

OPINIONS

HBO series compares to war



Josh Day
Columnist

The HBO mini-series "Band of Brothers" offers a look back at traditional warfare during the second World War. Objectives were clear—storming beachheads, holding cities, taking enemy strongholds—and there were few ambiguities.

The allied invasion of Nazi-occupied Europe measured their successes in terms of geography, and pushing the front closer to Hitler and Berlin.

In one sense, World War II was the purest war of the century, if you ever deigned to apply the word "pure" to a war. A tangible war, unlike Vietnam, where success was not measured in geography, but in Viet Cong body counts, World War II was the last war fought on the traditional stage of warfare.

Indeed, when one thinks of war, one often imagines barbed wire, mine fields, and Marines storming a beach.

Over the course of 12 episodes, "Band of Brothers" shows the allied invasion of France through the eyes of Easy Company, a paratrooper unit of the acclaimed 101st Airborne Division.

In light of Operation Enduring Freedom, the cut and dry progress of Company E through war-ravaged Europe almost radiates a nos-

algic glow for a time when the enemy had a face, and objectives were as clear as pushing Hitler out of France.

Easy Company jumps on Normandy on D-Day, getting scattered all over the country with the rest of the 101st. The company then proceeds to slice through France, participating in many of World War II's most famous battles.

Author and historian Stephen E. Ambrose wanted to capture the whole of the American soldier's experience in the allied invasion, and Company E was the perfect choice.

From parachuting into Normandy under heavy artillery fire, to the Battle of the Bulge and, ultimately, the discovery onto Hitler's Eagle's Nest (the vacation getaway where the Reich's highest ranking officials met and planned strategies and tactics), Easy Company saw it all.

Beautifully filmed and well-written, "Band of Brothers" is an excellent production, although it may not appeal to someone who isn't specifically versed in World War II history.

A general knowledge of World War II goes a long way, and is almost necessary for getting the full effect of the series. Characters phase

in and out, and there are so many of them, it's hard to keep track of all the names and faces.

Although produced by Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks, "Band of Brothers" is no "Saving Private Ryan." The series focuses more on historical fact and the broader results of battles than it does on individual characters or gratuitous carnage that was so abundant in "Saving Private Ryan."

While keeping the big picture of the war in focus, the action often stops to zoom in on a smaller scene that encompasses the whole, like the shining blue sky with wisps of smoke trailing through the air after D-Day, or a burning town seen from a distance.

Visually and thematically, "Band of Brothers" is more like "The Thin Red Line" than "Saving Private Ryan."

As I watch the series, I can't help but contrast World War II to the military campaign against Afghanistan.

Every major war is fought according to the rules learned in the previous war. Operation: Desert Storm is obviously on the minds of the George W. Bush administration in

their current bombing campaign against the Taliban.

The public has been given the following campaign rhetoric: If we bomb the hell out of them, then Osama bin Laden will be forced to crawl out of his caves or else be blasted to death.

The bottom line, however, is that we don't know where bin Laden is, and the results of this operation, whether positive or negative, will not be known until we know who or what we're fighting.

We are bombing the Taliban because they are harboring bin Laden and refuse to give him up. We are not bombing the Taliban because they attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

If they had, then we would simply declare war on that government and destroy it. Instead, we are fighting the only face we see, while the true enemy hides in caves in the desert.

There are no beachheads in this war and no front line to push toward the heart of the enemy. Right now, there is no definition to this war. Only history will define what we are actually doing.

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Tales of Middle Eastern culture



Craig Lovelace
Columnist

For the past few weeks, I've been doing a lot of research on the Middle East, for the purpose of having some idea what I'm talking about. I have come to one inescapable conclusion: this place is screwed.

It's been screwed largely from the beginning of time. For those who think the Middle East's troubles are a new phenomenon caused by Islam, Israel or America, let me turn your attention to a book, "The Jewish War," recounting a first-century A.D. Holy Land rebellion. It describes a region torn by groups battling each other, and occasionally themselves, over religion, land, food, and pronunciation. It takes place a half a millennium before the rise of Islam, and much longer before the little brawl we call the Revolution.

The description is remarkably close to a description of the Middle East today, complete with ham-fisted dealings by outside powers of every stripe. The fashion and hairstyles are largely the same.

The only difference is the choice of a warrior's weapon, Kalishnikovs instead of scimitars.

It becomes obvious reading these old histories that no simple solution for the violence exists.

Unless, of course, you take the Stalinesque approach: burn crops, raze buildings, sow the ground with salt, and kill anything that moves. In some circles, this solution has not been written off.

Perhaps the best experience I've had in dealing with the Middle East's crankiness was at Indiana University.

In an effort to better understand the violence, one of the Professional Worrywart's clubs invited a

"former terrorist" to speak to the group. Since all were welcome, and I was bored, I tagged along.

I first met "Ali" (called both to protect the mindless and because I can't spell his real name) at an informal reception hosted by the club. I fully expected to meet a body bag, since there aren't any terrorist retirement plans.

Apparently, Ali was part of their equivalent of Sinn Fein, the branch of people who want to help, but can't be trusted with a rifle.

He seemed pleasant enough, even telling some Syrian border patrol stories, which are the Polack jokes of the cradle of civilization.

Ali, it turned out, had been with one of the Scrabble triple word score groups in the land of Lebanon (it's improper to call most of these places countries—they're arguments with boundaries).

He had represented his organization in a human rights board examining incidents of mayhem in a community outside of Beirut.

You can imagine the meetings: "Abdur, your district has not thrown an adulteress off a minaret in almost three weeks. Stand on your chair and sing 'Danny Boy!'"

When the time came to give his talk, Ali proceeded to rail on Western civilization, to the great approval of the Sandalistas who wanted to show how everything is America's fault, from World War II to "Three's Company."

His Patrice Lumumba University education showed through, as he attacked American foreign policy using quotes from Saddam Hussein.

If I were going to accuse someone of devious political maneuvering,

I'd try to find better source material.

I'm amazed Saddam has time to foam at the mouth, considering he's busy slaughtering Kurds, giving his son's victims torture sessions for their birthdays, and writing the new Iraqi national anthem, an up-tempo number called, "America Will Choke on its own Imperialist Excess."

Even better than this, however, was his frequent references to Idi Amin. It wasn't as funny to the Sandalistas, of course, who still think Amin was a CIA plant who ate people on orders from former president Richard Nixon.

The most useful part, however, was the question and answer period. Ali answered questions about Arab culture from some fairly level-headed people.

For example, if I'm ever in the Middle East, I'll stay out of neighborhoods filled with one-armed men, something I should have known from watching "The Fugitive."

Overall, accounts of Arab customs, and horror stories concerning them, are absolutely true. The people are hospitable to the point of Alfred Hitchcock psychopaths.

When in London, I was trying to get a needle and thread to sew a fly button back onto my chinos before going to see a play.

I was directed to speak to Mustafa down the hall. Knocking on the door, I was invited in, then was given little thimbles of coffee.

It was only after half an hour of small talk, I found out I wanted the other Mustafa, at the end of the hall.

I left with a profound understand-

ing of how inhospitable I am.

I finally understood why you can't get real coffee at Starbucks anymore. It's all being served to lost houseguests in Riyadh.

Things were fine at the talk until one of the Sandalistas asked Ali what he thought would bring lasting peace in the Middle East.

"The creation of an Islamic Paradise for the faithful is our aim," he answered (it's amazing how these things always sound like failed projects from a sociopolitical Disneyland - Islamic Paradise, Worker's Eden).

The follow-up talk, given by a middle-aged former marine, wondered if this meant incompatibility with states having secular on other religious findings.

Ali assured us the Islam had a place for believers and non-believers, all except for Zionists, Imperialists, hockey players, and other infidels.

I clapped loudly, then did what any right-thinking, un-brainwashed American would do: I left.

Being a proud American, I then went to a bar, put a big dent in their bourbon supply, and lit some fireworks while singing theme songs to old John Wayne movies.

I thought it was amazing that anyone could live with his head buried that far in the sand.

Maybe American life isn't founded on whiskey and the Duke, but that makes it worth living.

If we want to help the downtrodden people of the world, we can send them big-screen televisions, VCRs, and wide-screen versions of "Rio Bravo," "The Longest Day," and "Big Jake."

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