

The socially critical films of 1974: Part 2

Hal Ashby's *The Last Detail*: "Imprisoned" by the US Navy, two sailors escort a young seaman to the brig

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This is the second part of a series of articles on the socially critical films of 1974. An introduction and Part 1 were posted May 6, Part 3 May 10, Part 4 May 13 and Part 5 May 16.

As a US Navy seaman prepares to meet his fate—an eight-year sentence in military prison where he will be tormented by Marine guards—two older sailors try to give the young victim of the system a taste of the life he will be losing out on.

The writing and acting in Hal Ashby's *The Last Detail*, from a novel Darryl Ponicsan and with a screenplay by Robert Towne, combine to create a memorable film, centered on the inhumanity of the American military as it compels "ordinary people" to commit an atrocity.

Randy Quaid plays 18-year-old seaman Larry Meadows, a quasi-kleptomaniac found guilty of stealing \$40 from a collection box raising money for charity. Unhappily for Meadows, the charitable cause was the pet project of the "do-gooder" base commander's wife.

The military justice system has thrown the proverbial book at Meadows, a troubled boy from a fragmented home in Camden, New Jersey. The punishment is meant to set an example, is grossly excessive and has everything to do with having offended the wrong people. The insignificant character of Meadows' crime stands in stark contrast to the American military's war crimes in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, where millions have died or been maimed, poisoned or mentally shattered.

In the opening scene as well as the final one, *The Last Detail* features military officers lording it over subordinates, barking at and humiliating them. Popular sentiment—against war and the social order more broadly—finds sharp expression here.

Initially incensed at the assignment (the "detail") of transporting Meadows from Virginia to Maine [the Portsmouth Naval Prison, actually located in Kittery, Maine], Billy "Badass" Buddusky epitomizes the lower-ranking Navy "lifer" who takes everything he can from Uncle Sam and offers as little as possible in return. Jack Nicholson's portrayal of this type is honest and often moving.

Buddusky cooks up a petty scheme with the other sailor assigned to transport Meadows, Richard "Mule" Mulhall (Otis Young).

Mulhall and Buddusky agree to bilk the Navy for every penny of their daily allowance—transforming a two-day trip into a weeklong hustle.

On the train ride out of Virginia, the older sailors develop sympathy for the young, ill-fated Meadows. "Badass" convinces Mulhall that they should interpret the travel schedule very loosely for Meadows' benefit. Mulhall needs little convincing.

From the initial departure from their schedule, the trio gets into a bit of everything, from bar crawls to must-have meals, fisticuffs with Marines, a party with hippie elements, a visit to a brothel, ice-skating and so on, before Meadows is handed over at the fortress-like prison in Maine, known as the "Alcatraz of the East."

Some of the more memorable scenes depict *individual* protest against official brutality and stupidity.

When a surly bartender refuses to serve the underage Meadows a beer, making a racist reference to the African American Mulhall in the process and threatening to call the shore patrol (a Navy law enforcement division), Buddusky pulls out his service pistol and yells "I am the motherf---ing shore patrol!"

"Did you see how I scared the shit out of that redneck?" he brags, and the three slap one another on the back over the episode.

Quaid's portrayal of the young and uninitiated Meadows is a strong feature of the film. His older cohorts, though brusque and jaded, extend a needed dose of humanity to him in the form of a series of life experiences.

When things have quieted down a bit, Meadows is eager to follow the sound of chanting emanating from a nearby apartment building. This leads to an encounter with a group of Buddhists, perhaps a stand-in for religious experience more generally. Meadows' brief dalliance with "chanting" is one of the best sequences of the film—the ridiculing of the promise of spiritualism—as the pretty young Buddhist he thinks he is about to have sex with simply relates that she "will chant so hard for you."

The mismatch of expectations prompts a visit to a brothel so that Meadows can have his first sexual experience. The awkwardness of first intimacy paid for by cash comes through, and Meadows maintains his essential sensitivity following the transactional first romance.

“I don’t have enough for another round, but can I give you the money I have just to look at you for a while?” he asks the equally youthful prostitute (Carol Kane).

Many aspects of Nicholson as the “badass” Buddusky ring true as well. This unambitious “lifer” is neither a romanticized version of an American worker, nor a caricature. He is at times quite humane toward Meadows and indignant toward injustice. He is also lazy, pleasure-seeking and intemperate.

Screenwriter Towne once described Buddusky’s character as “locked into the conventions of his life.”

Towne added, “He is a blowhard and he swears like a sailor should. But what’s underneath it is that he’s a lifer in the navy. He is imprisoned by the regulations and simply lacks the belief in his own ability to effect a change. Therefore, all he can do is swear about it. He can only express his feelings of impotence with strong language, but with no actions. He’ll still take that kid to jail.”

Towne, Ashby and Ponicsan clearly wanted to explore how ordinary people can commit atrocities by “just following orders,” a question that was particularly relevant following war crimes such as the My Lai massacre in Vietnam or—decades earlier—the Holocaust. The issue arises several times in the film.

In the course of some heavy drinking at a hotel, for example, Meadows asks Buddusky why he laid into the bigoted bartender earlier in the day. In refusing to serve them, wasn’t the bartender “just doing his job?”

Buddusky tries and tries to draw out of the young sailor some incident when he *must* have stood up for himself, hopefully with his fists. Buddusky’s eyes grow wide with excitement as Meadows relates an incident in which a Marine referred to himself blasphemously as Jesus Christ.

“Did you hit him, coldcock him?” he goads the youth.

Meadows merely reported the incident to the chaplain. Buddusky’s rage—breaking a lamp and some furniture—might be the most telling exhibit of the impotence Towne was attempting to capture.

Mulhall’s resignation to his “lifer” status involves a bit more development, but not much. He is financially responsible for his mother, who brags to everyone about how the Navy sends her boy all over the world. He relates this to Buddusky approvingly, as a point of pride.

At two points when he considers the moral iniquity of delivering Meadows to the brig, he says with a stern face, “I hate this motherf—ing chickenshit detail.”

As the WSWS has noted, Hal Ashby (1929-88) is a “generally underrated” figure, largely unrecognized today, “responsible for a number of valuable or, in some cases, provocative works in the 1970s.” His other credits in that decade include *The Landlord* (1970), *Harold and Maude* (1971), *Shampoo* (1975), *Bound for Glory* (1976), *Coming Home* (1978) and *Being There* (1979). Ashby, as we suggested, “experienced an outburst of creativity and social criticism under the influence of the broad popular radicalization in the late 1960s and early 1970s.”

By all accounts, the director “was a firmly anti-establishment figure, someone who despised authority, including his studio bosses, with whom he had many run-ins.” Specifically, Ashby

strongly opposed the Vietnam War, and his generally hostile attitude toward the military comes out in *The Last Detail*, a study of “military injustice,” in Nicholson’s words.

“Buddusky and Mulhall,” the WSWS wrote, “were hirelings sent to do the filthy work that the powers that be subcontracted to them, and they hated it and to a certain extent hated themselves for doing it. That coldness and bitterness, that self-recrimination, despite the work’s amusing moments, largely filled the screen. (*The Last Detail* was not, as one observer has noted, a film that would make you want to enlist.)”

Ashby’s film, which takes place in increasingly frigid temperatures as the trio makes its way north, reveals a generally declining, depressive, ramshackle America. The authorities are dishonest and corrupt, the “lower ranks” unhappy but locked in place.

There are undoubtedly ambivalences and unclaritys in the film. Overall, Towne’s point about the captivity and/or impotence of the Navy lifers feels more *asserted* than dramatically *demonstrated*.

One factor here is the film’s tendency to present Buddusky’s bravado (brilliantly, perhaps too brilliantly caught by Nicholson) approvingly or semi-approvingly. What are we to make of this character?

When the latter picks a fight with a group of Marines (referred to throughout the film as bullies) in a train station, the entire episode comes off as gleeful and innocent. The consequences of being a “blowhard” here are a sense of accomplishment and camaraderie, of having given Meadows (who partakes in the brawl) a lesson in “sticking it to the man.” This is the case too when Buddusky pulls the service pistol on the bartender. Excitement—not powerlessness—is the dramatic thrust of both scenes.

These shortcomings do not rob *The Last Detail* of its success in capturing significant features of the decay, disillusionment and class anger of the period.



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