

Overlord, Part VII

Stuart Cooper, Dir. (1975)

In the landing craft, en route to Normandy, Arthur says, "I don't think I'm gonna get through this." Tom puts his arm over his shoulder. "You'll be alright. We'll get you through it."

A dissolve brings us to a night when Tom and Arthur are running through an alleyway as a rainstorm roars in the background. It's a flashback.

Seeking cover from the rain, they hurry along a dark waterfront, while the thunder booms.

Finally, they find shelter. Looking out at the weather, Tom complains, "I'm not walking through this lot."

"So much for the seaside," Arthur agrees.

Behind them, they hear a piano playing and a young girl singing. Turning to look, they take their hats off and duck in, under a low archway.

In an empty auditorium, a girl in a white party dress stands in front of a pale curtain at the edge of the stage, while a woman looks at her from below, coaching her. The men enter and sit as the girl continues to sing:

*... And I don't care for him
He can go and get another
That I hope he will enjoy*

The girl, hands folded, sings quietly and hesitantly, her eyes downcast. The curtain behind her shines in the spotlight. She goes on:

*For I'm going to marry
A far nicer boy*

She finishes the verse and the soldiers applaud.

Looking up at the soldiers, the woman joins their applause. She wears a string of pearls at her neck and a dark hat. "Sing it again, Susannah!" she says.

"Please, Mommy," the girl begs.

"Sing it right through once more, for the soldiers." The unseen piano starts to play again and Susannah sings:

*So let him go
Let him tarry
Let him sink or let him swim*

*He doesn't care for me
And I don't care for him*

*He can go and get another
That I hope he will enjoy
For I'm...*

The men get up to leave.

“Don't go, Tommies,” says the woman, her shadow looming behind her. “Tommies,* please don't go.” But they do leave. As they go, Arthur gives the briefest glance back at the woman.

**The term ‘Tommy’ derives from Thomas Atkins; the name has been used in official forms and when a soldier’s name is unknown. In World War II, the British still referred to a soldier (but not an officer) affectionately as a Tommy.*

Back on the landing craft, Arthur looks miserable. “I think I'm gonna be sick again.”

After a moment, Tom asks, “Why didn't you become an officer, Jack?”

“I failed the initiative test. They locked me in a broken-down potting shed... and told me to imagine I was a prisoner trying to escape. If I used that wall, I'd be shot. If I climbed that fence, I'd be electrocuted. If I trod here, there, anywhere, I'd be blown up by hidden mines.”

Even Arthur – seasick as he is – pays attention now.

“I didn't move a fucking inch,” he laughs. “If they hadn't come and let me out, I'd still have been in that shed... waitin' to become an officer.”

The camera fixes on Tom, his eyes alert, his face impassive. The roar of the landing craft’s motor is deafening.

“This is it,” Tom says. “We're going in.”

With a faraway look, Tom suddenly has a vision. He’s standing at attention in a shadowy room, in uniform. Dim light enters through a window. We hear soft music.

The Girl appears. She approaches Tom.

We see their silhouettes against the light of the window. They stand motionless, close together, as if figures in a shadow play.

She asks, “Shall I show you how we prepare the dead?”

She reaches up to loosen the chin strap of Tom’s helmet, and takes it off him.

She starts to unbutton his shirt as he gazes at her, without moving.

She looks at him. He turns around and she removes his shirt.

Moving closer, she puts her arms around him, as he stands motionless, as if already dead. Then he falls back slowly into her arms, leaving the grid of the window to fill the screen.

She eases him down until he lies flat out on the floor. His arms are open, Christ-like.

She continues to undress him, pulling off his undershirt and then his boots and trousers.

She kneels at Tom's head, looking down at him, then bends over and kisses him. A white radiance outlines his profile. Sitting back up, she gazes down at his face.

"Now bring me back," he says, his voice seeming to come from a great distance away, from another world perhaps. The Girl unfastens her dress and pulls it off over her head.

We see her face from Tom's point of view, in extreme close-up, as it approaches him.

Back in the landing craft, Tom gets to his feet.

In close-up, Tom's eye fills the screen. Within the pupil, we see the image from the opening of the film: a soldier running toward the camera in slow motion, much as Tom ran earlier. As we watch, he is hit.

The rifle flies out of his hand and, arms outstretched, he falls. Tom's eye closes.

A sudden cut shows us a foam of water around Tom's legs as he rushes toward the shore and then runs across the beach, in the sand.

At the sudden sound of gunshots, we see Tom's legs as he stumbles and falls to his knees. What follows is practically a dissection, frame by frame, of Robert Capa's "The Falling Soldier" and its aftermath: the soldier leaning backward, the rifle in the air, and the body landing on the sand.

Another gunshot: we see Tom's eye in extreme close-up, wide open. Another: Tom covers the right side of his face with his hand.

Jack turns his head to see Tom lying down in the landing craft, his face bloodied. "Oh, Christ!" he exclaims, "He's hit! Tommy!"

As Arthur turns to look, Tommy presses his hand against his face. "Get him down!"

In a quick sequence of shots, Tom's friends come to his assistance. But at the same time, the landing goes on.

"Get out of the way!"

"Hold tight to ram the beachhead!"

"Get out of the blasted way!"

"Get out of the way, man!"

"Get down!"

"Jack, hold him!"

"Hold him! Hold him! Hold him!"

"It's all right. I've got him. Lay him down."

Tom's friends set him on the floor of the boat.

"Easy. You'll be alright."

"Oh, God, he's dead."

"Oh, fuck."

As somber music plays, the camera zooms in on Tom's face dirty with blood, his eyes still open. But there's no time, and soon men are carrying him off the boat on a stretcher.

Tom is laid flat and covered with a white sheet.

A series of shots shows us the men pouring out of the landing craft and wading onto shore. The images are interspersed with quiet scenes of the dead and wounded carried on stretchers.

Once again, from high above, we have the pilot's view of a bucolic England, a quiet sea, the quilt of fields, a village of tidy houses.

Elsewhere, the war continues without pausing to take note of Tom, his death, and all that he has lost – including whatever the future might have held for him.