

Overlord, Part V

Stuart Cooper, Dir. (1975)

Tom is sitting in the back of a truck with the rest of his company. Weary, the men lean back and rest as the truck moves through a wooded landscape. Tom asks Arthur, “Where are we going? I've lost all sense of direction.”

Arthur replies, “A game of musical bloody chairs,* mate. Thousands of us moving around from camp to camp, waiting for someone to shout, ‘Last one over the hill is out!’”

**Musical chairs is a game of elimination. To the accompaniment of music, the players walk around a group of chairs arranged in a circle. There is one fewer chair than the number of players. When the music stops, the players sit. The person who has not found a chair is eliminated. A single chair is removed from the circle, and the game – like the futility of travelling – resumes.*

Tom replies dryly, “First one over the hill is out, if you ask me.”

“You'd think they'd have a bit of sympathy for us by now, wouldn't you? Send us by train,” says Arthur.

As the men ride along, a popular British song of World War II plays in the background. Listening to the wry and resigned complaints of a soldier who is always on the move, we see footage of various types of military transport: trains, trucks, tanks, and more. They carry troops, as well as weapons of war.

The song goes:

We don't know where we're going until we're there

There's lots and lots of rumors in the air

*We heard the captain say we're on the move today
We only hope the blinking sergeant-major knows the way.*

After nightfall, the men are still in the truck. Tom, eyes closed, sways back and forth to the rhythm of its motion. Suddenly, amidst loud banging, a voice shouts, “Come on! Wake up! Come on! Come on! Wake up, everybody! Wake up! Look lively!” They've reached the camp.

The truck comes abruptly to a halt and the tailgate springs open. “Come on! Move!” The men clamber out and jump to the ground.

As the camera pans along the line of men, we hear a voice from off-screen: “You won't be doing any work. If you're wise, you'll take advantage of it. Sorry about the tight security. It means no wireless sets,* newspapers or telephoning... and I'm afraid none of your letters will get posted until afterwards. I'm sure all of you realize the importance of what lies ahead. That's all for now.”

**radio*

The men are dismissed, but Tom stands still.

The Girl appears.

"I thought you were meeting me tonight," she says.

"I was called away."

"Why?"

"To fight the war."

"Couldn't you have told me?"

"There was no time."

"So you left me."

"There was no choice."

"Are you coming back?"

"Don't know."

"Am I going to wait for you?"

"I don't know."

"I do though. Good-bye, Tom."

"Please..." he whispers, fog drifting around him. "Don't go."

After a quick cut, we see Tom standing at stiff attention and holding a card that shows his name and identification number. He's waiting to be photographed. The flash light bleaches the image; he fades into the wall.

Without looking up, a soldier at a desk says, "Fill in the form, please, name and address of next of kin." A poster pinned to the wall behind him shows a man hiking with a dog; they could be Tom and Tina. Tom approaches the desk. "If I get killed, they've already got a photograph," he says with a smile, trying to make light of the precariousness of life.

The man looks up, unamused: "It's for *our* records, Private Beddows."

"Oh," Tom replies, chastened.

The man goes on, "Follow the sign outside, please, and get your anti-louse gear from the stores... if you haven't already."

"God," Tom sighs, handing over his form. "How much more?"

"There's a will form... B-2089... to fill in."

"What for?" Tom is confused.

"What do *you* think?" The man glares at Tom, who is taken aback. It suddenly dawns on him: all the procedures he's going through are intended to prepare for the eventuality of his death.

He does a quick about-face and leaves the room.

Next stop: thumb prints. Tom's index card is one among thousands, in this vast system documenting those who may not be coming back. The card holds the photograph of Tom and his identification number. A few lines of text provide his name and date of birth. That's it.

To a soundtrack of quiet piano music, Tom steps, in Spring sunlight, to a table set up outdoors. He salutes and hands over his card. Then he moves on to sign for the cash he's about to receive. The soldiers behind the table don't look up.

As he signs, French banknotes are counted out and handed to him. So they are headed to France!

CAPTION: We see the same scene in an archival shot. Small stones keep the bills from blowing away. A soldier not unlike Tom collects his money. Hopefully, he will be able to put it to use.

CAPTION: As the soldiers wait to meet their fate, they relax with a range of activities: card playing, acrobatics, boxing.

CAPTION: At a briefing for the D-Day landing at Normandy, the men gather around vast maps that explain with precision how the operation will unfold. The soldiers in the last row stand on wooden benches for a better view.

Jack and Arthur lie on their cots, looking despondent. Arthur's beret is threaded through his epaulet; the star on it glistens.

"Cannon fodder... That's what we are," Arthur says. "Die of boredom, die in battle. What's the difference?"

Jack grins. "Did you hear what Tom did this morning?"

"No."

"He went to see old Nickelby and asked him if they gave out compassionate leave if there'd been a death in the family. So Nickelby said, 'Oh, yeah, yeah, depending on the circumstances.' And Tom said, 'Well, there hasn't been a death in my family yet... but there's gonna be one very soon. I request leave to go home and console my parents.'"

They laugh heartily at this chilling story. Tom seems more and more convinced that he will die. But this hasn't diminished his sense of humor.

"What did Nickelby do?" asks Arthur.

"He sent Tom with a note to the Medical Officer."

"Oh, Tommy. He's nuts."

"No, no. No, Tommy's not nuts. He could do with a break. Well, we could all do with a break."

Tom rushes in excitedly, his arms full of letters. Jack gets up expectantly.

"They're for me!" says Tom.

Jack and Arthur watch as Tom opens the first envelope. It's a card.

He looks first at Jack and then Arthur with a mischievous grin.

"Don't tell me it's your birthday," says Arthur.

"Yeah. Couple of days ago. The mail was held up."

Tom takes something shiny out of the envelope.

"What's that?" asks Jack.

“It's a key.”

“That's a funny sort of birthday present,” comments Arthur.

“What's it for?” Jack wants to know.

“It's a custom in our family. You know, key to the door, coming of age, that sort of thing.”

Jack asks from off-screen, “You just twenty-one?”

“Yeah.”

“Happy birthday, kid!” Arthur says. “Plenty more of 'em,” he adds, as a hopeful afterthought.

“Thanks.”

Tom spent his twenty-first birthday haunted by premonitions of his death. Will he get the opportunity to use that symbolic key?