

## Film Reviews

### *The Perilous Fight: America's World War II in Color*

Picture this: a little boy of no more than five stands alone, drab green clothes hang off his thin frame and a hat is pulled tight over his almost too-round head. He is clutching a chocolate bar and underneath the scene music measures the tragic nature of the image. Then the tone shifts, the music lightens slightly and softens as a tear falls from an eye of this poor little soul.

Can you picture that? You won't have to if you watch a PBS series on the Second World War entitled, *The Perilous Fight: America's World War II in Color*. He appears about two-thirds of the way through the sixty-second set-up for the series and it crushes me. I have watched this introduction a number of times, and every time I see that little boy my eyes well-up and I silently curse the people who tortured little boys and their parents and slightly begrudge the composer Chris Elliot for making my emotions so visceral.

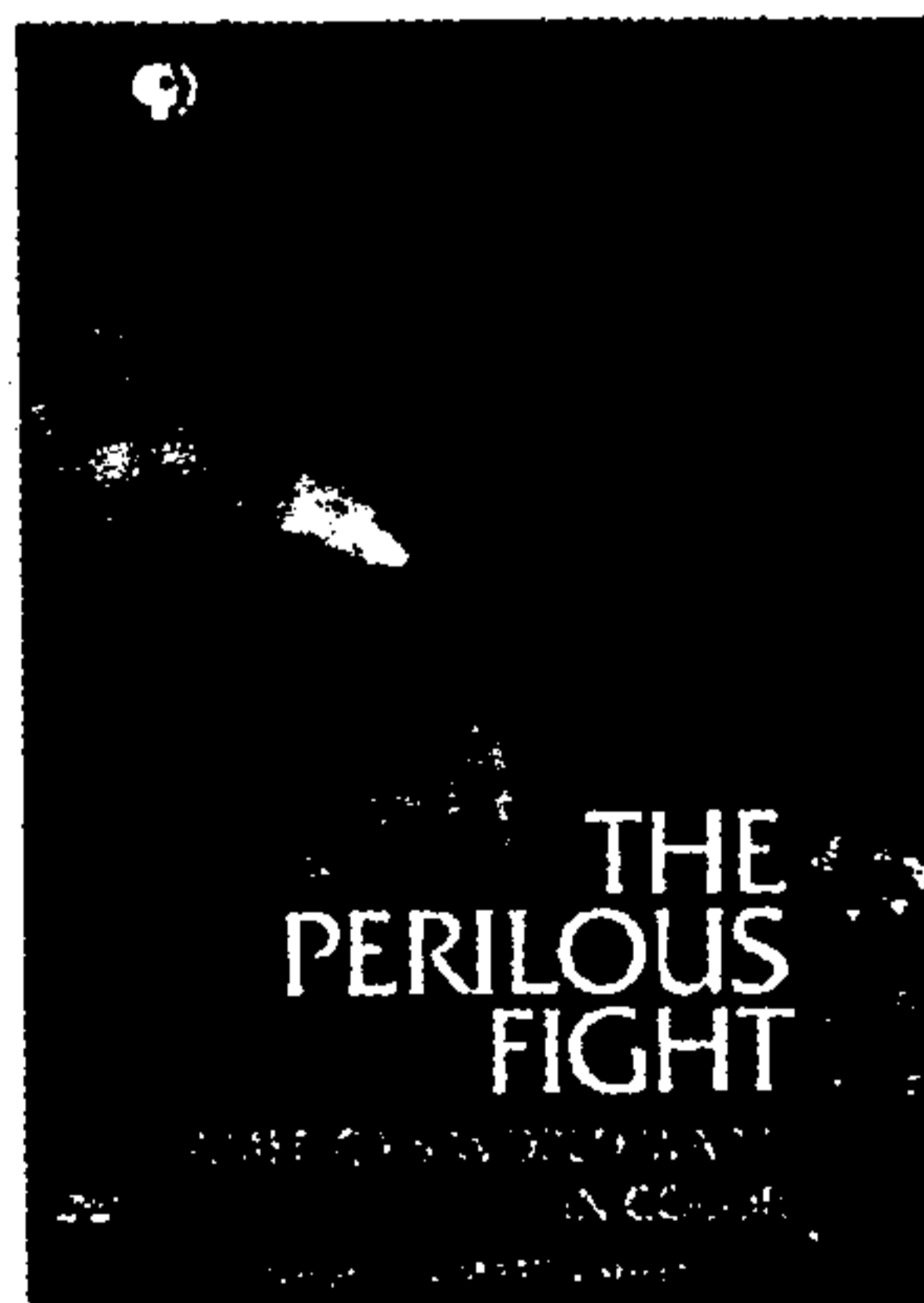
Martin Smith is the executive producer of the series and the man responsible for choosing that tragic image. Smith is a British documentary filmmaker who assembled a team at the offices of KCTS (Seattle's public television station) in the summer of 2001 to complete a four-film series in a little under a year's time. A veteran of historical documentaries, Smith has worked on a few of the most influential of the last thirty years, including *World at War*, *Vietnam: A Television History*, and CNN's *Cold War*. For *The Perilous Fight*, he and his team worked at breakneck speed—consider researching and writing a 300-page book in a single year. Preparation for each episode took eight to twelve weeks, thus while one episode was in the editing stage, another episode was being prepped. In the eighth month, for example, the team had episode two in the latter stages of research, episode one in late post-production, episode three in early post-production, and episode four in the editing room. All this work was done in two fairly small, windowless offices, and two very small editing rooms with a team that numbered at various times between ten and fifteen people.

For those of us who watch history documentaries for sport—condemning the bad, championing the good—footage of war has become something akin to advertisements—we pay attention when our

attention is piqued. Our intelligence is rarely engaged, though, and while we might be slightly moved by certain images, such a response is little different from those television commercials that make us a bit teary. *The Perilous Fight* is not more pap—it is a documentary heavy on authenticity. Many of us have seen color film of the Second World War, but just as many have been frustrated by the inaccurate juxtaposition of footage and dialogue—the narrator discussing the invasion of Iwo Jima while the film we see is of Okinawa. That sort of thing does not happen in *The Perilous Fight*. Smith made a decision to verify film footage and coordinate the narration and voice-overs with the clips. Thus the creation of this film was decidedly unique and something worth investigating because the approach not only broke with much of what is typically done in historical documentaries but it also posed an interesting dilemma: what comes first, the footage or the narrative? For example, no color footage exists of Pearl Harbor, yet no filmmaker would dare produce a documentary about the Second World War without discussing December 7<sup>th</sup> 1941. Smith and his team faced that problem and other situations like it while making *The Perilous Fight*.

I have chosen, therefore, to provide a slightly unorthodox review of this film. What follows is a discussion of how the filmmakers of *The Perilous Fight* and the historians who they used as consultants wrestled with the tension between footage and narrative. I will add now two points for clarification: first, for those wondering whether the film is any good let me assure you that it is first-rate and should impress audiences; second, I had access to part of the production. I spent a week in June 2002 watching Smith and his team assemble parts of the series. What impressed me initially was the high standard of accuracy under which the team worked. Such standards, however, did not ensure smooth-going. Precise verification of film footage proved difficult and, at times, impossible; finding film to cover all the topics Smith and his team identified as important also posed problems. For professional historians, documents drive the narrative. For filmmakers, footage dictates the film.<sup>1</sup> *The Perilous Fight* is an excellent film because of the footage, but is it good history?

For an answer to that question I looked at historians who worked with Smith. Over the course of my stay in Seattle I was able to read emails from the three historians hired as consultants. Unlike most other documentary filmmakers who use historians as onscreen commentators or breathing encyclopedias, Smith commissioned the three historians—Judy Barrett Litoff, Michael Sherry, and Ronald Specter—to criticize and fact-check scripts and cuts during the editing process. Such an assignment gave the historians considerable power to alter almost any aspect of the narrative. Even before production began on the series, Smith, his



team, and these three historians participated in seminars that educated the filmmakers on the history they would be covering and briefed the historians on the production of documentaries. Thus, while footage drove the film, the historians had considerable say in how the selection of that footage would be presented. To this end, each historian provided copious comments concerning tone and argument for each episode's script and film. Thus it was not unusual to read, for example, in Professor Barrett Litoff's email regarding the fine cut of episode one, "you must have incorporated about 80 percent of my first set of suggested revisions into this version."<sup>2</sup> That is no small feat considering that *The Perilous Fight* had access to over 1,000 hours of film, which could have, in the complexity and sheer volume of images, provided enough justification for most documentary teams to brush off the concerns of historians.

But Smith did not. Rather, he enlisted these three historians to contribute throughout the production of the series. Perhaps it is further testament to Smith's respect for historians that he did not relegate each historian to a particular role. All three had access to entire scripts and films and all were encouraged to contribute in any way possible, from line-editing to suggesting documents for the narration. But the expertise of each historian also came through. A prolific writer on the experience of women in the war, Judy Barrett Litoff consistently reminded the filmmakers of the vital roles women played in the military as well as on the homefront. In phone conversations with David Boardman, Ronald Spector suggested changes in emphasis to stress the experiences of soldiers in the field of battle. Michael Sherry assumed that one of the episodes would include a section addressing the gay experience in World War II. But on this issue his concern remained relatively unresolved. What he saw as late as one of the final rough cuts of the last episode in production, was a sequence of little more than a minute in length that would eventually, perhaps inevitably, be cut to a single line. From discussions I had with Smith and his team, they clearly hoped to include material on gays in the war, but could not find much visual or written material from the period. No material, no story, right?

Well, not always. In episode three, for example, viewers will learn about the tragedy at Port Chicago naval station in California. While no color footage exists of this massive armament explosion that took the lives of 320 people, the associate producer of the episode, Blair Foster, pressed for its inclusion because it was the largest home front disaster of the war and was, furthermore, typical of the type of work done by thousands of black American servicemen, of whom 202 were killed in the blast. The film shows black soldiers loading and unloading bombs during the war but not at Port Chicago and not at the time of the blast.

Likewise no footage exists of the moment the United States entered the war. Smith chose to let the screen go black for a moment rather than attempt to pass off clips as if they were footage of the attack. The footage we see is color film of the after-

math of the attack and was photographed by navy film crews working under Hollywood director and Naval officer John Ford. At the recommendation of Professor Barrett Litoff, shots of burned out ships are accompanied by letters from an Army nurse and a Seaman on the USS Virginia that provide eye-witness accounts of the attack and the rescue efforts that followed.<sup>3</sup>

The dilemma that filmmakers such as Martin Smith face is of course familiar to historians who deal with text documents. In the absence of documentation, historians use reasoned assumptions and draw conclusions based on whatever evidence does exist. For filmmakers, the temptation is to use footage that moves the narrative along or is visually arresting without much concern for accuracy. During my week at the office of KCTS, I witnessed the difficulties posed by too much footage, too little footage, and a narrative that strained under the weight of traditional histories about the war. But what I did not see was Smith sacrificing historical accuracy for the sake of dramatic expression. To me, Smith resembled the best kind of historian—the one who is visually sensitive and driven to produce a compelling story but who does not slide into the margins of authenticity with willful disregard for the trust of the audience.

Perhaps better than any other film in the series, episode two, entitled "Battlefronts," illustrated the dynamic Smith created with his particular approach. Scott Pearson, producer of the episode, and Blair Foster, the associate producer, wrestled with the problem of too much footage and too many themes. Pearson, a smart, and fierce investigative journalist and filmmaker, had the opportunity to make this episode the one that would go farthest toward expanding the traditional view of the war. Slated to encompass the period from immediately after the Battle of Midway to the D-Day Invasion, "Battlefronts" focused primarily on two theaters, North Africa and the United States. This meant for the most part discussing Americans going to war rather than actually fighting in the war.<sup>4</sup> It contains some wonderful footage on FDR visiting troops in North Africa and the WASPs (Women Airforce Service Pilots) testing planes. It also discusses the internment of American citizens of Japanese descent who lived on the west coast and migrant workers in the Southwest. I found it endlessly fascinating because it was slightly unorthodox—it is the episode about that theater of war most Americans experienced, the homefront.

Then again, *The Perilous Fight* is not a traditional documentary. Smith and his team had already broken with much of what we see in other documentaries when they decided to make authenticity a central feature of the series. To help the team achieve its noble goal, Professor Barrett Litoff offered detailed and impassioned critiques of the way Pearson had characterized women in military service. Her intervention saved the image of women such as those in the WASP from the rather mistaken view that they were "glamorous," rather than brave and perhaps a little bit crazy for testing planes that often malfunctioned. Over one-third of the WASPs lost their lives flying for the United States mili-

tary.<sup>5</sup> Ronald Spector found the lack of battle footage a bit problematic and wondered if Smith could somehow explain to viewers that in this documentary color footage more than chronological history informed the narrative.<sup>6</sup> Michael Sherry did not, though, receive much satisfaction regarding one of his chief concerns. He advocated for a segment on the experience of gays in the war.<sup>7</sup> While Smith's team tried vigorously to find material from the period, their searches turned up footage and documents of little real use. Because Smith and his team adhered to certain conditions under which to produce the documentary, a part of the larger story of the Second World War simply could not be told through film and first-hand accounts.

If historians are part professional, part advocate, documentary filmmakers are professional advocates who pay attention to historical accuracy with varying degrees of interest. The *Perilous Fight* team distinguished itself by giving credence to professional historians when it counted, during the drafting and cutting of the film. Moreover, the footage we see was verified and coordinated with the text. The team under the direction of Martin Smith had decided before any historian began to consult on the project to produce a film using only color film from the Second World War. That decision did nothing to undermine the ability to tell a story with power and argument, but it determined that it would be a story with limits. Therefore, we do not see any battle footage from Pearl Harbor or the Battle of the Bulge; nothing from Port Chicago or gays in the war. Did the lack of such images undermine the film? No, because historians understand that limits are part of every work of history. No, because *Perilous Fight* is a film that adhered to standards of authenticity in an industry not known for its devotion to historical accuracy. No, once more, because while the arguments advanced by the filmmakers might incite debate, this kind of debate is healthy. It demands engaging ideas and interpretation at a high level, rather than working damage control. *Perilous Fight* delivers its message by thoroughly engaging viewers and at least broadens the popular perception of war to include both the battlefield and the homefront; the women as well as the men; the minority as well as the majority. Even with the best of intensions, making this film remained a perilous fight, but one worth the fight to make.

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## Notes

- 1 According to Mercedes Yeager, the assistant producer who did a great deal of locating and negotiating for film footage, film came from all over the world and at a wide range of prices. Fees ranged from free for film from the National Archives of the United States, to \$100/second from private individuals and archives. The team used clips from the slightly hilarious series "Unusual Occupations" and the private collection of Francis Lyne, an American who took beautiful color film of his travels around the United States and Asia in

the 1930 and 1940s. In all, there were 1207 films used in the *Perilous Fight*.  
2 Email, Judy Barrett Litoff to Martin Smith and David Boardman, 10 December 2001.

3 Email, Litoff to Smith, 23 February 2002.

4 Scott Pearson and Blair Foster relied heavily on David Kennedy's Pulitzer Prize winning book, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

5 Email, Litoff to Scott Pearson and Blair Foster, undated. Litoff also reminded Pearson that the WASP had "the highest death rate of any of the military branches. 38 of the 1074 WASP died in the line of duty."

6 Email of phone conversation, Ronald Spector to David Boardman, 30 April 2002

7 Email, Michael Sherry to Martin Smith, 12 June 2002.

## Benedict Arnold: A Question of Honor

There has been a great deal of interest recently in the first generation of Americans. Books and films concerning John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Ben Franklin, and Hamilton and Burr crowd the book shelves and the air waves. Joseph Ellis turned his attention to the entire generation of *Founding Brothers*. It is not surprising that A&E jumped on the bandwagon with a film about the traitor in their midst. *Benedict Arnold: A Question of Honor* premiered January 13, 2003, and starred Aidan Quinn as Arnold and Kelsey Grammer as George Washington.

To a large extent, this film validated what my seventh grade teacher had taught me: Poor Benedict Arnold, weak man that he was, had been led astray by, who else? A woman, of course. This pervasive account of good patriot gone bad thanks to a conniving, social-climbing siren is the story that, apparently, millions of American school children have heard. Indeed, it is widely believed that Barbara Stanwick based her *Double Indemnity* character solely on Peggy Shippen Arnold. The A&E film does place a great deal of the blame for Arnold's treasonous, treacherous and most un-American-like behavior on his Tory wife. At one point in the film, Peggy (Flora Montgomery) argued that the American cause was lost and convinced her husband that his services to the Crown would secure him the position of Viceroy in America. Although Peggy takes a hit in this scene, the film does make it clear that there were other factors that contributed to the turning of Arnold's blue coat to red.

The film never questions that, early on, Arnold had been devoted to The Revolution. It is true that he was an early member of The

