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HISTORY

VETERANS DAY

A Time for Remembrance and Gratitude

JEFF MINICK

On the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918, the Great War came to an end. Though historians are still quarreling over the figures, the “war to end all wars” had killed at least 8 million military personnel and 6.6 million civilians. Less than 30 years later, another and far deadlier war would change the name of the Great War to World War I.

From that November date evolved what we now call Veterans Day. In 1919, President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed November 11 “Armistice Day,” a time to commemorate

those who had died in the war and to feel grateful for their victory.

In 1926, Congress passed a resolution making Armistice Day an annual observance, and in 1938 declared it a national holiday in honor of the veterans of the Great War. In one of those ironies of history, the Congress also dedicated Armistice Day to the cause of world peace. A year later, World War II erupted in Europe.

During the administration of President Dwight Eisenhower, the word “Armistice” was changed to “Veterans” to honor all veterans, living and dead. When the Holiday Bill of 1968 moved federal holidays to Mondays to extend

In 1919, President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed November 11 ‘Armistice Day.’

a weekend, veterans and others protested this change in regard to Veterans Day, and in 1975 President Gerald Ford restored the day to November 11.

This barebones history describes how Veterans Day was created.

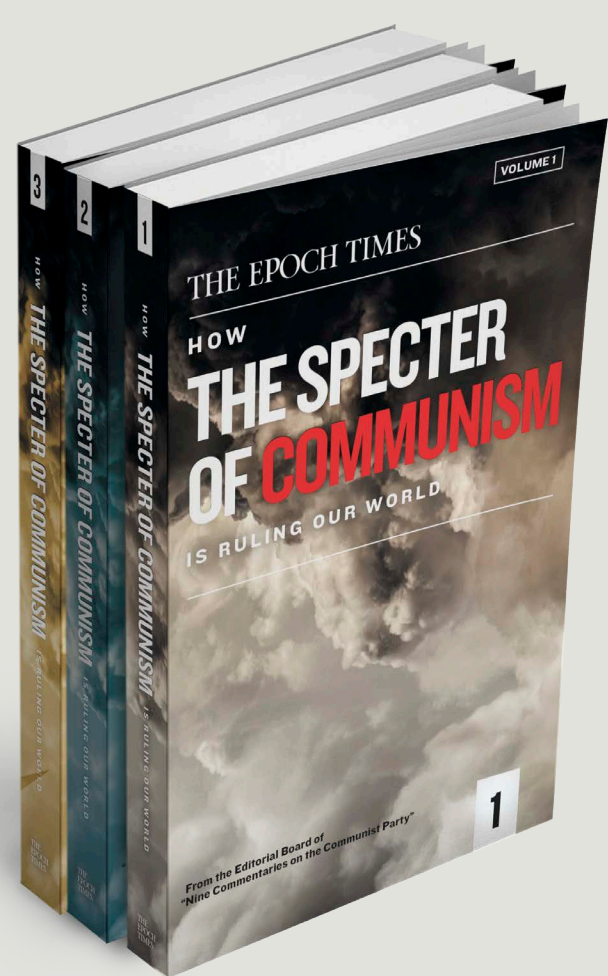
But what does this special day really mean to us?

The Horror

After a century of murder and violence—the Russian Revolution, the Nazis, the death camps, the seemingly endless wars around the world, the millions murdered during the Chinese Cultural Revolution,

A military parade with crowds of excited spectators along New York’s Fifth Avenue, in celebration of Armistice Day following World War I, in November 1918.

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HISTORY

A POIGNANT REMINDER FOR A GRIEVING NATION

The Unknown Warrior

LORRAINE FERRIER

Nov. 11, 2020, marks 100 years since Britain's Unknown Warrior was buried at Westminster Abbey in London, to honor all those who lost their lives in World War I.

Britain had suffered mass bereavement, with over 700,000 men being killed in the war and hundreds of thousands of those men recorded as missing in action, explained National Army Museum curator Justin Saddington in an email.

Those warriors gave the most precious things they could for their nation—their lives. Ultimately, their sacrifice ensured freedom for generations to come.

"Nearly every family had been denied a funeral for their lost loved one," Saddington said.

Saddington explained that grieving families had nowhere to mourn. The graves that did exist were overseas near the battlefields where the men lost their lives, so they were hard to access. The Unknown Warrior commemoration provided "a symbolic funeral for all the nation's dead and a surrogate grave for all those that had none," he said.

Saddington curated the National Army Museum's exhibition "Buried Among Kings: The Story of the Unknown Warrior." He's collated paintings, photography, and personal testimony from the period.

Two notable objects on display are a fragment of the original 1919–1920 wood and plaster cenotaph (an empty tomb), erected as a temporary memorial in London for Britain's war dead, and a painting depicting the Unknown Warrior's burial procession, titled "The Passing of the Unknown Warrior, King George V as Chief Mourner, Whitehall, 11 November 1920," by Frank O. Salisbury.

First, a Padre's Epiphany

In 1916, Rev. David Railton M.C. came up with the idea of an Unknown Warrior memorial while stationed on the Western Front. Despite Railton's having seen many war casualties and deaths, it was during the stillness of one particular day's dusk that an anonymous soldier deeply moved him, at Erkingham near Armentières in France.

Nearly every family had been denied a funeral for their lost loved one.

Justin Saddington, curator, National Army Museum

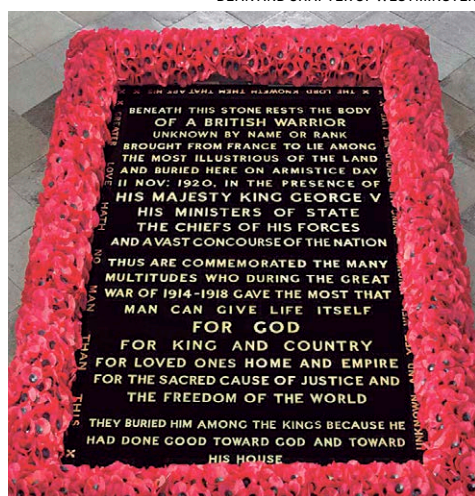
With the daylight fading fast, except for some officers playing cards in the billet behind him, Railton was all alone in the billet garden. "I remember how still it was. Even the guns seemed to be resting, as if to give the gunners a chance to have their tea," he wrote in "Our Empire" in 1931. Standing in that silence, he spotted a wooden cross inscribed with the haunting words "Unknown British Soldier" and underneath in brackets "of the Black Watch."

At that moment, the distraught voice of a soldier's mother may have entered his mind: "Where—exactly where—did you lay to rest the body of my son? ... I have been officially notified that he is 'missing, believed killed.'" Railton had written about how padres (chaplains in military service) stationed with infantry would often be asked such questions by the loved ones of soldiers missing in action.

He was certainly tormented. "So I thought and thought and wrestled in thought. What can I do to ease the



The grave of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey, London.



The dedication on the Unknown Warrior's grave at Westminster Abbey, London.

pain of father, mother, brother, sister, sweetheart, wife and friend? Quietly and gradually there came out of the mist of thought this answer clear and strong, 'Let this body—this symbol of him—be carried reverently over the sea to his native land.'

A Nation Mourns

Britain's post-war busyness prevented Railton from sharing his idea. Although Nov. 11, 1918, marked the Armistice, it wasn't until June 1919 that peacetime could be truly embraced after the Treaty of Versailles was signed. And it took time to dismantle the machinery of war and demobilize troops.

It was a tumultuous time. The turmoil of warfare had finished, but an inner turmoil continued.

"Men and nations stumbled back like badly wounded and 'gassed' warriors to their homes. The endless shedding of blood ceased but there was no real peace in the souls of men or nations," Railton wrote.

In 1919, architect Sir Edwin Lutyens erected a wood and plaster cenotaph by the government buildings of Whitehall to commemorate the nation's war dead. On Victory Day, July 19, 1919, thousands of military personnel paraded passed the cenotaph and, along with the public, paid tribute to a hard-won war with many sacrifices.

"Near the memorial there were moments of silence when the dead seemed very near, when one almost heard the passage of countless wings," The Morning Post wrote on July 20, 1919.

Selecting the Unknown Warrior

But it wasn't until August 1920 that Railton shared his idea, outside of his family, for an Unknown Warrior memorial. He wrote to Herbert Ryle, the Dean of Westminster, with little more than a humble hope to make the national commemoration happen.

Ryle petitioned King George V and Prime Minister David Lloyd George, and others in authority. A committee was formed in mid-October that year to bring Railton's idea to fruition.

With no official record of the Unknown Warrior selection process, Saddington explained, "historians have had to rely on divergent and less reliable accounts of the men who were involved."



"The Passing of the Unknown Warrior, King George V as Chief Mourner, Whitehall, 11 November 1920," 1920, by Frank O. Salisbury. Oil on canvas; 28 1/3 inches by 58 1/4 inches.

Before the burial could happen, a secret selection process took place. The commander of British forces in France and Belgium, Brigadier General Louis Wyatt oversaw the process.

One such account is from Wyatt himself. In November 1939, 20 years after the Unknown Warrior was buried, Wyatt wrote of his experience in The Daily Telegraph. Four digging parties were dispatched to four different battle areas of the Western Front—Ypres, Somme, Aisne, and Arras—Saddington explained, and each was tasked with bringing back one body to a chapel at St. Pol near Arras, Wyatt's headquarters.

On Nov. 8 and 9, Wyatt and a colleague randomly selected the Unknown Warrior. The three remaining bodies were reburied. The Unknown Warrior traveled by ambulance to the

French port of Boulogne, the beginning of his journey to be finally laid to rest on home soil.

Great Britain's Surrogate Grave

On Nov. 11, 1920, King George V led the burial procession of the Unknown Warrior in London. The procession passed the newly unveiled Portland stone cenotaph on the way to Westminster Abbey before the soldier was buried among Britain's most illustrious citizens.

Thousands attended the procession to pay their respects in a collective outpouring of a nation's grief.

One hundred sandbags of French soil filled the grave. And the union war flag was raised. The flag, called Padre's Flag, had belonged to Railton. He'd used it throughout his war chaplaincy. It had covered boxes, tables, and altars for Holy Communion and other ceremonies.

It had another solemn purpose. "It was the covering—often the only

covering—of the slain, as their bodies were laid to rest," Railton wrote.

"It is not a new 'bit of bunting' bought for the occasion but a real symbol of every Briton's life. Indeed, it is literally tinged with the life-blood of fellow Britons," he added.

Railton had wanted the flag to be left with the Unknown Warrior, and in 1921 he got his wish. The Padre's Flag hangs in Westminster Abbey, in St. George's Chapel, next to the Unknown Warrior's grave.

In honor of all who died for king and country, the last line of the dedication on the Unknown Warrior's grave states: "They buried him among the Kings because he had done good toward God and toward his house."

To find out more about the National Army Museum's exhibition "Buried Among Kings: The Story of the Unknown Warrior," which runs until February 10, 2021, visit NAM.ac.uk

In Oct. 17, 1921, the United States bestowed a Medal of Honor upon the British Unknown Warrior, and the British reciprocated by bestowing a Victoria Cross upon the American Unknown Soldier.



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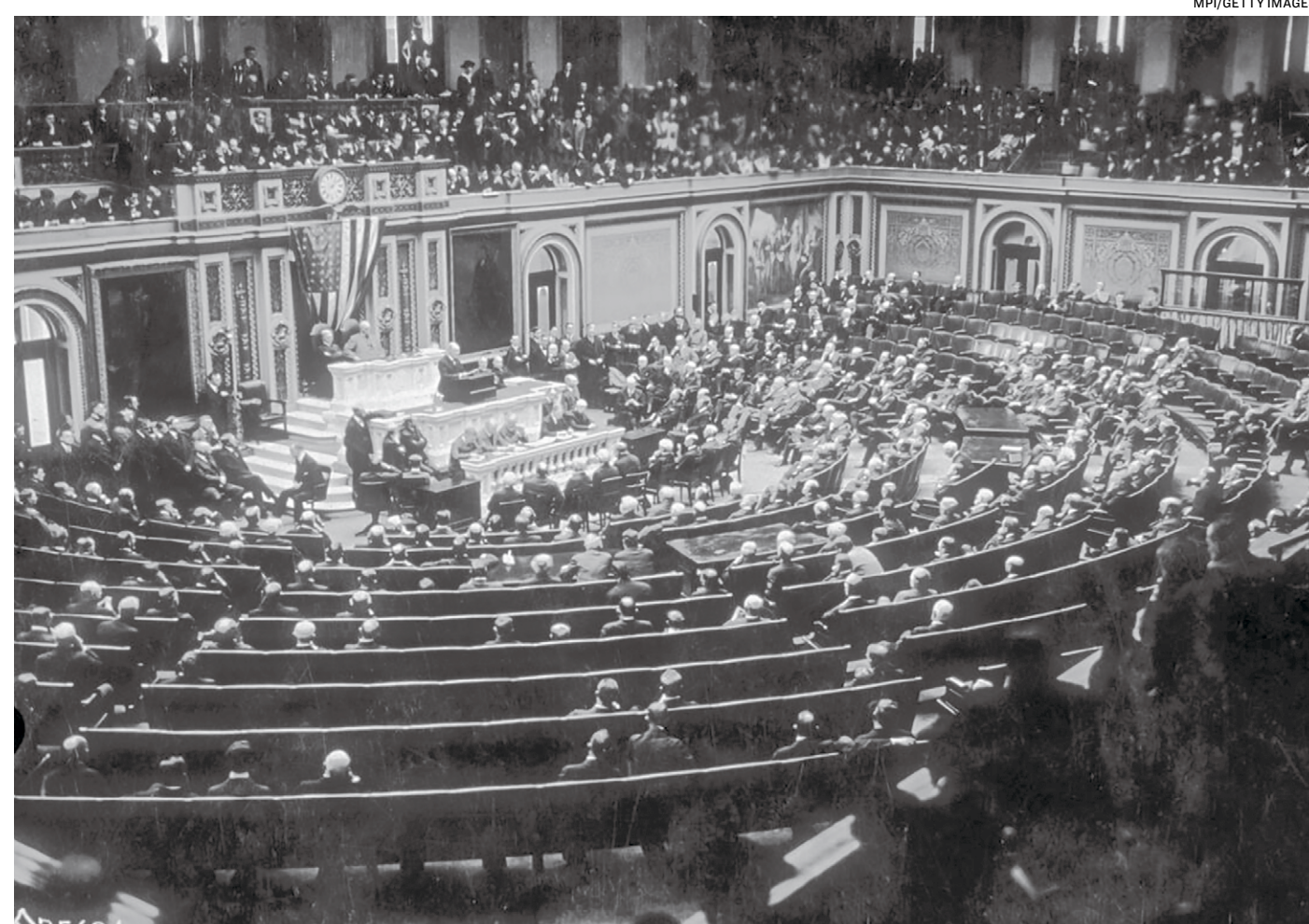
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The first Armistice parade along New York's Fifth Avenue in November 1918.



(Above left) French soldiers moving to attack from their trench during the 1916 Battle of Verdun in World War I. The battle won by the French in November 1916 cost the lives of 163,000 French soldiers and 143,000 German soldiers.

(Above middle) Allied soldiers in a trench on the battlefield at Marne, France, in 1914. World War I soldiers spent most of their time in trenches.

(Above) Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson taking part in the Remembrance Sunday ceremony at the Cenotaph on Whitehall in central London, on Nov. 10, 2019. Remembrance Sunday is commemorated on the Sunday closest to Armistice Day on Nov. 11.

(Left) President Woodrow Wilson reading the Armistice terms for World War I to Congress on Jan. 8, 1918.

HISTORY

VETERANS DAY

A Time for Remembrance and Gratitude

Continued from Page 1

the Killing Fields of Cambodia, and more—we moderns have seen enough spilled blood to fill an ocean.

As a result, we forget that our ancestors living in 1913 were much more innocent than we are today. The last half of the 19th century, at least in Europe, saw few conflicts other than the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. Europeans and Americans of that day simply lacked the imagination and experience to foresee a war in which millions would die, battles in which thousands would pay with their lives for a few yards of ground, and the terrible carnage that machine guns, mustard gas, and heavy artillery would bring to those battlefields.

Unless we have read biographies like “Goodbye to All That” by Robert Graves or histories like Paul Fussell’s “The Great War and Modern Memory,” we may also lack the ability to understand what the soldiers of that war endured. Most of the war on the Western Front, for example, was static, with soldiers embedded in trenches, living in muck and excrement, rain and snow, plagued by fleas and rats, and always suffering under the strain of possible attack or bombardment.

It is for all these reasons that Armistice Day came into being.

Remembrance Day

Like the United States, different countries involved in the First World War established November 11 as a day to remember the dead of that war.

In the Commonwealth Nations of Great Britain, Remembrance Day remains a time to recollect those veterans who have lost their lives in the service of their respective countries. In the United Kingdom, for example, there are wreath-laying ceremonies, the military marks the occasion with appearances by troops, and a two-minute silence at 11:00 a.m. still prevails in many places as a sign of respect for the dead.

Here from a Forces War Records post



British soldiers observe two minutes of silence at a British war memorial in Iraq, as they mark Remembrance Day for fallen troops on Nov. 9, 2003.

Veterans Day focuses on those who have served their country in the military.

is a description of that first silence in Manchester, 1919:

“The first stroke of eleven produced a magical effect.

“The tram cars glided into stillness, motors ceased to cough and fume, and stopped dead, and the mighty-limbed dray horses hunched back upon their loads and stopped also, seeming to do it of their own volition.

“Someone took off his hat, and with a nervous hesitancy the rest of the men bowed their heads also. Here and there an old soldier could be detected slipping unconsciously into the posture of ‘attention.’ An elderly woman, not far away, wiped her eyes, and the man beside her looked white and stern. Everyone stood very still ... The hush deepened. It had spread over the whole city and become so pronounced as to impress one with a sense of audibility. It was a silence which was almost pain ... And the spirit of memory brooded over it all.”

Because of the poem “In Flanders Fields,” with its famous opening lines “In Flanders Fields the poppies grow/ Between the crosses row on row,” the poppy became the symbol of Remembrance Day and is still worn by many as a token of

respect and recollection of the soldiers, sailors, and airmen who have died in Britain’s wars.

The Living and the Dead

Shortly after the Civil War, many American states had established Memorial Day as the time for honoring those who had died for their country. As a result, Veterans Day focuses more on those who have served their country in the military rather than on those who gave their lives in battle.

These men and women are still among us. Some veterans of World War II, millions of other men and women who served in such conflicts as the Korean War and the war in Vietnam, and those who have more recently done their duty in places like Afghanistan and Iraq remain very much a part of the fabric of American life. Veterans Day belongs to them, a time set aside to mark their patriotism and sacrifice, a time for the rest of us to pause and appreciate what they did for their country.

Of course, not all in our military see combat or finds themselves at risk of death or wounds, but we honor them as well for enlisting and for serving their country in capacities ranging from mechanic to military police.

Ways and Means

So how do we pay our respects to those who fought for our country?

We can begin by listening to the stories of those who still live who served in our military. Our grandfathers and in some cases, our great-grandfathers, our neighbors who served in Vietnam, our uncles and cousins who fought in distant places like Afghanistan or who served tours in countries like South Korea or Germany—we can ask them about their experiences and thank them for their service. By doing so, we are not only expressing our gratitude but also learning more about the costs of keeping our country free.

We can also educate ourselves about the valiant soldiers, sailors, and airmen who fought to preserve those freedoms. We

can read autobiographies by such combatants as Eugene Sledge in his account of the war in the Pacific against the Japanese, “With the Old Breed,” or novels like Anton Myrer’s “Once an Eagle,” which offers a broad account of the American wars of the 20th century. We can watch documentaries and Hollywood movies about these veterans and their wars, and discover the tremendous sacrifices some of them made and the horrible battles in which they fought.

Whether we ourselves served in uniform for our country, we can teach our children the honor of doing so. We can give them heroes from our past—the drummer boy of Shiloh; the buffalo soldiers of the Western plains; Alvin York of Tennessee in World War I; Audie Murphy, the most highly decorated soldier of World War II; generals like Pershing, Dwight Eisenhower, Douglas MacArthur; and so many others in uniform who gave of themselves on battlefields around the world.

We can support a military prepared for conflict. We must never send into battle young men and women who find themselves inferior in training and equipment when facing an enemy. We must give them the tools they need to win and to keep our country safe.

Finally, we can pause on November 11, offer our own two minutes of silence and reflection, and express our gratitude that from our cities, towns, and countryside young patriots continue to believe in this republic and are willing to serve it under arms.

Let’s Pause a Moment

My father, who died two years ago, spent his late teens as an infantryman in the 88th Division in Italy during World War II.

Over the years, Dad shared some stories from that time: the hardships of living in the open air, the afternoon when his platoon leader pushed ahead of him on a stairwell leading into a basement and lost his foot to a German mine, the morning when he and his squad captured a dozen Germans eating breakfast in a farmhouse.

At one Thanksgiving Day gathering, my siblings and I gathered our children, most of them teenagers, around Dad and asked him to tell some of his stories. They listened attentively, asked many questions, and came away knowing a little more about one man’s gift to his country.

All too often, many of us forget the meaning of the federal holiday we are celebrating. Memorial Day, for example,



World War I American infantry reenactors march in the Veterans Day Parade on Nov. 11, 2019 in New York City.



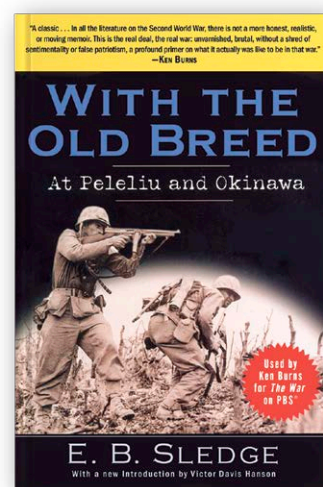
(Above) To honor veterans, we can listen to their stories. Pearl Harbor survivor Mickey Ganitch speaks during a Veterans Day celebration aboard the USS Hornet in Alameda, Calif., on Nov. 11, 2019.

means picnics and NASCAR races, Labor Day is a mini-vacation before the onset of fall and winter, and Presidents Day brings retail bargains and sales.

This year, Veterans Day falls on a Wednesday. Let’s pause on that day to pay some sort of homage to our veterans who have protected our republic and our freedom.

Thank you, Dad, and all of you who have served our country.

Jeff Minick has four children and a growing platoon of grandchildren. For 20 years, he taught history, literature, and Latin to seminars of homeschooling students in Asheville, N.C., Today, he lives and writes in Front Royal, Va. See JeffMinick.com to follow his blog.



Recommended reading to get a sense of what veterans have endured for us.

REWIND, REVIEW, AND RE-RATE

Greed, Gold, and Good Intentions During the Franco-Mexican War

IAN KANE

Mexico: the year 1866. The American Civil War has recently concluded, but the Franco-Mexican War is still in full sway. Napoleon III of France plans to establish colonies in the Americas, and to those ends, has established Maximilian Habsburg-Österreich as Maximilian I, the newly minted Emperor of Mexico.

It is against this highly turbulent backdrop that director Robert Aldrich spins his fast-paced Western yarn “Vera Cruz.” The plot revolves around two American gunslingers hungry for adventure and fortune in Mexico. In the film’s opening scenes, we meet Civil War veteran Benjamin Trane (Gary Cooper), who comes across Joe Erin (Burt Lancaster) in Mexico.

A clear distinction is made early on between the more gentlemanly Southerner, Ben, and the ruthless and conniving wild man, Joe.

After lots of gun-wagging (mainly at each other), the two settle into an uneasy alliance, with Ben joining Joe and his gaggle of grubby bushwhackers, which includes Tex (Jack Elam), Donnegan (Ernest Borgnine), and Pittsburgh (Charles Bronson). These are mercenaries who aim to join the Mexican Revolution—fighting to expel the French from their relatively new country. Ben, with motives of his own, hooks up with this bunch, figuring that he’s got better chances of survival with Joe’s outfit, however scurrilous they may seem.

Their initial plan is to locate and join up with Mexican rebel forces, led by General Ramírez (Morris Ankrum). However, after running into Marquis Henri de Labordere (Cesar Romero) and his detachment of soldiers representing Emperor Maximilian (George Macready), they decide that the money that Labordere is offering to employ them is just too good to pass up.

During this encounter, Ben saves the life of a local (and beautiful) pickpocket named Nina (Sara Montiel), who takes a particular liking to him.

‘Vera Cruz’ is a surprisingly weighty film, anchored by strong performances.

After meeting Emperor Maximilian himself at his opulent palace, the roughneck mercenaries—now jointly led by Ben and Joe—show off their gun skills and are hired on the spot to carry out a special mission. They are tasked with escorting a VIP, in this case, the Countess Marie Duvarre (Denise Darcel) to the city of Vera Cruz.

Ben and Joe are more than a little suspicious because of how fast they’ve been entrusted with such an important errand. Nonetheless, the compensation



Gary Cooper (L) and Burt Lancaster play mercenaries with very different goals, in “Vera Cruz.”

for their outstanding marksman skills convinces them to take the risky job.

A stunning beauty of royal lineage, Countess Duvarre soon becomes the object of Ben and Joe’s amorous intentions. However, since Labordere is already romantically linked to her, the three men take turns trying to win her affections (although she assures Labordere that he has nothing to worry about).

During their journey, Nina shows up and manages to weave her way into the caravan. Eventually, she also weaves her way into Ben’s heart despite his hardened exterior. He’s embittered about losing everything in the American Civil War.

During one of their pit stops, Ben and Joe discover that Countess Duvarre’s carriage is secretly hauling a large cache of gold intended to support the French war effort. When Duvarre and Labordere become aware of the men’s knowledge, the four engage in a deadly game of shadowy intrigue and shifting allegiances, with a healthy dose of backstabbing on display.

As they navigate through the treacherous landscape fraught

with rebel ambushes, Duvarre begins to suspect that she’s merely an ornamental distraction for Labordere from the real treasure: the gold. She reluctantly forms a slippery alliance with Joe in the hopes that he’ll bolster her in her increasingly dire circumstances.

Meanwhile, Nina, revealed to be part of the rebellion, breaks through to Ben’s inner goodness, and he decides that a just cause is more important than gold. But will he realize this in time to thwart the many dangerous forces closing in on them?

One of the things that I really enjoyed about this film is that, despite its overall peppy pace, Aldrich used lengthy facial close-ups. Through his director’s lens, we get to fully appreciate the oft-complex expressions of its characters. For instance, Joe’s perpetual grin seems to hide a barely contained malevolence, whereas Ben’s withdrawn countenance speaks to a war-weary man who is looking for a purpose. He has surprisingly humble goals; he wants to make enough money to restore his plantation back home in the South.

Despite some over-the-top

action sequences—including legions of men getting mowed down—“Vera Cruz” is a surprisingly weighty film, anchored by strong performances from Cooper, Montiel, Lancaster, and Darcel. It not only carries a positive message about altruistic motives trumping material ones, but should also inspire those curious to learn more about a lesser-known historical conflict—the Franco-Mexican War.

Ian Kane is a filmmaker and author based out of Los Angeles. To learn more, visit DreamFlightEnt.com

‘Vera Cruz’

Director
Robert Aldrich

Starring
Gary Cooper, Burt Lancaster, Denise Darcel

Running Time
1 hour, 34 minutes

Not Rated

Release Date
Dec. 25, 1954 (USA)

★★★★☆



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