



Roland Neveu

Tom Cruise as Ron Kovic in the Oliver Stone film "Born on the Fourth of July," opening Wednesday

The Private War of Tom Cruise

By PAUL CHUTKOW

LIKE SO MANY AMERICAN KIDS OF his generation, Tom Cruise came of age after America's fall in the war in Vietnam. Tet, My Lai, Cambodia, Kent State: To him these were just names, vague and confusing, void of any historical or emotional charge. The war was simply not part of his concerns or his consciousness. What the Vietnam War was all about, what the war did to America, what it did to thousands of Vietnam veterans who came home crippled and in wheelchairs; all these young Tom Cruise knew little or nothing about. By his own admission, when it came to Vietnam he was a total innocent.

Until one night in Manhattan. When he had dinner with a charismatic man named Oliver Stone. Mr. Stone had been a United States Marine twice decorated in Vietnam.

But Tom Cruise knew him better as the brilliant director of "Wall Street" and "Salvador" and the Academy Award-winning Vietnam movie, "Platoon." What Mr. Stone talked to young Cruise about was making another Vietnam movie, a movie even more ambitious than "Platoon," a movie that maybe, just maybe, could draw out the core of the Vietnam tragedy, in Vietnam and in America, and make it real and lasting for generations to come.

Already Mr. Stone knew the elements he would portray: The battlefield horrors and confusions. The mistaken killing of women and children. The wounds, the physical, psychic and moral wounds of thousands of Marines and G.I.'s, wounds that many of them would bring home and have to carry with them for the rest of their lives. And then would come the veterans' hospitals and all their circles of Hell, their squalor and degradations, their chronic and humiliating problems of understaffing and underfunding. And then Mr. Stone would

In the harrowing role of a paraplegic Vietnam veteran, the actor tapped his innermost resources.

focus in tight on what the war was doing to America at home. He wanted to show the politicians and the rise of the antiwar movement, and how it was joined by Vietnam veterans who had brought their wounds home to American towns and families who could not even muster them a heroes' welcome. This, he felt, was their second war over Vietnam, and Oliver Stone burned to show it.

"Coming home was a second war," Mr. Stone recalled in a telephone interview. "It slammed so many of us right in the back of the neck. For months over there you'd count the days you had left, and then finally it would come, Liberation Day, and you'd be aboard that big Freedom Bird feeling life would never be so happy again. Then WHOOM! Another war, right in your back. It wasn't the hostility that hurt. It was the indifference. And we all came to feel we had made a terrible mistake."

One of the beauties of the planned movie, to Mr. Stone's eye, was that he could draw out the essence of Vietnam through the true story of just one man, United States Marine Sgt. Ron Kovic of Massapequa, Long Island. Already what was clear in his mind were the core elements and characters that have come to life in "Born on the Fourth of July," Mr. Stone's new movie, opening Wednesday.

To Mr. Stone, Ron Kovic was the perfect

Continued on Page 28