

“Breaker Morant”

In 1902 Britain was bogged down in the third year of the Boer War. Much as we found ourselves in Vietnam, they were in a conflict that promised to drag on endlessly. They wanted out and their eagerness to extricate themselves from South Africa sealed the fate of three officers in the “Bushveld Carbineers”.

Following an engagement with the Boers, the Carbineer’s find the mutilated body of their captain. Swearing revenge they set out to find his killers. After a two day pursuit they surprise the Boer encampment and following a gunfight take five of them prisoner. Lt. “Breaker” Morant has them lined up and shot. Earlier in the war Morant’s superiors would not have blinked an eye at such wartime conduct. But now, desperate for peace, the British want to show a different face to the Boers. So Morant and two of his fellow officers find themselves facing a court martial for murder.

The resulting court martial is a slow motion firing squad. The verdict is foreordained but the pretense of a trial must be maintained. There is never a question as to whether or not the prisoners were executed but “following orders” was a valid defense in the days before the Nuremberg Rules. However, the court martial board has no intention of allowing such a defense. Fellow soldiers who could testify to as past practice are transferred to India so as to not be available for trial and not until the day before trial is defense counsel appointed - an Australian property law lawyer who has never been inside a courtroom.

Inexperienced he may be but Major Thomas is not going down without a fight. He eviscerates one of the prosecutions’ first witnesses and mounts a full- throated defense of his clients. But he is thwarted at every turn by a court martial panel for whom fairness is an alien concept. Watching such manifest injustice unfold is an infuriating experience. As a former trial lawyer I usually find courtroom scenes unrealistic. But I found myself completely absorbed in this trial and nowhere more so than with Major Thomas’ closing argument in which he summarizes the inherent horror of warfare and why his client’s actions must be understood in that context.

As befits the recounting of a true story, Director Bruce Beresford (“Driving Miss Daisy” and “Tender Mercies”) has perfectly recreated the world of the

colonial British Army. Whether it is kilted soldiers smartly marching, dusty frontier quarters, the palatial quarters of British Supreme Commander, Lord Kitchener, or the Spartan courtroom, you feel you are watching living history. Then there are the men themselves. Morant is an outwardly laconic soul but he writes poetry and flashbacks show him in back in Australia singing to a rapt audience at dinner party. Lt. Brown is the essence of a rough-hewn soldier but back home he is a loving father and Lt. Witton is a scared young man who finds himself trapped in a world where he has been rendered powerless. But their humanity counts for nothing as they have become pawns in a political scenario they had no hand in making. And then there is the final scene in the film. It will stay with you a long time.

(Amazon Prime)

Another film on military injustice is Stanley Kubrick's **"Paths of Glory"**. (1957). A suicidal frontal attack by the French on entrenched German lines in World War I results in a foreseeable slaughter. Will the criminally inept generals who planned the attack be held responsible? Not a chance. Claiming the attack failed because of the cowardice of the troops, they select three soldiers to be court-martialed for dereliction of duty. Kirk Douglas as their defender and Adolph Menjou as the unctuous prosecutor in an American film classic.

(Amazon Prime)



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