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Hollywood Tries a New Battle Plan

After years of war movies about conflicted fighters, a new crop of films is shifting focus: to tactics, technology and teamwork. Making a fictional drama with real-life SEALs.

By **JOHN JURGENSEN**



Courtesy of 'Act of Valor'

'Act of Valor' director Mike McCoy.

On a 2010 training exercise, a team of Navy SEALs converged on an ocean rendezvous point. Crouched beside the sailors on a bouncing Zodiac speedboat was a filmmaker, dressed in camouflage with his camera rolling as a submarine broke the surface. "We ran those boats right up on the back of that

nuclear sub," said director Mike McCoy.



For years, war movies have centered on conflicted, disillusioned soldiers. John Jurgensen on Lunch Break looks at a new crop of films that aim to make a fictional drama with real-life Navy SEALs.

His team came to film the SEALs perform an underwater exit from the sub, then spent a week alongside its crew when rough seas dragged out the two-day shoot. For two years the filmmakers had inside access to the Navy's elite and secretive force for an unusual assignment: to create a feature film that starred real-life SEALs—not actors—in lead roles. The movie, "Act of Valor," is not a documentary. Instead, it straddles reality and fiction, military messaging and entertainment. It features strike scenes written by the SEALs themselves, jarring live-fire footage and a body count that would rival any '80s action flick. Yet the movie, to be released in February, was designed to set

the record straight on a group that the military says has been routinely misrepresented in film.



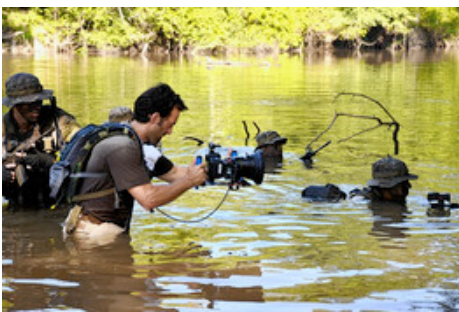
Ten years after the Sept. 11 attacks opened an ongoing chapter of U.S. military action, Hollywood's long history of depicting fighters at war is entering a new phase. The grinding wars in Afghanistan and Iraq spawned films that highlighted characters in uniform who were disillusioned with their missions and scarred in their homecomings. With the conflicted protagonists of movies such as "Green Zone" and "Stop-Loss," filmmakers tried to tap into the public's ambivalence about the conflicts, but their movies mostly sank at the box office. Now that deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq are tapering down, filmmakers are homing in on the more clear-cut job of battling

terrorists. And they're finding heroes in the elite—and now famous—special-operations forces leading the hunt. Projects in the pipeline focus on the armed heroics, high-tech tactics and teamwork involved in getting the bad guys.

Producer Jerry Bruckheimer recently struck a deal with ABC for a pilot about the family life and field missions of Navy SEALs. Universal is readying "Lone Survivor," a script about a decorated SEAL who fought through a rout in the mountains of Afghanistan. Sony recently set an October 2012 release date for "Hurt Locker" director Kathryn Bigelow and screenwriter Mark Boal's account of the decade-long hunt for Osama bin Laden, capped by the SEAL-led killing of the al Qaeda leader.

The box-office taint on movies with a perceived political bent, combined with the budget pressures that combat narratives bring, have made many contemporary war stories seem too risky for the studios, says director Peter Berg. He co-wrote the script for "Lone Survivor," which he will direct, based on a memoir by former SEAL Marcus Luttrell. For research, Mr. Berg embedded with a special-forces team at a remote base in Iraq near the Syrian border. Universal signed off on the project only after Mr. Berg agreed to first direct "Battleship," a big-budget extrapolation of the board game property, slated for release next spring.

Nevertheless, Mr. Berg says "Lone Survivor" wouldn't have been greenlighted had it not offered some commercial potential for the studio. "The idea of a good old-fashioned combat yarn, in which the politics are very clear—we support these men—was more appealing to them." Unlike many of the portraits of soldiers at war presented in recent years, "Lone Survivor" is about "the core warrior spirit," he said. "It's an unabashed tribute to the courage of these men." Production is scheduled to begin next spring.



Courtesy of 'Act of Valor'

Director Scott Waugh films the SEALs.

In 2008, Navy Special Warfare invited a handful of production companies to submit proposals for a film project, possibly a documentary, that would flesh out the role of the SEALs. The goals: bolster recruiting efforts, honor fallen team members and offer a corrective to misleading fare such as "Navy Seals," the 1990 shoot-em-up starring Charlie Sheen as a cocky lone wolf. "In the SEAL ethos, the superman myth does not apply. It's a lifestyle of teamwork, hard work and academic discipline," said Capt. Duncan Smith, a SEAL who initiated the project and essentially served as producer within the military.

The project offered filmmakers access to SEALs as well as military assets, but no funding. A production company called the Bandito Brothers, which had previously worked with Navy Special Warfare on a series of recruiting videos, got the assignment. Co-founded by Mr. McCoy, a former off-road racing champion and stuntman, and Scott Waugh, who had run a stunt company, the Bandito Brothers specialized in shooting action-driven viral ads for brands such as BMW and Mountain Dew.

The Los Angeles-based Bandito Brothers began shuttling back and forth to Coronado, Calif., the SEALs training

base near San Diego, to conduct on-camera interviews. They initially planned to work the research into a script, then hire actors to play the lead SEALs. The filmmakers' calling card within the military was a 2005 documentary called "Dust to Glory," for which they positioned about 55 cameras on dirt bikes, trucks and dune buggies in the bone-jarring Baja 1000, an annual off-road race in Mexico. The gritty camaraderie depicted in the movie resonated with the SEALs, as did the on-screen tenacity of Mr. McCoy (nicknamed Mouse), who did the team-based race solo on a motorcycle. He crossed the finish line in 18 hours, nursing broken bones from a crash.

As the SEALs' stories unfolded on camera and over beers, the filmmakers began to question the idea of casting actors to play the sailors. In one interview, a lieutenant spoke articulately and without affect about feeling envious while looking down at a comrade's coffin, knowing the man had fulfilled his duty to the end. In the lieutenant and another SEAL, a voluble father of five, the directors realized they'd found their leads. But it took them four months to persuade the men and a half-dozen other SEALs to take roles in the movie, thus bucking their community's ideal of the "quiet professional." For the SEALs, the decision meant potentially risking "ridicule for the rest of their careers for stepping outside the community," Mr. McCoy says.

After they made a group decision to participate, deciding the project served the SEALs' greater good, the Navy made the film a formal task for the sailors, who were between deployments. Their names won't appear in the "Act of Valor" credits; instead, the film will list Naval Special Warfare members killed since Sept. 11.

The Bandito Brothers commissioned a script from Kurt Johnstad, who had co-written "300," a comic-book-style depiction of ancient Spartan warriors that has many fans among U.S. troops, but that many critics dismissed as heavy-handed and excessively violent. His "Act of Valor" screenplay revolved around a SEAL team's mission to stop a Chechen jihadist cooperating with a smuggler to send suicide bombers across the Mexican border toward U.S. targets. (A villain from Eastern Europe was a less obvious and potentially sensitive choice than an Arab, the filmmakers say.) Most of the story's big action scenes were plotted around training operations that the Navy already had on the calendar.

To plot a scene in which the smuggler is apprehended on his yacht, the SEALs and their commanders used whiteboards to sketch out how such an operation would unfold in reality. To capture it, a Bandito crew, armed with 16 cameras, shot a squad in real time as it ran the simulated "maritime interdiction operation" in domestic waters. A boat-mounted machine gun opened fire and sailors plunged out of a helicopter on ropes to take control of a 150-foot yacht, rented by the filmmakers for the two-day exercise. In between training runs, the crew shot a key scene aboard the yacht, where the villain (played by an actor) is questioned below deck by a SEAL, working mostly off script.

The filmmakers came away with key scenes for "Act of Valor," while the Navy would receive blanket footage of the exercise for use in future training. Having paid for the initial shoot themselves, at less than \$1 million, the Bandito Brothers showed the clip to potential investors to demonstrate they could execute the film's unusual concept. Over time, financing came from about dozen parties, including Legendary Entertainment, the company behind blockbusters such as "The Dark Knight" and "Inception." Bandito Brothers Chief Operating Officer Max Leitman declined to discuss the film's total budget.

The Bandito Brothers' L.A. headquarters is nestled in a maze of converted warehouses. A loft-style office space opens onto a cactus-studded garden, where a silver Airstream trailer serves as an office and clubhouse. In an adjacent lot, a hangar-size building is being converted into a production facility, supplementing a garage that houses a studio and a small fleet of dusty motocross bikes. On a recent afternoon, artists at computer monitors toiled over visuals for the coming superhero movie "The Avengers," directed by Joss Whedon. The digital-effects job resulted from the Bandito Brothers' joint venture with design studio Cantina Creative.

"Radness?" Mr. McCoy said to one worker as he walked by. "Making radness?" The director has a slight, wiry build (hence his nickname since childhood). He smokes small Macanudo cigars, and his loping gait suggests both a swagger and a history of broken bones.

Mr. McCoy and his partners have clearly been influenced by their time in the SEALs' midst. Six out of their seven SEAL "actors" have been deployed since the film wrapped. Just days after a helicopter had been shot down in

Afghanistan carrying more than 30 men, 17 of them SEALs, the filmmakers spoke carefully about the "really heavy burden" they felt to accurately portray the sailors' skills and sacrifices. On Friday, the Navy Special Warfare community gathers at Arlington National Cemetery for a private burial ceremony.

In the movie, authenticity came with some trade-offs. Some dialogue-driven scenes seem stilted, including banter between the SEALs, who address each other as "dude" or "sir." The sailors' rapid descriptions of their mission plans could speed over some viewers' heads. Mr. McCoy acknowledged, "These guys are not Johnny Depp or Daniel Day-Lewis."

The filmmakers say the SEALs tackled their acting duties methodically, as they would a new tactical skill. In a scene where one of them discovers a female CIA operative who has been kidnapped and tortured, the directors coached him to slow down and tap into the emotion of the rescue. "For the audience, you need to get really compassionate. The women are going to need to connect," Mr. McCoy recalled saying.

By contrast, in the movie's many battle scenes, the sailors move with a fluid precision that makes typical Hollywood action movies look bogus. When the SEALs picked off enemies and moved through buildings in a tight snaking column, some footage was captured by helmet-mounted cameras. Certain plot points were based on true stories from the field, including a scene in which a sailor takes a rocket-propelled grenade to the chest at close range and lives.

By last March, the filmmakers had completed a final version of the film, following a tactical "scrub," during which officials screened 1,800 hours of footage for scenes that could divulge sensitive tactics. For instance, a re-edit made it less obvious how a SEAL team would line up to storm a room. Sales agents at William Morris Entertainment were deciding on a plan for selling the film to a distributor when, on May 1, news broke that Osama bin Laden had been killed.

Studios immediately angled for projects that might capture some of the public fascination with the SEALs who led the strike. The most high-profile was the Bigelow and Boal script, which had been in development since 2008. Sony scooped up the movie about the bin Laden hunt within three weeks of his death. The movie is expected to be released in October 2012, a date that has drawn some political controversy. Rep. Peter King (R., N.Y.) called for an investigation into whether the White House gave the filmmakers access to confidential information and suggested that the film's planned release next fall could influence the presidential election soon after. White House spokesman Jay Carney called the suggestion "ridiculous"; the filmmakers said in a statement that their film had no political angle.

Bin Laden's death found the Bandito Brothers sitting on a completed SEALs movie, but they didn't immediately put it on the auction block. "We were nervous about seeming exploitative," says WME agent Liesl Copland. The agency set up two "Act of Valor" screenings for potential buyers in June, four weeks after bin Laden was killed, by which time most of the related deal-making had died down in Hollywood.

A half-dozen distributors, including Alcon Entertainment and Film District, made serious bids for the movie. It sold to Relativity Media, known for titles such as "Bridesmaids" and "The Social Network," for \$13 million. In addition to the financial terms of the deal, the filmmakers said they were won over by the company's plan for a long-term rollout, led by marketing head Terry Curtin, who comes from a line of Navy aviators and admirals. Relativity plans a wide release on Presidents Day weekend, Feb. 17.

The Bandito Brothers acknowledge that the bin Laden timing helped them land a faster, more attractive deal than they might have otherwise. But they're gratified that Relativity didn't want to rush the movie out just to capitalize on the SEALs' moment in the spotlight. By February, Mr. Leitman says, "Act of Valor" can be expected to "sink, swim, live or die on its own."