

FILM

Suspended in Time

By LOUIS P. MASUR

Photographs hold us in their spell. We stare and study and think, So this is what happened. But we know full well that a picture represents only an instant, and that it can misrepresent the event it captures, sometimes even become the event itself. Photographs not only tell stories, but they also have stories. And behind those stories, as Clint Eastwood reminds us in the latest film he has directed, there are other stories. Making and remaking memories is a continuing process.

The story of Joe Rosenthal's picture of six Marines raising the American flag on Mount Suribachi, as the battle for Iwo Jima and World War II raged, has been frequently told, most notably by the scholars Karal Ann Marling and John Wetenhall in *Iwo Jima: Monuments, Memories, and the American Hero* (Harvard University Press, 1991), the historians Parker Bishop Albee and Keller Cushing Freeman in *Shadow of Suribachi: Raising the Flags on Iwo Jima* (Praeger, 1995), and in *Flags of Our Fathers*, by James Bradley, the son of one of the flag raisers, with the Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Ron Powers (Bantam Books, 2000). Rosenthal's snap of time is the most recognizable and widely reproduced photograph in history.

It is also a visual masterpiece. The six faceless men work in unison, raising a pole that splits the sky as the flag unfurls, their bodies arrayed in near-classical form, bending with effort, maintaining the touch of connection as the last one strains toward the pole, his reach, at that instant, forever exceeding his grasp. The image defined heroism, for Americans fighting the war and ever since. The Pulitzer Prize committee suspended its rules and gave Rosenthal its award that same year, calling it "a frozen flash of history."

In narrating the story of Iwo Jima, the photograph, and the lives and deaths of the six men in the picture, Eastwood's newly released *Flags of Our Fathers* seeks to demythologize the image. The movie's screenplay, written by William Broyles Jr. and Paul Haggis, hews closely to its source, Bradley's book, which had been rejected by more than 20 publishers before it shot to the top of best-seller lists. Steven Spielberg bought the rights and is credited as a co-producer of the film.

The battle scenes in *Flags* are every bit as jarring as those in Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), perhaps even more so because Eastwood presents many of them as flashbacks. We are deposited into the chaos of war again and again, just as veterans carry memories of battle their entire lives. However inured we have become to severed limbs and eviscerated bodies in war movies, *Flags* shocks us anew with the juxtaposition of the horror of battle and the courage of men to keep going. The assault on Iwo Jima left more than 6,000 Americans dead and 19,000 wounded. Easy Company, the flag raisers' unit, suffered 84 percent casualties.

Rosenthal took his photograph on February 23, 1945, five days into the battle that would rage for another month. The film depicts the deaths of three of the men in the picture — Mike Strank, Franklin Sousley, and Harlon Block — who were killed at Iwo Jima and the later lives of John Bradley, Rene Gagnon, and Ira Hayes, a Pima Indian who, in the photograph, is the last man in line.

As with the book, the movie explains what Rosenthal's picture was — and what it was not. It was a photograph of the second flag raising that morning (Secretary of the Navy James V. Forrestal wanted the flag from the first one). But it was not posed, and had Rosenthal not gotten the one shot he did, the event would have been largely unnoticed and certainly forgotten. As Eastwood shows, the photograph had a profound impact, offering hope to a nation at war, but shadowing the lives of the three surviving Marines it depicted. Brought home to be feted in a continuing rally of patriotism, they never wanted to be celebrated as heroes.

The heart of *Flags* is its meditation on the meaning of heroism — how heroes are created and exploited, and how they make sense of their experiences. Eastwood not only brings to life the struggles of Bradley, Gagnon, and Hayes, but he also plumbs the ways the government used and misused them (in, for example, the seventh war-bond drive that put them front and center and raised billions of dollars). The film also quietly and effectively addresses such issues as racism, the mendacity of politicians, and the impact of war on the parents of soldiers.

Hayes had the worst struggle. He despised the bond tour, drank heavily, and died at age 32 in 1955, just months after attending the dedication of the Iwo Jima memorial. Gagnon, who died at age 54, was not yet 20 when he helped raise the flag. He is depicted in the film as someone who initially enjoyed the celebrity, hoped to profit from it, but learned soon enough that yesterday's heroes quickly become today's relics. Bradley, who passed away in 1994, is portrayed in the film, as in his son's book, as the one survivor who managed to have a successful career after the war.

But that is not to say that he did not suffer. It is Bradley's story that frames the opening and closing of the film. After Iwo Jima and the bond tour, Bradley refused to talk about the war — he had his children tell reporters who called that he was away fishing in Canada. Following his death, his son James discovered personal letters written by his father and the Navy Cross awarded for heroism, and he set out to learn all that he could about the flag raisers.

In the film, John Bradley is shown in old age asking, "Where is he, where is he?" We learn that he is looking for his pal Iggy, Ralph Ignatowski, who disappeared during the battle. In a flashback, Bradley is led into a cave where he's told, "Look at what they did to the poor son of a bitch." Eastwood has a delicate decision to make here — whether to show us what happened to Iggy. He chooses only to focus on Bradley's face, and it is the right choice, though not knowing the specifics makes it more difficult to understand why Bradley cried in his sleep for months after returning from Iwo Jima.

Readers of the Bradley and Powers book will know that Iggy was tortured, left castrated with his penis stuffed in his mouth. Eastwood has completed a second film about the battle (*Letters from Iwo Jima*), told from the Japanese point of view. It will be interesting to see whether he addresses the question of war atrocities, which emerges briefly in a scene in *Flags* when Hayes is shown staring at photographs of alleged Japanese brutality. Such photographs drove soldiers on and haunted their dreams. But, as in so many wars, support at home was often built around more glorious images like the raising of the flag. By treading lightly here, Eastwood evokes that disconnect.

In a sense, every soldier who survived Iwo Jima was a casualty of one kind or another, and that included Joe Rosenthal. The film hints at his struggles after the war when reporters ask the flag raisers whether his photograph had been staged. For much of his long life (he died last summer at the age of 94), Rosenthal had to defend himself against such unfair accusations, which originated from confusion over the two flag raisings and from a group shot of soldiers atop Mount Suribachi that he took afterward.

Only obliquely, by showing us the impact of the photograph, does Eastwood delve into how important the photographers who, in difficult circumstances, take the pictures that make history are to our collective memory. Bradley's book does not mention Rosenthal until halfway through, and the film fully identifies him only in the credits. The man standing next to him when he took his photograph, Bill Genaust, the Marine cameraman who shot motion-picture footage of the flag raising, died in action nine days later. Perhaps developing the lives of the flag raisers required minimizing the photographer whose picture meant so much to so many, except to the survivors who had to carry the burden of the image. When deconstructing heroism, as when constructing it, we tend to focus on just a few individuals. The rest are nameless.

Even when portraying individuals, however, the truth of what the survivors felt is complicated. Concentrating on the underside of the image, Eastwood's *Flags* never reveals what is in Bradley's book: a letter from his father to his own parents, dated February 26, 1945. In it John Bradley wrote, "I had a little to do with raising the American flag and it was the happiest moment of my life."

His son suggests that for a variety of reasons — the response to Rosenthal's photograph, the death of Iggy, being paraded around as a hero when he and others always said that the real heroes never got off the island — Bradley could never recover that feeling. Eastwood's elision may fit his film's purposes, but Bradley's letter suggests that raising that second flag did matter. In seeking to challenge our memories, Eastwood creates new myths. Whatever happened afterward, at the moment Rosenthal snapped his picture, there was joy.

Like the photograph that is its subject, *Flags of Our Fathers* is visually perfect. The look of the film, in bleached beiges and greens and charcoal grays, evokes both the actual past and the hues of the pictures through which we remember it. It took today's tools of the trade — digital effects, 3-D integration, and rotoscope animation — to get it right, to make us believe what we are seeing.

Rosenthal never had to worry about such technical magic. A small man with glasses, he carried his Speed Graphic camera to the top of a volcanic mountain, piled up some rocks on which to stand, glanced into the viewfinder, and took a picture. He dropped the film in a mail pouch and never even saw the shot until after it had become a sensation. In 1/400th of a second, he froze a moment in time and framed a scene that brought hope to millions and hardship to a few. The men of the photograph have all passed from the scene, but their image keeps us in its trance.

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