

Courage and Cowardice as Depicted in WWI Films

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The recent centennial anniversary of World War I has the global population reexamining the destructive and tragic nature of this conflict. The disastrous nature of World War I was unprecedented and the events of this calamity are well documented. The futility, waste of valuable natural resources, economic collapse, and loss of life all defined how future generations would interpret the catastrophic events that occurred between 1914 -1918. Films based on factual persons and events can be excellent mediums of instruction for both students of history and the wider audience of dedicated moviegoers who are simply seeking entertainment. However, films that lack historical accuracy can thwart the efforts of serious academics attempting to properly instruct the next generation of historians.

Four films will be the subject of examination. These are: *Flyboys* (2006), *Paths of Glory* (1957), *Testament of Youth* (2014), and *The Lost Battalion* (2001). These works depict the Lafayette Escadrille, the practice of execution for cowardice in the French forces, the tragic experiences of British VAD nurse Vera Britton, and the October 1918 experience of an American combat unit in Northeastern France. These films were chosen for the variety of experiences and subject matter they represent. *Paths of Glory* and *Testament of Youth* are based on books by Humphrey Cobb (First printing, Viking Press, USA, 1935) and Vera Britton (First printing, Victor Gollancz Limited, UK, 1933). The moniker “*The Lost Battalion*” is often used for the title of secondary source texts that recount the October 1918 German siege of the 'Pocket' at Charlevaux, in the Argonne Forest, where the men of the US 308<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division 77<sup>th</sup> Regiment made their last stand. The title *Flyboys* does not have any specific text attached to it.

Students of World War I history need to be skeptical when examining films that depict specific events and individuals. When making films such as *Flyboys*, *Paths of Glory*, *Testament of Youth*, and *The Lost Battalion*, screenwriters and directors had distinct artistic goals and

financial objectives they wished to achieve and the films they created vary in their degree of historical accuracy. Careful examination of both primary and secondary source materials creates a blueprint of persons and events which can then be compared to the cinematic interpretations. This evaluation examines the films in order of historical accuracy, from the least to the most accurate interpretation based upon how well the filmmakers and screenwriters cinematically represent the individuals and events. Entertainment quality and performance value are entirely separate issues that will not be evaluated for the purposes of this endeavor.

The film *Flyboys* is a war drama based on the lives of the Lafayette Escadrille pilots. This 2006 MGM undertaking was a big budget work, costing 60 million dollars. This film was privately financed by a group of filmmakers and investors eager to see a modern interpretation of the Escadrille's story. Shot entirely in the United Kingdom in the spring and summer of 2006, the film was released September 22, 2006 in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

*Flyboys* is directed by Tony Bill, and the work reflects Bill's love of flying and longtime dream of making a film about aviation in World War I. Bill, a veteran Hollywood producer, won an Oscar for the 1973 film *The Sting* with Robert Redford and Paul Newman. Bill is also an amateur stunt pilot and lifelong aviation enthusiast. *Flyboys* original screenplay was written by Phil Sears and Blake Evan. The two then approached millionaire Dean Devlin, the founder of Electric Entertainment, with their script. Devlin, knowing Tony Bill's reputation as an award winning producer/director, proposed a collaboration which Bill eagerly accepted.<sup>2</sup>

The film would take five years to finance and Bill explained that he "broke a few rules"

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<sup>1</sup> "Film in Review: Flyboys." *New York Times* (1923-), Sep 22, 2006.  
<https://umw.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical>

<sup>2</sup>AircraftJournals.com: Tony Bill born to direct *Flyboys*, Sept. 1, 2006.  
<http://airportjournals.com/tony-bill-born-to-direct-flyboys/>

regarding the work. One rule was “never make an independent movie without distribution in place” and two was “never spend your own money.” While Devlin struggled to get financing for the film, Bill turned down feature directing jobs in case he “got the call” from Devlin. Bill supported himself by directing few movies for cable and sometimes had to sell items from his beloved World War I aviation memorabilia collection. The concept for *Flyboys* was as a completely independent film with no studio, no distributor, and no foreign sales. Additionally, Devlin and Bill were determined to only cast actors they felt were right for the parts. Devlin and Bill spent a great deal of time casting *Flyboys* because some of the money provided to finance the film came from British tax shelter money. In order to maximize the amount financed they were obligated to try and find actors that could do an American accent but were on British passports. The lead female actor in the film, Jennifer Decker, was an unknown who the producers “discovered” on a trip to Paris.<sup>3</sup>

The biggest hurdle Tony Bill and Dean Devlin faced was acquiring the French Nieuport 17 and German Fokker Dr. 1 aircrafts for the film. Not only did these planes need to be aesthetically pleasing but they also had to have flying capability. A total of seven Nieuport 17's were used in *Flyboys*, including two borrowed from Great Britain. Four of these were custom built for Tony Bill by Robert Baslee, a Missouri-based builder who specializes in full scale vintage replicas. Bill states that they had “a couple of close calls” during filming but no one was hurt and the aircraft only sustained small damage that was quickly repaired. The actors were trained by Ray Hanna, a legendary aerial coordinator who pushed them through the basics of flying such primitive aircraft. Bill and Devlin also employed six aerobatic stunt pilots to work

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<sup>3</sup><http://airportjournals.com/tony-bill-born-to-direct-flyboys/>

with the actors for a realistic interpretation of the aerial combat sequences.<sup>4</sup>

The Lafayette Escadrille has been described as “Warriors with Wings.” The Escadrille was composed of thirty-eight American who willingly volunteered to fight for France because they believed the world they cherished was facing extinction. The Lafayette Escadrille would operate for less than two years, from April 20, 1916 to February 18, 1918. It was during this time the Escadrille would rise to the level of modern day rock stars through written accounts of their many antics, escapades, and achievements.<sup>5</sup>

The best place to begin an analysis is with the names of the characters. The film stars James Franco as Blaine Rawlings, a Texan and loner with a chip on his shoulder as large as the state itself. Other Escadrille pilots in the film also have colorful names such as number one flying ace, Reed Cassidy. While the actors are as attractive as the names screenwriters have chosen to provide, the real Escadrille pilots had names such as Norman Prince, Harold B. Willis, Victor E. Chapman, and William Thaw. The only real Escadrille pilot with an unusual name was Kiffin Yates Rockwell of North Carolina. The only character in this film that has the name of an actual Escadrille member is Captain Georges Thenault, the French officer who was in command of the squadron. Acclaimed French actor Jean Reno is somewhat miscast as the moody commander who has a great deal of contempt for the American volunteers. This contempt is the first of many flaws in the film as Thenault’s memoir, written in 1921 and translated into English by Walter Duranty, heaps praise and admiration on the American pilots in his command.<sup>6</sup>

The attractive cast of *Flyboys* also features young African American actor Abdul Salis as

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<sup>4</sup><http://airportjournals.com/tony-bill-born-to-direct-flyboys/>

<sup>5</sup>Edward Jablonski, *Warriors with Wings: The Story of the Lafayette Escadrille* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1966), 7.

<sup>6</sup>Georges Thenault, *The Story of the Lafayette Escadrille: Told by its Commander*. (Boston: Small, Maynard and Company, 1921), 8.

Eugene Skinner, a professional boxer turned pilot who flies with the Escadrille. While the French military was less racist than the American forces, the truth of it is there were no African Americans in the Lafayette Escadrille. One possible reason is that the men of the Escadrille were mostly from upper middle-class backgrounds and had the financial stability to join a volunteer unit without worrying about incomes or mounting debt for their families back in the United States. However, the first African American pilot, Eugene Jacques Bullard, was a member of the French Air Service. Bullard, like the fictitious Skinner, was a professional boxer and also a jazz musician. Bullard survived the war but was relegated to obscurity, dying of cancer in 1961. He is buried in the Flushing Cemetery in Queens, New York, a place where Duke Ellington also rests.<sup>7</sup>

*Flyboys* depicts the Escadrille pilots as hard drinking womanizers who have little outside interests or talents. This could not be further from the truth. Six of the seven original members were sons of millionaires and all seven had college degrees.<sup>8</sup> In addition, these pilots loved adventure. Their pre-Escadrille occupations included artist, race car driver, big game hunter, and professional gambler. Rather than sitting around perpetually drunk, these educated and eloquent flyers recorded much of their adventures for posterity.<sup>9</sup>

Having examined the cast of the film, the next element for scrutiny would be the costuming. The studio's costume department did a good job of depicting the men's uniforms. Primary source images are black and white but it is documented that the Escadrille were clothed in the sort of faded blue gear we see in the film. The headgear is also proper and correct, with the

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<sup>7</sup>"Eugene Bullard: First African American Military Pilot Flew for France" by Dennis K. Johnson, Feb. 24, 2022, AOPA.org. <https://www.aopa.org/news-and-media/all-news/2022/february/24/eugene-bullard-first-african-american-military-pilot-flew-for-france>

<sup>8</sup>Charles Bracelen Flood, *First to Fly: The Story of the Lafayette Escadrille, The American Heroes Who Flew for France in World War I* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2015), 86.

<sup>9</sup>Flood, *First to Fly*, 130.

men wearing a mix of several caps. The leather “tall boots” and flight caps are also depicted accurately. The leather outerwear is a bit exaggerated. The Escadrille often wore flight suits and sometimes even fur coats while in the air. These facts were most likely left out of the film as the aforementioned gear is not very physically attractive but it was necessary in the extremely frigid temperatures the men encountered when flying so far above ground. The film depicts the flyers receiving silk scarves to protect their necks while constantly turning their heads in mid-flight however, the Escadrille also had a custom of placing woman’s stocking on their head, just under the soft leather flying helmet. Ned Parsons, a young flyer from Massachusetts, wrote:

The top fitted over the skull, while the leg and foot went under the chin and was tucked up on the other side. It was useful in keeping our heads warm as well as being a strong charm. Not any silk stocking would do. It had to be a stocking from some girl you loved or vice versa, and had to be well worn. If anything happened to you while wearing it, it was a sure sign the girl didn’t love you any more or never had. The personality that the stocking assumed through having been worn was held sufficient to keep you out of trouble.<sup>10</sup>

As an aside, the period clothing for the female characters was technically accurate but after four long years of war and deprivation, the dresses worn by the village prostitutes in *Flyboys* seem a bit too bright and fresh, which is often the way with period war films.

An examination of the aircraft used in *Flyboys* shows that the film was reasonably accurate. It is important to note that the August 1914 German declaration of war came only eleven years after the Wright brothers had made their historic flight at Kitty Hawk. Aircraft at the start of the First World War was largely made of canvas and wood. While aircraft strength and design would improve throughout the war, the first planes piloted by the Escadrille were little better than motorized kites. These flying deathtraps were dry wooden frames covered in canvas that had been treated with a highly flammable stiffening agent. France’s Marshal Foch

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<sup>10</sup>Flood, *First to Fly*, 27.

disliked the idea of aviation and stated in 1910 that aircraft were “useless” for the Army.<sup>11</sup> The Escadrille would primarily fly two aircraft models: the Nieuport 11 also known as the “Bebe”, and the Nieuport 17. Unfortunately, *Flyboys* does not address the lack of a pilot firing system in the Nieuport 11 which did not have a belt-fixed machine gun that could fire through the propeller arc.<sup>12</sup> The filmmakers chose to depict the Escadrille as only flying Nieuport 17’s.

*Flyboys* does show James Franco in awe of several brand new Nieuport 17’s being delivered which is accurate. The Escadrille pilots received these aircrafts on September 19, 1916 and the Nieuport 17 delighted these aviators. The wings were flatter, allowing greater air speed with an additional 20 square feet of wing surface. The 110 horsepower LeRhône rotary gave this model an airspeed 10-15 miles faster than the Bebe all the while maintaining the maneuverability that Nieuports were famous for. Additionally, the 17’s had a Vickers machine gun mounted directly in front of the pilot which was synchronized to fire through the propeller arc. While the Vickers was prone to jamming, it was still considered a major advancement in aerial combat.<sup>13</sup> *Flyboys* accurately depicts the pilots being given hammers for mid-air mechanical problems with mounted artillery.<sup>14</sup>

The depiction of a lion as a pet is surprisingly accurate. However, the pilots “doggie” named Whisky who resides with Cassidy was actually part of a pair. Two lion cubs, called Whisky and Soda, were the Escadrille’s mascots. Pilot Bill Thaw was in Paris in September of 1916 and noticed an ad placed by a Brazilian dentist selling a four-month-old male lion cub. Thaw was intrigued and felt the cub would make an excellent mascot for the Escadrille as a

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<sup>11</sup>Flood, *First to Fly*, 11.

<sup>12</sup>Philip M. Flammer, *The Vivid Air: The Lafayette Escadrille* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1981), 85.

<sup>13</sup>Flammer, *The Vivid Air*, 85.

<sup>14</sup>Flammer, *The Vivid Air*, 86.

symbol of bravery and nobility.<sup>15</sup> The cub was named Whisky and became a most beloved symbol of the Escadrille. The animal was gentle and played with dogs, spending his evenings in the company of the pilots and support crew. The public was intrigued and many people stopped by the Escadrille's headquarters at Luxeuil to view the unusual mascot, a fact that is not addressed in the film. When Whisky was about a year old, the pilots decided he was in need of a wife. The men found a female cub and appropriately named her Soda. Unfortunately, Soda "had a mean disposition, always spitting, clawing and scratching. Unlike Whisky who adored being petted and followed French commander Gervais Lufbery like a dog." The rambunctious pair had a habit of chewing on clothing and, after destroying the commanders very expensive cap, were sent to live out the war in a Paris zoo.<sup>16</sup> Commander Lufbery was killed May 19, 1918 at Maron. The film conveniently leaves out the ignominious end of the two Escadrille mascots.

The film correctly depicts the colorful screaming Native American Sioux, however, the Sioux was not the original Escadrille logo. The first insignia to be used by the Escadrille was the Native American Seminole. The men had chosen a Native American image as a nod to the United States. The image was only briefly used as Escadrille pilot Edward Hinkle, a note artist, suggested the men "beef up" the insignia to the screaming Native American Sioux to illustrate their fearlessness in aerial combat. The distinctive image contains the colors of both France and the United States.<sup>17</sup> *Flyboys* is also accurately representing the fact that each Escadrille aviator was also permitted to put a personal symbol on the opposite side of his aircraft. However, the logo on squadron leader Reed Cassidy's Nieuport 17 "Je Vous Tout" is an incorrect translation.

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<sup>15</sup>Flammer, *The Vivid Air*, 24.

<sup>16</sup>Edwin C. Parsons, *I Flew with the Lafayette Escadrille* (Indianapolis: E.C. Seale and Company Inc., 1963), 88.

<sup>17</sup>Flammer, *The Vivid Air*, 122.

The correct translation for “I See All” in French is “Je Vois Tout.” Most likely the set designer did not speak fluent French and failed to verify this detail which, interestingly enough, is pointed out in a word reference forum on the internet.<sup>18</sup>

*Flyboys* does not depict the Escadrille’s billeting correctly. The pilots did not stay in an incredibly large chateau which resembles Versailles. They were billeted in a stone villa at the hot springs of Luxeuil, France and took their meals at the Hotel of the Golden Apple which had an excellent supply of vintage Burgundy in its cellar for anyone who could afford it.<sup>19</sup> American financiers William K. Vanderbilt and J.P. Morgan did contribute funds for the Escadrille so the portion of the film that mentions Vanderbilt as providing their lavish lifestyle has some level of truth to it, however, records of exactly how the funds were dispersed are unavailable.<sup>20</sup>

The Escadrille were a superstitious lot who believed in luck as well as skill and the “bottle of death” shown in the film is a reasonable depiction of something the men actually did. Kiffin Yates Rockwell, one of the early members, returned from a short leave with “a rare and precious bottle of very old bourbon” and suggested each time an Escadrille had a confirmed kill, he be allowed a shot of the fine liquor.<sup>21</sup> The bottle was soon empty and it was pilot Bill Thaw, who survived the war, that jealously guarded the keepsake until his death from pneumonia on April 24, 1934. Thaw’s family then donated the treasured bottle to the French museum at Blerancourt, where it now rests with other famous aviation artifacts.<sup>22</sup>

The CGI air battles in *Flyboys* are exciting, edge of the seat entertainment. However, the

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<sup>18</sup>Word Reference.com forum, March 11, 2007.

<https://forum.wordreference.com/threads/movie-flyboys.419480/>

<sup>19</sup>Thenault, *The Story of the Lafayette Escadrille*, 29.

<sup>20</sup>Vanderbilt Cup Races.com, Jan. 23, 2018

[https://www.vanderbiltcupraces.com/blog/article/the\\_vanderbilts\\_a\\_century\\_of\\_military\\_service](https://www.vanderbiltcupraces.com/blog/article/the_vanderbilts_a_century_of_military_service)

<sup>21</sup>Flood, *First to Fly*, 32.

<sup>22</sup>T.B. Murphy, *Kiffin Rockwell, the Lafayette Escadrille and the Birth of the United States Air Force* (North Carolina: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2016), 171.

air combat described in primary source works is much more tedious. Equipment failure was a major issue for the Escadrille as well as their German counterparts. It cannot be over emphasized that aviation did not play a major role in the Great War. Escadrille pilots were “learning on the job.” The first written tactical guide for French pilot trainees did not even exist until late 1916.<sup>23</sup> The film has Escadrille pilot Blaine Rawlings transporting civilians to safety, a deed that the Escadrille never performed being a combat unit. Another incorrect scene is the death of squadron leader Cassidy as the Escadrille are attempting to destroy a large zeppelin, which is completely unrealistic. The Escadrille never participated in large scale air battles as the field of aviation was new and squadrons, both Allied and Central Powers, were still relatively quite small. The main jobs of the Escadrille were reconnaissance and as escorts to the French during bombing missions.

One final inaccuracy in the film is the CGI depictions of the Escadrille in their Nieuport 17's engaging with Fokker Dr. 1 aircrafts, simply known as the Fokker Triplane. The Fokker Triplane was never in service at the same time as the Nieuport 17, only entering active service in the Spring of 1918. Most of the Escadrille's primary source documents describe their service as a long series of skirmishes with German Fokker E type aircrafts. The Triplane was most likely used for the film because it was the model that Baron Manfred von Richthofen (aka The Red Baron) was flying when he was killed at Vaux-sur-Somme on April 21, 1918.<sup>24</sup>

The film *Flyboys* falls very short in its goals to capture the true essence of these brave aviators. MGM's expensive flop portrays the men as overzealous oafs, drinkers and womanizers who lack imagination, social outcasts seeking glory. The real Escadrille pilots were an eclectic mix of personalities and principles, some who were at odds but these men always put the mission

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<sup>23</sup> Murphy, *Kiffin Rockwell*, 97.

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-i/manfred-baron-von-richthofen>

ahead of any squabble.<sup>25</sup> The film depicts the pilots as men who dislike themselves and each other, totally ignoring the fierce camaraderie that the Lafayette Escadrille shared. However, *Flyboys* is a visually wonderful film. The cast are easy on the eyes and the shots of the French Countryside were exceptionally well done. Unfortunately, the studio completely misses the mark about the pilots themselves. These cultured and articulate men have inspired generations of military aviators. The noble nature of their sacrifice reminds us of the idealism that embodied this patrician generation. These elite men chose to renounce lives of ease and comfort to face death fighting for a cause they deemed just and imperative. Their exploits have been told and retold as a mixture of fact and fiction but it is their legacy of courage and commitment that continues to fascinate generations of historians, aviation enthusiasts, and modern thrill seekers.

The film *Paths of Glory* is based on a 1935 book by Humphrey Cobb. Cobb (1899-1944) an Italian-born, Canadian-American screenwriter and novelist had served in the World War I Canadian army at the age of 17. Cobb kept a wartime diary and utilized his recollections when writing *Paths of Glory*.<sup>26</sup> His disgust and disillusion are heavily reflected in the work. The title of the novel comes from Thomas Gray's 1751 poem *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*. *Paths of Glory* is based on the Souain corporal's affair that occurred on March 17, 1915.<sup>27</sup> The choice to set the novel within the French army was purposefully done by Cobb as he felt they had been "poorly led" by commanders and were needlessly slaughtered in futile quests for small patches

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<sup>25</sup>Flood, *First to Fly*, 130.

<sup>26</sup>Humphrey Cobb, *Paths of Glory* (New York: The Penguin Group, 2010), xxv.

<sup>27</sup>The Souain Corporals affair was an incident where four corporals in the French Army were shot by firing squad as an example to the rest of their companies during the First World War. The executions, which occurred in the vicinity of Souain on March 17, 1915, are considered to be the most egregious and highly publicized military injustice done by France in World War I. This event inspired the book *Paths of Glory* by Humphrey Cobb.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Souain\\_corporals\\_affair](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Souain_corporals_affair)

of territory.<sup>28</sup> The “ant-hill” mentioned in the film is called “the pimple” in the novel.

Kirk Douglas gives a stellar performance in the 1957 film as Colonel Dax. Stanley Kubrick, who would go on to become an acclaimed director of such films as “The Shining”, directs. Douglas’ 1988 bestselling autobiography, *The Ragman’s Son*, tells how he felt so moved by Cobb’s book that he provided thousands of dollars out of his own pocket to support the project.<sup>29</sup> Kubrick, Jim Thompson, and Calder Willingham were all screenwriters working on the project which re-wrote the character of Colonel Dax with Douglas in mind. The novel has Dax as a minor character that equivocates in his support of the men but the film does not. The novel also includes Colonel Etienne, who is the legal representative for the accused. Kubrick’s script eliminates him entirely. Another interesting fact is that Kubrick and his writers instigated further changes that had the film ending happily. The “happy-ending” script was vehemently rejected by Kirk Douglas which caused conflict with Kubrick. Douglas yelled: “I got the money based on the original script. Not this shit. We’re going to do the original script or we’re not making the picture”.<sup>30</sup> Douglas’ determination to portray the harsh reality of an injustice pays off in the emotionally charged finale which evokes tremendous empathy.

Adolf Menjou, the actor who plays General Broulard, was himself a World War I veteran and had misgivings about portraying the effete officer. George Macready, playing the part of the sinister General Mireau, actually had a severe facial scar from an automobile accident while still in college. Macready’s badly damaged face was stitched by the only available medical practitioner, a veterinarian. The only female actor to speak in the film is Christiane Harlan, a

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<sup>28</sup>Cobb, *Paths of Glory*, xx.

<sup>29</sup>Kirk Douglas, *The Ragman’s Son: An Autobiography* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster), 1988, 282.

<sup>30</sup>Douglas, *The Ragman’s Son*, 283.

German singer and dancer who later became the third wife of Stanley Kubrick.<sup>31</sup>

The film was shot in Munich in just 64 days and cost approximately \$900,000.00 to make. The choice to shoot this film in black and white enhances the main themes of despair and desolation. *Paths of Glory* was released in October of 1957 and enjoyed only moderate success in the United States.<sup>32</sup> The film, being an American endeavor, is an English speaking work. Kubrick and Douglas chose not to attempt French accents for the actors and this decision seems prudent. The Americanized phrases do not detract from the impact of the dialogue.

The characters in *Paths of Glory* are fictitious therefore an examination of costumes and setting is the starting point of this analysis. Unlike the big budget *Flyboys*, *Paths of Glory* was made for less than one million dollars, a small sum even in 1957.<sup>33</sup> The costumes are French military, officers and enlisted, which are correct. An interesting fact is that *Paths of Glory* does not show any of the German soldiers fighting at the front. Also interesting is that the film only has one shot of Christine Harlan, at the close of the movie. Harlan's clothing is simple but period appropriate. Kubrick keeps the focus on the French army throughout the entire 90 minutes of the film, which does not provide the audience with much variety in the costuming.

*Paths of Glory* open in 1916 at French General Mireau's quarters somewhere near the Western front. The actual site is never specified but it is important to note the film was shot in Munich, Germany, not France. The headquarters of General Mireau is some type of lavish mansion but as the film is shot black and white, the beautiful décor does not stand out and the audiences focus remains on the dialogue between the actors. During the Great War, many lavish chateaus and villas were commandeered by the French Army and this depiction is appropriate.

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<sup>31</sup>Background information provided by military-history.org  
<https://www.military-history.org/articles/war-on-film-paths-of-glory.htm>

<sup>32</sup><https://www.military-history.org/articles/war-on-film-paths-of-glory.htm>

<sup>33</sup>Douglas, *The Ragman's Son*, 283.

The filthy muddy trenches, lined with wood and sandbags are also historically accurate.

The cinematography is exceptional as Kubrick used a hand-held camera to follow Kirk Douglas in several of the battle scenes. This creates the effect that the audience is moving forward with Douglas.<sup>34</sup> Kubrick also is a master of the close up, these wonderful shots of the actor's expressions force the audience to note the fear and disgust of the French enlisted men. This disgust is an accurate depiction as the French forces at the Western front were exhausted from orders for repeated attacks and morale was low.<sup>35</sup> It is also of note that Kirk Douglas possessed a very distinct facial countenance that could convey tremendous emotion.

*Paths of Glory* is a critique of French military discipline. The narrative surrounding French military discipline is complex. The idea that French commanders would execute psychologically damaged men for failure to “go over the top” seems appalling but these types of situations did occur. The film's interpretation of the French judicial process is most accurate as in September 1914, the Commander-in-Chief, General Joseph Joffre set up special tribunals to replace the pre-war system of military courts which Joffre felt were inadequate due to judicial bureaucracy. All sentences were to be carried out within twenty-four hours.<sup>36</sup> Ian Sumner, in his text, *They Shall Not Pass: The French Army on the Western Front 1914-1918* states that French senior officers were unconcerned with physical and psychological excuses and the firing squad was sometimes a welcome alternative for men who were utterly desperate to leave the trenches.<sup>37</sup>

The notion of three men as “sacrificial lambs” to prove a point about insubordination is an accurate depiction as supported by both the Souain event and recent scholarship. In his 2014

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<sup>34</sup>Douglas, *The Ragman's Son*, 284.

<sup>35</sup>Ian Sumner, *They Shall Not Pass: The French Army on the Western Front 1914-1918* (South Yorkshire, UK: Pen & Sword Books Ltd., 2012), 67.

<sup>36</sup>Sumner, *They Shall Not Pass*, 68.

<sup>37</sup>Sumner, *They Shall Not Pass*, 130.

text, *The Embattled Self: French Soldiers' Testimony of the Great War*, Dr. Leonard Smith explains that discipline was swift and terrible as the French army needed to celebrate its mastery through murder.<sup>38</sup> Smith claims the common French soldier lacked any agency and was the victim of a capricious military authority that catered to the capitalist hierarchy and these men died to pay for the nation's consent to world war.<sup>39</sup> This account seems to label French military commanders as unjust, which is the main premise of *Paths of Glory*.

One portion of the film has an overzealous General Mireau ordering artillery officer Captain Rousseau to fire upon his own men in order to get them to advance. Rousseau refuses to comply and Mireau threatens him with the shame of death by a firing squad. This depiction seems to be historically inaccurate. There are no recorded instances of any French major casualty events resulting from intentional friendly fire in the Great War. However, one cannot rule out small scale atrocities committed by frenzied officers that were unrecorded. It is also important to note that friendly fire instances, as a result of miscalculations and human error, were common the Great War.<sup>40</sup> This point will again be mentioned in the examination of *The Lost Battalion*.

The true nature of French military discipline has fed into a left-right divide that separates historians.<sup>41</sup> Acts that we condemn today as egregious were not out of the realm of wartime military discipline 108 years ago. The moral dilemma of either condemning or praising French officer's disciplinary judgements should be evaluated by the sociological side of historical research. While *Paths of Glory* is a severe critique of French high command, the details

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<sup>38</sup>Leonard Smith, *The Embattled Self: French Soldiers' Testimony of the Great War*. (New York, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 162.

<sup>39</sup>Smith, *The Embattled Self*, 162.

<sup>40</sup>BBC Magazine relates the first casualty of the Great War as friendly fire.  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-35559589>

<sup>41</sup>Elizabeth Greenhalgh, *The French Army and the First World War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 456.

regarding the disciplinary process depicted in the film are, for the most part, historically accurate.

The “kangaroo court” that the three enlisted men are subjected to is an exaggeration of the French military justice system. Corporal Paris, the man who was unable to advance due to being unconscious, seems the most maligned. Also, it is unlikely that the OIC (Officer in Charge), in this case Colonel Dax, would act as the defense. In spite of Dax’s objection to the enlisted men’s charges, it is likely he would have been expected to remain outside of the judicial process in order to maintain his objectivity. While justice was swift and terrible, the majority of the verdicts of French wartime tribunals seemed to be a result of proof of criminality.<sup>42</sup> However, such events as the Souain Corporals affair show us that in any conflict, there are always atrocities that shake the faith of humanity.

A much more difficult subject to address is the depiction of the French Generals, Mireau and Broulard. *Paths of Glory* portrays these men as inept, effete, and vicious. Research indicates that French officers were conscious of their responsibility to look after their men.<sup>43</sup> French officers were encouraged to lead from the front and inspire, not threaten, the enlisted men.<sup>44</sup> Also, the French Army’s Chief of Staff, Marshal Phillippe Petain, did not hesitate to reduce mediocre officers to the ranks.<sup>45</sup> The characterization of Mireau as a childish sociopath and Broulard as an ego manic seems to be a plot device Kubrick is using to drive home the point that French high command was ineffectual but historically these characterizations are incorrect. The officers within the French Army during the Great War were no different than any other country,

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<sup>42</sup>Greenhalgh, *The French Army*, 62.

<sup>43</sup>Sumner, *They Shall Not Pass*, 66.

<sup>44</sup>Sumner, *They Shall Not Pass*, 65.

<sup>45</sup>Greenhalgh, *The French Army*, 63.

some good and some bad.<sup>46</sup>

The execution scene in *Paths of Glory* is cinematically well done but not particularly accurate. The first point to address is that Private Arnaud, with his skull fracture, was in a coma. The sight of a man being brought in front of the firing squad on a stretcher is an extremely unlikely scenario. The point of a military execution is to maintain discipline and set an example for troops. These executions were expected to be effective deterrents and the sight of such a helpless victim would have been bad for morale. The next issue is that the sergeant jailor tells Corporal Paris to “pull himself together” as there are “a lot of dignitaries and newspapermen out there” waiting to witness the execution. The presence of a priest, the French enlisted men and officers, and possibly a local official is accurate but it is unlikely that as late as 1916 the French army would want executions at the western front to be high profile enough to be covered by newspapers. The image of French senior military officials as brutes would not be well received by the French public. However, the actual details of the execution process by a firing squad are correctly depicted with Kubrick also incorporating the twenty-four-hour timeline that was stipulated by Joffre in 1914.

*Paths of Glory* ends with General Mireau being charged by Boulard, the more senior general, for the incident on the previous day when he commanded Captain Rousseau to fire on his own men. Mireau stomps off stating: “The man you stabbed in the back is a soldier.”<sup>47</sup> Boulard then offers a heartbroken Colonel Dax a promotion to the rank of General and the command that Mireau has lost. Dax, holding on to his humanity, vehemently refuses. The film

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<sup>46</sup>Greenhalgh, *The French Army*, 63.

<sup>47</sup>*Paths of Glory*. Kubrick, Stanley., Calder Willingham, Jim Thompson, James B. Harris, Kirk Douglas, Ralph Meeker, Adolphe Menjou, et al, (Santa Monica, CA: MGM Home Entertainment), 1999.

closes as Dax passes the tavern filled with the men of the 701<sup>st</sup> division, his command, who are listening to a young German woman singing, most of whom have tears in their eyes. He has just received orders they are to return to the front. The fatigue, homesickness, and heartbreak shown in the faces of all the men accurately sums up the feelings of combat weary souls.

The most interesting thing about *Paths of Glory* is its enduring message. The film has become a classic in its depiction of the ineptitude of French high command and the sacrifice enlisted men were expected to make without question. Many of the details in this film are correct depictions of Great War conditions for the French army along the western front. This choice is difficult to critique as the most accurate because French historians are still in debate about the true nature of French discipline. The Great War was fought on a new and frighteningly large scale. Weapons were mechanized and new ways to kill and maim were implemented. To face this type of daily horror was to look into the mouth of hell. It is understandable that the French army would have problems disciplining over eight million men in four short years. It is also understandable that many grave mistakes were made. *Paths of Glory* is a particularly moving film because its foundation is injustice, the slaughter of innocent men, which is so much more relevant than the inaccuracies contained in the film.

*Testament of Youth* is a film based on the autobiographical text, of the same name, by Vera Britton. The 2014 work, directed by James Kent has a particularly distinguished cast of British actors with the one exception being Alicia Vikander, a Swedish actor who has the leading role as Vera Brittain. Kent, a documentary filmmaker for fifteen years, undertook a great deal of historical research to ensure the accuracy of his endeavor. This was Kent's first feature film and he emphasized how, for eighteen months prior to filming, he took the time to carefully examine historical documents, photographs, and the surviving letters of sweethearts Vera

Brittain and Roland Leighton.<sup>48</sup> Producer Rosie Alison, describes *Testament of Youth* as the “quintessential rights of passage story about going through the worst the world has to offer and not giving up.”<sup>49</sup> The film was released by Lionsgate and was shot entirely in the United Kingdom. The film was completed in six months and the budget was 10 million dollars.<sup>50</sup>

*Testament of Youth* was shot in the centennial year of the Great War which, according to actors Kit Harington and Taron Edgerton, added much gravitas to the project. Harington states: “the war still feels very present to us, it was the first mechanized war and it feels so relevant as the first modern war.” Edgerton explained how, rather than trying to imitate the character of Vera’s brother, Edward Brittain, he sought to “do an accurate interpretation which is a more heartfelt way of paying tribute to the young man.” Colin Morgan, the actor who plays Victor Chapman, emphasized how the “lost youth concept” was particularly moving to him. Morgan explains how Vera’s ability to overcome losing so much was something the film “really gets across.” Edgerton also stressed how Brittain’s book helped him understand and interpret the “incredibly close” relationship between Vera and Edward Brittain. “Almost as if they were twins,” is the phrase Edgerton uses.<sup>51</sup>

Alicia Vikander, the actor who plays Vera Brittain, explains she had read the autobiographical book and it is Brittain’s “gift” to her generation. Vikander states that Brittain was a “force” that “decides to go and get the education she wanted.” The actor explained how she read the letters of Roland and Vera, as well as those between Vera and Edward which are

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<sup>48</sup>*Testament of Youth*: Cast and Director interview, You Tube, Jan. 13, 2015.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nm\\_y6VBofuY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nm_y6VBofuY)

<sup>49</sup>*Testament of Youth*: Full Press Conference, You Tube, Oct. 14, 2014.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nn-zDaGDvdU>

<sup>50</sup>*Testament of Youth* wikipedia page:  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Testament\\_of\\_Youth\\_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Testament_of_Youth_(film))

<sup>51</sup><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nn-zDaGDvdU>

“pure evidence” of how much the young people cared for each other. Vikander said she kept a copy of the last letter between Vera and Roland in her pocket which made her feel “emotionally attached” to the characters. Another point Vikander stressed is how the detailed the period costumes added to the connection she felt with Brittain’s era which made the role so enriching.<sup>52</sup>

Vera Brittain’s well written and moving memoir is considered a classic work that depicts the emotional experience of the Great War. The text is a personalization of one woman’s war experience. Brittain tells her readers: “In one sense I was my war; my war was I; without it I should do nothing and be nothing.”<sup>53</sup> Brittain, a committed pacifist, published her text in 1933 as a response to the already published memoirs of Blunden, Sassoon, and Graves.<sup>54</sup> The text is articulate and beautiful, a fitting tribute to the men who Brittain spent her life mourning.

The film version of *Testament of Youth* takes place over a period of four years. The filmmakers chose to omit the final sections of Brittain’s autobiographical text which chronicle her return to Oxford and life after the war when she marries (Sir) George Catlin, a political scientist, some three years her junior. The film does an excellent job of replicating Brittain’s experiences and emotions but strays just a bit from her text. The four most prominent differences that stand out are that it was Vera herself who received the telegram about her brother Edward’s death and Brittain did not first meet George Catlin when inquiring about her fiancé Roland’s death as they were never in the same unit. The scene where she learns of Roland’s death on her wedding day is also incorrect as they were only planning a visit, not a formal matrimonial event. Lastly, Vera did not save her brother Edward's life after he was wounded at the Somme in 1916;

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<sup>52</sup>*Testament of Youth*: Alicia Vikander Interview, Jan. 12, 2015.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TAIqqq3HpQI>

<sup>53</sup>Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth*. (New York, NY: PENGUIN Books, 2015), 655.

<sup>54</sup>Jean Pickering, 1986. “On the Battlefield: Vera Brittain’s Testament of Youth.” *Women’s Studies* 13 (1/2): 75. doi:10.1080/00497878.1986.9978654. Accessed 1/20/2022, 75.

he was sent to the First London General Hospital, where she just happened to be working as a Volunteer Aid Detachment (VAD) nurse.<sup>55</sup>

The study of Great Britain's Volunteer Aid Detachment nurses is a fascinating historical exploration of upper class British women whose patriotism demanded they sacrifice very comfortable lives and live under horrific conditions. Secondary source works such as Jean Pickering's article "On the Battlefield: Vera Brittain's Testament of Youth" explain that Brittain's desire to speak for "a generation of women" allowed her to utilize personal experience as a paradigm for the entire generation.<sup>56</sup> Pickering feels that Brittain's work represents the emotional climate of the war and its aftermath which reflects heavily on her losses and colors her ability to be completely objective.<sup>57</sup> Lastly, Pickering acknowledges that Brittain sought to "valorize female nature and culture" which leads her to the conclusion the text was intended to appeal to a whole generation of idealistic young women.<sup>58</sup>

The characters in this film are based on real individuals and therefore correct and appropriate. The attention to detail in costuming deserves some recognition. Alicia Vikander is a very physically attractive person and the clothing and jewelry she wears in the film is period appropriate and also, class appropriate, as Brittain was from the upper middle class of Buxton, UK. The film's costume department seems to have done extensive research into this era. The female actors are dressed in the appropriate mix of late Edwardian and transitional post war dresses and the muted colors all make for an accurate interpretation of fashion trends that existed

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<sup>55</sup>The Guardian "*Testament of Youth*: battles of Brittain make for a moving biopic" <https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2014/dec/17/reel-history-testament-of-youth-vera-brittain-film-adaptation>

<sup>56</sup>Pickering, "On the Battlefield", 75.

<sup>57</sup>Pickering, "On the Battlefield", 81.

<sup>58</sup>Pickering, "On the Battlefield", 79.

between 1914-1918. Of the four films examined, *Testament of Youth* has the best and most accurate interpretation of period garb which lends authenticity to events depicted. The civilian clothing and uniforms worn by Brittain's brother Edward, fiancé Roland Leighton, and friend Victor Chapman are also very well done and period appropriate.

The scenes where Brittain, a newly minted VAD, is ridiculed and pushed to drudge work by a certified nurse supervisor in the London hospital are quite accurate. The recent scholarship of Dr. Yvonne McEwen, *In the Company of Nurses: The History of the British Army Nursing Service in the Great War*, provides a great deal of information regarding VAD nursing from 1914-1918. This text paints a very accurate image of the role VAD nurses had in the Great War. Dr. McEwen explains many of these women were untrained and only utilized as probationers, cooks, and general cleaners.<sup>59</sup> Another interesting point that Dr. McEwen makes is the fact that the VAD nurses were not wanted by the fully trained certified nursing community. Rather than embracing the VAD women, McEwen tells us *The British Journal of Nursing* referred to them as 'war giddy women' who carried out 'spurious and emotional nursing' which did more harm than good for the patient.<sup>60</sup>

Another segment of *Testament of Youth* which accurately depicts events during the Great War is the time when Vera visits her Roland, who is home on leave. This portion of the film shows Roland as very changed. He is distant, moody, and uncommunicative; a stranger Vera cannot understand. Roland becomes physically rough when she tries to grab his arm which shows how the combat experience has left him mentally damaged. This depiction of men's personalities as altered after being exposed to combat is an accurate assessment of the impact of

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<sup>59</sup>Yvonne T. McEwen, *In the Company of Nurses: The History of the British Army Nursing Service in the Great War*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 59.

<sup>60</sup> McEwen, *In the Company of Nurses*, 60.

trauma. The work of Dr. Jason Crouthamel and Peter Leese, *Psychological Trauma and The Legacies of The First World War* explains how the impact of combat led to the trauma of social ostracization and many men had difficulties with recovery and reintegration into society.<sup>61</sup>

The death of Vera Brittain's fiancé Roland Leighton on December 23, 1915 is pivotal to the film and according to Brittain's novel she felt "mean and cruel" if she expressed any joy at being alive while her beloved was dead.<sup>62</sup> The film accurately examines the grief of Vera Brittain and her subsequent emptiness, which she communicates throughout Part II of her book. The death of her friend Victor Chapman a few months later also had a negative impact on Brittain. The film accurately depicts her decision to go to the front in France to be closer to Edward and the scenes where Brittain nurses wounded Germans is accurate according to the memoir.<sup>63</sup> Lastly, the film correctly shows how the lead nurse in Brittain's hut opened a window to release the dead German's soul.<sup>64</sup>

The experiences Brittain has as a VAD nurse in France are accurately delineated in the film but, unlike Brittain's memoir, the picture leaves out many important details about the grueling nature of battlefield nursing. The film shows Brittain looking reasonably neat and healthy, but in reality, the nurses were often infected with lice and were physically rather dirty and disheveled due to the awful sanitation of these field hospitals and casualty clearing stations.<sup>65</sup> The nursing stations were also subject to bombardments which often resulted in nurses being killed.<sup>66</sup> VAD nurses frequently died of disease and accidents but the largest number were

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<sup>61</sup> Jason Crouthamel and Peter Leese, eds. *Psychological Trauma and The Legacies of The First World War*. (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2016), 8.

<sup>62</sup>Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 241.

<sup>63</sup>Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 379.

<sup>64</sup>Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 379.

<sup>65</sup>Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 208.

<sup>66</sup>Mary Borden and Hazel Hutchison. *The Forbidden Zone*. (London, UK: Hesperus, 2008), 13.

lost to attacks on hospital and troop ships.<sup>67</sup> Another important point the film does not address is the myth of Britain's upper class VAD nurses as always competent "angels of mercy".<sup>68</sup> While the VAD nurses probably had good intentions, many of these women of privilege were ill equipped to endure the harsh conditions as well as care for the horribly injured.<sup>69</sup> Brittain was an exceptionally intelligent and compassionate young woman and yet she admits to becoming "intolerant to the suffering of her patients", a feeling she consistently fights during her entire wartime nursing career.<sup>70</sup> The complex challenges of large scale wartime nursing agencies are now being thoroughly examined and the truth about the VAD's role in the Great War is being brought forth for further historical analysis.<sup>71</sup>

The death of Brittain's beloved brother Edward is depicted as a "final blow" to her soul. *Testament of Youth* ends on a very sad note. The last scene is Brittain swimming and swearing an oath that she will not forget the lover, brother, and friend that have gone to their rest. This depiction is accurate as Brittain remembered the pain of the Great War her entire life. Her classic memoir was not published until 1933 and she dedicated it to Roland and Edward. Brittain became an accomplished writer and journalist who worked tirelessly for pacifism in an increasingly hostile world. When she died in 1970, she left instructions for some of her ashes to be scattered across the grave of her brother in Asiago, Italy.<sup>72</sup>

*Testament of Youth* does an excellent job of depicting the emotional toll that the Great

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<sup>67</sup>McEwen, *In the Company of Nurses*, 173.

<sup>68</sup>McEwen, *In the Company of Nurses*, 39.

<sup>69</sup>Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 210.

<sup>70</sup>Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 212.

<sup>71</sup>McEwen, *In the Company of Nurses*, 39.

<sup>72</sup>The Guardian, "Testament of Youth"

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2014/dec/17/reel-history-testament-of-youth-vera-brittain-film-adaptation>

War had on Vera Brittain. The screenwriters take small liberties with Brittain's lengthy memoir but the film ultimately is a solid period piece which supports Brittain's belief that war is an unnecessary waste, an avoidable horror that brings nothing but pain and death. Vikander's performance is an excellent interpretation of the quiet and agonizing pain Brittain conveys in her autobiographical work. *Testament of Youth* does not fail to accurately interpret the VAD war nursing experience, but the film keeps many of the tedious and unpleasant aspects of the experience away from the audience, which was probably a wise decision as mainstream audiences are often unconcerned with excessive detail. This cinematic work is a very emotional endeavor, which draws much of its material from the point of view of a woman mourning the loss of her generation. If the film is evaluated as accurate through the lens of pain and loss, then *Testament of Youth* is spot on. This film conveys a very distinct message about the costs of war while being careful not to glorify killing, a major accomplishment which shows the filmmakers were acutely aware of the sacrifice of an entire generation of promising young men. Evaluating the film for historical accuracy is not terribly difficult as it appears the cast and crew of this film went to great lengths to ensure they accurately interpreted what Vera Brittain's autobiographical text was conveying about the futility and waste of a war that destroyed her youth and took the lives of the men most dear to her.

The story of Major Charles Whittlesey's "Lost Battalion" is one of the most famous American Great War accounts. Major Whittlesey's command, First Battalion, 308<sup>th</sup> Infantry, in the Seventy-seventh Division, along with Captain George McMurtry's Second Battalion would endure a five-day ordeal, from October 2 – October 7, 1918, in the Charlevaux pocket of the Argonne Forest near the Meuse River in Northeastern France that became the stuff of legend. The "Lost Battalion" was never truly lost but this moniker was given to Whittlesey's men by a

United Press editor who was responding to a cable from reporter Fred S. Ferguson about the plight of the 550 trapped men. The editor's response read "Send more on lost battalion", and the legend was born.<sup>73</sup> The Seventy-seventh was primarily a New York unit and over the course of seven days, newspapers such as the N.Y. Evening Post, the N.Y. Sun, and the N.Y. Times all carried news flashes about the trapped battalion.<sup>74</sup>

*The Lost Battalion* is a 2001 made-for-television war drama directed by Russell Mulcahy, written by James Carabatsos, and starring Rick Schroder as Major Charles Whittlesey. The A & E original film was shot in Luxembourg and premiered in 2001. The film was also released on the A & E sister network, The History Channel. The film was nominated for three 2002 Emmy Awards: Picture Editing, Sound Mixing, and Sound Editing. *The Lost Battalion* won the Motion Picture Sound Editors award for best sound editing in television. Another nomination was for Best Edited Motion Picture for Commercial Television by the American Cinema Editors Association.<sup>75</sup>

One little known fact worth mentioning is that a silent film, also titled *The Lost Battalion*, directed by Burton King in 1919, has actual footage of Whittlesey and McMurtry. The film is an Edward Macmanus production and many of the surviving officers were invited to participate in what amounts to a reenactment of the events in the Charlevaux pocket. This silent version is available at the Library of Congress website, loc.gov, or it can be accessed through YouTube. It is also noteworthy that Whittlesey was an uncomfortable participant and only appeared in two

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<sup>73</sup>Robert J. Laplander, *Finding the Lost Battalion: Beyond the Rumors, Myths, and Legends of America's Famous WWI Epic*. (Waterford, WI: A.E.F. Services, 2017), 26.

<sup>74</sup>Thomas M. Johnson and Fletcher Pratt, *The Lost Battalion*. (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 258-259.

<sup>75</sup>The Lost Battalion (film) Wikipedia page  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Lost\\_Battalion\\_\(2001\\_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Lost_Battalion_(2001_film))

brief scenes with McMurtry. According to historian Edward G. Lengal, Macmanus was only using the officers as “window dressing” to give the film an air of authenticity which would increase public appeal.<sup>76</sup> The film opened in New York City on Sunday September 7, 1919 at the George M. Cohan Theatre. The next morning, *The New York Times* published its review which stated: “The attempt to reproduce the ancient forests and to picture the ordeal through which the men of Major Whittlesey's command passed a year ago next month is an elaborate and painstaking fabrication, but it is unconvincing and, considering the materials at hand, surprisingly undramatic.”<sup>77</sup>

The cast of *The Lost Battalion*, with the exception of Rick Schroder, are mostly unknown actors who are portraying a mix of New York immigrants and Midwestern farmers. The Seventy-seventh Division had many of its original members coming from the boroughs of Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Manhattan in New York City. However, heavy casualties had forced the army to pull replacements from Midwestern draftees that had virtually no basic training. This combination of New York “city slickers”, immigrants, and green Midwesterners made Whittlesey’s and McMurtry’s First and Second Battalions an eclectic mix unlike any other in the Argonne. The actors in *The Lost Battalion* do an excellent job of portraying the cultural differences that the men encountered. The New York accents are technically accurate and make the “slang” type dialogue historically correct. Also, the ethnic tensions portrayed in the men’s dialogue is accurate. However, the bonds formed under fire made these men a true band of brothers. Captain McMurtry would attend reunion dinners for the rest of his life, always willing to help and

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<sup>76</sup>Edward G. Lengal. *Never in Finer Company: The Men of the Great War's Lost Battalion*. (New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 2018), 291.

<sup>77</sup>New York Times, Sept. 7, 1919, Print archive: uncredited. Accessed 3/12/2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/1919/09/08/archives/thescree.html#:~:text=Of%20course%20in%20every%20siege%20the%20essentially%20dramatic,fleetingly%2C%20in%20the%20screen%20story%20of%20its%20ordeal>

counsel fellow survivors of the ordeal at the Charlevaux Pocket.<sup>78</sup>

Another noteworthy fact about *The Lost Battalion* is the accuracy of each soldier's name and rank. A & E research staff must have scoured the rolls of the 308<sup>th</sup> Infantry for correct information. Robert J. Laplander's extensively researched text, *Finding the Lost Battalion: Beyond the Rumors, Myths, and Legends of America's Famous WWI Epic*, contains a complete list of individuals known to have been at Charlevaux Pocket between 2 October and 7 October, 1918 and the names are a match to the men portrayed in the 2001 film.<sup>79</sup> *The Lost Battalion* also correctly names the two men used as "runners" during the siege of the pocket. Pvt. Abraham Krotoschinsky and Pvt. Frank I. Lipasti, both of the 307<sup>th</sup> K Company. Unfortunately, Pvt. Lipasti was killed in action but Krotoschinsky survived and often spoke of his fellow "runner".<sup>80</sup>

The sets, costumes and mannerisms are well done and correct. Still images and the footage from the 1919 film show that the uniforms and gear depicted by A & E's costuming department is historically accurate. The costume designers placed the canvas bags containing gas masks around the necks, which is accurate. Additionally, the men's circular dog-tags, suspended around the neck by a strip of leather are correctly replicated. Another authentic detail that the previous three films did not seem to consider, is the critical role of horses. Since automobiles were still rather new and not always plentiful, horses played a major role in the Great War and this film opens as the men are preparing to move out in both motor cars and horse drawn conveyances. The filmmakers also paid extra attention to detail in the depiction of the soldier's cigarette smoking. The previous three films, for unknown reasons, basically ignored the fact that soldiers in the Great War were extremely heavy cigarette smokers. Providing the men

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<sup>78</sup>Lengal. *Never in Finer Company*, 295.

<sup>79</sup>Laplander, *Finding the Lost Battalion*, 686-702.

<sup>80</sup>Laplander, *Finding the Lost Battalion*, 694.

with cigarettes was considered essential for morale and heavy smoking was thought to “steady” the men.<sup>81</sup> An interesting online article by Miranda Summers Lowe for Task & Purpose magazine shows an image of a mascot dog that would run up and down the trenches as a cigarette carrier.<sup>82</sup>

*The Lost Battalion* was filmed in and around Luxembourg but the locations have the same qualities as the Argonne Forest and a close examination shows that cold muddy conditions of October in Northeastern France are accurately depicted. The filmmakers portray all combat situations correctly, however, with the exception of one scene, the amount of blood and gore is kept to a minimum as this film was made for television. Another point the filmmakers address is how, on October 3, General Alexander orders Whittlesey’s and McMurtry’s men to advance in spite of the lack of support on both flanks. This scene is historically accurate as Alexander was under strict orders to advance from General John J. Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Forces.<sup>83</sup> These orders would come back to haunt the commander. When Pershing learned about Whittlesey’s plight on October 4, he was immediately concerned, not for the fate of his men, but about how the debacle would affect the personal reputations of himself and his officers. Pershing was exhausted and overwhelmed with the responsibilities of command and

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<sup>81</sup>With the entrance of the United States into World War I in 1917, cigarette use increased dramatically among United States military personnel as they were targeted by tobacco companies which touted cigarettes as a way for soldiers to psychologically escape from their current circumstances, boosting overall troop morale. Tobacco was viewed as indispensable to the war effort; General Pershing said "You ask me what we need to win this war. I answer tobacco as much as bullets. Tobacco is as indispensable as the daily ration; we must have thousands of tons without delay."

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Smoking\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States\\_military](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Smoking_in_the_United_States_military)

<sup>82</sup>Miranda Summers Lowe, *A Soldier’s Best Friend*

<https://taskandpurpose.com/history/military-working-dogs-world-war-i/#:~:text=Pipe%20smoking%20was%20the%20preferred%20method%20of%20nicotine,first%20American%20war%20where%20morale%20was%20taken%20seriously.>

<sup>83</sup>Laplander, *Finding the Lost Battalion*, 156.

hovering on the verge of a nervous breakdown. He then ordered Alexander to rescue Whittlesey, or else.<sup>84</sup>

One portion of *The Lost Battalion* that might seem unrealistic is the depiction of the German headquarters as somewhat luxurious. However, the film is quite accurate in its depiction of the German pavilions and blockhouses. The German had been occupying the Argonne Forest since 1914 and had constructed a series of lavish fortifications with bathtubs and hot and cold running water. There were beer gardens at several locations, as well as a movie theater and barber shops. The astonished American troops also discovered a bowling alley, billiard rooms and two full size concrete swimming pools. All these buildings were connected by stout wooden walkways with telephone communication available in most of the structures.<sup>85</sup>

The film's depiction of the friendly fire shelling on Friday October 4, 1918 is quite well done. This portion of *The Lost Battalion* is the most graphically represented and it is historically accurate. The friendly fire barrage wrecked Whittlesey's command hole and killed dozens of Whittlesey and McMurtry's men.<sup>86</sup> One particular death, that of Sergeant Major Ben Gaedeke, is most disturbing but historically correct. Sergeant Major Gaedeke, a German grocery store clerk from Yonkers, New York, received a direct hit from ordinance and there were no human remains that could be identified for burial.<sup>87</sup> The film shows Gaedeke's tragic death, which is the most intense scene of the whole picture.

*The Lost Battalion* shows how Whittlesey's unit used carrier pigeons to send messages to headquarters. This is another point of historical accuracy. Throughout the ordeal in the pocket, Whittlesey utilized these six birds to send pleading messages to his command for support and

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<sup>84</sup>Lengal. *Never in Finer Company*, 185-186.

<sup>85</sup>Laplander, *Finding the Lost Battalion*, 82-83.

<sup>86</sup>Lengal. *Never in Finer Company*, 201.

<sup>87</sup>Laplander, *Finding the Lost Battalion*, 452.

supplies. The men were injured and weak from hunger and Whittlesey was pinned down which meant the carrier pigeons were vital for conveying the urgency of the situation to General Alexander's rear command headquarters. The depiction of Cher Ami (dear friend), the last surviving bird, as a savior who carried a message to command to put an end to the friendly fire, is historically correct. Cher Ami was awarded the French Croix de Guerre with palm but the little hero died in the Spring of 1919 as a result of wounds and his body was professionally mounted by taxidermist, Nelson R. Wood. Since 1921, Cher Ami has been an exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C.<sup>88</sup>

The capture and interrogation of Lieutenant James Leak is yet another point of historical accuracy. The film shows German Lieutenant Prinz explaining to Leak that he had spent eight years in Washington state as a representative for a worldwide mining firm and was quite familiar with American customs and mannerisms. The German officer is portrayed in the film as polite and humane, with a sense of decency and fairness.<sup>89</sup> All of this is accurate and has been verified by Laplander's extensive research. The subsequent release of wounded Private Hollingshead with a letter to Whittlesey from Lt. Prinz, requesting his surrender, is also an accurate depiction of the course of events. The film even goes so far as to use some of the exact language contained in the document which is: "Please treat Pvt. Hollingshead as an honorable man. He is quite a soldier we envy you."<sup>90</sup> However, there is one small inaccuracy in this portion of *The Lost Battalion*, it occurs when Whittlesey reads the letter and states it is signed by "Major" Prinz, who was, in fact, a Lieutenant in the German command. Pvt. Hollingshead would survive the

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<sup>88</sup>The Smithsonian Institution has a detailed description of the Cher-Ami exhibit.  
[https://www.si.edu/object/nmah\\_425415](https://www.si.edu/object/nmah_425415)

<sup>89</sup>Laplander, *Finding the Lost Battalion*, 469.

<sup>90</sup>Laplander, *Finding the Lost Battalion*, 582.

Charlevaux ordeal, unfortunately, Lieutenant James Leak remained a POW and was never heard from again.<sup>91</sup>

The use of flame throwers and poison gas by the German army are chilling, yet accurate, details of what occurred while Whittlesey and McMurtry were trapped in the Charlevaux pocket. On Sunday October 6, the Germans began the heaviest and most determined assault on the exhausted survivors.<sup>92</sup> Many of the soldiers were terrified of the flamethrowers declaring them “Liquid Fire” but these Americans, with their last bit of strength, fought bravely and the attack was abruptly ended when the German army could not accomplish a breakthrough.<sup>93</sup> Many of the men would die of burns and Whittlesey was plagued by a persistent rattling cough and tinnitus for the rest of his short life.<sup>94</sup>

The October 8<sup>th</sup> rescue of Whittlesey and McMurtry’s men is accurate but certain details were excluded from the film, most likely because of the unpleasant nature of the rescue. The men in Whittlesey and McMurtry’s First and Second battalions had suffered a 66 percent casualty rate and the bodies of the dead were scattered throughout the pocket. The survivors, weak from injuries and hunger, could not get to all the burials and many men had lain in the forest for days with wounds that were now infected and rotting. Additionally, several days’ worth of blood, puss, urine, and fecal matter were stagnating in pools on the muddy ground.<sup>95</sup>

The biggest inaccuracy in *The Lost Battalion* is the insubordination Major Whittlesey shows to General Alexander on the morning of the rescue. The scene where Whittlesey fails to salute and turns his back on Alexander did not happen. The account by Robert J. Laplander states

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<sup>91</sup>Laplander, *Finding the Lost Battalion*, 694.

<sup>92</sup>Johnson and Pratt, *The Lost Battalion*, 248.

<sup>93</sup>Laplander, *Finding the Lost Battalion*, 533.

<sup>94</sup>Lengal. *Never in Finer Company*, 296.

<sup>95</sup>Laplander, *Finding the Lost Battalion*, 615.

that the General shook Whittlesey's hand and promoted him to Lieutenant Colonel, an honor to which Whittlesey: "murmured something apropos, and then said nothing more."<sup>96</sup>

The film does accurately depict the fact that Whittlesey remained with his men. Both Whittlesey and McMurtry remained at the site of the Charlevaux pocket for about six additional hours until the wounded were tended and removed by ambulance. Whittlesey also personally insured that all the dead had been given a proper burial.<sup>97</sup> While it cannot be verified, a part of the Lost Battalion's legend tells how Whittlesey, as the men were being carried out, turned to McMurtry and said thoughtfully, "George, we will never again be in finer company than we are right now," a sentiment to which McMurtry firmly agreed.<sup>98</sup> Whittlesey and McMurtry were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. The Great War ended just five weeks later. Whittlesey, haunted by the Charlevaux ordeal, committed suicide in 1921.<sup>99</sup>

*The Lost Battalion* examines the events at Charlevaux Pocket from the perspective of the men who suffered during the offensive. The filmmakers at A & E have done an outstanding job of interpreting a pivotal event in American military history. The situation on the Western front was dire in 1918 and the struggling American troops in the Argonne needed to break through the German defenses to link up with British forces. This film is an excellent portrayal of the events that occurred in October of 1918 without any excess embellishment or inconsequential plot devices. The researchers on the film accurately represent the valor of Charles Whittlesey and his "Lost Battalion" with taste and sensitivity, not an easy endeavor when depicting the brutal deaths of over 350 soldiers. *The Lost Battalion*, when compared to *Flyboys*, *Paths of Glory*, and *Testament of Youth*, is the most historically accurate portrayal of events. The film contains a

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<sup>96</sup>Laplender, *Finding the Lost Battalion*, 619.

<sup>97</sup>Laplender, *Finding the Lost Battalion*, 625.

<sup>98</sup>Laplender, *Finding the Lost Battalion*, 626.

<sup>99</sup>Lengal, *Never in Finer Company*, 305.

wealth of information which is presented in correct chronological order. *The Lost Battalion* would make an excellent addition to the World War I curriculum of any teaching institution.

*Flyboys, Paths of Glory, Testament of Youth, and The Lost Battalion* are all very different films. Each cinematic representation showed a different side of the Great War. The one major theme that all these films shared was the pain of loss. The loss of life, liberty, and love were so much a part of what the “lost generation” endured. The characters depicted in these films showed great fortitude under the most terrible conditions. While the films examined vary in accuracy, it is important to understand they are tributes. The men and women depicted on screen were people with a kind of stalwart courage that comes from the most intense suffering. The Great War generation witnessed the death of an entire way of life and they were forced to find a way to navigate through a new modern existence. It is difficult to image how frightening it must have been to see the world changing at such a rapid pace. These men and women was truly incredible.

Evaluating films for historical accuracy requires a thorough knowledge of the people and events being depicted. Unfortunately, motion pictures are money-making endeavors which have no ethical constraints that demand perfect accuracy. Artistic license allows screenwriters and directors to take their work in any direction they wish. Audiences crave excitement, not perfect authenticity. Whether blame lies with filmmakers or moviegoers, the “war film” is a cultural construct based upon the misguided premise that war is glorious and battles are opportunities to show individual valor. The notion that a film about war has to glorify the conflict presents many problems for scholars and historians. In attempting to convey the experience of war, filmmakers can twist seriously damaging and horrific events into cinematic misrepresentations that show conflict as an opportunity to exhibit one’s exceptional moral turpitude. This type of interpretation is terribly misleading. People who have never experienced war might see it as a chance to “prove

one's mettle" and a "glorious mission." The realities of war, which are well understood by scholars and military historians, are anything but glorious.

***I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work.***

*Bonnie L. Akkerman*

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