

Armor Movie Classics:

Your Nominations Please....

by Jon Clemens, Managing Editor

It's probably foolish to try to explain one's compulsions, like the irrational desire to stay up late and watch tank movies, but there you have it. It's midnight, Orville Redenbacher has done his thing in the microwave...it's time for field duty! Up tonight on the ol' Cable Classic Movie Network is Humphrey Bogart in "**Sahara**," not a great movie, actually a lousy movie by Bogart standards. The movie really stars an M3 Medium named "Lulabelle," its crew thirsty and lost, as they struggle across the North African desert.

The M3 was a stopgap tank built early in WWII, tall and ungainly, seeming to bristle with turrets. The tapered barrel of a 75mm cannon stuck out the right side like an afterthought — not a great weapon for hull-down fighting positions. But in the movie, it's a thrill to see this confused-looking moving van of a tank pitching and rumbling across the sands. Actually, these are the sands of California's San Felipe Hills, west of the Salton Sea, near the Desert Training Center where Patton had honed his new sword. The movie was made in 1943, and the tank was certainly borrowed by the filmmakers from the Army, who probably needed it back soonest if they were to Save the World for Democracy.

As the story unreels, Sergeant Bogart's crew keep encountering people as they travel through the desert — a lost German, a lost Italian, there's a Brit — a remarkable mix of ethnic backgrounds considering the situation. And each one

seems to have a political speech to make. After all, this is a 1943 war movie, and seen from our perspective, it is pure propaganda. But pay no attention. Just enjoy "Lulabelle" and her crew as they hold an oasis against a unit of thirsty Nazis who are ultimately forced to surrender. (Incredibly, this story was re-made for cable in 1995. James Belushi is no Bogart.)

With the approach of Memorial Day or the Fourth of July, the networks usually do their patriotic duty by showing war movies, including a few tank movie classics. For example, there's "**Kelly's Heroes**," an almost surrealistically confused film about misfits with automatic weapons who also Save the World for Democracy while, oh yes, robbing a German gold hoard. This film reflects its time: It was a "war movie" made in 1970, at a time when war and the military were not well regarded, but its subject was World War II, when they were. So we have jive-talking, pacifist soldiers giving "V" signs as they road march toward Berlin. Loony? Yes! But it was filmed in Yugoslavia — back when there was a Yugoslavia — and all the military equipment in the film was dead-on genuine.

The filmmakers appear to have rented the entire Yugoslavian Army, and the vehicles are genuine because we gave all this stuff to the Yugos after Saving the World for Democracy in — yes — World War II. (A lot of this same equipment still makes an occasional showing on the evening news, driven by Serbs.)

One of the Shermans in "**Kelly's Heroes**" is TC'd by Donald Sutherland, wearing what appears to be a Korean War-era winter "Ridgway" cap. Go figure. But it's fun to watch those Shermans, halftracks, and Hellcats running around.

A gnawing problem for tank movie addicts is the category of tank movies made without the proper tanks. Maybe it's a case of too much knowledge being a dangerous thing, but there's something totally unsatisfying about watching M48 "Tigers," painted gray with German crosses, attacking our troopers in the Bulge. Yes, you have to sympathize with the filmmakers — there weren't a whole lot of real Tigers left in one piece by the mid-'60s — perhaps a few in museums, but most, by that time, had been melted down by the French to make Renaults and fine gourmet cookware.

Both "**Tobruk**" (1967) and "**Raid on Rommel**" (1971) are sort of tank movies about the North African campaign. Again, lots of phony equipment, but enough stuff blows up to keep you awake. These two films have an eerie similarity, which is no mystery when you learn that "Raid" was mainly made because the film company had miles of action-scene out-takes from "**Tobruk**." Filming for the second movie took about a week. This shows.

Occasionally, a sleeper turns up that is such a good tank movie that it doesn't appeal to anyone but tank movie fans. In this category, I'd nominate "**The Beast**,"



Computer Montage by Jody Harmon



Allied soldiers and their prisoners struggle through a desert sandstorm to reach the shelter of an ancient desert fortress in "Sahara," which starred "Lulabelle," an M3 Medium Tank...and Humphrey Bogart.

PHOTO: SONY Pictures. Used with permission.

a most unusual film made in Israel in 1988 about the Russians in Afghanistan. Like "Sahara," the dynamic pivots on the relationship between a tank, in this case a real Russian T-62, and its crewmen, like Sergeant Bogart's men, who are lost in hostile, desert territory...some questioning why they're there at all. True tank movie fans know enough to take mere technicalities like plot and characterization with a grain of salt, but this one has a mood of despair about it that is really effective. You end up sympathizing with these Russians, lost and trapped and waiting to get picked off. The downbeat mood of this film makes you wonder if it might have reflected Israeli disillusionment with their invasion of Lebanon, but maybe that's making too much of a mediocre movie.

In a setting closer to home is the preposterously plotted "Tank," a 1984 James Garner fantasy co-starring a Sherman. Not a war movie, but a morality tale about a Dad who comes to the rescue of his son, jailed by a scoundrel of a county sheriff. How does he do this? Easy...he just happens to own his own Sherman tank! As he smashes everything in his way trying to save his boy, you can't help but identify. Who hasn't wanted to do this once or twice in their lives, faced with stubborn left-lane hogs out on the bypass?

Seldom seen anymore on TV is a 1951 film called

"Here Come the Tanks," which was partially filmed at Fort Knox's Otter Creek. That's what I'm told by LTC (Ret.) Burt Boudinot, who grew up on Fort Knox prior to WWII. He says that an earlier film with the same name was also made at Knox in 1939.

Now, let's get to the mission: If this article stirs any memories, why not share your favorites with fellow tank movie

nuts? If we get enough response, we'll publish your nominations to the Tank Movie Hall of Fame in a future issue. Frivolous, no! Good professional development? Of course!

Editor's Note: In another world, long ago and far away, ARMOR's managing editor — now in his second career — used to occasionally review movies for two daily newspapers.



Bogart, at right, discusses his next scene with Zoltan Korda, director of "Sahara," while on location in the California desert.

PHOTO: SONY Pictures. Used with permission.