

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

## FULL METAL JACKET (1987)

Stanley Kubrick

**OVERVIEW** This was not Kubrick's first anti-war film, but this time he refined his critique and honed in on the psychological training that transformed Marine recruits before they were sent to Vietnam. By devoting the first half of the film to that training, led by a sadistic drill instructor, Kubrick is able to show the horror of war before the story moves to the battlefield. The real battle is for the men's minds, which was won by the military during boot camp. Again, the director explored his favourite themes of masculinity, sexuality and violence. And, as usual, Kubrick did a lot of background reading, which led him to *Short-Timers* (1979) by Gustav Hasford, and *Dispatches* (1977) by Michael Herr; both authors were journalists who covered the Vietnam war. Both Herr and Hasford also worked with the director and co-wrote the screenplay, ensuring an authenticity lacking in many war films. Noteworthy also is the extensive use of popular songs and jingles, none more memorable than the 'Mickey Mouse' marching song, which sums up many veterans' opinion of the war. The title 'full metal jacket' refers to a type of bullet with a soft core encased in harder metal. Kubrick chose it as a simile for the humanity covered up by the brutality of war. The film opened to considerable box-office success and later won several awards (though none were major prizes). It regularly features on lists of all-time best war movies.

**SYNOPSIS** The film is divided into two parts. The first opens in 1967 when a group of new recruits arrive at a US Marine training base and are put through a harsh regime by drill instructor Hartman. Two of the main characters (Joker and Cowboy) survive, but the third (Pyle) loses his mind and kills the instructor and himself. The second part moves the story to Vietnam, on the eve of the Tet Offensive, where Joker works as a journalist with the military newspaper *Stars and Stripes*. He is sent on assignment, where he meets up with Cowboy, who is the leader of a group of soldiers. During the battle of Hue, the soldiers are pinned down and some killed by a lone sniper. When Joker confronts the sniper, his gun jams, but he is saved by a comrade. The sniper turns out to be a teenage girl. As she writhes on the floor, fatally wounded, Joker executes her in order to end her suffering.

### MAIN CHARACTERS

Joker	Joker is a Marine Corps recruit.
Pyle	Leonard 'Gomer Pyle' Lawrence is another recruit.
Cowboy	Cowboy is another recruit.
Hartman	Hartman is the drill instructor.
Animal Mother	Animal Mother is a machine gunner.
Rafterman	Rafterman is an army photographer.

### STORY

**Recruits** The story begins in 1967. New army recruits have their hair cut off at a Marine Corps training base. Next, the bald-shaven men are lined up in a dormitory and addressed by Hartman, their drill sergeant. Hartman shouts, mocks and humiliates them. When one of the recruits whispers something about John Wayne, Hartman names him 'Joker' and then knocks him down. Hartman derides another recruit and names him 'Cowboy' because he's from Texas. Next, he abuses a chubby recruit and names him 'Pyle'.

**Boot camp** Hartman supervises the squad's training, including handling a rifle and marching at dawn. When Pyle mistakes his right shoulder for his left, Hartman hits him hard in the face. At night, the men are told to sleep with their rifles, which they are taught to revere. Their physical training includes negotiating an obstacle course, which the overweight Pyle is unable to complete and is subjected to more of Hartman's insults.

**Pyle** When Joker shows courage in answering Hartman's trick questions, he is promoted to squad leader and told to whip 'fat boy' Pyle into shape. Joker helps Pyle get through the tasks they are set. Still, Hartman's abuse and humiliation of Pyle continues. Fed up, Hartman punishes the whole squad for any mistake Pyle makes. One night, the recruits beat the sleeping Pyle with towels wrapped around bars of soap; although they do not injure him, they need to expel their anger.

*Killer instinct* Hartman drills the killer instinct into his men, exhorting them to emulate Lee Harvey Oswald, who was a Marine. He also leads them in chants valorising the 'corps'. At Christmas, Hartman leads the men in singing 'Happy Birthday' to Jesus. He then explains the need to defeat 'world communism', saying that 'God has a hard on for Marines because we kill everything we see.'

*Pyle disturbed* After weeks of conditioning and humiliation, Pyle seems mentally unstable and talks to his rifle. Joker notices this and is worried about him. Later, though, Pyle excels at marksmanship and is praised by Hartman.

*Graduation* As a final exercise before graduation, the recruits participate in mock combat. Afterward, Hartman declares that they are no longer 'maggots.' They are Marines. Most will go to Vietnam. Some will die. But the Marine Corps will live forever. When the assignments are read out, Joker is assigned to the journalism section, while Cowboy and Pyle are assigned to infantry.

*Killing* During their last night on the base, Joker is the watchman. He finds a deranged Pyle in the bathroom assembling his rifle and tries to talk him down. Standing up, Pyle goes through the movements drilled into him. Hartman enters and orders Pyle to drop the weapon, but Pyle kills him, and then kills himself.

*Vietnam* It is 1968, on the eve of the Tet Offensive. Joker, promoted to sergeant, is a war correspondent and his friend Rafterman is a photographer. They work for the *Stars and Stripes*, a military magazine that churns out US propaganda to keep the soldiers in the field happy. Both Joker and Rafterman are anxious to cover a real battle, and they get their wish during the Tet Offensive. When the North Vietnamese attempt to storm their base in Da Nang, Joker and Rafterman use machine guns to shoot down attacking enemy soldiers.

*On assignment* In a meeting the following day, their editor explains the extent of the enemy advance across the country. He sends Joker on an assignment to the front lines, but advises him to remove the peace symbol button on his jacket. Rafterman goes with him. On their helicopter ride to Hue, a man with a machine gun mows down peasants in the rice fields below and boasts about his 'kills.'

*Mass burial* When they land, they witness the mass burial of civilians executed by the Viet Cong. Joker is confronted by an officer who demands to know why he wears a peace symbol on his jacket and the words 'Born to Kill' on his helmet. Joker gives him an honest but confusing answer.

*Cowboy* Joker and Rafterman join a squad of Marines, and Joker meets his boot camp friend Cowboy, who is second in command. Joker gets into an argument with Animal Mother, a macho Marine who loves to kill. The squad comes under enemy fire and some are killed, but the battle is won. The next day, the men are interviewed by civilian journalists and talk openly about their feelings and experiences. The men are then offered prostitutes by a local pimp.

*Sniper* A few days later, they go to a burnt-out factory building where some Viet Cong are hiding. The patrol leader is killed, putting Cowboy in command, but they become lost. When the sniper wounds two more men, Cowboy radios for support but none is available. Cowboy orders a retreat, but Animal Mother disobeys and attempts to save the wounded men. The wounded men are killed by more fire. Cowboy is shot and dies in Joker's arms.

*Mercy killing* Animal Mother takes control and leads the men in a rush to find the hidden sniper. Searching through the burning building, Joker finds the sniper, who turns out to be a teenage girl. After hesitating, he attempts to kill her but his rifle jams. Rafterman saves Joker by wounding the sniper, who begs the men to finish her off. Animal Mother thinks they should leave her to suffer and die, but Joker says they can't do that. Animal Mother agrees but only if Joker is the one to put her out of her misery. Joker delays but kills her.

*Mickey Mouse* The film ends with the soldiers returning to their camp singing 'Mickey Mouse.' In a voiceover, Joker says he's in 'a world of shit' but is happy to be alive.

## THEMES

*Gender: masculinity* The central theme of the film is the corrosive association between war and manhood. Throughout the first half of the story, in boot camp, drill instructor Hartman makes direct connections between male genitalia and war. In one scene, the men march about the barracks in their underwear, shouldering a rifle and grabbing their crotch while shouting: 'This is my rifle! This is my gun! This is for fighting! This is for fun!' Hartman consistently addresses the men as 'ladies' and insults them for being 'queers'. Later, he orders the men to name their rifle after a woman and to sleep with it at night. The purpose of boot camp is to turn the recruits into violent men, with a killer instinct, which means cutting off their 'girlish' hair and eliminating any softness in their personalities. Pyle is not strong and fit enough to be a man, so Hartman picks on him, illustrating the warped military thinking that humiliation will produce manliness. One of the soldiers is nicknamed 'Handjob' because he masturbates ten times a day. In the second half

of the film, we see the men in combat, where the animalistic instincts drilled into them are displayed. One soldier is actually called 'Animal Mother'. The most dramatic illustration of the link between sex and killing occurs at the very end, when Joker executes the dying female sniper. The scene is staged with hyper masculinity. As the men stand over the prone girl, one of them says, 'No more boom-boom time for her,' referring to the local English slang for sex. The one who shot her screams, 'I fucking blew her away' and gyrates his hips, simulating intercourse. The last image shows Joker, the soft-hearted man with a peace button on his jacket, staring into the distance in horror. He has become a man.

*Identity* The other dominant theme of the story is the transformation of the identity of young men. Similar to the experimental therapy satirised in *A Clockwork Orange*, here the method of identity alteration is the mental conditioning dished out in boot camp. The idea is to eliminate individuals and create cogs in a killing machine. It all begins with shaving off the men's hair, removing that idiosyncratic element of their appearance. Then they are given new names, dressed in uniforms, made to march in step and to chant in unison. The men are taught to identify with their rifle and to submerge their personalities in the weapon of death. 'If you survive,' Hartman tells them at the beginning, 'you will become a weapon.' When they do push-ups, the men chant, 'One, two, three four, I love the Marine Corps.' Everything is designed to submerge the individual into a communal identity of the 'corps.' Any aberration in this masculine monolith must be destroyed. That is why Hartman does not punish Pyle individually for his mistakes and instead applies a communal punishment. That is why the men beat Pyle as a group while he sleeps. That is why Hartman goes ballistic when Pyle confuses his left and right shoulders. 'You want to be different,' Hartman yells and hits him hard in the face. Slowly, even the overweight Pyle is moulded into a machine that follows orders. The tragic irony of his transformation is displayed at the end of the first half. Having lost his sense of self, Pyle identifies with his rifle, which he talks to while assembling and disassembling it. When he uses it to kill Hartman, he is simply acting on the impulse that the victim has drilled into him, eliminating any guilt for murder. The same is true for Joker at the end of the second half of the story when he also kills the defenceless teenage sniper. The difference is that Pyle also kills himself, as if acting on orders to purge the Marines of any weak links. And so, more than just a criticism of war, the film dramatises the futility of resistance to the power of the military to change a person's identity.

*Appearance and reality* A less sensational but still important theme is the representation of war, an emphasis that owes a great deal to Michael Herr, who co-wrote the screenplay. After passing out of basic training, Joker, the nominal protagonist, is a journalist, and his friend, Rafterman, is a photographer. Both work for the *Stars and Stripes*, the official US military newspaper, with a history going back to 1861. They attend briefings at which their editor tells them what to write and what he will print, all of which should emphasise the moral cause of the American presence in Vietnam. This includes minor changes in vocabulary, for example, changing 'North Vietnamese army regular' to 'North Vietnamese soldier'. Similarly, 'search and destroy' missions should be 'sweep and clear' missions. The editor also criticises Joker's report about an assault for its failure to include a 'kill' or 'blood.' 'We run two basic stories,' the editor reminds him. 'Grunts [GIs] who give half their pay to buy geeks [Vietnamese] toothpaste and deodorants... And combat action that results in a kill.' When Joker makes fun of this policy, the editor points out that it is 'not a popular war' and 'it's our job to report the stories that these "why are we here?" civilian reporters ignore.' This picture of official army propaganda about the war stands in contrast with the later scene, when civilian reporters interview the soldiers. Now we hear uncensored voices. 'Think we waste geeks for freedom? This is a slaughter,'

says Animal Mother. 'Do I think America belongs in Vietnam?' another soldier says, repeating the reporter's question. 'I don't know. I belong in Vietnam.' One mimics President Johnson's words about not sending American boys to Asia, while another points out the Vietnamese people would rather 'be alive than free.' Joker tops it all off with a parody of the US Army recruiting propaganda when he says, 'I wanted to come and meet interesting people in an ancient culture and...kill them.' Neither the official newspaper nor these vox populi seem able to capture the true nature of the war. The lived experience defies representation.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Joker** Joker is the hero by default, the only one among the recruits who appears to hold out against the war machine that wants to destroy the individual. He is nicknamed 'joker' by Hartman because he made a comment about the drill instructor resembling John Wayne. His integrity is recognised even by the brutal Hartman, who makes him squad leader and tasks him with improving Pyle's performance in training. Joker bravely wears a peace symbol button and, even in Vietnam, continues to make sarcastic comments about the war. Until the end, when he, too, succumbs to the horrible illogic of war.

**Compassionate** Joker is the most sympathetic figure in the story largely because of his reaction to Pyle's humiliation by Hartman. A good example is a scene that occurs after Pyle has been caught with contraband, a jelly donut, hidden in his foot locker. For this crime, Hartman decides to punish the entire squad, which (as Hartman intends) turns them all against Pyle. Now, Pyle is a pariah. Not only has he constantly failed in training but he is also the reason why the others suffer. In the next scene Joker is dressing Pyle, like a mother might dress a child, pulling down his shirt and even doing up the buttons. 'Joker,' the big man says, 'Everybody hates me now. Even you.' As Joker continues to button the buttons on his shirt pockets, he says that nobody hates him. 'You just keep making mistakes, getting everyone in trouble....I'm trying to help you, Leonard [Pyle's real name].' This moment stands out as the only display of genuine kindness in the entire story. Joker shows himself to be honest but supportive. He seems to sense that his pal is starting to go over the edge.

**Rebel** Joker's rebellious nature is illustrated at various points in the story, but perhaps the most memorable is the editorial meeting of the *Stars and Stripes* staff in Vietnam. When the editor tells his staff to substitute 'sweep and clear' for 'search and destroy', Joker gives a sardonic smile and says, 'Sweep and clear. Yes, that's very catchy.' The unsmiling editor replies by asking him why he didn't include any 'kills' or 'blood' in his report on a recent battle. Joker says he didn't see any, to which the editor replies that he is supposed to follow the guidelines for reporting combat. As the conversation continues, Joker keeps on smiling and answers his editor's question with truthful answers that expose the newspaper's all-too-obvious propaganda.

**Thoughtful** At the end of the scene just described, when Joker is sent to the front lines, his boss tells him to take off his 'damned button', his peace symbol. But when Joker gets to the combat zone, he is still wearing it, which causes an officer to ask him what it is. 'A symbol, sir,' Joker barks out, in military fashion. The officer asks why he wears that symbol and yet has 'Born to Kill' written on his helmet. 'Some kind of sick joke?' the officer wants to know. 'No, sir,' says Joker, again politely and honestly. When the officer demands an answer, Joker says, 'I think I was trying to suggest something about the duality of man, the Jungian thing, sir.' Joker's statement reveals the terrible conflict in his character. He is both a thoughtful person who believes in peace and a soldier trained to kill.

**Defeated** In the end, the soldier triumphs over the peacenik, as shown in the dramatic ending of the story. Joker, still wearing the peace button, is the one who finds the deadly sniper, who turns out to be a teenage girl. He raises his rifle to kill her, but the weapon jams (mechanical failure or a failure of nerves?). After one of his comrades mortally wounds the sniper Joker and the others stand over the suffering girl and debate what to do. She begs them to kill her, but the men want her to die a long death. Joker says they 'can't just leave her'. Animal Mother suggests that Joker should 'waste her'. Joker kills her, and the scene ends with his face hardened into the 'thousand-mile stare' that is said to define a killer. Joker, in a final voiceover, says, 'I'm in a world of shit, yes. But I am alive and I am not afraid.' Joker, the rebel wearing a peace symbol, has been defeated and turned into a killer.

**Pyle** Leonard Lawrence is nicknamed 'Gomer Pyle' because he resembles a character by that name who was a soldier in a popular American TV series from the 1960s. Like his namesake, Kubrick's Pyle is naïve and meek, and also overweight, which means he continually fails during physical training. For this, he is mercilessly humiliated by Hartman. Although he shows talent in

marksmanship, the mockery and abuse he suffers takes its toll, and he eventually appears confused, vacant and unhinged.

**Weak** Pyle's weakness is displayed in the first scene with drill instructor Hartman, who verbally abuses the recruits as they stand to attention in the barracks. Hartman makes fun of his name (Leonard Lawrence), which puts a grin on Pyle's face (in truth, Hartman's abuse does sometimes contain humour), which only angers Hartman because it is a sign of weakness. The more Hartman insults him in colourful language, the wider poor Pyle's smile becomes. Told he has three seconds to wipe it off his 'stupid face', Pyle squeezes his features but cannot suppress his amusement. 'Sir, I can't help it, sir,' he says. Hartman then punches him hard, dropping him to the floor. Pyle, in other words, is just an ordinary person, a bit overweight, but not excessively so. His real problem, for a Marine Corps recruit, is that he is weak-minded. Lacking self-discipline, he is seen as a threat to the discipline that defines the Marine Corps. He is the soft centre that Hartman hates and must destroy.

**Unhinged** Under the severe strain of boot camp, Pyle's mental weakness turns into depression and then madness. This is a slow process that reaches its culmination in the killing scene in the barracks bathroom. Joker finds him alone at night, filling his rifle's magazine with bullets. The lighting is low and Pyle's crazed grin is illuminated by Joker's flashlight. 'Hi, Joker,' he says in a slow, abnormal voice. When Joker asks if the bullets are live, Pyle grins again and says, pausing between each word, '762 millimetre. Full. Metal. Jacket.' His face hardens into a vacant stare. He leaps up and goes through the rifle drill, shouting out commands to himself. Hartman enters and Pyle shoots him, and then himself. The training has been successful. Unhinged, Pyle destroys himself, so that the weak link in the group is eliminated.

**Hartman** Abusive, sadistic, bullying, misogynistic, homophobic, Hartman displays just about every negative characteristic that one can imagine. He is a drill instructor whose job is to transform young men into killers, and he is very good at his job. Although thoroughly detestable, he is not without the ability to understand his men. One hopes that when he goes home to his family, Hartman is a different man, but that seems unlikely. (Lee Ermey, the actor who gave a mesmerizing performance as Hartman, was himself a Marine Corps drill instructor during the Vietnam War).

**Sadistic** The film begins with a sensational scene in which Hartman addresses his raw recruits and bullies them into submission. It is a superb performance of the sadistic bully who insults, humiliates and mocks, all in order to diminish the men's self-image and make them more malleable, the human clay that Hartman will mould into killers. His first command is that the men will only speak when spoken to and that the first and last words out of their mouths will be 'sir'. He seems to enjoy his role, barking out orders and seeing how much he can humiliate them. He calls them 'maggots, the lowest form of life on earth...pieces of amphibian shit.' He is also explicit about his psychological method. 'You will not like me,' he screams, 'but the more you hate me, the more you will learn.' Hatred generates knowledge. That is the perverse belief that motivates the sadistic Hartman.

**Perceptive** Hartman may be a sadist, but he is not a fool (however much we may want to dismiss him as one). He does display an understanding of his men in one particular scene. Hartman orders Joker to go on toilet duty and make it clean enough for the Virgin Mary to use. 'Do you believe in the Virgin Mary?' he asks, and Joker says no. Hartman slaps him hard and tries to trap him into contradicting him, but Joker stands his ground and does not say anything he doesn't believe, while at the same time remaining respectful toward authority. Hartman then promotes Joker to squad leader. He has seen something in Joker that he admires—integrity, inner strength, honesty—and he is smart enough to reward it with a promotion. It is the single moment when we see Hartman as something more than just a bully.



(Pyle in the bathroom before the shooting)



(Hartman mocks Cowboy)



(Hartman leads the men in a drill)



(Joker in combat)