

Last Flag Flying

“The Last Detail” was a great film of the 1970’s that told of two Navy signalmen shepherding a young sailor to the brig, especially a triumph for Jack Nicholson. It was based on the first novel of a young writer Darryl Ponicsan. Almost 40 years later, in 2005, Ponicsan wrote a kind of sequel to that work. “Last Flag Flying” featuring, again, three servicemen on a quest, but in a different context.

Now, director Richard Linklater (“Boyhood”) has teamed with Ponicsan (co-writing the script) for the film of “Last Flag Flying,” wherein three Vietnam War vets come together to honor the son of one of them who has died in the Iraq War. Ex-seaman Larry “Doc” Shepherd (Steve Carrell), the grieving father, brings the threesome together by looking up his old Marine buddy Sal Nealon (Bryan Cranston), running a cheesy bar in North Carolina (the kind of joint where Sal drinks last night’s beer for breakfast). They, in turn, run down Richard Mueller (Lawrence Fishburne), once a Marine with a reputation as “The Mauler,” who has become a dedicated minister with a congregation in Virginia.

Acceding to Doc’s wishes, the three set out to receive the young Shepherd’s remains at Arlington cemetery. Oops! The body is not being flown into Arlington, but Dover AFB, where Doc’s contesting of an officious colonel’s orders leads them to rent their own vehicle and drive Doc’s son home to Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Joining them, at the Corps’ insistence, is Lance Corporal Charlie Washington (J. Quinton Johnson), a friend of the deceased, to keep protocols intact.

Thus, a road trip ensues as the old timers cajole, reminiscence, bond, and recall a terrible incident from their war experience. Doc is a self-effacing man, bound in a reticence that contrasts utterly with the wise-ass Sal, a drunk and a *macher* always on the lookout for a chick or a hustle. Mueller is a bear of a fellow who has found the Lord and given up sinful ways—almost. Meant to be a sweet-and-sour tour of these differing personalities, the film traces their traits in sometimes humorous, sometimes tart set pieces, some more effective than others.

There are comic elements that the actors pull off well, such as a bit when these 50-somethings get picked up as elderly “terrorists” with a U-Haul when Mueller’s name gets mangled into “Mullah.” Or when, terrified of Sal’s driving, the respectable Mueller lets fly a flurry of obscenities he hasn’t used since the war. There are touching scenes, too, as when the three look up the mother (Cicely Tyson) of a lost soldier to reassure her about her son’s death. There are struggles, too, of what war losses can mean: when the Colonel (Yul Vazquez) wants to shelter Doc from the truth of his son’s death, he rages, “Let him have his hero!” to which Sal retorts, just as vehemently: “Let him have the lie!”

There are lapses in logic and tone. Cranston’s character, though often amusing, dominates the movie with a logorrhea of cracks and crudities without break. Also, is it believable that the introverted Shepherd would travel hundreds of miles to seek out a “buddy” he has not communicated with for 30 years and ask him to participate in his son’s burial? Finally, a finale that turns on Shepherd and Mueller sporting full Marine dress blues is a sweet image but wholly unbelievable.

Yes, a flag that flies mostly spiritedly, but one with rips.
(The film is rated "R" and runs 124 mins.)

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