



Mission Impossible: The 3rd Troop, 4th Musketeers on assignment to build a cricket pitch behind enemy lines in North Africa.

“John Lennon, please don’t die while there is still hope!”

NEVER AGAIN WILL I MARCH in a parade going nowhere. Thus, near the end of 1967, I am forever done with demonstrations. Done with tautological protests. I have resigned from all ad hoc committees. I no longer have any faith in art as a means to affect social change. No points are given for good intentions, nothing for neatness, nothing for being on the side of human beings. The only things that count, it seems, are things that actually occur, really happen.

Take your anti-war films for example. I know now (having learned the hard way) that there is no such thing as an anti-war film. There is only *the* anti-war film. There is only the ultimate film making the ultimate statement, rejecting the concept of war, rejecting war in all forms under all flags, in the name of all names. When this ultimate anti-war film was made, I had

once reasoned, reasonably, then that would be the end of war. Until this definitive war film was shot, until it was shown and all the wars ended, other films treating the subject, regardless of how sympathetic, or how humane and pacifistic, no matter how stirring, or how epic, would be merely academic.

But the ultimate anti-war film has *been* made, and now I see the fallacy in my reasoning. Now I can understand why the Richard Lester-John Lennon film, “How I Won The War,” as nearly perfect as it is, won’t end war—but will end war films.

That is a start, a very good beginning.

Take note here that the mythology of modern war is essentially a motion picture mythology. And only a movie can destroy a movie, or, as in this case, several thousand war movies. Most were made from the falsified version of a contemporary reality—a pile of raw fiction—as it was conceived

by Stephen Schneck

and presented more than 20 years ago in the grand theatre of military operations, during the glorious, vague, recreated, and almost entirely fictionalized epic of WW II. It is all over now.

Still, how many people remain convinced that the war makes a damned good movie, has a little something for everyone? Patriots to the right, cynics to the far left, and those in between, can choose from an infinite number of movies espousing either extreme, or somewhere in between. From battlefield to paths of glory, historically and philosophically speaking, you can authenticate your own personal image of war. From the horrific "Night and Fog" to violent fantasies, like this season's hard-core war flick, "The Dirty Dozen." And for those who can't swallow the stuff cold, there is a branch specializing in science fiction satire, à la "Dr. Strangelove."

How many war buffs realize that WW II exists only in the minds of men—not in fact, but in fallacious history? The prototype war never happened, existentially speaking. It has been fragmented and filed into historical fiction in memories cherished by people: just people. And some non-people. There are only innumerable motion picture adaptations, and a corps of middle-aged and aging veterans, patriots who served their nation once upon a time of national emergency, who now wonder why the cream of American youth has turned sour over war.

The American Legion hasn't a clue to the reasons why so many of their children won't play the good old war game, won't follow the flag to glory. "What's wrong with war?" they ask each other in the forever crippled wards of Army hospitals. What's wrong with war? Didn't the kids enjoy the movie? John Wayne, Robert Mitchum, Audie Murphy certainly seemed to enjoy their work. Especially when they got shot, grenaded, bayoneted, firebombed or boobytrapped, dying beautifully with convulsive élan towards the end of the last reel. Or if they were the enemy, they died dirty. Simplistic but straightforward, like a good movie should.

There used to be a sense of morality, a sense of order (kept by the continuity girl) in the War Movie Department. War might be wonderful, or war might be hell: the Hollywood mentality didn't muck about with ambiguities. If you needed to be vague about war, you could see a foreign art film.

But that was yesterday, or the day before Richard Lester's "How I Won The War." This Lester fellow has burned the Second World War right down to the ground; there is hardly a workable dramatic surface left. He really mucked up the material, rendered it useless from this point on. Most unforgivable of all, he cops out to the best-kept secret of the war: the whole bloody business was a music hall romp, a song and dance act of monstrous proportions, the biggest, goriest sight gag ever offered at neighborhood prices.

It is just possible that Lester has gone too far. There are certain things that may not be mocked. And that Beatle chap, that Lennon, should be careful. He keeps associating his name with these declarations of conscience, these expressions of radical, anti-Establishment positions. And what he has done in this movie, getting so bloody anti-war and all, seems rather more serious than that ad in the London Times publicly supporting revisions of the marijuana prohibition. Even more serious than Mr. Lennon's infamous comparison of Jesus Christ's popularity with the popularity of a certain group of young entertainers.

"Why did you make this film?" I asked Lester.

"Not for the money, not for the fun of it, but because I am opposed to war. And so is John Lennon."

And Lester lets his film go the limit. He's wrecked the war movie business by catching WW II without its pants on. The result is hysterical, funny as a rubber crutch. Funny as an insane asylum full of amputees. Your basic, brutal, comic situation; should make many choke on their own laughter. Gag.

A lot of little people, common soldiers, and just plain gypsies, Jews, Russians, etc. Not to mention our gallant Allies, not to mention ourselves, all of whom lost a lot of arms and legs and lives and so forth. WW II may be in the public domain, and used without royalty payments. Still, all those dead and maimed veterans deserve something better than the truth, don't they?

Lester could have played it a whole lot safer and stuck to traditional symbolic anti-war gestures—giving the finger to flag, country and war: the corpses and sacrifices that provoke the great bellylaugh from the maggots and the worms. Good tried and tested stuff.

I SAW "HOW I WON THE WAR" on Wednesday, and on Thursday I drove out to Twickenham Studios, 20 miles north of London, to let Richard Lester know that he'd made the definitive war film. (Just in case he'd been too involved to notice.)

"Thanks so much, nice of you to say so. But I doubt that it is the best war film ever made, you know. It's only the best one I ever made."

"Why?"

"Why what?" he asked, and I was tempted to answer, "Why not?"

"Why did you make this particular film?"

Question 6 on the idiot questionnaire, one of those questions that answers itself. But I was going for an answer from the horse's own mouth, an answer that could be framed between quotation marks. "Why this film, Mr. Lester?"

It is a rare pleasure to have a man turn and look you right in the eye and answer straightout, "Because I believe wholeheartedly in the subject. And because I am not a cheat. I won't short you, and I won't short myself. Beatle movies make themselves now: I like to keep interested—I want to achieve just a touch more than I can. And because now is the time for all real artists to come to the aid of the human race.

"Now is the time to tell the truth about those lies which we are following to the edge and over. How to convey the most important message at large in the world today? How to defeat the legacy of 20 years of fiction: how many hundreds of thousands of feet of film showing everything about war except the fact that it is and always was an implausible, illogical, secret and steel unreality—officers don't run the war, you know. They run the enlisted men. But the war is in charge of everyone."

"A damned dangerous business, war. One is lucky to get out of it alive."

Lester laughed politely. Like most good comics and comic directors, Dick Lester doesn't make many jokes, doesn't laugh very hard or very often.

"It's not very funny, you know," says Michael Crawford in "How I Won The War."

"Too terrible to bear." Lester was talking about all the battle footage from the Second World War, which he sat through in preparation for shooting his own war movie. "I



*"Fought for three reasons—but I can't remember what they were."
—John Lennon*



He: "It hurts, Flo."
She: "Run them under the cold tap, luv."

got hold of footage, not only stuff from our side. From the German films, too. And Japanese stuff. I watched stuff filmed in Italy by the Fascists; footage from Greece, Yugoslavia, Poland, all those poor places in Europe. Parisians getting shot. Tanks and artillery moving up roads in convoys, and fighter planes suddenly diving out of the clouds and strafing the soldiers lying in the grass, trying to hide. Like the civilians lining up in front of graves they just dug, trying to hide from a firing squad with nothing to hide behind, nothing to hide under. O God, I watched those pictures till I went out of my mind. Then I went ahead and started 'How I Won the War.' It's the part that wasn't in any of the documentaries that I suffered through, and I've never seen it in any feature films made after the war, supposedly based on the war. It's the part they always cover up with blood and high explosives.

"God bless you, Bertold Brecht," sighed Lester. War is the continuation of a vaudeville show by means of force.

"I'll tell you my plan," says a lovely, long-faced member of the cast, of a sudden gone full out camp blackface, who keeps explaining confidently, "It is very simple. All my plans are very simple."

"O my God, Luv, did ya see that hun boot the lieutenant square in the face? (E went squish, yes 'e did.) T's a real damn war, look how hard he hit the lad . . . and look here, look at lovely John Lennon, so polite all thru the film: laying back and dripping in choice lines here there, and everywhere, look how John Lennon gets his one-way ticket. You can see it coming, almost. O look 'ow 'orrible, he goes for dying. Then he did, of a sudden, die: and his color changes, why it is a real bloody war that R. Lester is fighting on his own slapstick and sight gag-rigged terrain. But why'd he have to go and kill good John Lennon?"

"John wanted to do this film with me," Lester said. This particular film. We all were talking about the same thing when we made the picture. We wanted to do the war, really do it. None of the other wars are available yet. World War II is actually all we've had to go on for two decades now.

"John wanted to work in a film, so he did. But I rather doubt that he'll do another one. It's not the most interesting job, being a movie actor, you know. You have to hang around all day to do three minutes in front of the camera. I don't see John devoting his life to playing a film actor, not John . . . not likely."

JUST AS ALL OF DICK LESTER'S MOVIES, like the ones the famous Beatles group makes, are to date very simple. But elaborately got up as though they were on their way to a costume party.

Dick Lester doesn't cheat. War is well known to be hell; and it is not only hell, war is also a staple of show business. Patriotism is a soft shoe dance, even if it does get a bit much sometimes. *What with wives appearing suddenly in the midst of battle to advise their recently amputated better halves to run their oozing wounds under the cold water tap, there's a dear . . . an 'ere comes old dad marching into combat with the boys dressed in their battle kit, old dad in his tweed suit, the queerest bunch you ever saw but who the 'ell can say a thing when everybody's tramping into the cannon's mouth (hurrah boys).*

"By the way, would you ring John up? I'd like to ask him a few questions about the film."

"John prefers not to give any more interviews," Lester said, with only the merest tinge of envy in his voice. "He's been misquoted so often that he's very leery. Besides, all he has to

say about 'How I Won the War,' is in the film of that name."

Dick Lester has a very nice smile. "Please don't be offended. I'm certain that you wouldn't misquote him, but he has had some ghastly experiences with journalists in the past." I have a pretty fair smile myself. "I don't misquote anyone, and anyway, I'm a novelist, not a journalist. Fiction's my field. I don't misquote, I make up my own quotes. After all, when one is writing about mythology, motion pictures, war celebrities and all that sort of phantasmagoria, one can't be a traditionalist. When you're covering the fictive reality, you have to stay loose. The facts so often interfere with actuality. I can write much more lucidly if I make it all up as I go along."

"Hmmm," Lester lifted his left eyebrow. "I see. Do you want to ask me anything else?"

"I would like to know if you sincerely believe that the satire and ridicule in 'How I Won The War' will have much effect on the mentality of people who believe that war is a way of resolving political disputes?"

"I hope so. I didn't make this movie for pacifists. They already know better. It's the others that we're trying to inform: I've tried to give them a picture of what war actually is. 'How I Won The War' isn't satire, you know." "What is it then?" "Neo-realism. Just because it's fantastic and unreal doesn't make it satirical. It's the nature of the beast, war. Take a hideous example, take a historical farce like Dunkirk. British soldiers were slaughtered on the beach waiting for fishing boats to cross the Channel and pick them up. Would you call Dunkirk a satire? It was, you know, but then Fate is a rotten gag writer. A situation is only satirical if a person makes it up. When the situation makes the person up, that's life."

Some life. Some war. But of course it's the only war we have so far. That must be why the moviemakers keep remaking World War II over and over. But now, Richard Lester's "How I Won the War" has ended that dishonest picnic. By presenting a perfectly accurate, absolutely factual picture of a hideous hallucination, men at war, Lester and his gang have given the show away. Frankly, I don't see how anyone can ever do another World War II film: this one is it. And vested show business interests may very well wonder where they are going to get their next war movie from. Already there are angry rumblings in the industry. In England, the Rank Organization refuses to distribute the film. I suppose one cannot blame them too much. It is more accurate a picture of patriotism and militarism than good taste and common decency should allow. Just because war is conducted by maniacs, is that a reason to film lunacy? But Lester has done it.

Now where can World War II go from there? I'm afraid that the truth has been told, and World War II as a source of material is a thing of the past. Bringing us to the problem of what will the war movie boys do for their next picture. This suggests that Vietnam may not be the pointless horror that it appears. There is some superb footage coming out of location. Monstrous, yes. But the entertainment industry must be served. "How I Won the War" is the end of World War II, and thank you for that Mr. Lester. However, war film buffs, don't despair. Some extraordinarily resourceful fanatics are working on a new one. So keep tuned to the news for previews and trailers of coming attractions.

—LONDON, August 26



Crossing the Rhine: General Omar Bradley is elated ("Hot Dog!") when he hears that Lieutenant Goodbody (Michael Crawford) has bribed a German officer, with a rubber check, not to blow up a bridge across the Rhine. Goodbody salutes his German counterpart just before the German is crushed by the first Allied tank. The tank's commander cries, "On to Moscow!"



Pacification in Vietnam

PACIFICATION" is thought to be part of the "other war"—a much cleaner and better one. Although never given precise definition by its practitioners, whose activities have ranged over the years from advising Diem's secret police (in the '50s) to the current effort at arranging a national election, pacification always retains a sense of virtue. And, whatever its value to the Vietnamese peasants, it has served admirably to promote a sense of optimism among Congressmen, newspaper editors and others with a need to believe. In an effort to discover just what pacification is all about, Ramparts dispatched Senior Editor David Welsh to Vietnam. Welsh had previously been stationed in Asia as a U.S. Army lieutenant serving in Korea and specializing in order-of-battle intelligence. The report which follows is based on a two-month visit to Vietnam.

Photograph by David Welsh