

Casualties of War ★★½

Year of Release: 1989

Review by Randy Parker

Country: USA

Verdict: Skip It

"*The Accused* in Vietnam." You have to wonder if *Casualties of War* was sold on that high-concept pitch. Brian De Palma's shocking war drama is based on a horrifying true incident, in which a handful of soldiers abducted a teen-age Vietnamese girl and dragged her on a long-range reconnaissance mission. In short, they kidnapped, raped, and murdered her, treating her like a piece of meat.

Unlike *The Accused*, however, *Casualties of War* doesn't take the victim's point of view. Rather, it tells story of Private Eriksson, the only soldier in the platoon who has the guts and conscience to vehemently protest the violent crime.

Michael J. Fox turns in an impressive performance as the naive and idealistic newcomer, who after only three weeks in Vietnam, still thinks the war is just a game. That is, until he witnesses the brutal rape, which he is powerless to prevent. Eriksson's moments of moral outrage and of tenderness with the rape victim are heartfelt and stirring, which unfortunately can't be said of anything else in the movie.

Except for Thuy Thu Le, who will break your heart as the victim, the supporting actors get caught in a cross fire of clichés. Surprise, surprise, Sean Penn plays the racist and psychotic sergeant who instigates the atrocity. In nearly every film

he's made, Penn has played an arrogant tough guy, and frankly, it's getting boring. Most of the characters, including Penn's, come across as unbelievable stereotypes.

A clumsy and heavy-handed screenplay, which telegraphs the big moments, also bogs down the film. According to the *New York Times*, screenwriter David Rabe is so unhappy with the way his words were translated to the screen that he's trying to disassociate himself from the film. Rabe objects to the simplistic dialogue and thinly drawn relationships—and his objections are warranted.

On the plus side, *Casualties of War* regains some solid footing from De Palma's confident direction, which is unusually understated and for once doesn't call attention to itself. De Palma is careful not to allow the film to become sensational or melodramatic.

Ultimately, *Casualties of War* fights a losing battle because it fails to justify the repugnant violence. The movie has very little payoff: it offers few, if any, new insights into Vietnam. We already knew that war is hell and can turn men into monsters. No kidding! De Palma needs something more enlightening to underscore such a grim, disturbing film. As is, *Casualties of War* may leave you asking: is this movie really necessary?