

## Zanuck's D-Day Opus

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**ON THE BEACH:** Producer Darryl F. Zanuck, far left, acts as field marshal on the set of *The Longest Day*. Seated next to him is Robert Wagner, and far right is former teen idol-turned-actor Tommy Sands.

The 60th anniversary of producer Darryl F. Zanuck's *The Longest Day* traces an eerie parallel to the current devastation in Ukraine, where cities and towns have been reduced to rubble. In Zanuck's 1962 magnum opus about D-Day, during an assault on the French port of Ouistreham—the scope of which is stunningly captured with a sustained aerial tracking shot—French soldiers are forced to level their own landmarks to root out their Nazi occupants.

This was a film where “a cast of thousands” literally applied (23,000 real soldiers were used to fill out the battle scenes, including the U.S. Navy's Sixth Fleet). Zanuck recruited an international team of directors to lend each major participant an equal perspective, intimate or epic. Instead of accented English, French and German characters spoke their own language, despite the commercial risk of using subtitles. Through it all, Zanuck commanded more troops than any single general did during the actual invasion. His associate producer, Elmo Williams, was listed in the end credits as “coordinator of battle scenes.” Zanuck himself got behind the camera to helm key sequences.

A pioneering Fox executive whose legend loomed as large as that of his contemporaries Thalberg and Selznick, Zanuck earned the possessory credit emblazoned on *The Longest Day's* posters from the get-go. He bought the rights to Cornelius Ryan's book and insisted Ryan write the screenplay, with support from such scribes as James Jones (*From Here to Eternity*). He recruited a global all-star cast that included Richard Burton, Jean-Louis Barrault and Curt Jurgens. American names ranged from Golden Age stalwarts like John Wayne and Henry Fonda to such young Hollywood heartthrobs as Fabian, Robert Wagner and Richard Beymer, fresh off of *West Side Story*. Zanuck even found a dead ringer for Dwight D. Eisenhower, a nonactor named Henry Grace.

Zanuck's gambles, including the decision to shoot in black and white, paid off. *The Longest Day* turned out to be the top grossing film of 1962, outgunning *Lawrence of Arabia* and affording Fox executives a huge sigh of relief given that cost overruns on *Cleopatra*, being made simultaneously, almost sunk the studio.

“In the entire history of warfare, no undertaking had ever approached in size or stakes the D-Day invasion,” said Zanuck in 1969. One could say the same about the producer's massive cinematic undertaking. ■