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- HOME
- POLITICS
- MEDIA
- BUSINESS
- ENTERTAINMENT
- LIVING
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- CHICAGO
- COMEDY 23/6
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DVDs: A *Stop-Loss* on Iraq War Movies

Posted July 11, 2008 | 03:36 PM (EST)



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Why are movies about the Iraq War so difficult to make? That's easy -- *all* war movies are difficult to make, especially when the war is on-going and the support for the war is murky at best. World War II was easy -- movies like *Mrs. Miniver* were meant to rouse people and stir up patriotism. Get to Vietnam and an awful movie like John Wayne's *The Green Berets* was hopelessly outdated the moment it was released, capturing neither the reality of the war nor the spirit at

home. You can barely call a minor skirmish like Grenada a "war," so when Clint Eastwood tried to build *Heartbreak Ridge* around it you couldn't help giggling.

And now the Iraq War. Documentaries have proven extremely effective and well-received because a point-of-view is a strength. But mainstream commercial films are afraid to seem partisan which means they fail to be realistic. And so to *Stop-Loss* (\$34.99; Paramount), Director Kimberly Pierce's follow-up to her brilliant *Boys Don't Cry* squanders a fine cast on a timid story about soldiers upset over being forcibly re-enlisted via a backdoor draft after fulfilling their duty (the "stop-loss" of the title) but eventually showing up for duty anyway. Instead of the careful ethnic mix of a WWII movie, *Stop-Loss* features a careful balance of flaws: Channing Tatum is violent and unable to control himself in civilian life, Joseph Gordon-Levitt (a terrific actor wasted in a small role) is a drunk who hates following orders and Ryan Phillippe (who is consistently better than you think he's gonna be) is a guy who refuses to accept being dragooned back into Iraq when he believes he kept his side of the bargain. Phillippe is the most stable of the lot, which makes his going AWOL all the harder to swallow. Could the smartest guy in his group really think a US Senator would go up against the Defense Department during wartime and help a soldier gone AWOL to avoid service? That's the hard-to-swallow engine driving this movie. Combine that with a respect for the soldiers and their families that keeps the movie from specifically talking about THIS

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war (the conflict could be darn near any conflict, for all it matters) and the result is a hard to buy premise vaguely connected to the current conflict rescued somewhat by a fine cast.

What's your favorite war movie? I have a fondness for the Korean War flick *Pork Chop Hill* because it was boldly pessimistic and my local TV station showed it over and over again late at night when I was growing up.

Also out this week:

Chop Shop (\$26.98; Koch Lorber) -- Director Ramin Bahrani's superior followup to *Man Push Cart* delicately captures the struggles of two orphans in Queens, New York who claw out an existence around the junkyards near Shea Stadium. If he keeps improving like this, Bahrani's next film is definitely one to watch.

Superhero Movie (\$29.95; Genius) -- If I told you this *Airplane*-like parody of superhero movies was dumb, would you think that was a compliment? If so, snap this up. At some point, actor **Drake Bell** is gonna be a superstar. I just can't figure out whether it's going to be via acting or his terrific music.

Batman Mania -- *The Dark Knight* is getting terrific reviews from the trades, so to pump up anticipation even more they're re-releasing *Batman Begins* in a Limited Edition Giftset (\$49.99; Warner Bros.), which includes a flashdrive with Batman artwork, postcards and the such. But doesn't everyone who would pay extra for a giftset already own it? More useful is the 5th and final season of *The Batman* (\$19.98; Warner Bros.), the recent animated series that began in 2004 which is fine, but not as good as the highwater mark of *Batman*, the animated version from the 90s. Finally, I'm split on *Batman Gotham Knight* (\$29.98; Warner Bros.), the first PG-13 animated Batman movie. I know the movies are increasingly dark and really for adults and have no problem with the superior quality of this release. But somehow the fact that they're pushing the envelope content-wise with even the animated Batman just doesn't sit well with me. I know, it's not meant for kids just because it's animated. But still...

Mummy Mania -- Brendan Fraser's return to the square-jawed hero of *The Mummy* in the new movie *The Mummy: Tomb Of The Dragon Emperor* has spawned the usual reissues. There's *The Mummy* (\$19.98; Universal), the surprisingly fun 1999 movie; *The Mummy Returns* (\$19.98; Universal), the 2001 sequel which couldn't live up to even modest expectations, the original Boris Karloff *The Mummy* (\$26.98; Universal) in a special edition that can't hide the fact that the original is pretty dull; *Van Helsing* (\$19.98; Universal), which is a stretch but they need to make their money back on that one still, don't they; and even *Journey To The Center Of The Earth* (\$19.95; Genius), a TV movie from earlier this year starring Ricky Schroeder that beat Brendan Fraser's other summer movie, at least to the little screen.

Shhhhh! "The X-Files" Is Coming Out -- For some reason, the summer movie *The X-Files: I Want To Believe* appears to be the buzz-less movie of the year. A once wildly popular TV show, *The X-Files* stayed on the air far too long (like virtually every hit show ever made) and wore out its welcome. But when I watch the trailer for the movie, that haunting score immediately gets me going again. Maybe this stand-alone adventure can be sold as a straight horror movie of sorts, with fans slowly realizing they missed the show after all. All it will need is some good reviews and a decent first weekend could turn into "legs," where the movie plays and plays and the fun of the show is reignited. One good way to get excited: dipping into *The X-Files Revelations* (\$22.97; Fox), which brings together eight of the best stand-along episodes from the show including the pilot, the one with the sewer monster, the one with Peter Boyle as a psychic and more. No surprise: all eight episodes come from the first six seasons. Watch these and you'll be sure to line up for the movie on opening night come July 25.

Finally: the Canadian gem *Mon Oncle Antoine* (\$39.95; Criterion); *Sheryl Crow Live* (\$19.99; Koch), with the rocker celebrating her enduring career in this fine 90 minute show; *Dog Whisperer Third Season* (\$39.98; Screen Media), with Cesar Millan working with problem dogs (and as often as not, problem owners as well) in this reality show; *Tyler Perry's Meet The Browns* (\$34.98; LionsGate), Perry's latest romantic drama, this time with Angela Bassett and the always hilarious Jenifer Lewis in a special edition that includes a free digital download (an increasingly common feature on DVDs) for portable or computer viewing; *305* (\$29.99; Allumination), the YouTube spoof of *300* turned to full-length DVD movie, proving that being the first YouTube to feature film doesn't necessarily mean you're the best, but at least you've got bragging rights; *Stealth* (\$29.95;

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Arianna was on CBS' "Washington..."

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I'm a little embarrassed to love this show as much as...

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WaterBearer), a well-reviewed queer comedy about identity and love; *Down The River* (\$29.95; WaterBearer), a pretty but shapeless Thai film about awkward teen gay love that is so typical of current Thai cinema in its disregard for niceties like character development that you have to wonder what the Thais have against plots; *Soul Food* (\$49.98; Paramount), the fifth and final season of the Showtime series; and *Down The Barrel* (\$19.95; Genius), a too-short ESPN documentary following Kelly Slater, Rob Machado, Joel Parkinson and Kalani Robb as they surf in some of the most gorgeous spots in the world. No reason not to stuff this with extra footage of their surfing but the 93 minutes here look beautiful.

So tell me, what's your favorite war movie of all time?

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my favorite war movie is "monte carlo". george hamilton and joan collins play spies in monte carlo and are nearly killed when the british and americans strafe a lawn party. in one of the boldest risks undertaken in modern cinema- joan collins sings; but george hamilton forgives her. most of the footage is believed to be on location. they had to take the yachts out of the harbor and replace them with smaller boats, so they'd look like warships. the dvd is european PAL format.

joan is taking pictures of the ships in the harbor (yes, it is a vintage leica) when she is discovered by george hamilton, a cynical debonaire roue. george keeps it light as he begins his pursuit of joan,

love it for a reason like being green!
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amiably complementing her spying sideline by keeping the champagne chilled. (priceless gascon bartender). meanwhile a broke englishman (not to be redundant) is trying to make a buck smuggling jewish scientists. initially entirely mercenary, he dies for the cause. in a suspenseful and exciting climax. joan and george escape the nazis in possibly a bugatti cinquantasette cabrio. one was in use in La Clayette at the time of filming.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 11:59 AM on 07/15/2008

Michael Giltz See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz permalink

Talk about obscure. It looks like Monte Carlo was a TV miniseries and runs five hours long. Is it campily fun or an underappreciated gem? I'm gonna assume the former but I'll keep an eye out for it. With hundreds of TV channels, someone's bound to rerun it some day.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 06:23 PM on 07/17/2008

wayoutleft See Profile I'm a Fan of wayoutleft permalink

it's camp, mike. i appreciate your serious estimation of the serious films discussed. i always try to blow up military or war-oriented threads. [like a few months ago a blogger wrote a piece on jim webb and the scots-irish "cult of the warrior". i wrote this comment presuming "cult of the warrior" referred an old SEGA videogame title.] i do this because i believe that as long as war is thought of differently than as a social pathology, we will inevitably get more of it. i feel taking on the nobility stuff head on is absolutely neccessary to achieving a more peaceful world. i.e., war mythology must be deconstructed to make warfare as unaccepable as epidemic disease. i'm a little more of a louche monegasque than i am an airborne ranger, though. a little more "tiens!" than "ten-hut!"...

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 12:11 AM on 07/18/2008

RickO See Profile I'm a Fan of RickO permalink

There's usually a wide gulf between the good and bad war movies. Green Berets was really god-awful. We Were Soldiers would have been much better without Mel Gibson (he's the same character as he was in Braveheart and The Patriot) The Band of Brothers series is excellent, especially the Bastogne episode. The D-day sequence in Private Ryan is absolutely wrenching and realistic and if the cemetary scene doesn't get to you, nothing will. One that I think got missed was Letters from Iwo Jima, That was quite good. As far as the Iraq movies, they've all basically sucked so far, as though they needed to be "cleared" first. I am watching that new series Generation Kill and the first episode is promising, although the overacting is a bit annoying. Let's hope it delivers.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 07:47 AM on 07/15/2008

Michael Giltz See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz permalink

Thanks for the comments. Do you mean the cemetary scenes that bookend Private Ryan? I'm afraid I have to disagree. Like many people, find the bookends thoroughly unnecessary and (SPOILER ALERTSPOILER ALERT) the "cheat" of making us think Tom Hanks is the old man a the cemetary when it's actualy Matt Damon and Hanks is dead is a cheap trick and undermines what for most of the movie is a classic, traditonal war movie. I'm taping Generation Kill but haven't watched it yet - I hope it's good too.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 06:27 PM on 07/17/2008

Guitarsandmore See Profile I'm a Fan of Guitarsandmore permalink

Best war movies:

"The Kingdom of Heaven" - because in the end it shows that a city is just another piece of stone and the real precious treasure is the children, women, friends, and relatives, that you love and need to protect. The humility from the queen and the knight as they give up their roles and find each other in love seems real and much more important. Good special effects.

"We were soldiers" - with Mel Gibson because it showed the beginning of the path of folly in Vietnam that would only get worse. Colonel Moore was an exceptional soldier but even he did not realize what

the United States was walking into and the price paid for our ignorance would be enormous. The final comment from the North Vietnamese leader is an eerily ominous prediction for the United States.

"Saving Private Ryan" - War is not glamorous and should be avoided if possible. Good acting. Good character development throughout the movie. Carnage.

"Black Hawk Down" because it looked so real it was scary and gave me nightmares, chest pain. another case of the United States under estimating the enemy and over estimating its own capabilities.

"Gallipoli" - Mel Gibson because once again it showed the absolute and complete waste of humanity that is war.

"Troy" - Brad Pitt - interesting version of the classic tale from Homer.

"Apocalypse Now" " confusion and uncertainty of everyone involved in the Vietnam War. Poetic acting from Marlon Brando.

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 **Michael Giltz** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

Gallipoli is one of my all-time favorites too. I haven't watched We Were Soldiers yet so I'll have to check that out. And afraid I'll have to NOT chime in on Troy, though there's certainly no satisfying version of that war that's better than it. But too stiff for my taste. Thanks for reading.

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 **Jude2004** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Jude2004](#) [permalink](#)

My favorite war movies? Twelve O'Clock High for World War II (or, if I'm in a *really* schmalzy mood, The Glenn Miller Story) and from all time? Letters from Iwo Jima.

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 **Michael Giltz** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

I'd never thought of The Glenn Miller Story as a war story per se, but of course you're right (and right about the schmalz). Twelve O'Clock High is very good and Letters is certainly superior to Flags of Our Fathers.

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 **jvarga** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of jvarga](#) [permalink](#)

Speaking of X-files, I've been killing myself trying to get through the entire series before the movie comes out. I still have 2.5 seasons left (SIGH). I'm pretty happy to hear it's more or less stand alone, because watching 4 episodes a day was driving me crazy. In other news, the complete series box set from amazon was a good purchase at 50% off.


The war movie question is a good one. For whatever reason I'm really fond of Enemy at the Gates. I like Glory and Full Metal Jacket a lot, too. I guess Starship Troopers doesn't count, but if it did it would be my favorite.

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How are you enjoying the show? Is it your frst time watching The X-Files? I understand wanting to be complete, but really seasons 1-6 are by far the good ones compared to 7-9, which are better forgotten (especially when Duchovny is gone). You're certainly more than prepared for the movie. Enemy at the gates isn't bad, Glory is good, Full metal Jacket is great (and looks better and better with the passage of time, like most Kubrick films) and Starship Troopers IS a war movie, darn it, and a very funny pointed one.

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 **jvarga** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of jvarga](#) [permalink](#)

When x-files came out I was in high school and my parents didn't have cable (let alone a satellite) so I had to try and watch it on a crappy uhf station that usually didn't come in at our house. Then I went to college and started drinking on friday nights, so I never saw many episodes of it.

I'm enjoying it quite a bit, but there are a few times when I've just kind of shaken my

head in dismay like when Mulder says things like "Scully this is a classic case of demonic rape and abortion". One of the things I didn't recall from my limited exposure to the show was the humor that he displayed ("I'm OK, my ass broke the fall".) I am fearing what it will be like when I make it to the episodes without him, seems like there won't be much of a purpose to the show?

One thing I don't get is how did people keep track of the major storylines in the show when it was new. I mean, I'm watching the episodes in quick succession and I can go to wikipedia if I get confused, but when the show came out that wasn't an option and sometimes you'd have to go a month or two between thematically related episodes. I guess the internet has made me lazy.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 09:17 AM on 07/15/2008

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