

RED WHITE BLACK & BLUE

PRODUCTION NOTES: FILMING ON ATTU

While researching a narrative script on small unit combat in World War II, filmmakers Michael Harbour, Jeff Malmberg and Tom Putnam came across the story of the Battle of Attu.

Realizing that the battle would be far too expensive to make as a traditional action film, the filmmakers decided to tell the story as a documentary. The three had previously completed two fiction short films, "Tom Hits His Head" (an official selection of more than 190 film festivals and winner of over a dozen major awards, including the Spirit of Slamdance award at the Slamdance Film Festival and Grand Jury Prize at Aspen Shortsfest) and the Fox Searchlab short "Broadcast 23", which premiered at the 2005 Sundance Film Festival.

According to director Tom Putnam: "We wanted our film to have a main character and a supporting 'cast of characters', just like a narrative film. And, unlike many documentaries, which rely on a narrator to fill in the gaps, we wanted our story to be told by the guys who lived it." This was no easy feat as few soldiers survived the initial battle and most Attu veterans were in their eighties, making a return trip to the island a serious challenge to their health.

The Most Remote Place on Earth

Located 1,200 miles from the nearest hospital and 800 miles from the nearest commercial airport, Attu is one of the most remote places on earth. It has been closed to civilian traffic for the past 60 years, so the only mode of access is a Coast Guard transport plane that drops off supplies every two weeks to the 22-person outpost on the island. "We started asking the Coast Guard to fly us out and put us up for two weeks," recalls producer Michael Harbour. "They said no."

Putnam: "So we just kept asking and asking, and after about a year of this, one day I got a call and they said five of us could go. If we could get ourselves to the Coast Guard base in Kodiak, Alaska, they'd fly us out, put us up, and feed us for two weeks... All for nine dollars a day... Which was great because, up until then we had been putting everything on our credit cards."

Deconstructing the War Documentary

The filmmakers had done extensive research on the island and arrived prepared to incorporate a number of unorthodox techniques to rethink the historical war documentary. In the Spring of 2003, Putnam and producer and editor Jeff Malmberg visited the U.S. National Archives and discovered 60-year-old photos of the island with locations of the shots scribbled on the back. They decided to map out the locations of numerous photos shot by Army and Navy cameramen during the battle so they could match the same lenses and angles for the film's dramatic "then and now" photo sequences. Due to the largely abandoned nature of the island's battlefields, Putnam was able to match actual craters and equipment left behind from the war.

Putnam described other unusual techniques: "Since we couldn't bring other battle vets to the island, we decided to place their taped interviews on a small monitor in various island locations. The result gave them a presence as they talked about their various experiences on Attu."

In addition, the filmmakers used an old Russian 16mm camera for the film's time-lapse photography to show the rapidly changing weather conditions on Attu.

Filming in the "Cradle of Storms"

Commented director of photography Alex Vendler: "This part of the Aleutians is called the 'Cradle of Storms' with good reason. We'd be out in a field somewhere and the sky would be crystal clear, and then 10 minutes later everything would be black, freezing rain would be coming in from every direction, and we'd be struggling against 40 mile-an-hour winds to try and get under cover. And then, a few minutes later, everything would be fine again."

But, despite the rapidly changing weather conditions, the veterans and crew were able to visit all the key locations in the battle. The filmmakers started on the beach in the ominously named Massacre Bay, where Attu veterans Bill and Andy recounted boarding the landing craft on the first day of the battle. And then, each day, they would travel further inland as the veterans recounted the subsequent days of combat.

"Many of these places hadn't seen people since the war," said Putnam. "Attu is like a 30-square-mile museum to World War II. Everywhere you turned there were remnants of the battle."

During their travels, the filmmakers and veterans found an undocumented plane crash, Japanese artillery positions with live rounds still in the chamber, and an unexploded 500-pound bomb.

"We were constantly falling into holes, rolling down hills, getting nails through our boots..." remembered Putnam. In fact, all three crewmembers were seriously injured while filming. Putnam put his back out and ended up with severe tendonitis in one hand. Producer Matt Radecki injured his leg when the vehicle he was riding in rolled over. And Vendler fractured his tailbone after sliding 50 feet down a rocky, grass-covered hillside.

Putnam smiles: "Bill and Andy didn't get a scratch."