

U.S. Special Forces: Real and on Film

NYT

6-20-68

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IN real life the wonderfully proficient, likable men of the United States Army Special Forces are often improbably theatrical.

One of the first 12-man "A Teams" to arrive in South Vietnam in 1962 got off the airplane broke because it had been forced to surrender several hundred dollars to pay for the Air Force bar it had playfully demolished in Guam.

A few months later one of their number, an ex-rodeo rider named Hoyt Henry, was wounded on a patrol near the Laotian border. His team leader came on the radio to ask where Henry had been shot. The heavily tattooed sergeant radioed back: "Just north of Hokkaido and just south of Mom."

It would, in other words, be possible to make an "accurate" movie about the men of the Special Forces and still take a few poetic liberties.

The first major studio movie about the Vietnam war, "The Green Berets," however, will leave even the Saigon commandos (rear area troops) and the Red Cross doughnut girls laughing.

The star and co-director, John Wayne, is an important part of the folk culture of the young Americans who fight the war in Vietnam, a kind of reference marker for fictional toughness.

Thus, a .45-caliber service pistol—which almost nobody can shoot accurately—is called a "John Wayne rifle" in Vietnam because in the movies the Duke could knock down a running man at 300 yards with one. The hard, tasteless biscuits included in every box of C rations are affectionately

known as "John Wayne cookies."

And an exasperated old sergeant once told some troops who were being careless about their lives, "There are two ways to do anything—the right way and the John Wayne way."

"The Green Berets" was filmed the John Wayne way.

Some effort has been made to achieve technical excellence. The weapons, uniforms and, for a change in films, even the military nomenclature are authentic. There is, naturally, the newly arrived newspaper reporter in his Jungle Jim, television correspondent bush jacket.

But authenticity is one of the earliest of several hundred casualties in the movie. Chinese bit players, playing Vietnamese, sit at sidewalk cafes in what is supposed to be dirty old Danang, but looks like St. Tropez.

Patrols deploy through pine trees and what may be the Fort Bragg, N. C., golf course. In an assault on a Special Forces camp a regiment of Vietcong ambles shoulder-to-shoulder into the muzzles of machine guns, as though they planned to picket the camp rather than overrun it.

Despite their atrocious tactics, the VC manage to take the camp, perhaps because Wayne, playing a full colonel, is an even worse tactician. Leading a reaction force back to the camp, Wayne has so many troops bunched up that one mortar round would wipe out the whole cast.

The highlight of the film, however is its portrayal of the Vietcong. Wayne plots with a gorgeous patriot,

played by Irene Tsu (another Chinese playing a Vietnamese) who selflessly agrees to offer her body to the guerrilla to distract him from the arrival of a full rifle squad tiptoeing into his bedroom.

Wayne and the men of the Green Beanies parachute into the Vietcong base area, but Miss Tsu and the VC general arrive in a chauffeur-driven Citroën limousine, flying a major general's flag.

The Vietcong leader's villa closely resembles Hugh Hefner's Chicago mansion and the electric lights blaze cheerily in the night (what a target for an air strike). The general—who thinks he's doing the seduction—has both champagne and caviar waiting in the bedroom. He is one Vietnamese who wouldn't know nuoc mam (fish sauce) from catchup.

Wayne and Miss Tsu, along with the hapless VC officer, make their getaway in the limousine in a scene that more closely resembles "The Untouchables" than Vietnam.

The left-wing, dovish, bleeding-heart reporter has, in the meantime, overcome his objection to torturing prisoners and got with the program, as we say in Vietnam. Sartorially he has switched to proper jungle fatigues and ideologically he has seen the light. "If I write what I want to say I may not have a job," he tells Wayne in a dark suggestion about his foreign desk.

At fadeout, Wayne walks down the Danang beach into the sunset. But unless they have moved the South China Sea, the sun disappears majestically into the east.