

Film Commentary: *The Best Years of Our Lives*

Bette Davis considered *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) to be "*the finest film ever made.*" It's hard to disagree, since it won seven *Academy Awards* in an era when the *Academy* was run by adults and those awards really meant something. First, the film deals objectively and earnestly with a vitally important subject. Second, it was brilliantly and skillfully acted and directed. And third it was timely, because it was released a mere eight months after World War II ended. It focused on the very real challenges facing many returning veterans following the war.

Not only did returning servicemen often have difficulties adjusting to civilian life, many were also scarred by the war in some way and often carried those scars for years. Moreover, while they were overseas, American society and culture changed significantly, often complicating their transition to civilian life. So, in addition to their scars, returning servicemen often found civilian life more perplexing than they anticipated. Thus, the film's title echoes the grievance often voiced by returning GIs, that they gave "*the best years of our lives*" to the war.



Returning GIs: *Homer Parrish, Fred Derry, & Al Stephenson*

The film's central characters are three returning servicemen who meet on an Air Transport that flies them to their hometown of Boone City. **Al Stephenson** (Frederic March) was a respected banker before the war, and served as a Sergeant First Class in the Army's highly-decorated *25th Infantry Division* in the Pacific theater. *Al* has developed a thirst for alcohol, perhaps to cope with the carnage and savagery he witnessed at Guadalcanal and a dozen other battles where his "*Jungle Lightning*" unit saw action during the war. When he returns, he finds his son and daughter are nearly grown. Moreover, his son is now a college-student, who seems ambivalent about the sacrifices *Al* made for his country.

Fred Derry (Dana Andrews) was a *soda jerk* before the war, but served as a Bombardier with the rank of Captain on a B-17 in the *8th Army Air Corps* in the European theater. *Fred* has recurring nightmares and sweats from haunting memories of bombing raids over NAZI Germany, where he helplessly watched as close friends in other planes were shot down and killed by enemy *anti-aircraft* fire. Upon his return he also has a very difficult time finding employment because the pharmacy where he used to work has changed ownership. His miniscule unemployment stipend creates a rift in his marriage, so his shallow, mercenary and unfaithful wife soon demands a divorce.

Homer Parrish (Harold Russell) was a high school athlete before the war, and served in the Navy as a 2nd Class Petty Officer in the Pacific theater. It is Homer who has the most readily visible scars: he lost both hands below his elbows when his aircraft carrier was torpedoed and sunk by the Japanese. He abandoned ship only to find himself in a sea of burning fuel and oil, which cost him his hands. *Homer's* fiancé is his high school sweetheart and next-door neighbor, **Wilma Cameron** (Cathy O'Donnell,) who still adores him and wants to marry him. However, Homer fears becoming a burden to her -- and assumes she feels sorry for him -- so he coolly distances himself from her so she will no longer feel obligated to marry him.

Clearly, readjustment isn't easy for the three. Upon his return Al is promoted to *Vice President for Small Loans*, but he immediately receives a mild reprimand from his boss for an uncollateralized loan he approved. It was to a former serviceman who wanted to buy his own land after his family had been tenant farmers for three generations. At a banquet held in Al's honor and sponsored by the bank, he imbibes so heavily that it is of concern to his wife **Millie** (Myrna Loy,) the guests, and his boss, all of whom become uncomfortable. Yet, he snatches triumph from the jaws of disaster with a brilliant speech that ends this way:

"...I love the Cornbelt Loan and Trust Company. There are some who say that the old bank is suffering from hardening of the arteries and the heart. I refuse to listen to such radical talk. I say that our bank is alive, it's generous, it's human. And we're going to have such a line of customers seeking and getting small loans that people will think we're gambling with the depositors' money. And we will be: we'll be gambling on the future of this country."



Al's Impassioned Speech at the Banquet in His Honor

Alienated from his wife, *Fred* is immediately attracted to Al's 22 year-old daughter ***Peggy*** (Teresa Wright,) creating a problem since *Fred* is still married. This prompts *Al* to demand that *Fred* not see *Peggy* again. That blow, on top of all the others he's experienced since returning home, convinces *Fred* to abandon Boone City. While he's waiting for the first departing flight, he climbs into the nose section of a junked B-17 where he served as a bombardier. His thoughts are rudely interrupted by a junkman who is scrapping these planes to make prefabricated housing. After exchanging pleasantries, the junk man offers *Fred* a job.



Captain Fred Derry, Reliving Painful Memories

Homer's injuries will prevent him from ever fully adjusting to civilian life, and nothing can change that. However, despite his efforts to distance himself from *Wilma*, she still loves him and wants to marry him. The two are married in her parents' home, and *Fred* stands up for him as *Homer's* Best Man. As the newly-wed couple is being congratulated by a swarm of friends, *Fred* and *Peggy* spy each other across the room, and quickly embrace and kiss. *Peggy* is lovely, kind, generous, empathetic, patient, and probably one-in-ten-million women. It's clear that things are going

to work out rather well for *Fred* after all, and that he and *Peggy* will eventually marry despite *Al*'s fatherly misgivings.



Peggy and Fred (Left) Reunited at Homer's Wedding

There are three exceptionally powerful scenes in this film that are particularly memorable. One is the speech *Al* gave at the banquet in his honor. The second occurred after *Fred* decided to leave Boone City, and after saying goodbye to his father and stepmother. He left some things behind that he didn't want, including the citations for his medals, which he modestly dismissed as being "*handed out in K-Rations.*" After Fred leaves, his father is overcome with emotion as he reads one of the citations to Fred's stepmother, which was worded as follows:

"HEADQUARTERS, 8TH AIRFORCE: AWARD OF THE *DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS*:

Despite intense pain, shock and loss of blood, with complete disregard of his personal safety, Captain Derry crawled back to his bomb-sight, guided his formation on a perfect run over the objective, and released his bombs with great accuracy. The heroism, devotion to duty, professional skill, and coolness under fire displayed by Captain Derry under the most difficult conditions, reflect highest credit upon himself and the Armed Services of the United States of America.

By Order of Lt. General James H. Doolittle"

(Editor's Note: Lt. General "Jimmy" Doolittle was the architect and commanding officer of the retaliatory bombing raid on Japan that took place on April 18th of 1942, a mere four months after the Japanese sneak attack on Pearl Harbor. Afterward, he was awarded the *Congressional Medal of Honor* and was idolized by a grateful and worshipful American public.)

The third exceptional scene in this film occurred after *Peggy* confessed to her parents, *Al* and *Millie*, that she was in love with *Fred* and that she intended to break up *Fred's* unhappy and loveless marriage. She is rebuked by her father, *Al*, who asks her how she intends to do this, and what gives her the right to do it, and does she think she is God? In tears, she tells her parents that they can't possibly understand because they've always been deeply in love and never had any troubles. It is her mother, *Millie*, who responds to her while speaking directly to *Al*:

"We never had any trouble. How many times have I told you I hated you and believed it in my heart? How many times have you said you

were sick and tired of me, that we were all washed up? How many times have we had to fall in love all over again?"



Millie Consoling Peggy

The film's title is rife with irony, and that was the director's intent. Despite the common lament echoed by veterans that they gave the "*best years*" of their lives to the war, by the end of the film a different realization begins to dawn on all three. As they begin their readjustment to civilian life, the prospect of a world at peace -- which they helped to ensure -- causes many of them to recognize belatedly that *the best years of their lives* lie *AHEAD* of them, not behind them.