



A visual representation of the movies "Private Benjamin," "Stripes" and "In the Army Now." (U.S. Army illustration created by NCO Journal Staff)

The All-Volunteer Force in Film

"Private Benjamin," "Stripes" and "In the Army Now"

Dr. Katharine Dahlstrand and SSG Brandon Cox

Team Chief, Research & Books, Army University Press and Senior Editor, NCO Journal

Goldie Hawn's character in "Private Benjamin" stood as a role model for me when I was seven. I often recalled the film with fondness after joining the U.S. Army. During basic training, my platoon routinely did Bill Murray's razzle-dazzle shout-out from "Stripes" when called to attention. Since I attended basic training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, I in-processed with a group of future water treatment specialists who had joined because of Pauly Shore and Lori Petty's portrayal of Army life in the 1994 film, "In the Army Now."

These films took a comedic view on Army culture and its portrayal of the All-Volunteer Force. Though rarely positive or realistic, they recognized why someone might choose to enlist and offered a possible solution for those seeking direction in uncertain times.

The All-Volunteer Force

From 1948 through 1973, in periods of war and peace, American men were drafted "to fill vacancies in the armed forces which could not be filled through

voluntary means " (Selective Service System, n.d.). The end of conscripted and compulsory military service sent shockwaves through a nation still grappling with its treatment of Vietnam veterans and its view of military service in general when President Richard Nixon allowed the induction authority of the Military Selective Service Act to expire at midnight on June 30, 1973. The success of an AVF was not a foregone conclusion.

For years after the AVF was fully integrated into practice, critics questioned the viability of a peacetime army comprised entirely of volunteer servicemembers. In 1977, William R. King assessed the AVF for Military Review, concluding "the time has come to conduct a searching and candid evaluation of the AVF, its effectiveness, its cost and its impact on our society." He suggested that more investigations on possible alternatives for manning a standing peacetime army were warranted, like compulsory or voluntary national service, universal military training, a "better managed" AVF, or a return to the draft.

At one point, the draft was considered a duty and an honor celebrated with public support. During the Vietnam War, the draft was something to resist at all costs. The draft reinforced constant communication between military and civilian leaders. Topics of national security served as fingers on the pulse of popular sentiment in government acts of aggression.

Service in Films

Strong sentiments regarding military service revealed themselves in films that reached colossal audiences. Unlike books, magazines, newspapers or even film scripts themselves, films are not typically constrained by matters of literacy or intellectual accessibility. They communicate ideas and symbols. They can influence an audience when they honor a cause or destroy a reputation if they disparage a person. Films normalize behaviors and cement legacies. Most importantly, however, films offer an interpretation of reality that entertains by design and informs the culture in which they were created.

Historian Matthew Hulbert suggested, "films perform two functions on an unrelenting cycle: they influence how society thinks and they reflect what a society, or at least a significant segment of it, is actually thinking " (Christopher-Hulbert, 2019).

The films "Private Benjamin" (1980), "Stripes" (1981) and "In The Army Now" (1994) offer a glimpse

of what the American perception of an AVF looked like, who joined and what that service meant.

"Private Benjamin" (1980)

"Private Benjamin" follows a woman with something to prove to the world and her navigation through the U.S. Army. She enlists after her husband's death on their wedding night. I watched this film again wearing rose-colored glasses, prepared to wax nostalgic.

"Apparently, all men in 1980 were sex-craving morons," said Staff Sgt. Brandon Cox, senior editor for the NCO Journal, after watching the movie for the first time.

Tough, but fair. The film has aged like skim milk in a parked car on a hot summer day. There are several points called into question. Portrayals of sexual harassment, attempts at sexual assault and the portrayal of women leaders as incapable of mentoring subordinate women Soldiers were a constant distraction.

Private Benjamin was likable, but her status in society did not translate well into military service. So, her leadership did not know how to handle her or understand her motives. We found ourselves rooting for Benjamin despite our disgust at how Army culture was presented throughout the film.

The AVF was not positively portrayed in this film. Recruits were depicted as broken in some fundamental way. Whereas other military films generally use basic training scenes to frame a change in attitude, presentation and lethality, there was no growth between them and their leadership when Benjamin's platoon graduated. The training exercise portrayed in the film appeared difficult, but overall, it boiled down to a punchline about



Military water treatment specialists compete against each other in this year's Reverse Osmosis Water Purification Rodeo from May 8th to 12th, 2023. This five-day U.S. Army Forces Command (FORSCOM) competition tested their skills and readiness under the watchful guidance of U.S. Army Reserve instructors from the 94th Training Division – Force Sustainment. (U.S. Army photo by Master Sgt. Benari Poulten)



Dr. Dahlstrand dressed as Private Benjamin for Halloween. (Photo courtesy of Dr. Dahlstrand)

of men who, like the women in Private Benjamin's platoon, were fundamentally broken and transformed them into a tight-knit group of non-traditional Soldiers who serve razzle-dazzle to the parade stand. It was painful to hear him explain that he would do great in the Army because the guys who joined were not intelligent.

"In The Army Now" (1994)

I liked this film the MOST. Two young men with vague ambitions for success are unsure how to achieve their goals after getting fired from a job they didn't like. Not ready to commit to the Army lifestyle full-time, their recruiter talks them into joining the U.S. Army Reserves.

high-ranking men's uncontrollable lusts.

Laws were broken and lower-enlisted Soldiers took matters into their own hands. Today's audience would claim the Army has no positive qualities. However, this movie gave us the best quotable line, "If Patton were alive, he would slap your face."

"Stripes" (1981)

When the first "Be All You Can Be" recruitment ads hit television screens in January 1981, the U.S. Army was on its sixth recruiting slogan in nine years. Nothing stuck. Five months after the ad first saw airtime, "Stripes" debuted at the box office. In it, two men debate the benefits of joining the Army as the jingle plays on a television in the background. The taxi-cab driver quits his job after leaving a woman customer stranded, gets his car stolen and then gets home to a girlfriend ready to leave him. He complains about his life to his friend and talks him into visiting an Army recruiting station. Like Private Benjamin's recruiting experience, the two men are fed lies about Army life and enlist.

In this film, the AVF is portrayed as something that requires unit cohesion. While preparing for the graduation ceremony for their Basic Training, the main character makes a speech that brings the Soldiers together to train and get better at their skills. They know their future is threatened because they lost their platoon sergeant halfway through training and must finish it themselves. Wildly implausible, but entertaining. He culled a group

The main character is likable after he wears you down with his charm and you stop wanting to punch him in the face.

Unlike "Stripes" or "Private Benjamin," the two main characters aren't a hard sell for the recruiter. He gently corrected them when they could not remember the Army motto, "Be All You Can Be," and allowed them to discuss enlisting privately. In fact, this recruiter appeared in the film's conclusion when they opened a business in the shopping mall next door to the recruiting station. It's one of the most redeeming portrayals of a military recruiter in film, with the character representing a member of their newfound community in their post-Army life. It was refreshing to see that the recruiter was not a joke or a slick used-car salesman.

That sentiment defined this film's portrayal of an AVF. It had a vague sense of permissive patriotism. The nation had just come out of a successful military engagement in the Middle East, and popular culture tacitly endorsed patriotism at a level not seen since before Vietnam. Some people who served alongside the main characters joined because they wanted to serve their country. By this time, joining the Army became an admirable and acceptable path for young adults seeking security and a sense of service.

Taken Together?

All Volunteer Force film portrayals in the decades following its institution made assumptions about who joined the Army, what the Army offered people who

raised their right hand willingly and what those people offered the Army in return. When films provide a glimpse of the American experience, they simultaneously help shape and reflect what audiences think about that specific topic.

Hollywood described the Army's newest recruits in these films as dimwitted, broke or out of alternative options. The people who entered service did so because it benefited them after they reached a point in life where the future seemed uncertain. The Army was the answer. It was the solution to personal problems and economic fragility. The Army offered structure and experience.

All three films were comedies and did not strive for

accuracy or realism in their portrayal of military service. The scripts and storylines, however, stayed aligned with one reality that resonated with those of us who've worn a uniform. Where military movies featuring conscripted service commonly highlight how the wars disrupted the draftees' regular lives, the AVF in cinema tacitly acknowledges the wide range of reasons someone might join the Army. When the Soldiers are physically and mentally exhausted, when they are stuck in a room or the back of a truck or on a range, when they have hurried up and are waiting for whatever comes next, they tell each other their stories. ■

References

Selective Service System. (n.d.). *History of the Selective Service System*. <https://www.sss.gov/history-and-records/#~:text=From%201948%20until%201973%2C%20during,be%20filled%20>

Christopher-Hulbert, M. (2019). *Writing History with Lighting: Cinematic Representation*. LSU

King, W.R. (1977). *The All-Volunteer Armed Forces Status, Prospects and Alternatives*. Military Review. <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/January-February-2022/King-All-Volunteer-1977/>



<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/>

<https://www.facebook.com/NCOJournal>

<https://twitter.com/NCOJournal>

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NCO Journal, the U.S. Army, or the Department of Defense.

