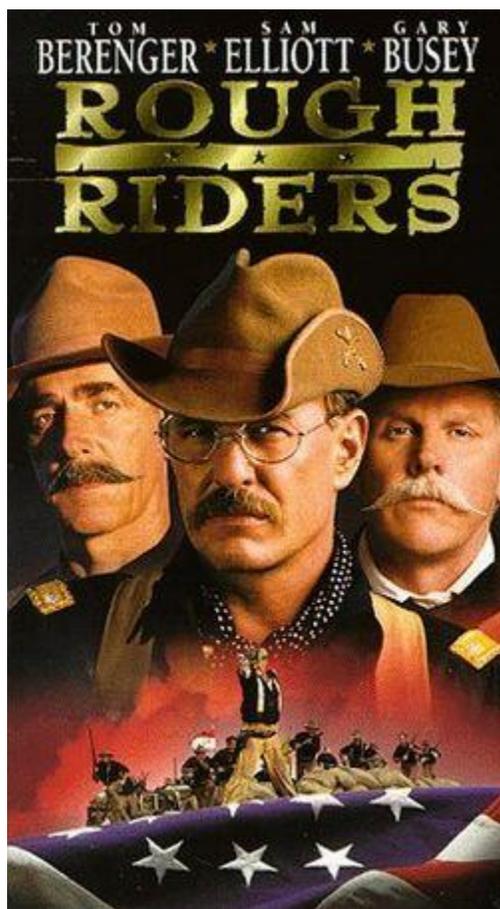


Rough Riders



A Review by Garry Victor Hill

Rough Riders. Produced by Alan Apone and Tom Berenger. Directed by John Milius. Screenplay by John Milius and Hugh Wilson. Music by Peter Bernstein and Elmer Bernstein. Photography by Anthony N. Richmond. Production design by Jerry Wanek. A Larry Levinson Production. Original Release 1997 Television Miniseries. DVD version released 2006. No rating. Length 184 minutes. The DVD version contains interviews with John Milius and the Executive Producer William J. MacDonald. Rating: ***** 75%

Cast

Colonel Teddy Roosevelt: Tom Berenger

Henry Nash: Brad Johnson

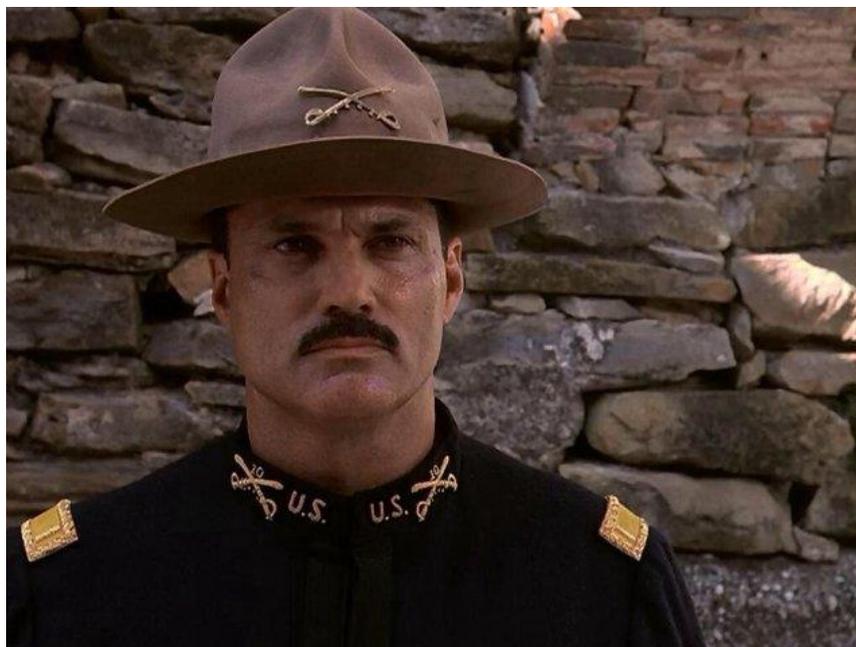
Captain Bucky O'Neill: Sam Elliot
Major-General Joe Wheeler: Gary Busey
Craig Wadsworth: Chris Noth
Lieutenant Black Jack Pershing: Marshall R. Teague
George Neville: Buck Taylor
Colonel Leonard Wood: Dale Dye
Indian Bob: Bob Primeaux
Francesco Quinn: Rafael Castillo
Henry Bardshar: Eric Allan Kramer
Eli: Geoffrey Lewis
Hamilton Fish: Holt McCallany
William Tiffany: James Parks
Lieutenant Woodbury Kane: Mark Moses
B.F. Goodrich: Titus Wellover
Edward Marshall: William Katt
Stephen Crane: Adam Storke
President McKinley: Brian Keith
Edith Roosevelt: Ileana Douglas
William Randolph Hearst: George Hamilton
Mademoiselle Adler: Diana Jorge
General Shafter: Roger Boyce
Frederick Remington: Nick Chinlund
Delchaney: Michael Greyeyes
Major Frederick Funston: Pablo Espinosa
Colonel of the 71st Regiment: Patrick Gorman
John Hay: R. Lee Ermey

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This film tells the story of the formation, development and wartime experiences of what became known as the Rough Riders Regiment during the 1898 Spanish-American War. At the film's start and ending the story is narrated by one of their troopers, Henry Nash. He looks back from many years later to the camaraderie, the test of courage and the excitement of those days.



Roosevelt leads the Rough Riders. Below Marshall R. Teague plays Black Jack Pershing future commander of the American forces and then commander of the Black units that did so much to win the battle. To the film makers' credit that they show this For decades the black soldiers were left out of American history as Roosevelt's flair for publicity focused attention on the Rough Riders. Both images are from the public domain.



The film follows several recruits, both fictional and real, from the start of the war and shows their extremely varied backgrounds and their equally varied motives for joining Teddy Roosevelt's motley volunteer regiment of cavalry. They come under the command of former Confederate General Joe Wheeler. He rapidly emerges as a man hungry for military command again and for victory. Others have more practical motives. Henry Nash and his sidekick George Neville are outlaws who think that the riders following are a posse after them. To evade they enlist – and “the posse” turn out to be volunteers rushing to make the awaiting troop train. They are led by Sheriff Bucky O' Neill who is also a militia captain. Henry Bardshar enlists to get away from being crowded out of his shabby home by his nagging wife and noisy children. Francesco Quinn has ideas of proving himself through the test of battle. Similarly Indian Bob seems to be escaping reservation life through becoming a warrior. Eli seems to be an aging cowboy needing the money and excitement that enlistment will bring. William Marshall is a journalist on Roosevelt's staff: where Roosevelt goes he goes. Colonel Leonard Wood is another who serves Roosevelt. An experienced regular army officer and friend to Roosevelt, he is the first regimental commander of the Rough Riders. Roosevelt appears to be smart enough to know he knows little about military training and warfare and so he takes second place, rather than the blame if things go wrong. Craig Wadsworth, Woodbury Kane, Hamilton Fish, William Tiffany and Titus Wellover are five friends from the wealthiest levels of New York society. In an opulent silver service and velvet curtains restaurant they form a pact to achieve honour and experience excitement through enlisting in the war. The toast is given in champagne glasses. When Craig Wadsworth debates this choice with his cynical

father he comes very close to saying that he is a rich kid going slumming so that he will not miss out on any of life's experiences. Later we hear his real motives, he wants to see what he has inside himself, courage or cowardice.

When these five turn up at the rough riders Texan encampment in immaculate three piece suits and boater hats, they are obviously showing up the diverse and extremely different social composition of the group as they are amongst cowboys in horse breaking gear, working class enlistments in civilian clothes, regular army soldiers and Indians.

These Rough riders have an accompaniment of non-fighters, the artist Frederick Remington, the war correspondent Stephen Crane and seldom seen William Randolph Hearst enjoying his Cuban beach encampment and the company of young women. Along with Black Jack Pershing commanding the Buffalo soldiers and assorted other officers, these are the characters that the film follows from the start of the war to its aftermath. It is a film about the men who made the regiment as much as it is a film about what the regiment did.

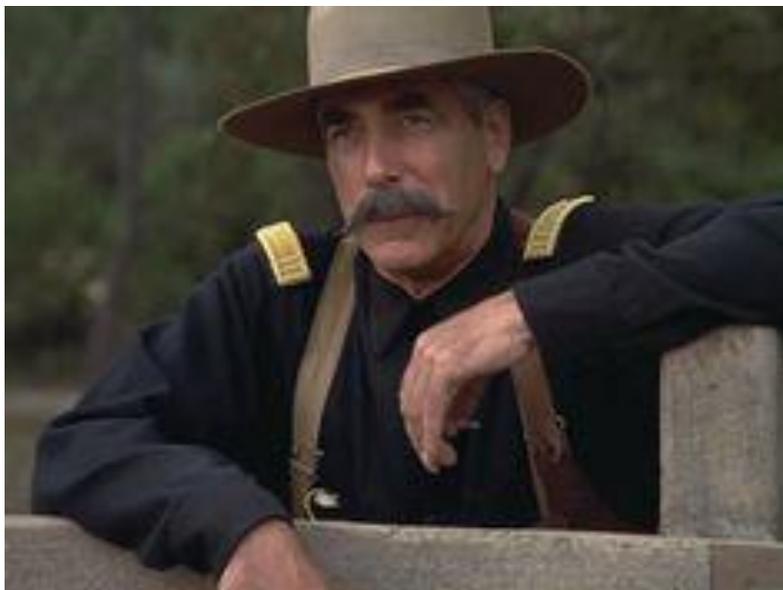


Preparing for the charge. Pinterest Public Domain

Rough Riders does not lack in vigour, detail, excitement, scope or an epic feel. Nobody was niggardly or wasteful with the budget either. The battle scenes must be amongst the most exciting ever filmed and they avoid the two extremes of filmed battles: sanitising battle so it becomes unrealistic and easy to glorify or

prolonged, almost loving depictions of gore. They would be better without too many cuts to Stephen Crane telling us what they film shows – like a speeding train hurtling directly at us. The story flows well and the music and editing are a strong part of this process, like the best music and editing, seeming not to be there.

Starting with the outbreak of the war rather than a prolonged explanation about the causes, we do get that information on the way to the decisive victory. That was at what we now call the battle of San Juan Hill, although as the film shows, the real battle was at San Juan Ridge which consisted of Kettle Hill and San Juan Hill and they were taken one after the other. The film also accurately shows (against historical fallacy) that it was not only the Rough Riders who won the great victory; the buffalo soldiers, the artillery and the infantry had much to do with it. This accuracy and several famous historic quotes and historic personages (being depicted even down to small roles) gives the impression of historic accuracy. This starts even with the title cards when grainy, original film segments from 1898 are shown and intermixed with Hearst's propagandist images. Then we get a verbatim speech by Teddy Roosevelt on America's destiny and the virtues of being a military nation: so from here on we will have historic accuracy, right? Wrong! The wakeup began when John Hay, Secretary of State, confers with President McKinley in Washington. He then appears in several other similar scenes, playing a key role in formulating war plans. The reality was that he was the American ambassador in England at the time, did not become Secretary of State until after the war was over and was not even in Washington during the war.



Sam Elliot as Captain Buckeye O'Neill Pinterest/Public Domain



Gary Busey as General Wheeler. George Hamilton as William Randolph Hearst. After doing so much to cause the war at least he took part. Both pictures are from Wikimedia



Another alarm bell rang when Joe Wheeler appears to confer with President McKinley. Wheeler was a thin, small, nearly bald, bearded man with delicate features. Gary Busey who plays that role is the opposite in every adjective just given. Roosevelt was not alive in 1920 as described, he died in early January 1919. Knowing these misrepresentations, investigations started. Wheeler did not give the order to Pershing to attack at San Juan Hill as depicted. Checking with *Wikipedia* revealed errors abounding in the depiction of Captain Bucky and Henry Nash. They were friends, not the antagonists the film depicts and Nash was a schoolteacher who never robbed stagecoaches. The whole last scene, effective as cinema, is way way wrong historically. Apart from Roosevelt being dead when Nash talks of him being alive, Nash could not have been a millionaire with a son at Harvard, as Henry Nash died in 1902. He could not have stood at the graves of Bucky and his fellow robber George Neville somewhere in the West for two other reasons. First Bucky was buried at Arlington. Second George Neville could not have been buried beside him – or anywhere else as he did not exist. Bucky incidentally is shown commanding troop G and this unit is referred to several times at length in the film, but Bucky really commanded A Troop. Craig Wadsworth is shown as being in his command, but really was in another troop. When Hearst responds to the comment that he cannot send war pictures because everything is quiet in Cuba, he tells Frederick Remington to supply the pictures, he will supply the war. The film sets that scene at a luxurious dinner table. The real exchange was by telegram as Remington was in Cuba. All this causes doubt about other scenes. Did Hurst really gallop into battle waving a rifle? Did Stephen Crane who wrote *The Red Badge of Courage* an expose of war heroism in 1895, really cheer the charging troops on while in a euphotic state?

The filmmakers should have fictionalised the names of Hay, Nash, Wadsworth and Buckeye. There is nothing wrong with this, but when a film seems historically accurate and is not...

The acting provides the film with both strengths and weaknesses. Several actors seem to be reciting their lines for didactic purposes rather than acting. Others, particularly Brad Johnson, Illeana Douglas, Chris Noth, Diana Jorge and Dale Dye, give the film much needed subtle moments. Those moments give contrast to the loud aggressive warriors who are as subtle as a screaming soldier charging forward with a bayonet - and at times the screen fills with them and they are there for quite some time. Others in the planning or training stages command on full loud with no turn down volume. Not only the bullied troops but the audience must give a welcome sigh of relief when Captain Bucky quietly and

successfully tells one such to leave. Sam Elliot could have easily overplayed this role with loudness, stretched glares and an overly twangy accent, but fortunately and wisely he underplays. If only some of the others had. Initially Tom Berenger initially seems to be overdoing Roosevelt, especially when supported by others definitely doing that with their characters. However the real Roosevelt often adapted a braggadocio persona and overdid that. Yet what was he like beneath the act? Obviously an attention seeker, a man determined to win and have his way... but ultimately an enigma, this makes for a difficult role to play. In childhood he was short, sickly and not expected to live and seems to have overcompensated with a relentlessly hearty, sedulous and somewhat claustrophobic optimism about his less than subtle intentions.



The real Teddy Roosevelt of 1898

In one funny scene set at an elegant high society social event, he and his wife meet the Delaware governor, accompanied by a sophisticated upper class French woman Madam Adler (Diana Jorje) and Roosevelt, loudly, obsessively and insistently intent on getting the governor's support, ignores all attempts to rein him in and

Madam Adler, releasing that subtlety can only be beyond him, announces that she will soon faint. Mrs Roosevelt sardonically tells her to go ahead and arranges others to hold her: apparently she has seen this happen before. While others are stunned Roosevelt smiles, and announces that he has convinced the governor. Apparently he takes stunned silence for acquiescence and does this several times during the film. Berenger the actor frequently plays Roosevelt the actor and Roosevelt, like many attention seekers, appears as not the nation's most perceptive person. Always tripping over his sabre, brushing his glasses, wandering around in his tailor made suit with his hat developing a floppy side, he continually calls out "bully" or something similar. He has Marshall follow a few paces behind to record his words and deeds, but this only makes him look more vainglorious and ridiculous. He remains oblivious to his reality as others see him. He becomes a somewhat wearying figure of fun – until the battles start and then he emerges as anything but funny. He becomes ruthless, courageous, determined and steely.



Brad Johnson as Henry Nash, outlaw turned rough rider Wikimedia



The surviving rough riders after conquering Kettle Hill. This shot was obviously closely modelled on 1898 photographs of the event as shown above. Both images are from Wikimedia

Fortunately Berenger's performance has subtle moments when we see the pensive Roosevelt who exists beneath the macho alpha male performance that dominates his life. One of these moments comes after he conquers Kettle Hill and rests. We expect him to be loudly exultant, but he appears enigmatic, almost depressed as he looks up at the American Flag as it flutters around the water tank with the advertisement for sugar.

This recalls an earlier staff room conversation when officers talk about what the war might really be about and one of the juniors says that some think they are there to liberate Cubans from Spanish oppression but others think it is so that America can control the sugar market. Another officer says he hopes that his friend Hamilton Fish died for something more than the price of sugar. The prolonged shot where the flag flutters back and forward revealing and then concealing the sugar ad becomes unsettlingly ambiguous. Is it saying that beneath patriotism there is money? Or is it saying that big business is America and that therefore this must be a good thing? Given this film's celebration of American patriotism that is quite possible. It has the feel of those war movies of the 1940s through to the early 1960s, the ones that celebrated American values and the team spirit of the military world. Since Vietnam that mood in movies has generally died out with only a few exceptions emerging in the Reagan era.

Writer/director Milius had a choice in his filmmaking to either treat the spirited patriotism and naivety of the enthused rough riders with a scepticism or to embrace it. He embraced. That made a movie militaristic patriots will love. Others while seeing its many virtues, will on reflection treat that embrace with some scepticism.

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Tom Berenger as Roosevelt at Kettle Hill