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Bruce Lee in *Fists of Fury*, courtesy of National General Pictures.

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The Bodies We Keep Tripping Over:

Critical Commentary on Sam Fuller's

The Big Red One

By DENIS WOOD

Sam Fuller's *The Big Red One* is a seeing-eye film. Whatever its ostensible subject matter, the film is about perception, about the act of seeing as a way of making meaning in the world. This subject matter is not adventitiously embodied in Fuller's memories of World War II, but emerges from them necessarily, for war is first of all an act of perception, a searching for and confirming of the existence of the other, the inhuman human, not the fellow, but the alien, not the ally, but the enemy, not another subject, but an object in the sight of a gun. Fuller denies the existence of the other, denies it by refusing to perceive the existence in war of anything but men. Though they kill each other, there are no enemies in *The Big Red One*, only fellow human beings. They fight, not for principles, but because it's their job. When the central character murders his German counterpart in the film's conclusion, that it is murder is all that matters. Enemies are made, not born, and cannot be killed: only reconstructed. They are things we see, not things that are.

Fuller's insistence on seeing only men in war gives his film its form as well as its subject. His is a human's eye's view, not a bird's eye's view. His film is shot through the sight of a gun, not through the perspectives of policy. As such, it consists of

narrow views, fleeting glimpses, and occasional longer stares—just as does your view of the world. But precisely as your view of the world is not a random, purposeless process, neither is Fuller's view of war. It may consist *in* details, but in those seen from a point of view. But by coordinating the perspectives from which each scene is shot, this point of view becomes obvious and we are forced to occupy it with increasing clarity of vision as the film unfolds. At the film's end we know where Fuller stands and stand there with him.

Fuller is too deeply committed to his point of view to leave its construction entirely to us. Although the viewer is given the sense that he can make of the movie what he can, Fuller is in full control throughout, encouraging the active constructionism of the viewer as an aid to the viewer's understanding of the task faced by the soldier. The form of the movie is its very point, and the whole is the foundation for its parts. For the viewer used to film in which the first part provides the foundation for the second, finding that the two are needed to make sense of either can be disconcerting. So is war. So is perception. Befitting a former First Division rifleman, Fuller constructs his film the way infantry lays down fire. Keeping us

pinned in our seats with fusillades of details and sprays of motifs, he proceeds to knock us out of them with cannonades of linked episodes lobbed from entrenched mortars. Once he's got us flying through the air, he hits us with the stories he's firing from the heavy guns he's got walking up and down the aisles. If you've paid any attention, you leave the theater completely blown away.

1. *Small Arms Fire*

"Fusillade of details" is more than a convenient metaphor. In *The Big Red One* the seemingly incidental ground against which all else is seen as figure is fired at the viewer. BLAM! and the close-up of a muzzle fills the screen. POW! And a soldier licks a spoon before putting it away. BAM! And Eisenhower's face replaces that of Sicily. RAT-TAT-TAT! And the camera pans after a helmet rolling away from the head from which it's just been blown. Fuller's alter-ego in the film remarks that in battle you always seem to be alone: the only others you're aware of are the guys beside you and the bodies you keep tripping over. Fuller's montage has the same effect. The screen is constantly slapped by shots which have themselves no ground and for which there is neither preparation nor follow-up. BANG! BANG! BANG! If the results approximate Fuller's desire to fire at the viewer from behind the screen (*The Big Red One*, Bantam, 1980, 434-5), it also threatens to shatter the film into a frivolous assemblage of disconnected and unconnectable parts. To invest his memories of World War II with meaning for us as well as himself, Fuller exploits an armament of formal devices with the tactical skill necessary to insure the achievement of his strategic objectives. While these latter, as in war, become apparent only when they've been realized in the film's conclusion, the hail of small arms fire is with us from the start.

The details Fuller chooses for ammunition are critical. I was going to say that for a war movie there is little blood in *The Big Red One*, but there is little blood here regardless of genre. When Kaiser (Perry Lang) is shot to death the screen is washed with green, not splashed with blood. The camera finds him on the forest floor, foreshortened like Mantegna's dying Christ. It is his eyes that gently close, not his blood that flows and it is the eyes and not the blood that echo in the film. People I've talked to remember most vividly the low angle violent zooms crashing like fists into the eyes of



The Sergeant in the black-and-white prologue as a First Division infantryman in World War I.

Zab (Robert Carradine), Vinci (Bobby di Cicco) and Johnson (Kelly Ward), followed by the slow curious crawl of the camera past the bright sunken eyes in the concentration camp at Falkenau that are the object of their startled gaze. These are but the most dramatic of a film of eyes that all but opens on a slow dolly into worm and ant-infested hollows that used to hold the eyes of an ancient wooden Christ. Eyes are what we notice of Griff (Mark Hamill) on the beach at Arzew. Eyes are what we see of the "baby faces" in the North African desert. Eyes are all there are in the fox-holes at Kasserine. It is the eyes of the Sergeant (Lee Marvin) and Griff in close but deep two-shot that play out the scene in the cave on Sicily, the camera focusing first on Griff's eyes, darting like a rabbit's, then pulling back to focus on the Sergeant's, omniscient and still.

The invasion of Normandy is a barrage of eyes: the eyes of the Sergeant scanning the beach move from one side of the screen to the other so completely do they fill it. It is the staring eyes of the dead soldier that paralyze Griff in the bangalore relay, and the staring eyes of Griff that find and hold the Sergeant's. The sweep and scope of "the longest day" are reduced in this radical film to the

interaction of three pairs of eyes. But the next scene of two guys meeting (at the rest station following the invasion) is also shot as the interaction of three pairs of eyes. With Zab the camera pulls in very tight on Kaiser's eyes—engrossed in Zab's book—until one of them finally rises to confront Zab's. The scene is played eye to eye until the camera pans down to catch those of the Sergeant, looking on. It is the eyes of the German soldier in the oven that leap at Griff and Griff's eyes we watch as he fires on the first soldier whose eyes he can see. The dying child and the Sergeant speak to each other only with their mellifluous eyes. *The Big Red One* is a seeing-eye movie: from shot to shot, scene to scene, the eyes are there, on ours. . .

But it's not just eyes we look back at. Fuller's film can be understood as a collation of cross-referenced close-shots, close-shots of people eating, for instance, or posters and paintings, or little kids' faces. Or insignia. The divisional patch, for example, not only accompanies the opening titles, it is emblematic of the title, which itself is seen to constitute, as the film unrolls, a great deal of its content. It is not only called *The Big Red One*, it is about the Big Red One, or at least about some soldiers identified with it. Men, division, patch, and film are one. This identity, logographically established in the titles, is dramatized in a (black-and-white) prelude which sketches a history of the patch and the sergeant who—in France in 1918—created it. This prelude concludes in an extreme close-up of a strip of cloth from a dead Hun's hat which is optically transformed into the First Division patch (now in color) on the shoulder of the man who twenty-five years earlier had murdered the Hun to create it. The patch is immediately associated with the American flag brassard the Sergeant is wearing beneath it, and by virtue of the inherent contrast, with the insignia of the Vichy French and the Germans. The close ups of insignia which follow—of the German Army on Schroder's (Siegfried Ranch's) helmet, of the Grasshopper on the German guarding the Sicilian peasants, of the piping on the uniforms of the Germans at Soissons, of the belt buckle after their slaughter, of the Skull-and-Crossbones of the guard (hanging dead in the barbed wire) at Falkenau, taken together with those of the French and the Americans—constitute a rain of insignia whose whole alone is capable of providing the context for its parts. Precisely as the single fire of an individual rifleman differs from

the fusillade of a squad, so the individual close-ups of insignia differ from the whole of which they form a part. Individually each works splendidly as local color. Taken together they raise the issue of identity, but no longer the narrow relation between a big red 1 and the Big Red One, but the relation more generally between a sign and the thing for which it stands.

2. *Crossfire*

No collection of details, no matter how extensive or insistently driven home, can mean more than it is. Together, shots of eyes can be read as "eyes" instead of "his eyes" or "her eyes"—and hint perhaps at "seeing"—; in aggregate, close-ups of patches can imply "insignia" instead of "First Division" or "German Army"—and conceivably suggest "identity"—; but in a film of cross-referenced close-shots for which there is no concordance, the hints and suggestions can hint and suggest too widely, or too narrowly, or not at all. For this reason Fuller lays over his fusillade of details a crossfire of motifs, structures within which details can be subordinated to more generally meaningful ends without having to sacrifice any of their individual material presence. The way a motif operates can be seen in the way the American flag brassard worn by the Sergeant is forced not only beyond its actual presence as a piece of cloth into the domain of insignia, but as an instance of insignia into the still broader domain of socially perceived identity.

As I noted, the color portion of the film opens with the optical transformation of a strip of cloth from a dead Hun's hat into the big red 1 of the First Division's patch. As the camera pulls back from its extreme close-up to reveal the patch on the Sergeant's shoulder, it simultaneously reveals an American flag brassard. Taken by itself the brassard is a detail, one which does happen to raise the issue of identity—a flag is, after all, a symbol of allegiance, itself an act of identification—but not in an especially interesting way. What other flag would an American soldier wear? As detail it is let lie, like many of Fuller's details, nothing more than lovely local color. But pulling back from the brassard the camera further reveals the Sergeant contemplating a poster of Churchill which he proceeds to yank from the wall and carry over to his squad. There he gives it to Griff who turns it over and immediately commences drawing



Landing in North Africa. Note the divisional patch, the American flag brassard, and the condom over the muzzle.

a cartoon on its back. As Griff draws, the camera introduces each of the central members of the squad, the last of whom, Johnson, turns back to Griff's cartoon where he reads:

"'Watch out Vichy—here comes the Big Red One.' I thought Vichy was some kind of soda pop."

"No," says Griff, "Vichy's the French fighting on Hitler's side."

"I came to kill Krauts, not Frenchmen," says Zab.

"That's why we're wearing these," says the Sergeant, pointing to his brassard. "We hope they won't shoot Americans, but if they open fire, we'll have to kill them."

The brassard is no longer just something worn by a player in the picture. It is now a player in the picture itself. With the Sergeant's casual gesture, it is transformed from a hunk of local color into a precise embodiment of the question of identity. Nor is this an issue adventitiously dragged into the film. In the North African campaign it was one of supreme importance:

... the French political situation further complicated the plan, as the Vichy government, which still controlled French North Africa, would most probably oppose any attempt to occupy it. It was known, how-

ever, that there existed throughout the area a strong element of opinion bitterly opposed to Vichy and ready to welcome the Allied landings; but, despite searching diplomatic investigations by the United States, its strength was unpredictable. One thing was certain: the Vichy government was bitterly antagonistic to Great Britain; so that, if the operation was to stand any chance of winning support from those in authority in French North Africa, it would have to be American in character. (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1954, 23, 792Ad).

In the film—as in the actual campaign—this character is established by the leaflets the French discuss before the landing, by the sepulchral "*Ne tirez pas! Nous sommes Américains!*" booming from the ocean darkness, and by the brassards. With the identity of the Americans clearly established, it was hoped that the Vichy would change theirs. That their identity is open is made obvious when they try to surrender. "We do not accept your surrender," booms the American voice. "You surrender only to the enemy. If you are Vichy, fight us. If you are Frenchmen, join us."

If the issue of identity is not adventitious at this point in the film, it is certainly not adventitious for the film that it recurs throughout it. Johnson's confusion of Vichy French with Vichy water is a question of identity. So is Zab's effort to establish himself as a writer in the eyes of the squad. When the Vichy defenders wonder if they're "men or Nazi shits" they're raising a question of identity. When the British report that the Germans have sunk the wrong ship, the joke rises out of mistaken identity. The Sergeant's squad wishes to mistake the identity of the tanks in the Kasserine Pass, while the Sergeant prays that no one mistakes the identity of the makeshift hospital in which he finds himself in Tunis, a city about whose identity yet another soldier is desperately mistaken. To rejoin his squad the Sergeant is forced to hide his identity—under an "Arab bed-sheet"—until he's challenged, when he's forced to reveal his identity by puffing a cigar *through* the purdah. On the crossing to Sicily a soldier questions Vinci's identity as an American by emphasizing the Italian in Italian-American. The identity of the guns shelling them in the cave on Sicily is questioned—with compelling reason. The big question about the money Vinci finds is its identity: "Mussolini money's no good," one of them remarks, but "Victor Emmanuel's kisser makes it legal." Vinci wants the money for his old man:



The Sergeant and his "Four Norsemen." Note the insignia: "Duce," the cross, dog tags, patch and stripes.

"He always wanted to open a bagel shop." "A bagel shop?" Zab wonders: "I didn't know they had Italian bagels." The only problem the squad experiences with Matteo is identifying a self-propelled gun, and the only problem with the gun is the way the Germans have masked its identity by hiding it in a house. As the Sergeant observes, it would "look real peaceful from the air." That's what Schroder thinks when he sets up his ambush at Soissons. The ambush fails because the Sergeant can interpret German insignia. But because Kaiser couldn't tell the living from the dead it almost succeeded. After the episode in the asylum where Walloon masks her identity behind that of an inmate and an inmate confuses his with that of a soldier, Zab wonders who's crazy and who's sane. But he also notes that he asks the question wearing his writer's, not his soldier's, identity. Only the

child dying at Falkenau has no identity. "Polish? Russian? Czech?" asks the Sergeant. It doesn't matter. That he's a dying child is all that signifies. . . . As a focus of attention a motif permits details to be read, and read again, in its light. The weight associated with any question of identity changes as further questions of identity are raised, and it becomes difficult to miss the general issue in the welter of beads drawn on it. How a man is identified as an enemy becomes a question which—while never asked—will not quite go away.

It is only one of many, for the film is as rich in motifs as it is in details, and each facilitates a mental montage enabling the film to be recut as many times as a viewer has needs or wants to. In the belly of the tank at Soissons Griff, Johnson and the Sergeant deliver a baby wearing condoms instead of gloves, condoms designed as prophylaxis

of the very event they now support, but most typically used to keep water from the barrels of guns manufactured to finish off what prophylaxis had not prevented. The multiple ironies are not heavy handed or even pointed, but it is indicative of the way this film is put together that a single scene can engage so intricately the film as a whole. War, birth, death, the ongoingness of the daily, the monstrousness of the unique, all explode simultaneously in the chamber of this joke. When the baby won't come, Johnson insists on the mother's help. "What's push in French?" he asks the Sergeant. "*Poussez*," comes the response, a pun caught long before Johnson's accent turns it into "Pussy! Pussy!" Sex, central reality of the quotidian world, crosses the episode like a phone call at a switchboard, but it's a phone call that runs from one end of the film to the other: on the way to Algeria when asked a question about his handedness, Griff responds with a crack about playing with his pecker; before disembarking, the stretching of condoms over the muzzles of their guns induces among the guys an exchange about screwing; on the beach, they remove the condoms before firing; eating at Arzew revolves around a discussion of hard-ons and saltpeter; prior to the landing on Sicily, condoms are again stretched over muzzles; Smitty, wounded by a mine, is the butt of jokes about castration; the party on Sicily is a volley of wise-cracks about the availability of women; at the birth, fingers like erect penises are sheathed in condoms, the men wear cheese-wrappings in place of masks, and the pun on "*poussez*" detonates the assembled allusions; in the forest the men reveal their sexual fantasies; and at the party act them out. Under such bombardment other things begin to get in line. Guns have often been treated phallically, but the point takes on point when muzzles wear rubbers. The use of "stiff pricks" for guns quickens many of the scenes of carnage with sexual tension, especially those in which a single soldier shoots another, as when Schroder fires at Gerd (in response to the latter's comments on the homosexual proclivities of Hitler's henchmen); or the Sergeant fires into the Germans from the tank at Soissons; or at Falkenau when Griff fires point blank—again and again—at the German in the oven. Other gun imagery is similarly allusive, as when the self-propelled gun shoves its muzzle—complete with a glans of flash-hider—through the window of the house; or Griff shoves the bangalore torpedo—itsself phallic—through the cordon on the

beach at Normandy. At Soissons the memorial to the dead looms over the landscape like a giant priapus. Even the language picks up the overtones, and it doesn't take the pun on "*poussez*" to sense the rape in the military use of "push" and "penetrate." Even "shoot" and "blow" acquire unavoidable connotations, incisively dramatized in the complex scene on the way to Sicily in which Vinci jams his gun into the mouth of the American racist down on Italians. While a scene like this carries its weight unaided, it is immeasurably enriched by the polysemic echoes reverberating through the networks of meaning established by the coordinating motif.

3. Mortar Fire

Motifs in *The Big Red One* are like motifs anywhere. Floating disembodied in an abstract space of their own creation they are like the footnotes to a collection of folktales rather than the tales themselves. To embody his motifs in the time and space of human existence, Fuller embeds them in a narrative matrix of thirty-five linked episodes—jokes, vignettes and stories about a combat veteran sergeant and four young soldiers in his rifle squad. If the pounding details and coordinating motifs could be ignored, or seen solely as supportive of the narrative structures of these episodes, the film could be understood as an anthology of short war stories, a kind of clipped and unshrinking *Tales of the South Pacific*. Many of these, especially the jokes, are all but self-contained. In the Sicilian sequence there is an episode in which the squad is shown resting on a rubble-strewn stair. Smitty, a new man trying to ingratiate himself with flattery about the survival of the Sergeant and his "Four Horsemen," wonders if he'll die like previous replacements. "Why not? You something special?" Zab asks. The camera pulls back, keeping the squad in the foreground, lower right, while Smitty climbs into the background, upper left. As Zab leans back and drops his eyes, BLAM! Smitty goes up on an unexploded mine. "You'll live Smitty," says the Sergeant, coming to his aid; and then, as he tosses a severed testicle off-screen, "That's why they gave you two!"

It doesn't take the extreme close-up of a mouse that is the shot immediately following to make it clear that however self-contained the episode, its point is anything but. The insistently disintegrative orientation of such details only emphasizes

the disintegrative propensities of the episodes themselves, which, despite their interior narrative organization, refuse to add up into a story that is even the sum of its parts. The formal brilliance of the linkages—and Fuller employs them all with such appropriate grace you scarcely know they're there—cannot and indeed do not try to hide the fact that each leads to the heart of yet another fragment, isolated, alone . . . as with the details and motifs, the film is ours to make of as we must or can, as the war was Fuller's to make of as he had to or was able. *The Big Red One*, matching montage and message, is a close-up view of the war seen through eyes that blink and sleep. It is anything but the history, "the magnificent saga of World War II's incredible First Division," its sadly misguided—not to say blind—promoters made it out to be. "Battles, tactics, strategy, movements on maps of the 15,000 dogtags that made up the First Division was for military historians," Fuller writes. "Facts were eclipsed by emotion. Personal, private, the heart exposed, the brain bared. Thus this became the rifle bore's human approach to war. . . ." (*The Big Red One*, 434), stories, not a story, experiences, not a single ("wasn't that some!") experience, a rifle bore's view, the war,

life, like everybody but God and Eisenhower saw it.

The episodes that gave us battle the way Fuller saw it are loosely grouped into six sequences that do reflect the geography and chronology of the war. "The place, the fight, the date and death are factual," Fuller says. Each sequence is established with a title giving us the time and place, and the film does follow the First Division from North Africa to Sicily, from Sicily to Normandy, from Normandy to Czechoslovakia. But this is the loosest of frameworks and it is more pretense of than actual history and geography. The film was shot, after all, in the late nineteen-seventies in Israel and Ireland; and it is a long time since 1962 when someone like Henry Hart could review *The Longest Day* with the conviction that the names of battles and generals meant something to any of his audience (*Films in Review*, October, 1962, 481). Besides, if all we see are the guys on either side of us and the bodies we keep tripping over, one beach is like another and all the days and nights are the same.

If Fuller does not use his episodes to tell a story, he certainly uses them to embody the motifs in the cause and effect world of human action. Just



The recurrent motif of eating: the squad is feted in Sicily. Note the divisional patch near the center of the frame.

as the concrete substance of the details is given meaning in the web of relations established by the motifs, so the meanings thus potentialized are given life through the jokes and stories of the episodes. Thoughts about "seeing" prompted by shots of eyes are only thoughts until the issue they provoke is shown to have consequences in the world of action; questions of identity are questions of philosophers only until a soldier's survival can be shown to hang on their answer. Both issues are focused in the episode whose heart is the ambush at Soissons.

Like the other episodes, this is linked to those on either side by narrative as well as formal devices, in a prelude that lays the ground for action and a postlude that reviews it. The joke just described has such a structure: a preludial conversation reflecting Vinci's survival as point man (in the preceding episode); the joke itself, Smitty's concerns about staying alive and his near fatal accident; and the Sergeant's crude postludial review of its severity, preparing us for his posture in the conflict with Griff (in the episode that follows). The prelude to the ambush is more expansive. While the Sergeant sends Kaiser ahead to check out a German tank surrounded by apparent dead in the shadow of the ancient wooden Christ-on-the-Cross, the rest of the squad waits by a World War I memorial to First Division dead. The issue of identity is directly and immediately raised:

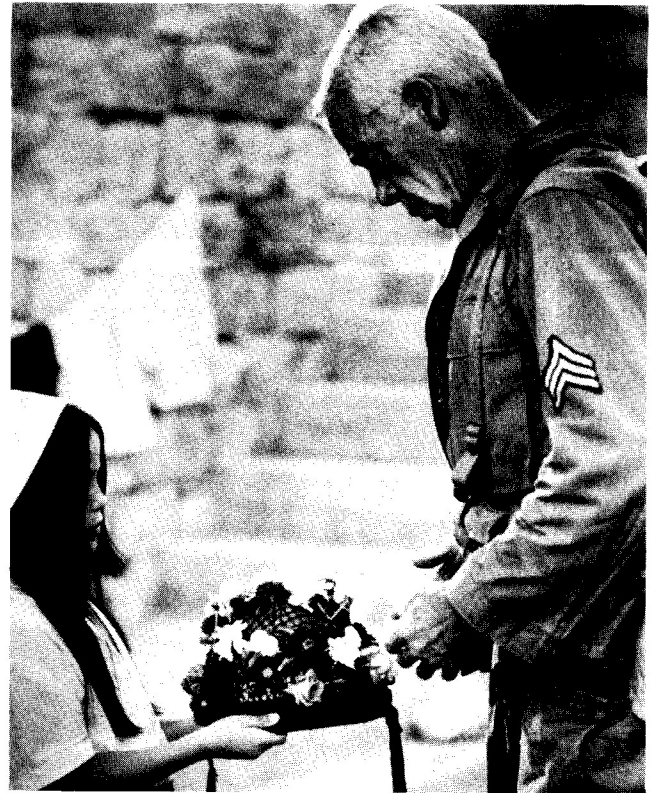
"Look how fast they put up the names of the guy killed in our squad," says Johnson, reading the names on the memorial. The link to the Normandy dead of previous episodes is simple and secure.

"That's a World War I memorial," replies the Sergeant.

"But the names are the same!"

"They always are."

The question of seeing is raised with equal conviction. On patrol, a squad takes on the role of eyes for a platoon; as a scout, Kaiser has become the eyes of the squad. As the squad's eyes, as the Sergeant's, Kaiser is conscientious in the use of his. Since the identity of dead men is written in their eyes, he keeps his on those of the Germans. The camera, taking his point of view, is tight on them. Eyes, staring, some with the fixity of death, some with the fixity of deceit. But Kaiser can't tell them apart, and returns to the squad with good news.



The recurrent motif of children: a girl decorates the Sergeant's helmet in the Sicilian sequence.

Blind eyes lead to mistaken identities. The squad descends to the ambush. The Sergeant, secure only in what he has seen, clambers into the tank for a closer look at three Germans. The infantry piping on two of the uniforms gives him pause and he stabs all three to make sure. The two had been alive. The perils of not being able to see have been demonstrated: can the consequences be avoided? The Sergeant fakes a retreat with a squad now aware of its danger. Kaiser, looking with opened eyes, finds a German pair on his. Unnerved he opens fire, unleashing the ambush on the squad, instead of the platoon. Returning the German fire, the squad takes cover and the Sergeant makes it inside the tank, whence his fire is devastating. Of the enemy only Schroder, hidden behind the missing eyes of the ancient wooden Christ, survives. The eyes of the Sergeant, and his ability to identify German infantry, have saved the platoon; Kaiser's blindness has cost the squad four members. In the postlude the dead are counted and accounted for. Near the tank Johnson succors a wounded Kaiser. The Sergeant watches, impressed. "You should be a medic," he says. "I was in the States," Johnson answers, making the tie to the following episode in which he'll deliver a baby.



The link between the ambush and delivery at Soissons: Johnson tends Kaiser.

4. *Heavy Guns*

Such episodic mortar fire is of low velocity, great angular elevation and short range. There are some shells that just barely make it from the postlude of one episode to the prelude of the next, but there are others which fly from the film's beginning to its end. They didn't come from mortars: of high velocity, low elevation and long range, they came from big guns. Their explosion blows the film right off the screen.

One of the bombs belongs to Griff. The other is the Sergeant's. In the prologue to the film as a whole, the Sergeant murders a defenseless German only hours after the war has ended. What makes a man an enemy, targeted for death? "*You didn't know the war was over,*" says his Captain. "*He did,*" says the Sergeant. At the time it appears on the screen, it feels like the rest of the episodes that follow, linked to them through the patch that was its product. It's true: we do hear the occasional scream of a shell passing swiftly overhead—in the

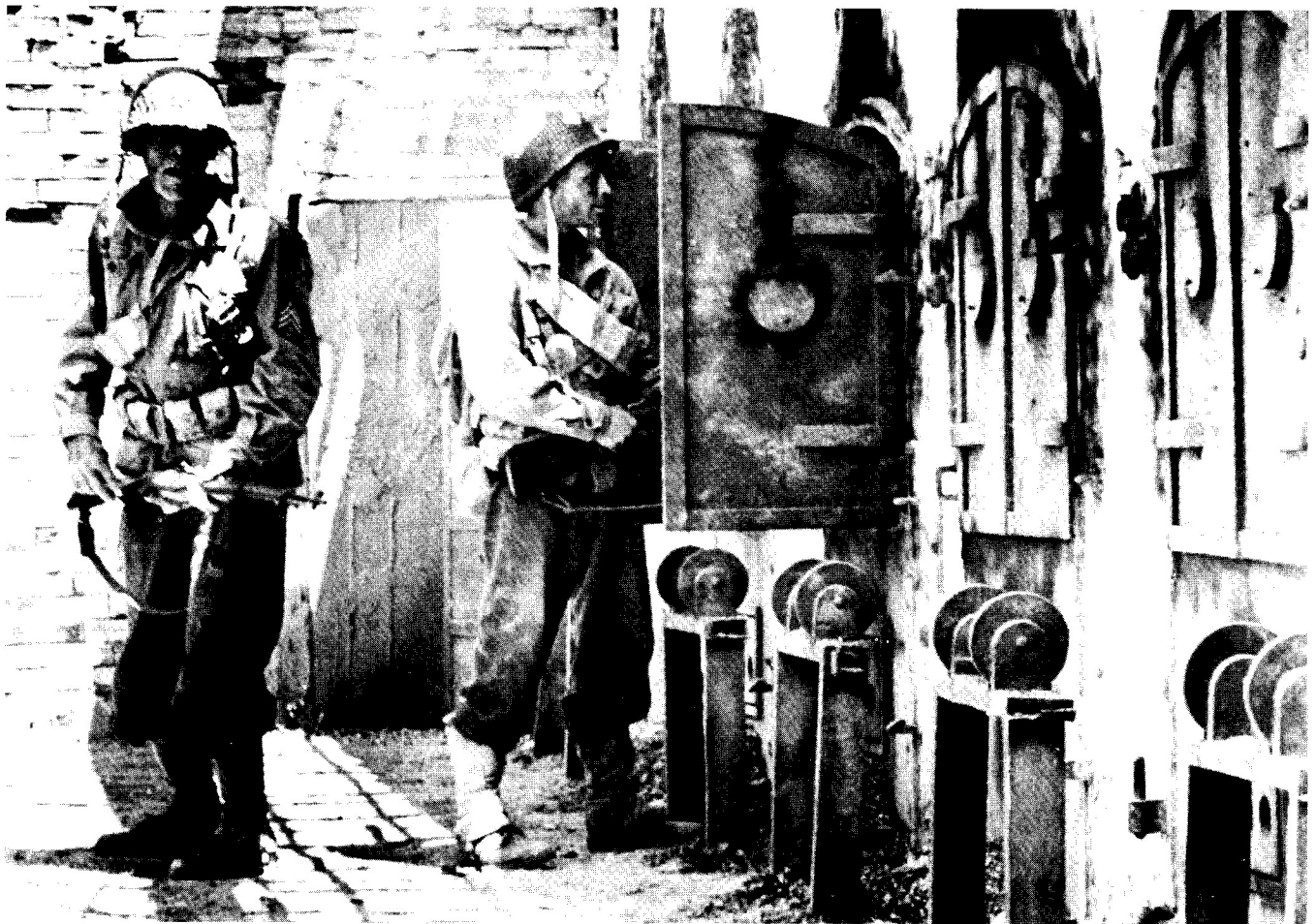
Sergeant's justification to Griff that "*We don't murder, we kill,*" in the way he looks when he sees the Christ-on-the-Cross for the second time, in his arguments for not shelling the Belgian asylum, even in his relations with the dying child at Falkenau. But when in the woods at Falkenau he murders again, it's not just a scream, it's an explosion. "*You didn't know the war was over,*" Griff says. "*He did,*" says the Sergeant. A bomb has hit home, a story has arced across the film and seized control. The film's four levels collapse into one and our ability to make of the film what we want has been foreclosed. If we've been digging anything but fall-out shelters, they're turned into graves. Nothing inherent in man can make him an enemy: it is Schroder's language that gets him killed—not his ceaseless attempts to kill the Sergeant—and the hour of the day that turns it into murder, social conventions, simple-minded ones, dates and borders, flags and badges. Who can read belief at four hundred yards? Armed with knives, it is too late for philosophy. If four hours one side or the other

of a line in time can distinguish ally from enemy, there was nothing in the enemy that deserved to die or the ally that deserved to live: on either side of such a line, killing must be murder and war a crime.

It is appropriately Griff who tells the Sergeant he didn't know the war was over, for Griff's story is the obverse of the Sergeant's, and he sees the night just before the Sergeant sees the day. A sharpshooter in target practice, he's a washout on the beach at Arzew: with another man's eyes in his sights, he cannot pull the trigger. After the landing he returns to his squad from a visit to the psychiatric unit. "I can't murder anybody," he tells the Sergeant. "We don't murder, we kill," comes back the response. But Griff can't split death quite so fine. He keeps pulling his shots, wondering what the hell he's doing in the war. It's not cowardice—though he does want to live—that makes Griff bolt at Kasserine or think about it in the cave on Sicily. It's certainly not fear that

freezes him on the beach at Normandy: it's those eyes, those staring eyes that were once a man's. If for the Sergeant a man's an enemy when convention makes him so, for Griff an enemy's a man if he can see his eyes. Both positions are perilous, for the Sergeant's, dependent on bureaucratized consensus, leads him into murder, while Griff's, wholly individual, severs him from the group and leads him to endanger it. Emblems may be inhuman, but no man lives without some badge. Fuller's film is finally as tough as it's supposed to have been, but only with respect to the choices it proffers its audience.

At Falkenau Griff chases a soldier into a crematorium. Smoke leaks from the chimney; the ovens are hot to the touch. With his gun, Griff slowly pries open an oven door. From the camera within the oven, the door opens on . . . Griff! He is shocked at the sight of the smoldering bones, and moves to another oven. Again the door opens . . . on Griff. And again. . . . In one the German soldier



The incineration of Griff's innocence: shooting the German soldier in the Falkenau crematorium.

crouches, waiting. The door opens . . . on Griff. The soldier fires . . . with an empty gun. Griff smiles. And fires. And fires. And fires. And fires. Close shots of Johnson—and the sound of Griff's gun—and dead Germans—and the sound of Griff's gun—and Vinci—and the sound of Griff's gun—and the Sergeant—and the sound of Griff's gun. The sound of his gun is the only sound, twenty-five times, the only sound. When Griff finally closes the oven door, it's his own face it closes on.

With reason: in the heat of his fire, it's his innocence that's been incinerated. If killing is no grounds for murder, murder is no grounds for killing. At the film's close the Sergeant's second victim is discovered still alive. "You're going to live if I have to kill you," says the Sergeant. He's not joking: having expiated his guilt in the saving of a life he tried to take unsanctioned, the Sergeant

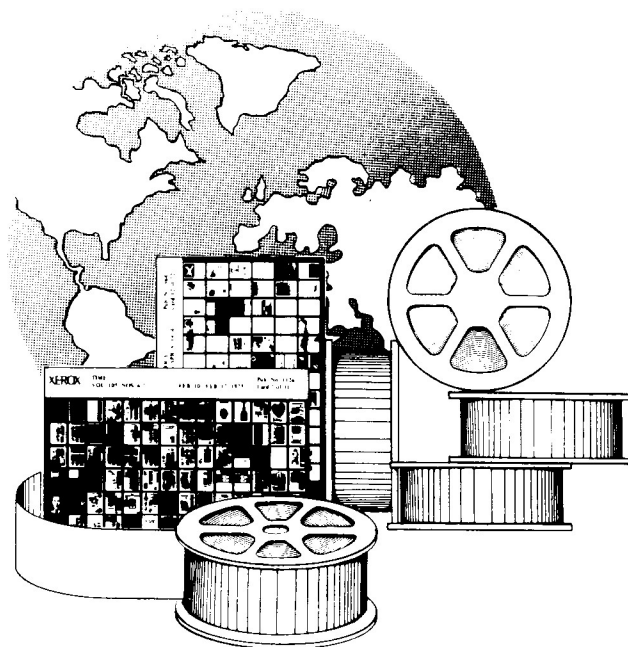
can rejoin the squad . . . and the human race. Shorn of his innocence, so can Griff. Survivors, like you and me, they claim no special glory, though it be the only one in war. Freed of the vision their special status gave them, Griff can overlook and the Sergeant can forget that the Big Red One they've taken as their badge started as a hunk of cloth stripped from the hat of a murdered man.

A bloody badge. . . . Whose isn't?

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