

*The story, themes and characters behind 'The Last Rifleman' by writer, Kevin Fitzpatrick*

***"You never went back there, Artie? In all this time?"***  
– Tom Malcolmson

*The Last Rifleman* is about Artie Crawford, a World War II veteran living in a care home in Northern Ireland whose wife has just died. On the eve of the 75th anniversary of the D-Day landings in Normandy, Artie decides to secretly escape his care home and embark on an arduous but inspirational journey to France to pay his final respects to his best friend lost in battle. Along the way, Artie is aided and abetted by interesting and entertaining individuals each of them roused by Artie's ambitious quest and his stubborn refusal to give up. It's ultimately about a man near the end of his life finally confronting the ghosts of his past.

Growing up as a boy my family often holidayed in France. We would take the caravan, spend a few weeks on the west coast, then on the way back to the ferry Dad would stop off in Normandy to visit the beaches and D-Day museums. But it was the visits to the military cemeteries that I remember most vividly, even as a child, with their rows of pristine, white headstones laid neatly out on perfectly manicured grass plots. In some cases, thousands of headstones stretched out before us, each with a name and a regiment and often a date of birth. Each with a story. Later, I would take my own children on holidays to France and stop off in Normandy to visit the cemeteries and pay our respects. I remember being struck at seeing them as moved by these visits as I had been as a child. And perhaps when my own children are older, they will take their children to these very same cemeteries.

***"I saw terrible things. We did terrible things. And I have had to live with that."***  
– Friedrich Muller

I have always had an interest in the history of the Second World War and in movies set during it. The visits to Normandy only helped intensify my interest in the period giving added poignancy and realism to what were often romanticised Hollywood adventures. Then in June 2014, on the eve of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of D-Day, I read about a British veteran who had escaped from his care home in the south of England and joined up with some old army pals to return to France for the D-Day commemorations.

I was enthralled by this story and the motives that drive a man near the end of his life on a quest to a place that must hold only painful memories. Then a few days later I caught the Brian Henry Martin documentary on BBC Northern Ireland entitled '*We Fought on Day*' which had been made ten years earlier for the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The film focussed on a handful of Northern Ireland veterans who had landed in Normandy on D-Day with the Royal Ulster Rifles regiment, part of the British invasion force. The documentary was powerful and moving with veterans recounting heading to France on this great adventure. They spoke about their experiences, their buddies, the initial excitement and the grim aftermath.

***"By day's end over one hundred and fifty-six thousand troops had landed in Normandy."***  
– News Reporter

Immediately an idea started percolating. What about a story of a D-Day veteran from Northern Ireland who escapes from his care home and has to battle his way back to Normandy for a D-Day anniversary? And what if I set it not at the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary but five years later at the 75<sup>th</sup> when there would be even fewer survivors left to attend? How would he do it? Who would he encounter? But most of all, what drives a 92-year-old D-Day veteran

to return to a place that holds only painful memories for the first time in 75 years? I knew then that I had to tell this story and my returning veteran had to be an Ulsterman.

I had only taken up screenwriting a few years earlier so when I sent my finished screenplay off to Northern Ireland Screen - who at the time were doing an open call for new writers - I didn't honestly expect to hear anything back. So I was stunned when development executive, Ursula Devine rang to tell me that *The Last Rifleman* had been selected for NI Screen's New Writers programme. And so began my own extraordinary journey.

***"We were all scared to death. Anyone tell you otherwise is a damned liar."***

***- Lincoln Jefferson Adams***

I love story, and I believe in everyone there is a story. We all have experiences that are unique and worthy of telling. But few of us ever experience war. We hear about it in the news, we even watch it unfold on TV but few of us can understand or appreciate the impact that experiencing war first-hand can have on a person. So, in a veteran's story like Artie Crawford's, the everyday experience is magnified 10-fold, perhaps 100-fold. How has his life been affected by his war experiences? What baggage does he carry – physically and metaphorically – as he returns to Normandy? And how representative is he of all World War II war veterans?

I think it is important to tell the stories of those men and women who did put their lives on the line all those years ago, especially now with so few of them still alive. I also wanted to highlight Northern Ireland's little-known contribution to D-Day, the role the Royal Ulster Rifles played, the only regiment in the British Army to have had both its regular battalions take part in the D-Day landings. Maybe, in years to come, *The Last Rifleman* might be watched as a companion piece to the *We Fought on D-Day* documentary as a way of remembering and paying tribute to those Ulstermen who did make the ultimate sacrifice.

***"Some of us live long and full lives. Others live shorter, perhaps fuller lives."***

***- Artie Crawford.***

Guilt and redemption are probably the two over-riding themes of *The Last Rifleman*. We get a sense of Artie's past from his interactions with the people he meets but it's only when he reaches Normandy, and the grave of his best friend, do we fully learn the reasons for Artie's journey, and fully appreciate the emotions he has buried away all these years.

In my research I discovered that few veterans talked about their experiences after they returned from the war. They bottled them away from family and friends, only sharing their experiences much later in life and often only with fellow veterans. I watched and listened to hundreds of interviews with veterans from World War II to try and get a sense of how their experiences shaped their lives. Many of them recalled the initial excitement of signing up with their mates, or *chums*, and leaving for war. It was a great adventure, a romantic crusade, and there was often a twinkle in their eyes when these ageing men recounted this aspect of their time in the military. But the twinkle quickly disappeared when they recalled the brutal reality of their experiences and particularly the friends they lost. Their moods would suddenly change, as if someone had just flicked an emotional switch on in them. Old men, hardened by war and life, found themselves in tears over a single memory that they thought they had buried away years ago.

It's difficult for any of us to contain all our emotions all of the time. There's often some trauma or experience that haunts us. But war veterans have an entire haversack of emotions to contend with. Probably the greatest over-riding emotion that seems common to all

veterans is guilt. Guilt at what they did, what they witnessed, what they endured, but mostly guilt at having survived when others didn't. Artie's story is about a man confronting his guilt and seeking forgiveness. Even redemption. And he must return to the scene of all these horrors - the scene of the crime, as it were - to achieve this. But Artie's journey to the grave of his best friend is not simply about *seeking* forgiveness. It's also about *learning* forgiveness. Artie must learn how to forgive himself for his own feelings of guilt all these years. And for veterans that journey of self-forgiveness is often the hardest one.

When we watch D-Day veterans return each year to Normandy – fewer every time – we wonder what stories each of them carries with them and if returning to France eases the pain and the guilt. Perhaps by enduring that pain and guilt through their returning, eases it on their leaving.

***“I was terrified with all the shellin’ and mortarin’ and all the rest of it.”***  
– Artie Crawford

There's a scene in *The Last Rifleman*, where Artie meets another war veteran the American, Lincoln Jefferson Adams while in a cafe. Artie opens up for the first time, recounting to Lincoln his first experience of battle. He tells Lincoln that during heavy shelling he took shelter in a ditch with other soldiers. He was terrified and this English soldier, an older man, put his arm around Artie to comfort him. Except Artie could feel the older man trembling and that frightened Artie more than all the shelling did, knowing this man was also afraid. I created that scene from a real veteran's story, a real experience, and borrowed his line “*A child can't find comfort in a frightened adult.*” Such personal stories are almost impossible to invent, but they're also too poignant to ignore.

Lincoln himself has his own D-Day story which he shares with Artie about his younger brother who landed on Omaha beach along with him. Lincoln has just been awarded a medal at a 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary ceremony for being the first black American to land on D-Day. But he tells Artie that he was actually the second black American to hit the beaches that day. His little brother was the first but died as soon as he hit the water. Lincoln, like Artie, has had to live with his own loss all these years and his confession to Artie is part of his own coming to terms with the past. This mutual exchange of grief, although painful for both men, is part of the healing process. One man acting as a crutch for the other.

***“That's the thing about folks like us, Artie. We're all living with ghosts.”***  
– Lincoln Jefferson Adams

Artie also has an encounter with a German war veteran, Friedrich Muller, a former SS panzer grenadier when he gets a lift on a German tour bus. The 12<sup>th</sup> SS Panzer Division - Friedrich's regiment - was noted for its brutality in the latter stages of the war including its cold-blooded killing of stretcher-bearers as they attended the wounded during the battle of Cambes Wood. The encounter between the two old warriors is strained at first as both men justify their actions during the war. But it is clear that Friedrich harbours as much regret as Artie, lamenting what he did but still trying to extend the hand of friendship - literally in this case - to his former adversary. Putting Artie on a bus with these veterans, with all the baggage that went with the 12<sup>th</sup> SS, was the perfect opportunity to have Artie confront his old enemy, discovering that he actually has more in common with this man than he realises. It's another step on Artie's journey in coming to terms with his past.

***“They're soldiers, Artie. Just like you.”***  
– Juliette Bellamy

Working on *The Last Rifleman* has been an amazing experience. Not just developing the screenplay - my first produced feature - but every aspect of the film making. Seeing how a feature film comes into being and the number of people that it takes to bring it to fruition is fascinating. Probably one of the highlights was filming the opening battle scene in a field in County Antrim in Northern Ireland where my two sons and I got the opportunity to be extras and dress up as soldiers. We had some heavy armour on set, though the Sherman tank that I had written into the script had been sold so we sadly had to cut it! We did have a Bren gun-carrying track machine as well as a crashed Horsa glider that our Production Designer, John, physically built from scratch. And the noise of over sixty explosions – some quite spectacular – filled the Antrim air. Those few glorious days in April, in the company of my two boys playing at soldiers in a film I wrote, will remain one of the most memorable times of my life.

And as a big film music fan I was also privileged to be able to attend the recording of the film's soundtrack at Air Studios in London and watch the great Stephen Warbeck do his work. Needless to say, the score is gorgeous and moving.

But it is the whole collaborative process that has been a joy to be part of. If I learned one thing from the experience, it's that film making is about a lot of people - all with different skill sets - coming together to achieve the same goal: making a great movie. If, as the saying goes, it takes a village to raise a child then it takes a small town to make an independent movie. But once it's made everyone owns a piece of it.

***"I'm ninety-two- and three-quarter years old. I'm well passed my expiry date."***  
– Artie Crawford

Working with director, Terry has been great. He's easy-going, fun to be around, but very focussed on what he wants. And he delegates and works well with his team. It helps that he's also a writer and I've learned a lot from him, particularly about the economy of dialogue in screenwriting. Less is often more, and great actors don't need words when an emotion or a simple expression can suffice. It has been great having Terry fire me an idea for a scene change or a character rewrite then seeing the outcome of this as it often makes the screenplay better.

The producers, Katy and John have also been amazing to work with. From the get-go when they optioned the screenplay they have been passionate about the project and supportive through thick and thin. There have been ups and downs. And setbacks. The screenplay was written back in 2015 and since then we have had Brexit, a global Pandemic, a war in Europe, a cost-of-living crisis all of which have impacted in some form or fashion on getting the film over the line. But the producers persevered. They showed immense resilience, determination and professionalism and full credit goes to them for soldiering on through every adversity and getting the film made. It's like we have all been on this long and arduous journey with Artie, but the final destination has made the journey worthwhile.

***"That's going to be my headline. Kind of like, you know, Last of the Mohicans?"***  
– Tony McCann

When I was a boy - full of wild notions and crazy dreams - I wanted to be in the movies. I lived on a diet of westerns and war films and spy thrillers. I also loved to write. Though back

in school it was mostly poetry and short stories. That love of writing and movies stayed with me all my life, though I never imagined that in middle-age I'd become a writer of movies.

Seeing my script evolve from the germ of an idea through to the final film has been an incredible experience. I have been very fortunate. Northern Ireland Screen has been hugely supportive right from the beginning when they championed the script and helped me get producers on board. Then to see great actors say my words, bringing those words to life in a way I could never imagine, is humbling. And to have those words become scenes and those scenes to become a movie? Well, having dreamt of being in the movies as a boy I couldn't ask for anything more.

***"I was in the Hitler Youth. Were you not in the Boy Scouts?"***  
– Friedrich Mueller

The entire cast is excellent, from actors who have graced our screens for a generation to the bright, young talent who will grace our screens in the years to come. Pierce Brosnan's commitment to the role was extraordinary, given he had to spend several hours getting prosthetics done up each morning before filming even began. I think it's the first time he has played such an aged character and he embraced the role with tremendous passion. His performance moved me to tears on one occasion, and that was just watching him on a monitor with no Stephen Warbeck score playing in the background! As for the supporting cast? I loved the TV series *Das Boot* as a boy so having Jurgen Prognow on board was a thrill and an honour. Clemence Posey and John Amos each brought a beautiful poignancy to their roles and of course, Desmond Eastwood as our crusading journalist generates a lovely chemistry with Pierce's character. However, one of my highlights was getting to meet RTE's legendary news reporter Tommie Gorman, who had a small cameo part in the movie. Tommie was for many years RTE's Northern Ireland Editor and, having once aspired to becoming a journalist myself, getting to meet him in the flesh was an absolute privilege.

***"Fate intervenes. For better or for worse."***  
– Artie Crawford.

I'm really excited having now seen the finished movie – complete with score! I think people will like it. At its essence it's a simple story: A man, near the end of his life, coming to terms with his past. Maybe it's a universal story, particularly as we grow old and look back at our own lives and the choices we made or didn't make. Like the Normandy veteran I heard interviewed who said he couldn't cry yet but with each year that passed he could feel a 'sort of tears' in his eyes. I think we all cry easier as we get older. I know I do. And maybe that's a good thing. Maybe it means we've lived. That's a lesson that men like Artie probably only learn at the end.