the fundamental underlying theme of almost all PCFs: the sacrifice of soldiers for the nation memorialized in a narrative feature film.<sup>78</sup> As Clancy's foreword to *Act of Valor* the novel plainly states, "We have an obligation to honor the SEALs and their families."<sup>79</sup> Sitting through any of these PCFs—except perhaps *Zero Dark Thirty*, which casts the SEALs in walk-on parts—qualifies as meeting such an obligation, a rather low standard but of a piece with the distant relationship between the military and most American citizens in the era of the all-volunteer force.<sup>80</sup> The SEAL Team subcycle, on the whole very successful at the box office, effectively transferred the memorializing functions of the Vietnam and World War II PCFs to the very different context of the GWOT.

While action films, Hollywood's bread and butter since the late 1970s, are typically not morally complex, prestige combat films are, or aim to be. The entire subgenre can be grouped under a Hollywood oxymoron: ambiguous action movies. This flows in part from their story context and content. As the critic Andrew Sarris noted, "The war film is the one cinematic genre that can exploit massively homicidal violence while professing to make a

moral statement about it.”<sup>81</sup> But forged as the subgenre was in a delayed cinematic reaction to Vietnam, the PCF can push such “moral statements” into new territory, where the fact of American defeat must be accounted for and where the actions of the US government and military can be opened for debate. However, as the above survey shows, most PCFs dwell on the soldier and the veteran, filtering any larger questions through the experiences of individual characters with whom the movie audience can identify, and allowing viewers to selectively read these films. Young men can simply read them as pro-war.

The PCF demonstrates how, in the combat film scholar Jeanine Basinger’s words, “different wars inspire different genres.” Her terse formula “genre is alive” finds support again and again in the history of the PCF.<sup>82</sup> The remainder of this book shows how the PCF has been especially “alive” in the domains of music and sound, where innovative expressive tropes from the 1980s Vietnam cycle find different meanings in the World War II, Gulf War, and GWOT cycles. Along the way, questions of patriotism (love of country) and humanism (appreciation for the value of all human life, including the enemy) are constantly under negotiation. The ambiguous nature of the PCF opens a perhaps unlikely commercial space for these concepts to be explored. Mikkel Bruun Zangenberg, discussing Eastwood’s *Iwo Jima* films, notes how “the Western umbrella terms ‘humanism’ and ‘patriotism’ . . . do not denote sharply delimited fields of meaning” but are instead “derived from a huge, if fuzzy, culturally saturated terrain of ideas, notions, beliefs, norms, and values.” Zangenberg expresses concern that in Eastwood’s two films these terms are only resolved in ambiguity. In fact, the capacity for ambiguity constitutes the aesthetic advantage of the PCF. As will be shown, music—the least prescriptive of the arts in its meanings—often powerfully serves such ambiguous ends. Still, as Zangenberg notes, there is for war films a “*strong, hermeneutical desire*, the desire that warfare not be meaningless, absurd, and futile.”<sup>83</sup> Meeting this desire with *some* positive response—however equivocal—underpins the PCF in every instance (except, perhaps, for Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket*).

Most of the time, of course, the response sought by PCFs is one of thankfulness for the sacrifice of the fallen, the posture proper to ritual acts of memorialization. To be surprised at this is naive, but it is hoped that the analysis of PCFs to follow shows how equivocal and unsure these films have been, at times, about such conclusions. I take issue with Vibeke Schou Tjalve’s assessment that “though war politics after Vietnam has done a better job at welcoming veterans, its ability to come to terms with war—to mourn, reflect, and regret it—has not improved. A genuine public language



of the tragic nature of all warfare remains absent."<sup>84</sup> In the realm of the PCF, and especially on the soundtrack, a new, modern language of the tragic nature of war can be heard. But, to reiterate, that language is relentlessly personal—it sounds at the level of the individual. And here, a change in military policy toward individual soldiers helps bring the nature of the PCF as a therapeutic subgenre into focus.

The poster tagline for *Black Hawk Down* reads, "Leave No Man Behind." A track on composer Hans Zimmer's score album for the film identifies a musical theme with the phrase. The military imperative to "leave no one behind" on the battlefield is of relatively recent vintage. Beth Bailey's *America's Army* (2009), a history of the all-volunteer force, locates formal articulation of "leave no man behind" in the so-called "warrior ethos," a rebranding of the post-9/11 Army that put the phrase "I will never leave a fallen comrade" into the Army Soldier's Creed as spoken ritualistically and as emblemized on special dog tags.<sup>85</sup> Leonard Wong traces the policy to Vietnam, when "search and rescue began to replace all missions as the most critical mission, . . . the tactical expression of the US strategy to bring home its troops." Wong quotes a rescued pilot who understood that if a man was lost, the official attitude was, "Okay, we're going to stop the war and get this guy back, and then we'll resume."<sup>86</sup> Wong also details specific post-Vietnam missions—such as Mogadishu in 1993—where engagements with the enemy turned into rescue operations to recover wounded or dead comrades in which further American lives were lost. Writing in a military policy journal, Wong questions the "rational sense" of a military ethic that demands soldiers' bodies always be recovered, noting that such a policy ends up becoming the mission of the military. In the context of commercial narrative cinema, this relatively recent combat prioritization opens the door to a certain kind of plot where—to quote the tagline for *Saving Private Ryan*—"This time the mission is a man."<sup>87</sup> Recovery of the wounded and the dead takes on a sacred quality, the only thing of importance in a generic discursive context where political discussions—Why are we there at all?—are tacitly ruled inadmissible. All that matters is recovery of the body, dead or alive—but hopefully the latter. The tools of cinema are great at telling this story.

War film scholarship at times seems to ignore this function of the combat genre, instead faulting these films for supporting the very idea of nation-states making war and using young men to do so. To quote a blog post by Slavoj Žižek: "However, we should bear in mind that the terse-realistic presentation of the absurdities of war in *The Hurt Locker* obfuscates and thus makes acceptable the fact that its heroes are doing exactly

the same job as the heroes of *The Green Berets*. In its very invisibility, ideology is here, more than ever: we are there, with our boys, identifying with their fear and anguish instead of questioning what they are doing there.”<sup>88</sup> Criticizing war films for not asking the “why” question of a given war makes them an easy target; indeed, not a target at all but instead a straw man. More interesting questions are, What are the moviegoers doing there? Why do audiences go to these films, which are more complex than the average action-adventure film? Why are the filmmakers there? What function does making the film serve them? And what is the substance of the “there” of these films, which are poised so delicately between genre conventions, conceits of authenticity, and the need to memorialize American men fighting and dying on foreign battlefields, whether for glory or for a lie, depending on the war? *Hymns for the Fallen* takes up these film-centered questions by listening to the PCF subgenre with an ear for how film form and musical form work together, and for how the sonic space of the soundtrack is mixed for narrative and ideological ends, producing over decades of creative ferment a group of cinematic war memorials that represent the figures of the soldier and the veteran in the post-Vietnam era.