

Above, Ron Kovic as a young Marine with his father, E. Thomas Kovic, during the mid-1960's; at left, Raymond Barry in the role of the father, carrying Tom Cruise as the paralyzed Vietnam veteran Ron in a scene from the movie—"Both men were motivated by a desire to be the best, to be No. 1," says the director, Oliver Stone.

## The star knew he faced an enormous challenge.

rage. And we were only there a week and half. Ron was there for four months. And when shooting was over, I could get up and walk away."

### The Loss Of Manhood

Later, near the bottom of Ron's Hell, came impotence. The scene was Mexico, at whorehouses catering specially to crippled Vietnam veterans. Again the settings are of filth and degradation, but this time the vets are trading that against whatever satisfactions they can find from the touch of a woman and all that represents. Ron Kovic, paralyzed from the waist down, with catheters running out of his crotch, is so lonely that he risks any potential humiliation for a woman's touch.

"The way I work best is to be totally relaxed," Mr. Cruise said. "I don't pretend to be the character, I am the character. But you know what

struck me? Intellectually, philosophically, you sit back and you go, well, I'm someone who doesn't feel that being masculine is in my, you know, crotch. There are many other elements to being a human being and a man. But there were moments when I read the script when it just struck me, WHACK!, to the marrow. Hold it! The realization of losing that...

"Reading those scenes, it was right there in my face: you're going to play this. The loss of manhood. The loss of one's ability to create on a physical level. It's not just being able to feel a woman, to be inside a woman, it's being able to create a family. To procreate is a very important aspect to life. And where does that take you, if you can't?"

Where it took Tom Cruise was to a strange inability to perform the key bedroom scene: "I went to Oliver and I said, 'I'm just not there. It's just not working.' I remember feeling a lot of anxiety actually. Going, why do I feel all this anxiety? Oliver said, 'Look. You got it. Just don't think about it. Just do it, man, do it.'" Action! Snap to! Mr. Cruise:

"I remember we just started shooting the scene again, we were just doing it, and I just started crying.

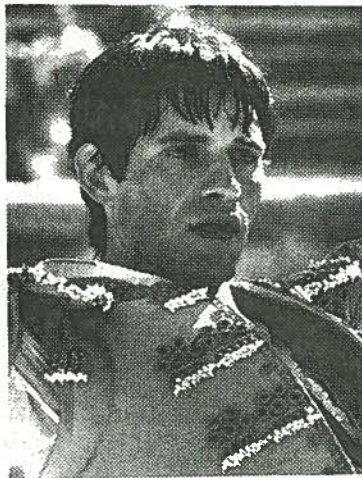
Crying and laughing a little, too. It was an absolute relief. Essentially I just let go."

It was just this kind of intensity and commitment that Mr. Cruise brought to his entire portrayal of Ron Kovic, who would later find a degree of redemption in becoming the potent and charismatic leader of a wheelchair brigade of antiwar activists called Vietnam Veterans Against the War. And no one esteems Tom Cruise more than Ron Kovic.

"I'm extremely proud of his performance," Mr. Kovic said in a telephone interview. "I truly believe he actually becomes me. For 21 years I had kept my Bronze Star in a box by my bed, and I always felt a little ambivalent about it. On the last day of shooting, I gave Tom my Bronze Star, the medal I won in Vietnam. I told him it was for his heroic performance."

To Oliver Stone also, Tom Cruise is a hero. Through his performance, Mr. Stone hopes he has been able to keep his promises. To himself. To his friend Ron Kovic. And to tens of thousands of fellow veterans who share the wounds of Vietnam. "We wanted to show America, and Tom, and through Tom, Ron, being put in a wheelchair, losing their potency. We wanted to show America being forced to redefine its concept of heroism." □

## THIS WEEK



### In the Ring

Patrick Catalifo stars in "Sand and Blood" as a gifted matador seeking to escape poverty who becomes the friend of a cultivated doctor and musician. Co-starring Sami Frey, Jeanne La-brune's drama opens Wednesday at the Lincoln Plaza.