

By MAUREEN PATON

# The men who brought Bilko to book

TWO British ex-public schoolboys have written the world's first book about Bilko, America's most famous rebel without a pause. Forget Rambo, just a hulk with bulk. Bilko, most of whose muscles reside in his mighty brain, is the greatest of them all.

He's the Master Sergeant at the U.S. Army's remotest post, Fort Baxter, where he's in charge of relentless psychological warfare that can turn a pickle sandwich into a lethal weapon. He is the consummate conman. He could talk his own grandmother out of her false teeth and then come back for her gums.

The role was written for fast-talking Jewish comedian Phil Silvers and has made his name like nothing before or since. Bilko has become an international institution, especially in Britain.

The cult American TV comedy show, originally made between 1955-58, is still screened world-wide and BBC2 is currently repeating all 142 episodes on Thursday nights.

Be there in front of your TV set or be square. For the interesting thing about the Bilko phenomenon, celebrating its 30th anniversary this year, is that he's hippest of all among trendy types who are much too young and lovely to remember him first time around. He's even number five in the T-shirt charts.

## GRIN

Which is where the authors of the just-published Bilko: The Fort Baxter Story (Vermillion/Hutchinson) come into the picture.

David Thomas and Ian Irvine are two Bilko lookalikes of 26 and 27 respectively. They've already got the regulation specs and they're working on the baldness and the belly you could comfortably play one of Bilko's favourite poker games on.

Give them time. They've still got enough hair between them to stuff a three-piece suite.

David is an Old-Etonian, a Cambridge graduate in Philosophy and the son of our Falklands man at the Foreign Office — David Thomas senior. Ian is an Oxford English Literature graduate who describes himself as a "burly Scottish aesthete" and works as a sub-editor on The Times.

## APPEALING

Most of the actors are mentioned by name, but the whole idea is to write as if Bilko actually exists.

So we get an exhaustive character analysis of the man whose motto is: "The early bird catches the worm, but it's the smart bird who sleeps late then gets up and talks the early bird out of the worm."

That's why he always gets up at the crack of noon — and why he's so appealing to a generation that never knew National Service.

Bilko was unavailable at Eton when David was there. "They wouldn't let us watch any TV, worse luck," he glooms. So he caught up with Bilkomania in the hols.

Susan Hill, then an editor at Hutchinson, gave David the idea for the book after remarking that every other cocktail party she went to seemed full of Bilko freaks.

One day he met fellow fanatic Ian in a pub and the result was a six month



Irvine, Thomas — eggheads with an eye for Bilkomania



Silvers as Bilko...hit by illness



Long-suffering Colonel 'Melonhead' Hall (left) and superslob Doberman



confinement in each other's flats to give birth to Bilko, with girl friends Clare Jeremy and Jane Shilling acting as midwives.

Former Young Journalist of the Year David says: "What I love about Bilko is that he's always bucking the system. I'm not a gambler like him — I'm too stable and non-committal. But I admire that ability to take outrageous risks. He has so many qualities that I don't have. Like nerve."

## NUISANCE

"He's a terrible nuisance, but he's central to everyone's lives because he takes the risks for them. I could write a pseudo-intellectual PhD thesis on Bilko as the biblical scapegoat who bears all the sins of the world.

"But I won't. I prefer to be endlessly trivial about him because he's such a straightforward laugh.

"I have no pretensions about this book. It's not War and Peace. I hope it will be read in the bathroom — Bilko In The Bath just about sums up his appeal.

"We did think about having it printed on waterproof paper.

"I've just had a letter from a teenage boy who's started a Bilko Appreciation Society in this country.

"There are far more Bilko fans in Britain than in America — they aren't nostalgic in the way we are.

"The British are much more prone to hold onto the things they love. America still doesn't seem to realise what a huge hit it's had with Bilko, which has been

in continuous syndication all over the world ever since it was made.

"It's crazy that it's been left to Britons to bring out a book on an American legend. I'd be much less worried if President Reagan held up Bilko as a symbol of American manhood rather than Rambo. At least Bilko's funny.

## ILLNESS

Phil Silvers gave his blessing to the project and was all set to write the introduction until one of his many illnesses intervened.

"He was really pleased and rather touched at the idea, says David. "I'm a tremendous hero-worshipper, a real fan, and Silvers as Bilko was the ultimate fantasy-figure for me.

"But I don't think I'd ever like to meet him. It would spoil the illusion. There are some heroes who are sacred and you should always stay away from them."

## Sadness behind the smiles

THE creator of Bilko, Nat Hicken, and most of the cast are now dead. None of their subsequent careers ever managed to match the incredible success of Bilko.

● PHIL SILVERS (Bilko) is now 76 and in poor health. He once said: "I'm beginning to wonder if I created Bilko or he created me." Much of his private life mirrored the hectic career of the wily Master Sergeant — at one point he gambled nearly all his money away. Despite starring in the 1966 hit movie *A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To The Forum*, he could never beat his Bilko act — hence the title of his autobiography, *The Man Who Was Bilko* (W. H. Allen).

● ELISABETH FRASER (Bilko's lady-love Joan Hogan) is in her 70s and retired from acting.

● ALLAN MELVIN (Corporal Henshaw), also in his 70s has not acted for several years.

● PAUL FORD (Colonel "Melon head" Hall) died in 1976.

● HARVEY LEMBECK (Corporal Rocco Barbella) died in 1983.

● MAURICE GOSFIELD (Superslob Duane Doberman) died in 1964 after providing the voice of Benny the Ball in the *Top Cat* cartoon series.

Forget Rambo, here's a hero whose mighty muscles reside in his brain