

Overlord, Part VI

Stuart Cooper, Dir. (1975)

Tom is still opening his birthday mail. Light floods in on him through the open doorway. He reaches into a package. "How about this, Jack?"
Jack sits up and looks.

It's a pen. "Oh, that's nice," Jack says, examining it carefully.

"I think I'll go and get some ink and write back to them," says Tom, taking the pen back.
"Can I have a look at your cards?"
"Yeah, help yourself. See you later."

Tom sits alone in a woods, leaning against a tree. With his new birthday pen, he writes to his parents. We hear him in voiceover as he writes:

*Army post office, England
Dearest Mum and Dad,
Thank you very much for your letter and the presents, which have just arrived.*

The camera pulls back as Tom writes.

He continues:

*My fountain pen works very well, as you can see.
We're very cut-off here, as you can see from the address. I don't know where we are, exactly.
It was so nice to hear from you.*

As the camera continues to move, we see the bright glow of the sun at the back of the shot. The trees cast long shadows.

You don't have to worry about me. We are eating very well in this camp. Although the beds are hard, I'm getting plenty of sleep.

We all think the invasion can't be far off. It's like being part of a machine which gets bigger and bigger... while we grow smaller and smaller until there's nothing left.

We see the stark vertical silhouettes of the trees, their sweeping shadows, and an intense horizontal band of light at the rear. Tom seems to have vanished amidst the trees.
A dissolve takes us to a city, seen by an airplane pilot.

We hear the roar of the engine as the plane flies over the coast and out into the sea towards France. An aerial shot shows us the plane, its shadow on the water, and the iconic white cliffs of Dover.

As we watch a military convoy on a country road, Tom resumes:
I wish I had some news. Yesterday I saw a fox on the other side of the barbed wire.

The camera shows us the view of tranquil trees, from inside a truck under them.

As Tom continues, we see a family walking toward the village store. The boy, in short pants and a sleeveless sweater, carries a wicker basket. Abruptly, military vehicles drive past, disturbing the pleasant, small-town feeling.

And when we could still go out, I went to see This Happy Breed with Celia Johnson in it. I thought it was terrific at the time... but I can't remember much about it now. Seems so distant.*

**This Happy Breed (David Lean, 1944) tracks the life of a lower-middle-class British family between the two world wars. It was enormously popular with British audiences on the eve of D-Day, the period in which Overlord is set.*

The street scenes give way to views of English houses seen from a bomber, slightly out of focus.

Everything outside the army and my mates here has faded away.

I must have done even more traveling in the last two weeks than when I went to France on that school holiday.

In one shot, the convoy looms as a dark mass at the right edge of the frame, casting heavy shadows toward the quiet village.

But I couldn't tell you where we are or where we've come from. All we seem to do is sit in trucks and barracks, waiting for our bit of the war to start.

Tom pauses, as we see a line of soldiers marching, packs on their back, rifles slung on their shoulders. Seen from the bomber, the landscape is laid out in square patches, like a quilt.

The men have reached the English coast.

At any other time your news about Tina would have left me unable to think of anything else. But now it just seems part of the war like everything else. I was going to ask you to keep one of the puppies... but I don't think there's much point. I don't think I shall live to see the end of this war. It sounds silly... but this war has killed so many already. I'm just going to be another one.

He reads this last line lightly, resigned and philosophical.

From above, we see soldiers boarding small vessels.

Of that I'm sure. I can feel it... the way you feel it when you're going to get a cold. I didn't know whether to tell you. I thought you shouldn't get one of those official letters without knowing what was inside. Please be brave. I shall be all right. I'm not frightened.

The men are ferried out to the warships that will take them to Normandy, for the D-Day landing. As they climb up the diagonal ladder to the warship's deck, they look like a line of black ants.

CAPTION: Views of the sea at night.

As in the opening of the film, the screen goes black, and stays black for a full twenty seconds. Only the sound of exploding bombs reminds us what is happening. We see rows of bombs falling, with the quilt of fields as backdrop. From the bomber's perspective, high above, the explosions when the bombs reach ground seem tiny.

More archival footage of soldiers at sea moves us gradually back to Tom's story and the journey to Normandy.

As in the opening of the film, the camera pans from face to face around a small group of soldiers seated in a small boat. Once it reaches Tom, it rests in close-up on his serious face.

A dissolve takes us in flashback to Tom's camp where a bonfire is burning fiercely. A stern voice from off-screen announces, "It is necessary to burn all personal letters and papers or wrap them in the paper being issued to be sent home. The choice is yours. You will carry nothing except your Pay Book, Part I,* and Bible."

**Part II of the Pay Book was simply a pay record. Part I contained identifying information about the soldier, such as clothing sizes, medical issues, and the name of an individual to be notified in the event of injury or death.*

Tom stands at the fire. In his hand, he holds the letter he wrote in the woods, now sealed into an envelope and addressed. He looks down at it, and then tosses it into the flames.

Gazing solemnly into the fire, he says quietly, "I've got nothing now. I've thrown it all away."