

# Four Film Reviews

## Jonathan Lighter

### *12 STRONG*

In the dark of one night eighteen years ago, a Chinook helicopter of the Army's "Nightstalkers" aviation regiment deposited Green Beret Captain Mark Nutsch and eleven other members of his Special Forces A-team somewhere near Dehi in northern Afghanistan. Though preceded by CIA pathfinders who'd made contact with the anti-Taliban, anti-al Qaeda Northern Alliance, Nutsch's team, augmented by two Air Force combat air controllers, were the first American combat soldiers in Afghanistan to fight the War on Terror. They would link up with, befriend, train, advise, and help supply the Alliance cavalry of General Abdul Rashid Dostum, while actively conducting unconventional warfare against the enemy. With the aid of laptop computers, they would also call air strikes on al-Qaeda and the Taliban from, among lesser craft, B-1 and B-52 heavy bombers in the novel role of close air support from 20,000 feet. Other teams followed elsewhere.

The successful 25-day operation, over terrain which helped force the Americans to become cavalry themselves, culminated in the Alliance capture of the strategic city of Mazar-i-Sharif. It soon led to the fall of the radical Taliban government. Telling the story is *12 Strong* (2018), the first Hollywood feature from Danish-born director Nicolai Fuglsig and the first notable Green Beret movie in a very long time. The script, by Ted Tally and Peter Craig, draws mainly on journalist Doug Stanton's narrative nonfiction *Horse Soldiers* (2009), which is founded on more than a hundred interviews and over two hundred written sources.<sup>1</sup>

If you've forgotten that Sylvester Stallone's parody commando Rambo was an ex-Green

Beret, and that the assassin Captain Willard and the mad Colonel Kurtz of *Apocalypse Now* also belonged to Special Forces Command, the last movie about U.S. Army Special Forces you'll likely remember is John Wayne's overtly tendentious *The Green Berets* of more than a half century ago (1968). But after several decades, the Special Forces are back, more believably and in a markedly more favorable light. *12 Strong* is an earnest and presentable tribute to Nutsch's Operational Detachment Alpha 595 from Fort Campbell, Kentucky. Otherwise it's a genre war movie in the most current sense: it's "based on a true story"; depicts elite troops in ground combat; is heavy on the blood squibs and aspirations to verisimilitude; is patriotic though not flag-waving; and showcases G.I. characters hard to distinguish from one other because their highly motivated personalities are, well, hardly distinguishable. One of the first such films was director Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down*; better at individualizing its characters is Randall Wallace's *We Were Soldiers* (produced, like *12 Strong*, by the prolific Jerry Bruckheimer). Released in early 2002, both films were made some months before the Nine-Eleven attacks.<sup>2</sup> Contrary to some perceptions, therefore, neither was a gung-ho response to Nine-Eleven (particularly since both recount American reversals, not triumphs). You could say of *12 Strong* that the actors are good enough to make you think their roles are more than two-dimensional, even if the early vignettes of the soldiers' wives and children do not quite reach that level.

As docudrama, however, *12 Strong* is better than the sum of its characterizations, partly because it's careful enough not to mess with consequential history any more than two hours of action, stark landscapes, and human interest demand—a worthwhile characteristic since much of its core audience of young men and teenagers was just learning to walk in 2001. (It thus performs much the same educative pop history function as did the far larger-scale *The Longest*

*Day*, which retold events of 1944 to audiences of 1962.) If one must be found, the most egregious whopper in *12 Strong* may be merely the offhand claim that Alliance General Dostum, the Americans' host, had started "fighting the Russians when he was sixteen." That would have been in 1962, in the story's reckoning, seventeen years before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. What's more, the real Dostum had long been an officer of the Communist Afghan army till he switched to the *mujahideen* in 1992. (He changed loyalties several more times and fled the country twice before returning in 2001 to fight the Taliban: who said a warlord's life was easy?)

Dostum (Navid Negahban) fairly takes charge of the movie as soon as he arrives: a tribal leader in the mold of the Pashtun raider Kamal in Kipling's "Ballad of East and West" (1889), except for being heavily armed with better weapons. The weary skepticism of Iranian-American actor Negahban (who was the evil "Abu Nazir" on Showtime's *Homeland*) helps make Dostum a perfect foil for Chris Hemsworth's "Mitch Nelson," which is Mark Nutsch's movie alias. (The Australian Hemsworth has played the Marvel Comics thunder-god Thor on screen six times.) Dostum doubts the Bush administration's stamina: "If one American die, your government leaves. And then we lose the war." He is so concerned that he assigns a bodyguard to each of them: "If anybody is killed," says Sergeant Diller (Michael Peña), "Dostum will execute the family of the man he's assigned to protect him."<sup>3</sup>

The general has more glum predictions for his new allies: "Your mission will fail because you fear death. Mullah Razzan's men, the Taliban, they welcome it. Because they believe there is riches waiting for them." By the end of the film, not even the imminent collapse of the jihadist regime cheers him up:

There are no right choices here. This is Afghanistan. Graveyard of *many* empires. Today you are our friend. Tomorrow you are our enemy. It won't be any different for you. Soon America will be just another tribe here. You will be cowards if you leave, and you will be our enemies if you stay.

Nicely put, even if informed by seventeen years of real-world hindsight.

When Kipling's raider Kamal and the unnamed British "colonel's son" face off at last after a wild chase across Afghanistan's plains, each quickly recognizes the other's gallantry, a heroic virtue that Kipling believed transcended race, culture, and geography. Audience tastes change, however. Rather than perceive the special ops' implicit courage as rigorously trained jacks-of-all-battle-trades, Dostum right away searches the faces of the Americans for signs of indisputable "killer's eyes," which seem to be indispensable. Nelson may call in the '52s, but unlike many of his team, he's never seen combat, so he takes a while to get that killer look; but, after the extended final battle with al-Qaeda and the Taliban on the road to Mazar-i-Sharif, Dostum solemnly congratulates Nelson on attaining the even more desirable "heart of the warrior." ("I have no soldiers," Dostum has said earlier. "Only warriors.") Thus the civilized Westerner first proves himself to the semi-barbarian Asian chief, rather than, as in Kipling, the other way around.

Nobody anywhere, by the way, could have "killer's eyes" scarier than those of the fictional, fanatical Taliban leader Mullah Razzan, played by Turkish-born Numan Acar; the black-robed mullah embodies the most murderous Taliban practices and exhibits fewer human traits than, say, Sessue Hayakawa as the cold-blooded Colonel Saito of *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), or even Erich von Stroheim as the lust-crazed Hun of *Hearts of the World* (1918). Razzan is a gun-toting symbol of radical jihadist cruelty and not much else. This might be called

“demonizing the enemy,” or it might be called “personification.”<sup>4</sup>

Unlike many presentations of the “young-warrior-proves-his-fighting prowess” motif, however, Nelson’s testing in *12 Strong* seems almost gratuitous from the start: like more classic heroes in the manner of Perseus and Beowulf, he’s promising from the start, captain after all of a Green Beret A-team in an American story, so how can one doubt he’ll get the job done? The bigger challenge is to win Dostum’s confidence and respect, which of course he incrementally does; it comes down finally to an illustration of Kipling’s now familiar humanist theme (radical in the 1880s) that:

[T]here is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,

When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth!

*12 Strong* shows Dostum as hardnosed and capable, but not quite the diamond in the rough that is Kipling’s Kamal.

Fuglsig persuasively turns the New Mexico plains and the bleak foothills of the Jarilla Mountains into a stand-in for Balkh province, much of which is even bleaker. He and cinematographer Rasmus Videbæk inevitably evince the imagery of countless westerns as Nelson and his men, from the side at middle distance, are expressively filmed at saddle level, as, rifles high, they spur their horses to the gallop. That the rifles are sci-fi looking M4 carbines with scopes, laser sights, and other attachments only enhances the guilty iconographic thrill. (Captain Nutsch told an interviewer in 2002 that the campaign with Dostum felt like a series of “Wild, Wild West events,” sometimes demanding rides of up to thirty kilometers on mountain trails and attacks every day, and he has said of Hemsworth that “Chris did an incredible job trying to

portray what a Special Forces commander does.”)<sup>5</sup>

Nutsch has said further that in one month Dostum’s warriors, the Special Forces, and the U.S. Air Force

. . . destroyed several hundred enemy vehicles. We liberated probably 50 or more towns and the six northern provinces, which is hundreds of square miles. We planted [i.e., killed and buried] thousands of determined Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters in the north. ... We captured several thousand other fighters, foreign Taliban as well as Afghan Taliban. And, hundreds more of these local Afghans defected to the Northern Alliance side.<sup>6</sup>

An end title reveals that Abdul Rashid Dostum became Vice-President of Afghanistan in 2014, and that “he and Mitch Nelson remain close friends to this day.” Given his checkered past, Dostum’s rise in Afghan politics status might be worth pondering. But if he’s still buddies with Thor, pondering would clearly be a waste of time.

*12 Strong* tells a rousing though not an optimistic tale. Screenwriters Tally and Craig set up a reflective moment before the GI’s go home:

DILLER: You won a battle, y’ know. Still gotta win the war.

NELSON: It ain’t up to us. Ain’t our job anyway. Right?

After thirteen years, the U.S. military’s combat mission, Operation Enduring Freedom—Afghanistan, which began with the insertion of the CIA and Special Forces, was officially ended by President Obama on Dec. 28, 2014. Three days later it was succeeded by Operation Freedom’s Sentinel. In February 2019, some 17,000 Coalition troops remained in Afghanistan. About 8,500 were Americans.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> New York: Scribner, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> "Black Hawk Down Production Notes," <http://cinema.com/articles/732/black-hawk-down-production-notes.phtml> (accessed March 19, 2019). "We Were Soldiers: Filming and Production," [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0277434/locations#filming\\_dates](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0277434/locations#filming_dates) (accessed March 19, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> According to Stanton (120), he only promised to kill the bodyguard; but the real Dostum has repeatedly been accused of other nasty things: Rod Nordland, "Accused of Rape and Torture, Exiled Afghan Vice President Returns," *New York Times* (July 22, 2018) <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/22/world/asia/afghanistan-general-abdul-rashid-dostum-rape.html>. (accessed Apr. 20, 2019). There were no fatalities among Nutsch's team.

<sup>4</sup> Tom Coghlan, "Taliban execute teacher in front of his pupils for educating girls." *The Telegraph* (Dec. 17, 2005): <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/1505722/Taliban-execute-teacher-in-front-of-his-pupils-for-educating-girls.html>. Also, "Women...have been killed, burned and threatened for attending school. Many teachers have been executed in remote villages by the Taliban during the latest resurgence." "Women's education in Afghanistan," *The Guardian* (Feb. 17, 2009): <https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2009/feb/17/afghanistan-women> (accessed Jan. 19, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> "'12 Strong' Green Beret ... played by 'Thor.'" Fox News Network (Jan. 19, 2018) <https://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/12-strong-green-beret-said-being-played-by-thor-has-scored-serious-points-with-his-kids> (accessed March 31, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> "Frontline ... On the Ground—After Action: Evaluating the Military Campaign" <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/campaign/ground/after.html> (accessed March 26, 2019).

## 317<sup>th</sup> PLATOON

In a recent issue of the *Guardian*, the English military historian Antony Beevor reflects on the war film as a shaper of our understanding of both war and history—almost always for the worse. One movie that especially makes him “gnash his teeth” is *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), largely because after Spielberg’s harrowing evocation of Omaha Beach, the movie becomes, to Beevor’s eye, awash in stagey sentimentality: a case of thematic bait and switch. But *Ryan* is hardly the worst offender. More obnoxious, Beevor writes, is the plain exploitation of history by reckless docudramas like *Enemy at the Gates*, *Valkyrie*, and *U-571*. Such films push the dodgy concept of “inspired by actual events” to the limit.<sup>1</sup>

Beevor’s factual standards are high: that’s why he’s a historian and not a film critic. But as cinema, a “war movie” (unlike a documentary) doesn’t often stand or fall on its complete fealty to fact. The current standards of achievement, moreover, are extreme accuracy of detail and a relentless realism. Thus, in his succinct judgment of celluloid takes on history, Beevor nominates one film as the “greatest war movie ever made.” That film, not very well known in the English-speaking world, is *La 317ème section (The 317<sup>th</sup> Platoon)*, novelist-director Pierre Schoendoerffer’s revealing 1965 recreation of one corner of the First Indochina War. Schoendoerffer’s film was rarely seen in the U.S. before its New York premiere in 2018, more than a half century after its French release, which was three months before U.S. Marine combat troops landed at Da Nang. Reviewers suggest it’s a movie that could or would or should have “kept us out of Vietnam.” (They have a touching faith in the power of cinema.)

Pierre Schoendoerffer was well acquainted with Vietnam. His career began as a merchant seaman, an army draftee, an aspiring filmmaker, and—for the sake of experience—an enlisted cameraman with the French Army in Indochina. He was captured by the Viet Minh at Diên Biên Phú in 1954 and spent four months as a prisoner of war; he attempted to escape but was recaptured. After his release, Schoendoerffer worked in South Vietnam for magazines like *Paris Match*, *Look*, and *Life* and in 1958 co-directed his first feature film, the Afghanistan adventure *La Passe du Diable* (*The Devil's Pass*). In *317<sup>th</sup> Platoon* Schoendoerffer, like his New Wave contemporaries Godard and Truffaut, deftly blurs the boundary between cinema fiction and *cinéma vérité*. Black-and-white film, hand-held cameras, location shooting (entirely outdoors by the celebrated Raoul Coutard, also a veteran of *Indochine*), natural light and sound, long takes on ugly sights, and “carelessly” composed shots gave *317<sup>th</sup>* the look and feel of spontaneous reality to a generation raised on movie-house newsreels.

Schoendoerffer was not quite the first to exploit the *faux* documentary technique in a war film. Carl Foreman in *The Victors* (1963) and Kubrick in *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) both used a similar technique, however tentatively. (*The Victors* begins in earnest with a staged sequence masquerading as an actual newsreel; and imitation news footage depicts the attack on the mad General Ripper's headquarters in *Strangelove*.) A pseudo-documentary approach, moreover, fully defined Peter Watkins's recreation of the eighteenth-century battle of *Culloden* (1964) for the BBC; more striking still was Watkins's second *tour de force*, *The War Game* (1965)—whose unsparing depiction of a nuclear attack on Britain was thought so disturbing by the BBC that it wasn't broadcast for twenty years. Gillo Pontecorvo's celebrated *Battle of Algiers* (1966)—Antony Beevor's number-two choice for top honors—may have been the definitive mid-sixties,

neorealist film seeking to depict war more effectively by making drama look like photojournalism.

And *317<sup>th</sup> Platoon*—frank and uncompromising—is indeed effective as it follows a French-led Laotian platoon near the Laos-Cambodia border in the final days of the war. The French, as might be expected, are the center of interest—but the ambiguous position of the Indochinese is not overlooked. The fall of Diên Biên Phú looks imminent as, far to the south, the isolated platoon must fight its way through a hundred miles of wide-open savanna, jungled wilderness, and cascading streams, from one obscure outpost to another. Heat, mosquitos, leeches, the start of the monsoon, and roving Viet Minh patrols don't help. Subtitles date the screen action from May 4, 1954 and count down to the historically ordained end five days later.

Behind the opening credits (with creepy theramin accompaniment) we see big, vile insects swarming over the ground, and our first look at the platoon is the sight of them hauling down the French tricolor in a soaking rain: the Cambodian townsfolk look on, worried or impassive. Soon there's a close-up of the drastically unprepossessing face of Warrant Officer Willsdorf; that is, Bruno Cremer, a future Inspector Maigret on French TV who, with his warts and Cyrano proboscis, doesn't look much like a movie star. Cremer's physiognomy is a further indication that *317<sup>th</sup> Platoon* will be the polar opposite of mainstream Hollywood rousers like *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949) and *To Hell and Back* (1955), with their confident focus on individual heroism and their faith in good-looking, exemplary heroes.

The platoon's leader is Second Lieutenant Torrens (Jacques Perrin), fresh from the academy at Saint-Cyr and less than two weeks in country. Willsdorf, Torrens's tough "adjutant," has been in Indochina since 1946. Schoendoerffer manages the archetypal tension between

rookie lieutenant and hardened platoon sergeant without the familiar trope of depicting the young officer as an incompetent know-it-all. Torrens may be inexperienced and by-the-book, but he's also honorable and imperturbable, and he respects Willsdorf's sometimes ruthless advice, even when he rejects it—in situations where it is impossible, really, to know which course of action to choose. But it's Willsdorf, towering physically over everyone else, who's the movie's tragic antihero. Willsdorf, we eventually learn, was one of the 130,000 so-called *Malgré-nous*, men drafted into Hitler's *Wehrmacht* from French Alsace and Moselle, and he is a proficient and wholly pragmatic survivor of the Eastern Front. Unlike the malevolent, one-dimensional Sergeant Barnes in Oliver Stone's Vietnam *Platoon*, Willsdorf is affable enough off duty, but Nazi conscription and two complicated and inglorious wars have infused him with a nihilist's aloofness. He recalls with odd nostalgia the words of a desperate German officer in Russia just after ordering a suicidal assault: "Hooray for death!" He tells Torrens a story about French burning a seemingly deserted (and presumably insurrectionist) village quite by mistake, leaving the community riceless and homeless; but the story is "funny" to the war-nurtured Willsdorf because the population had ironically gone to the wrong end of the village—with French flags—to give their "protectors" a warm welcome: for Willsdorf, *C'est la guerre!* We learn that *if* he were to leave the army, he'd buy a hut and settle down by some languid Cambodian river. But he won't leave the army. He's addicted to it. Besides, he "can't go back to France," presumably because of the prevalent contempt for the 130,000 *Malgrés* like him.<sup>2</sup>

When Torrens prepares to carry along several men who have been wounded in a brush with the Viet Minh, Willsdorf protests that trying to exfiltrate wounded soldiers through enemy lines is suicide: he'd seen it tried in the Ukraine. He then suggests a compromise: carry Sergeant

Roudier (Pierre Fabre) but abandon the wounded Laotians. Torrens insists on taking them all on makeshift litters, leaving nobody behind. It's a typically cruel dilemma, especially since a few men must be spared to decoy the Viet Minh away from the rest of the now more vulnerable platoon. Willisdorf volunteers to lead the decoy squad, but not all make it, and Willisdorf is almost shot while hurrying back to retrieve a machine gun dropped by one of the casualties.

At one point, to jolt the Viet Minh, Willisdorf casually booby-traps the body of the deceased Sergeant Roudier with a live grenade. Just as casually, he tells Torrens (who's in the dark about the grenade) that Roudier was "a great guy and a good sergeant." And that's as deep into character as this movie gets—which is to say, deeper than many other war movies.

Schoendoerffer's infantrymen do not lend themselves to "audience identification." All relationships within the platoon are professional: the only warmth is for and between the dying, and if anybody much likes or dislikes anybody else, it's of limited interest to Schoendoerffer.

Evasion of a determined enemy in a dismal jungle had already been the subject of the standard-issue dramas *Objective Burma!* (1945) and *Beachhead* (1954). What distinguishes *317<sup>th</sup> Platoon* from these and others is a literalism of script and image more rigorous than in any previous combat movie. Wooden dialogue, for example, is anathema to Schoendoerffer, who scorns lame, bulky exegesis. Compare Darryl Zanuck's *Longest Day*.

TED: Have you seen Johnny? .... You mean [*pause*] he's *bought it*?! ...Poor old Johnny. ... I mean, he went through the battle of Britain and all that. ...  
with *317<sup>th</sup> Platoon*.

PERRIN: Bastards. They got Johnny.

TORRENS [*reading map*]: OK. We'll move off this way.

And there is plenty of insider minutiae for the observant. No Hollywood film had included, for example, that one-time staple of the combat soldier, the condom stuffed with cigarettes to keep them dry.

Without either melodrama, a meaningful “hero’s journey,” a “narrative arc,” artificial suspense, or any intrusive philosophizing, Schoendoerffer dramatizes war’s comprehensively malign ethic, which, of course, is largely unalterable. Except for the observation that “In Marseilles and again in Saigon the cops had to protect us from the demonstrators,” the only topical comment comes after French radio has announced the surrender of Diên Biên Phủ. One of Torrens’s Indochinese soldiers then explains a Viet Minh talking point:

Yellow Cambodians no good be friends with white French. Yellow stick together!

...French leave Diên Biên Phủ. White run! Yellow stay!

Then he proves it by crushing an egg in his fist.

If Schoendoerffer had a Hollywood counterpart, it was the legendary director Samuel Fuller. Both men were novelists as well as filmmakers, and both mined their own experiences of battle to make iconoclastic films. But Schoendoerffer fortunately lacked Fuller’s weakness for the pulp *ambiance* that marred *The Steel Helmet*, *Fixed Bayonets* (both 1951, both low-budget) and *The Big Red One* (1980, expanded to five hours in 2005). *The Steel Helmet*’s Sergeant Zack (Gene Evans) is just as callous as Willsdorf but twice as gruff; coincidentally or not, a booby-trapped corpse also figures prominently in Fuller’s film. Fuller, moreover, had written, directed, and produced the fanciful, hardboiled adventure *China Gate* (1957), which like *317<sup>th</sup> Platoon* was set in Vietnam in 1954. But more striking still, just as Schoendoerffer intended *317<sup>th</sup> Platoon* as a revelation of real life, Fuller—a veteran of North Africa, Omaha Beach, and Germany—wrote and

directed his debut *Steel Helmet* explicitly as a GI's rebuke to optimistic films like Lewis Milestone's semi-stylized *A Walk in the Sun* (1945).<sup>3</sup>

Schoendoerffer's naturalist style is the art that conceals art, and (except for the relatively unobtrusive score) the film has the unpretentious, unportentous feel of real life: people pursue their aims of the moment, and stuff happens. It's like one of Zola's "experimental novels," which pretended only to scrutinize society and behavior without making explicit judgments. We're so used to having directors alert us to what's important by means of visual technique, that it's perfectly possible to miss the significance of Willisdorf's grenade, an offense to decency that may also be a war crime in violation of the Hague Convention. And it's entirely gratuitous, since a Viet Minh soldier might well be wary of the unburied, tightly covered corpse of a French soldier left out in a village street, but a returning villager might not. "Good guys" in war movies do not booby-trap the corpses of their buddies; nor have they fought for Hitler, reluctantly or otherwise. Yet Willisdorf illustrates Schoendoerffer's thesis that the battlefield can erode one's humanity in ways the soldier doesn't even notice. The narrator of Schoendoerffer's Conradian adventure novel, *Farewell to the King*, set in World War II, exclaims, "How cruel we were in those days, as cruel and indifferent as young animals devoid of imagination!"<sup>4</sup>

It's interesting to compare *317<sup>th</sup> Platoon* with Peter Collinson's *The Long Day's Dying* (1968); though set in Europe it has a comparable story and outlook, and it also won praise for its realism. Much of Collinson's movie, however, is plotted for suspense. Suspense in Schoendoerffer's film rises and falls instead solely from the immediacy of its episodes and is muted considerably by the coolness of the director's astringent eye.

In the fall of 1966, Schoendoerffer returned to Vietnam to film an operation of the U.S. 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry (Airmobile) for a genuine small-unit documentary, which he called *La Section Anderson* (*The Anderson Platoon*) for Lieutenant Joseph B. Anderson, the African-American West Pointer who was in command. Schoendoerffer didn't add much narration, letting the images speak for themselves, though there's a stand-out sequence of grunts slogging through creeks, rice paddies, and deep mud, as Nancy Sinatra sings the Top Twenty hit of the day, "These Boots were Made for Walkin'." *The Anderson Platoon* won an Academy Award in 1967 for Best Documentary Feature and, after a special TV showing on CBS, an Emmy in 1968.<sup>5</sup>

Nearly a quarter century later, his mind again occupied with Vietnam, Schoendoerffer wrote and directed *Diên Biên Phú* (1992), an epic treatment of epic mistakes. It is not yet available in English.

One might watch *The 317<sup>th</sup> Platoon* most of the way through, thinking that its point, like that of so many other war films, is to show people "being tested," and may the best man win. But by the final frame, we're shown the futility of the "test"—and of the future prospects of war addicts like Willsdorf. Whether Beevor has pronounced justly that Schoendoerffer's *Platoon* is the "greatest" war movie ever made remains a matter of opinion. But of its sobriety and verisimilitude and unstinting rejection of cliché, surely there is no doubt.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Beevor, 2018. A recent film “based on historical events” that’s virtually all fiction is Russell Crowe’s well-mounted *The Water Diviner* (2014), whose method is instructive: historically there *was* a Gallipoli campaign, but almost every other narrative element on screen stems from a single sentence in a British colonel’s postwar letter: “One old chap managed to get here from Australia, looking for his son’s grave” (Shanahan).

<sup>2</sup> Thatcher discusses the *Malgré-nous* in some detail.

<sup>3</sup> McAdams, 83; the first Hollywood film about Schoendoerffer’s war came as early as 1952 in the form of Wallace Grissell’s B-level *A Yank in Indo-China*. Fuller’s most satisfactory war film overall may be *Merrill’s Marauders* (1962), despite Warner Bros.’ marketing decision to impose a *finale* of an Army marching band playing F. W. Meacham’s “American Patrol.”

<sup>4</sup> The vaguely worded Article 23b of the 1907 Convention makes it unlawful by international agreement “to kill or wound treacherously individuals belonging to the hostile nation or army”; by 1980 the supplementary Geneva Protocol on the use of “Mines, Booby-Traps, and Other Devices” explicitly prohibited the booby-trapping of the dead—and the living as well; Schoendoerffer, 53.

<sup>5</sup> *The Anderson Platoon* was re-edited (rather indifferently) by T. C. Coley and re-released in 1987, with new narration by Stuart Whitman.

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## *THE CAPTAIN*

**A**dolf Eichmann was the chief logistician of the German SS who, from his desk in Berlin, organized the round-ups and deportations of European Jews to the camps where they would be exterminated. Responsible at long distance for the murder of several million people, Eichmann was convicted in the state of Israel for war crimes and executed in 1962. His oft-quoted defense was that he was “only following orders.”

“Only following orders” was also the trial defense of the seemingly unremarkable First-Class Private Willi Herold, a *Luftwaffe* paratrooper, whose bizarre story provides the basis for Robert Schwentke’s unique German-language film *The Captain* (*Der Hauptmann*, 2017). At Herold’s 1946 trial, it became clear that his own “obedience” had nothing to do with his killing of nearly 200 German inmates of the Aschendorfermoor prison camp in April, 1945. Nobody ordered him to do it. Writer-director Schwentke sticks reasonably close to the real events, aided throughout by Michal Czarnecki’s crisp editing and by expressive black-and-white cinematography by Florian Ballhaus, which add a desperate clarity.

Herold was apprenticed to a chimney sweep when he was drafted into the *Wehrmacht* in 1943 at the age of eighteen. Schwentke begins his story about a year and a half later, two weeks before the fall of the Third Reich, as Herold, presumably a deserter, is running like hell from a careering truckload of half-drunk military police. Freezing in the late winter weather, hungry, his uniform in tatters, the vulnerable Herold (perfectly played, one feels, by Max Hubacher, who strongly resembles him) eventually encounters an abandoned six-wheeled command car in which he finds a few apples and the freshly laundered uniform of a *Luftwaffe* captain, with

combat badges and an Iron Cross. Miraculously, the uniform fits him almost to a T. For this he thanks God.

If we didn't know *The Captain* was "based on fact," we might conclude from what lies ahead that Schwentke had devised a cunning, deadpan satire on the nature of German fascism—or of all fascism for that matter. But reality has made any such invention gratuitous. Clothed with false authority, the nineteen-year old Herold promptly starts shouting orders to invisible underlings; aiming a pistol, he barks at an imaginary somebody to "Run for your life!" as he himself had just been doing. When another lost soul stumbles on the scene—a weary corporal twice Herold's age—the older man (Milan Peschel) is rightly intimidated. After demanding the man's papers, the counterfeit Captain orders him along as his chauffeur. Claiming fantastically that he is ascertaining civilian morale for the Fuehrer, Herold upbraids the demoralized customers at a nearby inn and demands a good meal from the surly innkeeper for him and his disheveled aide. One might be amused at the baby-faced Herold's predicament: what a potential for fun and adventure, in the mold perhaps of the comic *Imitation General* (1958) with Glenn Ford and Red Buttons. But *The Captain* is far darker as well as far more interesting.

"Looters," warns a sign at the inn, "Will Be Punished by Death!" When a quaking miscreant is delivered to Willi's mercies, he shoots him in the head without much hesitation. Since we've just met Herold as a hunted, shivering animal with Nazis in hot pursuit, it's impossible to have seen that coming. Who *is* this man really? Is he trying to protect his masquerade at any cost, or is there something else more sinister still? The sympathy we've had for Willi Herold evaporates in a flash.

It doesn't take long for Willi to impress a half dozen or so ne'er-do-wells and predatory deserters into his newly formed "Task Force Herold." Only the thug Kipinski (Frederick Lau) silently and correctly appraises Herold's youth and overlong trousers, saying slyly, "Opportunity is what you make of it." When their huge car runs out of gas, Willi's motley crew must drag it down the road with cables, hunched over and straining like oxen while their boss relaxes in the driver's seat. A skeptical MP officer brings them to a nearby prison-camp, whose commandant, Colonel Hansen (Waldemar Kobus), is facing an annoying, typically totalitarian judicial problem. He's in charge of 300 German looters, deserters, and recaptured escapees, none of whom does he want freed by the approaching British. Nazi justice would be served by a perfunctory military court and the predictable punishment. But a court requires the presence of an additional officer, and Hansen—also buffaloes by Willi's uniform and voice and manner of command—expresses disappointment that Herold is not the judiciary officer he's requested. But there is a simple solution, says the boyish captain, who claims authorization from Hitler "to take any necessary action." He will personally oversee the execution of the prisoners and take full responsibility. His offer is entirely gratuitous. The district *Gauleiter* gives his blessing over the phone ("He can help you out!"), and the executions begin. Willi forces a platoon of miserable, ill-clad prisoners to sing a jolly hiking song while he marches them to the execution site where they dig their own mass grave. An anti-aircraft gun is wheeled up, and when it inconveniently jams, Herold orders the camp guards to keep shooting with their sidearms. Then he orders his dumbfounded driver Freytag into the pit to finish off the survivors. One of Hansen's officers, Schneider (Wilhelm Koch), is so shaken by the killings that he reports the incident to higher authority. But the Herold massacre continues.

Two of the remaining prisoners entertain the camp officers at dinner with a crudely scatological, anti-Semitic comic skit. Herold then questions one of them in the artfully insidious manner of Christoph Waltz in *Inglourious Basterds*; this gives Herold the opportunity to gloat, in a falsely ironic tone, "I stole this uniform." The victim forces a laugh. Soon the two comedians and others are sadistically shot with the participation of the guard commander's wife.

An RAF raid destroys the camp, and Herold, Freytag, Kipinski, and their remaining cronies drive to a town where Herold's first order of business is to shoot the mayor for flying a white flag. Under Willi's "orders," the gang shakes down passers-by and commandeers the hotel (or is it the brothel?) for a drunken orgy. There's another killing. Then military police arrive and haul Willi and his henchmen away.

The courtroom scene that follows is scathing as Herold, boyish and modest, faces a *Wehrmacht* accounting at nearly the very moment of the Reich's collapse. For impersonating an officer, shooting a public official, and massacring Germans on false authority, the judge is ready to sentence him to hang. But a navy officer has another idea—to give him an "administrative transfer to the front":

He showed tremendous military leadership qualities. ... A man like him is worth his weight in gold, especially now. ...The war is over. ... But that does not mean that we're giving up. We will establish an underground army that will operate in occupied Germany and continue the armed struggle against the enemy.

"Heil Hitler!" shouts Willi, as though eager to join Operation Werewolf, Hitler's mostly illusory "resistance movement": "We'll march to Berlin on foot to free the Reich's fallen capital. *Jawohl!*" That a manipulating, criminal psychopath should be chosen for his "leadership

qualities" as a savior as the Nazi regime dissolves seems poetically fitting. Schwentke ends the story with a symbolic scene of Willi disappearing into deep woods over a roadbed of skeletons.

And, in truth, the real Herold's career was done. He escaped the German authorities and blended in briefly with his countrymen till he was arrested in the British Sector in May, 1945—for stealing a loaf of bread. The Military Government identified him and tried him and eleven of his accomplices for mass murder, putting Willi and five others to death at Wolfenbüttel Prison, in the new, British-created state of Lower Saxony, in November, 1946. The German guillotine was the manner of execution.

Director Schwentke uses Germany's looming, ignominious defeat as a backdrop, but not a necessary or sufficient condition, for acts of moral and judicial anarchy, even (be it said) by the corrupt standards of the Nazis. Moreover, moral judgments on Willi in *The Captain* are limited to appropriate looks of distress in the eyes of the pathetic Freytag, and to the short-lived outrage of Schneider, the staff officer at the prison. His role is easy to overlook. At Herold's trial, Schneider, who'd reported the massacre, can do no more than weakly acquiesce to the opinion that Willi is real officer material. Nor does Schwentke try to offer insights into Herold's mind and behavior. All we know is that he quickly becomes what he pretends to be. Or is what he pretends to be who he really is? Did Adolf Hitler simply urge millions of Germans (and not only Germans) to play-act, in newly designed uniforms, who they really were? Eichmann, the characterless functionary whose life story suggested to Hannah Arendt the phrase "banality of evil," was "following orders," but Herold, the otherwise powerless nobody, made up his own and got others to follow them. Is Private Willi Herold an equally representative antihero, albeit in miniature, for his place and time?

In the extraordinary soundless sequence that backs the final credits, Willi and his gang are tooling through city streets in their Mercedes, and it takes a moment to realize that these are twenty-first century streets. The previously discordant soundtrack booms a spirited waltz as the credits roll in red off to one side—adding the final National Socialist color to Schwentke’s black-and-white palette—and these hobgoblin visitants, from a past thought dead, accost, interrogate, rob, and detain shocked pedestrians of all ages and both sexes. Maybe it’s just a freak of Schwentke’s, a sick joke on the audience. But while offering a jolt of relief from the darkness of the tale, this bitterly ironic finale, shot as though an actuality video for YouTube, typifies all at once the preposterousness, the horror, and the ominous import of the fact that such events occurred at all. No particular era, no specific political regime holds a monopoly on exploitation of power, blind obedience, crime, ruthless opportunism, and psychopathology, and the parodic intrusion of Willi Herold into the current world is a *tour de force* of reminder and warning.

As to servile obedience: the film’s most striking English-language poster features the stunning image of the hunched-over soldiers dragging the imperious Willi Herold down the road under a lowering sky in his huge military Mercedes. In the poster version, he stands erect as if on inspection. The tagline is a splendidly ironic “Follow the leader.”<sup>1</sup>

## Note

<sup>1</sup> The disturbing tale of Willi Herold has been related in detail by T.X.H. Pantcheff, a British intelligence officer involved in his 1946 trial. Pantcheff's book, unfortunately, is available only in German; perhaps the release of *The Captain* will prompt an English edition. See also Wiese, Pfaffenzeller, and the documentary *Der Hauptmann von Muffrika* (dir. Paul Meyer and Rudolf Kersting) (1997).

Herold may have been encouraged to push his imposture to the limit by the legendary masquerade of cobbler and jailbird Wilhelm Voigt (1849-1922). After being released from prison in 1906, Voigt donned the uniform of a Prussian officer, dragooned a convenient detachment of soldiers, and, with command voice, led them to the town hall of Köpenick. Voigt placed the burgomaster under arrest, ordered the soldiers to take him to jail in Berlin, and stole nearly 4000 marks from the cashbox. The usually humorless Kaiser pardoned him, and Voigt became a minor international celebrity. He was the subject of the silent comedy *Der Hauptmann von Köpenick* (1926, dir. Siegfried Dessauer), remade with sound in 1956 by Carl Zuckmayer. The Voigt incident reinforced the idea that blind obedience was a signal virtue in the Kingdom of Prussia. See, e.g., Rosenblum and "Modern Highwaymen."

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## *A PRIVATE WAR*

**S**ixty years ago the great Martha Gellhorn (one of the ablest war correspondents of the century) wrote of her former faith in the impact of her calling:

If people were told the truth, if dishonesty and injustice could be shown to them, they would at once demand the saving action, punishment of wrong-doers, and care for the innocent. ...A journalist's job was to bring news, to be eyes for their conscience.<sup>1</sup> But after reporting on war in Spain and Finland, Gellhorn had changed her mind. Telling the world didn't make people (and still less governments) demand the saving action, punish the wrong-doers, or care for the innocent. The public shrugged off the news and preferred to believe the bilge and chicanery of politicians instead. But Gellhorn kept reporting—from China, Normandy, Dachau, Vietnam, El Salvador, and places in between: no longer because she thought her words could help bring justice to the earth, but for the more Kantian reason that journalism is "honorable" and "the act of keeping the record straight is valuable in itself." She kept at it till she was into her seventies.

The late Marie Colvin, whose career is the subject of filmmaker Matthew Heineman's conscientious docudrama *A Private War* (2018) was equally driven, equally devoted to speaking the truth for the victims of war. Martha Gellhorn was her acknowledged role model, and Colvin rivaled or surpassed her in geographic range and time under personal threat while doing her job. Born in Queens, N.Y., Colvin earned a Yale degree in anthropology before she went to work in 1986 for the *Sunday Times* of London. For twenty-five years she covered conflict in the Third World for the editors of that paper. For putting her life on the line to get the scoop, she was named British Foreign Journalist of the Year in 2001 and 2009—and once more, posthumously,

in 2012. (Heineman was irresistibly drawn to Colvin's story: his stunning 2017 documentary *City of Ghosts* spotlights the desperate, underground journalistic resistance to ISIS inside Raqqa in 2014—a story virtually unknown at the time.)

*A Private War* hurtles headlong from Sri Lanka, where a rocket-propelled grenade blinded Colvin's left eye in 2001, to the ruins of the besieged city of Homs, in Syria, where she was killed by forces of Bashar al-Assad in 2012. Foreign journalists had been banned from entering the country, and it looks as though Colvin (who the day before had reported the plight of women and children via CNN) was intentionally targeted with others in a makeshift "news center" in a first-floor apartment. At fifty-six, Marie Colvin was too young to die. In photos, she looked older.

Among Hollywood treatments of reporters under fire, *A Private War* is easily one of the smartest. The earliest of note is Hitchcock's *Foreign Correspondent*, released in August 1940. Though less about war than about espionage, it ends with the American hero, Huntley Havistock (Joel McCrea), broadcasting from London under falling German bombs,

It's ... as if the lights were all out everywhere, except in America. Keep those lights burning, cover them with steel, ring them with guns, build a canopy of battleships and bombing planes around them. Hello, America, hang on to your lights: they're the only lights left in the world!

Deftly channeling Edward R. Murrow, Walter Winchell, and Sir Edward Grey in this impassioned plea for preparedness (though not intervention), journalist-prophet Havistock is clearly a movie concoction.

Not so the real-life Ernie Pyle of the Scripps-Howard chain, quietly portrayed by Burgess Meredith in *The Story of G.I. Joe* (1945, dir. William A. Wellman). Pyle was one of the most celebrated of all shoe-leather journalists. His regular newspaper columns, written from North Africa, Europe, and finally the Pacific, reached tens of millions of American readers between 1942 and 1945, making him the leading chronicler of the American soldier in World War II. The nation was stunned when the unassuming, forty-four-year old Pyle was killed by a Japanese machine-gun on the island of Ie Shima in April, 1945.

But, as the title suggests, *The Story of G.I. Joe* focuses not on Ernie Pyle but on the soldiers he reported on. The same is true of Raoul Walsh's well-made *Objective, Burma!* (1945), in which the fictional Mark Williams (Henry Hull) parachutes into the jungle with Errol Flynn's platoon of commandos. The professionally seasoned Williams is stirred by American determination and infuriated by the discovery of a Japanese atrocity. A very different character is Beckworth (David Janssen) in *The Green Berets* (1968, dir. Roy Kellogg and John Wayne). Shown first as a liberal critic of the Vietnam War, Beckworth pledges at the end to tell America the "truth": that vigilant, warmhearted Americans are successfully protecting South Vietnam and its children from the scheming, inhuman Communists.

Before the 1980's, war correspondents in movies were thus mostly serious-minded, supporting characters. Then came a new image in a spate of movies including Peter Weir's *The Year of Living Dangerously*, Roger Spottiswoode's *Under Fire* (both 1982), and Oliver Stone's *Salvador* (1986): political action-romances focused on brawny young Western journalists caught up in Third-World civil wars. But the fullest picture of a war correspondent before the current *A Private War* was Roland Joffé's Oscar-winning *The Killing Fields* (1984). Starring Sam Waterston

and Haing S. Ngor, it paints a truthful, awful picture of Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge between 1973 and 1976.

Matthew Modine's Private Joker, in Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), is a Marine Corps combat correspondent, but he doesn't do much reporting. Michael Winterbottom filmed *Welcome to Sarajevo* (1997), located in Bosnia soon after the 1996 cease-fire. Based on the true story of correspondent Michael Nicholson, the script follows two journalists, one British, one American (Stephen Dillane, Woody Harrelson, both in top form), who thanklessly cover the brutal siege of the suddenly dystopian city in 1992. Depending on your artistic sensibility, the film's impact is either weakened or enhanced by the skillful integration of anguishing news footage.

Juliette Binoche stars as a beautiful, idealistic war photographer addicted to her profession in Norwegian director Erik Poppe's *1,000 Times Good Night* (2013). Poppe's stilted melodrama, with some stunning images, focuses on the domestic woes engendered by rushing overseas into terrorist country. The plot, alternately flat and overheated, regains some emotional authority through Poppe's own early career as a conflict photographer.

Largely froth is Glenn Ficarra and John Requa's haphazard *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* (2016). *WTF* was loosely inspired by the Afghanistan part of a semi-comedic memoir (*The Taliban Shuffle*) by Kim Barker of the *Chicago Tribune*. When "Kim Baker" (Tina Fey) stumbles into a firefight, she's instantly hooked on the fun of war. (This incident is invented.) Baker is a perky, clueless young woman trying to find herself: a patronizing formula always reliable for movie humor—as are some of the customs and practices of the locals.

The real Marie Colvin was totally unlike Fey's imaginary Baker but as a woman drawn to war zones, she could have been the major inspiration behind *1,000 Times Good Night*. *A Private War* honors a long career dedicated to revealing pain in the world's seemingly inexhaustible fought-over places. A deglamorized Rosamund Pike is impeccable as Marie Colvin, affecting a pitch-perfect American accent and bringing ferocious life to a demanding part. And, as confidently told by director Heineman and writer Arash Amel, Colvin's story is gripping as well as emotionally complicated.

Besides having been one of the most daring reporters of her generation, Colvin is one of the most interesting war-movie characters in a long time. Her story of dedication is an important one. "I hate being in a war zone," she says, "but I feel compelled to see it for myself." *A Private War* shows the personal price she pays for her compulsion and concern. In a curious, arresting remark (not, regrettably, in the script), Colvin confessed in 2004 that she sometimes thought of herself on assignment as a "smelly, exhausted pseudo-man."<sup>2</sup> Was professional success paradoxically destroying her self-esteem? *A Private War* notes that Colvin wore luxury lingerie beneath her often grungey on-the-job fatigues. Would "gender insecurity" explain Colvin's compassion and sense of calling? One doubts it.

People like and respect her, but they can't understand her—not even her collaborating photographer and relatively level-headed foil, Paul Conroy (Jamie Dornan) or her new (semi-fictionalized) boyfriend Tony (Stanley Tucci), who explains that he eschews "one-night stands" in favor of "sexual adventure." Everyone fears for her sanity as well as her safety. So does she. Though prosaically dramatized, Colvin's PTSD nightmares are bad enough to send her to rehab. But they don't stop her.

The nature of the hard-nosed Colvin's career sounds absurd in the abstract. Like Martha Gellhorn, her inspiration, she crosses seas, continents, and cultures in a personal campaign to see that evil will not be falsified or erased. Vodka martinis, cigarettes, and adrenaline keep her going: those things, and her compulsion to bear witness. "I have to ... make that suffering part of the record. I see it so you don't have to," she says, troubled and apologetic, in the film's most notable line. But thank God most of us *don't* have to; and if, by some cosmic edict, we did, journalism would not get us off the hook. The title suggests that the ruggedly individualistic Colvin is at war with herself (and to find herself), but Heineman offers no theory (beyond brief mention of a failed marriage and two miscarriages) to explicate her habit of harming herself mentally and physically in order to publicize the world's cruelty. Perhaps no fully satisfying theory is possible. And if any theory would reduce this compassionate, heroic woman to no more than a remarkable neurotic, perhaps none should be sought.

Colvin's world is one of extreme opposites—galas among the media glitterati thrown into grotesque relief by recurrent scenes of suffering and violence in Asia, with the fulcrum provided by the high-pressure offices of the *Times* and by her not-unsympathetic editor (Tom Hollander). In the unavoidable contrast between wealth and wasteland, the civilized, consumerist, hedonistic, decadent West comes off as infinitely preferable to the violent, impoverished, barbaric East (stretching on screen from Sri Lanka through Afghanistan, Syria, and Libya)—an infernal crevasse where the barbarians, pretending to civilization, turn modern machines of war against their own populations and each other. Colvin, taking harrowing risks—often against editorial advice—is out of place in either world. But she is at heart a moralist,

pulling back the veil again and again from the species' worst depravities. Were she alive today, Marie Colvin would be reporting from Yemen.

But to find moral coherence in crimes against humanity would be like wringing order from random felonies. In photo-based CGI, devastated Homs (prewar population 775,000) looks like Hamburg or Dresden. Such images of gutted cities, like films of the Holocaust, long ago surpassed the once sufficiently shocking photos of the dead at Antietam and Gettysburg as emblems of human ferocity and war without scruple.

"Bravery," the real Colvin said in 2001, "is not being afraid to be afraid."<sup>3</sup> But that only gets you so far. To function well amid visceral horror, Colvin (like any normal person) must fool herself for a time into the conviction that she's really *not* afraid. Yet she repeatedly subjects herself to violent tests of courage, as if needing to bear the impossible burden of knowing all there is to know about war.

Probably no movie re-enactment could more horribly suggest the human toll of war than Heineman's image of a backhoe exhuming the bodies of six hundred persons murdered by Saddam Hussein. It resembles films of the Holocaust, except that yards away, widows in black burqas wail and prostrate themselves inconsolably. Though in reality no widows were present, Colvin watched just such an exhumation east of Ramadi in 2003; in fact, she oversaw it.<sup>4</sup>

The eye-patch she donned after being half blinded makes Colvin's face impossible to forget. She came to think of it as piratical. But Wotan, wearing a similar patch in Wagner's *Ring* cycle, might be a more appropriate standard of comparison. He sacrificed his eye for the gift of knowledge: so did Marie.

A good biographical drama avoids *genre* clichés. *A Private War* does just that, as it recounts a decades-long quest whose object (intangible and unobtainable) is knowledge that, turned into news, might help remake the world. The chief obstacle to the quester is the combination of armed killers, an ordinary sense of caution, and Colvin's inner demons. ("I would like to have a saner life," the real Marie once said. "I just don't know how."<sup>5</sup>) Like it or not, *A Private War* asks implicitly whether the quest is worth it. We think we know, but do we? How politically responsible should we or can we be? "Compassion fatigue" is a real phenomenon and easy to contract.

Regrettably, the chronological scheme of the drama barely allows mentions of what may have been Colvin's finest moment. In 1999, two years before the movie begins, Colvin was covering the independence war in East Timor when her reportage was credited with helping to save some 1,500 women and children threatened in a UN refugee camp by Indonesian troops and pro-Indonesian militias. She and two other journalists stayed on the scene after more than a score of their less intrepid colleagues had departed. The journalists' reports prompted international threats of intervention that forced an Indonesian withdrawal after four days.<sup>6</sup>

*A Private War* is a biopic in the feminist tradition of *Sixty Years a Queen* (1913), *Madame Curie* (1943), *Erin Brockovich* (2000), *Winnie Mandela* (2011), and *Colette* (2018). But even including movies about Joan of Arc, *A Private War* is one of very few biographical films about a real woman in a real war. (The recent *Testament of Youth*, *Megan Leavey* and *The Zookeeper's Wife* are exceptions in this regard. So is part of the 2012 TV movie, *Hemingway and Gellhorn*.)

Accepting the International Women's Media Foundation Courage in Journalism Award in 2000, Colvin summed up the credo of writers on modern war in every genre: "We have failed if

we don't face what war does, face the human horrors rather than just record who won and who lost." One letdown of *A Private War* is the final camera shot, the familiar ninety-degree overhead zoom-out (foreshadowed by the concluding crane shot in Carl Foreman in 1963's *The Victors*) to suggest human beings dwarfed by the enormity of wartime destruction. Aside from that quibble, *A Private War* is a splendid effort from almost every angle.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gellhorn, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Brenner.

<sup>3</sup> Colvin 2012, 211.

<sup>4</sup> Colvin 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Brenner.

<sup>6</sup> After East Timor, Colvin addressed some realities of being a female war correspondent for readers of the *Times* (Oct. 1, 1999). Interestingly, the world's first woman war journalist was probably Jane McManus Storms ("Cora Montgomery") of the *New York Sun*, who wrote (with a marked expansionist bent) from Vera Cruz and Mexico City during the Mexican War of 1846-47.

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