

# *The Popcorn Papers*

## *A Movie Review*

*By*

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*"Brothers Separated by Gene Slicing"*



## *Hart's War*



David: "Hart's War" is a film set in WWII, where a young Lieutenant (and 2nd year law student) is captured by the Germans and sent to Stalag 7A as a POW, where he is pressed into service as counsel for a lieutenant accused of murder. Intrigue and multiple plots insue.

Kevin: Directed by Gregory Hoblit, the story centers around Thomas Hart (Colin Farrell), a young American lieutenant who is captured by the Germans and sent to prison camp Stalag 7A. The senior American officer is Col. William McNamara (Bruce Willis), a grim veteran at odds with the camp's German commandant Col. Werner Visser (Marcel Iures). Hart learns how things work at the camp and is adapting to POW life when two arrivals stir things up. They are Lt. Lincoln Scott (Terrence Dashon Howard) and Lt. Lamar Archer (Vicellous Reon Shannon) - captured black pilots from the 99th Air Squadron (Tuskegee). When McNamara bars the Lieutenants from the officers' quarters and bunks them with enlisted men (who are all white and yet outranked), they become the targets of racism and bullying. The most vicious bigot, Sgt. Vic Bedford (Cole Hauser), begins to frame them to get them in trouble with the Germans. When he is found dead, Scott becomes the prime suspect. The SS wants to execute him immediately, but McNamara convinces Visser to give them seven days to hold an American court-martial per the Geneva Convention. Having been a law student before the war, Hart is picked by McNamara to defend Scott in the face of prejudice and damaging evidence.

D: First of all, the really neat thing about reviewing movies is you get to see them for free. (Ka-Ching!!) The flip side is that "Hart's War" is proof that you get what you paid for. HW is a movie made by a committee.

MGM Exec: “Pearl Harbor made big bucks so we need a new spin on WWII and patriotism, shoot it around the room tell me what you got.”

Flunky 1: “What about an updated ‘Hogans Hero’s’? But kinda serious...”

Flunky 2: “Yea but with some with a bit of ‘The Great Escape’ and something topical like ‘Time to Kill.’”

Flunky 2.5: “What about some racial discrimination issues?”

Flunky 3: “Give it the ending from ‘Gladiator’ but make it really lame.”

MGM Exec: “Great, we’ll throw only one headliner in who can sneer really well and it’s a tear jerker!! Big money time boys!!”

K: The major flaw of this movie is that it tries to remake itself at different points of the plot. John Katzenbach’s novel on which the story is based is (by all accounts) hailed as a tour de force, but in the adaptation by Billy Ray and Terry George, it is hard to see a consistent tone or message in the story because each aspect is told in a completely new form.

D: They could have advertised this movie with an info-mercial: “It’s a war movie! It’s a race-relations study! But wait! It’s also a courtroom drama! And it’s waterproof and makes Julienne fries!”

K: There is only so much time to tell a story, and some of the scenes seem incomplete or sketched over with generalities. For example, there is evidence in the court case pertaining to some of the characters having, or not having mud on them. Not only does Hart miss his argument on this point, the whole issue is forgotten as if it was not vital to the case. The sub-plots are treated with a half-hearted approach that makes most of the movie seem unfulfilling or, in some cases, implausible.

D: Finally, a nostalgic war film that is less filling and not encumbered by quality! Bruce Willis stars as The Sneer, adding new complexities and dimension to a fully one-dimensional character with the subtle inner direction of a cucumber.

K: The McNamara character is not the war hero we expect him to be. For reasons that aren't revealed until the latter part of the film, he seems genuinely bent on finding Scott guilty and later he gets so many men killed that the idea of worthy sacrifice is pushed to it's limit. Ironically, the most engaging character in this piece is the German Col. Visser. The subtle pushing and pulling between him and McNamara amounts to a game of chess played with camp politics. Visser seems to be morally superior to the ambiguous McNamara, and there is a poignancy to the fact that any brutality suggested by the

Germans is far outweighed by the ugliness of the American soldiers toward their black countrymen.

D: I would take it a bit further and say the character of Visser is the only one that has any real depth to it. Sadly, the American WWII characters were just as thin and one-dimensional as they were in films 40 years ago. Bruce Willis is The Sneer who stares down each scene with the same curled lip no matter what the hell is going on around him, the accused captain is a build up of a monologue from "To Kill a Mockingbird," and young Hart reacts only to what happened in the last 20 seconds of the film.

Movies like "Saving Private Ryan" raised the bar, peering into the reasons and motivations that drive people in violently detached situations. "Hart's War" is simply a bad rehash of current themes done in a 1940s genre. The first 25 minutes of the film are gripping, both emotionally and visually, but then the movie falls into itself and becomes - blah.

K: At the end of the movie, I walked out of theater wondering what I was supposed to get out of it. The only morals seemed to be "Our soldiers used to treat blacks badly, but they fought bravely in the meantime," or, "True patriotism erases all previous sins." Since I don't believe the filmmakers were trying to say either of these things, the true message must have been lost in the jumbled plot. Look - David and I aren't going to the theater each time hoping to see the next great movie, but we do expect to see a story with some depth that is told in a coherent way.

D: Unfortunately, "Hart's War" did not live up to expectations. You would be better off waiting for this to come to video. In the meantime, to satisfy your war movie sweet tooth - save your money for "We Were Soldiers". Mel Gibson has never been known for his sneer.

Shortly after writing this article, David traveled to Prague, where his comments on the historic, Old World architecture consisted mainly of, "These old stone buildings are playing havoc with my cell phone." In Los Angeles, sub-70s temperatures have forced Kevin to finally dig his winter shorts out of the *closet*.