

A Mark of Excellence

Volume 3, Issue 4

25 June 2000

Blast From the Past

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What a pleasure it is to write about "The Big Red One," because it is one of my all-time favorite Mark-movies!! (And quite possibly IS my very favorite one now that I'm 'old' and have *somewhat* outgrown Star Wars. <G>) It might seem odd to claim that "The Big Red One" was ahead of its time, considering it came out long after the World War II movies of the 50s and 60s, but it was also released long before the current wave of highly praised and popular WWII movies, leaving "The Big Red One" in a little niche all its own. However, despite it being nearly 20 years old now, "The Big Red One" is such a powerful, unforgettable movie, that it compares quite favorably with the more recent WWII films such as "Saving Private Ryan," and even outshines those movies in many ways. Acclaimed director, Sam Fuller, actually served in the Big Red One (the "Fighting First") during WWII, and some of the movie's events actually did happen to him, which lends a very personal "feel" and intensity to this film that helps it to stand apart from (and above!) the many WWII movies.



"The Big Red One" opens with a black-and-white "flashback," set in France in November 1918 during World War I: a soldier (Lee Marvin) is wandering through a scene of carnage, the aftermath of a battle, near a large statue called "Christ on the Cross." As he picks his way through the bodies, he hears a German soldier walking towards him with his hands up, claiming that the war is over. Marvin thinks the German is trying to trick him, so he kills him. A few minutes later, after Marvin finds another American, he is told that the war is indeed over -- the Armistice had been signed four hours earlier -- and he realizes that he is now (technically speaking) a murderer. This grim knowledge seems to be carved into his granite face for the rest of the movie.

After this nearly silent flashback (in fact, many of the movie's most powerful scenes are eerily silent and without a lot of dialogue), the film jumps ahead to World War II. In November of 1942, Marvin's character has now aged into a grizzled, gravel-voiced sergeant ("Sarge"). We are introduced to his squad of "wetnoses" -- new soldiers who are kids just out

of high school -- while they're aboard a ship on their way to North Africa. Mark's character, Griff, is a sharpshooter, and loves to draw and "cartoon" whenever he gets the



chance. (Hmmm... art imitating life there, eh? <G>) Johnson (played by Kelly Ward) is a former pig farmer "with a bad case of hemorrhoids"; Vinci (Bobby Di Cicco) is a "mean kid from the streets" who loves to play jazz on his sax; and Zab (Robert Carradine) is a budding writer, who serves as the movie's narrator (and is obviously supposed to be a young Sam Fuller).

The first battle this squad of inexperienced soldiers is engaged in immediately throws them into moral turmoil: they are supposed to "take" a North African beach that is being held by Frenchmen (who are referred to as Vichy, because they are fighting on the side of the Ger-

(Continued on page 3)

Notes from the Editor...

Travelling is always an adventure, and even more so when one get together with friends who happen to be fan club members. I had that distinct pleasure twice last month. Two members and I spent an all-too-short 4/5 days in the San Francisco area, part of a larger group of friends.

Two days after returning home from SF, I was on the road again. A yearly get-together of Star Wars, and, in my case, Mark-fans. This year, the con was particularly special, as Tina, good friend and German staff-member, was finally able to come :-). There's nothing quite like a group of 6-8 Mark-fans hanging out to watch the video of 'Walking Across Egypt'. For me, it was fun watching their reactions the first time Lamar comes onscreen.

In the coming months, look for changes to come on the website. Some will be throughout, some at first limited to the fan club members-only area.

If you are a member, and don't yet have access to the fc area and want it, e-mail fcmember@markhamill.com with the following info: full name, e-mail addy, and

username (max of 10 alpha/numeric characters.) It may take a few days, but once access has been set-up, the password will be mailed to you. Please make sure your e-mail is set up to receive mail from the website. This applies mainly to AOL members.

The next issue (25 September 2000), is the birthday issue.

<G> If you wish to have a **SHORT** message included in the newsletter, e-mail HdShroom@aol.com, subject: Birthday Wishes, by 31 August. Members without internet access may send their wishes to IMHFC-Birthday PO Box 287 Grand Blanc MI 48439 USA.

Mark has requested that you NOT send gifts. In the name of the fan club, we will be making a donation to a favourite charity of Mark's choice. Thanks again to those members who have bought badges to show support for Mark and donate to his charity of choice! If you would like to do the same, each 2.5" badge costs \$1.35, including postage.



All profits will be included in a birthday donation.

Keep a Lookout For...

Mark has done work on a upcoming **Hollywood Off-Ramp** episode, playing a detective. Aired on E!, it is an anthology reminiscent of 'The Twilight Zone', taking on Hollywood and it's denizens.

On Thursday, 15 June, Mark did work on an upcoming episode of 'Son of a Beach'. Look for it to air later this summer, probably in August.

Mark WILL be at the **San Diego ComicCon** on Saturday, 22 July, at 4.30 pm. He is participating in a panel discussing the new video, 'Batman Beyond: Return of the Joker'. Later that day, he will also make an appearance at a local Warner Bros store, again for the Batman video.

Blockbuster Video has begun selling used rental copies of 'Walking Across Egypt'. If you are having trouble finding this video, thanks to my local BB, I do have several copies available, for cost + postage. Non-US/Canadian members, please remember this tape is in NTSC, not PAL. The copies I have currently were \$8.00, inc. tax; priority postage in the US is \$3.20. If interested, e-mail fcmember@markhamill.com. Or write to the above fc address, with WAE instead of 'Birthday'.

(Continued from page 1)

mans), and the Americans find it appalling that they might have to kill their former allies. The Vichy, we also see, face this same moral quandary, and one of them bravely stands up to his commanding officer and refuses to fire upon the Americans.

Sadly, the officer shoots this dissenter, but then another soldier kills the officer. Unfortunately, as the officer dies, he pulls the trigger of his gun -- which is aimed at the Americans -- and this inadvertently sets off a raging gunfire exchange between the two sides.



It is at this point that we see poor Griff begin the inner struggle that tortures

him throughout the movie: he “freezes” during the battle and doesn’t shoot a single “enemy” soldier, because he finds that he cannot kill another human being.

Following this battle, a humiliated Griff (“... nobody wanted to use the word ‘coward’...”) distances himself



from the others, unable to face them. Sarge -- father, mother, and psychologist to the boys in his squad -- finds Griff and tries to draw him out. Griff admits to Sarge that he can’t murder anybody. The Sarge replies to him that, “We don’t



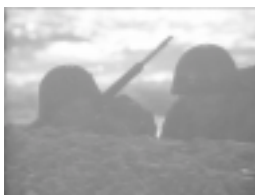
murder -- we kill.” When Griff argues, “It’s the same thing!” the Sarge replies,

“You don’t murder animals -- you kill ‘em.” But immediately

after saying this to Griff, Sarge gets a pensive look on his face -- in trying to reassure Griff, we sense that Sarge is also trying to reassure his own guilt-ridden self.



As time passes, the core of the squad -- Griff, Johnson, Vinci and Zab -- survives several battles and gradually becomes seasoned fighters, although Griff still struggles constantly with his fear of combat. When the squad is hiding in a cave in Sicily, they are informed by Sarge that the German army is rapidly approaching, and that they are basically sitting ducks. Griff struggles with himself -- he wants desperately to run away and starts to head out of the cave -- but then he hesitates, regains mastery over his fear again, and heads back down into the cave to help his squad-mates dispatch all the enemy soldiers who come their way. The core group survives this, and indeed so many battles and an endless stream of squad “replacements” that they achieve near-legendary status amongst the U.S. fighting forces and are referred to as “The Sergeant’s Four Horsemen.”



moments in the film, is the D-Day landing on Omaha Beach. They were supposed to encounter only a lightly guarded area, but instead they found a heavily fortified and barricaded stretch of sand that barred any forward

movement. Trapped between the sea and the barricade, the troops were pummeled for hours by enemy fire and sustained huge casualties, and finally were forced to use their last resort, the “Bangalore torpedo.” A 50 foot long tube which, when fully assembled, acted like a gigantic cannon. The trick to this torpedo, though, was that it was divided into segments and these segments had to be assembled, by hand, by soldiers who ran out into the open under enemy fire. Each soldier was assigned a number, and when a soldier’s “number was up,” he had to dash out from cover and add his segment to the lengthening tube, with each soldier having to run farther and farther away from the shoreline and towards the enemy. The first seven members of Sarge’s squad whose numbers came up, were either dead before the attempt was made, or died trying to assemble the tube. Griff is number eight, and we can see the tension and fright build to a crescendo on Griff’s face as he silently urges his lower-numbered squad-mates to succeed -- to no avail. The terror on Griff’s face when his number is called out is a heart-wrenching thing to see, but he manages to get up and start his attempt despite his fear. After making some progress, Griff survives a near-miss enemy gunshot, but this has the effect of destroying



whatever vestiges of courage that had got him going in the first place, and he just lies on the beach, immobilized with ter-

ror. At this point, Sarge begins to fire a few shots near (and just barely missing) Griff. As Griff looks back at the sergeant in shock, Sarge fires another shot at him. As Sarge must have guessed would happen, this ticks off Griff, his rage finally overwhelms his fear and propels him into action. Griff then manages to successfully assemble the tube (after several horrifying moments when he is almost blown up) and thus heroically opens the way for U.S. troops to get through the barricade.

In addition to surviving battles, the squad also enters into many situations that zigzag between the brutal, the beautiful, and the bizarre. After surviving an ambush at



the "Christ on the Cross" statue, the exact place where the sergeant had killed the surrendering German soldier in World War I, Griff, Johnson and Sarge deliver a Frenchwoman's baby in a captured German tank.

This scene is by turns tense, hilarious, and joyous, and incredibly transforms the "tools of war" (the tank "delivery room," ammunition belt "stirrups," and the rifle-condom "gloves") into something far more life-affirming and humane.

The squad is also assigned the task of wiping out a German platoon that is occupying a monastery/insane asylum, but the squad must do this without killing any of the patients. "Killing insane people is not

good for public relations" deadpans Sarge, to which Griff cynically replies, "But killing sane people's okay?"

After silently killing most of the Germans, the squad encounters the remainder in the dining hall, where both the Germans and the inmates are eating a meal. As gunfire erupts between Sarge's squad and the Germans, most of the patients keep on eating, oblivious to what is happening. One patient, however, grabs a gun and opens fire, exclaiming, "I am one of you! I am sane! I am sane!" which later leads Zab to make the observation that "When you're in a situation where you can't tell crazy from sane, that's pretty confusing for a soldier." Confusing as that crazy situation might have been for the soldiers, it sure didn't stop Griff from stealing a kiss from a "friendly" female spy (who had helped them infiltrate the asylum) as he lies on top of her under a table "protecting" her from the gunfire. Griff certainly isn't a coward when it comes to women.



After many more months and battles, the war starts to wind down. Zab throws a party for his squad with money that he has received from the publishing of his first book. It was during this party that Griff/Mark had an amazing 4.5 minute long "drunken" monologue, that was filmed all in one take, and won the praise of both Lee Marvin and Sam Fuller for Mark's superb act-

ing. Unfortunately, this was cut from the American release of the



movie, so we here in the U.S. only got to see a mere snippet of what our friends overseas got to see of this wonderful scene :::BIG SIGH::: I would dearly love to get my hands on a director's cut of this film!!! From the research I've done on this movie, I've learned that Fuller's version was a nearly four-hour long epic, but the studio chopped it down to 2 hours. What a shame! (Ed note: sadly, the dvd version is not a director's cut, either!)

Zab's party was meant to be a last, fun 'blow-out' for the squad before they were shipped off to the rear lines (or so they thought) to wait out the war's end. Little did they know they were about to enter into their most harrowing experience yet. They were sent not to "mop-up" in the rear lines, but to liberate a concentration camp. At this point, the film once again nearly becomes a silent movie: very little dialogue is used, perhaps because words just simply cannot express the horror to be found in the death camps. After some intense fighting against the Germans, Johnson, Vinci and Zab break through and rush off to the prisoner barracks. As each man kicks down a door, they behold the silent, suffering, starved faces waiting inside. As each man looks into the eyes of

these people, we see them undergo a moment of realization -- a moment where they understand, finally, what the war has been all about.

None of them, however, has a more intense epiphany than Griff. During the fighting,



we see Griff still struggling with fear, but enduring nonetheless. He

sees a German soldier run away from the fighting, and follows him into a building. Griff does not realize what the building is, neither does he realize its appalling purpose. As he cautiously enters the building, he hears the "clang" of a metal door shutting, and guesses that the German soldier has hidden himself somewhere nearby. As Griff moves into the building looking for the soldier, he notices a line of metal doors:

the ovens. Going up to the first one, he at first tries to



open it with his bare hands, but it's too hot to touch, so he uses his gun to slowly open the doors. What he sees inside the oven -- human bones and ashes -- sears his soul. He stands there, staring at the grim remains with such intense emotion on his face, that it's almost unbearable to watch. Every bit of the horror, disgust and grief that he is feeling is plainly written -- engraved -- on his face, reflected in his eyes, and apparent in every move of his head, hands, and body. After he uses his gun to

slowly, but resolutely, close the oven doors on the horror inside, he turns to the next set of oven doors. He stares at it -- then once again slowly, but resolutely, opens the doors. This oven reveals living contents -- the German soldier. As Griff stands before him, the soldier repeatedly fires his rifle point-blank at Griff, but the rifle is jammed, and no shots are fired. Griff, however, has been so transformed in the past few seconds



by what he has seen in the ovens, he does not flinch even the

slightest bit as the soldier fires upon him. As Griff looks straight into the German soldier's eyes, he raises his own rifle and shoots the soldier. And shoots him again. And again, and again, and again, emptying his gun and purging his fear at the same time.

As the movie comes to an end, life comes full circle for Sarge. Once again, he is alone when he encounters a surrendering German soldier who claims that the war is over. Once



again, he thinks he is being tricked and kills the German, only to find out from Griff and the others that the war has indeed been over for four hours. However, this time the situation resolves itself more positively for the sergeant. Johnson checks the German, realizes that he is still alive, and Sarge and the squad work feverishly to save him. Zab reflects in

the closing moments of the film, that "... saving that Kraut was the biggest joke of the war." But it also leads him to understand that they have something in common with the German soldier, they were all alive, they were the survivors. And as Zab puts it, "surviving is the only



glory in war."

I realize that this review is quite long, and yet still I keep thinking of all the wonderful parts that I've had to leave out mentioning because of space limitations. Mark's performance in this film is simply superb -- there's just no other word for it! The incredible, HUGE range of emotions that Mark is able to display with just his face alone is truly awesome!! Several of the most crucial scenes of the film were virtually without dialogue, and relied completely on Mark's ability to convey the meaning, and shades of meaning, of the import of the scene with only his facial expressions, and Mark was fabulous at doing this!! The scene where Griff sees what is in the ovens of the death camp is (in my opinion) Mark's finest moment ever caught onscreen (to date, that is!). "The Big Red One" is a movie that wears well, seeming to gain even further depth and meaning with repeat viewing, and the vignettes and unforgettable shots and images stay with us long after the closing credits



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The Last Word...

A Mark of Excellence is the quarterly newsletter of the **International Mark Hamill Fan Club**. Yearly dues are \$15 US, and include 4 consecutive issues of the newsletter, a membership card, access to the fan club area on the website, and special mailings as appropriate. For more information, please send a SASE to:

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