

USA, 1980. R. 188 min. Cast: Lee Marvin, Mark Hamill, Bobby DiCicco, Kelly Ward, Robert Carradine; Music: Dana Kaproff; Cinematographer: Adam Greenberg; Producer: Gene Corman; Writer & Director: Samuel Fuller

Samuel Fuller – director of the classic war movie, “The Big Red One” – once said that it is impossible to portray war realistically in the movies unless you were to fire real shots and have casualties in the audience.

Fuller’s brusque comment may seem contrary to his legacy as a hard-boiled filmmaker, especially with the recently restored war-epic “The Big Red One.” The movie tells the story of Sgt. Possum (Lee Marvin) and his band of soldiers in the First Infantry. Told in episodes, the squad participates in battles along French Vichy Africa, Italy and Normandy. The “Big Red One” will run from Dec. 3 to Dec. 9 at the Brattle Theatre.

The reconstructed version adds an additional hour to the 1980 theatrical release, increasing its running time from 113 to 188 minutes. The idea for “The Big Red One” originally came to Fuller in 1953, but remained unfinished until he returned to the project in 1977. He filmed more than 30 hours of footage in Israel and Ireland, trying to restage his experiences in World War II. While still missing an hour of Fuller’s original concept, Richard Schickel – who reconstructed the movie – wrote in the July 2004 edition of DGA (Director’s Guild of America) magazine that it’s probably the closest version viewers will get to Fuller’s original movie.

Fuller’s life may also seem as epic as his movies. A Massachusetts native, Fuller was born Aug. 12, 1911 in Worcester, but was raised in New York City, according to Jason Ankeny’s biography in the “All Movie Guide.” He quit school at 13 to become a copy boy for The New York Journal and was soon working for the paper’s editor, Arthur Brisbane. After a fight his boss and the paper’s owner William Randolph Hearst, Fuller went on to become the country’s youngest crime reporter for The San Diego Tribune at the age of 17. He quit

the position at The San Diego Tribune to travel the country, becoming a pulp novelist in 1935 with his book, “Burn Baby Burn.”

In Ankeny’s biography, Fuller moved to Hollywood in the same year and started ghostwriting scripts. His first screen credits arrived with “The Gangs of New York” in 1938 and “Confirm or Deny” in 1941. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Fuller enlisted in the U.S. Army, serving in the First Infantry Division, also known as the “Big Red One” after its shoulder patch. Fuller earned a Purple Heart, Silver Star and Bronze Star.

About enlisting in the Army at 29, The New York Times film critic A.O. Scott reported that Fuller said in his memoirs, “I had a helluva opportunity to witness the biggest crime story of the century, and nothing was going to stop me from being an eyewitness.”



Fuller returned to Hollywood after the war as a scriptwriter for Warner Brothers. Frustrated that none of his scripts were developed into motion pictures, he worked for scale at Lippert Productions in order to write and direct his own material, wrote Ankeny in the “All Movie Guide.” He didn’t receive much attention until his first war film, “Steel Helmet.” Shot for about \$100,000, it was one of the first movies to deal with the Korean War and the implicitly reference the Japanese internment in the United States during World War II. “Steel Helmets” earned \$6 million and for Fuller, a contract at 20th Century Fox.

Fuller’s work always combined a sense of grittiness and reality. He made everything from war flicks [“Fixed Bayonets” (1951); “Hell and High

Water” (1954)]; noir [“Pickup on South Street” (1953)]; and westerns [“Run of the Arrow” (1957); “Forty Guns” (1957)]. The director wasn’t afraid to tackle tough issues like racial identity in “The Crimson Kimono” (1959) or neo-nazism in “Verboten!” (1959).

In 1963, his career started its decline with two pictures, “Shock Corridor” in 1963 and “The Naked Kiss” in 1964, according to the “All Movie Guide.” While some critics now consider these some of his best works, they told stories in grotesque, over-the-top forms: In the former, Fullers depicts life in an asylum when a reporter commits himself in order to find a killer and earn himself a Pulitzer Prize; and in the “The Naked Kiss,” a prostitute leaves the streets to find a better life in the suburbs, only to discover it to be more loathsome.

When Fuller started to make “The Big Red One,” it was his first Hollywood picture since “Merrill’s Marauders” in 1962. Using Marvin and young stars Robert Carradine and Mark Hamill, he presented his four-and-a-half hour opus to executives at Lorimar Studios (which was acquired by Warner Brothers in 1988), before agreeing to cut it to its original running time of 113 minutes.

Film critic Robert Schickel, who reconstructed the film, wrote in the June 2004 of DGA Magazine that he believes the lengthened version of Fuller’s D-Day landing in Normandy is one of the best representations of the engagement prior to Steven Spielberg’s “Saving Private Ryan” (1998). While some critics consider the movie to be too B-grade or cartoon-like, Schickel argues that the newly restored version depicts the reality with war, echoing Fuller’s own statements that a “soldier’s main obligation is not to heroism, but to survival.”

- Jason Nielsen