Film yields Jack Nicholson’s best performance

By Oliver Spivey
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Almost everyone has a favorite Jack Nicholson perfor-
mance, and it’s usually the kind where Jack gets to
play Jack. Pictures like Easy Rider (1969), Five Easy
Pieces (1970), One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest (1975) or The Shining (1980) might be your fa-
vorite. My personal favorite “Jack” performance
from this period—comes in Hal Ashby’s The Last Detail (1973).

Review

Nicholson plays a vet-

orous Navy petty officer, “Badass” Buddusky, who
along with a fellow “Lifer,” “Mule” Mulhall (Otis Young), is ordered to trans-

sent an 18-year-old rookie, Meadows (Randy Quaid), from a Virginia Naval base to

a New Hampshire Naval prison for piffring $40 from the Admiral’s wife’s favorite charity. The kid is

absurdly sentenced to eight years for his trifling offense, something Buddusky and

Mulhall find to be an ap-
palling injustice. What

changes between their depar-

tures from Norfolk and their

arrival in Portsmouth is a journey, both literal and

symbolic, in which the vet-

erans will try to give the

rookie some time to learn

life before he loses precious

years to a life in prison.

From the time Bud-

dusky and Mulhall are

assembled to the details, we can

already see what’s coming.

But even when the kid

takes the turn we expect, we

end up being pleasantly

surprised at the variations and

touches in the unfolding.

The movie has the ob-
vious comedic elements of a

buddy-road picture, but it

also reverses one of the con-
nventions we’ve seen in nu-

merous Westerns and cop
dramas, where a dangerous

prisoner must be delivered
to a jailhouse with all
haste. Rather than transpor-
ting the prisoner promptly,

Buddusky and Mulhall all-
cide to tarry at the stops

along the way, their

cheerful dallying giving Meadows to experience

he will not have for years to

come.

Meadows’ movement from innocence to experi-

ence begins with cheese-

burgers and milkshakes and

ends with beer and provi-

dence. The hard-drinkin’ and

hard-cussin’ Buddusky is

unmistakable as a New Hampshire Naval

Navy, the only place that of-

fers their lives any purpose.

It’s a movie filled with un-

assertive Meadows.

He also brings that

Irreverent, vulgar and pug-

nisomedy, with both its farce and

surdity of the characters’

deeds and the un-

nerving images of a

human figure

sinking in the

snow, the sound of crows

filling the sky above them.

For all the humor found

in this movie, there is an

undercurrent of tragedy that is

unmistakable. The Last De-

tail is as an described as an

exemplaric, with both its face and

absurdity of the characters’

surreal journey. As Buddusky

wrestles with his fate in the

Navy, the only place that of-

fers his lives any purpose.

And his scenes with Robert Towne (adapting

from a novel by Darryl Pon-

ticsan), wisely avoid ending

in a corn-covered Boston park. Meadows, wanting at last to escape,

makes a run for it. After Buddusky and Mulhall

tackle him and brutally subdue him, the camera

remains icily detached in a wide shot showing three

diminutive human figures

sinking in the snow, the sound of crows filling the sky above them.

The movie certainly has

a couple of flaws. One is a

contrived scene where the

trio comes across a counter-

culturalist hanging group, which gives the impression

it was dragged into the

movie for what it says about 1970s cultural

politics and little else. The

movie’s biggest little flaw is

Johnny Mandel’s score, which consists of military

parade music that is sup-

posed to be an attempt at

irony. It works fine once or

twice but is overplayed at
	imes in the story when the

images themselves plainly

present their ironies.

One element initially

dismissed by critics that I

found effective was Michael

Chapman’s intentionally

grabbed-out cin-

ematography. The camera-

work conveys the geldedness and

lifelessness of an indif-

ferent world blanketed by

winter, a world as frozen

and stunted as the ability of

these men to break from the

decaying muscles of military

routine.

The best use of the cine-

matography comes after the

trio attempts a ridiculous cookout in a snow-covered

Boston park. Meadows, wanting at last to escape,

makes a run for it. After Buddusky and Mulhall

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