

**Off The cuff**

DON MILLIGAN'S

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**The Inglorious Bastards!**

“OH BOY . . . KILLING GENERALS could get to be a habit with me.” So says Joseph Wladislaw, aka Charles Bronson, at the end of the *Dirty Dozen*. Wladislaw is the surviving member of the Dirty Dozen: twelve Allied soldiers condemned to death or hard labour by Courts Martial in 1944. They can redeem themselves only by killing a large number of the German high command in a suicidal attack on a château near Rennes. The humourous ambiguity in Wladislaw’s final remark rests in the fact that he would plainly relish killing Allied generals almost as much as he does slaughtering the Nazi ones.

So enters a theme common in platoon movies where troublesome, individualistic, rascally soldiers, some of whom are evidently lovable, in the company of some who are honestly psychotic, sock it not only to the enemy but to their own officers and indeed to the entire military hierarchy. The paradox is that the members of the benighted platoon generally perform with conspicuous discipline and bravery, complete their mission, or die in the attempt. Their murderous violence is lovingly explored, and their barbarities are ultimately justified, along with the martial order of things, by the self-evident nastiness of the enemy.

*The Inglorious Bastards*, made by Enzo Castellari in 1978, is just such a film. But strikingly, the platoon in this picture, composed, as one would expect, of criminals and misfits, finds itself fighting both sides in a desperate attempt to escape the war by fleeing to Switzerland. Their misfortune is compounded when they mow down a column of soldiers in Wehrmacht uniforms only to discover that they were really highly specialised Allied troops on a secret mission to derail a train and steal the gyroscope from a prototype of the

VII rockets being readied by the Nazi's for their final assault on London.

Having killed the crack troops by mistake, Enzo's dirty dozen rose to the occasion by carrying out the task of those they'd accidentally killed. Honour is restored as they die one after another, during the successful completion of the mission. The moral of the story is that disrespectful, disorderly, and psychotic men can make great soldiers; they are great soldiers because their naturally insubordinate and bolshie attitudes give rise to initiative and creativity, conspicuously expressed by personal courage and commitment to fighting the greater evil. In this way, the dirty dozen endorse not only the martial spirit, but also the cause of the army from which they fled.

All this must be borne in mind when you see Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*. The weird spelling distinguishes it from Enzo Castellari's *The Inglorious Bastards*, which was actually released in Italy as *Quel maledetto treno blindato*, literally "That Cursed Armoured Train", and only assumed the guise of *The Inglorious Bastards* with its release in the US. Tarantino loved Enzo's picture so you could think of *Inglourious Basterds* as a tribute to the earlier movie, though, of course, it's pure Tarantino: the plan is to assemble a platoon of Jewish soldiers dedicated to putting the fear of God into the German army by randomly murdering and scalping Nazi soldiers, enlisted men and officers alike.

Tarantino's dirty dozen is led by Brad Pitt, in a passible impersonation of a junior officer from the backwoods of Maynardville, Tennessee, given to making the sort of blood-curdling speeches that made General Patton infamous. The platoon becomes tangled up in the plot hatched by a Jewish girl to burn down her own cinema during the premier of a Nazi war film in occupied Paris. The platoon, the girl, and her black lover, succeed. The entire Nazi leadership, Hitler, Goebbels, Göring . . . the lot of 'em, meet their fiery end in a marvellous *Götterdämmerung* at the

hands of the Untermenschen: the Jews, the Blacks, and the boy from the backwoods.

This is Tarantino's revenge on history, where the obvious justice of the cause, and the resolution of the struggle, meet in a way that justifies his picture: its *homage to the genre*, its cheerful succession of brutal murders, its splendidly wicked Standartenführer Hans Landa, played by Christoph Waltz, and the fast frame extinction of the Third Reich; all are sufficient to justify the enterprise.

Unfortunately, we all know that actual history, like actual war, doesn't fit well with Tarantino's revenge, not just because of his trashy love of trashy movies, but because his dirty dozen, just like all the other dirty dozens simply defy the random anonymity of the machinic slaughter that has characterized war since at least the 1860s. Initiative and creativity is mostly reserved for staff officers as they engage in the logistics of moving vast bodies of men and machines about the place, the rest go where they are sent; they live or die in the lottery of happenstance and confusion on the battlefield. Almost nothing any individual soldier does, or can do, will determine whether he will live or die, be grievously wounded or survive physically unscathed.

Sometimes an individual soldier becomes famous for his decisions, but this is usually for some crime, or act of vengeance against prisoners, or unarmed civilians. Specialist Lynddie England and Specialist Charles Graner became well known for their expertise in humiliating and brutalising prisoners at Abu Ghraib. RAF hero, Douglas Bader, became famous for killing Germans despite having no legs, and Second Lieutenant, William Calley of Charlie Company, became famous for participating in the murder of around 400 unarmed Vietnamese men, women and children.

William Calley finally admitted last week "There is not a day goes by that I do not feel remorse for what happened that day in My Lai." Breaking his forty-year silence, he told the members of the Kiwanis Club in Greater Columbus, Georgia, that he was "sorry" for

organising and participating in the killings. This was his first apology since March 16<sup>th</sup> 1968, when Calley's dirty dozen, tortured, raped, murdered, and mutilated their way through the inhabitants of My Lai and the surrounding hamlets.

You might think that this judgement on the visibility of individual soldiers is somewhat one-sided, but I defy anyone to name common soldiers – privates, GIs, or the like, who have become well known for anything other than crimes. For the most part, we know of generals and their audacious plans, we hear briefly of those ordinary soldiers who have distinguished themselves by dying, in Afghanistan or Iraq, but the ruthless initiative, brutality, and creativity of the dirty dozen, remain firmly in the realm of the movies and the novels they spin off.

Young men (it is mostly young men) are randomly blown to pieces, grievously disfigured and wounded, by roadside bombs in Afghanistan. While recent experience suggests that some soldiers possess uncanny, perhaps intuitive, abilities in dealing with IEDs, on the whole, it is doubtful if their skill has much bearing on whether or not they survive unscathed. Of course, an army's success is dependent upon its numbers, the quality of its weapons and equipment, the skill of its commanders, and the fighting spirit of its soldiers, but it depends very little upon the initiative of the men in its ranks. In this, our soldiers in Afghanistan and elsewhere have an experience common to all soldiers: death and injury will occur at any time regardless of the skill or initiative of the individual sqaddie.

The inglorious bastards (or even the inglourious basterds) in the movies operate behind the lines in 1944 after the landings of vast armies in Normandy, and the South of France. The reality was one of huge and random slaughter in which the bloated bodies of men lay for weeks tangled in a charnel house of dead livestock, ruined farms, burned out vehicles, and flattened towns and villages. We must have soldiers, but let's not kid ourselves, that fighting is anything other than a filthy and unpredictable business.