

## William Fruet's Search and Destroy

p.c. Search And Destroy Production Company (1978) p. James Margellos exec.p. R. Ben Efraim assoc.p. Ian McDougall, Don Enright d. William Fruet ass.d. (2nd unit) Buddy Joe Hooker sc. Don Enright d.o.p. René Verzier ed. Donald Ginsberg sd. Douglas Ganton art.d. Carol Spier p.man. Ian McDougall stunt co-ord. Buddy Joe Hooker martial arts advisor Park Jong Soo cost. Linda Matheson mus. FM l.p. Perry King, Don Stroud, Tisa Farrow, George Kennedy, Park Jong Soo, Tony Sheer, Phil Aikin, Rummy Bishop col. Technicolor, 35mm & 16mm running time 94 min. dist. Danton Films

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 run-down 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



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## FILM REVIEWS

*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 plethora of Catholic holy cards which he lights candles to.

Likewise, the acting never rises above the journeyman level. Perry King, an unspectacular actor, and Don Stroud, a heavy in the Bruce Dern tradition (he was the principal villain in *Death Weekend*) who is trying to change his image, are only adequate. As a weary police officer, horrified that a war is about to erupt in his own town at the height of the tourist season, that old bull, George Kennedy, has another of those roles that he can, and does, perform in his sleep. Mia Farrow's sister Tisa (last seen in that bizarre James Torback vehicle for Harvey Keitel called *Fingers*) might as well not be present as Kip's girlfriend, for all she is required to do. One wonders why these American actors — who, except for Kennedy, have no viewer profile — are in this Canadian film. At least Toronto karate teacher Park Jong Soo, who plays the killer, has a reason to be there, and performs what is essentially a stunt role with reasonable dispatch.

A film like *Search And Destroy* raises, in the final analysis, some important questions. Is there not something rather patronizing and smug about Canadian filmmakers, however much they may hide their nationality, doing a picture about the consequences of the American war in Vietnam on its people — especially considering our own country's rather ambiguous role in that conflict? And why is it that the author of such a landmark script as *Goin' Down The Road*, in order to keep employed, must do a picture like this? Though it is made with craft and some style, it says nothing that has not been said before.

Paul Costabile

## Alvin Rakoff's Death Ship

p.c. Bloodstar Productions (ABP) Ltd./Bloodstar (UK) (1979) exec.p. Sandy Howard p. Derek Gibson, Harold Greenberg assoc.p. Adrian Hughes d. Alvin Rakoff a.d. Charles Braive (1st), Pedro Gandol (2nd) sc. John Robins d.o.p. René Verzier p.man. Roger Héroux 2nd cam. Frank Lenk cont. June Randall art.d. Chris Burke, Michel Proulx ed. Mike Campbell sp.effects Mike Albrechtsen props Normand Simpson, David Phillips sd.rec. Henri Blondeau boom Normand Mercier unit man. Jacques Pinard p.account. Shirley Gill ward. Gaudeline Sauriol make-up Joan Isaacson hair Pierre David stills Frank Connor p.sec. Monique Brasseur l.p. George Kennedy, Richard Crenna, Nick Mancuso, Sally Ann Howes, Kate Reid, Victoria Burgoyne, Jennifer McKinney, Danny Higham, Saul Rubinek col. 35mm running time 91 min. dist. Asral (Canada), AVCO-Embassy (USA)

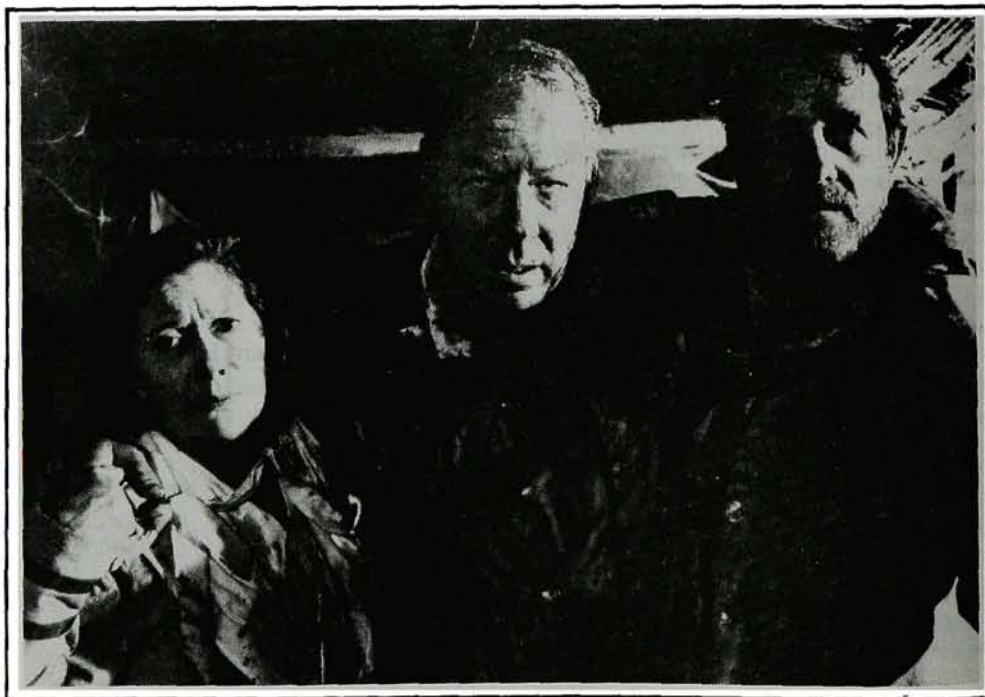
A terrible script sinks a film, no matter how interesting the concept, no matter how famous or competent the cast. The script of Alvin Rakoff's *Death Ship* offers elements of what could have been a compelling story, but fails to develop them. Instead of information, it supplies enough clichés to virtually 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

"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.



Fighting the odds to survive the *Death Ship*, are Kate Reid, George Kennedy and Richard Crenna