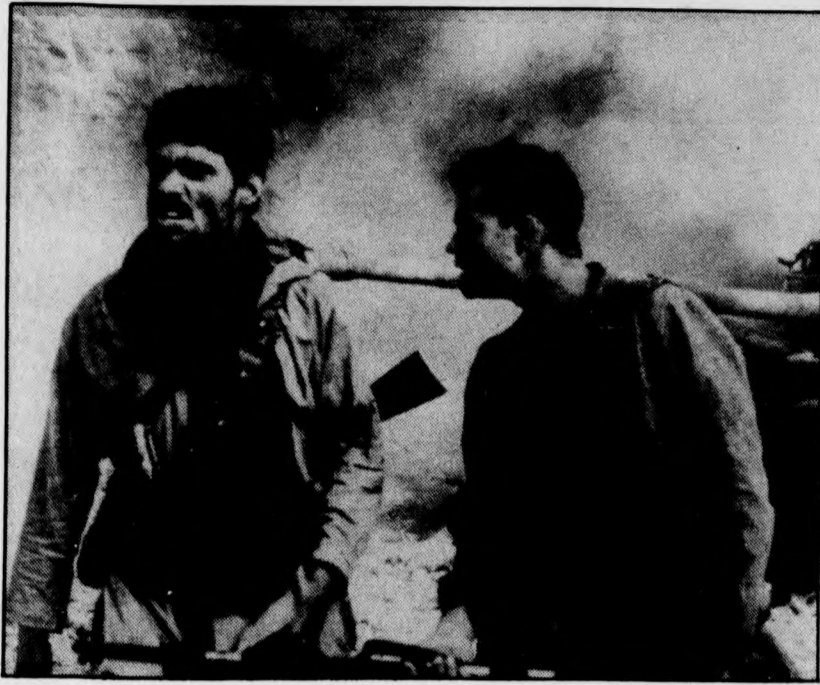


Reynolds' *The Beast*: Chuck Norris would have loved it!



"You said there'd be sun, sand, women . . . where's the babes?"

By MARK DILLON

Columbia Pictures is touting its new film as the first American movie to look at the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Sound like a rare, serious movie after a summer of fluff? Don't be fooled. *The Beast*, directed by Kevin Reynolds, is as fluffy as they get.

From the opening scene, a rip-off of *Apocalypse Now* in which a peaceful, peasant village is suddenly destroyed by a high-tech enemy (by tank here, by helicopter in Coppola's film), we see that writer-director Kevin Reynolds will offer us nothing new. In fact, one could point out several scenes lifted from other movies.

What *Platoon* was to Viet Nam, this film is to Afghanistan — little more than a setting in which a character study unfolds. While *Platoon* suffered from an uneven script (the one here is far worse), it was kept

a float by Oliver Stone's direction. Reynolds strikes out on both counts.

After razing the Afghan village, an unnecessarily violent scene, one Russian tank is separated from the others and becomes lost in the desert, amid vengeful Afghan rebels. Okay, cinema buffs: where have we heard this plot before? That's right — in the 1943 WWII Humphrey Bogart flick, *Sahara*, which on video would cost you half of what it would to see *The Beast* — and would be twice as rewarding.

The characters on board this tank, "the beast," are stereotypical: we have the insane, feverishly patriotic commander who's starting to lose his grip; our protagonist, an ace soldier who begins to question his commander's orders; and an Afghan who is a member of the Soviet army. All but the Afghan are portrayed by American actors.

The results are absurd and uncon-

vincing. A Soviet officer spouts such lines as "Nobody wastes my tank!" Perhaps by "Americanizing" the Soviet soldiers, Reynolds means to draw parallels between the military interference of the Superpowers. The point is hardly worth examining here.

Along with inept dialogue, Reynolds gets poor performances all around from a cast of newcomers and unknowns. The three young American actors do not come across as young Russians coming to grips with what their country means to them in a time of great change. They would probably do better in a John Hughes teen comedy.

Our protagonist eventually comes to blows with his commander in a

development reminiscent of the Tom Berenger-Willem Dafoe conflict in *Platoon*. The young Russian soldier is left for dead but is first met by Afghan rebels. The inevitable happens when he comes to respect these Afghans for their simple nobility; he joins these "Davids" in their attempt to fall the mighty Goliath, "the beast"; and of course, they do. In the end, the Russian soldiers stumble feebly out of Afghanistan.

And what is the audience supposed to do — stand up and cheer? Not for this turkey. Reynolds has reduced a critical world situation — for which there is much cinematic potential — into a would-be audience-ouster; he has made a political film for the Chuck Norris crowd. Rey-

nolds thinks that by including peasant heroes and Russian baddies he has made a relevant film. *The Beast* does nothing more than wallow in clichés and sensationalism. For its utter lack of pretense, I'd rather see *Die Hard*.

I will pay the film one compliment: it is done in great cinematic style. Reynolds and his cinematographer really take advantage of their location filming in Israel. And Mark Isham's soundtrack is also excellent. Too bad they had such pedestrian material to work with.

The Beast, a Festival of Festivals Special Presentation, will be shown Sept. 14 at 7 p.m. at the Uptown One Cinema.

Toeing *The Thin Blue Line*

By MICHAEL REDHILL

The Thin Blue Line
Errol Morris

Real life has supplied Errol Morris with a plot better than fiction. His documentary, *The Thin Blue Line*, unravels the truth and the lies behind the conviction of Randall Adams for the murder of a police officer.

Morris weaves interviews from several sources to create a picture that proves, in the words of one lawyer, "that someone set the wheels of justice rolling in the wrong direction." In their zeal to send the guilty to the chair, Dallas lawmen went out of their way to fashion testimony to suit their version of what happened the night the officer was killed. The fly in the ointment is David Harris, the only other man who could have committed the crime. But Harris was only 16 and would not have been sent to the chair.

The extent of their blindness is the factor which informs the dark flavour of Morris's film. While contin-

ually weakened by recreations of the crime (at least a dozen versions of it) it is still a scathing review of justice. From Morris's representations of the Dallas police (who are interviewed in front of a map of the city) to his interviews with bogus witnesses (described as "scum" who would do anything for money) to his claustrophobic interviews with Harris and Adams, one is left with the distinct impression that the jury had to employ an industrial load of ignorance to have convicted Adams.

It is the classic paranoid fantasy: you are walking in front of a bank when the robbery takes place and you are arrested and eventually convicted for the crime — your plea of innocence goes unheeded. In Adams' case, a request for an appeal was turned down. A psychiatrist described him in court as a "cross between Manson and Hitler," and "the type who could work hard all day and creep all night."

Even in the face of evidence sug-

gesting Adams had not committed the crime, the Supreme Court would only commute his sentence to life. By the end of the film, one's faith in the justice system is shot, but Morris saves the hardest pill to swallow for last: recorded testimony that changes everything. One wonders, when leaving this film, if it would be admissible as evidence.

The Thin Blue Line is not a well-made film. Morris has an annoying habit of emphasizing nonsensical particulars as an alternative to the only real visual cues he has: interviews and old newspaper headlines. More than once he allows us to meditate on the relevance of a clock in a shake-down room, or corn popping, in the dramatization of a crime.

But *The Thin Blue Line* is an important film, as real as *Scared Straight*, and as indicting. Even if Morris tends to load the imagery in this work, one's response is fired most by the blatant miscarriage of justice the film investigates.



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