



# Call Of Duty

By Richard Miller

# THE END

And then the credits begin to roll across the screen.

"That was great, pop!"

"Yep, it was. And realistic, too. Vvveeeerrryyy accurate."

And he would know.

This is what we do, Pop and I, every Saturday night from eight to ten. The 'Heroes Theater' on channel twenty-six. It's a weekly program that features only WWII movies, and only those filmed in black and white. Never color.

And that's fine with Pop and me. We both love the old black and whites. Both of us feel the same way: that color seems to take something away from movies. Exactly what, though, neither of us can say.

Or, I dunno. Maybe it's something else. Maybe it's not so much that color takes something away from a movie; it's that black and white gives it something color can't or doesn't. And what black and white gives a movie is, among other things, a greater sense of drama. To me, black and white makes drama more dramatic. It makes violence more violent and horror, well, more horrific. It's what puts the thrill in thrillers.

Color, on the other hand, tends to soften things. It makes a movie more...more... *viewer-friendly*, I guess you could say. By that, I mean that color tends to take the edge off. It makes a movie more lighthearted and livelier, more animated. Which is why it's a better choice for things like musicals and what have you. You know, comedies, romances - that kind of stuff.

Anyway, that's mine and pop's take on it, and we're not alone. I think a lot of people feel that way. In fact, it may be the reason Ted Turner refuses to 'colorize' the old classics, like the old Perry Mason reruns, for example. He may feel that converting them to color would upset too many viewers. Viewers who like their classics just the way they are, in good ole black and white. And I would be one of them. In my mind, there's just something inherently wrong with seeing Paul Drake tool around in a mint green Studebaker, or Perry wearing a suit that's anything other than black or different shades of grey. It just doesn't work.

For me and Pop, anyway.

I can't even imagine it, really, watching the old classics I love so much in color. I'm talking Hollywood legends here. Movies like:

*To Kill a Mockingbird*

*Lilies Of the Field*

*Psycho*

*It's a Wonderful Life*

*Casablanca*

## Madame X

...to name a few.

I'm talking about movies that are good, to begin with, but are made so much better by being in black and white. It's something that causes me to stop and wonder about some of today's movies. About how much better they might have been in black and white. Movies like *The Machinist* and *Chinatown*, for example.

And then I think about the modern movies that *were* filmed in black and white, and what a crime it would have been to have made them in color. Movies, for example, like Spielberg's '*Schindler's List*', Scorsese's '*Raging Bull*', Kevin Smith's '*Clerks*', and, of course, my personal favorite, Frank Miller's '*Sin City*'. All excellent examples of what black and white can do for a movie.

But it's not just movies. How many TV series would have been better without color? Like *Magnum PI*, for example. Filmed in black and white just so I wouldn't have to look at Tom Selleck in those cheesy Hawaiian tourist shirts. Shirts so loud they almost glow from having too much color. I'm talking about shirts you could probably see from space, even.

Which, by the way, proves another point – that the man has *no* sense of fashion. None. But then, I suppose if you look like Tom Selleck, being a fashion retard isn't high on your list of things to worry about.

I wouldn't know.

But anyway, enough of the dribble. It's late, and I need to be getting home soon. But what an evening it's been. I dearly love watching these old war movies with my pop. Not only is it nice to spend that time with him, but the movies are always so good. I enjoy every one of them, and tonight's feature was no exception. As always, it was the best. I tell Pop...

"Great movie, and the action scenes were fantastic! We've been watching these things for years now, and the battle scenes still manage to keep me on the edge of my seat. It just never seems to get old."

"Hhhmmm. That's because battles never get old. It's something you never really get used to. Doesn't matter how many of them you've been in, or, in your case, how many you've watched. They're always exciting."

He thinks about it for a moment and then adds...

"I guess what it is, is that you never feel more alive than when you're staring death in the face. That, and the fact that no two battles are ever the same. Always different. So no, it never gets old."

Again, he would know. He was there, a decorated WWII vet. A sergeant in the Marines, no less, under MacArthur's command, and the action he saw in the Philippines was amongst the most brutal, bloody, and intense the war had to offer. Fighting the Japs. And in my book, that's as tough as tough gets. A true war hero, my pop.

I think about the movie we just watched, and something suddenly occurred to me. Why I'm just now realizing this after having watched so many of these things, I don't know. But it's something I find odd, so I mention it to the old man...

"Here's what I don't get, pop."

"And what's that?"

"Well, the flamethrower guys."

"What about 'em?"

"Have we ever once watched a movie where the poor bastards didn't end up as fireballs?"

He chuckles...

"No, you're right. But that's the way it was. Flamethrower duty was a guaranteed death sentence, for sure, but I always saw it as simply the cost of doing business. Men die in war. They die from bullets, from bombs, grenades, bayonets, and yeah, they die from flamethrowers. But the flamethrowers were the worst because you'd end up dead no matter what end of them you were on, the receiving *or* the giving."

"The giving? I don't follow."

"Well, the flamethrower boys were always a favorite target for the enemy. The fuel tanks these guys wore on their backs were big and easy to hit. What's more is, when you shot one, not only did the explosion take the flamethrower guy out, but it pretty much cooked everyone around him as well. That's why these guys were loners on the battlefield. Nobody wanted to get near them. Which was sad because it meant that during the heat of battle, these poor sons-of-mothers were on their own."

"I guess, but who was the idiot stupid enough to strap one on? I mean, didn't he ever watch war movies? Jeez!"

Pop massages his chin with a thumb and forefinger as he considers my confusion. He thinks about it for a moment and then does his best to explain that part of war to me...

"Yeah, well, it was a problem. These guys weren't stupid - for the most part, anyway. And sure, they had seen all the movies, which made my job that much harder. You see, being a sergeant means that you're the guy that decides who gets stuck with the flamethrower. Fireball duty. That's what we used to call it."

"Sheez, pop. Must have been a grim task. You know, deciding who gets cooked and all."

"No, not really. Deciding 'who' was the easy part. You have to understand that there's always an idiot or two in the ranks, and these guys, the morons, are dead meat anyway. Their life isn't worth a plug nickel once the bullets start to fly. Because frankly, stupid doesn't last long in battle. So, like I said, the 'who' part was simple. A 'no-brainer,' you might say. Pun intended."

"So what was the problem, then?"

He lets out an exasperated sigh and then goes on to answer the question...

"The problem, you see, was getting one of these fucktards to actually strap the tanks on. No easy task, I assure you. Like you said, they'd seen all the movies, and that made Fireball Duty a tough sell."

"Fucktard? Wait, what's a fucktard?"

"Marine speak. Short for 'fucking retard'."

"I get it. So anyway, how'd ya do it?"

"Do what?"

"You know, convince some fucktard to strap fat tanks of gasoline on their back?"

He laughs...

"Wasn't easy, that's for sure. Well, not at first, anyway. But it's like anything else in life. You do something enough times, and eventually, you get good at it. That practice makes perfect thing. Sooner or later, you figure it all out, and before you know it (snaps fingers), it's second nature. Like you've done it your whole life."

"In my case, what I found worked best is you find a way to overcome a person's natural instinct to survive. In other words, his will to live. Take that away, and the rest is easy. The dominoes start falling all by themselves."

He pauses for a moment, I guess to let it all sink in, and then finishes up with a summary...

"What it comes down to is this: you gotta make the poor sap *want* the job."

I think about that for a moment, but the dots just aren't connecting. I'm missing something here, so I ask...

"How? How do you do that? I mean, make someone not want to live anymore?"

"Well, a couple of different ways, actually. It depended on who I had in mind. You see, you had to know the guy. Know what would get to him. That was the key to it all, knowing what made the person tick. Once you had that figured out, it was just a matter of deciding what approach to take, and there were several."

"I don't understand."

"OK, for example. Some guy has a sweetie back home, right? The girl he plans on marrying? Maybe a high school sweetheart or something? Spends hours every day just staring at her photo. What I would do, in that case, is I'd have one of the nurses write him a 'Dear John' letter. Dottie, our head nurse, was a real pro at it. Could copy *any* girl's handwriting perfectly. She'd write the guy a letter, saying something like she's pregnant by his best friend and plans on marrying him next week, so don't bother writing her anymore because she's in love. And by the way, could you return my photo when you get a chance? Something like that. Works every time. Stupid fucker practically begs me for the duty."

"OK, I can see how that'd work. But what if the guy didn't have a girl? What then?"

He drains the last few gulps of beer from the can and then crushes it...

"In that case, you gotta do the hard sell on 'em. You gotta really work the fucker. And I gotta tell ya, it wasn't easy. Like this one guy, McMillan. Midwest farm boy. Good kid and all, but dumb as dirt, and this is the type you look for."

He pops the top of his next beer, takes a healthy gulp, and ponders the memory...

"Yeah, McMillan. That's one I'll never forget..."

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"But Sarge, I've seen the movies. The flamethrower guy always ends up BBQ."

"Look, McMillan, that's Hollywood, and those guys *a/ways* exaggerate. Got to. Makes the movie more exciting. You know, sells more tickets. Besides, that might have been true in the early days of the war, but like everything else, the military learns from its mistakes. These babies (pats the flamethrower tanks like a proud father would his son's back) are new and improved, my boy. Today, these mothers represent the safest, most effective method on the planet for setting people on fire. Cutting edge technology, they are."

The sarge raps his knuckles on a tank as if knocking on wood...

"Ya hear that? Solid as a rock! These honchos are made of the highest quality armor known to man. Completely bulletproof. AND, they're HHHUUUGGEEEE (meaning they're easier targets for the enemy, but he doesn't tell McMillan this). It'll be like wearing your own personal armor plating. You'll be a human tank, for God's sake!"

The sergeant pauses for a moment to check his progress. He steals a look at the private's face and sees that his resistance is fading, so he moves in for the kill...

"Look, with Hell's flames belching out your front, and Thor's shield protecting your backside, you're gonna be the single most protected soldier on the battlefield tomorrow. And not only that, think about how much kick-ass fun it's gonna be lighting up a buncha slope heads like firewood!"

The sarge starts to light his cigar but throws a sideways glance at the highly volatile tanks and returns it to his top pocket. He puts his arm around the future dead man's shoulder instead...

"Look, kid... Frank. Your name's Frank, right?"

"Uh, huh?"

"Mind if I call you by your first name? We're all friends here, right?"

"Sure, Sarge."

"Look, Frank, I'll give it to you straight. You're gonna be the envy of every guy in the platoon tomorrow going into battle."

"No kidding?"

"I kid you not, my boy. Hell, I got every grunt in camp pestering me for fireba...er, flamethrower duty. Only reason you're getting it is because your name was next on the list."

"No shit!"

"I shit you not, son."

"Jeez, Sarge. You're the best! Thanks! I mean that!"

"Don't mention it, soldier. Just doing what's fair is all. You just be sure to make me proud tomorrow."

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Later, back at the camp...

The company of Marines, with the exception of McMillan, filed into the mess tent that evening for a briefing on the next day's battle plan. Everyone gathers around the sarge, who's standing on a chair in the center of the tent...

"OK, knuckleheads, listen up. This is how it's going down, so pay attention. At precisely zero eight hundred hours, McMillan's gonna take point and lead the charge up the hill and..."

But he's interrupted...

"Wait, Sarge! McMillan? That fucktard! Are you serious?"

The interrupting private's concern here is not without merit. McMillan is a moron of the first order and is something that, by this time, everyone in the company has come to know for themselves. Meaning the private is not alone in his misgivings. Everyone present shares his concern, and is a fact made only too apparent by the look on each man's face.

The sarge parks his fists on his hips and scrunches his face into that famous 'why, you insolent maggot' look of his...

"If you had let me finish, you'd know that the reason McMillan is front man on the assault is because *he* was the only guy in camp with coconuts big enough to volunteer for flamethrower duty!"

A collective gasp shudders through the tent. The men begin murmuring to each other, hands cupping their mouths, but fall silent when the sarge continues...

"...unlike the rest of you pussies", he snarls, using his unlit cigar as a pointer and sweeping it across the now embarrassed crowd of Marines.

He continues...

"But getting back to what I was saying before I was so *rudely* interrupted..."

He snaps his head to the left, taking a moment to stare holes in the insolent maggot that interrupted his briefing, and then continues...

"So, the way I figure it is like this - McMillan will make it halfway up the hill, at least, before the gooks light him up. By that time, he will have already taken a bunch of 'em out. But when he goes fireball, he'll pretty much toast the rest of 'em. Then, all's we gotsta do is move in and mop up the leftovers. Easy peasy. Makes our job a regular cake-walk. Capeesh? McMillan does all the heavy lifting here; we just do the clean up."

He looks around the room...

"You blockheads getting any of this, or am I up here yapping just to hear myself talk?"

They all answer him at the same time, whistling and cheering as they do. The Sarge, in turn, nods his approval. He cracks a satisfied, confident smile and concludes the briefing. But before he can dismiss the troops, he has to ask...

"Before I adjourn this cozy little get-together of ours, are there any questions?"

A single hand goes up near the back...

"Yes, you in the corner there."

"Sarge, those tanks really *that* explosive? I mean, that's a lotta Japs up there waiting for us."

"What? You kidding me? Are you the only numbnut in here that don't watch war movies? Why do you think we put McMillan's tent down in the ravine a half mile away? And even that's a little too close for comfort if you ask me.

Look, not only are these bastards that explosive, but the fucking things are known to go off for no reason. No reason at all. You look at 'em wrong and WWWOOOOSSSSHHHHH (waves his hands upward to illustrate)."

Another hand goes up...

"Yeah, you there (points to the soldier waving his hand)."

"Sarge, how will we know when McMillan explodes?"

"Easy. Your eyebrows will disappear, and you will be blinded for five minutes.

Yes, you there in the back (pointing to the next raised hand)."

"Sarge, McMillan owes me money."

The sergeant lights his cigar. He blows a thick cloud of gray smoke and then addresses the soldier's concern...

"Well then, I strongly suggest you collect it, and fast."

But then, rethinking the matter, he back peddles...

"You know, on second thought, seeing how volatile those tanks are, best you just write this one off, son."

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The next morning...

The battle is over. As expected, the fighting was intense, violent, bloody, and outright brutal. But in the end, the enemy was soundly defeated - one hundred percent casualties on their side with but a single loss for the Marines. The campaign was a complete success. More than a success. It was a humiliation for the enemy.

The platoon walks the battlefield, killing any wounded and putting a bullet through the head of the dead just for good measure. Afterward, they all gather at the base of the hill and circle around their triumphant commanding officer, the sergeant, who's waiting for them on one knee and puffing on a victory cigar he'd saved for the occasion.

He congratulates the valiant victors...

"You guys were great today. Outstanding. You have proven yourselves true marines of the highest caliber, and I'm proud of each and every one of you. Not only was our mission to take the hill a complete success, but we did it with only one casualty."

One of the soldiers asks...

"Who was that, Sarge? Who'd we lose?"

The sarge removes the cigar from his mouth and lets out a somewhat dispirited sigh...

"Yeah, the causality. Well, it was McMillan. Probably the bravest soldier I've ever seen, that man. A regular killing machine, if ever I did see. Charged right up the hill like he was friggin' invincible or something. Never seen anything like it."

The corporal chimes in...

"Yeah, I saw him, Sarge! Fucking guy acted like he was bulletproof or something. Too weird, man! I think he cracked under fire and went all nutso or something!"

"Well, whatever. All I know is that without him, I don't think we coulda pulled it off. Or even if we did, it would have cost me a lot of good men; men, I would have hated to lose. There'd be a lot of you zippered up in bags right now if it weren't for McMillian. Remember that."

Everyone falls silent as they consider the sergeant's words, each of them suddenly feeling a debt of gratitude to the one marine that didn't make it back.

The sergeant takes in another deep breath and surveys the somber faces surrounding him. Many of which would not be there now if not for McMillian's heroic effort. He continues where he left off...

"In fact, let's all take a knee and dedicate a moment of silence to him, to McMillan, our fallen brother-in-arms. The bravest Marine I've ever known."

And they all do just that. They remove their helmets, take a knee, and with rifles in one hand, standing upright, bow their heads and pay homage to the man known as McMillan. A soldier who willingly gave his life for the bigger good, for the cause.

Then, after a while, in unison, almost as if on cue...

"BBBBBWWWWAAAAHHHHAAAAA. WHAT A FUCKTARD! HHHHAAAA HHHAAAA BHHHAAAA HHHAAH-HHAAAA. BBBWWWWAAAAHHHHAAAHHAA."

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Indeed, the flamethrower is an interesting weapon. It stands as undeniable proof that at some point in history, someone said...

"See that guy over there? I want to set him on fire."

*THE END*