

For Tom Cruise, Ron Kovic's Story Was a Private War

Continued From Page 1

symbol of the Vietnam War. And as Mr. Kovic himself first described it in his distinguished and powerful 1976 memoir "Born on the Fourth of July," he was a true Yankee Doodle Dandy. He was born on Independence Day, grew up in a working-class Roman Catholic family steeped in the virtues and symbols of God and country, community and flag, John Wayne and President John F. Kennedy. And when the call came, the call of Vietnam, the call to stop the march of Communism, Ron Kovic responded. He joined the United States Marines and went to Vietnam, only to be wounded in action and come home in a wheelchair. Permanently crippled. Impotent.

As Tom Cruise recalls that Manhattan dinner now, Oliver Stone let him know his ambitious film project faced only two tiny problems: he had no star to play Ron Kovic and he had little firm money to back the film. He and his friend Mr. Kovic had first written a screenplay in the late 1970's, and they had lined up Al Pacino to play the lead. But the money had fallen through at the last minute, publicly pinning Oliver Stone to the mat in the film business. And shattering Ron Kovic's dreams of seeing his story come to life on the screen, of seeing his own sacrifices take on new meaning. Couldn't Tom Cruise find a way to turn those twin defeats into redeeming triumphs?

Indeed Thomas Cruise Mapother IV could. By then he was already the hottest young box-office draw in the business. He had broken in with an effective small part in "Taps" in 1981 and then scored bigger in "The Outsiders," "All the Right Moves" and the surprise hit "Risky Business." He had held his own with Paul Newman in "The Color of Money," and his breakthrough leading role in "Top Gun," the Navy jet-fighter thriller, had confirmed his star power and grossed \$435 million. At the age of 24! Even a piece of fluff-stuff he did called "Cocktail" turned in gross receipts of more than \$70 million.

Plus Tom Cruise was ready for a personal declaration of independence. He had a bellyful of Hollywood's commercial this, commercial that, and he was turning down offer after offer to do "Top Gun II" and "Son of Top Gun" and all the rest. Take "Rain Man," for instance. Yes, even "Rain Man." He and Dustin Hoffman burned to do that picture, and it would eventually bring Dustin Hoffman an Academy Award. But all along, the money kept slipping and sliding. Why? The reason still chafes Tom Cruise:

"There were a few people who really fought for that film. But there were some people who said, 'Look. Two jerks in a car going cross-country. Who's going to want to see that movie?' They just don't get it. They just don't get it."

So Tom Cruise took Oliver Stone's pitch and made one of the most important decisions of his career: to enlist. It was a done deal. With his name and face on the marquee, the money would come in, finally, a tight budget of \$17 million. And not only would he sign on. Mr. Cruise even agreed to defer all payments until revenues started coming in, the same provision as Oliver Stone accepted. They were forming common bonds.

"The approach was pure Oliver," Mr. Cruise now says with a laugh. "A little hmm, hmm. Testing. Where are you? Where are you? You know, the challenge. 'Well,' I said. 'All right. The challenge is on.'"

Yes, and "Born on the Fourth of July" was about to become real. And so was the private war of Tom Cruise.

Even now you can see the pain in his eyes. Physically, Tom Cruise is sitting in a hotel room in Charlotte, N. C., where he is making an auto racing movie called "Days of Thunder," but mentally he is focusing in, getting ready to explain his stunning personal journey into the core of the Vietnam experience, into the psyche of sexual cripples and finally deep into the very core of his own manhood.

This journey is the central experience of "Born on the Fourth of July." The film stars Mr. Cruise as Ron Kovic. It also stars Willem Dafoe as his paraplegic soulmate, Charlie; Raymond Barry as Ron's father; Caroline Kava as his mother; and Kyra Sedgwick as his teen-age love, Donna. But almost all the primal feelings pent up in the film are expressed through Mr. Cruise.

Journeying Far, Journeying Fast

The first time you meet Tom Cruise, in his jeans and his leather jacket, your first instinct is to think: Huh? How could a kid seemingly so young and so green have come so far so fast? In his big climbing shoes and his gray athletic T-shirt, he looks like he's done a permanent freeze into a Reebok caricature of the All-American Boy. Everything about him is boyish and eager, earnest and engaging, modest and polite, and as hard as you look you can find no trace of either artifice or guile. And that face. Unblemished. Uncut. Cocksure. How can this be?

And just when you're about to sigh, well, Hollywood is a world unto itself, Tom Cruise comes forward into the light. And for the first time you can see it. You look into his eyes and see all that raging fire. And all those surprising depths of color. Blues and greens and browns and even flecks of yellow. People in the movie business, insiders who have watched his talent and his power grow, tell you he's intense. Focused. Driven. That

doesn't begin to describe it. He keeps to a strict training-table diet, gulps great handfuls of vitamins, keep his blood sugar steady, and every morning it's a rigorous workout. Action. Snap to.

On the Road To Discovery

But words do not always come easily to Tom Cruise. He grew up partially dyslexic, and when his parents divorced he started changing schools almost every year. He never went to college. Instead he went to New York to make it as an actor. But his lack of verbal skills for years made reading for acting parts very risky business carrying with it the fear of public humiliation. And even now he travels with a dictionary, to make sure he gets the meanings right, to make sure he keeps on learning, learning, learning.

"I went to many different schools

When the actor signed on, Oliver Stone's dream of making 'Born on the Fourth of July' became reality.

growing up," he said. "You travel to one school and they've already learned what nouns and verbs are and where the periods go. So they've moved on to the next thing and I'm still going. 'What's a verb?' That's kind of the story of my life. Catching up."

The words might not come easily, but mention "Vietnam" to Tom Cruise, and the single word works like a trigger, igniting words and sentences and feelings and sending them spraying forth, not elegantly sometimes, but always hitting their targets. And what those words and sentences and feelings piece together, when added to interviews with Oliver Stone and Ron Kovic, is how these three men came together in a tightly knit unit to make "Born on the Fourth of July." And what also becomes clear is how Mr. Stone and Mr. Kovic worked to turn "Born on the Fourth of July" into Tom Cruise's own frightening rite of passage.

Questions of Motivation

"Our only concern was bringing the film to a certain level, to make it real," Mr. Stone said. "I always admired Tom as an actor. I had a feeling about him. And I had known Ron for 10 years. When you put them together, you knew."

"Both men were motivated by a desire to be the best, to be No. 1. And they both had high self-esteem. In the 1960's, with Ron Kovic, that took the form of joining the Marines. And at the end of the day, I sensed with Tom a crack in his background, some kind of unhappiness, that he had seen some kind of trouble. And I thought that trouble could be helpful to him in dealing with the second part of Ron's life."

Ron Kovic's own involvement was key. It was his story, with Mr. Stone he had co-written the screenplay, and so it was only natural that the director take his new recruit out to see this man, crippled, confined to a wheelchair, so that Mr. Cruise could understand the man he was going to bring to life on screen, so that he could understand the thousands of other veterans who had come home in wheelchairs.

"Kovic really opened up to me," Mr. Cruise recalled. "It was very emotional. I felt an immediate understanding looking at this man, talking with this man. If it had been me, back in the 50's, back in the 60's, well, I understand that feeling of country, of wanting to do something good for people and your country, and I under

Continued on Next Page

stand how easily you could be misled." The bond was forged.

Through the Circles of Hell

From then on, Ron Kovic served as Mr. Cruise's guide through the key aspects of the Vietnam experience, and he worked the way Virgil led Dante through the circles of Hell, showing him the pitfalls and where to walk next. With Mr. Kovic as his guide, Mr. Cruise went to some veterans' hospitals and talked and worked with paraplegics. It was total immersion, long before shooting, and the bonds multiplied and tightened. Both men came from Catholic backgrounds, both men knew what hunger was, both men suffered from their lack of formal education. And the bonds hardened Mr. Cruise's sense of resolve to make this film the ultimate Vietnam experience, for himself and for young American generations to come.

"I was nervous, excited, there were many different feelings. There was an element of fear. There was an element of great challenge, of great emotional commitment. But at the end of it, I just didn't want Ron to say, 'Oh, man. I made a mistake. You shouldn't have played the role.'"

Then came boot camp. Oliver Stone brought in a former Marine captain named Dale Dye to lead Mr. Cruise and others on two separate weeklong training missions, one in the United States, one in the Philippines, where

the battle episodes were to be shot. In the same spirit, but on the opposite political pole, the antiwar activist Abbie Hoffman was brought in to help everyone understand the feelings and dynamics of the peace movement. Mr. Hoffman, since deceased, even played a small part in the film.

The Ordeal Of Hospitalization

Tom Cruise now remembers much of the shooting as a blur, the battle scenes, the wounding, the sense of shame and alienation Ron Kovic felt returning home to his family, with Mr. Stone going 12 or 13 hours at a clip and making sluggards snap to with commands of "Action!" "Do it!" But one of the hardest parts of making the film was shooting Mr. Kovic's, and Mr. Cruise's, ordeal in a veterans' hospital, where the wounded United States Marine lay strapped to a bed for four months in a desperate bid to save his leg from amputation. For Mr. Cruise as an actor, these were some of his most grueling scenes.

"I'm not the Stanislavsky kind of actor," Mr. Cruise said. "It doesn't work for me. I just want to communicate with the people in the scene. That scene is real. It's happening. You're there. In person. And believe me, you sit in that bed for a while, and hear what happened, and believe what you believed about Vietnam, believed that it was right, and then being treated that way. It's very easy to find the