

# ON JOEL SCHUMACHER'S *TIGERLAND*

Unfortunately, when I think of Vietnam War movies I picture actors like Chuck Norris or Sylvester Stallone holding two .50 caliber machine guns in both hands while flying an attack helicopter. Although some were entertaining, most were just too far from the truth. In 2000, Joel Schumacher took a new and different approach to showing a side of the Vietnam War that was uncommon compared to other war movies. The director wanted to show the other form of combat that mostly goes unnoticed to the general public, combat training. Rather than showing the rigors of combat with the enemy, he filmed the psychological stress among comrades. "Tigerland" was shot using 16-millimeter film, hand held cameras, and unknown actors to show a sense of realism. Also, one of the writers, Ross Klavan, based the movie script on his own personal experiences. The movie focused on the defining moments of combat and, more importantly, expressed the many different styles of leadership. I think the director did convince the audience that Private Boz possessed real leadership qualities, however; I feel he could have made Private Boz more realistically portrayed as a rebellious soldier by not having so many acts of defiance. Boz showed a great sense of troop welfare by realizing certain men should not be sent to combat or even be in the Army at all. He possessed enough courage to question authority in order to help his fellow soldiers. However, the director failed to convince me that Private Boz would have lasted as long as he did in the Army.

When I was twenty years old, I enlisted in the United States Marine Corps in October of 1996 and went to boot camp four months later. The next three months of boot camp turned out to be the hardest challenge I have ever faced in my life. From the minute the first Drill Instructor picked us up from the airport in San Diego, we were under total control of some of the finest instructors in

the whole United States military. At first, I did not think that way about them; they were extremely intimidating individuals. After the first day, or maybe even the first hour, all I wanted to do was go home. Many of us felt that way. I would be a liar if I said I did not think of a way to get back on the next plane home. The culture shock was unreal. Everything about being a civilian or an individual was squashed immediately. Physically, it was the best training program I could have ever imagined. Mentally, it was the hardest thought process I have ever had to overcome. Thankfully, it got better towards the end, and I became a U.S. Marine. Just as a developing leader does, I took leadership qualities from the leaders who helped shaped me into a Marine. After boot camp, I went to Marine Combat Training for two months and became a squad leader while I was there. This was like infantry training, but it was for non-infantry personnel. Then I went to Camp Johnson, North Carolina to complete eight weeks of Supply and Operations training. After graduating in the top 10 % of my class, I received orders to report to the 1<sup>st</sup> Force Service Support Group, 1<sup>st</sup> Supply Battalion, Supply Company on Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, California. This turned out to be my first and only duty station. While there, I encountered more leadership styles and used those of which I thought were important to develop into a leader myself. I quickly realized that I wanted to be a leader rather than a follower. I was meritoriously promoted to the rank of Corporal faster than all of my peers. This rank meant that I had become a Non-Commissioned Officer and was able to take charge of Marines and help develop them. Due to this, I also quickly learned that leading others was a tough job, just as is portrayed in the movie "Tigerland".

The movie takes place in a Louisiana Army training ground in 1971 where men are being trained at faster than normal rates so they can be shipped off to fight a losing war in Vietnam. Narrated by Private Paxton, the film is a memory of his experience with Private Boz, who is first introduced being released from the base stockade. Then, he is turned over to second platoon, Alpha Company, who has just graduated boot camp and is now entering infantry school located at Fort

Polk, Louisiana. After completing infantry school, the platoon is sent to Tigerland; their final phase of training before being shipped out to Vietnam. Before leaving, Boz is forced to take charge of the platoon and must lead them through the rest of their training and then on into Tigerland. The attitude portrayed by the members of the platoon and the training command is that of a losing proposition to fight in the war. The movie shows many different positions of leadership and how they effect the platoon and the command.

Private Boz showed a great sense of troop welfare by realizing certain men should not be sent to combat or even be in the Army at all. In the movie, Boz recognizes that three soldiers in his platoon would surely become casualties once sent to the war. First, he helps Private Cantwell get a humanitarian discharge from the Army because of his terrible family life outside of the military. Second, he recognizes that their current platoon leader has joined the Army for all the wrong reasons, and he can not take the persistent humiliation and psychological torture from the training command. In turn, Boz helps Miter get discharged as well. Private Boz's ability to listen and react to these unfortunate problems occurring between the two men portrayed a true quality of being a leader. The Third man that Boz saved from being shipped to war was his buddy, Private Paxton. The movie's final scene captures Private Boz's true leadership potential in the way he deals with the confrontation between Paxton, Private Wilson, and himself. Although he had his chance to escape the Army by way of desertion, Boz returns to save his friend from the horror of combat soon to be inflicted by Wilson. With one shot fired from his M16A1 service rifle, Boz not only ends the conflict between Wilson and Paxton, but he also saves his friend from going to die in Vietnam. He does this for two reasons; one is that he realizes his friend is not prepared for the war. Paxton hoped of becoming the next great war novelist, not becoming a war hero or a real combat soldier. Second, Boz chose to end the relationship between himself and Paxton because he did not want the emotional attachment that could alter his chances of staying alive in Vietnam.

As a former leader of Marines, I can definitely relate to the character of Private Boz and his ability to take care of his fellow soldiers. According to the eleven leadership principles taught in the Marine Corps, knowing your men and looking out for their welfare is high on the list. During training missions or while in garrison, that is the first thing I tried to accomplish from the very beginning. My goal was to get to know each Marine as an individual so I could find out their capabilities, strengths, weaknesses, and if they had personal problems. For example, one of my best Lance Corporals in my former squad struggled to adapt to the military environment his first year in. Our platoon sergeant just about wrote him off for dead and was ready to proceed with non-judicial punishment proceedings. Luckily, before that happened I was able to sit down a talk to him like two ordinary men. Rather than order him or command him to shape up or ship out, I listened to his problem and then, most importantly, took action to help him overcome his problems. It turned out that his mother, who happened to be his only parent, was in great financial need back in his home state of Washington. All it took to turn him into an outstanding Marine was to set up an allotment to his mother's bank so he could get some money to her. Although I do not believe he was ever a threat to other Marines during training exercises, minor problems like the one he had can make people do the craziest things.

Along with implementing some leadership principles, Private Boz had enough courage to question authority in order to help his fellow soldiers. In the movie, Boz tells Paxton that, "courage is when you are the only guy who knows how shit scared you really are." I feel that those words could not be any closer to the truth. I think that is why the director of the movie portrays Boz as a rebellious soldier, although too much, but it gets the point across. Boz acts this way to show his platoon they still have a reason to live. For instance, after the Platoon Commander asks Private Boz why he acts the way he does, Boz replies, "I am just trying to keep myself alive." Then the Captain shouts back saying, "we are fighting a war Private, nobody knows how he is going to

come back." Boz's final reply is, "that is not the kind of alive I am talking about." His courage united a band of men who thought of themselves as walking ghosts soon to be roaming through jungles of death. Furthermore, the director showed Boz's courage when he questions Private Miter's reasoning for advancing towards enemy machine guns head on. When the training Staff Sergeant begins yelling at him for defying his Platoon Sergeant, Boz stands his ground and explains his maneuvering strategy. Due to his flanking attack plan being logically correct, the rest of the platoon stands behind Private Boz's defiance.

According to the fourteen leadership traits, also taught in the Marine Corps, courage is defined as, "A mental quality that recognizes fear of danger or criticism but enables a person to proceed in the face of it with calmness and firmness." I feel that if I did not have courage I would have never become a good leader. In order to be an effective leader, one must lead from the front and lead by example. That alone takes courage to do. Some people think that questioning authority is an act of rebellion or insubordination. However, if it is done with tact and reasoning, most of the time it shows courage and respect for doing what one thinks is right. For instance, during a patrolling exercise out in the bush of Camp Pendleton, I was ordered to take my squad down a ravine and across a slow moving stream channel. Once I recognized that poison oak surrounded our entire path, I chose to halt my squad and take a new route. Unfortunately, our platoon commander was watching from afar and was not happy with my decision. Due to the respect we had for one another, he did not yell or carry on why I seemed to defy his order, but he did question my decision of why I would not go through the grove of poison oak. At first, he failed to realize that I was treating that contagious bush as the enemy and that it could cause casualties in my squad. I treated getting a terrible rash the same as getting shot in the leg or possible killed. My squad supported my decision and, soon after my explanation, our Platoon Commander did too. In contrast to portraying Private Boz as having good leadership qualities, the director failed to

convince me that Private Boz would have lasted as long as he did in the Army. Although the Vietnam War Era was thirty years ago from the time I served in the military, I think that any soldier during any time period would be discharged or be confined behind bars if they did the kind of things that Private Boz did to act out his defiance. First, the director lets the audience know that Boz must have done something bad because he is introduced being let out of the base stockade. Second, Boz is shown hanging off the side of a five-ton truck while it is in motion. Third, Boz is caught being AWOL from his appointed place of duty. Fourth, he causes another five-ton truck to come to a sudden stop by shoving his canteen down the exhaust pipe. Finally, his consistent disrespect towards the training sergeant completes my argument.

I can almost guarantee that two or maybe even one of those actions would warrant a reason for some type of punishment other than a minor consequence. Granted, the director portrayed these actions to show hidden leadership qualities, however; it was just too much for me to believe. In my former platoon alone, I witnessed Marines getting demoted in rank for disrespecting commanding officers to Marines getting confinement, demoted, and discharged for being UA (unauthorized absence). These punishments were the result of only first time offenders. The Marines who caused trouble quickly got a name for themselves and were looked upon as being a cancer to the entire platoon. They were usually dealt with expediently so their actions could not hurt others. Platoon moral is always in jeopardy when one single action by one single Marine could cause discontent. It would be unfair to the many good Marines to keep a major troublemaker among them.

In conclusion, I think Joel Schumacher convinced the viewing audience that Private Boz did possess real leadership qualities, but he could have made the character of Private Boz more realistically portrayed as a rebellious soldier by not having so many acts of defiance. Boz showed a great sense of troop welfare by realizing certain men should not be sent to combat or even be in

the Army at all. He possessed enough courage to question authority in order to help his fellow soldiers. However, the director failed to convince me that Private Boz would have lasted as long as he did in the Army.

George Nicholas

Section 1