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Behind the scenes of 'The Unit'

CBS show enjoys strong relationship with SCV community

The air strike comes in low over the insurgents' camp. The napalm ignites and a thunderous fireball leaps some 200 feet into the azure sky, belching thick, black smoke and sending a wave of heat rolling across the meadow.

A truck carrying Jonas "Snake Doctor" Blane races away from the blast zone and toward safety.

"Cut!"

Just across the ridgeline from 'Afghanistan' are rows of cookie-cutter Stevenson Ranch tract houses. And the "Snake Doctor," veteran actor Dennis Haysbert, is off the set and safely removed from the controlled chaos.

Five hundred gallons of gasoline turned this pastoral green scene into a valley of fire, captured by three cameras for CBS' "The Unit," based at Santa Clarita Studios and now in its fourth season.

With mild temperatures, clear skies and a gentle breeze, Tuesday was "a good day for blowing stuff up," said Nate Ehrman, assistant to executive producer Vahan Moosekian.

The series focuses on a fictional, elite military counterterrorism team called The Unit, similar to the U.S. Army's Delta Force.

Inspired by "American Taliban" John Walker Lindh, the explosive scene filmed last week will serve as the opening sequence for the episode titled "Whiplash," set to air April 12.

The production company generally spends about eight to 10 days shooting each episode, Ehrman said.

Essentially, it's a weekly movie production on a TV schedule and budget.

Getting it right

While sequences like Tuesday's are fleshed out by a bit of digital special effects, the goal is to capture the most action on film.

"I try to make everything film quality on a TV budget," special-effects coordinator Dennis Dion said. "I try to do everything so it's as real as possible."

The crew started setting up the blast site on Feb. 21, Dion said. They dug pits for each 44-gallon drum filled with gasoline and sawdust, which acts as an accelerant. They set detonator cords and prepared the authentic-looking military camp to be enveloped in flames.

Ever-advancing digital effects technology allows for a few touch-ups in the editing room. Visual effects supervisor Dave Altenau said a few more flames and napalm-dropping fighter jets will be added to the scene digitally.

"These guys always make it big," he said, referring to Dion and his team, "so we don't have to add much."

Aside from making explosions and firefights look real, Dion, a Vietnam War veteran, said safety on the set is paramount.

"I tell (Haysbert) he's in good hands," Dion said, referring to the question asked by Haysbert in commercials for Allstate Insurance: "Are you in good hands?"

During a break in filming Tuesday afternoon, Haysbert, an avid golfer, practiced his swing while still dressed in his military uniform.

His imposing stature is belied by sentences delivered in low, measured tones.

Over time, he said, the show has become less about some over-arching message, and more about entertainment, but he stressed it allows viewers "to see what unsung heroes have to do."

Haysbert has been with "The Unit" since day one, after his stint as President David Palmer on Fox's "24."

A veteran of films including "Heat," "Major League" and "Waiting to Exhale," Haysbert said he prefers big-screen roles but is happy playing to the home box office.

He compared his work to that of a pilot, saying, "you always want to fly jets (films)," but he doesn't mind "flying Apache helicopters (TV shows)."

"Dennis brings this natural poise and confidence to the role," director Seth Wiley said. "Aside from Dennis' impressive physical presence, he's a very deep and gifted actor as well."

A tale of tribes

"This is not '24.' A lot of anti-terrorism shows are paranoia-based," said Krishna Rao, director of photography. "This is not that show."

If anything, he said, "The Unit" is about different tribes and tribal warfare.

"It's like a show about relationships," Rao said.

Each week, the crew of "The Unit" present a story that's pure fiction and all entertainment, but it has its roots in fact.

Created by writer and director David Mamet, the show was inspired by Eric Haney's 2002 memoir "Inside Delta Force," about his time with the Army's counterterrorism unit.

Haney has also served as a writer, producer and technical adviser for the show.

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Given the show's inspiration, there's a drive to get the technical aspects right, Wiley said.

"There's so much technical precision because these guys are based on real-life Delta operators," he said.

There's not much room for ad-libbing and the show stays close to the script, he said.

For action scenes involving special effects like explosions, Wiley said there's usually only one take.

When it comes to other scenes, the crew still tries to get them right in as few takes as possible.

"It either feels right or it doesn't," he said. "They're mostly perfect the first time."

Bringing it together

Rao has worked as a cinematographer, camera operator and director for more than 30 years, and has been with "The Unit" since the pilot episode.

"The truth is, I love the process," he said, of the varied roles he's had over the years. "It's so much fun."

Rao is slim and his black hair is flecked with gray. Between takes he falls into conversation, occasionally cracking jokes with crew members or fiddling with his iPhone.

When the cameras roll, he is all business, focusing intently on the monitor and making sure the scene plays out how he's envisioned it.

When it comes to shooting for television, he likes the room there is for experimentation.

He prefers to shoot scenes with hand-held cameras, giving the viewer a sense of realism and urgency.

"This is a little more raw," he said. "Every episode is a different movie."

Rao cited the films "Battle of Algiers" and "Z" as sources of inspiration. Both films - Italian and French, respectively - are examples of neo-realistic filmmaking styles, blurring the lines between drama and documentary.

Since the first season, "The Unit" has enjoyed a close relationship with the Santa Clarita Valley.

Numerous scenes have been filmed on the sprawling acres of the Newhall Ranch property on the west side of the valley and the sound stages at Santa Clarita Studios.

Rao said Blue Cloud Movie Ranch in Saugus has stood in for Indonesia, Paraguay, Europe and Afghanistan.

"Once in a while it's America," writer Dan Hindmarch quipped.

The series has been set in the Midwest, with a Newhall neighborhood standing in as military housing - until this season, that is.

Since season four is set primarily in Southern California, the show is, ironically, not filming in the California neighborhood it has used for the previous three years.

Hurry up and wait

Minutes on the TV screen equal hours on a set.

For two days last week, the crew took over the former BMW dealership on Creekside Road, which has been empty since May 2007.

A crew of armed men at his side, the "Snake Doc" is trying to negotiate with a rogue team member.

They run through one take after another, getting the camera framing and line delivery just right.

Finally, it's time for a crew safety meeting, a quick rehearsal and another explosion.

Each actor finds his place and the cameras roll.

A deafening boom rattles the building, likely turning the heads of those kicking the tires at the Acura dealership across the street.

"Cut!"

Rao and Wiley are satisfied with the shot.

But it's 2:30 p.m. and the day is far from over.

There is more work to be done.

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