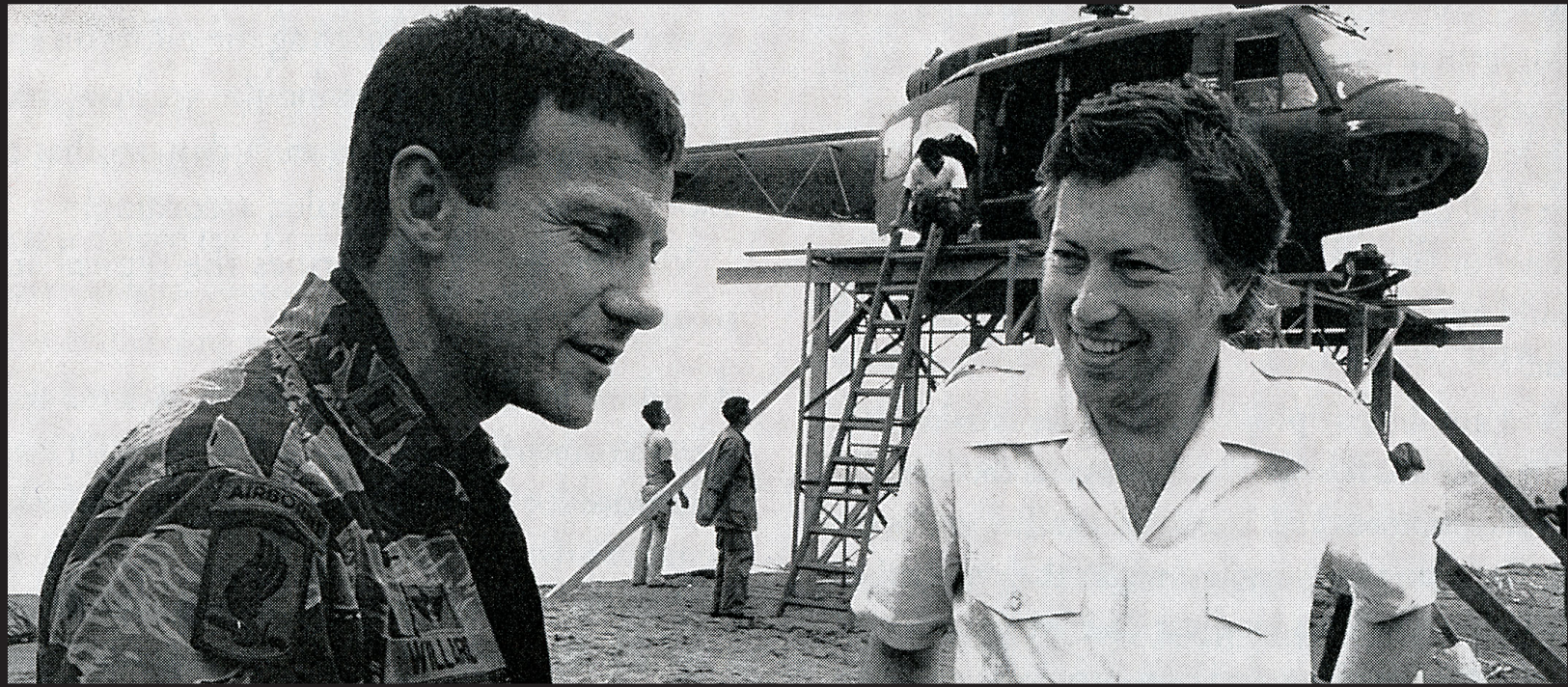


Making Apocalypse Now

Episode 6: Why Harvey Keitel was Fired



Forward

By **CINEMATYLER**

The causes behind the firing of Harvey Keitel from Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* always seemed to be a big mystery. I often come across comments speculating on why such a great actor would be fired just weeks into the production. I can certainly relate to the curiosity. Seeing the photos of Keitel as Willard floating around Twitter were so bizarre—it was like they were from the alternate universe where Eric Stoltz played Marty McFly in *Back to the Future* and Will Smith played Neo in *The Matrix*.

Hopefully Episode 6 has satisfied some of the curiosity, but when you look at Keitel's life and

experiences leading up to *Apocalypse Now*, the mystery somehow comes back. His story seems like it would make him a great candidate to play the role of Willard. Okay, so Keitel is as Brooklyn as you can get. It isn't hard to imagine him clashing with the West Coast surfer mentality of the story and I can't imagine anyone playing the role better than Martin Sheen, but there was a particular defining experience that Keitel had in the Marines that taps into Willard's relationship with the heart of darkness, which we'll explore in this companion to the episode.

CONTENTS



Characters

-Pg 3-



Keitel in the Film

-Pg 4-



Keitel the Marine

-Pg 5-



BTS Photos

-Pg 8-



Selected Comments

-Pg 10-

CHARACTERS



Francis Ford Coppola:

The Hero. A director coming off the massive success of *The Conversation* and *The Godfather* parts I and II is about to embark on a journey that will test his limits—physically, mentally, and spiritually. Will he change the film industry? Will he survive?



Steve McQueen:

The First Choice. An established legendary actor entertaining the possibility of a role in Coppola's big project. The dream of one last great role is enticing, but the actor instead opts to spend his final years with his family.



Harvey Keitel:

The Marine. An up-and-coming actor leaves Brooklyn to slog in the jungle with a group of West-Coasters. He doesn't fit in, but could it just be that Coppola cut him loose in an effort to get over his own false start?



Martin Sheen (Willard):

The Face. An actor yearning to become a movie star will go through a journey similar to his character, Willard. In order to exercise his demons, he must face his one true enemy... himself.

Walter Murch

HARVEY KEITEL APPEARS IN THE FILM

For the YouTube channel, *Web of Stories - Life Stories of Remarkable People*, editor Walter Murch talks about the two shots of Harvey Keitel that made it into the final film and why. We saw one of these shots in the episode. Below is the other, more distant shot of him walking from the helicopter.



Walter Murch: “Tangentially, there is a shot of Harvey Keitel in the film, for those who are interested. It is the shot of Willard walking from the helicopter to the boat and he sits down on the front of the boat with his rifle by his side sticking up in the air. That’s Harvey Keitel because that was a big shot to get. The sunset is just perfect. It was a big production to make this happen and they had shot it with Harvey Keitel. Unless you know, there’s no reason to re-shoot it with Martin Sheen, but in fact, Harvey Keitel is in the film and he’s in that shot.” - <https://bit.ly/39QtkCy>



Harvey Keitel

APOCALYPSE NOW

Keitel grew up in Brooklyn near Coney Island. He lived a block from Brighton Beach and spent his childhood playing on the beaches of Coney Island where there were weekly fireworks displays and the diverse locals would entertain people with song and dance.¹ Keitel had been kicked out of high school at fifteen and attended Alexander Hamilton Vocational School before dropping out a year later.²

Keitel's introduction to the military came shortly after, in 1956.³ He and his high school friends were not interested in school and had no job prospects, so they figured they would join the Navy.¹ They had been hanging around the local pool hall where the neighborhood tough guy would shoot pool wearing his Marine Corps uniform. They told him that they were going to join the Navy and the Marine said, "Fine. If you want to be one of our little sisters..."¹ They immediately scrapped the Navy idea and decided to join the Marines.

Becoming a Marine had an enormous impact on Keitel's life. He said,

It challenged my spirit in a way that it hadn't been previously. And it comes along with learning about sacrifice and courage. It changes you as a person.⁴

He thought of joining the military like the old adage about a man who is asked why he decided to climb a mountain and replies, "Because it's there."³

In a separate interview, Keitel went on to say,

The discipline of the military defined my life to a great extent... It gave me something that I didn't have as a young man growing up. It gave me a sense

of honour, of self-esteem, it gave me the lessons of endurance. I was able to handle much more than I thought I could handle or that I'd ever be asked to handle. And a very strong sense of camaraderie. I had that sense growing up in Brooklyn, but this was something deeper.²



Keitel's Marine portrait.

Keitel trained at Parris Island—the same location that is depicted in the first half of Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*. Part of this training involved an advanced night-combat course where Keitel and a hundred other Marines learned to fight in the dark.

During his interview for *Inside the Actors Studio*, he recounted that experience, saying,

You couldn't see your hand in front of your face. It was pitch dark. It was a night combat course and this Marine instructor was up there in the dark, you

Harvey Keitel

APOCALYPSE NOW

could see his silhouette. We were all very nervous. Very jittery. And he said, 'You're all afraid of the dark. We're all afraid of what we don't know. I'm going to teach you to live in the dark, so that you're not afraid of it.' Years later, that proved to be sort of a guiding mantra for me.¹

I can think of nothing closer to Captain Willard's (and Kurtz's) psyche than the fear and desire to learn to "live in the dark." Willard wishes to no longer fear the jungle, but become part of it. He uses this fear to find Kurtz who has already become a part of it. Of course, by that time, the (quote/unquote) "Jungle" had destroyed Kurtz's mind. As we'll learn in a later episode of this series, screenwriter John Milius had a similar mindset while writing the screenplay.

For three years, Keitel was stationed in Lebanon and was part of Eisenhower's anti-Communist operation, "Operation Blue Bat."² He would eventually earn a medal for his role as a fire team leader in the operation.³ Upon leaving the Marines, Keitel was an initial supporter of the war in Vietnam, but after reading a book titled *The Arrogance of Power*, he began to change his mind and eventually protested the war.⁴

He said,

I remember some demonstrations that were in favor of the action in Vietnam, and they were chanting, 'Your country: Love it or leave it.' That disturbed me because I kept thinking, 'What if I love my country but I disagree with it?' Was leaving it the only option? I decided, no, that protest was also an option.⁴



You merely adopted the dark. I was born in it, molded by it.

Harvey Keitel

APOCALYPSE NOW

Keitel's first job when back in the states was as a court stenographer where, during his breaks, he would read plays and study acting.³ It wasn't long before he left the job to join the New York Actors Studio. His father wasn't very happy about his passion for acting, fearing that Keitel would wind up poor like he had been.² Nevertheless, he persisted and studied with legendary acting teachers Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler and played bit parts in Off-Broadway shows.⁵ At 26 years old, he answered an ad for a thesis film by a student of New York University.⁵ The student was Martin Scorsese and the rest is history.

Reflecting on his time as a Marine, Keitel said,

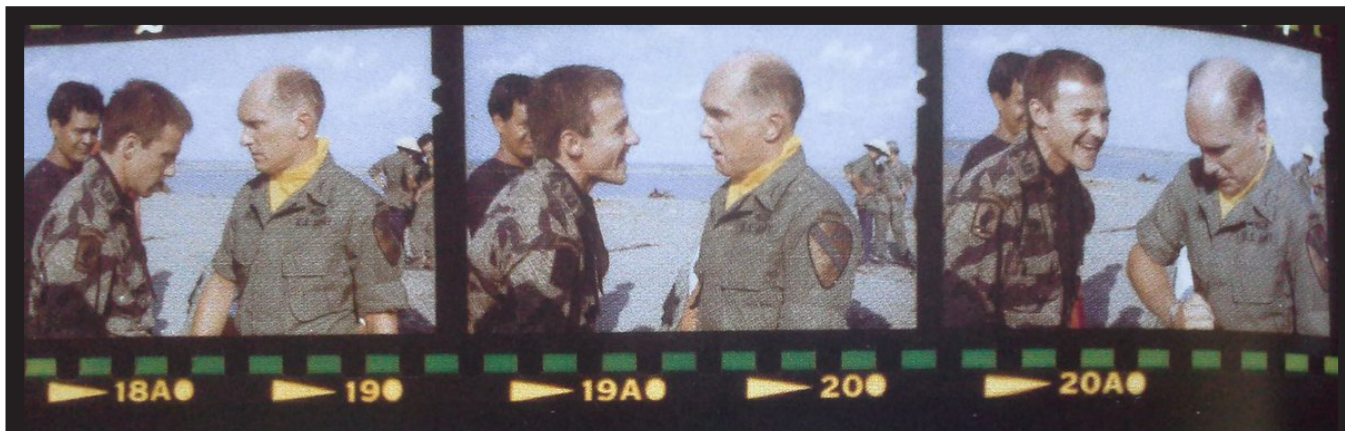
I can tell you that if you do not take the training that a Marine takes, and you are thrown into the jungle, you're probably going to die. If you do not take the training an actor needs to take when you are put into that human jungle of cement and palm trees, you are going to die.³



Welcome to the jungle...

Harvey Keitel as Willard

PRODUCTION PHOTOS



Harvey Keitel as Willard

PRODUCTION PHOTOS



Selected Comments

APOCALYPSE NOW



plane gaper

Sheen's passive roll was perfect, being an experienced, combat hardened soldier, he was like a coiled snake.. Patiently preserving himself, hardening himself for what he knew he had to do in the final climactic scene.. Fate had made it so he was the only one that could get close to Kurtz.. kurtz knew he was going to die, even welcomed it, and wanted to go out like a soldier.. hence chef's death, (lance was too spaced out to kill anyone, and his puppy returned him to a childhood state, rendering him harmless) , no, willard would be the one, and he's been steeling himself, reducing himself to a reptilian state, need to do this one final deed.. pure clarity and purpose in a world of chaos.. He receded into himself from the second he got his order's, knowing he would never be the same when it was done.. but still needing his mission to retain sanity in the chaos..

There's a sense of Chaos throughout the entire movie, the only one that act's rationally , and thinks rationally through the whole film is Willard (though Phillips keeps has a good head, but is disposed of as just transportation up river, Hall created excellent tension on the trip with Willard, but loses effective control when they shoot up the puppy boat) , Coppola's use of filters added a lot of depth and tapped into memories we all have being on a the water, one can almost smell, and sense the river flowing beneath him, as they fight it's current, the VC and them selves.. Willard had to beat the river before he could defeat Kurtz, and the river is a character in this movie as much as anyone else..



Cesar Gonzalez

I always loved this aspect of the movie being about two broken men facing one another and the winner not acquiring wholesomeness, but assimilating into himself the brokenness of his defeated equal, just like neither America nor Vietnam won the war in reality but had to carry the corpses and the ghosts of the war with them into the future, the US went into a crisis of identity and Vietnam had to deal with the inequality and corruption of the pre-war status-quo.

Selected Comments

APOCALYPSE NOW



T.L.

I saw this many years ago in the theater, shown without any titles/credits at the beginning or end. It was one of the most powerful cinematic experiences I've ever had.



Derek Brou

@T.L. that sounds awesome. I had a similar experience with the movie "Synecdoche, New York". I went to a university screening of it before it was released without knowing what I was about to watch, and it deeply affected me.



Insanejughead

I got to see it for the first time at the IMAX in August 2019. It was the Final Cut, with Gray Fredrickson introducing it and staying to meet/talk with anybody afterward.

So, there are several reasons why this movie is one of the untouchable greats for me.

CinemaTyler: I try to go in fresh when the movie is from a filmmaker I like (currently staying away from any *Tenet* info). I had a similar experience with *Synecdoche, New York*. I was living in the SF Bay Area and it was only playing at a tiny theater in Berkeley. With traffic, I managed to get to the theater five minutes after the screening started. I ended up waiting two hours for the next showing, but it was so worth it. I was lucky enough to catch a screening a couple of years ago with a Q&A by Charlie Kaufman. Such a great experience!

They really should make IMAX screenings of *Apocalypse Now* an annual thing. I've seen the movie a hundred times, but seeing it on IMAX felt like the first time all over again. The sound was incredible. I have to imagine that modern blockbusters are trying hard to emulate that experience, but there is just something unique about being in the hands of an auteur for such a big movie. Here's hoping that the pandemic ends soon, so we can experience *Tenet* the way it's meant to be seen!

Selected Comments

APOCALYPSE NOW



Trying Times

This is going to sound so dumb but I'd appreciate someone sharing their knowledge, during the scene where sheen is breaking down Coppola was shouting directions and prompts, did they have the capability at the time to edit this out? Or how was this masqueraded? I'm interested in cinema but I'm not a student so I have no technical knowledge. Thanks.



Kult Dawg

A lot of the sound in movies is done in post production. So what they would have done is cut out the audio, and put in things like sound effects, music, and anything else. Some sound can be recorded on set, but for that scene in particular they probably cut out the audio and replaced it. That's also why you see the clapperboard in the unedited footage, to sync up sound and film.



beeskneesplees

Almost every film made going back decades and decades has had the ability to overdub audio onto a scene making it possible for things like a director telling an actor what to do to occur but not be heard in the final product. It is done all the time. Probably more than you could imagine. Sound effects are recorded on a foley stage by foley artists who have a wide variety of methods and physical items they use to recreate almost any sound imaginable. They do this while actually watching the footage from the film and timing the sound effects (a creaky gate, footsteps, swords clanging against each other, drawers opening and closing, a mirror getting punched and smashed... the list is endless, really) along with the actual footage so it matches what is occurring onscreen. There are also sound designers who often create whole new sounds and aural effects using an array of techniques. They can come up with sounds for things that are relatively mundane like a radio playing in the background to the fantastical like a laser gun blasting. Dialog from the actors themselves is often recorded in an audio studio and overdubbed later after the visuals have already been captured on film.

CinemaTyler: It's always so fascinating to see behind-the-scenes footage of directors directing scenes as they unfold. The footage of Kubrick directing Danny during the maze scene in *The Shining* with a little boombox playing scary music as he shouts commands feels like peeking inside Kubrick's head. It's like watching a conductor and an orchestra!

Selected Comments

APOCALYPSE NOW



hancock63

I've always liked film critic John Nolte's theory that Willard died in that hotel room and when he opens the door, he's entering hell for his many sins.

CinemaTyler: Such an interesting take! It gives new meaning to: "Everyone gets everything he wants. I wanted a mission, and for my sins, they gave me one."



Stop the Philosophical Zombies

Weird how the hotel scene injury accounts are totally different between Francis and Martin. Both take credit for not stopping the scene for different egotistical reasons.



MrMysteryman00

Reminds me of Leonardo's scene in Django Unchained.

CinemaTyler: Another one would be Daryl Hannah accidentally breaking the van's glass window when she's running away in *Blade Runner*. I love when weird accidents manage to fit so well into the scenes. I believe *Django Unchained* was one of those rare exceptions where they ended up using fake blood to continue working Leonardo's cut hand into the rest of the scene.

Selected Comments

APOCALYPSE NOW



Beaugard Slim

I love hearing about how some amazing scene in a movie was lit with bubblegum and paperclips.

CinemaTyler: The best artists always find a way! It brings to mind the great cinematography of Robby Müller where he would simply use tungsten film with florescent lights to create a super unique look in locations they couldn't mess with.



ihearsatan

If they would remake this they would cast The Rock as Willard.

CinemaTyler: Jeez, Kurtz wouldn't stand a chance!



SOURCES

Endnotes

1 **Inside the Actor's Studio (S4E1)**

- <https://bit.ly/3i9jYVz>

2 **Harvey Keitel: from the marines to the screen, from Scorsese to Tarantino**

- <https://bit.ly/3guUQbo>

<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/film/harvey-keitel-from-the-marines-to-the-screen-from-scorsese-to-tarantino-1.2505353>

3 **Famous Veteran: Harvey Keitel**

- <https://bit.ly/3gv2geD>

<https://www.military.com/veteran-jobs/career-advice/military-transition/famous-veteran-harvey-keitel.html>

4 **'The Irishman' Actor Harvey Keitel on Classic Comics, Political Protests, and Curing a Broken Heart With Sinatra**

- <https://bit.ly/2XtpryA>

<https://www.mensjournal.com/features/the-irishman-actor-harvey-keitel-on-comics-politics-and-life-as-a-marine/>

5

CelebVet: Harvey Keitel, Actor

- <https://bit.ly/2XvaX15>

<https://www.veteransadvantage.com/blog/veterans-advantage-awards/celebvet-harvey-keitel-actor>

Patrons

THANK YOU!!!

Aaron
Heather Minton
John Donaldson
Jammez
Nicolas Zapata
Vincent Lan
Joe Simmons
TheCinephiliac
S T
Hot Multimedia
Cheryl Moch
Zachary Sersland
Micah RagingRiver
Ryan Ellis
Chien
Nick Siegenthaler
Lewis Peterson
tam buriini
Antonio T
Quincy Battieste
Mark Wiitanen
rxl
Ike
John b
Shaun Michael Eliades
Mitchell Cait-Goldenthal
Tom Vohasek
tony scola
Brandon
Jeremy Bell
The Geeky Amreeki
Mannnaus
Mauro Vargas
Bradley
Matt Dancer
Martin Tower
Shane Reynolds
Matt A

Keith J Pickett
james fentress
Thibault Longuet
peter ford
IFCYG
warren blyth
Zeke
Ville Peltonen
Michael Andre
riggio037
James R. Miro
Aj Salvo
Johnny North
MAOA
Bill Banse
COMICS IS DEAD
Darren Simon
Colin Christian
Chris Markham
Stephan Thien
David Kehn
Samuel McAlpine
Richard Millett
Simo Iiskola
Jonathan Sklar
Robert A Zeichick
mike l
jaz h
Paul Spence
Darin Boville
Christopher Urena
Robin Block
Kheng Lai Tan
William Burke
Adam
Thomas Zenker
Lamont Cranston
Chad Jackson

Ryan Razeghi
Ricardo Montoya
Make This Movie
Konstantin Bredyuk
Mohammed Taher
Louis J Neumayer
Matt Finnegan
Frank Kuo
Ross Colombo
Zerj
Matthew Reyes
Niall Munnely
Christopher Wenham
David H. Adler
Agustin Herrera
Andre K
Leo Leigh
Jimmy Durickas
Ivar HEGGEN
ZeosPantera
Martin Forchemer
chip moore
Dillon Norton
Tom Sheard
J. D.
Jonathan Starch
Costas Stergiou
Graeme Neil Reid
ben hengst
Jan van Huizen
Dennis L Garling
Ian Porter Phillips
Ziad Shihab
Sasha Koshman
Glenn Wilkinson
Caleb Mathre
Make Stuff
Seth Lochhead

Patrons

THANK YOU!!!

| | |
|--------------------------|-------------------|
| Danial Sami | Jeroen Houben |
| Dale Strumpell | Marshall Crawford |
| Nikita Liamzine | Israel Storey |
| Rodrigo de Salvo Braz | Giant Sparkplug |
| Alexander Kozlov | Steven Medcraft |
| Johnnathon Schroeder | Kristi Delasia |
| Anton Halldin | Steven Kinhead |
| FreeSir | Aidan |
| eumoria | Markus Ploeckl |
| Alex M. Martinez | |
| Rap Upz | |
| Tom Xia | |
| Mårten Ferm | |
| Nico the Mexican | |
| Chino | |
| Chris Washburn | |
| Jakub Łabeński | |
| Fabian Gordon | |
| Denys Holovyanko | |
| Moez G Solis | |
| Phil Strahl a.k.a. Pixel | |
| Prophecy | |
| Ra Ra | |
| Hernan Marques | |
| Ned Price | |
| Alain | |
| Brendan Smith | |
| Beau Stucki | |
| woodruff phillips | |
| Nancy Corcoran | |
| James Mereness | |
| VAUCHER ARCHITECT | |
| Dianne Knudsen | |
| Paul Thomas | |
| Zach Shevich | |
| Taylor DeLuca | |
| James Webb | |