

The Making of Hunt for Red October

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In October 1986, Paramount Pictures signed me on as Technical Consultant to assist in the film version of Tom Clancy's *Hunt for Red October* (Naval Institute Press, 1984). Shortly thereafter, I began working with Don Stewart, the first of three screenwriters to work on the film over more than a two-year period. It involved lots of time on the phone and about eight trips to Los Angeles. Don was a marvelous person to work with, and had won an Academy Award for *Missing*, starring Jack Lemmon.

It turns out that for every movie produced, scripts are written for about ten subjects. Thus, there was no real assurance that *Hunt for Red October* would ever be made—particularly since preliminary cost estimates showed it would be extremely expensive to produce the movie properly. After a script is “bought and paid for” by the studio, management must decide whether to: make the movie using that script, forget about making the movie, or hire another screenwriter and let him use any previous scripts as a point of departure for another try.

From the outset, I was given some good advice from Admiral Bruce DeMars, then-Assistant Chief of Naval Operations for Undersea Warfare: first and most important, I was not there to attest to “real or authentic,” since real and authentic were none of their business. Paramount was making a fictional movie based on a fictional book, and it was critical to both Paramount and the submarine force that it be entertaining; if not, Paramount would lose money, and we wouldn't get wide exposure for enlistment purposes—we learned something from *Top Gun*. The movie also had to be credible, which meant not violating the laws of physics. These became easy and mutually supportive bounds to work within, especially since real can often be rather dull. Cooperation from the submarine force was unprecedented (e.g., all writers, major actors, the director, and the producer were invited to ride one nuclear-powered attack submarine (SSN) or another on scheduled operations from both coasts). As a result, Commander Mancuso—the CO of the USS *Dallas* in the story—captures the essence of those that drive these machines (for officer recruitment), and the fire control and sonar displays on the *Dallas* are interesting enough to capture the

imagination of all those bright young computer-oriented potential “Jonesies” (the star sonar operator on the *Dallas*) in the audience.

During the course of the two years, it sometimes got discouraging, since each of the three writers’ basic scripts needed major rewrites. Also, although the plot started out following the book closely, it crept slowly away in search of more action until it was barely identifiable. As filmed, however, the movie is as close to the book as it ever was in any of the script variants. Any differences are basically as needed to trim down the scope (a movie script is about 120 pages, double-spaced, and can be read in about an hour), or to meet the requirements of an entirely different medium (Ryan did not get on board the *Dallas* in the book, but must in the movie to allow development of personal conflict between him and Mancuso).

When the production decision was made in early 1989, the “money valve” swung wide open, and things started happening quickly. In the industry, \$20 million is considered a big budget film. *Hunt For Red October’s* budget is in excess of \$40 million, with more than \$7 million said to have been spent on sets alone. Since it was not technically or operationally feasible to film on board actual submarines. Paramount was obliged to build sets of the *Dallas*, the *Red October*, and the *Konovlov*—the Soviet Alfa-class SSN involved. The sets were spectacular: they were built on huge (50-foot x 50-foot) gimbaled and hydraulically operated platforms having plus/minus 25° of pitch and roll. When one of the boats maneuvers, viewers will see a believable dynamic response on the screen. For some scenes involving the *Red October* on the surface, a fiberglass mockup (from the waterline up) more than 500 feet long was built which was capable of being submerged and surfaced.

Production consisted of 12 to 13 hours of shooting a day, from which perhaps a minute or two of screen time will eventually emerge. The typical scene is only 20 to 30 seconds long, but is shot seven to eight times with slightly different “spins” as injected by the director—in this case, John McTieman (*Die Hard* and *Predator*), who is action and special effects oriented. The set is then put back together and taken apart to allow camera access to shoot the same scene another seven to eight times from a different angle. It is long, hard work, tightly packed into a two to three-month period, for the actors, the directors, and others closely involved with the project. Then a few people figuratively disappear into a dark closet with scissors, glue, and enough film to wrap around the world. Months later, they and a movie emerge.

Although they're not at the top of the credits, a few words are in order concerning the crew of the *Dallas* in the movie, both officer and enlisted. These people were about a 50-50 mix of real submariners borrowed from various commands, including the real *Dallas* (SSN-700), and of Hollywood extras. For the first four to five days of production we conducted what a sailor would call a "fast cruise" on the floor of one of the sound stages (where masking tape indicated the location of the periscope stand, ballast control panel, etc.); basic evolutions such as changing course, coming to periscope depth, manning battle stations, and so on were run through over and over to instruct and ingrain credible dialogue, intonations, and the multifaceted intercom and face-to-face verbal communications. Submariners will be hard-pressed to identify the real crew members. I'll share one secret: the Chief of Boat (complete with coffee cup surgically implanted onto the first finger of his right hand) is Larry Ferguson, the last of the three screenwriters.

There were some tough times, also, in making the movie. I sometimes found it difficult to balance all of the missions—serving my employer. Paramount, watching out for submarine force interests and keeping the "Submarine Mafia" informed, and trying to get the Naval Submarine League involved so they could exploit the film as a vehicle to help execute their mission of "informing the American public about the existence and professionalism of the Submarine Force." It was sort of like being deployed—with lots of people expecting lots of things, but with any real help thousands of miles away.

Involvement with the preparation and production of *Hunt for Red October* was a wonderful adventure. The movie reflects favorably on submariners, and it is credible and entertaining.

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