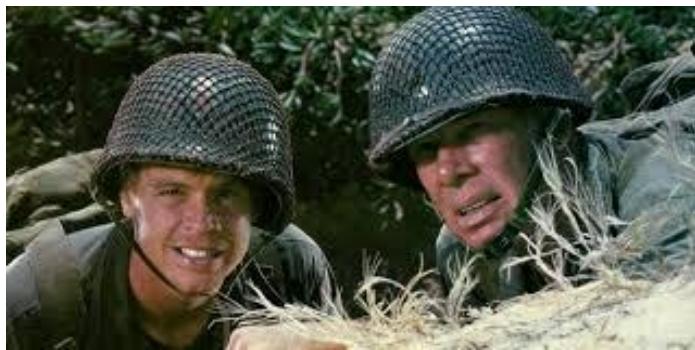


# The Big Red One

By Emily Soares



With a reputation as a hard-talking, uncompromising director and a past as rugged as any of his films, it's not surprising that Samuel Fuller's best-remembered picture would be an autobiographical war film: *The Big Red One*. In his day, Fuller was America's youngest-ever crime reporter (working for the dailies when he 17), a puffer of cigars, a pulp fiction writer and a highly

decorated soldier. Sam Fuller was a man who saw movies as warfare. In Jean-Luc Godard's *Pierrot le Fou*, Fuller laid down his credo: "A film is like a battleground. There's love. Hate. Action. Violence. Death. In one word, emotions."

Word is that Fuller once admitted that he plotted his films on a blackboard, using different color chalk to ensure that the elements of action (red), exposition (white) and romance (blue) were all evenly balanced. Some critics call him crude, primitive, hysterical, vulgar -- so do his fans. One thing is clear in Fuller's films -- a disdain for high-art (for which the French New Wave loved him) and an obsession with calling a spade a spade, and then, as an obit writer for the *Independent* put it, slamming said shovel "into the public's face as an irrefutable demonstration of its physical existence."

It seems that Fuller never lost his reporter's nose for news or his pulp writer's sensibilities. Many of his film titles could easily have splashed across a tabloid front page: *I Shot Jesse James, Pick Up on South Street, Hell and High Water, Underworld USA, Shock Corridor, Shark*.

Fuller made a host of war films, the first batch about Korea, but he never pretended to have captured the reality of it all and probably would have bristled that such claims were made about *Saving Private Ryan*. An actual participant in the Omaha Beach landing of D-Day, Fuller knew first-hand the limitations of film when it came to delivering the true horror of battle. "To do it right," he told *Time* magazine in 1984, "you'd have to blind the audience with smoke, deafen them with noise, then shoot one of them in the shoulder to scare the rest of them to death."

In *The Big Red One*, Fuller doesn't try to relay the full scope of war. His focus is the remnants of the 1<sup>st</sup> Squad of the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division of the U.S. Army -- four young battle-tested and weary riflemen, who see action in North Africa, Italy, France, Belgium and liberate a concentration camp in Czechoslovakia, and their Sergeant -- a perfectly grizzled and stoically conflicted Lee Marvin.

Robert Carradine plays Fuller's biographical character Zab, a cigar-chomping aspiring writer, and is also the film's narrator. Bogdonavich was originally slated to play this part when he was signed on as producer – we're glad he didn't. Mark Hamill is Griff, a crack shot who doesn't have the stomach for killing. Fresh on the heels of his *Star Wars* success, Hamill had only *Corvette Summer* and the "Star Wars Holiday Special" for television under his belt when filming started. Bobby DiCicco is Vinci, a Brooklyn-bred Italian American, and Kelly Ward plays Johnson, a character described in Zab's voiceover as a "pig farmer with hemorrhoids."

First announced for production in 1957 with John Wayne as its star, *The Big Red One* seemed destined to remain a dream for Fuller. Similar noises were made during the '60s and '70s until the project became one of Hollywood's most notorious unmade films. Following the financial failure of *The Naked Kiss*, chances that the film would ever be produced looked even thinner. But while Hollywood might have seen Fuller as increasingly unbankable, European interest in his films continued to grow. Ultimately, it was film critic-turned-director Peter Bogdonavich (*The Last Picture Show*, *Paper Moon*) who secured funding for the film, though he later had to abandon the project. Gene Corman (Roger's brother) took over as producer. The film was shot almost entirely on location in Israel during the summer of 1978 and had its world premiere at the Cannes film Festival in May 1980.

In many ways, *The Big Red One* is not a typical war movie. Fuller keeps the action contained, and we spent almost the entire film with the group of five men as company. The 1<sup>st</sup> Squad meets others – enemy soldiers, of course; Italian villagers; asylum inmates – but audience focus remains on the small band, and through them, the war becomes intensely personal. Fuller largely ignores military bureaucracy in his story, except for Zab's occasional wry references to it, and the 1<sup>st</sup> Squad seems to be on its own for the film's duration, with only occasional radio conversations between Marvin and some unknown and invisible commander as the link to the larger war.

Fuller's original cut took a year to finish and was four hours long, which the studio frowned upon. Executives ended up wresting control of the picture from Fuller and hired "film doctor" David Bretherton, who described the first cut as "brutal" and "shocking," to re-edit. Though the first cut was undoubtedly closer to Fuller's heart, the final film is considered one of the finest war movies ever and ranks among the best works of one of American cinema's truest originals. *The Big Red One* airs Sunday, May 30 at 2 p.m. and 11:30 p.m. ET/PT. Rating: TV-14-LV.