

# Improvising in tunnels

By Joanna Sterkowicz



DIGGING IN – The Tunnel Rats

The makers of *Tunnel Rats*, a harrowing film about the horrors of war set against the background of the Vietnam war, utilised an unusual method by working off a treatment and allowing the ensemble cast to improvise their dialogue. *Tunnel Rats* completed filming in Cape Town at the end of March.

Canadian producer Dan Clarke (who wrote the treatment), German director/producer Uwe Boll (*BloodRayne*) and Cape Town-based producer Chris Roland (*Charlie Jade*) of ZenHQ called in the cast a week prior to shooting and put them through a boot camp supervised by a professional mercenary.

Explains Roland: “We didn’t want to force dialogue on the actors as we wanted the real horror of the story to pervade. The film is based on the US army platoon nicknamed ‘Tunnel Rats’ who were sent out to hunt and kill the Viet Cong soldiers living in tunnels underneath the jungle. Our cast were taught jungle warfare tactics, how to fire M16 and AK47 rifles, and had to live in uniform for the entire week of the boot camp.

“During that time the characters of the actors emerged and we capitalised on this and the relationships they built up with each other. And so the scenes were improvised. It was a great process because it was about being creative and telling a story truthfully.

Consequently, the moments in the film are very real.”

Boll adds: “We did extensive castings in Los Angeles and particularly wanted young, unknown actors so as to give the film a documentary feel. The improvisational process really allowed the actors to develop their characters and be emotionally honest in their performances.”

Known for creating films out of video games, Boll financed *Tunnel Rats* himself. Says Roland, “Late last year Uwe, Dan and I were in discussions about another film, *Far Cry*, when they asked me to produce *Tunnel Rats*. I didn’t want to do just another high action ‘war’ film, but it was soon clear that this film was different. The ‘Tunnel Rats’ platoon was virtually a suicide mission and a lot of the American and Vietnamese soldiers died in the tunnels. I’ve personally visited the Cu Chi tunnels and they’re very scary. Some are so small that you have to crawl through them. In between the tunnels there are chambers for kitchens, sleeping quarters and latrines – they also buried their dead in the tunnels to avoid detection. The Viet Cong planted lots of booby traps in the tunnels.

“Being part of this platoon was an incredibly intense experience and that’s how we’re shooting the film. Those soldiers



FIGHTING BACK – Subterranean soldier

who survived suffered lots of psychological damage. We show the perspective of both sides, the US and the Viet Cong.”

Boll felt that with the ongoing Iraqi war, it made sense to do a film about the fact that nobody wins at war. “I learnt about the ‘Tunnel Rats’ when I accidentally came across a book about the platoon. Vietnam movies to date have never gone into this aspect of the war. I think the tunnels are the reason the Americans lost the Vietnam war – they couldn’t control the guerrilla warfare that was rampant in 260km of tunnels.”

Roland accepted the project in January and the recces were completed in a week. There followed five weeks of pre-production and four weeks of shooting (on Super 35mm). South African construction manager Clive Pollick was in charge of building the tunnel sets at the Three Arts Studio in Cape Town. His team used different types of flexible and bendable plywood to build the tunnels and added sculpted foam material to them. Copious amounts of real dirt and mud were then ingrained onto the tunnels.

The aboveground scenes were shot on a farm in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) near Southbroom, which has lots of jungle-like areas. A whole military camp was set up there by Canadian production designer Sylvain Gingras, who

had worked with Roland on *Charlie Jade* and is now based in South Africa. The crew shot Huey helicopter scenes along the Umtanvuna river in KZN and at the same waterfall where *Greystoke* was shot decades ago.

Roland notes that there was a predominately South African crew on the film, apart from the German DOP, and the Canadian 1st AD and editor. A German team, headed by Olaf Ittenbach handled the extensive prosthetics required while local company Big Bang Stunts & FX expedited all the special effects and stunts, including a big battle scene in the ‘jungle’. Camera and lighting equipment was supplied by Media Film Service.

This was Boll’s first time shooting in SA. “It’s been a really convincing shoot – good crews, good weather and good locations. Everything has worked out very well. Because this is a Vietnam movie, we first considered shooting there but they don’t have a film culture and in fact, the government doesn’t allow war films to be made. Chris [Roland] has done a great job on the film and we got so much more production value shooting in SA.”

The film was assembled in SA and is being post produced in Canada and Germany. Plans are to complete the film in time for the American Film Market (AFM) in Los Angeles in November. 📺