

# JOIN THE PROFESSIONALS



*The Professionals* ran for four series over six years on ITV from 1977 with audiences of over 10 million. Robert Fairclough recounts the action-packed exploits of Bodie, Doyle and Cowley, CI5's finest!

**T**here were a lot of bad, nasty dangers coming from the Soviet Union and its satellites," observes David Wickes, director of three episodes of *The Professionals*, on the unstable nature of national security in late 1970s Britain. "Ghastly people with thumbscrews, and all the horrors that existed behind the Iron Curtain. We had terrible fellow travellers in this country: people blowing things up, threats of anthrax in the water – it was a horrible time, and *The Professionals* reflected that. Two guys have to put it right, and Brian Clemens said to me before we started: 'I'll tell you what I want the audience to say: Thank God they're out there.'"

Even if the inspiration for *The Professionals* was anarchy in the UK – and footage from real, violent political demonstrations of the time featured in the first series episode 'Look After Annie' – the elite organisation that formed the basis of the series, Criminal Intelligence 5 – CI5 for short – was a complete fiction, with a jurisdiction that handily ranged through organised crime, terrorism and espionage (the 'C' was from CID, the 'I5' from MI5). According to advance publicity in the *TV Times*, "they finish jobs that the police wouldn't even know how to start. Keeping Britain clean sometimes calls for dirty tactics."

"Brian Tesler, the MD of London Weekend Television, was impressed with our production record with *The New Avengers* and said 'I'd like you to do something else,'" the series' creator Brian Clemens recalled in 2004. "At that time, *The Sweeney* had been running and also *Starsky and Hutch* was just appearing, and he said 'I want a buddy show.' So I submitted two ideas – one was about two undercover cops, and the other was what became *The Professionals*. I'd entitled it *The A-Squad*, but I didn't think that would ever be a commercial title, which is ironic, because a few years later *The A Team* came out and was a huge hit."

Pictures courtesy Network Distributing

This image l-r: Bodie (Lewis Collins) and Doyle (Martin Shaw), seen above with Cowley (Gordon Jackson)



Although *The Sweeney* had three top-line artists credited in the titles, DCI Haskins (Garfield Morgan) was a supporting character to DI Regan (John Thaw) and DS Carter (Dennis Waterman), and didn't appear in every episode; on *The Professionals*, the principals were very definitely a trio.

Veteran Scottish actor Gordon Jackson (1923-1990, as ex-commando Major George Cowley) took top billing over Martin Shaw (Raymond 'Ray' Doyle) and Lewis Collins (1946-2013, as William Bodie). Cowley handled the Whitehall intrigue, while Bodie and Doyle handled the investigating, which always involved the gun-play, punch ups and very fast driving in Ford Capris and Escorts required to bring their cases to a usually violent conclusion.

"The boys did drive like mad in their cars," Jackson noted in December 1983. "One was trying to outdo the other by being better, with muggins sitting at the side. After the first few days I said, 'Can I have a double to sit beside Martin and Lewis?' because they have to twirl the car around on the brake."

Jackson was best known at the time for playing the avuncular butler Hudson in the historical drama *Upstairs, Downstairs* (1971-75). Clemens, though, had faith in his principal actor's versatility: "I think Gordon is one of the best actors in Europe and because he has become so associated with [Hudson], this will prove to be an

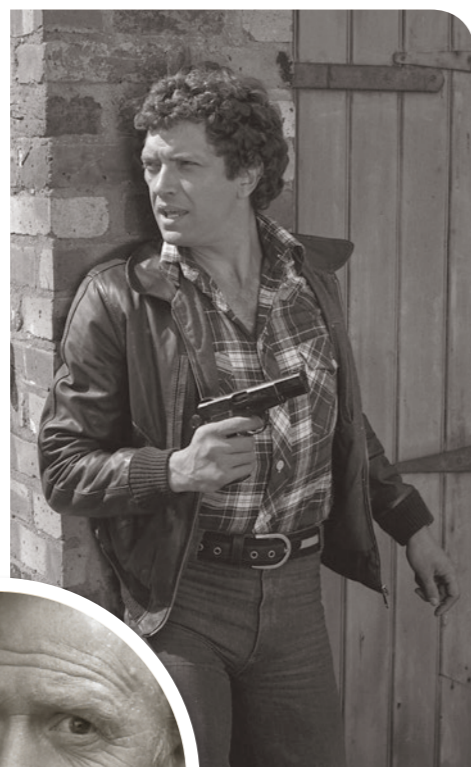
interesting piece of casting." That is something of an understatement.

The writers weren't afraid to make Cowley completely ruthless and unsympathetic when the situation demanded – notable examples are threatening to inject heroin into a drug dealer, turning him into an addict, in 'Private Madness, Public Danger', and, in 'Wild Justice', promising to shoot Bodie in the head if he murders a civilian. On other occasions, Cowley is prepared to sacrifice Doyle and Bodie's lives if the situation requires it. On every occasion, Jackson rose to these acting challenges with fearless commitment.

"[Bodie and Doyle] could have been very unsympathetic," David Wickes reasons. "They had something in common with a bouncer outside a club – not your friend, not your friend at all – whereas Regan and Carter were. You had to get [the balance] dead right."

After a misfire in the casting of Bodie – Anthony Andrews, later to become famous through *Brideshead Revisited* (1981), was the original choice for the role, filming some scenes with Shaw – the production





Above: Bodie and Doyle race against time to track down an expert sniper with a high-powered rifle able to strike over extraordinary distances in 'Killer With a Long Arm,' directed by David Wickes

team opted for Lewis Collins as the tough but approachable ex-mercenary. He was paired with Martin Shaw as Doyle, an ex-CID officer with more of a conscience than his partner.

However, the balance between the two leads didn't synchronise straight away. Unhappy with what he had got himself into, Shaw recalled on *Without Walls: The Professionals* in 1996 that he "wrote my letter of resignation six weeks into the filming of the first episode."

The production team's refusal to release Shaw from his contract caused tension with Collins, who in later years would diplomatically play down the initial difficulties

between himself and his screen partner: "Martin and I always had a bit of a spark, because we weren't quite the same animal."

Eventually, Shaw conceded that Andrews' replacement was a good choice and one he could work with. "I said to Lew, 'Look, you probably know I didn't want you to do this, and I was not in favour of it, and I absolutely fought against it, but I've changed my mind and I think you're really great in the part, and can we be friends?'" After a pause, Shaw added, "I think he still thought I was an arsehole, for a while."

Although the screen partnership did work well, particularly in the bantering car scenes the duo claim they rewrote, Shaw remained creatively frustrated. "It was continual," he stated. "We had researched a bit – as actors,



you want to do it properly, so we'd found out how these people would behave. We'd had days training with an SAS regimental weapons instructor. And so, when we were asked to kick a door down and stand framed in a doorway with the light behind us, we would say, 'No, come on, please, you're an easy target in the doorway, you'd just get cut off at the knees. Can we do it properly?' 'No, nobody will know,' they said."

Collins, however, fully embraced the action man opportunities the series offered: he had learned to shoot at the age of thirteen with his father and, in between six-month filming blocks on *The Professionals*, he would "go off with the Territorial Army" to become "very fit." Even though he broke a leg during a parachute jump – which closed down production – Collins was undoubtedly the most professional of the professionals.

#### HARD-HITTING STYLE

Outside three charismatic lead actors, at the heart of the series was Action with a capital A. When it came to handbrake-turning cars around London roads, staging realistic shoot outs in broken-down warehouses and choreographing street battles, there was only one man to call. Peter Brayham, the stunt arranger who had developed the – literally – hard-hitting style of *The Sweeney* for Euston Films, received a phone call shortly after *The Professionals* entered production in 1977.

"I was asked if I would be available to do



The *Professionals'* stunts were impressively ambitious for a 1980s TV series, involving hardware such as helicopters and hovercraft.

Top right: The villains from 'Killer with a Long Arm' included Diane Keen – one of director David Wickes' favoured actresses – as Helga

the title sequence," he recalled in 2002. "I asked who the director was and they said, 'We haven't got him yet but we think it's going to be David Wickes.' So I said, 'If you've got David, I think he'll probably ask for me.' He did, and we did a military assault course for the [original] titles, and I also did one where I, famously, drove a car through a sheet of glass. That's the way it started, and I was asked to stay, as things hadn't worked out with their original stunt guy."

The experience of the Euston personnel in making the kind of fast, action-movies-for-TV that Brian Clemens had envisaged was so essential that key members were invited onto *The Professionals'* production team after *The Sweeney* concluded in 1978. Assisting producer Raymond Menmuir (1930-2016) from the second series on were Chris Burt and John S Smith; film editors at Euston, they became associate producer and supervising editor respectively.

Directors David Wickes, Douglas Camfield, William Brayne, Tom Clegg, as well as Burt himself, together with writers Roger Marshall, Ronald Graham and *Sweeney* producer Ted Childs, were all among the contributors to Bodie and Doyle's exploits. "All the [central] people who worked on *The Sweeney* were pulled over after it finished," Brayham affirmed. "There's the pattern - 'How do we do it? Get the guys that did it first!'"

One notable director not from *The Sweeney* stable was the BAFTA-winning Martin Campbell. For the BBC, he went on to direct Troy Kennedy Martin's iconic nuclear conspiracy thriller *Edge of Darkness* (1985), and in 1995 successfully relaunched the James Bond franchise with Pierce Brosnan's first film as 007, *Goldeneye*. (Brosnan himself appeared in a tiny role in *The Professionals*, as 'radio man' in 'Blood Sports'). Campbell reinvented the movie Bond for a second time with Daniel Craig's debut in *Casino Royale* (2006). "All of the action in James Bond I can attribute back to *The Professionals*," Campbell affirms. "Everything I learned on *The Professionals* is up there on the screen in Bond."

#### KEEP IT MOVING FAST

The series debuted on London Weekend Television on 30 December 1977 at 9pm. Brian Clemens' script 'Private Madness,

*Public Danger*, about a chemical warfare expert, Nesbitt (a sinister Keith Barron), blackmailing the government into stopping research on chemical weapons, set the slick, comic strip tone for the rest of the series (even though it wasn't the first episode filmed).

*The Professionals* was about cause rather than effect, with the emphasis always on the stunts and fights and double-act by-play between Bodie and Doyle, rather than probing too deeply the motives of the villains or the political or social incentives behind their crimes; this may explain why some of the stories end so abruptly. As Clemens' writers' brief put it, "Any political motivations must be subjugated to the ordinary human involvement – keep the relationship of Ray and Bodie, with Cowley, firmly in the foreground: keep it moving fast."

*The Professionals* seemed naturally more at ease with terrorists and foreign agents, and most of its more impressive stories involved that combination of elements. Don Houghton's *A Stirring of Dust* features Darby (Robert Urquhart), a Russian defector clearly based on MI6 traitor Kim Philby (1912-1988), while Philip Loraine's *Dead Reckoning* has a clever plot in which a double agent, Stefan Batak (Alan Tilvern), arranges for his double to be killed in CI5 custody so he can continue his espionage unhindered.

Unusually, in Douglas Watkins' *Servant of Two Masters*, Cowley is undercover and suspected of being a traitor, while another impressive twist of the format was Clemens' *Mixed Doubles*. The story draws a thought-provoking parallel between





## “NAUGHTY BOY!”

*The Professionals* was so conspicuously macho that it was instantly ripe for parody. Members of Channel 4's *The Comic Strip* team poked fun at CI5's finest in 1984, in a comedy TV film entitled *The Bullshitters: Roll Out the Gun Barrel*, which grew out of satirical vignettes for Keith Allen's late-night 'youth' programme, *Whatever You Want* (1982-83). Directed by Stephen Frears, *The Bullshitters* focused on two gun-toting agents of 'DI5', the familiar-sounding Martin Foyle (Peter Richardson) and Bonehead (Allen).

*Roll Out the Gun Barrel* went straight for the jugular in questioning the duo's sexuality, as Bonehead and Foyle ran around London barechested in an attempt to find the kidnapped daughter of "Commander Jackson" (Robbie Coltrane). The duo eventually professed their gay love for each other, but not before the film made some sly digs at Martin Shaw and Lewis Collins: post-intelligence, Foyle had opted for a career in serious theatre ("the fights were rubbish"), while Bonehead ran a school for TV tough guys called KNOBS ("Yes, it is a bit of a mouth full").

The dysfunctional duo returned in a bona fide *Comic Strip* entry in 1993, this time for the BBC, entitled *Detectives on the Edge of a Nervous Breakdown*. This time they were part of an ensemble of 1970s detectives – completing the team were "Shouting George of *The Weeney*" (Jim Broadbent), c.f. Jack Regan from *The Sweeney*, and "Jason Bentley" (Richardson again), c.f. Jason King, from *Department S*.

Much of the fun came from seeing the sparks fly between the various vintage crime fighters and the "'90s detective", Phil Cornwell's Spanker (based on Jimmy Nail's *Spender*). Confronted with this scruffy new model, Bonehead demanded, "Who's the squatter?"

The spoof-*Professionals* proved so appealing to men of a certain age that in 1996 Nissan employed Richardson to produce a Bonehead and Foyle-inspired advert for their Almera GTI, this time using *The Professionals*' theme music. Cornwell played 'Doyle' while Ray Trickett's 'Bodie' was the highlight, running down a corridor punching locker doors with a boxing glove, as the duo banter such catchphrases as "Cover me!", "Move it!" and "Naughty boy!" The advert had the appeal of the first two spoofs distilled into under a minute.



two hit-men, Coney (David Beames) and Joe (Nikolas Grace), and Bodie and Doyle, as the two duos prepare to attack and defend a peace conference. The clear implication is that the CI5 agents could find themselves in the same position as their doomed opponents.

Arguably the series' most impressive spy script is Ranald Graham's *Operation Susie*. In a story that keeps twisting and turning until the end, Diane Molner (Alice Krige), a foreign exchange student, is involved in manufacturing artificial cocaine to undercut the value of the real drug being exported by her country; as it forms the basis of her homeland's economy, the plan is that the right-wing junta in control will be toppled. A novel idea, the story is also enlivened by inter-departmental politics between CI5 and MI17, "the department of dirty tricks", and the script is peppered with sharp and witty dialogue, such as Cowley's "A left-winger at Sandhurst? Not exactly a stereotype," and Bodie's sardonic observation, "Smoking marijuana can be dangerous to your political health."

Even when the stories were pedestrian, one way in which *The Professionals* always scored over *The Sweeney* was in the ambition of its action sequences. Tom Clegg's direction of *Blind Run* is incredibly impressive for a TV production made in 1978, involving gun battles in the streets, in a country house and, most impressively, during a car chase in a disused train yard as a CI5 vehicle is shot to pieces.

Elsewhere, highlights included a shoot out on a gasometer (*Fall Girl*), a speedboat chase on the Thames (*Spy Probe*) and Bodie scaling a factory chimney in *Foxhole on the Roof*. Ironically, the ever-escalating scale of the series' set pieces was why, Gordon Jackson believed, *The Professionals* came to an end: "It became too expensive to make because of the Bond thing with helicopters and speedboats."

### THE BANNED EPISODE

When the series engaged with 1970s' Britain's most contentious political subject – racism, at a time when support for the right-wing, extremist National Front was dangerously on the rise – the series' action format amplified the volatile argument to a point where LWT felt the episode in question, *'Klansmen'*, couldn't be shown.



In March 1978 the company stated that "some viewers would have been disturbed by characters expressing extreme points of view," and to date the episode has never been shown in the UK. Collins, in particular, was unhappy with the way Bodie was handled: "I wasn't a fan of that particular show because my character was written as definitely racist... There were some heated words over that." *The Professionals* was never so explicitly political again.

The series' filming schedule was a gruelling one. "The turnaround is ridiculous," Collins said at the time. "At the end of six months, you [collapse]." This may explain the negative comments reportedly made by both him and Shaw that appeared in the press in late 1979.

Collins had apparently "demanded a bigger say in the scripts, criticised the locations and even revealed that he is ashamed to watch the show," while the latter was dissatisfied with being "a violent puppet." Defending his co-stars, Jackson put this criticism down to Collins and Shaw being "very tired," but added rather sharply that "If you want to shape the scripts, go away and become a writer."

Nevertheless, more episodes centring on Bodie and Doyle's characters were commissioned, notably *'Wild Justice'* (1980) and *'Discovered in a Grave Yard'* (1982). (Shaw was to admit in later years that he learnt the hard way to moderate his comments in the press.)

If *The Professionals* had two overriding criticisms, it was its levels of violence and sexism. On the latter point, Collins,

interviewed in 1996, took the view that "It's OK to look back and say 'Ah, they shouldn't have done this and that,' but I think everything goes in cycles. It'll be the fashion to be a real man once again, somewhere down the road."

Discussing the criticism over violence, Gordon Jackson considered that the programme was "an action-packed series, so in an action-packed series you're bound to have collision. I don't think it was pre-meditated violence, it was good, healthy fisticuffs."

Even so, with excessive action and macho attitudes in its fast-moving mix, *The Professionals* drew an exceptional amount of bad press from newspaper reviewers. "Farcical" (*Evening News*) and "the values of a soft porn magazine" (*Sunday Telegraph*) were typical comments from the broadsheets, while the left-wing *Morning Star* condemned "a state police agency answerable to nobody but itself."

"[The critics] gave it rotten notices at the start," Gordon Jackson conceded, even though, over time, the series would accrue audiences of 18+ million viewers. "Even Brian Clemens said... it wasn't until the second or third series that [reviewers] started warming up to it. But we were attacked, especially by one man – Richard Afton, in the *Evening News*; he could hardly wait to get his teeth into *The Professionals* every week. And even after it started soaring to the top of the ratings, he kept saying 'Stop! Stop looking at this! You must realise this is awful!'"

### HARD NUTS BUT GOOD SPORTS

Away from the punishing schedule and the media controversy, Lewis Collins and Martin Shaw were good sports when it came to the series' sizeable younger audience, a constituency fostered by spin-off merchandise such as jigsaws, trading cards, annuals and toy cars.

In 1979, the duo visited 11 year-old bone marrow transplant recipient Michelle Beckley at Hammersmith Hospital and, to her delight, it was arranged for her to feature in the episode *'The Madness of Mickey Hamilton'*. The following year, Collins appeared on ATV's anarchic Saturday morning show *Tiswas* as "all-action he-man Bodie... straight from rehearsals for *The Professionals*", confined to a wheelchair and gamely covered from head to foot in bandages.

Unlike *The Sweeney*, which ended with Jack Regan's resignation, *'No Stone'*, the last *Professionals* adventure to be screened on 6 February 1983, offered no hint of a conclusion to the caseload of CI5.

There was a very good reason for that, as Clemens revealed: "When LWT finally cancelled [the show], we had all the cast available, under



contract – I think – for another ten or thirteen episodes. Within three weeks... LWT had terrible second thoughts. They knew they'd made a huge error, because by that time, lots of the logistics were coming in, not just from here, but from places abroad, and they realised what a terrific job financially [the series] was doing for them."

"I think it would be very difficult getting the boys together again," Jackson considered at the end of 1983. "They're young and they want to go on to other things. *The Professionals* made them very famous. Lewis has gone on to do films – *Who Dares Wins* (1982) – and Martin has gone back to his first love, the theatre. They're very busy all round the world."

On television, the influence of the series can be seen in the ambitiously staged set pieces of the BBC's MI5 drama *Spooks* (2002-2011) and the USA's *NCIS* franchise (2003-), while, with the major tweak that CI5 now operated globally, the series was itself revived in 1999 on Sky One as *CI5: The New Professionals*. The sequel offered an

entirely new team of young guns led by Edward Woodward as Harry Malone (even though Lewis Collins had been the first choice as an older Bodie, now in charge, but – reluctantly – had to decline).

*The Professionals* also made its mark in the wider cultural zeitgeist: it can't be a coincidence that a 1978 British army recruiting campaign used the headline 'Join the Professionals', a song title appropriated by post-Sex Pistols guitarist Steve Jones and drummer Paul Jones for their band of the same name in 1979.

Elsewhere, Clemens recalled that the series became notorious in the rogue state of Libya: "When they were having all these demonstrations outside the Libyan embassy... there was a faction there with posters shouting 'Down with CI5!' I thought that was the final accolade, that they were condemning a unit that I'd created and it didn't exist outside my own mind."

In 2011, it seemed the Clemens' ambition to get a

movie of *The Professionals* off the ground – which had initially been talked about as far back as when the original series was in production – was close to happening. Speaking at the 50th anniversary celebration of *The Avengers*, he enthused that the film was to be "funded by Lionsgate... It'll be made in England and will be contemporary. What we're waiting for now is to cast the director, and from the director you get the main cast. Nothing's etched in stone, but Russell Crowe is a big fan, and he would like to play Cowley – if we can find his fee! Names like Tom Hardy and Michael Fassbender have been mooted for Bodie and Doyle." Despite this positive announcement, however, nearly ten years later the film is still yet to happen.

In the end, perhaps it's best to enjoy *The Professionals* in its 1970s and 1980s heyday. Despite initially faltering in re-runs thanks to Martin Shaw's reluctance to sign a re-screening deal, the series now continues to be regularly repeated, continuing to impress with the level

of ambition in its stunts, blokeish banter and infectious, propulsive theme music.

"It does seem incredible to me now, that some of the stunts they pulled, the boys did themselves," observes Martin Campbell. "Martin Shaw was always doing his own stunts, and did them very well, as did Lewis. By today's standards, I don't think the insurance companies would let them do it. They were both excellent drivers too, and they both knew what they were doing."

"I always felt [Martin and Lewis] were a bit unhappy and relieved when it was over," Gordon Jackson mused after production on *The Professionals* concluded. Half smiling, he added, "I, in fact, was very sad when it was all over."

Thanks to Umbrella to quote from their DVD commentaries by Brian Clemens. Thanks also to Henry Holland.

