William Fruet's Search and Destroy


In a recent issue of Films in Review, a number of veterans of the war in Vietnam took a critical look at the various films which have been made about that conflict in the past few years. For the most part, they were not impressed with the manner in which the average American soldier has been portrayed, whether it be in Coming Home, The Deer Hunter, or Apocalypse Now. And they had nothing but scorn for the too easy stereotyping of the vet as psychotic that has provided a convenient hook for such B-grade fare as Rolling Thunder or Heroes. It is this context that should be kept in mind when examining William Fruet's Search and Destroy.

Like many of the men who served in Southeast Asia, Kip Moore (Perry King) has tried to put his days as the leader of a team of cack jungle commandos out of his mind. He lives, marginally, in the border tourist town of Niagara Falls, drives a sports car that is mostly rust and 'gets by' working for the garage run by the uncle of one of his former teammates. But then, he hears that one of the team members living in Los Angeles, has been murdered — martial-arts style. When another is found floating in his car in the river, Kip realizes that someone he knew in the war is out to get him as well.

Kip goes to see Buddy Grant (Don Stroud), who has kept up his karate and works as a mechanic on one of the Maid of the Mist tour boats. When Buddy is attacked on the dock and left paralyzed by a vicious beating, Kip is brought face to face with the killer — a former South Vietnamese officer who has sworn vengeance on the five Americans of Kip's squad who abandoned him in the jungle. The stage is set for a confrontation, high above the Niagara gorge's wild water, where the deadly skills that enabled both men to survive the war are turned against each other.

This is by no means deep stuff, and director Fruet is well aware that the film will be primarily directed towards undiscerning drive-in audiences. Therefore, he gives them a simple plot, a passable chase, and a good chunk of violent hand-to-hand action. What he does not do is pander to the most retrograde elements of this audience, as was done in Death Weekend. Instead, he tries to create an atmosphere of decay. This is done through the location shooting in Niagara Falls, with its old-fashioned, slightly rundown powerhouses, its all-too-familiar natural wonder, and the tackiness of its main drag cluttered with cheap shops and galleries. Cinematographer René Verzier, who has brought just this type of stark moodiness to films as diverse as...
Death Of A Lumberjack, The Pyx, The Newcomers and The Little Girl Who Lives Down The Lane, deserves the credit for this achievement.

Verzier's contribution to Search and Destroy is all that more important when one considers how routine the rest of the film is. Don Enright's script is thoroughly unoriginal, relying on Hawkesian truisms to explain the conflict. The Vietnamese officer was abandoned by Kip and his men because he had left one of the team to die, and, as Kip explains to his girlfriend, in the jungle "you had to look out for your buddies. There was no one else."

At least the filmmakers have the honesty to explicitly acknowledge the racism inherent in that attitude. Unfortunately they undercut it by making the killer a typical fanatic, who carries around a typewriter. As a weary police officer, Kip torments people who survive the sinking of their luxury liner, only to find themselves "saved" by an old, crewless freighter which is haunted by a malicious force set upon killing them. This group includes the aging Captain Ashland; Marshall, the sensible second-in-command; Marshall's wife and two kids; Nick, a handsome midshipman; Lori, his lover, Sylvia, a quirky widow; and Jackie, the ship's entertainer. George Kennedy is Ashland, the central character, bitter and dissatisfied at the end of a long career at sea. The malicious evil turns out to be nothing less than the spirit of Nazi Germany — the freighter being a derelict torture ship left over from World War II.

A "suspense-thriller," as Death Ship has been dubbed, ought to be structured enigmatically, spinning itself out in bits and pieces. In the first five minutes we just barely get the sense that Ashland is mad at the world... Then disaster strikes. He is rescued, but he is in a coma, and stays that way more than halfway through the film. When he finally begins to participate in the action again, he has been completely possessed by the haunted ship, although we don't know why or how.

We are, however, given a few clues as to the nature of this mystery ship, and what it represents. Periodically a German voice issues an order over the ship's intercom; the way the ship 'kills' two of its captives is reminiscent of SS torture methods. But there is no indication of any connection between Ashland and Nazism. When they merge it is arbitrary, and the script allows it to remain so.

A terrible script sinks a film, no matter how interesting the concept, no matter how famous or competent the cast. The script of Alvin Rakoff's Death Ship offers elements of what could have been a compelling story, but fails to develop them. Instead of information, it supplies enough clichés to virtually paralyze every member of the cast; the story is merely a vehicle for meaningless images of sensational horror, and its impact is strictly monetary.

Death Ship concerns a group of people who survive the sinking of their luxury liner, only to find themselves...