

Overlord, Part I

Stuart Cooper, Director (1975)

Cinematography: John Alcott (plus a significant amount of archival footage)

Screenplay: Stuart Cooper & Christopher Hudson (based, in part, on diaries of WWII combatants)

Editing: Jonathan Gili

Please note: This translation document is not a literary translation of the photo-story. It is a tool to assist intermediate-level Italian learners understand the text. In writing our photo-stories, we aim for a fluid, standard Italian, albeit at a high intermediate level. Then we write an English translation – which is naturally at an intermediate level of English – to match it. At times, the English translation retains a little of the Italian syntax, to give students a feel for the Italian language.

As always for our English language films, we have preserved the original lines in English, including non-standard grammar and the speech of the time and place. However, the Italian reflects standard modern usage. For this film, British terms no longer in use or with which a modern or international audience might not be familiar are translated into modern, standard Italian on the blog, and explained in footnotes in this English translation document.

The images are an important part of the photo-story. Each paragraph refers to specific images. Even if you don't understand Italian, please read this translation alongside the Italian version on the blog with photos, so that you can have context for the words. Consider as well that these visuals help us to know the movie better: they not only enrich the story, but they also show camera movements, editing, the symbols chosen by the director and thematic ideas. You will also have access to the links to other references in the blog itself. (An underline in the translation document indicates a hyperlink in the photo-story on the blog.) Please see the blog, specifically on the page “How the blog works,” for more information about our translation philosophy and our glossary style.

Photo-story summary: Tom Beddows, a quiet, thoughtful young man, enters World War II as a recruit. We follow him first to training camp and finally to D-Day on the beaches of Normandy. He makes a new friend; he meets a girl. But never for a moment does his sense of isolation and foreboding leave him.

The film begins with a full minute of dark screen. We hear sounds that we can't quite identify: the clopping of horses' hooves? The march of soldiers' feet? The roar of an engine? Then we have our first image: a row of houses, seen from an airplane. And our second image: a convoy of military wagons pulled by horses. It seems a quiet town, but where is it? Whose houses are they? Which side are the soldiers on? Who is looking out from the plane?

Along a street littered with debris from bombed buildings, we watch soldiers walking, Germans. We hear the same sounds from the opening of the film, but now they suggest a shuffle, not a march. The men are exhausted. In another scene, we see soldiers on horseback outside of the town, smoke billowing from a building in the background.

We return to the view from the plane. This time we're aware of the ominous shadow that it casts on the ground.

Still from above, we see the Arc de Triomphe: so this is the Nazi occupation of Paris. As mournful string music plays, the camera slowly pans around this monument to France's past victories. In the occupied city, the streets around the monument are deserted.

In another shot from the plane, we see the profile of a human face, and at last we understand whose point of view we have been sharing. It's Adolph Hitler, who is inspecting the damage caused by his army. The plane flies over Notre Dame, which is undamaged.

The film's title, *Overlord*,* appears on screen, followed by nighttime images of battleships at sea.

**The title is a little bit of a spoiler. "Operation Overlord" was the code name for the invasion of Normandy. On D-Day, this Allied operation launched the successful invasion of German-occupied Western Europe during World War II.*

The camera pans along rows of young soldiers jammed into a small boat. We see their worried faces in close-up.

Out of focus, a soldier runs toward the camera, a shot rings out, and he falls in slow motion, his rifle flying from his grasp.*

**This scene is an homage to Robert Capa's Spanish Civil War photograph, "The Falling Soldier."*

In haunting synchronicity with the previous scene, a young man in suit and tie comes running up a leafy English lane. The contrast is stark: the soldier is alone, behind him there's only the horizontal line dividing earth from sky; the Englishman, Tom Beddows (Brian Stirner), embraced by the bucolic comforts of a sunny day.

Running past a pretty lattice fence, he reaches his house, where his father (John Franklyn-Robbins) opens the gate for him. "Where've you been, lad? The bus leaves in 15 minutes." A row of modest brick houses extends behind them.

"I had to get this back," he says, showing him a book. "I'll want something to read. Anyway, I'm all ready upstairs."

"Oh, *David Copperfield*." This classic novel traces the shaping of a child through his experiences until he finds himself as a mature adult: it's a coming of age story. As we'll see, Tom's experiences in the

military are a kind of ironic inversion of *David Copperfield*.

“You’ll be lucky if you have time for reading,” Tom’s father is more practical. “I never did,” he adds, referring to his service during the Great War.

In the house, Tom pets his dog. Off-screen, his mother asks, “Has he got everything?”

“Of course,” his father replies. “He doesn’t need much.”

“What do you mean, ‘he doesn’t need much’?”

“Well, they give him the rest – clothes, rations, you know.” Tom looks up, alert for information about what is to come.

His mother (Stella Tanner) insists, “He needs what I’ve given him.”

“Time for the bus, lad. You don’t want to miss that train.” Tom stands, looking down at his dog.

The three look at each other, in the moment of farewell. Tom’s father has his hands clasped at his waist, as if holding himself together by an act of will.

Tom’s mother leans in to kiss him. Behind her, we see a picture of two little girls on a hilltop on a sunny day. She nods and smiles so that she won’t cry.

Finally, he says, “Bye, Mum.”

“Good luck, Son,” his father says quietly, still rigid and motionless.

With a roar, we are in a bomber, looking with the gunner through the observation window at the ground below. Shell casings pile up on the glass.

And, just as suddenly, we are at the train station. Tom stands alone, as casual as a student on a weekend trip. Cinematographer John Alcott has composed the shot beautifully, with Tom posed at the graceful curve of the platform and the tracks.

We hear the whistle of the train.

The bomber is flying above a ship. Over the roar of the plane’s engine, we hear the rat-a-tat of bullets.

Tom sits on the train and looks out of the window, immersed in his thoughts. In parallel, we see a view of the ocean and the ship from the plane high above. The engine’s roar contrasts with the rattle and hum of the train’s wheels.

Tom is awakened from a nap when the train comes to a sudden halt. He lifts the shade to see what has happened. It’s nighttime.

A sharp cut brings us to a London street, where firefighters in metal helmets struggle to control flames in bombed housing. As the camera pans, burning buildings fall and desperate firefighters work to save the city.

Tom comes running, but it’s too late: he’s missed his connecting train. He sits down on his suitcase, setting his gas mask box* on the ground.

**During World War II, everyone in Britain was given a gas mask in a cardboard box, in case chemical weapons were dropped during air raids.*

An elegant image of a horrifying scene: firefighters huddle in the lower part of the frame as the white jets of water draw slanting parallel lines across the image. Next, the camera shows a street wreathed in smoke, empty except for the skeletons of buildings, quiet except for sirens.

Finally Tom has arrived at his destination. He gets off the train and stands on the platform in a sort of daze. The station master (Harry Shacklock) yells, "Are you for the camp?" But Tom just stares blankly. The man tries again. "Hey, you! Are you for the camp?"

"Yeah." Tom finally comes back down to earth.

"You're a bit late, son. The others got in last night."

"I know."

"Got caught up in that air raid, eh?"

"Yes."

"Oh, well, never mind, son. You'll have to walk!" Laughing, he adds, "It's not many miles!"

Walking along a country road, Tom takes off his coat and puts it over his arm, to the sound of sad orchestral music. His luggage is heavy and, as a long shot shows us, he is very much alone.

Tom checks in at the camp and is sent to his barracks. There he encounters a soldier (Sam Sewell) stretched out on a bed, reading a paperback book. The man orders Tom to pick up his suitcase again, go outside and properly request permission to enter. He's evidently the barracks supervisor, responsible for keeping order.

In a quick sequence, we see Tom go to get his uniform.

"Next!"

To the doctor, who wears his white coat over a shirt and tie.

"Next!"

To get his inoculation.

"Next!"

Back at the barracks, the supervisor whom Tom has already met addresses the men. He calls out their names, then walks through the room as they stand at attention. "Right. Let's have a look at you." He stops in front of Tom.

"Can you tell me what you've got there?"

Tom recites the list nervously, "One pair of shorts, one pair of drawers, one balaclava, one pair of boots, great coat, socks, gas mask, knife, fork and spoon" and so on. He finishes, relieved and a little bit proud.

"Anything else?"

"I don't think so," replies Tom, unsure.

"What's this?" the man demands.

"It's a pull-through."*

"You're learning," the man replies sarcastically and walks away.

**A tool used to clean a rifle.*

Out on the field, the corporal, a Scot, bellows out orders to the new recruits.

To finish, he asks, “Is that understood?”

“Yes, Corporal!”

Louder: “Is that understood?”

Louder: “Yes, Corporal!”

Another day begins: the supervisor bursts into the room and yells, as he bangs on a mess tin with a spoon to make noise. “Up! Wash! Shave! Get dressed! Clean this barracks room, and I want it shining!”

The soldiers count off: One! Two! Three! Four!

At the corporal’s order, the men complete a maneuver quickly and precisely. It’s apparent they have been here a while now.

As the recruits shine their shoes, the barracks supervisor barks question. He calls on Tom, who answers yelling – as he is supposed to – without hesitation.

“Right. Let's have a look at what you’ve been doing. Stand by your beds!” The men immediately jump up and stand at attention at the foot of their beds. He walks down the room, looking from side to side at his men.

“Right! Now, let's start all over again, shall we?”

This time, the drill confuses the young men, and the corporal screams at them. The camera zooms in on Tom, his humanity slowly being stripped away from him. He glances at the camera, looking briefly into our eyes. But actually, that is not permitted; he quickly averts his gaze and looks straight ahead again.

Combat training has begun. The recruits practice stabbing with bayonets; they run while trying to avoid exploding bombs; they cross a ditch while balanced on logs; they cross a stream, walking on one rope and holding another that runs overhead; they wade across a stream, hoisting their weapons aloft to keep them dry. Some fall in the water or run into obstacles; it’s all part of the training.

Tom and his friend Arthur (Nicholas Ball) are walking in a field.

Arthur complains, “Fuck! I need a fag.”* He speaks with a Welsh accent.

A plane passes overhead, noisily and not exactly in focus. Editor Jonathan Gili juxtaposes images from Tom’s present and his future, cutting quickly from one to another, until the viewer is as disoriented as Tom is himself.

**A cigarette (British slang).*

“They're ahead,” comments Tom. He thinks they should keep moving, so as not to fall too far behind.

“Well, you go on. I'm stopping for a smoke.” Arthur tosses his rifle down on the ground. Then he takes off his helmet and tosses that down as well.

Tom gives in, taking off his own helmet. They both flop down in the tall grass.

Arthur lights his cigarette. After a moment of silence, he says, "I hate this war."

"You'll get through," Tom reassures him.

"No, it's not that. It's me girl. We was engaged, see, and... and then when all this come along, well... her old man wouldn't let me marry her. Sod him. Said we could wait till after we won the war. Bastard."

Another plane roars overhead.

Arthur goes on, "I wanted to fly. I failed the medical."

"I didn't know that."

"Who you got waiting for you, Tommy?"

"Who have I got? Well, there's Mum and Dad, I suppose. And Tina."

"Good for you, mate," answers Arthur, misunderstanding. "Let me guess. She got brown hair, brown eyes... pale skin, nice tits, right?"

Tom sets him straight. "Tina is a cocker spaniel. She's a lovely dog."

"What are you gonna do when all this is over?" Arthur asks, as another plane flies overhead.

"Oh, I don't know."

"I've got me plans. Garage, mate. I'm gonna buy a garage somewhere round here and set up a scrap metal business on the side. How 'bout coming in with me, Tom?" So Arthur would stay in this bucolic setting and open his own little business, rather than return home to Wales after the war.

"Hey. We ought to go."

Helmets on head, they head back to their group.

Arthur asks, "Coming with me and the lads tomorrow? We're celebrating... end of training. Pub crawl in the afternoon, fleapit* in the evening."

"Yeah. Yeah, okay. What's the film?"

"Forget the picture, mate. It's the women!"

One more day: a pub crawl and the pictures. And then Tom's off to war...

**British slang for a dump, in this case, referring to the local theater.*