**Band of Brothers**

Band of Brothers is the story of Easy Company, 506th Regiment of the United States Army 101st Airborne division. HBO’s 10 part miniseries focuses on the company’s tour through Europe during World War Two from 1942 to 1945. Based off of Stephen E. Ambrose’s novel, HBO reenacts their time in training, the deployment on D-Day, Operation Market Garden, the Battle of the Bulge, and their capture of Eagle’s Nest. Discussing the plot and summary of each installment will lead to the further analysis of the historical value of the context within.

Despite the sound of enamored brotherhood, the motto of Easy Company was “Currahee”, meaning “Stand Alone”. The first episode, titled ‘Currahee’, introduces men in Aldbourne, England, but the story is told through flashbacks of their original training in Georgia. In 1942 at Camp Taccoa, the site of Currahee Mountain, the men of Easy Company begin the transformation into American soldiers. Airborne Infantry was a revolutionary idea in the early 1940s. Considered the newest branch of military, Paratroopers were paid extra and pushed harder than any other regiment in history. A driving force of Easy Company was 1st Lieutenant Herbert Sobel. Lieutenant Sobel was rash, critical and aggressive in tactics. Despite his lofty goals and impressive discipline, the men of Easy Company didn’t respect his leadership style or his approach to training. This was a reoccurring theme within regimens around the world. This internal struggle for power effected Sobel’s transition into higher rankings and the overall orientation of the company. It ultimately led to him losing control of Easy Company- the machine that he had built. While Camp Taccoa prepared the men physically and emotionally for war, it was at Camp Benning that the men earned their wings and title. After becoming fully fledged Paratroopers, Easy Company was moved to Camp Mackale for a brief stay and study before boarding their passage to Aldbourne, England. Upon tactical and mental training in England, Sobel was cast aside from Easy Company to be replaced by a new set of Lieutenants. As war neared, the American’s planned their attack upon the Third Reich through an invasion by air and sea over the channel. Paratroopers prepared themselves for the entrance into the Second World War. Two critical points can be made from the context of this episode alone. The first is the insight into training operations, improvements to US military, and relationships between soldiers. Without the building of this first episode, all three would have been nearly impossible to understand. The assertive behavior of Sobel advanced the Company as a whole, but also hindered their trust in commanding officers. A second observation comes from the scene in which the troops are traveling by boat to England from America. Two Privates, Guarnere and Liebgott, bring into light the true viewing of some American citizens. It becomes apparent in this scene that, while the United States has entered a war to defend the oppressed and scorned, her own countrymen were struggling with the same blatant and outrageous disgust for other religions.

After days of cancelled operations, the men are addressed and sent on their mission to take back the shores of France. ‘Day of Days’ is the title of the second installment where Easy Company, and the entire American force, arrive at Normandy. Picking up where the first episode left off, the exhausted faces of the Paratroopers tell the tale of preparation for war. Nervous looks were well placed, for Germany’s anti-aircraft machines lit up the night sky as the C-47s flew over enemy’s land. Men jumped from planes at excessive speeds and deathly heights in attempts to escape from the planes getting hit by enemy fire. Men lost their weapons, their radios, and their direction upon landing. Companies were separated from their counterparts by miles: stranded, scattered, and surrounded along German territory. Slowly, men met up with familiar comrades as they made their way through Normandy. Hours of travel led soldiers to the rallying point where a group of 11 men from Easy Company and 1 man from Able planned to take down the four German 88s that were firing on the beaches of Utah. Completing their objective, the men of Easy Company saved the beaches from constant artillery fire. Historical observations made from this episode come from varying sides. A concept developed with Paratroopers was the idea of leg bags: a packed bag that would be strapped to the men as they floated back down to Earth. While the concept could have changed the supply outcomes of the war, it was also a failure. In the fury of shots and explosions during the invasion, the leg bag didn’t match up in importance to their lives and were lost. The second observation is that without the work in quickly and quietly taking over the four guns, the beaches would have had a storm of explosions for more hours to come. Thirdly, in Keegan’s book, “The Second World War”, it was made obvious that most planes crashed accidently, not as a direct hit from enemy fire. While “Band of Brothers” was written based off of real experiences and encounters, the dramatization of planes crash landing gives a false sense of the German’s skills in marksmanship. Finally, this episode teaches a valuable message of planning and coordination. Most textbooks make the invasion appear to be seamless and straightforward. In fact, the invasion was a mess with many unaccounted for deaths and lost men wondering the countryside.

Episode three, ‘Carentan’, gives an idea of how long these stranded soldiers looked before finding the correct companies and how they behaved in the meantime. Many men joined other regiments and fought next to them along the journey showing us the importance of brotherhood in a different sense. Their camaraderie came from being American soldiers. It wasn’t the years of bonding that brought them together, it was their internal drive to survive and overcome the enemy’s obstacles. The last of the missing men that would rejoin Easy Company did over the few days of this episode. That being said, their leading operatives were still claimed missing (their plane had been shot down during the initial invasion on D-Day). Richard Winters, a well-respected and applauded man within the company, is named head of the operation until further notice. The plan for Easy Company was to overtake the city of Carentan so that the American fighters on Utah and Omaha could connect as one force. In the process, Easy Company partakes in their first truly bloody operation: an operation that sends a man into shock and another to stab his own comrade from paranoia. These days were often the first time men had seen any field action. Despite preparation, there are some things a body just can’t handle. Casualties continued to grow when German tanks ambushed the Company the following morning. By the end of the episode, Easy Company had lost 65 men total and was pulled off of the front lines. I think it is critical to discuss how crucial a productive start is to the morale of soldiers. Without an abrasive and strong beginning from Winters, I believe that the men could have been disheartened. The men were ready to fight mentally, physically and emotionally, but I believe that when the time comes to participate in a war there will always be a part of the human that isn’t prepared for the repercussions and aftermath of killing and watching your brothers die. It is a truth that all soldiers must learn to cope with in the midst of a war.

Returning to England in episode four, ‘Replacements’, Easy Company was relieved from Normandy altogether. With the large loss of soldiers, Easy Company needed more manpower to continue to fight in the war productively. A group of men, called Replacements, were sent in to help fill the spots of soldiers who had perished during the war. The episode gives a deeper insight to the bond built during initial training for war. Original members of Easy Company were not eager or ready to accept new men into their ranks. They didn’t have the time or ability to fully grieve the loss of their brothers before someone new expected their acceptance. Thinking of how eager these young men would have been to get on the front lines of the fight, they had no idea of what would lie ahead of them. In reality, those who had already been serving would be scarred and unbalanced after what they had seen and angered that someone wanted so badly to be there. Remembering a reading from “The Second World War”, the allies would be in desperate need of numbers. With that being said, training wouldn’t be as efficient or sound as before the war had started, and these men would be coming in with a disadvantage from the very start.

German SS were thought of as the elite fighters of the Third Reich. In the fifth episode, ‘Crossroads’, Captain Winters leads his company in an attack. In a courageous sweep, he takes on two entire companies of German SS while waiting for Easy Company to arrive. Seen as one of their most successful attacks, Easy Company almost killed both companies in their entirety from their surprise attack and swiftness in action. Cleaning up the mess that was Operation Market Garden, Easy Company loses Captain Winters to a promotion and is sent to rescue the British paratroopers that were trapped behind German lines. In an overnight rescue mission, we are able to see the teamwork and gratitude that Europeans and Americans shared. Although the British had been seen in flashes throughout the show, this is the first time that full contact and conversation shows the allies in action. This scene is the ideal representation of the war. England needed the US to enter the war. Without it, they wouldn’t have enough manpower or supplies to ride out the remainder of their fight against the superpower. Together, however, we created a team that could outwit and outperform Hitler’s army. Winters was noble and brave in his attempt to take down German society. As a lone attack, Germans were too dismayed to think of firing back. He had the opportunity and advantage that gave Easy Company the chance to overpower their fleet. However, this act seems to haunt Winters for the remainder of his time as a soldier and civilian. Another representation of the aftermath soldier’s are left with once a war is finished.

‘Bastogne’, the sixth installment, captures the horrors of war. Low on ammo, rations and medical supplies in the forests of France, the free world depended on the men of Easy Company to hold their line at Bastogne. Spending Christmas in a foxhole covered in snow lacking basic supplies would be among the Company’s worst nightmares. The episode focuses on the life of Eugene Rowe, a medic for Easy Company, and his challenge in gathering supplies. In most cases, medics of WWII were not fully trained doctors. They were regular men who were selected for the position as if lives didn’t depend on their knowledge and skill. Rowe was a talented and smart kid, but in a war, there should be more to the plan than that. Thanks to the First Geneva Convention, many medics were able to move about and save soldiers without fear of being killed, but often times, these medics were killed in bombings and accidental fire leaving soldiers to pick up the pieces and attempt to save lives. I believe that after WWII it became apparent to many countries the importance of fully trained doctors in war, but with the rise of insurgents, who simply don’t care about treaty’s signed by other men, medics no longer where significant markings and act as an normal soldier would during combat.

After a long and cold Christmas in Bastogne, the men reach a forest at the town of Foy, Ardennes, in the seventh episode. Picking up in 1945, Easy Company has the Germans retreating. Unfortunately for the Allies, they had surrounded themselves in the city of Foy with heavy artillery. This artillery caused many casualties during the Battle of the Bulge and continued into the following weeks. Since Winter’s promotion, Lieutenant Dike, had taken control of Easy Company. A coward and incompetent leader, Dike continuously made tactical errors that led to even more causalities than was necessary. Some claimed that they would have rather been stuck with Sobel in war than Dike. The few remaining original men of Easy Company were either wounded or so grief stricken that they were barely performing. In the episode, Easy Company is ordered to take Foy and joins forces with Dog and Item Companies to surround the city. Dike, who froze in the field, almost had his entire Company killed. A Lieutenant from earlier episodes, Spiers, was given command of the operation, saving the day- and countless lives. This episode had a lot of gun and firing action that carried deep weight in the importance of trusting the men that fight beside you. Dike’s inability to move forward could have been the end game for the Ally’s advancement in France. Not only did the men not believe in him as a leader, but also they didn’t back him up when he needed them the most. In a setting like war, if you can’t carry your own weight, you’re dead weight. Literally. They needed to follow someone who would charge into danger without thinking twice. That’s what all soldiers depend on in order to have hope for returning home.

Nearing February of 1945, the men of Easy Company had made their way into France’s city, Haguenau. There is a sense of relief all around as soldiers start to feel the end of the war approaching. Men that are sent in to replace old friends have little to no field experience, and the focus of many operations is aimed at gathering intelligence instead of bodies. A patrol that was set up for a quick and simple capture of prisoners ended up with injury and embarrassment. When a second patrol was crafted for the following night, Captain Winters fabricated a report claiming that his men completed the mission. This draws on the point that lives are too precious to waste no matter the cause. After years of combat and shuddering in foxholes, to die during a nighttime raid would be counterintuitive. The decision that Captain Winters made could have cost him his position, but his sound reasoning and judgment saved lives of the men he cared for.

With Captain Winter’s decision on the minds of his men, many reflect on their decision to fight another man’s war. The ninth episode, ‘Why We Fight’, was what attracted me into the study of World War Two. In this installment, Easy Company stumbles upon their first concentration camp. It is the start to the discovery of hundreds of camps across Eastern Europe. The utter shock and devastation witnessed in this one scene doesn’t begin to describe what the rescuers felt at the sight of these captives, but it does put into perspective the shape of the prisoners and the attitudes of the German villagers who ignored the smell of rotting flesh in their own backyard. German’s living in the town that our Easy Company took over are ordered to clean the camp starting the following day by helping to dispose of bodies. Easy Company was told of Hitler’s suicide and ordered to his Eagle’s Nest. The first of many soldiers to reach Berchtesgaden, the men of Easy Company celebrate the spoils of victory at the news of Germany’s surrender. Unfortunately for some, their fighting would continue in the Pacific before they would have the opportunity to return home. For those awaiting orders, the idle hands end up killing men who could have had a safe passage home only days away. The end of this episode, ‘Points’, covers the remaining men and their road back home. Survivors who interviewed for the miniseries are shown in excerpts discussing their arrival home and their time afterwards. There is no doubt that returning to society after the horrors that they witnessed was a transition that many couldn’t handle. But for those who did, they carried with them a bond that was untouchable and undeniable all the same. They were a band of brothers.

The striking and courageous tale of the 101st Airborne has won accolades from all accounts. The value of both the novel and the series is the new perspective brought to the world of what it was like to be a soldier before, during and after the war. Society is realizing the honor and service that is provided by military man with each new testimonial these series bring. Often times, men come home from war unwilling to mention what they had seen or experienced during their time in service. A reoccurring theme throughout the film is the struggle between post dramatic stress disorder. Which is now becoming a well-known diagnosis for men returning home. It is seen multiple times within the series without recognition to the true problem. Another critical theme is the relationship between leader and follower. Men were often times willing to risk treason hearings rather than die following and incompetent leader; however, the superior and beloved leaders made choices that risked their well being for the betterment of their soldiers. The trust and camaraderie amongst all men in the force paired with their belief in the cause can make or break their alliance and power as a fighting body. Without just cause, moral acceptance of their operation, and a qualified leader, Easy Company would often falter in their resilience. With them, however, they were a superpower Company with superior talents and assets. It is critical to understand the power of their bond as a unit in comparison to other US Regiments and outside country’s military.

Sources:

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