# Words Fail in the Pacific

Did anybody ever use the term “conflict resolution” in the Second World War? You would have thought that the term didn’t show up until decades later. But someone says it on screen in *The Pacific*, the giant HBO television miniseries that comes from the same creative workshop as the excellent *Band of Brothers,* and was meant to outdo it, or at least to match it. *The Pacific* is must viewing. Nobody who knows anything about the Second World War will want to miss it. But if the idea was that anyone who knew nothing about the Second World War – the next generation, for example -- might learn something important, the wish has gone wide of the mark, largely because anything said is almost impossible to pay attention to, let alone remember, except in the wrong way. Some of the dialogue is still with me, and I wish it weren’t. As well as hearing about “conflict resolution” we also hear both soldiers and civilians speaking well-worn lines in predictable scenes which come across as a mish-mash of every Hollywood action epic since the Japanese surrendered, including movies in which Persians fight Spartans.

In other words – and if only there had been other words – the entire script of *The Pacific* is stone deaf, thereby undoing prodigies of visual authenticity. There is no point restaging a naval night battle off Guadalcanal if some awed young actor, gazing grimly out to sea, is going to describe the gunfire as looking like “the fourth of July.” The same writers would have had Mark Antony saying that about the battle of Actium. That kind of writing, aspiring to vigour but conveying nothing vivid, concocted by people whose mentalities are saturated by the movies and by nothing else, is put in *instead* of writing. Facing the piles of corpses in the aftermath of yet another night-time battle, the marines describe the Japanese as “either incredibly brave or incredibly stupid”. One of the reasons the line sounds vacant is that you heard it last week in a movie about Thermopylae. Second-rate movie dialogue is perennial, a dolt’s dialect of its own, and one of the hopes extended by the mini-series as a genre – think of *The West Wing* at its hurtling best --- is that the old botched carpentry can be left behind. Hence the depression induced by a mini-series that reverts to chipboard and cheap nails.

A movie can survive dud speeches, however, if its scenes are written to suit a structure and advance a story. But if the structure is no more coherent than the speeches, and the story no more coherent than the structure, then the script is a liability from both the top down and the bottom up. What is true for the movies goes double for a miniseries, where, no matter how lavish the spectacle, the focus is tighter on the narrative. But whole episodes of *The Pacific* go by in which almost nothing happens that might keep your brain alive, even when hundreds of stuntmen pretending to be Japanese are running out of the jungle in order to fall down in heaps. Sometimes there is a map with an arrow pointing towards Japan, where the stuntmen come from.

Any form of moving picture without a strong script is merely a device for the incineration of money. *The Pacific*, despite its would-be monumental scale, is feeble at its core, a drawback that would have mattered less if *Band of Brothers* has not been quite so good. Setting the scope of their ambitions far beyond any movie, even those movies that they had directed or starred in, Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks, with *Band of Brothers*, gave us what could pass for an appreciable summary of the war in Europe. With *The Pacific*, the same duo, going back to the other half of the same war, have come up with little more than an illustrated treatise on conflict resolution.

Their aim was worthy, but they have disappointed expectations which they themselves helped to create. Yet if the scripts had been less mechanically done, would the result still have got anywhere near evoking the magnitude of the war in the Pacific? Or was that conflict, none of which was ever resolved by any other means except absolute violence, just too big a mess, too shapeless, too wide-spread, and, above all, too horrible?

The ghastly behaviour of Japanese militarism was well known long before the Pearl Harbour attack initiated what the Japanese called the Strike South. In Nanking in 1937 at least a quarter of a million Chinese civilians were put to death in hideous circumstances. Throughout the war, personnel on the Allied side correctly regarded the Japanese as barbarians who would use women and children for bayonet practice: correctly because that was what they had already done. In Europe, the Nazis had arrived at an equally unspeakable barbarism, having overwhelmed a young democracy to do so. But the Japanese military forces had arrived at their own barbarism out of a military culture that was barbaric already.

Japanese mimicry of the West since the Meiji Restoration had provided only a thin layer of civilized influence, and indeed Japan’s most successful act of imitation was to duplicate the command system of the Prussian army. In the Japanese version of blind military obedience, any rank could hit members of the rank below until the chain of blows got down to the private soldier, who had nobody to hit except prisoners and civilians. The result should have been predictable but was hard to believe even after it started happening wherever the Japanese army went. Long after the war was over, when all the personal histories had been published, there were still people writing for literate periodicals who preferred to believe that Japanese ill-treatment of Allied prisoners had been exaggerated. The facts were just too bad to take in, even when you were faced with them. And all this happened over an area of the earth that left Europe looking like a car-park.

Nor was America the only nation involved in bringing the catastrophe to an end. In the task of saving the Asian nations, including Japan itself, from the ravages of a psychopathic totalitarianism, every battle counted and many of them were fought by America’s allies, who were often surprised to find themselves being left out of the publicity coverage. Australia, a thinly populated country which even today holds no more people than New York State, suffered more than 12,000 dead before the Japanese left New Guinea in peace. General MacArthur always seemed to have trouble remembering that the Australians were in New Guinea at all, even though he never left the Australians in doubt that he himself was in Melbourne. Later on, in Burma, the British, at great cost, visited the Japanese with a salutary disaster, but their commander, William Slim, was quite right to call his troops a forgotten army. (Fergal Keane’s *Road of Bones*, his history of the siege of Kohima, is too serious a work to be dealt with *en passant*, but one doubts if it would be coming out right now if the timing were not thought propitious. Behold the power of television.)

In the long view of publicity and the movies, it was the Americans who counted because they not only had by far the bigger forces, they controlled the means of mass communication. In Britain and Australia in 1945, cinema audiences were astonished and revolted to find the Australian actor Errol Flynn imitating an American while he defeated the enemy in *Objective Burma*, with the British army hardly mentioned. Finally the Americans weren’t hated for their military might, which did, after all, bring to an end, by means of the atomic bombs, a war which nobody sane wanted to continue for a day longer than it needed to. But the Americans were distrusted for the only kind of imperialism they seemed bent on exercising without self-doubt: cultural imperialism. They’re still at it, operating by now on a world scale and adapting to all sectors of a global market, in an increasingly sophisticated form of imposition by consent.

Some of the accompanying publicity for this series foolishly nattered about the Pacific war being about two different varieties of racism colliding, but luckily not even the most convinced revisionists and fans of moral equivalence found it prudent to sustain that line for long. The awful truth is that though there were Allied soldiers who used Japanese skulls for ashtrays and referred to the enemy as animals, on the Japanese side racism went beyond language and custom and far into sadism, with the torture of helpless victims as standard practice.

*The Pacific* shows scarcely a sign of bad behaviour on the Japanese side, almost as if lingering Japanese sensitivities were still being catered to. Actually there are plenty of liberals in Japan who think that such sensitivities should be catered to a lot less, and luckily some of those liberals are in the television broadcasting system. Since the war, until embarrassingly recent times, the Japanese education ministry did a resolute job of keeping the facts about what the Japanese armed forces did in Asia and the Pacific out of the school text-books, but the broadcasters have always been more honest. *The Pacific* will be screened in Japan in July. They could have done with something less like a movie. We all could, but things don’t necessarily go right twice just because they went right once.

They went right in *Band of Brothers*, but not here. Suppose though, that the thing had been done better. Could it have got near the reality? Surely not: the reality was too complex to be reduced to a story of any kind. In*Band of Brothers*, the boys were quite plausibly on their way to Berchtesgaden, and Goering’s collection of fine wines. Raiders of the lost ark! In the Pacific war there was no simple aim except to remove from the Japanese military forces their capacity to go on doing what they had been doing since the early 1930s, and what they had been doing is simply too dreadful to be contemplated in anything resembling a story. It is matter for history only: for a sense of nuance that has survived a long gazing into a furnace.

But even if one inclines to that view, there is still the preliminary duty of registering just how thoroughly what we see on the screen in this series fails even to fulfill the elementary requirements of a good adventure story, even though the resources lavished on it were seemingly infinite. The “seemingly”, of course, has a lot to do with computer-generated imagery, which gives the TV directors a range of spectacle that was unavailable to the earlier film-makers. In *The Sands of Iwo Jima*, John Wayne ran slowly across a short stretch of sand on the studio floor while whole nests of Japanese machine gunners unaccountably failed to hit him.

In *The Pacific*, young actors less identifiable than John Wayne have real islands for décor. Actually the real islands consist mainly of stretches of bush in Queensland, but some supplementary long shots make everything look so kosher that you wouldn’t know, whereas, when my generation was young, even a child knew that John Wayne had never left Hollywood either during the war, which he deliberately dodged, or after the war, which he retroactively won on screen within the confines of the back lot. The realism of a series like this would have left him snarling at the waste of money.

The realism even extends to giving us some idea of what the invasion forces must have looked like. In the actual war, towards the end, a US invasion fleet often occupied a greater area than the island it was attacking. The fleet was a city on the water. It had its own dry-docks, its own everything. From the transport ships came the landing craft with various initials that brought the troops ashore. There were hundreds of these machines churning around in the water. After the war they nearly all went for scrap, and apart from a few precious examples Hollywood could bring them back only out of stock footage, shot during the battles by directors (one of them was John Ford) who had been seconded to the war effort. In *The Pacific* you will see that very same stock footage – some of it was shot in colour and still looks, as it always has, magnificent – but the CGI can multiply one or two Amtracs into a flotilla, just as it can carpet the ocean with a huge grey fleet all the way to the horizon.

In such effects we can see the valuable apogee of Spielberg’s influence on movies about historical disaster. He commands the machinery to make the visual texture less inadequate to the facts. In the war stories told before his era it was an outright lie to suggest that a direct hit by anything bigger than a bullet could leave actors intact. And the lies verged on blasphemy in a movie about a concentration camp such as Sidney Lumet’s *The Pawnbroker*, where the camp looked merely like a holiday resort fallen on thin times. In Spielberg’s*Schindler’s List*, even though it amounts to an uplift story about providence intervening to save the lucky, the camp looks, as it should, like a hell-hole.

Similarly, in the D-Day beach assault scene that introduces Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan*, soldiers get authentically blown to pieces instead of, as in days of yore, clutching their hearts after being hit in the back by an invisible mortar bomb and looking distressed as if they had just been told about a cut in their salary. And it was *Saving Private Ryan*, with all its hokum about someone lucky being spared, that nevertheless, after having brought Hanks and Spielberg together in a creative marriage, set the visual standard for *Band of Brothers*, the series that left the movies behind altogether and spread the story into time so that people you had really learned to care about could really, or at any rate realistically, be killed at random.

This conviction in the viewer’s mind, that the appearance of the thing is congruent with what the facts might have been like, has helped to make the television miniseries a mode of expression fit to leave a movie looking short of time, if not short of money. In T*he Pacific*the settings aid that conviction. But what happens in front of the settings?

Not enough, alas: or rather, nothing new. The story-lines for the episodes turn around the real-life vicissitudes of three or four individual ex-marines and you aren’t very far into the overall narrative, partly compiled from the books two of them wrote afterwards, before you realize that a mistake has been made. (This is not to impugn the books: *Helmet for My Pillow*, by Robert Leckie, first published in 1957, and *With the Old Breed*, by E.B. Sledge, first published in 1981, are both out again to catch the wave of publicity, and are both well worth a look.) In *Band of Brothers* the focus of the story was Easy Company, whose personnel were almost all replaced as time went on. But the appearances and disappearances happened within a tight framework. Here the framework is too big: a whole division of Marines. In *Band of Brothers* the popular historian Stephen Ambrose pulled the real life stories together with the skills of a writer of fiction. (Lately it has been questioned whether he might not have used too many of those skills in his official biography of Eisenhower.) In *The Pacific* his son, Hugh Ambrose – whose background book *The Pacific*, though routinely written, is a lot more literate than the script of the show --- is so loyal to the separate real life stories that he assembles them with little connection and in no kind of order.

A preliminary boot-camp episode, like the one for the Airborne troops in *Band of Brothers*, would at least have told us what was involved in being a marine – they were, after all, troops much more highly trained than the average GI – and perhaps introduced some of the characters in a context more informative than the unrelenting corn of home life in America, which seems to have consisted mainly of the taking of long meals while parents worried about what might happen to their sons.

Practically the first thing that happened, by this account, was Guadalcanal, where the airfield had to be defended against swarms of Japanese stunt-men ready to run out of the jungle and fall down until none were left vertical. At no point near the beginning of the series, where the information would have been useful, was it ever explained that the airfields were the key factor in the island-hopping campaign. The idea of invading island after island was to bring the airfields closer to Japan so that the enemy could be bombed out of the war. Contrary to the impression given by the script, the strategy was well understood by the troops, who could have read about it in the newspapers put out by the services even if they had not been told by their officers. (In*Band of Brothers* there was a delightfully sardonic, hard-drinking intelligence officer to tell the soldiers, and us, what needed to be known. Alas, he didn’t make it to the Pacific, perhaps because the producers were afraid of repeating themselves. The lesson is: if it works, repeat yourself.) The eventual, dearly bought American victory on Guadalcanal came a week after the Russian victory at Stalingrad. The marines would have known all about this coincidence. The glaring fact that the marines in the script don’t mention such things can be put down only to the disturbing likelihood that the writers haven’t heard of them either.

The televised marines hit island after island all the way to Okinawa but there is little sense of progress being made, because it’s the same thing every time: the Marines go ashore, the Japanese can’t win but refuse to give up, and the Americans, if they survive, acquire the thousand yard stare that turns a boy into a man. It’s largely true that the Japanese, when they lacked the means to defend a beach with artillery, would set up defence lines further inland and hope to wear down the invaders by charging them at night, often shouting “*banzai!*” to tell the adversary where they were, so that they could be slain in large numbers. But they kept on coming until they were all gone, and then it turned out that there were more of them up trees and down holes.

Quite apart from some of the better post-war movies, such as *The Halls of Montezuma* – the sumptuous stock footage did something to offset Richard Widmark’s gritted teeth – there were popular books that conveyed the actual feel of the island fighting. It was brilliantly evoked in Norman Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead*. Mailer was not a rifleman on Guadalcanal – he spent most of war service as a cook in the Philippines -- but the combat scenes in his classic novel are up there with Richard Tregaskis’s *Guadal*c*anal Diary*, a book once famous and no doubt fated to appear again, now that the publicity storm for the miniseries is bringing all the old documentation back from oblivion. On the whole, in the islands, the Japanese were bound to lose every time, and knew they were; but for them there was a cultural tradition which made the moment of imminent defeat the climax of the battle, and when they were desperate they were a collective nightmare. In the miniseries what you get is mainly the night. It’s dark, and suddenly guns start going off. Ten or even fifteen minutes later they are still going off. At dawn there are extras in Japanese uniforms lying everywhere in heaps, while the actors in American uniforms practice the thousand yard stare. What can provide solace except female company?

Most of the females are provided by the city of Melbourne, the main setting for the side-stories. The Melbourne romance in which one of the boys gets involved is the most glaring example of how the plot-line fails to attain even the low standards of intensity set by the movies. In the bad old movie *Battle Cry*, based on the book by Leon Uris, the teeth of Van Heflin out-gritted even those of Richard Widmark, but at least the marines met the women of New Zealand, and at least there was some acknowledgment of the awkward fact that the American men were there while the New Zealand men were away.

Marines in Australia carried a similar burden of privilege. A fascinating school-project-type boxed spin-off from the series called *War in the Pacific* contains, among a heap of other precisely reproduced documents, a facsimile of a pamphlet handed out to American service personnel in Australia explaining that the locals were meat-eaters on a gigantic scale. The implication was that the Australian men were at least as well built as the Americans. But the Australian men weren’t present. The American men were, and on top of that they were rich, with access, through the Post Exchange, to all kinds of goods that the Australian women found hard to resist. No matter how well the Americans behaved – and on the whole, as usual, they were polite and nice – there was a lot of local resentment, which lingers to this day. (In Sydney while I was growing up, there were men of the older generation who were still complaining of how the Yanks ruined the Australian culture by tipping too much for the taxi into which they had inveigled one of our girls by the offer of a pair of sheer stockings.)

In this show, the script skates past the whole problem by making the object of the boy’s ardour a girl from a family of Greek immigrants. Her name is Stella and the actress playing her is a natural star, but you never hear a word from her about any Australian-born male she might previously have met, and we are led to conclude that she has not met any. Even more strangely, her family seems to have no interest in what is currently going on in Greece, a country which the Nazis, in those years, were already in the process of terrorising. Devoid of a sense of history, the story of the liaison limps forward to its inevitable end, where he must leave her forever, the two of them having dramatized precisely nothing about their historical situation except a case of the hots, which incredibly they are able to palliate by night in her weatherboard house, with her parents only inches away through the thin walls. It never happened in my part of Australia, believe me.

In later episodes, the boy who wins the Congressional Medal of Honour, after going home for a War Bonds tour during which he is obliged to make out with numerous Hollywood female stars, falls in love with a female marine, marries her, and breaks her heart by shipping out for Iwo Jima and getting himself killed. Distraught beside the tumbling waves of America’s Pacific coast, she might as well be weeping for the absence of any decent lines to say. The girl in Melbourne has nothing to say either, except stuff that heartbroken heroines have been saying in the movies since sound came in, and indeed since before sound came in, because duff dialogue is essentially a gesture, like the vocabulary of the hands in a bad ballet.

As *Band of Brothers*made gratifyingly clear, the big advantage Tom Hanks was able to offer Steven Spielberg was that he, Hanks, was a highly intelligent actor who knew from experience, just from looking at the pile of paper, whether a project was hard nourishment or sentimental mush. The two men together were thus in a good position to tell in advance whether a script was ready to shoot. The script of *The Pacific* was scarcely ready even to burn, but they somehow let it happen. The oldest lesson of the movies applies equally to a miniseries: never, if you can help it, set a date for the beginning of principal photography until the script is licked, because you will never fix it while the clock is ticking.

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