

Overlord, Part III

Stuart Cooper, Dir. (1975)

Somber and contrite, Tom goes through the pockets of the dead German soldier.

He finds an engraved tobacco tin. He opens it, touches the loose leaves, and closes it again. He sets the box on the man's stomach.

Tom pulls out a wallet from the soldier's breast pocket. It contains a lock of hair, which Tom lets fall onto the man's body. There's also a photo of a castle atop a mountain, as if in a fairy tale; Tom drops that, too.

A photograph that appears to be of the young man himself captures Tom's interest. He holds it up for a longer look.

From high above, we see a field where a tiny figure – Tom? – is running desperately, as shots ring out around him. The camera tracks the soldier in his flight. As fast as he runs, he cannot get past the lower right corner of the frame.

Still in long shot, we see the soldier from ground level. He's heading towards the point where a bomb has just burst. The horizontal composition of the shot – the rows of brush, the lines of treetops against the sky – seems to trap him.

In silhouette, he runs through a forest of tall trees. Now the vertical lines of the tree trunks seem to obstruct him.

He runs through giant puddles, with bullets flying around him.

He runs towards us in slow motion, out of focus, as in the opening shot of the falling soldier. From off-screen, a voice yells desperately, "Get down there! Get down!"

A sudden explosion turns the screen dark. As the smoke clears, we hear a blast and then silence. Tom has been hit. He falls quietly: we hear the thud of his gun as it hits the earth.

In the next shot, we see a photograph of Tom standing to attention in his uniform, the black beret arranged neatly over his head. A hand – Tom's mother's – is holding the picture carefully, by the edge, so as not to smudge it. In its elements, this image echoes the shot of Tom gazing at the dead German's portrait.

Tom's mother leans the photograph against the statuette of a World War I soldier, beside Tom's old necktie, which is rolled up neatly inside his collar. All are set lovingly on a lace doily.

Back in the train, Tom is still sleeping, his head resting against the leaf-patterned upholstery.

Suddenly, his eyes open; he stares straight ahead with a troubled expression.

As the English countryside streams by outside, Tom stands and opens the window. He leans out, as if to let the fresh air awaken him. Then he sits back down.

Another soldier (Davyd Harries) slides open the door to Tom's compartment and looks in.

"Hello, Jack," Tom says.

"All by ourselves, are we?" Jack sits down, the leafy upholstery still reminding us of the leaves under the dead German's head. "You're a solitary sort of fellow, aren't you?"

"I felt like reading."

"Christ, I wish this fucking war was over," Jack complains. "You spill your blood and guts to help the Belgians... and then four years later, you get ready to spill 'em again to help the fucking French. And in between, you go paddling down on the south coast learning how to keep your bloody rifle dry. It's a fucking mix-up, if you ask me. I've been in His Majesty's bleeding forces four and a half years... seen active service, and now they want to send me back to bleeding battle school. You know what that means, don't you?"

"No."

"It means we'll be the first ashore when they do put on the sodding invasion, that's what." Jack gazes at Tom with a flat, fatalistic expression.

Tom considers for a moment, then comments with a smile, "I suppose someone's got to go first."

"It's no fucking joke!" Jack's face shows a mixture of indignation and resignation.

Tom's smile vanishes.

But Jack, in return, grins broadly at Tom. An experienced soldier, Jack has a fatherly attitude towards Tom: reminding him of danger – but not wanting him to worry too much either.

Tom's face blossoms again into a smile.

But some thought – perhaps the memory of his dream – gives his face a somber appearance as the screen fades to black.

We see the headlights of a truck, tiny in the vast darkness. After crossing a bridge, the truck is stopped by a soldier with a flashlight – another spot of light in the dark.

The men get out and line up in formation, at attention. The central figure bears a strong resemblance to the photo we have just seen of Tom in his beret.

A voice informs them, "You will now be taken to the coast where you will be joined by Allied Forces and take part in combined exercises and assault training."

In daylight, the men disembark from a ship, carrying their heavy gear. Their boots stomp loudly on the wooden walkway.

The men march in formation, in rows of four, wearing metal helmets, with bulky packages on their backs. They pass trucks being loaded and also ambulances, with crosses clearly displayed on the roof. Seen from above, the column of men fills the whole shot, seeming to have no end.

These are the preparations for D-Day: the invasion of Nazi-occupied France.

As their train starts moving, GIs lean out of the window and banter with an Englishwoman, dressed in a coat and rain hat, who bids them goodbye.

"We want to see you again, baby!"

“Oh-ho! And you, soldier,” she replies cheerfully.

“Blow us a kiss, sweetheart!”

“Good luck! Have a good time! Bye!”

“How you doing? Let's have a quickie.”

“Cheeky!”

“Come on, sweetheart.”

“Bye!”

The train pulls out of the station, blowing smoke, and winds slowly through the frame, following the elegant line of the rails. In the background, a row of bare trees stands guard.

We see soldiers jammed into a small boat, their oars all but useless in the rough sea. It's a training exercise.

The boat submerges for a moment, crashing into rock at the water's edge as the men struggle to stay in place.

A warship sits in the water. Over a loudspeaker, a voice instructs the men to disembark as quickly as possible. They climb down the side of the ship and wade to shore, with water up to their thighs. Their silhouettes in procession cut across the frame, receding toward the great bulk of the ship.

From the loudspeaker, a calm voice orders, “Move up the beach and join your company. Keep moving. Keep moving.”

On the shore, lines of black figures draw arcs over the dunes. Out at sea, we see that warships sit side by side, unloading soldiers.

Disembarking, the men are told to hold on to the rope and to keep their rifles above their heads. The ship towers over them.

Seen in a long shot, the men walk ashore in an orderly line. From the loudspeaker comes the command: “Move up the beach.”

CAPTION: Beautiful images of the experimental weapon called the Panjandrum.

Tom's unit is in a landing craft, clustered against the walls. They don't know it, but this is a drill for the D-Day landing.

They are told, “You will remain in these positions until you are instructed to hold tight to ram the beach.”

Tom is seated next to Arthur. Beneath their helmets, both look anxious.

From behind them, Jack says, “This is a bloody nightmare.”

Tom replies, “I feel sick.”

Jack warns, “Watch out. We're going in.”

And the voice on the loudspeaker: “Stand by to hit the beach.”

To a soundtrack of dissonant music, the men rush off the landing craft onto a beach. Their images are blurred, as in Tom's dream, as in the opening sequence of the falling soldier. We are in the realm of shadows and premonitions. As the last man leaps off, the screen fades to black.