

● GETTING PERSONAL

Like Ike?

Tom Selleck earns his wings

By MICHAEL GILTZ *5/30/04*

TOM Selleck can identify with General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Allied Commander who had the overwhelming responsibility of organizing D-Day.

"What got to me in playing Ike," says Selleck, 59, who plays the beloved war hero in A&E's "Ike: Countdown to D-Day" on Monday night, "was the sheer load of it. He was never dealing with one problem at once. All he had to do was turn his head and someone else was coming to him with something else. If it wasn't the weather, it was any number of other things."

Surely Selleck understands that constant demand for attention: his career hasn't been this hot since he catapulted to stardom in 1980 as the mustachioed Vietnam vet turned private eye on "Magnum P.I." (a role that famously cost him the lead in 1981's "Raiders of the Lost Ark"). Last week he starred in CBS' two-part TV movie "Reversible Errors" opposite William H. Macy. His Emmy-nominated stint on "Friends" proved he could be as adroit with comedy as he is with drama. A string of Westerns on TNT, among them 2001's "Crossfire Trail,"

have set cable ratings records. CBS just announced his new project "The Culpesper Cattle Company" as one of its premiere TV movies for the fall.

And tomorrow night comes "Ike," a look at the arduous buildup to D-Day, one of the most complex, disaster-fraught enterprises in military history. It co-stars Timothy Bottoms as his chief of staff and Gerald McRaney as George S. Patton. History can seem inevitable in retrospect — of course, the Allied Armies defeated Hitler — but Selleck hopes this movie ("It's not a docudrama" he says repeatedly) can show viewers the very real risks involved and why they had to be taken.

"This stuff is so hard, from an ordinary soldier's point of view," says Selleck, who is married to the actress Jillie Mack (she appeared in a few episodes of "Magnum") and with whom he has one daughter. "It's so hard from a command point of view. If we hadn't invaded France and taken huge risks, it's quite possible — even

though Germany was on the defensive by then — they could have sued for peace and we could have had a Nazi-dominated Europe. It's also possible D-Day could have failed."

Selleck knew why A&E wanted him for the role — his TNT movies had been huge critical and commercial hits. The morning after "Crossfire Trail" aired, the network called to say it was going to wait a day before putting out a press release, and Selleck figured the numbers just weren't that good.

In fact, the numbers were *too* good. TNT was so stunned by the figure — a record 9.6 that made "Crossfire Trail" far and away the highest rated, basic-cable movie in history — that they wanted to triple check it before making any boasts.

"Ever since then, I've always had a Western in development," says Selleck, "and I've always known it will get made."

Given that track record, it's easy to see why Selleck didn't quite see himself as Ike. Lionel Chetwynd, the writer and producer of the project, convinced the actor that he had the right sort of screen aura — a certain decency that has served him well when he played cowboys. Then he plunged into the role. He knew he didn't want to do an imitation, but watching some footage proved immensely useful.

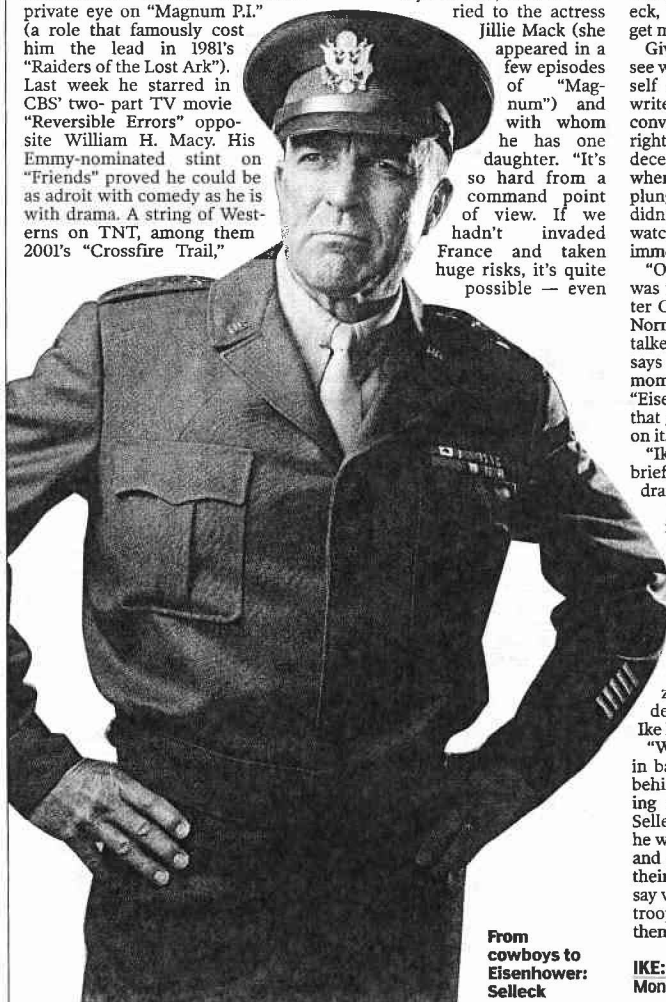
"One show that helped me a lot was this TV program [where] Walter Cronkite walked the beaches of Normandy with Eisenhower and just talked and asked him questions," says Selleck. They shared a rare moment of unguarded emotions. "Eisenhower was an old man, and that generation didn't wear its heart on its sleeve," he says.

"Ike" is a far cry from Selleck's brief appearance in the 1976 military drama "Midway."

"Wanna know my favorite line from that?" laughs Selleck, who played a military aide. "After they bomb the field in Midway, we come out to look and I say, 'God, they creamed us!'"

He finally gets to have his military victory in "Ike." The three-hour movie leads up to that fateful day and Selleck zeroes in on one moment that defined the heavy responsibility Ike had to shoulder.

"When he ordered airborne troops in bad weather to do a close drop behind German lines, Ike was looking at seven-out-of-10 dead," says Selleck. "When he gave that order, he went to the airfield and met them and put on a happy face and shook their hands. It's the one time people say when he walked away from those troops — certainly not in front of them — and he had tears in his eyes."



From cowboys to Eisenhower: Selleck

IKE: COUNTDOWN TO D-DAY
Monday, 8 p.m., A&E