

The Last Grenade



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Produced by René Dupont. Directed by Gordon Flemyng. Screenplay by Kenneth Ware & John Sherlock. Adaptation by James Mitchell based on *The Ordeal of Major Grigsby* by John Sherlock. Cinematography by Alex Hume. Art Direction by Anthony Pratt. Original Music by John Dankworth. Edited by Ann Chegwidden. Cinematic length: 94 minutes. Distributed by Lockmore CRC. Cinematic release: March 1970. DVD Release 2012. Cinematic Rating M. Rating ***** 45%. All images from the public domain, Wikipedia, and Wikimedia.

Cast

Stanley Baker : Major Harry Grigsby

Alex Cord: Kip Thompson

Honor Blackman: Katherine Whiteley

Richard Attenborough: General Whiteley

Ray Brooks: Whiteley's Aide Lieutenant David Coulson

Andrew Keir: Gordon Mackenzie

Julian Glover: Andy Royal

Rafer Johnson: Joe Jackson

John Thaw: Terry Mitchell

Review

So much is good in this film, yet as a whole, *The last Grenade* turns out so badly. This happens because of a few things that could have been so easily fixed that it could serve as a textbook example in filmmakers' classes of what to look for in film things going wrong – and how to correct them.

To start with the advantages: With one exception this film has a dream cast. Britain generally gets the concession for producing the world's best cinematic performers and watching this film proves this point. Although it must have been obvious that much was wrong during the making of this film, nobody time served, walked through their performance and then collected their pay check. The Brits here put everything into their roles, making their characters as rounded and as creditable as the screenplay allowed. The story and the locales had the merit of being underused. A serious and therefore underused look at the world of mercenaries was a good and nearly original idea in 1970, although it has been overused after 1985's *Rambo*.

The story also had possibilities. The British government want Thompson (Alex Cord) a renegade American mercenary who leads Red Guards in attacks around Hong Kong, dead. They find the perfect man to kill him in Major Grigsby (Stanley

Baker) with the perfect team of mercenaries for the task. Grigsby and some of his mercenary team were among the few survivors of a group betrayed by Thompson for money some time before. So the team go to Hong Kong and the situation becomes even more complicated and dangerous when Grigsby and Katherine Whiteley (Honor Blackman) are attracted to each other. She is the wife of General Whiteley (Richard Attenborough). He oversees Grigsby's task.

The locales of the Congo, (actually Spain filling in for Africa) Hong Kong and the areas around that city were also fresh and underused. The interiors were also fine. Combining interiors and exteriors and some fine acting and occasional subtle touches conveyed a great sense of place. The film did not meander within its short time span. Now to the problems.



This is no way to present the title in an adventure movie

The opening shots of exhausted mercenaries awaiting lift-out by a fort somewhere in the jungle were fine, but with the arrival of Thompson in his helicopter the faults in *The Last Grenade* are as loud, and as obvious as the explosions and stunt work in this prologue. Any film should draw the viewer into its world, so that the audience becomes engrossed and half-forgets that they are watching a movie. That does not happen here. The explosions look just like what they are: carefully planned explosions with a camera on them. The stuntmen blown about do somersaults or overact in what are obviously carefully staged stunts. Bad as this is, with Thompson's gleeful, overacted machine gunning of the mercenaries walking towards his helicopter a five year old would know that this film is at best, badly flawed. Even after he machine guns them while many are unarmed, most continue to run upright *towards* the helicopter. A few take cover and shoot back – missing at a range of around eighty metres!!!? not only Thompson, who seems to know he

will not be hit even if he is in plain sight, but the obviously massive helicopter big enough to take dozens of troops. We hear no dints of bullets hitting the helicopter, no signs of a single shot coming near him. Professional infantry soldiers unable to hit the helicopter as big as a barn at close range??????



Stanley Baker as Major Grigsby and Alex Cord as Kipp

The film then cuts to the credits and problems continue as they unroll in a dreary way that suggests an unimaginative approach, showing us grey London streets. When the government official visits Grigsby in a tuberculosis sanatorium he has no trouble in talking Grigsby, The Aging Old Hero Into One Last Mission (clichés get capitalisation) Audiences then know that Grigsby is MFD (Marked For Death) but so does Grigsby; he just wants to make sure that Thompson goes first. Stanley Baker was an actor of tremendous presence, dedication, energy and character and he brought those qualities into his roles. He comes close to saving this film as he plays not an invincible hero, but a once strong, now exhausted and world weary man who while being wasted away by tuberculosis, painfully forces himself to make efforts. This is exactly what Baker looks like and what his dialogue, body language and voice tones convey. The film has a welcome surprise when weary of war, Grigsby suddenly finds he might have a new and happy life. Attenborough,

Blackman, Keir and others aid him in his nearly successful cinematic efforts to make *The Last Grenade* into the great film it could have been.

The film picks up in quality after the mercenaries arrive in Hong Kong, but by then it has lost much of its audience. To succeed, a film cannot be as disastrously wrong in the first ten minutes as this film is. By then most audiences will be looking for more plot holes, more mistakes in continuity and more bad acting – and they are here. To give some examples:

Mercenary Joe Jackson (Rafer Johnson) accompanies a camouflaged Grigsby on a secret mission through the jungle in florescent clothing so bright it stands out in shots taken about a hundred metres away. Although they are not meant to be seen

Although he apparently has no spy network, Thompson always appears at just the right moment for the plot. He knows when Grigsby will chase him through the jungle. He appears in one of the many many Hong Kong bars - the one where the mercenaries gather for the first time. When General Whiteley's Rolls-Royce is being driven along a road he does not usually travel on, Thompson waits there for the ambush. Why not take a few minutes of cinematic time to write a spy network in?

Holes in the plot abound. If the British Government wants the mission to be a success why send a tubercular retired officer? If British military involvement must be kept secret and so not appear to be involving them, why do the mercenaries wear British army headwear? If they are going through enemy territory on a secret mission why wear fluorescent clothes? When Thompson captures Grigsby, what does he do with this man who is such a danger to him? He does not even bind him up, but puts him in a flimsy bamboo and twine hut with one armed guard, although he has dozens of gang members under his command. Of course Grigsby escapes. Thompson has already killed another captured mercenary, so why keep Grigsby alive?

As the story unfolds another problem emerges. When seen in the early 1970s the depiction of Thompson as some kind of former student turned hippie turned mercenary brought well justified comments from some audience members: "So the Communists are really behind the hippies. Uhm." When aid workers refused to believe Grigsby was right about one of the supposed refugees being a Communist spy due to his facial expression, Grigsby raves against communism and the naiveté of the aid workers. This was so loud and frenzied that one audience member stated

words to the effect that Grigsby “was Joe McCarthy in uniform.” When Grigsby searched the suspect and found a grenade strapped to his ankle and so was triumphant at being proved right, the same person sarcastically came out with: “See! Joe McCarthy was right!”



The romance develops in a Hong Kong retreat

Actually the anti-communist British are not depicted as heroes. World weary fatalistic General Whiteley goes through the faded forms of ruling from the days of empire. He knowingly tells Grigsby that the Chinese tolerate them clinging on in Hong Kong because they make them billions. Standing there in his immaculate medal heavy red dress coat, with his weary face and expressionless voice, telling his wife of yet another pointless formal event that they must attend, says it all about the worn remnant of empire in Hong Kong. In response the fading of her smile and her weary acquiescence indicates why she will go off with Grigsby.

In comparison when Grigsby gets drunk in a ritzy bar frequented by upper class Brits, when he abuses the aid worker in front of her and later talks to her, he appears as energetic, decisive, loud, and attentive – all the things her husband is not. When she tells the general that she wants a holiday from talk of red guards, politics and formal events, this becomes very believable. The romantic aspects of this film are creditable, even if aspects of the later action strain credibility. This reverses the usual problem in action films, which almost always have a spurious romance.



Alex Cord as Thompson. Note the hippy aspects

The biggest problem with *The Last Grenade* has to be a crucial miscasting. Villainous Thompson appears as the second most important person in the film and his rather implausible, inadequately explained actions fuel the plot. We know that his motivations, at least to a large extent, are caused by money and sadism, but are the Chinese his financiers or does he work as an independent bandit king? If the Chinese are happy for Whiteley to make them billions, why do they authorize Thompson to bomb Whiteley's car? Or is this Thompson off the rails? Is he a sociopath, a vicious brat on arrested development or just an arrogant self-aggrandizing gringo out for money?

With a bit more work on the screenplay his role and personality could have been made clearer, making him a deeper, more interesting and more believable character. Alex Cord remains unconvincing throughout this role. Unlike the rest of the cast he brings no self-conviction, no subtlety, credibility, or depth to it, just relentless looney loudness. Donald Sutherland, Anthony Perkins or James Coburn

could have made him a creditable psycho. Elliot Gould, Richard Jaekel or Robert Redford would have been fine as an egocentric all-American boy gone wrong. Bruce Dern, David Carradine or Charles Bronson would have made him a sociopath.

The Last Grenade provides so many textbook examples of what can wreck a good movie and what needed to be fixed. One major miscasting can outweigh several good ones. Ten bad minutes at the start and four more elsewhere can outweigh eighty effective minutes. Editing out the unnecessary prologue in Africa would have been wise. Everything that happened there appears in later dialogue. A little more work on the screenplay, equalling perhaps five or ten more minutes screen time and substantial working on continuity could have been the saving of this movie. The cast that tried to do that deserved these things and so do audiences.

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