



STARS AND SNIPES

When Marine sniper Anthony Swofford went to war in the Gulf, the only enemy he faced was tedium. Brit wunderkind Sam Mendes now returns to fight his own battle: adapting Swofford's explosive memoir **Jarhead** for the screen... WORDS MATT MUELLER

Listen up, recruits: 'Jarhead' is a slang expression for a Marine's high-and-tight haircut. It's also an absurdist drama about the hormonally-charged tedium of waiting for war, penned by real-life 'Jarhead' Anthony Swofford, whose meditative, unvarnished account of his stint in the Marine Corps, training for a starring rôle in Gulf War One, has been turned into an Oscar contender by Brit director Sam Mendes. Dumping the composed formality of his first two films, *American Beauty* and *Road To Perdition*, Mendes has opted for parched visuals and jumpy, handheld urgency to breathe life into Swofford's war-is-dull memoirs.

'Semper Paratus' — 'always faithful' — is the Marines' motto. Loyalty, camaraderie, fierce friendships: The problem for Mendes was that no matter how talented the big names he enlisted for his *Jarhead* campaign — Jake Gyllenhaal, Peter Sarsgaard, Jamie Foxx — the best he could ever hope for was a superficial transmutation into a crack Marine platoon. So he didn't push too hard on the legitimacy front: the sum total of his actors' pre-shoot training was four days of boot camp.

"I get bored of hearing actors say, 'We went to boot camp, we know what it feels like to be Marines,'" says Mendes. "They have no idea what it feels like and neither do I." That didn't stop his stars from entering into their own mental, and physical, war zone during the shoot. In fact, it's fair to say they all went a little bit AWOL...

But more on that later. Starting at the beginning, Swofford, or "Swoff" as he's known, was a third-generation enlistee, dispatched to Saudi Arabia in the summer of 1990 as part of the enormous build-up to Operation Desert Storm. His training as part of an elite unit of Marine snipers — the Surveillance and Target Acquisition Platoon, or STA — meant he expected to see plenty of action taking out Iraqi brass and enemy sharpshooters.

But the 20-year-old never saw a single second of eye-to-eye combat. So, 10 years after returning from the Gulf, he channelled his experiences —

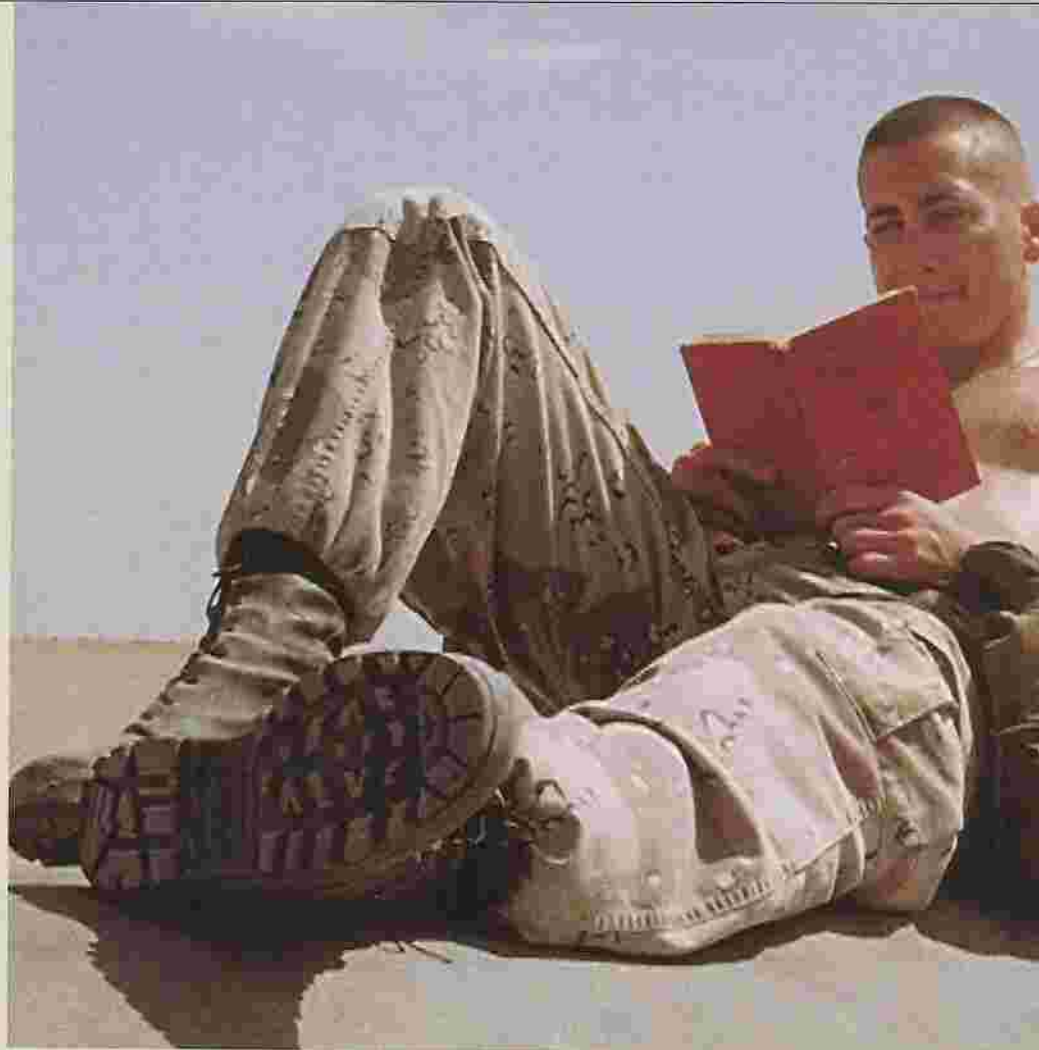
JARHEAD

and anger — into a bracing, irreverent memoir about life in the Corps, expressing in brutally unsparing prose the pumped-up machismo, all-pervading fear and soul-numbing loneliness of being a shaven-headed cog in America's fighting machine. Or, in Swofford's case, standing on the sidelines while his country's overwhelming air superiority pummelled Saddam Hussein's Kuwait invaders into charred submission, then wandering through the grotesque aftermath (the Highway of Death, Kuwaiti oil fields set ablaze).

Although *Jarhead* was a bestseller and critical darling ("will go down with the best books ever written about military life," gushed *The New York Times*), Hollywood wouldn't touch it at first. But as soon as Gulf War Two was in full swing, producers emerged wanting to sink their talons into Swofford's property. Unlike most take-the-money-and-run authors, however, he was determined to hold out for someone he trusted, avoiding those with less pure ambitions. "No one ever suggested making it a combat movie," says the now 35-year-old ex-Marine, "but I'm sure it could have happened with some entities."

Eventually, Swoff entrusted *Jarhead's* adaptation to the husband-wife producing team of Lucy Fisher and Doug Wick, who set the project up at Universal, hired ex-Marine William Broyles Jr to handle adapting duties and recruited Oscar-winner Mendes to direct (not an ounce of military experience). "There's something valuable about having an outsider's look," says Wick of Mendes' unlikely appointment. "But we joked that if *American Beauty* is 'Sam Mendes goes to the suburbs,' this is 'Sam Mendes goes to war.'"

For Mendes' part, tackling his third American tale in as many films was "totally unintentional — my accidental trilogy." But, after developing then exiting an adaptation of the stage musical *Sweeney Todd*, *Jarhead* caught his eye for the opportunities it offered him to evolve. "Having only made two movies, I feel it's too early in my career to say 'This is my style and I'm sticking to it,'" says the 40-year-old of his somewhat whiplash-inducing leap to *Jarhead*. "Road To Perdition was too precious; I got too obsessed with painting the composition and forgot to make room for the actors to interact properly. With *Jarhead* I was determined to make way for the happy accidents that actors bring."



Together, Broyles and Mendes (who surrounded himself with several Marines as advisers) boiled down Swofford's novel — lopping off most of his life before and after the Corps — and milked the author for more stories (including the film's Christmas celebration where Gyllenhaal prances around in two Santa hats, one strategically placed over his nether regions). Otherwise they stuck fairly faithfully to Swoff's tales of juiced-up recruits pumping themselves up with porno, 'Nam movies and alcohol — and wracking themselves with anxiety over the fidelity of their wives and girlfriends back home.

For Mendes, Swofford's chronicle was comparable to "JD Salinger dealing with the Gulf War." Which would make Gyllenhaal Holden Caulfield. But Mendes didn't rush to cast the *Donnie Darko* star

as Swoff, keeping him on tenterhooks for months after the 25-year-old, by his own admission, fluffed his audition ("I sucked"). There were also voices around Mendes impugning the actor's masculinity — insofar as to how convincing he would be as a gung-ho grunt. "We needed to see him as an actual Marine," says Wick, "not a guy who's been a movie star since he was 16."

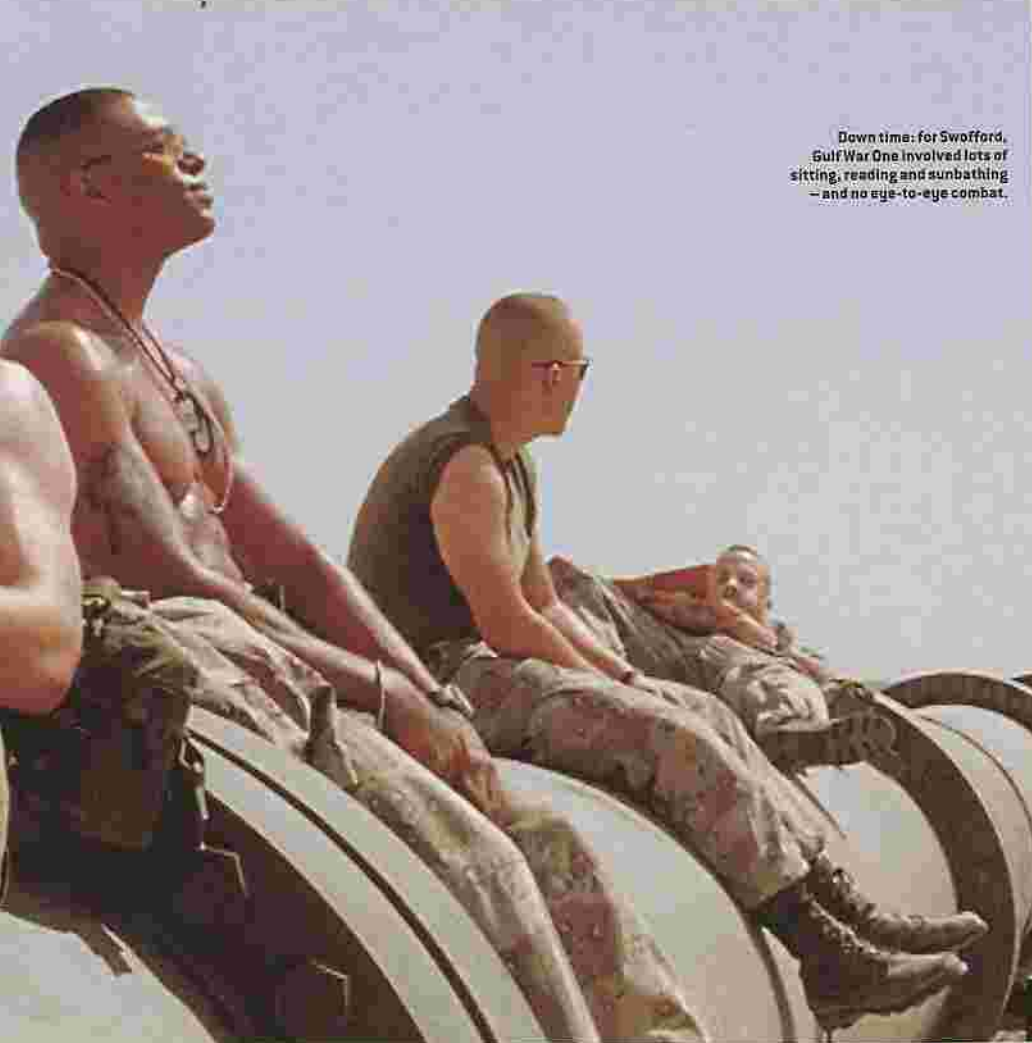
While shooting *Brokeback Mountain* in Calgary, Gyllenhaal heard that Mendes was seeing other actors. Deciding to throw caution to the wind, he rang him up to leave an impassioned message on his voicemail. "It actually *did* matter," says the director of Gyllenhaal's plea. "He timed it very well and it was good to know how passionately he wanted to play the role." Nevertheless, Mendes still kept him waiting another month before telling him he had the part.

Once he'd accepted him, however, Gyllenhaal insists Mendes made him feel like he could do no wrong in the role. So the star committed himself to getting into a Marine mindset, both physically and mentally — including buffing up big time ("He went nuts," claims Sarsgaard, who plays his sniper partner Troy and has been a close friend since he started dating Jake's sister, Maggie). With Gyllenhaal and Mendes in place, it was a cinch getting other actors to sign up: first in line was Oscar-winner Foxx, who enrolled for the supporting role of Staff Sergeant Sykes. Mendes' working methods, however, took some getting used to for everyone, including Foxx. "The first couple of days working with Sam, he says, 'I want you to walk forward, Jamie, and deliver your line. And then I want you to walk out of frame.' I was like, 'Is that it?' 'Yes, unless you want me to release some doves behind your back...'"

"Yeah, I did say that," laughs Mendes. "I think it's too many months of working with Michael Mann

Highway to Hell: Gyllenhaal discovers recently bombed-out cars — full of burned-out corpses.





Down time: for Swofford, Gulf War One involved lots of sitting, reading and sunbathing – and no eye-to-eye combat.

for Jamie! It's like, 'Okay, take 78.' Jamie's like, 'That's it? Seven takes?' I would say, 'Now we're going to shoot it at 120 frames per second and then we're gonna do a slo-mo version... Just teasing.' For the scene where Sarsgaard's character, Troy, gets pinned down and branded with the USMC insignia by his comrades – an excruciating rite of passage administered after your Corps cohorts feel you've proved yourself worthy – Sarsgaard also received a particularly piquant slice of direction. "I did one take for the branding scene and felt so good about myself," says the 34-year-old actor, whose

hair and make-up team were men), rife with the hazing spirit of barracks life.

"There was a lot of bickering and there was a lot of nudging each other out of the way to get attention in the scene, to get attention out of the scene, to pay attention even," says Gyllenhaal. "When Jamie was on set, it was like, 'Who can laugh louder at his jokes?' We were all competing with each other: who could do more push-ups, who could do more pull-ups. It got pretty personal at times. People were just beating each other up all the time, and somehow it was okay..."

'It was competitive, pretty personal. We were beating each other up all the time' JAKE GYLLENHAAL

hard-nosed platoon leader is an amalgamation of two characters from Swofford's book. "I was walking away going, 'I'm such a good actor! I'm so amazing!' I could feel that people thought I did a good job. And then I hear Sam coming up behind, saying, 'Peter, Peter, just wondering, erm... Lovely. Really lovely. Could we do it again?' I was like, 'Why, that was so great!' And he said, 'Try to push through looking like you're being fucked by an elephant...'"

Sleep, drink, eat, shit, exercise, follow orders (or not), wank, sleep, drink, eat, shit, exercise, wank... wait. Continue on monotonous repeat for months in the desert. It's a tough life being an actor. No wonder they went a bit stir-crazy – and worse – out in the deserts of southern California and northern Mexico, which doubled for the desolate expanses of the Arabian Peninsula. It was a testosterone-fuelled, alpha-male zone (even the

factions formed and changed throughout the shoot. The two guys who were best friends on day one weren't best friends on day 60. One-upmanship was a way of life, as were some foul pranks. On one occasion, an actor – who no one will name – took a dump in a Styrofoam tray, placed it in another actor's trailer and turned the heat on high. "It was all locker room stuff," says Sarsgaard. "You start to realise what kind of man you are. When someone comes at you, you're either the dog that rolls over on its back or you're the guy who does that to other people or you're the one who goes off by themselves and tries not to get involved."

Despite being the latter, Sarsgaard came in for plenty of stick, even if he wasn't always aware of it. "I'm playing a guy who doesn't talk much so I was very quiet on this movie," he says. "They would all tease me behind my back. I'd put my headphones on and would just sit in my chair, meditating. And they all started imitating me and saying I was going like this... [Sarsgaard strikes a pose like a praying mantis about to strike] I didn't know this 'cos I had

my eyes closed and my headphones on. I didn't notice a lot of things. I was trying to act like I wasn't there a lot of the time."

At one point, Gyllenhaal and Sarsgaard stopped talking to each other, a mutual snub that lasted almost two weeks. "Jake and I fought, we made up, we hit each other, we loved each other," says Sarsgaard, who one night, to the utter amazement of Gyllenhaal, stood up from the table where they were drinking in their Mexican hotel, walked into a nearby fountain, then stumbled up to his room – fully clothed and soaking wet and without saying a word. "Jake was mid-sentence but this pool... it just looked so nice."

As lifer platoon leader Sykes, Foxx kept his distance from all the grunt grappling. "It was a legitimate parallel with what was going on on screen," says Foxx. "He'd quietly play chess between scenes," observes Gyllenhaal. "We'd all play him and he'd always win. There's a pecking order in the Marine Corps just like there is on a movie set, and it was easy to look to Jamie as our leader." But things changed when Foxx went off mid-shoot to collect his Best Actor Oscar for Ray. "All the young actors were really funny about it," says Wick. "They said they felt much better taking orders from him now that he had the Oscar."

"But I didn't change that," Foxx chimes in. "You gotta come in and say, 'I'll still own that ass, I'll still talk trash to him'. You gotta remain in character. You can't beat people over the head with the Oscar. You only bring that leverage out on people when you need it." >>

JARHEAD-SCRATCH

Total Film stumbled out into the great British streets and asked one simple question: "What do you think *Jarhead's* about, then?"



Kieran Farrell, Salmon Chef

"Oh, Christ. It's not some Jar-Jar Binks spin-off, is it? Do me a favour, mate. Put out my eyes with coat hangers."



Jim Sawyer, Thief

"A documentary about a new danger sport where people try to wriggle inside oversized glass receptacles and roll themselves down a steep hill, due to some ancient bylaw that promises the first person to get to the bottom two full nights' official ownership of the village mayor's daughter? Is this for heat?"



Kathy Latham, Arson Investigator

"Is that the obsessive-compulsive glass-blower thing? Have you got test screening tickets?"



Gareth Mansfield, Fruiterer

"Like the Annabel Chong film, only with a woman who goes for the world-record at eating loads of jam sandwiches in one sitting, as opposed to having sex with men?"



Greg Clarke, Abattoir Janitor

"Isn't that the profane and poetic, grunt's-eye view of the first Gulf War, based on the book by Anthony Swofford? I heard that, despite its spellbinding evocation of the key character's dehumanisation, the film disappointingly muffles the primal howl against the modern military's policy of politically motivated brain-washing." Andy Lowe

JARHEAD



Fired up: American Football in gasmasks for the media (above) and Peter Sarsgaard shoots off in frustration (below).



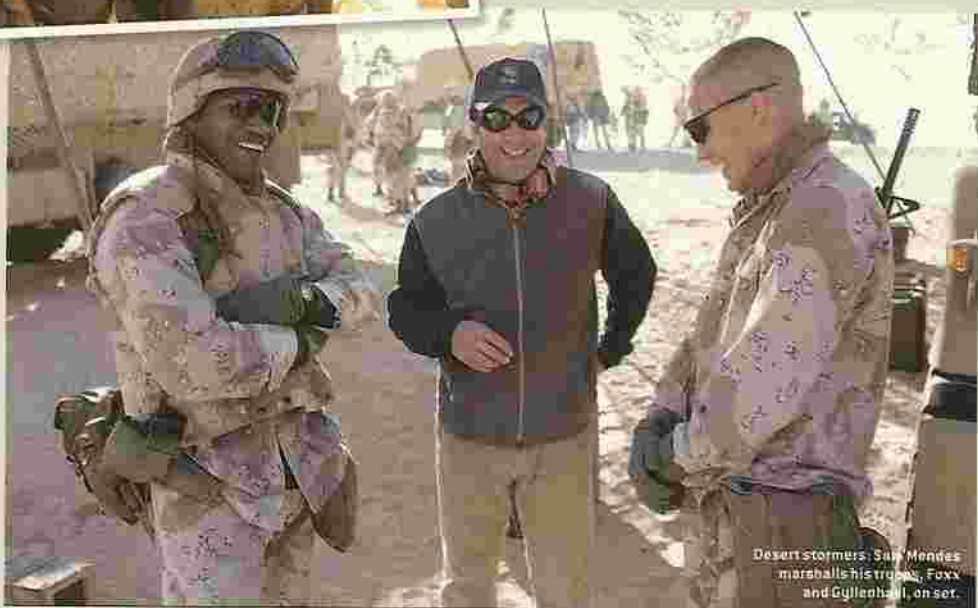
In the same way that Swofford's platoon mates watch repeat viewings of *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket* to get themselves pumped up for battle and, to quote him from *Jarhead*, revel in "the terrible and despicable beauty of their fighting skills," Mendes aims his viewfinder through the filter of classic war films.

Jarhead's vein-busting drill sergeant sequence is practically a direct lift from Kubrick's illustrious *Jacket* scene, while the film's grunts also sit through a whooping, orgasmic viewing of *Apocalypse Now's* 'Ride Of The Valkyries' beach assault. It's a shrewd move on Mendes' part, disarming inevitable comparisons to the all-time great war movies; it's also a nod to the way movies seep into our

cultural lexicon. "There's not a drill instructor in the Marine Corps these days," says Broyles, "who doesn't in some ways pretend to be R Lee Erney."

But *Jarhead* differs in a big way from its Vietnam predecessors — yes, it has the coming of age story, the male bonding, and the military blunders, but it doesn't have, as Mendes phrases it, "the bizarrely invigorating action stuff." "This is an existential war movie in which you train men to go to war and then you take away the war," he says. "But because it says 'war movie' on the packet, an audience is expecting the kind of thrills, in-inverted commas, they get from a combat movie. This is not a combat movie, it's about this war where there wasn't any fighting. I can't invent the fighting. If you want to see combat, go watch a Vietnam movie..."

'Road To Perdition was too precious — this time I've actually made room for the actors' SAM MENDES



Desert stormers: Sam Mendes marshalls his troops, Foxx and Gyllenhaal, on set.

The other thing *Jarhead's* missing, despite a vibe from both book and movie that's insubordinately anti-war, is a grand pronouncement — either for or against what's happening now in Iraq. As Mendes quite rightly points out, why should it? "I don't think we should be in Iraq now," he declares. "But it has nothing to do with my movie. This is a movie about Operation Desert Storm in 1990. And I think people's desire to make an overheated political statement about now is just to simplify the movie. The best war movies are about the futility of war and this is as futile a war as there has ever been." Meanwhile, American critics disenchanted by the fact that *Jarhead* doesn't wield a Big Message have already dismissed its Oscar chances. But don't rule it out just yet. As Sarsgaard's Troy declaims in *Jarhead's* most essential statement: "Fuck politics. We're here now and that's all that matters." **TV**

Jarhead opens on 13 January and is reviewed on page 30.