

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Throw It Deep

Peter Berg on The Mosquito Bowl, finding unbridled joy between the horrors of Tarawa and Okinawa, writing at Parris Island, why Texas never leaves his soul, and teaming up with Taylor Sheridan in Weatherford for Call of Duty.

Interview by Paul Salfen · AMFM Magazine

On Christmas Eve 1944, on a hand-cleared patch of coral dirt and jungle dust on the Solomon Island of Guadalcanal, sixty-five young United States Marines from the 4th and 29th Marine Regiments strapped on whatever gear they had, lined up across from one another under a blistering South Pacific sun, and played a sixty-minute game of full-contact tackle football. Among them were some of the most celebrated college football stars in America—All-Americans, Big Ten record-setters, Ivy League captains, and NFL draft picks who had walked away from roaring stadiums and professional contracts after Pearl Harbor to enlist in the Corps. They called the game the Mosquito Bowl. Less than four months later, both regiments stormed the beaches of Okinawa in the bloodiest amphibious campaign of the Pacific War. Fifteen of the young men who took that field on Christmas Eve never came home.

That extraordinary, heartbreaking true story is the spine of *The Mosquito Bowl*, the sweeping new World War II epic directed by Peter Berg, co-written by Berg and *American Primeval* and *The Revenant* screenwriter Mark L. Smith, and adapted from Pulitzer Prize winner Buzz Bissinger's bestselling nonfiction book *The Mosquito Bowl: A Game of Life and Death in World War II*. Produced by Berg for Film 44 alongside Brian Grazer for Imagine Entertainment and Alex Gayner, the film stars Nicholas Galitzine as Brown University captain John McLaughry, Bill Skarsgård as University of Wisconsin bruiser Bob Bauman, Ray Nicholson as Purdue scoring machine Tony Butkovich, and Tom Francis as Wisconsin two-time All-American Dave Schreiner, heading a rugged ensemble that also includes Brent Comer, Dominic Bogart, Texas country troubadour Jack Ingram, and Pat McAfee. Opening in theaters nationwide this Friday, October 30, 2026—following its world premiere at AFI Fest and ahead of its global streaming debut on Netflix on November 25—the film reunites Berg with his signature *Friday Night Lights* and *Lone Survivor* collaborators, including cinematographer Jacques Jouffret and Austin post-rock composers Explosions in the Sky.

When Paul Salfen sat down with Berg for AMFM Magazine, the conversation started on deeply personal ground. Coming from a military family himself—his grandfather served as a colonel in World War II, and his uncle as a lieutenant colonel—Salfen told Berg how much it means to see stories like this put on the record. Then Berg spotted the other thread in Salfen's background, asking about his work with the Dallas Cowboys, and Salfen introduced his radio and television co-host: Pro Football Hall of Famer Drew Pearson, the original “#88” who caught Roger Staubach's legendary 1975 Hail Mary.

After saluting Pearson and asking Salfen to pass along his regards, Berg leaned straight into the question that Pearson's catch inspired: the Hail Mary moment in a career when you have to throw it deep and trust that

someone on the other end will bring it down. Salfen suggested that mounting a war-and-football epic on the scale of *The Mosquito Bowl* is a Hail Mary in its own right.

“I mean, they all kind of are,” Berg told Salfen. “You spend a lot of time researching a script, writing a script, making a movie, putting it out there, and then you kind of just throw it up—you throw it deep, and you see if somebody catches it. That’s pretty much it. I never thought about it, but *Project Hail Mary* could apply to any film that gets made by anybody.”

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AN INTERMISSION BETWEEN TARAWA AND OKINAWA

Nobody in modern American cinema knows the physical and logistical punishment of staging combat better than Berg, who has spent two decades putting audiences inside the smoke and shrapnel of *The Kingdom*, *Lone Survivor*, *Patriots Day*, and *Mile 22*. As Salfen noted, war is hell, and recreating it on location is never an easy day at the office. Yet when Salfen asked which day or sequence on *The Mosquito Bowl* stood out most—the moment Berg looked around the set and knew how glad he was that he had made this film—the director offered a surprising confession. The hardest thing to shoot wasn’t the horror of the Pacific islands. It was the football game.

“All movies, as you say, are hard to make,” Berg said. “This one, because the amount of war that we were recreating was really challenging. I’ve done a lot of combat and war sequences in my film career, so I kind of have an expectation for what that’s going to be like, and it’s going to be hard, and I sort of know how to do it. The challenge in *The Mosquito Bowl* was filming the actual football game—the Mosquito Bowl.”

To understand why, you have to understand where that Christmas Eve kickoff sits in the emotional architecture of the film. By the time the 4th and 29th Marines square off on Guadalcanal, the audience and the cast have already been dragged through the meat grinder of the Pacific theater, and the specter of Okinawa is hanging over every huddle.

“Because that was this moment of joy—this respite, this little intermission that these Marines got to experience in between the Battle of Tarawa and the Battle of Okinawa,” Berg explained. “And trying to find joy—just unbridled happiness and joy—in the middle of the movie, where we’d been doing all this war. And now it’s like, ‘All right, guys, this is time to laugh and be happy and just play a game that you love.’ That was the challenge. Because we were in such a war mode, to suddenly be happy and be playing a fun game of football—that was a surprising challenge, and I’m very happy with how it turned out.”

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CULLING THE HERD FOR PASSION

Pulling off both halves of that equation—the mud-and-blood terror of amphibious warfare and the swaggering, trash-talking locker-room camaraderie of twenty-year-old gridiron stars—required an ensemble that could look, move, and hit like Division I athletes while carrying the interior weight of men staring down mortality. Salfen pointed out that Berg has always had one of the sharpest eyes in the business for spotting talent on the rise, from the young Texas ensemble of *Friday Night Lights* to the four leads anchoring *The Mosquito Bowl*, and asked how he knows when he has found the right players to take a movie all the way.

“When you cast a movie, you meet hundreds of actors, and they’re all very compelling in their own way, and they’re being extremely charming, and they’re selling themselves,” Berg said. “I try to identify passion—people that feel like they truly want to do this on a very deep level, and that they have reasons why, and they can talk about those reasons. And then I’ll sort of start culling the herd, looking for passion. And when I kind of feel like I’ve zoned in on people who definitely are talented, definitely look the part, but have that intangible, that passion quality—that’s what I look for. Yeah, these guys all have it.”

Asked when he first realized he had that gift for reading actors in a room, Berg traced it straight back to the beginning of his own career in front of the camera—including his four-and-a-half-year run playing Dr. Billy Kronk on David E. Kelley’s acclaimed medical drama *Chicago Hope* in the 1990s.

“I think because I started my career acting, I’ve worked with so many actors,” Berg said. “When I was on that TV show, *Chicago Hope*, for four years—four and a half years—I met so many actors, and I came up as an actor, and that gave me a strategy for picking actors. And I like to get in and play with them in the auditions, and I’ll act with them a lot. And that experience maybe helps me understand a little bit about who might be the right person for the job.”

That hands-on instinct also shapes the advice Berg gives to anyone hoping to follow in his footsteps—whether as an actor, a director, or a craftsman anywhere on a call sheet.

“I think the most important thing is you have to really love it,” Berg told Salfen. “It can’t be a job. It can’t be something you want to do because you want to become famous, or rich, or both. You got to actually love it. You got to love movies and TV shows, and you got to love acting, set designing, and stunts, and camera work. You have to have a true passion for it. It’s not just a job. And if you don’t have that extra level of real passion, you’re probably going to struggle a bit. And if you do, you still might struggle—but at least you’ll know why you’re struggling.”

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PARRIS ISLAND AND SELFLESS LOVE

Carrying a film as physically and emotionally demanding as *The Mosquito Bowl* from page to screen requires a warrior mindset of its own. When Salfen asked what Berg kept in mind to stay on the right path during the

long march of production, the director pointed to two sources of fuel: his decades-long creative bond with his cousin by marriage and *Friday Night Lights* author Buzz Bissinger, and the time Berg spent embedded at Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island in South Carolina while writing the screenplay.

“Well, the book *The Mosquito Bowl*, written by Buzz Bissinger, who wrote *Friday Night Lights*, gave me so much inspiration,” Berg said. “You know, it’s a book about war and about football, but it’s really about much more—it’s about the brotherhood, and it’s about sacrifice, and just human struggle. And that was very much in my soul when I was writing the script. And the amount of time I spent at Parris Island with drill instructors and young recruits—that’s where I wrote most of the script—I was kind of loaded up. My energy was good, and my passion was strong, and that just carried me the whole film.”

Salfen noted that for the young Marines themselves, surviving what they endured between Tarawa and Okinawa had to require a deep reservoir of faith. Berg agreed—and defined what that faith looks like when the landing craft ramps drop.

“Well, for sure, you have to have faith, and you have to love your brother,” Berg said. “People talk about the brotherhood and what that means, and it’s just really love. It’s selfless love that you see over and over—whether it’s, to a lesser level of intensity, on a football field, a brotherhood of a football team, which is very real, and lesser compared to combat. But I’ve spent a lot of time with members of the military, and they always talk about the brotherhood. They love their country, they want to protect their country, but when they get into battle, and they’re doing things like the Marines did in World War II—trying to take islands like Tarawa—it’s the brotherhood. It’s, ‘I want to make sure you’re okay, you want to make sure I’m okay.’ That’s what we’re doing there.”

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THE HUMAN COST OF WAR—AND WHY THEATERS COME FIRST

Arriving in the autumn of 2026, as America marks its 250th anniversary year and audiences reflect on service and national identity, *The Mosquito Bowl* feels uniquely timely. Yet for Berg, honoring the courage of the Greatest Generation is inseparable from confronting the staggering human arithmetic of global conflict.

“Yeah, I do, for the reasons you just said, and I also feel that it’s important for us to understand history,” Berg told Salfen. “You know, 18 million people were killed in World War I. Seventy-five million people were killed in World War II. I really don’t want there to be a World War III. I really don’t. And if you look around the world today, it doesn’t necessarily feel like we’re living in a more peaceful time. I think it’s important for people to understand and look back at the cost of war—the human cost. And if this film can be a little bit of a reminder, and a little bit of a part of an energy that gets people thinking long and hard before we decide to go to war, that’s kind of a win for me.”

Before *The Mosquito Bowl* arrives in living rooms worldwide on Netflix on November 25, Netflix is giving the film a nearly month-long theatrical run beginning this Friday, October 30. When Salfen said he couldn’t wait

to experience it on the biggest screen possible, Berg made a passionate pitch for seeing it in a darkened theater with a crowd first.

“It comes out a month before—it comes out this Friday, October 30th, theatrically, so it’ll be in theaters,” Berg said. “I do think it’s a much better experience in a movie theater. I’m biased—I’m a movie guy. It’s nice to be able to go home and watch it on Netflix, but I recommend you do the movie theater first, because it is a big visual film, and it’s loud, and it’s very immersive. To go in there and let the lights go down and be with a group of people, I think it’s a powerful experience. And then, if you really like it, you can watch it again in your living room.”

THE BLACK ANGELS, TAYLOR SHERIDAN, AND A RETURN TO TEXAS

That visceral, wall-rattling sonic design extends even to the film’s marketing. Salfen praised the inspired needle-drop in *The Mosquito Bowl*’s ferocious red-band trailer, which pulses to the hypnotic drums and fuzz-drenched drone of Austin psych-rock band The Black Angels’ classic track “Young Men Dead” (paired alongside an original film score by fellow Austin legends Explosions in the Sky and music supervision by George Drakoulias).

“Oh, the red band—the red band!” Berg lit up when Salfen mentioned The Black Angels. “You’ve got good taste. You’ve got good musical taste.”

And Texas is very much on Berg’s mind—and on his calendar—as he turns toward his next massive undertaking. When Salfen asked how Berg plans to top himself after *The Mosquito Bowl*, the director needed only three words.

“*Call of Duty*,” Berg said. “With a fellow Texan—my buddy Taylor Sheridan and I are going to kind of roll up our sleeves and get into that one. I’m very excited.”

Reuniting Berg and Sheridan—who previously teamed on the Oscar-nominated Texas crime classic *Hell or High Water* and *Wind River*—for Paramount Pictures and Activision’s live-action *Call of Duty* feature (slated for theaters June 30, 2028, and set within the *Modern Warfare* universe) brings Berg right back to the Lone Star State. When Salfen mentioned he was calling in from Dallas, Berg immediately clocked the geography west of Fort Worth.

“You’re not far from Weatherford,” Berg grinned, referring to Sheridan’s home base in Parker County. When Salfen asked if they were going to shoot the movie in Weatherford, Berg laughed: “No, but that’s where Taylor’s got a big ranch, so we’re spending a lot of time out there. I just love it out there.”

From Buzz Bissinger’s Permian Panthers in *Friday Night Lights* to Explosions in the Sky, The Black Angels, and late-night story sessions out in Weatherford, Texas has never stopped being home turf for Peter Berg.

“Forever, man,” Berg said when Salfen brought up *Friday Night Lights*. “That’s wonderful—all of it, the whole state.”

Salfen promised that everyone in Texas and beyond will be lining up for *The Mosquito Bowl* starting this Friday. Seventy-five million lives lost in a world war. Sixty-five young Marines playing four quarters in the

Guadalcanal dirt between Tarawa and Okinawa. And a filmmaker who still throws every story deep, hoping it makes us love our brothers—and think twice before the next war begins.

FIND THE MOSQUITO BOWL

Directed by: Peter Berg

Screenplay by: Peter Berg and Mark L. Smith

Based on the Book: *The Mosquito Bowl: A Game of Life and Death in World War II* by Buzz Bissinger

Produced by: Peter Berg (Film 44), Brian Grazer (Imagine Entertainment), Alex Gayner

Executive Produced by: Ezra Emanuel, Buzz Bissinger, Jeb Brody

Starring: Nicholas Galitzine (John McLaughry), Bill Skarsgård (Bob Bauman), Ray Nicholson (Tony Butkovich), Tom Francis (David Schreiner), Brent Comer, Dominic Bogart, Jack Ingram, Ella Newton, Peter Berg, Lola Bond, Stacy Clausen, Billy Smith, Steven Sammut, Blake Erickson, Claudia Ware, Pat McAfee

Director of Photography: Jacques Jouffret, ASC · **Production Designer:** Phil Ivey · **Edited by:** Jon Otazua, Garret Donnelly · **Costume Designer:** Liz McGregor · **Hair & Makeup Designer:** Angela Conte

Music by: Explosions in the Sky · **Music Supervisor:** George Drakoulis (Red Band Trailer Music: “Young Men Dead” by The Black Angels) · **Sound Designers:** Wylie Stateman & Anne Jimkes · **Action Designer / Stunt Coordinator:** Keir Beck · **Casting by:** Rachel Tenner

Story: Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, four of America’s top college football stars set their fame aside to enlist in the United States Marine Corps. Stationed on Guadalcanal after the Battle of Tarawa as they prepare for the brutal invasion of Okinawa, the 4th and 29th Marine Regiments stage a legendary Christmas Eve 1944 tackle football game—a fleeting afternoon of brotherhood and joy that, for many on the field, will be the last game they ever play.

Release & Streaming: Following its AFI Fest world premiere, *The Mosquito Bowl* opens **in select theaters nationwide Friday, October 30, 2026**, and premieres **worldwide on Netflix on Wednesday, November 25, 2026**.

Follow the Film: Instagram: @themosquitobowlfilm · X: @mosquitobowl · Facebook: @themosquitobowlfilm

Interview conducted by Paul Salfen for AMFM Magazine, October 2026.

Paul Salfen is Managing Editor of AMFM Magazine and a veteran interviewer of film, television, music, and sports figures. He is the author of Going For It!, a collection of Hail Mary moments from the artists and athletes he has spent two decades putting on the record.
