

"CENTURION": Marshall-ing Forces Part One

Written by Samuel Zimmerman
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Simply put, CENTURION is a blast. The fourth film from DESCENT director Neil Marshall hits theaters today in limited release from Magnolia/Magnet Releasing (see official website and list of theaters [here](#)), and is nothing short of a solid, period action film with plenty of gore and badass-ery throughout. Marshall recently sat down for an exclusive interview with FANGORIA to discuss Romans, Picts, the Middle East and everything in between. Hit the break to check it out!

For starters, here's the film's official synopsis: "CENTURION is set during the war between Roman soldiers and Pict tribesmen during the 2nd century Roman conquest of Britain. Michael Fassbender stars as Quintus Dias, Roman centurion and son of a legendary gladiator who leads a group of soldiers on a raid of a Pict camp to rescue a captured general (Dominic West). The son of the Pict leader is murdered during the raid, and the Romans find themselves hunted by a seemingly unstoppable group of the Pict's most vicious and skilled warriors, led by a beautiful and deadly tracker (Olga Kurylenko), and hell bent on revenge."



FANGORIA: How did you get become interested in the tale of the ninth legion?

NEIL MARSHALL: It started about 10 years ago. I was sitting in a bar with a mate of mine and having a few drinks and chatting about shit and he mentioned to me this legend that he'd heard of, of the ninth legion of Rome—this entire legion of Roman soldiers that marched into Scotland in 117 AD and vanished without a trace. That's the legend; it's pretty straightforward. There's not much to it, but I was instantly hooked. I thought, "This is going to make a great movie. There's got to be a story in there." I'd just come off the back of doing DOG SOLDIERS when I'd heard about this and initially I thought we could add some sort of fantastic element to it; they all got slaughtered by the Loch Ness monster or something. But then I quickly thought, "That's not

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the road that I want to go down. I'd really like to know what could've potentially happened to them if this thing was real." The thing is, the more research you do into it, you find out that historians have since disproved the whole thing. The legion did get attacked, but they didn't get wiped out, just kind of dispersed afterward, which is all a bit boring because you think, "Oh, the legend's really cool, so I'll stick with that." So I came up with this whole story based on what might have actually happened to the Romans where they're battling these tribes in Scotland called the Picts, and how the Picts might have fought against the Romans in a kind of guerrilla war and they've beaten the Romans somehow and then actually it's the Romans that create the myth as a cover-up for their own screw-up, basically. In order to cover it all up, they create this myth and it's a mystery that they disappeared.

FANG: Would it have been easier to go the supernatural route?

MARSHALL: It would've been easy to come up with some supernatural element or whatever, but I just felt it was too similar to DOG SOLDIERS, that being werewolves in Scotland. I set myself the challenge of—the legend states that they vanished without a trace, that there was no trace of them whatsoever, so when I was just writing the script, I was trying to figure out what the Picts could possibly do to remove all evidence that these people were ever there. So not only do they kill them, but they melt down their armor and burn all the bodies and do something with the ashes so there is literally, physically, no evidence that the Romans were ever there. And this was all in the script at an early stage. Then we realized that it was actually quite long winded and was going to distract from the story so some of those elements got lost. The ashes thing is still there to a point. It just became more about telling a good, solid story about these survivors trying to find their way home and then the cover-up. For me the big thing was, if I wasn't going to do it supernatural, I still wanted to maintain a horror aesthetic to it by making it as bloody and realistic as possible. I figured, "If I'm going to make a battle film, it's inevitably going to be full of blood and guts." We're dealing with people who are attacking each other with swords and spears and axes. There's no clean way of killing somebody with an ax. I had to be honest to the world and the subject matter by doing that.



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FANG: Obviously you're a supporter of more on-set and practical FX. How was it making the transition to epic battle scenes as opposed to one kill at a time?

MARSHALL: It's definitely more complicated. It was kind of a new experience for me. We did as much as we possibly could, but we didn't have very long to make the film at all. In comparison, for BRAVEHEART, Mel Gibson had six weeks to shoot one battle. We had seven weeks to shoot our entire film. We had like three days to shoot our big battle, and obviously we're trying to move as fast as possible and we did. Maybe about 90 percent of the gore effects in it are practical and on-set. Unlike a lot of other directors, I don't like to leave that stuff until the end of the day, unless I absolutely have to. Most of the time, that's just as important as anything else in the movie, so we schedule it properly and get it in there. You have to know how long these things take to do. One particular kill in the movie involves Olga cutting this guy's head off in the middle of a river. Well, that was going to be hard enough for the effects guys because they're in the middle of a freezing cold river and they're just standing around with this mannequin that they had that was rigged full of blood. It was incredible, the dummy that Paul [Hyett] built, it was fully armatured and it had like a skin on it as well and inside it was pumped full of pressurized blood. The idea being that whenever Olga hit it with a real ax, no matter where you hit it, blood would pump out, and under pressure as well, so it looked very realistic. She had to hold onto it by the head and with a real ax had to hack its head off, but its own weight kind of kept it there. What's funny about it was, it was really hard work. It was a little ax and Olga was about 20 hits in and had blood spurting all over the place and she's just like, "I can't do it anymore." I said, "Cut it there, take five minutes and we'll start again and literally pick up where we left off." She goes back in there and is hacking away at it and eventually the head comes tearing off and falls off into the river or something like that, and it was kind of messy because she tripped just as the head came off, and because she tripped, tore it off and I was like, "That looks great! That's going in the movie!"

TO BE CONTINUED

Stop back tomorrow for more exclusive Q&A time with Neil Marshall.

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