



# MI-5 VOLUME 1

MI-5 Volume One  
 BBC Video  
 Six episodes, three disks  
 available at amazon.ca

My family doesn't watch much television. My 17-year old trolls through a couple of hours of teen-oriented music shows a day, I watch the odd Discovery Channel or History Channel show, and we watch quite a few DVDs. But in our house, the TV is usually off. It's been years since I've sat down at the same time on the same day to catch the next episode of a television drama or comedy. So I nearly missed the newest DVD wave entirely.

Now there are seasons and seasons worth of TV shows on disc - oldies, cult shows, really cheesy stuff and really cool stuff. I'd seen the box packs of complete seasons of TV shows: X-Files, Sopranos, Sex in the City, Buffy, Mayberry RFD, Sgt. Bilko...

The Honeymooners and I Love Lucy were always good for a chuckle. But I never wanted to own a season of any TV show (except maybe James Burke's Connections) until I saw MI-5.

The show is from the BBC, and across the pond, the series was originally titled Spooks. Think about it, and you'll realize why they changed the name when they brought the product over to the colonies. I first saw it when A&E ran the series on cable. Awesome. But it was difficult to catch the show on a regular basis. I missed a lot of episodes, so I've always had a bit of a longing to see the whole series, one show after another. I finally got my chance, on disc.

BBC Video released season one (and season two, but I'll focus on the first season here) on DVD, a three disc set of six episodes, plus all the usual add-ons, voice tracks, cast bios, background videos and the like.



Read almost anything about this show and you'll find it gets rave reviews. The show deserves all of the accolades dished out. Kudos to the gang at Kudos Productions, especially David Wolstencroft, the series creator. So what's so special about this show?

First, it's well written. The stories are interesting and intelligent, the dialogue crisp, and the cast is second-to-none. Each and every one rings true. There is not a disjointed note in the crowd, and they seem happy working together. Good casting, good acting coupled with good writing, and you have the makings of something serious. Only two things could kill this - shoddy direction and production values. They nailed both. Truth to tell, MI-5 is the first show I've seen in a long time that puts the split screen technique to good use.

What's it all about? Pretty much what the title says - the British Intelligence Service, MI-5. Originally called Military Intelligence, Department 5, Britain's intelligence services changed, morphed and swallowed other services until eventually there were three - MI-5, to handle threats originating within the British Isles, the more famous MI-6, to handle external threats (yeah, James Bond works for 6), and the GCHQ (or Government Communications Headquarters), which sort of runs both things. In any case, these are the tales of MI-5's anti-terrorism team of Section B.

At the top, as Head of Section, Harry Pearce, a tough as nails spymaster, can run with the best of them. His team includes Tom Quinn, Zoe Reynolds, and Danny Hunter, assisted by Tessa Phillips and a host of lesser characters.



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This team works week to week to keep the British Isles safe from terrorism and foes including the IRA, fanatic anti-abortionists, white supremacists, Americans, and government bureaucracy. Then they go home at night and try to live normal lives. Right.

That's what sets this series apart - the ease with which the series shows us the personal lives of the central characters. Mainly we see Tom Quinn's life outside of work, but the series also keeps Zoe and Danny in focus and allows the odd peek into Harry and Tessa's lives. The seamless quality of the whole production makes the characters (and situations) compelling.



Even with the most well written characters, if the actors don't work, the show doesn't work.

MI-5 is loaded. Matthew MacFadyen as Tom Quinn, the central character, gets the most screen time, and this man pulls it off. MacFadyen easily transitions between the soft, loving man at home with his girlfriend and her young daughter, and the cold, hard, calculating head-of-ops that his job demands. MacFadyen uses facial expressions to perfection. Zoe and Danny are perfectly cast as well. Keeley Hawes as Zoe and David Oyelowo as Danny strike perfect chords as newly active agents forced to use every skill and instinct to keep up with Tom Quinn and the relentless war on terror. Their private lives add dynamics to the mix, and these two actors have an on-screen chemistry, that, while not red-hot, is certainly interesting.

Peter Firth plays Harry to perfection. Harry, a bulldog of a man, is whip strong and steel cold. He has no qualms about sending people into harm's way. He's fiercely patriotic, loyal to his troops, and has a propensity for quoting the Bible - a fascinating character. Jenny Agutter, rounding out the central cast as Tessa, adds extra spice to the show as an exchange agent who has come from Ports and Harbours. Tessa is distant and hard to get to know, but she sure knows her stuff. Revelations about Tessa, as the series wears on, are jaw-dropping.

While the show is slightly set-bound (no doubt as a cost

control measure), this in no way hampers the show, and in fact serves to highlight the fascinating dialogue. The stories run at a quick pace, inexorably moving toward a conclusion, suspense and anticipation growing along the way. Stunning work.

Each of the six episodes is complete to UK running time, which means about an extra 15 minutes or so across the length of the series that we didn't see on A&E. It's great to watch TV shows without commercials. I love that part.

The DVD package is slick and well designed, and the extras on the discs add to the experience. I particularly like the menu style. A spy breaks into The Grid (the main office) of Section B and uses a desktop terminal to get information about MI-5. The viewer uses this desktop to navigate the discs. For example, click on the stack of DVDs on the virtual desk and the spy picks one up and slips it into the virtual iMac to start the selected show. A Rolodex on the desk provides detailed information and a telephone adjusts the audio settings. A well thought out DVD here - slick and easy to use.

I can't say enough good things about MI-5. Whether you're a TV fan or not, this is a fantastic series that leaves you wanting more. Highly recommended.

J. Michael Dlugos

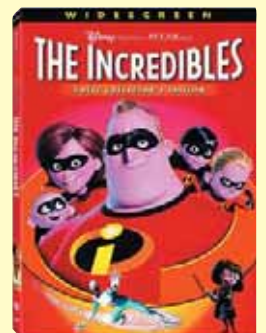


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