

Rambo: Bringing the War Home

By Scott Perez

“I want, what they want, and every other guy who came over here and spilled his guts and gave everything he had, wants! For our country to love us as much as we love it! That’s what I want!”[1]

– *Rambo, Rambo: First Blood*

Few films about a Vietnam veteran have had the same influence as *Rambo: First Blood* does. *Rambo: First Blood* is the first of many in the Rambo series, and is widely considered the best one.[2] *First Blood* is one of the most significant and iconic as it is one of the earliest in the action hero genre.[3] The film paints a vivid picture of the emotional struggle American veterans faced after the Vietnam War revealing many of the controversial post-war issues of the Vietnam War most chose to ignore or forget. As a result, *Rambo: First Blood* displays political concerns of the 1980’s to the 1990’s as it illuminates the contemporary dominant ideology of that era.[4]

The 1980’s experienced a cultural zeitgeist where films were increasingly becoming dominated by violence and muscular action heroes.[5] Films such as *First Blood* were among the many to showcase an action hero who was considered hyper-masculine in both stature and attitude. Rambo was one of the earliest in the genre as it came out in 1982. It is based on a 1972 novel by David Morell entitled *First Blood*. Though removed in time from the publication date of the novel and the Vietnam War, the film communicates that there were still problems after the Vietnam War had ended that needed to be addressed.[6] The film does this by depicting the experiences of its main protagonist John Rambo upon his return from Vietnam.

Rambo: First Blood starts with John Rambo, a Green Beret and Vietnam veteran, looking for one of his friends who served alongside him in the same unit, only to find out that he had died of cancer. This powerful scene reveals some of the issues that veterans faced during and after the war, as Rambo’s friend developed cancer due to being exposed to Agent Orange, a chemical used by the American military in Vietnam.[7] Rambo then walks into the town of Hope and is confronted by a sheriff named Teasel, who assumes that Rambo is some type of vagrant due to his long unkempt hair. Teasel ultimately decides to arrest Rambo after several attempts to get him out of the town.[8] The sheriff’s attitude towards Rambo can be interpreted as a metaphor for the

United States and its treatment of Vietnam veterans, many of whom upon returning from Vietnam suffered from ridicule and mistreatment by their own country despite having risked their lives for the flag.[9]

As the film progresses, Rambo (now in custody) must deal with the sheriff and his abuse of power. While in jail, it is discovered by the police that he is a veteran of the Vietnam War as the police begin to investigate him. After processing Rambo, he is stripped of his clothes only to reveal his many scars and muscular build, alluding to his past and abilities as a killing machine. The level of masculinity showcased is a trope that becomes part of the action hero genre.[10] While at the police station Rambo is non-combative and reserved, but the corrupt police mistreat him. As he is about to receive a shave from one of the officers, Rambo's mistreatment and torture by the police cause him to experience war flashbacks of his time as a prisoner of war (POW) in Vietnam. It is in this instance that it becomes clear that the horrors of the Vietnam War left Rambo mentally scarred.

The war flashbacks that Rambo experiences are among the many symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), that Vietnam veterans commonly experienced and that often were dismissed or ignored. It was difficult for veterans of Vietnam to seek help and find adequate treatment for mental issues as the public dismissed them for fighting in an unpopular war. This is where *First Blood* addresses its biggest issue in the film.[11] As a veteran, Rambo does not receive the help of his country and instead is forced to deal with his problems on his own, whether they are financial, physical or mental. The poor treatment of Vietnam veterans can be linked with events surrounding the years of the war, from the moment the U.S. involved troops up to the fall of Saigon. Vietnam veterans fought in a war that many at home believed the U.S. had no purpose getting involved in. From the civil rights movement, to the counterculture Anti-Vietnam War movements, many Americans challenged the Vietnam War in different aspects.

Ultimately, these movements led to the widespread unpopularity of the war, which forced the U.S. government to find a way out. As a result, returning veterans experienced a shocking unwelcome. Vietnam veterans experienced a lot of issues such as unemployment, homelessness and a high rate of suicide.[12] Many of the veterans also had families that relied on them for support. Families who lost loved ones in the war struggled with poverty, as families were unable to collect benefits.[13] Though he returned home, Rambo is representative of these realities as he too is unemployed and suffers from a mental illness, which no one recognizes.

Rambo, abandoned by his government, is also abandoned by his people as sheriffs hunt him down after his escape from jail. No longer considered a vagrant but a criminal, Rambo is forced to hide in the surrounding forest. In this wild manhunt Rambo skillfully gets away using his cunning and skills, all aspects of the action hero. When the police use force it pushes Rambo to fight back, only he does not kill anyone but just maims them in self-defense using skills he learned as a Green Beret. His character demonstrates skill and honor as he does not kill.[14] However, in his final assault on sheriff Teasel Rambo all but destroys the town of Hope with the use of a machine gun he found in a truck. The film ends with his former military commander coming to save the city of Hope from Rambo. In the final dialogue of the film we see some of the controversy involving Vietnam and its veterans. As Rambo utters some of his last words in the film, he breaks down letting his commander know that he only wants his country to love him as much as he loves it. In the final scene, military authorities take him to a military prison. Just like the many veterans of the Vietnam war that returned home, it would be Rambo who would be punished.

The message that *First Blood* conveys speaks about the poor treatment that Vietnam veterans suffered. Many did not want to be in the war but had no choice as they were drafted. The film brought up topics that might have been controversial at the time and even suffered from rejected scripts due to hostile reactions.[15] *First Blood* pushed the limits in portraying Rambo as a heroic Vietnam veteran despite being at odds with his government and people. *Rambo: First Blood* is a unique work of art as it paved the way for the action hero genre while also falling under the Vietnam War genre.

Films such as *First Blood* served an important role in cinema as the tragedies that veterans faced were depicted on screen and consequently illuminated the American conscience.

People may know the history of the Vietnam War, but viewers often lack the perspective of the people who fought in it. Rambo lets us see and focus on the veteran as it gives Americans an idea about the war on a more personal level and exposes them to the types of lingering attitudes towards Vietnam veterans that had not been appropriately addressed.[16] Rambo's portrayal as a tragic hero reveals the unseen influence and aftermath of war. Because of this, the film helped evoke empathy for Vietnam veterans as many realized that America had largely abandoned them.[17]

End Notes

- [1] Rambo: First Blood Part I (1985) – Quotes –
Imdb, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0089880/quotes>
- [2] Paul Budra, “Rambo” in the Garden: The POW Film as Pastoral.” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (1990): 189
- [3] Drew Ayers, “Bodies, Bullets, and Bad Guys: Elements of the Hardbody Film.” *Film Criticism* 32, no. 3 (2008): 49
- [4] Drew Ayers, 52
- [5] Drew Ayers, 41
- [6] Ken Betsalel, and Mark Gibney. “Can a Film End a War?” *Human Rights Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (2008): 523
- [7] Drew Ayers, “Bodies, Bullets, and Bad Guys: Elements of the Hardbody Film.” *Film Criticism* 32, no. 3 (2008): 49
- [8] Drew Ayers, 49
- [9] Drew Ayers, 53
- [10] Drew Ayers, 46
- [11] Michael Comber, and Margaret O’Brien. “Evading the War: The Politics of the Hollywood Vietnam Film.” *History* 73, no. 238 (1988): 259
- [12] David James, and Rick Berg. “COLLEGE COURSE FILE: REPRESENTING THE VIETNAM WAR.” *Journal of Film and Video* 41, no. 4 (1989): 72
- [13] David James, and Rick Berg. 70
- [14] Drew Ayers, “Bodies, Bullets, and Bad Guys: Elements of the Hardbody Film.” *Film Criticism* 32, no. 3 (2008): 49
- [15] Geoff Stoakes, *Journal of American Studies* 28, no. 2 (1994): 287
- [16] Paul Budra, “Rambo” in the Garden: The POW Film as Pastoral. 191
- [17] Gaylyn Studlar, and David Desser. “Never Having to Say You’re Sorry: Rambo’s Rewriting of the Vietnam War.” *Film Quarterly* 42, no. 1(1988): 10

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- Stoakes, Geoff. *Journal of American Studies* 28, no. 2 (1994): 286-87. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40464189>.
- Studlar, Gaylyn, and David Desser. "Never Having to Say You're Sorry: Rambo's Rewriting of the Vietnam War." *Film Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (1988): 9-16. doi:10.2307/1212431.